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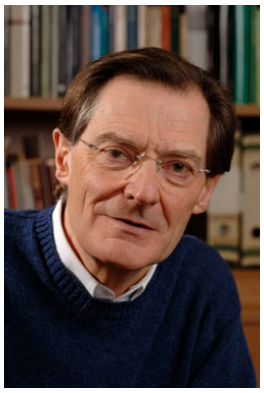
Quentin Skinner: “Concepts only have histories”.

Par Jacques Lévy et Emmanuelle Tricoire. Le 23 novembre 2007



Emmanuelle Tricoire (ET): *What about your field? What is your field?*

QS: Well that is, immediately, a difficult question. I was for nearly twenty years the Professor of Political Science at Cambridge, but my present Chair is in the Faculty of History. My official title is Regius Professor of Modern History. I suppose that, by formation and existentially, I am a historian, definitely, rather than anything else. But obviously, I have studied philosophy as well, and I have taught both subjects. I think that, if I had to summarise what I do, I would say that I work at the interface between intellectual history and political philosophy.

I am interested, that is, in historical and philosophical questions about politics, and I have worked in particular on questions about freedom, representation, democracy and the state. But I also accept and indeed profoundly believe in the Nietzschean view that no such concepts can have definitions: they only have histories. But if they only have histories, then the only way to understand them is historically ? and that is what animates my work, the belief that if we are going to understand any of the concepts we use to organise our social, moral, and political world, we shall have to study them historically. If only because, as Nietzsche says in a wonderful phrase, the concepts we have inherited ? and the interpretations we place upon those concepts ? are just *frozen conflicts*, the outcomes of ideological debate. We just get the views of the winners, so that historians always have to engage in an act of retrieval, trying to recover wider and missing structures of debate.

ET: *And what about the “history of ideas”?*

QS: Yes, that is the traditional term in the Anglophone academic world. It's a very old-fashioned term, the reason being that the study of the so-called "history of ideas", especially in the United States, was founded on the methodological assumption that there simply are certain concepts which recur throughout history with a completely unchanging and determinate meaning. So the historical task is taken to be that of picking them out. But as I have already said, that is exactly the methodological assumption I reject. One of my earliest articles was called "Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas", but I used that phrase ironically, my intention being to deconstruct the claim that there could ever be a history of ideas of that kind. So I certainly do not like being described as a historian of ideas. I think that, in the English language, we would nowadays say "intellectual historian". Except that, in the United States, they hardly ever use that term. To me it is striking that, when I am invited to the United States, which happens more or less every year, I am almost never invited by history departments. My hosts are almost always either in philosophy departments or politics departments. What I do is either understood as a particular way of studying moral and political philosophy, or else as a contribution — a rather marginal contribution, it is generally supposed — to the study of politics.

ET: What is your itinerary, the way that led you to study these specific objects? From a disciplinary point of view, how did you choose fringes instead of cores'

QS: Well, I suppose what started me thinking about fringes was the traditional way of studying philosophy and its history when I was first beginning to study the subject in the 1960s. At that time ? and I think still to a great degree, in Anglophone philosophy departments ? there was assumed to be a canon of texts that basically need to be studied more or less to the exclusion of all else. If you asked why you were studying them, you were told that they embodied certain timeless truths. And the reason for continuing to study them was that we remain interested in the truths they contain. This idea died very hard. What I came to feel was that there could be a kind of historical research done on the canonical texts, which would, as it were, distance them from us. We would come to see that instead of merely being the statements of timeless truths ? even if they *were* statements of timeless truths ? there was something else going on when they were being created, when they were being written. I wanted to try to show that, in the case of the canonical texts in moral or political philosophy, where perhaps one can show this most easily, you cannot think of even the most architectonic of these texts as being separated from the ideological conflicts of the period in which they were written.

That is now a cliché, but when I started to write my first articles along these lines I had great difficulty in getting them published. I took the example of Thomas Hobbes, because in the English tradition he is the most architectonic among political theorists, and had generally been thought to stand apart from the debates of his age. I tried to show that his philosophy was a recognizable political intervention and that you could place it on a recognizable spectrum of political debate. And you could talk about very precise ways in which Hobbes was supporting particular political causes, denouncing others, seeking to discredit others, seeking to revive yet others. I tried to enmesh his philosophy very densely in the politics of the English revolution. The reason why I chose Hobbes was because I thought that, if you can show this for Hobbes, you can show it for anyone in the Anglophone tradition. My interest in decentring such canonical texts, and my interest in the very large fringe of texts that had been neglected, arose because I wanted to show that really there isn't any such distinction between texts and their so-called contexts. Even Hobbes' *Leviathan* is far more like a speech in parliament than it is like a mathematical treatise.

ET: And now, are you still the only one of your kind? Are you "lonely"?

QS: Not at all. I was lonely to begin with, although I had one or two intellectual associates from whom I learned a great deal in the 1960s who were already working in a similar way in Cambridge. These included Peter Laslett, who had worked on John Locke in a similar style, and an exact contemporary of mine, who still teaches at Cambridge, John Dunn, who has likewise written about Locke in this style. But yes, it was lonely in the sense that we were thought to be doing the subject in the wrong way. Worse than that, we irritated exponents of the American tradition of the 'great texts' because it looked to them as if we were challenging the supposed rationale for studying the subject, which of course we were.

But now I don't feel lonely at all and, indeed, I have been involved for a long time in two large-scale co-operative projects, both of which have brought me into friendly contact with hundreds of scholars in the field. One is a series I co-edit with James Tully entitled "Ideas in Context", in which we have tried to propagate this approach to intellectual history. There are now nearly ninety books in our series, and they have helped to make the approach I've described well-known. The other is that, with my colleague Raymond Geuss and my former student Richard Tuck, I set up a series in which, instead of merely republishing the canonical works in the western tradition, we began to publish as many as we possibly could of the fringe texts, the contextual texts that would help to make sense of the celebrated works we all know. We began to do that in the 1980s and we have by now published something like a hundred and twenty volumes in this series, which has made it the main textbook series for the teaching of the subject in the Anglophone world.

ET: And are there only English authors in this series?

QS: Oh, by no means, no. Our greatest successes have, in fact, been translation of foreign works into English where there had not been translations before, or where the translations had been unsatisfactory, or where the texts had been so enormous that people had never thought they could be translated and profitably published. One good example would be Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois*, which had been translated into English immediately after it was published, but had never been translated again. We published the first complete translation since 1751. Another good example would be Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*. This has, of course, had many translations into English, but our translation is one of the two best selling texts in the entire series. (Our other best-seller is the translation Russell Price made for the edition that he and I did together of Machiavelli's *Il principe*.) Besides these and many other texts in French, German and Italian, we have also translated a very large number of works in Latin and Greek.

ET: What about the place of a text as a source of history in your way of studying history?

QS: Well, I have a general view about the relationship of the kind of textual studies we are talking about to more general social and political history. I take it that ? here is a reckless generalization ? all the major works of moral, social, and political philosophy were designed to legitimize certain moral, social, and political positions and to delegitimise others. They should all be seen as ideological documents ; that's the general approach I would take to all of them. If a text doesn't seem to yield interesting interpretations along these lines, I would be very surprised. But if it really doesn't, I would say that this is probably because we do not have sufficient historical information to enable us to see what kind of an intervention the text constituted. For example, I think that this is true of some of the greatest political texts of classical antiquity. It would be very difficult now to recapture what kind of an intervention in Greek politics was intended by Plato in *The Republic*. But that's not to say that it may not have been designed as a specific kind of polemical intervention ; it's merely to say that we may not be able to surround it with sufficient inter-textual materials to

find out what sort of an intervention it constituted.

So my general answer to your question is that the relation of these texts to more general history is that I see them as ? roughly ? attempts either to sustain or to overthrow, to speak for or against, some particular set of beliefs or courses of action. That does not mean that they have to be innovatory in the sense of radical or revolutionary texts. What they might be doing is trying to show you, as Hobbes does, that you have far better reasons for maintaining existing arrangements than you might suppose. Some of the greatest of these texts are conservative in the strict sense that they wish to be *conservateur*. There is no implication that they are always deconstructing the politics or morality of their age. That would be a simple prejudice — although it's a very common one in intellectual life.

If I were to put the point more formally, I would say that what we should be looking for, in textual interpretation, is not so much the meanings of texts as the nature of the speech-acts embodied in them. The question that interests me most is: what are texts *doing*? What are they rejecting or affirming, criticizing or ignoring, satirising or ridiculing? Speech, I am saying, is action, and to understand speech requires that we find means to understand what actions are being performed by the language we use.

ET: Did you bring about a change in the way of considering a text in history? Was it the same thing before and after you worked on texts in their historical context'

QS: Well, I hope that the subject now looks a bit different. My approach certainly differs from traditional intellectual history, but it also differs from the post-structuralist and anti-hermeneutic work that began to come out of France in the late 1960s. I was course very influenced by this trend, but I also feel at cross-purposes with a lot of that tradition, and especially with Derrida's work. There is a sense in which Derrida is still concerned with traditional hermeneutics ; he is still worried about people who want to ask 'What is the meaning of this text'' He has brilliantly shown that this is not a good question, that interpretation cannot be a process of recovering the intended meaning of texts. But I myself have never been primarily interested in meanings in that sense. I am basically interested in what people mean by what they say — in speech-acts, not meanings. I am interested, in short, in something very different from traditional hermeneutics *and* from the deconstruction of traditional hermeneutics.

I should add that this commitment of mine has been widely misunderstood. There is obviously a sense in which I am interested in intentionality. But I am interested in the intentions with which people use language, not in any alleged relationship between intention and meaning. It may look as if I am interested in something which Derrida and his school have exploded, namely the belief that the meaning of a text is the intended meaning of the text, so that what you are trying to do is to recover what specific meaning the writer intended. But this has never been my concern, and I agree that this is an impossibility. I'm interested in the notion that texts are actions, so I am interested in a completely different question about intentionality. I am interested in what speakers and writer may intend *by saying* what they say or write. As I've said, I'm basically interested in what texts are doing, in their performativity. That is the difference: not 'meaning' but 'doing' — I could put it in that slogan.

In summary, my answer to your question would be that what I hope is different in my approach lies in seeing that there is a question completely different from the old questions in hermeneutics. What can and should primarily be asked of texts is not what they say and what they mean but what they

are doing. What I have in mind here is much easier to say in French: I am interested in *vouloir-dire* more than in *signification*.

Of course you cannot entirely separate these two questions, because texts are verbal objects, and in order to find out what they are doing you have to read them. That's fairly obvious. But what you then need to do, I am saying, is to lay your chosen text up against all sorts of other texts and try to see what is *going on* in them.

This obvious leaves us with a large question. *Which* other texts? Well, that's what you've got to find out. You can't know until you've looked, and the art is to look in the right direction, relating your chosen text to just such other texts as will show you what's going on in your chosen text. That's very difficult to do and obviously it's provisional and equally obviously it's defeasible by further interpretation. But the historical project I'm describing has become a very large research programme now. For example, in the *Ideas in Context* series I mentioned earlier, I would say that practically all the work we have published over the last twenty years or so has tried to adopt this approach.

ET: A methodological question: when you are working about Italy and Geneva some centuries ago, or when you are working about questions of political philosophy that are historically situated, like those raised by Machiavelli for example, do you read the texts first or do you begin with a sort of an impregnation by or an immersion into the context'

QS: It is a little bit difficult to recapture, but I think I generally try to begin by reading as widely and contextually as possible. Insofar as I had any success in applying this approach in the case of Machiavelli, it was to suggest that one key to understanding *Il Principe* might be to see that it is in a certain sense a satire. It's a book, I noticed, that quotes and refers to many texts of classical humanism in order to try to question the presuppositions of humanist moral philosophy. One specific thing I noticed, which I don't think had been noticed before, was the extent to which *Il principe* actually quotes from some of the great texts of classical humanism, especially Cicero. Quite often what Machiavelli is doing is taking a doctrine of Cicero's and affirming its opposite. For example, Cicero says that it is always better to be loved than feared ; Machiaevelli replies that it is always safer to be feared than loved. Cicero says that in politics you must always employ manly methods, never beastly methods, never the mere force of the lion or the guile of the fox. Machiavelli famously retorts that manly methods are never enough, that you need to know which beasts to imitate, and that you will do best if you imitate the lion and the fox. He is satirising Cicero's moral earnestness.

To answer your question, I noticed these effects because I had begun by reading as much as I could of the materials produced in republican Rome and Renaissance Italy about the proper conduct of political leaders. I was trying to do what I have been describing to you, trying to see various *settings* in which you could place the *Principe* of Machiavelli. My procedure was simply to use the great library catalogues to tell me about every book printed in Italy from the invention of printing until the death of Machiavelli which was called either *De principe* (Latin) or *Il Principe* (Italian). I then read the entire genre, trying to gain a sense of the exact place that Machiavelli's text occupied on the spectrum of debate about the proper conduct of princes: whether it picked up the usual sorts of questions or asked new questions ; whether it asked the usual sorts of questions but gave new answers. By following this rather mechanical procedure I gradually built up a sense of what was conventional and what seemed to me satirical and subversive in Machiavelli's text.

I should add that the fact that the great library catalogues are nowadays on-line, and that you can conduct word-searches on vast arrays of texts, is already raising the standards of the subject I practise to wholly new heights. You can far more easily and accurately do historical research on changing vocabularies, changing meanings of terms, the entry of different concepts into moral vocabularies, than used to be possible. Once it becomes possible to scan all these texts, it is going to become almost indecently easy to perform these interpretative tasks.

Jacques Lévy (JL): Now, some questions about the substance of your study. We have of course been completely seduced and convinced by the way you bridged the gap between a traditional philosophical approach to an 'eternal' text and, on the other hand, the fact that you are a historian, that you accept and endorse this label as a possibility to propose a somewhat universalist interpretation, which is based not on the denial but conversely on the acknowledgement that you study a singular historical situation. You preferentially study texts written in times when social sciences had not emerged yet, which gives you, in a sense, some advantage, an 'epistemological superiority'. Now don't you think it would be as easy to use the same methodology with texts, for example, by Jürgen Habermas or by Robert Putnam, in political science, and if not, why? What about Samuel Huntington ? whose relevance as a scholar might be challenged'

QS: First of all, I have to say a word about why writing in an historical idiom is so important to me. It seems to me that, if one thinks of contemporary political theory, the sort of approach I have sketched is not likely to strike one as very interesting, just because we know too much about the answers to what for me are the big questions. It is usually perfectly clear ? Huntington would be a good example ? where contemporary political theorists are 'coming from', as prevailing American slang so revealingly puts it. The sort of questions that have to be excavated from the philosophy of the past are lying on the surface in contemporary political theory and moral debate. So I fear that in those cases my approach is likely to look of marginal significance.

That's not the only reason, however, why I prefer to study the relatively remote past. A further reason connects with something I said earlier, which is that what we gain from the intellectual traditions we have inherited is a set of concepts and arguments which are themselves the outcomes of battles. We need as historians to go back to the point before these battles were fought. There we find very different configurations of thought, and we may even find valuable traditions of thinking that have subsequently been lost. I have come to think that this is one of the most important things that intellectual historians can attempt to do.

This, for example, is what I tried to do in my book *Liberty Before Liberalism.* What interested me was the extent to which the triumph of modern individualistic categories of thought succeeded in obliterating a completely different way of thinking about what it means to be a free person and to act freely. Furthermore, what I wanted to do was not merely to resurrect a lost theory; I wanted us to reconsider it, to ask ourselves whether, in the ideological battles of the early-modern period, something may have been lost which might be of value to us to resurrect here and now.

What I am trying to say, to answer your question directly, is that while I am sure you are right that my approach could equally well be applied to contemporary figures, I don't think that it has so much value or usefulness. If my approach has any distinctive value, it lies in bringing back to light more remote traditions of thinking that may in the course of the centuries have become lost to sight.

JL: I have read in a criticism of your work that the way you select the works you study is not always clear and that you do not always explain how to hierarchise the respective importance of different texts. The logical answer, in a certain perspective, would be that the rest of the settings can give the answer: because of the rest of history, of the rest of political scene, of the rest of political society and of the rest of society in general that gives you the way, the methodology to say 'this is important, this is less important'. So how is the part of history which is not directly part of your field nevertheless present in the background of your analysis'

QS: I think there are two answers to the objection. One is, and here I can state a very strongly held principle of mine, that it is the social world itself that sets the questions. It is the crises of politics, the crises of morality in societies which set political theory going. No one is going to theorise about any of these matters in a void. It can even look as if political philosophy only develops in times of crisis. This is a mistake, of course: there are always ruling ideologies. It's just that, the more everyone accepts them, the less do they have to be articulated. Usually people only crystallise into published treatises their views about the political or moral sphere when there has been some demand in society for the clarification of some particular concept which has become overlooked or has fallen into disrepute. So, always, what lies at the back of my mind is that the theories I write about are produced by the social realm itself ? everyone is a Marxist to that degree, I would hope.

As a result, my books tend to start with quite a lot of elementary political history. This is because I am always trying to say 'look, none of these treatises would have been written if it weren't for the fact that…' — and then usually I have in mind some huge fact like the outbreak of a war, an event which at once raises questions about the right to use force, about the legitimacy of pacifism, about the nature of patriotism, and so on and on. That's when debates about such concepts begin anew.

The other answer I would give is that there is something completely conventional about my approach as an intellectual historian. I trade on the fact that there has been a canon of texts in the western intellectual tradition which we have habitually paid attention to, rightly or wrongly. We have habitually paid attention to some degree to national traditions but, in a broader degree, to the European tradition of political reflection ; no one would want to deny that. We might, as I do, work to question it, but there it is. I accept the canon and try to interrogate it. And the outcome of my interrogation is an attempt to decentre the canon and to replace it with an understanding of whatever it is that makes sense of the canonical texts. But as I say, this shows that there is something completely conventional lying at the heart of my enterprise. I do not want to deny that the western tradition has contained a number of texts which, to put it as primitively as I can, it is far more worthwhile to read than other texts. Reading the lesser texts we need to examine in order, for example, to understand what Hobbes is saying (what he is commenting on, what he is criticising) is never going to as interesting as reading Hobbes himself.

JL: Sometimes, particularly here when I read the chapter about the kind of arguments the French certainly used to defend their struggle to obtain some political changes, my impression was you express much, maybe too much empathy, as if it was implicitly obvious that we, now ? you and your reader ? were in the same context of arguing. For example, when you say (I translate from French) 'they could have used more extremist means but, of course it was not the right way to act because they did not have a population large enough to support them'. My feeling was that you were using the vocabulary of present-day political communication, while at this period the issue was not exactly the kind of issues we can have in a stabilised democratic system. When we read your explanation of the political rationales at work at that moment it is very convincing but perhaps too easy… When you use, for example, an indirect style, you can give the reader the

impression that we are living in the same social world, that there is no gap between 'them' and 'us'. As you can see, I propose you a 'reversed frontline battle': do you contextualise enough'

QS: Well, there is a grammatical point here, which I haven't checked in the French version of the text you quote, which is that I always write in the historic present tense. For me the interest of the texts I study always lies in the here and now, and in writing about them I try to place them in a direct relationship with the reader, as if he or she is being addressed. So I say things like 'Hobbes assures us that ..' or 'Machiavelli provides us with the example of …' I do indeed assume a dialogue between the writers and the readers of the texts I discuss, and this technique is one way of emphasising it.

But there is also a more substantial historical point here. Perhaps you are right that I don't contextualise enough, but I do not want to cut us off from the past ; rather I want to use the past to illuminate the present. The book of mine you have just quoted is called *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. One of the questions that chiefly interested me in that book — and the reason why I gave so much prominence to the French tradition — is: how did we ever come to found our politics on the idea of the sovereignty of the people? Where did that idea come from? How did it ever arise? I try to show that, by a kind of historical irony, most of the concepts used to vindicate the idea of popular sovereignty arose as part of the debate about the proper organisation of the Catholic Church. These debates are nowadays very remote from us, and in my book I had to reconstruct them. But what I was trying to reconstruct was the set of concepts we still employ in justifying some of our present political arrangements. The concepts in question are *our* concepts no less than those of our forebears. This was why I called my book the *Foundations of Modern Political Thought.* Not because I believe that political theory really has foundations, a view that, like any good Foucauldian, I reject. But because what I was trying to isolate was a founding moment, the origin of a view of politics we still endorse.

JL: It seems to be one of the main debates with your critiques: how far can we assume that there are some objects, some realities that overcome historical situations. When you say, for example, 'it is not convincing' or 'it was more convincing', we do not exactly know when the people to be convinced are living.

QS: I am trying to talk about *their* criteria of rationality. I am a sworn enemy of the view that there can be transhistorical understandings of rationality. I do not believe, that is, that we can ask of any belief whether it was rationally held in the absence of asking about an entire network of beliefs. I have tried to illustrate this claim by considering the practice of some leading historians who have studied alien systems of belief. One historian I have discussed is Emmanuel Le Roi Ladurie and his masterpiece, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*. I tried to show how even such a great historian can go badly astray by making the assumption that, if the historical agents we study hold beliefs which seem to us manifestly false, then it must follow that it was irrational for them to hold those beliefs, and we can proceed to ask what caused them to make such a serious cognitive mistake.

This is how Ladurie proceeds, and his approach seems to me fatally to undermine his explanation of why witchcraft beliefs were so widely held in 16th c. Languedoc. He begins by assuming (no doubt correctly) that the beliefs held by the peasants about the existence of witches were completely false, simply because there are of course no such things as witches. He then goes on to ask how they could possibly have fallen into such a state of irrationality. He answers (roughly) that the Reformation had robbed them of their traditional spiritual comfort, so that they felt increasingly lost, began to become increasingly anxious and paranoid, and were thereby led into collective

fantasies.

My objection is that showing that belief in witchcraft is mistaken is not the same as showing that it is irrational. The peasants may have had perfectly good reasons, by their lights, for believing that there are witches, so that this belief, although false, may not have been irrational at all. For example, the Bible explicitly states that there are witches, and that they must not be allowed to live. Surely it would have been highly irrational for the peasants *not* to believe what the Bible says, especially when everyone assured them that the Bible is the word of God. Once we accept, however, that it may have been perfectly rational for the peasants to hold their beliefs about witches to be true — even though we would unhesitatingly dismiss their beliefs as false — we see that there is no reason whatever for accepting the explanation given by Ladurie of why the peasants held their specific beliefs.

My first answer is thus that I am as far as possible from wanting to take a transhistorical notion of reason and apply it to the past in the way that Ladurie does. On the other hand, I do of course assume that there are some continuities between us and the peasants of sixteenth century Languedoc when it comes to the processes of thought. If we were to find, for example, that they regularly affirmed and denied the same proposition without any feeling of discomfort, then we would have to admit that there is no prospect of identifying any of their beliefs. But I do assume that we have a good prospect of identifying lots of their beliefs, especially when there are abundant written records of them. Perhaps we might even go so far as to say that, if we are to understand them, then their processes of thinking must be much like ours. It's just that I see no reason to convict them of irrationality just because their actual beliefs may happen to be different from ours in many individual instances.

I do think, therefore, that there are strong cognitive continuities between past and present. But I absolutely distinguish that claim from the proposal that we can and ought to apply a transhistorical notion of rationality to appraise beliefs in the past. I assume that the question of what it is rational to believe always depends on what else you believe. That is a kind of conceptual relativism, if you like. That is to say, I think that what it is rational to believe varies with the totality of your beliefs. I don't really see how historians can avoid being relativists in that sense. But this is very different from saying that truth varies in the same way, and thus that it *was* true for the peasants of Languedoc that there were witches, although it is false for us. I want to say that the claim that there are witches was *always* false, but that it may nevertheless have been wholly rational (*pace* Ladurie) for the peasant of Languedoc to believe it to be true.

JL: Another question about your general framework: For me some of your references are very clear like the affiliation with Wittgenstein and Austin the idea of intentionality which is not to be taken in confusion with the common sense 'intention' is very consistent. What is less obvious for me is how you do connect this with the debate on agency. When you say 'vouloir-dire', qui veut? Who wants to say, who wants to mean? Tell me if I am wrong but I perceived a certain hesitation in your vocabulary between 'agent' and 'actor' and, for instance, on the French-speaking intellectual scene, it is almost impossible not to choose because, if you locate yourself in the structuralist-functionalist paradigm, you say 'agent' and if you stand for the pragmatic turn, you say 'actor'. Might this 'hesitation' be a choice?

QS: Well, that is an important point because we are at the mercy of translators. My sense of where I sit in these debates will perhaps enable me to pick my way amongst the terms that you offer me. I am obviously interested in a certain way in agency because I am interested in authors, I am

interested in people who write texts, and I am interested in what they are doing in writing texts. This may sound old-fashioned, especially so long after the announcement by Barth and Foucault of the death of the author. But in fact, as I have already tried to make clear, I am not mainly interested in individual authors. Rather I am interested in how they contribute to broader patterns of discourse. My constant effort has been to show that even our disposition to say 'Yes, but Descartes is different' or 'Yes, but Rousseau is different' is not likely to be the right emphasis. They too are using an inherited vocabulary, they too are meshed in the debates of their period. And an understanding of their texts is an understanding, as I said before, of what sorts of interventions this enables them to make.

So, while I begin with the traditional figure of the author, I end up by decentring that figure in favour of studying the circulation of discourses. I suppose that commitment probably sounds a rather Foucauldian one. I certainly don't object to that. When I first became aware of Foucault's work in the late sixties I found what he was saying very congenial. But I didn't find it very startling, for you could already find very similar things being said by that later Wittgenstein, whom I had already read intensively some years before.

JL: Could we say you prefer agency to actor'

QS: I think you'd have to explain the distinction…

JL: …Agency would be considered essential but the actors would not be the point. You do not expel them from the scene but it is not your focus.

QS: Yes, exactly, that would certainly be a way of putting my point. I do not think that we can wholly dispense with agency. The Althusserian project of trying to bypass agency in order to talk exclusively about structures does not seem to me to work at all for the sort of history in which I am interested. My reason for wanting to retain the category of agency is that I do not see how we can do without it if we are interested, as I am, in those moments in the history of discourse when one episteme, to use Foucault's terminology, is suddenly challenged or questioned. Some identifiable agents must have mounted the challenge. Actually I am particularly interested in such moments of rupture, such as the moment when Machiavelli questions the inherited understanding of *virtus*, or the moment when Hobbes subverts the classical understanding of liberty. This is where agency continues to matter. But I am much less interested in actors, if by the use of that term we mean to imply that they should be our focus of attention. Most actors in history act conventionally, and in the case of intellectual history this means in effect that they disappear into the general discourse of their age.

ET: Here you show some dual 'allegiance' because in a way you say you are interested in texts, in what they are doing, and, on the other hand, in agency ? that means there is something bigger than the text.

QS: Yes, I do believe that there is something outside the text, to quote the famous phrase. Sometimes there are what we have been calling agents, writers with a high degree of originality. And invariably there are other texts, to which the specific text in which we are interested will be related in complex ways. But basically what concerns me is not texts or authors but the phenomenon of intertextuality. I am interested in the relationships between texts and the study of those relationships in such a way as to disclose the performativity of particular texts.

ET: What about religion? You often talk about it and in several texts we've noticed that maybe

your conclusion is that the texts are more political than religious, even when you speak about religion. In the case of Machiavelli, of course, and maybe about Calvinists, too, when they act because of other reasons than religion. So it's more political than religious people.

QS: That appearance is I think deceptive. I'd like to say two things about what you say. One is that I have certainly been much accused, especially in some hostile reviews of my most recent book, of being insensitive to the importance of religion and being some kind of Enlightenment rationalist. It is true that I am not a believer, and I suppose it's likely that this has more of an influence on my writings than I realise. But I have been obliged in a number of my historical projects to master a great deal of Christian theology. One reason is that I have written a lot about the era of the Reformation. Another, which I mentioned to Jacques Lévy earlier, is that much of our current political vocabulary is a secularisation of earlier religious ideals, which need to be understood if we are to understand ourselves. I have to admit, however, that this is an aspect of my research that I have never found congenial, although it has been unavoidable to undertake it. When I study Christian theology, it is very hard for me to take it seriously. That is clearly a limitation in my sensibility as an historian.

The other point I want to make is about religion and politics. Within modern European history, religions have always been political ideologies. I am not of course saying that they have been nothing else, but for a long time they played a profound political role. This is now beginning to happen all over again in the present generation. I am astonished by this development, for I had supposed that, with the evolution of the modern state in Europe, religion had largely been relegated to the private sphere. This certainly happened for a time, but that time is now over, and political demands are again being made in the name of religious faiths.

The point I want to make about all this is the one that I tried above all to stress in my *Foundations* book. Essentially the point I want to make is one about the structure of ideologies. Suppose that there is some policy or course of action you particularly want to promote. Then you have no option but to try to show that your behaviour can in some way be legitimised in terms of existing normative beliefs. The ideologist is I think wrongly described if he is thought of as someone with something wholly new to urge upon us. If he is to be successful, he will need to couch his new policies so far as possible in terms of existing values.

This brings me to what I tried to say about religion in my *Foundations* book. Suppose, to take a famous example, you were one of those who wanted to legitimise large-scale commercial enterprises, which in early-modern Christian societies were apt to look morally doubtful, involving as they did the lending of money at interest and the exploitation of labour for personal gain. How could you hope to legitimise such new social relations and practices? It has always seemed to me that this is really the issue which preoccupied Max Weber in his essays on Protestantism and the *geist* of capitalism. Although Weber is not usually read in this way, it seems to me that what he is really telling us is that Protestantism was not a *cause* of capitalism, but that it offered a particularly good means of *legitimising* the large-scale commercial enterprises on which capitalism is based. The reason why Protestantism was so suited to this purpose was that it places so much emphasis on effort, hard work, conscientiousness and punctiliousness. It is not very difficult, this being so, to present the effort and the hard work required for commercial success as religious virtues, and hence contend that the work ethic is part of the religious ethic of Christainity. That legitimises capitalism at a stroke. The Christian watchword *Laborare et orare* becomes *Laborare EST orare*. So a great number of undertakings that had previously seemed morally dubious come to seem acceptable, perhaps even sanctified.

To speak more generally, the task of the ideologist is always that of finding a potent language of legitimation which is already normative in the society in which he lives. You have to be able to show, in other words, that your new projects can be legitimised in terms of existing beliefs. Taking the same example as Weber had discussed, this was what I tried to show in the case of the Protestant Reformation in my book.

ET: But you go further. You say sometimes that political thinkers are using religion in a cynical way.

QS: I don't think I say exactly that ; I think I am trying to say two rather different things. One is that historians should not ask about sincerity and cynicism, since the question of sincerity is not one that we can ever hope ultimately to settle, as long as the agents we study act in line with their professed beliefs. It's only if they profess some principle and then act in defiance of it that we can convincingly accuse them of insincerity. But they may be wholly insincere in a way that we can never manage to reveal, since their actions may always remain in line with their professed beliefs, although they may not in fact hold the beliefs they profess.

The other thing I am saying is that, even if you are completely cynical about religion, even if you intend to use religious language and values purely instrumentally for your own ends, then you will nevertheless be constrained in what you can hope to achieve by the religious language you use. You may not be sincere, but if you want to legitimise what you are doing then you will have to appear sincere. But if you are to appear sincere, you will have to take great care to behave only in ways that you can plausibly claim to be religiously motivated.

This is, of course, at one level a case of cynical manipulation, as you rightly say. But at the same time the cynic is a prisoner of the religious vocabulary he employs. This is because, if the use of religious language is to be effective as a means of legitimising what he wants to do, he will have to limit himself to acting only in such a way that his behaviour remains *compatible* with his claim that he is religiously motivated. If, for example, he seeks to legitimise his commercial undertakings by claiming that they are examples of virtuous industriousness, he will have to make sure that he is indeed industrious. Mere money-lending and living off the interest will still appear illegitimate. The normative language you need to invoke in order to legitimise what you are doing will always serve, that is, to place constraints on the range of things you can do. So the cynicism of your manipulation has clear limits to it. Indeed, if you are not virtuous, perhaps you have all the more reason to try to make it appear that you are, in which case your behaviour will be all the more constrained.

JL: I think what you said can be particularly useful for political science of the contemporary societies. I mean political scientists here generally don't like ideals. They prefer to imagine that politicians are only running political enterprises, I'm totally not 'prisoner of ideas' as you said. So would it be the reason why you left them, why you abandoned the field of political science? Of course, I can understand you could be unhappy with the ordinary political sciences.

QS: Absolutely, it's such an ill-thought dichotomy. But one finds it as well among writers of political history, especially in the generation in which I was growing up, when the greatest English historian was thought to be a scholar called Lewis Namier, for whom it seemed obvious that all ideologies are simply ex post facto rationalisations. From which he inferred that there is no need to refer to people's professed principles when explaining why they behave as they do. Now that's recognisably a thesis of Marxism: that when I understand that the beliefs you profess in relation to

the moral or economic projects in which you engage are merely rationalisations of your class interests, I do not need to worry about the contents of your belief in order to explain your actions.

For me that is *the* non sequitur, and also the identifiable mistake in Marxist theories of ideology. It may indeed be the case that you are cynical with respect to the content of the beliefs which you invoke in order to legitimise your behaviour. But that does not mean that the ideals you profess are irrelevant to explaining how you behave. This is because, as I've been saying, your need to act in line with what you profess to believe will always constrain how you are able to act. So the ideals you profess always need to be invoked to explain how you actually behave, even if they never motivate you to act in any instance at all. This is the way, the rather roundabout way, in which there is a causal connection between principle and practice, and thus between professed ideals and the explanation of action.

I should perhaps add that I also believe, like any good post-modernist, that there is a yet further and vitiating error in Marxist theories of ideology. This stems from the reliance of Marxists on the notion of false consciousness. I don't think there's such a thing as the true contents of my consciousness ; I just think there are lots of things it's suitable for me to believe and lots of other things it's not appropriate for me to believe. But that doesn't yield any kind of idea of true consciousness which we can then measure up against false consciousness. It is interesting, I think, the way in which post-modernism embodies a profound critique of Marxism ; it leaves Marxists looking like old-fashioned positivists, still arguing that truth is simply a matter of correspondence to facts, as if the notion of a fact is an unproblematic one.

ET: About a global vision of your work: do you think that the foundations of our political world are more in Rome than in Greece'

QS: Yes I do think so, but I also think that much of the legacy of the Roman tradition has been set aside far too readily and needs to be reconsidered. But I certainly think that the direct legacy of Roman moral and political theory, and especially of Roman law, has been of enormous importance. It's from the *Digest* of Roman Law that we take much of our theory of private law, and many of our views about property and the state. There is a very interesting distinction here between Greek and Roman political thought. In the Greek tradition they're far more interested in questions about social harmony than in individual liberty, and there's a recurrent suspicion of private property, which perhaps reaches its apogee in Plato's *Republic*. This aspect of Greek political theory is disturbing to the Romans, for whom it generally seemed obvious that the main reason for having civil associations must be to protect property relations. Why else would we submit to the state? Here, as in other respects, the mainstream of later European legal and political theory owes far more to Rome than to Greece.

When I said, however, that there are elements in the Roman tradition that have too readily been set aside, I have in mind in particular the Roman understanding of political liberty, in which I have for some time been deeply interested. According to Roman law, freedom is not, as it largely is for us, a matter of being unconstrained in pursuit of your chosen ends. For us, freedom is usually taken to be a predicate of actions. But according to the Roman law account, freedom is the name of a status, the status of the citizen by contrast with the slave. Slaves are of course unfree *ex hypothesi,* but what makes the Roman discussion so interesting is its account of what *makes* slaves unfree. They are said to be unfree because they are dependent on the will of someone else, a master under whose control and in whose power they are condemned to live. So it follows that a free person must be someone who is *not* dependent on the will of others, is not under the control of someone else, but is

on the contrary ‘his own man’. Freedom is defined not as absence of constraint but as absence of dependence.

This view became discredited with the rise of liberal, individualistic assumptions in Anglophone political theory in the course of the seventeenth century. The key figure in this particular paradigm shift is Hobbes, and I have just completed a book in which I try to show how Hobbes was successful in setting aside the earlier and generally accepted view that freedom is a matter of living independently of the will of others. Hobbes argues, on the contrary, that you lose your freedom if and only if some other agency actually interferes with you in the pursuit of your goals. This was a very convenient conclusion on which to insist. No wonder it was so successful. It assures us that all contracts are freely undertaken so long as no coercion is involved. It also demands much less of the state. The Roman view of freedom requires the state to protect us from falling into dependence on others, and hence to protect us from the possibility that our rights might be undermined. Hobbes’s view only requires the state to protect us from actual acts of interference, a much simpler task (although one that modern liberal states are now signally failing to perform).

What I want to say here is thus that there is an aspect of the Roman legacy that has *not* exercised an influence over later political theory, but which it might be well worth thinking about again.

ET: Do you define some chronological limit to your field’

QS: Yes, I find that I have. I’ve really only worked in two historical periods. But as well as working as an historian I have done some purely philosophical work in political theory and in the philosophy of language, where the question of chronological limits doesn’t of course arise. And when I worked in the 1970s on the theory of democracy, I worked only with contemporary cases.

As an historian, however, I have done research only on the period of the Renaissance, especially the early Renaissance in Italy, and on the rise of absolutism in France and England in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I started by focusing on France in my first book, but in recent times I have mainly worked on the background to the English civil wars of the mid-seventeenth-century.

JL: In the continuation, what is your theory? I would say, I mean that there is much of course in the main body of your contribution, your analytical reading of some texts, contextualised reading. And, on the other side, you have some methodological texts. But sometimes I felt a missing link in terms that I don’t know what’s your theory of history. For example, you mention modernity, modern thought… Sometimes I have the impression that you have only two values, the ‘before’ and the ‘after’. For example, what is your theory about the State ‘after’, the emergence of what is the ‘modern State’? For example if we consider the question of the relationship between sovereignty and internal logics of legitimation, which is very important to me in your framework, we can very easily understand how it played, it worked in the Machiavellian style, but already in Leibniz, for example, distinguishes between sovereignty and majesty, and this is a way to introduce federalism, because in federalism you can have states which are not geopolitical states, which have not a complete use of sovereignty in that sense and nevertheless are full-ranged political bodies… So this kind of complexity which can only emerge after the emergence of the modern state and also the fact that there is a history of the state, of course after the welfare state, changes what we can call a State now and all this changes this… maybe the increasing overlapping between political society or political institutions on the one hand and the State on the other hand, because there are parts of political institutions which are not in the State and parts of the State which are not political this

isn't a very clear listing but… I think that there are very interesting developments of the political theory of the State and of political society and the political scene and legitimation and so on… we could expect from you and I didn't find them.

QS: There seem to be two closely interlinked questions for me to consider here. First you ask me about modernity. I have nothing interesting to say about modernity and I'm sure we should all stop talking about it. Nobody knows when it began, nobody knows when it yielded to post-modernity, or even if it ever really did. The concept is a complete reification, and I rather regret using it in the title of my first book, except of course that I was talking there about the modern world by contrast with the medieval one, a distinction which perhaps makes a bit more sense.

You also ask about the concept of the State. I like very much what you say about the complex logic of modern states, and it's certainly true that I have never properly written about this complexity. I am inclined to say about the state what I said at the start about all concepts that have a history, namely that they escape definition. I don't think we can hope to give a straightforward definition of the state. After the term 'state' and its equivalents (lo stato, l'état, Der Staat and so forth) began to be used in the western European vernaculars in the early-modern period, several rival conceptions of how the concept should be understood began to emerge. Sometimes the state was held to be equivalent to the body of the people. Sometimes it was taken to be another way of referring to the actual apparatus of government within a determinate territory. Sometimes it was taken to be the name of a *persona ficta* in whose name the government is obliged to act. All these conceptions have had their exponents in modern European political theory, and it would make no sense at all, I think, to ask which of these is *really* our concept of the state.

Even if we were to agree about which agency is to be identified with the state, we would still be left confronting a further range of questions about this agency itself. What, we still need to know, is the range and limit of its lawful power? Is its function merely to provide us with security? Or does it have a broader duty to look after us? If so, how broad is this duty? One striking changes over the past fifty years has been that, at the start of this period, states were being urged from many quarters to do more and more, whereas nowadays they are far more likely to be urged to do less and less. Germany, for example, still operates a large-scale welfare state, but the Germans are constantly being advised to adopt a different social model, one in which markets are allowed to exercise far more power and the state far less.

We are even told nowadays that the state is in decline, that perhaps the concept is no longer a useful one at all. This strikes me as a gross exaggeration. It is true, and very interesting, that in recent times the western powers have given up respecting what was always taken to be one of the defining rights of states, namely that no one had any right to tell them how to behave within their own territories. We have lately seen this principle widely challenged in the name of what has come to be called humanitarian intervention. So there is a sense in which the powers of *some* states may be said to have declined. On the other hand, the leading states in the world remain extremely powerful entities. The French state is even prepared to give instructions to young women on how to dress. Nor do I think it likely that the alleged rivals of states — in the form of international organisations, multi-national corporations and so on — will want to take on the distinctive powers of states, such as printing money, maintaining standing armies and the like.

JL: Don't you think in a sense there is a disenchanting of the State? It becomes a non-fictive person again. Because we speak to them no more as to an ideality, to an act of Plato, but to real people that become money with a contract'

QS: Yes, I do think that this is happening and that it is a worrying development. The whole point of the theory according to which the state is the name of a fictive person was to distinguish states from governments. This is why the concept of the state as a fictional person came to be of such importance in European public law. It was seen as a means of insisting that governments have duties — duties to uphold the public ends and purposes of the state. To insist that, in speaking about the state, we are speaking about nothing more than current apparatuses of power — about nothing more, as you say, than contracts with a government — is to risk undermining the possibility of setting limits to the powers of government. It is to risk making it too easy for current governments — as some claim is now happening in the United States — to use the apparatus of the state to promote not public purposes but rather the private ends of those who currently hold power.

JL: And, for instance, viewed from France, you may appear as a member of the intellectual party which would have this flag of fighting against liberalism. At the same time you have strongly criticised Marxism. I would like to have your view about the problem of liberty and freedom in the context of empowerment of multiple actors who have a certain power to use their freedom to destroy the political debate by over-using their liberty. For example, when you mentioned that there are two concepts of liberty, one including the necessity of pluralism, don't you accept to be enrolled in a kind of party that pretends to be for pluralism but in fact is for civil war? The idea that there is no possible compromise, there is no possible consensus, for example those heirs of structuralist Marxism who cannot imagine progress in society but only a breaking an eschatological view of history… Don't you think you are in fact closer to John Rawls for example than you admit? Because of some intellectual or friendly complicities'

QS: It is true that I criticise both liberalism and Marxism, but I do so for very different reasons in the two cases. I have already gestured at some of those reasons earlier in our conversation. What I mainly criticise in Marxism is its theory of base and superstructure and its accompanying theory of ideology, both of which seem to me totally misconceived, as I have tried to suggest. What I mainly criticise in liberalism is its understanding of the core concept of individual freedom. According to most liberal political theorists, to be free is simply to be unconstrained from acting at will. I want to insist on the neo-Roman view that it is possible for your liberty to be undermined even in the absence of interference. This is because liberty is basically taken away not by acts of interference but by structures of domination and dependence in society. To be dependent on the will of another is already to be deprived of your liberty, since you are no longer able to act according to your own will, but are obliged to mould your actions to suit the will of someone else. You only ever act by grace, never by right. Contemporary societies are filled with these dependency relationships, in families as well as in the workplace, and are filled in consequence with the many forms of self-censorship to which they give rise. My objection to the moral reach of liberalism is that it is so insensitive to these sources and manifestations of unfreedom. I don't in the least see that pleading for the recognition of these further freedoms is pleading for civil war ! I am simply pleading for liberal states to recognise that their obligations towards their citizens do not stop with the securing of their rights, but extend to ensuring that these right are held autonomously and not by the mere permission of anyone else.

You say that my commitments appear close to those of John Rawls, and ask whether there is any personal or intellectual complicity here. I knew Rawls only slightly, although we were colleagues for a year at Princeton and I admired him very much. If I look like a follower, it is mainly because he seemed, in his later writings, to adjust his earlier accounts of freedom and citizenship in such a way as to bring them closer to the kind of neo-Roman analysis I have just laid out. I have a number of doubts, however, about Rawls's approach to political theory *via* a theory of justice. One is that,

if the political process is seen essentially as a means to ensure distributive justice, this tends in effect to produce a kind of juridification of politics. The practical result is that everything has to be settled in the law courts in the last resort, which in fact is what seems increasingly to be happening in the United States. It is *this* way of conducting civil society, I think, which increasingly looks like a kind of low-level civil war. I am said to have numerous human rights, you are said to have equally numerous human rights, and when they collide there can be no negotiation, since rights are trumps, as Ronald Dworkin puts it. So there can only be some form of legal adjudication between us which we have to agree in advance shall be final, so that our conflict is arbitrarily brought to an end.

A better way of running a civil society, it seems to me, would be to give more power than we currently do to representative assemblies, and less to courts and executives. To put the same point in a different way, my priorities are those of someone who sees himself as a democrat. The threat to democracy from excessively powerful executives seems to me even more obvious than the threat from excessively powerful courts. The system we are currently operating, certainly in my country, isn't really democratic at all. What we have is what in the 18th century would have been called executive tyranny, where a small number of people can follow whatever policies they choose, the sole constraint being their desire to be re-elected after a set period. That's Rousseau's joke about the English ? they think they are free but they are only free when they elect their governments. To which he wonderfully adds that, when you see what governments they elect, you see that they deserve their slavery.

I worry too about the democratic deficit, as it has rightly been called, within the European Union. There currently appears to be a kind of anti-democratic rhetoric coming out of Brussels. The Union appears to be seeking to legitimise itself by other than democratic means. There seems increasingly to be a desire to rule through experts, to try to create a consensus among them, to seek legitimacy by following their advice, and then to sell the results to the people as what unavoidably must be done. This is certainly one way of running things, although it will give us, for example, genetically modified crops when it seems clear that most people don't want them. To summarise, what I am saying is that I would like to see us trying to take the institutions of democracy more seriously.

ET: What about your audience and your object: is it England, Europe, the West?

QS: It's such a good question. I mean, it's a strange world that we live in, because I write at the moment about English history but with the hope that some of the questions I'm raising, especially about freedom and representation, may have a much wider relevance. I hope they do, but I may of course be deceiving myself. I certainly don't like to think myself as just writing about English history. But I have to admit that my work tends to be quite detailed, and that at the moment it is largely centred on the English case.

It's not for me to speak, however, about the reach of my work, for as soon as one's scholarship is translated it goes out of one's control into a series of very different contexts in which it may look very different, may have very different resonances. I feel this loss of control and resulting strangeness even when my work is translated into French, to say nothing of Chinese. When a recent book of mine was published in French, one reviewer remarked that it was extraordinary that it should have appeared in a series edited by Pierre Bourdieu. The comment left me bewildered. Why was that extraordinary? I felt totally at a loss. In truth, when I travel to other countries I almost always feel at a loss to understand the intellectual life there. The only country, I must admit, in which I have any confidence that I may be communicating in the way I intend is England.

JL: And you wouldn't include North America in the hard core'

QS: No, indeed not. The United States strikes me as increasingly isolated from the kinds of intellectual interaction we have in Europe. Recently, I must admit, I have rather lost confidence in my ability to get people in American Universities interested in my work. I have frequently lectured in the States, and I lived there for several years, but increasingly there seems to me an intellectual as well as a political gap between America and Europe which is harder to bridge than used to be the case. But on the other hand, I have been delighted to find an increase of interest in my work in Europe in recent years. For the past twenty years and more I have always felt welcome in France and Italy, but lately I have been lecturing in Spain and Germany and especially the Nordic countries as well. I am very happy to be a European.

JL: So the traditional opposition between continental thought and Anglo-Saxon thought doesn't seem to operate here'

QS: No, I've never understood that way of dividing up the world. I have been much influenced by a number of Anglophone writers, of course, but at least as much by such continental writers as Foucault and, above all, Wittgenstein. Surely the best course of action is to look for guidance and illumination wherever we can find it.

Transcription de l'interview audio : André Ourednik.

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