

Diederik Smit en Wouter Hulstijn

Neither text, nor context

An interview with Quentin Skinner

Tijdens zijn bezoek aan Groningen sprak de Britse professor Quentin Skinner met Groniek over zijn werk van de afgelopen jaren, zijn bijdragen aan de historiografie van de politieke theorie en actuele problemen in de politiek.

On Friday the 13th October 2006 the first Kossmann lecture was held at the University of Groningen. Named after the late Professor Ernst Kossmann who died in 2003, and inspired by his work, this yearly event tries to renew the interest in political theory in Dutch historiography and focuses on recent trends in the study of political culture. This year's speaker was Quentin Skinner, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, who visited Groningen 23 years ago at the invitation of Professor Kossmann. During this visit the editors of *Groniek* interviewed him: an event which was repeated last autumn.

Educated at Gonville and Caius Colleg, Cambridge, he was elected into a teaching Fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge in 1962, where he has been ever since. Skinner's historical writings have been characterised by an interest in recovering the ideas of early Modern political writers. This has been spread over Renaissance republican authors (see *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* 1978), the 'pre-Humanist' *dictatores* of later medieval Italy, through Machiavelli, and more recently (in *Liberty before Liberalism*, 1998) the English republicans of the mid-seventeenth century. His work of the 1970s and 1980s was directed towards writing an account of the history of the modern idea of the state. In more recent publications he has preferred the more capacious term 'neo-Roman' to 'republican'.

Skinner is generally regarded as one of the two principal members of the influential 'Cambridge School' of the study of the history of political thought. The other principal member is the historian J.G.A. Pocock, whose *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* was a significant early influence. Another important stimulus came from the work of Peter Laslett, and more particularly from Laslett's edition of John Locke's *Two Treatises*

of *Government*. The 'Cambridge school' is best known for its attention to the 'languages' of political thought. Skinner's particular contribution has been to articulate a theory of interpretation which concentrates on recovering the author's intentions in writing classic works of among others Machiavelli, Thomas More and Thomas Hobbes. However, in the 1990s Skinner's attention turned towards the role of neo-classical rhetoric in early modern political theory, which resulted in his study of *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. More recently he has renewed his interest in the development of the concept of liberty over the centuries, a topic which was also the subject of this year's Kossmann-lecture.

When we interviewed you 23 years ago, you said that you had just held a lecture in Utrecht in which you wanted to show that the concept of liberty has changed over time. Today, you will be giving a lecture entitled 'How many concepts of liberty?'. Could one say that 'how to think of liberty' has been the main thread of your scholarly work in the past decades?

It certainly has been, yes. I'm quite surprised, though, that I was already talking about this issue at that time. I was working in that period on Renaissance philosophy and I became interested in the conception of freedom embodied in the republican tradition, but I don't think that I had worked systematically on later theories of freedom. At that time, if I had a polemical target, it was the view which you find for example in John Pocock's classic work the *Machiavellian Moment*,¹ that the conception of freedom that underlay the republicanism of the Renaissance was what in Anglophone philosophy would be called positive conception of freedom. Pocock was drawing on a long tradition of the discussion of freedom that you find for example in Machiavelli's *Discorsi*,² which connects freedom with virtue in such a way that the free actor is the virtuous actor. I wanted to say that this is a misunderstanding of the connection, and that the way to think about the connection between freedom and virtue in those writers is to think of virtue as a causal condition of the upholding of freedom. If you ask what they meant by freedom itself, it was not an unfamiliar idea of freedom. But I now think I wasn't really right about that last point, I think it was an unfamiliar view of freedom, but it was not at all the 'positive' view that Pocock had assumed.

1 J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment. Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton 1975).

2 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (1519) (*Gedachten over staat en politiek*. Paul van Heck ed.; Amsterdam 2000).

In your book Liberty before Liberalism you argue, by contrast with Isaiah Berlin, that a 'positive' concept of liberty is a reasonable option. Do you think it is possible that in modern society the Neo-Roman concept of freedom could regain its dominant position in politics?

I should begin by stressing that I distinguish the Neo-Roman view of freedom from the positive view of freedom completely and categorically. The positive view of freedom that Berlin identified and also denounced is the view that I have just been talking about, that is to say that there is a positive content to the idea of liberty. That freedom is not simply absence of constraint on action, but that freedom is action of a certain kind. It is a very hard idea to grasp. I didn't want to say that I endorsed that view, I just wanted to say that you can make it coherent. The philosopher who has done most in the Anglophone tradition in recent times to make it coherent is Charles Taylor, especially in his great treatise *Sources of the self*.³ His view is that freedom names a particularly pattern of actions, so that we could say of someone that they are not fully or truly or really free unless they act in a certain way. The sources of this view are recognizably Hegelian, and Taylor is of course a great expert on the philosophy of Hegel. The underlying assumption, which is very strongly contrary to liberal political theory, is that human nature has an essence. And then freedom is the ideal of acting in accordance with that essence.

As I say, it is a hard idea to grasp. But I think you can make sense of it if you think of it as an Aristotelian idea, that we are political animals, that man is the *zoon politikon*, the political animal. Then freedom would be politics, because you would most fully realize the essential character of your humanity in acting politically. So that's one way of trying to make sense of the idea of positive liberty.

Now, I want to say that the Neo-Roman view has no conceptional connection with that way of thinking about freedom at all. On the contrary, if we're talking about positive and negative, I want to say that the Neo-Roman view is a species of negative liberty. But where I went wrong in my critic of Pocock, and people who had seen positive freedom in Renaissance philosophy, was that I've now come to think that the idea of freedom that underpins the whole of Roman and Neo-Roman and therefore Renaissance philosophy is a negative theory, but in a different sense from the idea fundamental to liberalism. The liberal idea of negative liberty is the

3 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity* (Cambridge 1989).

idea that freedom is absence of interference with your capacity to exercise your powers in some way. The distinctive characteristic of the Neo-Roman tradition, I think, is that it breaks this connection between unfreedom and interference. It wants to say that you can be unfree even in the absence of any interference. And it wants to say that is because freedom is not just a predicate of actions, it's the name of a particular status. The antonym of freedom is not interference but servitude. So the fundamental contrast is between the status of the free person and the status of the slave. To be free is not to be subject to the power of anyone else.

But isn't everybody subject to the power of somebody else?

Right, so we have to say subject to the *arbitrary* power of somebody else. We have to say that you are unfree if there is any identifiable power that can itself act at will and potentially contrary to your interests, simply in virtue of your dependence upon that arbitrary power. The contrast is with the free citizen who is not subject to arbitrary power, because the power exercised in their political society is in some way exercised with their consent. What has to be worked out, then, is how do we ensure that all political power is subject to our consent? You might want to say, well there are certain circumstances in which we're all subject to that kind of arbitrary power. Maybe so, but what I am saying is that a free society would be a society in which there is no such arbitrary power.

I suspect that the radical Neo-Roman writers of the English Revolution would think that we are all slaves in the societies in which we're living. That's to say, we are increasingly subject to the power of executives rather than legislatures for which we have voted and which we think are to some degree under our control. And the extent to which these executives help themselves to arbitrary power would be what the exponents of Neo-Romanism would worry about. The view that our rulers take, certainly in my country, is that civil rights are not in jeopardy because they're not interfering with our civil rights in any way. But the anxiety of the Neo-Roman theorists relates to the *character* of the power they have taken, not whether it is being exercised to our detriment. The capacity to exercise political power to the detriment of those who are subject to it is, according to on the Neo-Roman analysis, what makes us slaves, not the exercise of that capacity. The exercise of that capacity is what they call tyranny, of course. But what produces slavery is not tyranny, but there being power within the society which is itself tyrannical power. The question of whether it is exercised or not is not the important point.

Just by being anxious, being aware what the government could do, one enslaves oneself.

Yes, that's the claim. If we're talking about this view of freedom, we have to separate out two aspects of it, which even in the best contemporary literature on the subject, for example Philip Pettit's major work called *Republicanism*,⁴ don't properly separate out. First of all, there is the existential condition of those who live in servitude. That is, the condition of those who live subject to the arbitrary power of others. They may not even be aware that they're subject to arbitrary power, but if there's arbitrary power in that society, that's to say, power that could be exercised over them but doesn't track their interests, then they're living in servitude. That's the fundamental claim of the Neo-Romans. But they also have a second claim to make. This is that it's impossible that you won't quite soon realize that you're subject to arbitrary power – for example, a brutal husband whom you can't control or to the discretionary powers that immigration officials have, or something like that. You quite soon come to see that you are, with respect to these people, subject to their arbitrary will. You haven't consented to this, they're not subject to regulation, you are simply in their power.

Now, the second claim made by Neo-Roman theorists is that, as soon as you attain this self-awareness, you will begin to censor yourself. Think of the Danish case, for instance.⁵ They discovered that there was something that couldn't be discussed. They thought it could be discussed, but they were mistaken. I'm trying to make a distinction, a philosophical distinction, between the existential condition of servitude, which is what we've talked about, and what happens once you reflect that that is the condition in which you are living. You start to think, 'well, I'd better not say that', or 'I'd better say that', or 'I'd better not do that', or 'better do that'. There are things I can't say, there are things I can't do, there are things I must say, there are things I must do. You begin to shape your responses in the light of the recognition of, well now, of what exactly? Not of the fact that you will be put in jail if you say something or do something, but of the fact that you don't know what will happen, what might happen. Nothing might happen, it might

4 Philip Pettit, *Republicanism. A theory of freedom and government* (Oxford 1997).

5 Skinner refers here to the international commotion in the first months of 2006 after the in September 2005 in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of Mohammed had been published all over the world. Many Muslims found them blasphemous and turned their anger against Danish (diary) products and embassies.

be all right, but in the face of arbitrary power you cannot be sure, so you self-censor to minimise risk.

Would you say that it's one of the main tasks, or the benign task of political theory, to take into account such theoretical possibilities?

Yes, I do want to say that. I also want to say something more general, which is that all political theories are to do with legitimizing or de-legitimizing existing state of affairs. We don't theorize politics in a void. We're always concerned with what states of affairs can or cannot be held to be legitimate. Most politics in democratic societies is a shifting ground about that. We should accept that, and indeed we should accept that as historians. It seems to me that, if you look at even the most abstract of the great political philosophical systems, it's usually quite easy at a distance in time to identify what positions are being criticized, what positions are being defended, what is being attacked, what is being denounced, what is being ignored. You can easily place these texts into a political context, showing that even the most abstract works constitute some kind of intervention in the politics of their time. We shouldn't think that that makes them less important; I think we should simply agree that that's what the activity of theorizing politics is like.

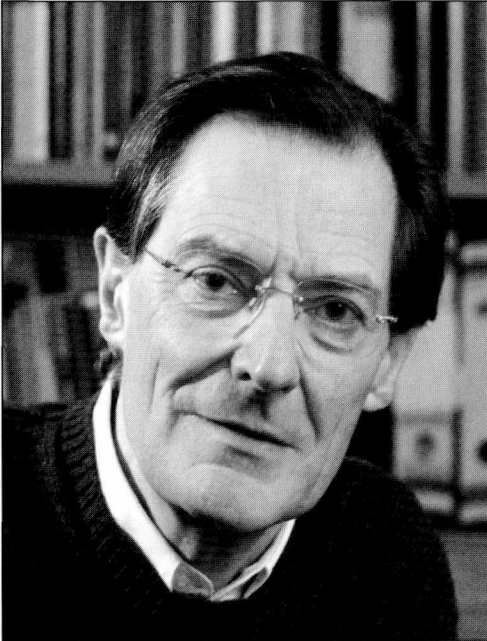
Well, I'd rather say that that's the good thing about it.

Yes, that's not of course how we were brought up, and it's not how we were taught, but of course I agree with you.

About your methods of research. Back in the late nineteen sixties you offered your methodological innovations as a challenge to both the existing Marxist-contextualist approaches and a sheer textual approach. Why were you dissatisfied with those existing methods?

My dissatisfaction with the then very strongly prevailing Marxist methodologies, especially in France, was their reductionism. The view they took was, roughly, that social and political philosophies are epiphenomena, that they are simply rationalisations of particularly socio-economic positions and therefore have no independent role to play in historical explanation. But all sorts of things are wrong with thinking like that. One is that we might think that there are things to do as historians other than provide causal explanations. That has become much more widely agreed since then, because questions about interpretation, especially in post-modern culture,

have become so much more central than questions about causal explanation, so it's difficult to think ourselves back into the period in which causal explanation was supposed to be what the historical task was. But another thing which is wrong is that, even supposing we agree that we're looking for causal explanations of political movements, the idea that ideologies are simply rationalizations which can be omitted from explanations misses out everything that we were talking about earlier, about legitimation. So I think



Professor Quentin Skinner.

that there were two things that were completely wrong with the Marxist story. If you need to be able to legitimise what you are doing, then you need to be able to describe what you are doing in terms of accepted normative principles. But if that is so, these principles are far more than epiphenomena.

As to what I wanted to say about the purely textual approach, as you call it, I wanted to say something very different by way of a critique there. When I was first interested in these questions in the nineteen sixties there was a very strong tradition, not just in

Anglophone countries, but a very strong German and even stronger French tradition, of 'explication de texte': that you took a major treatise and simply tried to give a sense of how the argument was put together. I wanted to say that this embodied a kind of mistake about interpretation or, if you like, a mistake about meaning. To put it differently: I wanted to say that interpretation shouldn't simply be an attempt to recover meanings. Of course post-modern students of interpretation carried that thought very much further, and I'm not at all opposed to the direction in which they carried it. My own claim is that there's something completely separate which should be central to interpretation, which is a question not about what words mean

or what sentences mean or what texts mean, but what was meant by writing those texts, what the act of writing those texts signified.

I'm interested, to put it in philosophical jargon, not just in meaning but in speech acts, and I want to separate those two and to say that the recovery of speech acts is a separate enterprise. It's a very important enterprise, as we all know, because we're always saying to people in ordinary conversation things like: 'I wasn't insulting you, I was just commenting on what you said', or 'I didn't really mean that as a criticism, I was only observing...'. These are all speech acts, aren't they? To observe, to comment, to criticize, to question, to doubt. Now, texts are a myriad of speech acts, amongst other things. Sometimes there are more speech acts in texts than there are words. I proposed that interpretation should basically be about the recovery of speech acts. Now why I proposed that was for reasons we talked about earlier, which is that this helps us to see what texts are doing and not just what they're saying. They have the character of being interventions of some kind in the social, political and moral the debates of the societies in and for which they were written. And interpretation becomes the task of discovering what sort of interventions they constituted. What positions were they upholding, criticizing, satirising, ignoring, developing? So, if you like, I'm saying that all political theories are dialogue, and the act of interpretation is in large part the act of recovering what dialogues they're taking part in. And that's of course not easy to do. By dialogue we don't necessarily mean a discussion with the person sitting next to you; the most important dialogue might be with Aristotle or Heidegger. The task of interpretation isn't simply the task of placing a text into some obvious context. A lot of imagination and learning is needed to see what is the appropriate context. But that's the task, I thought, and that's what made me hostile to the idea that we've performed the act of interpretation when we have given an account of the contents of a text.

You seem to have found much inspiration in the work and the writings of R.G. Collingwood, who has especially here on the Continent long been a quite controversial person. Why is the hermeneutic approach of Collingwood exactly so appealing to you?

I don't want to say that it alone is appealing to me. Obviously the distinction between what language is and what language does, or however you care to frame that distinction between meaning and use, is an insight that I owe to the work I did in the nineteen sixties on Wittgenstein. Very similar

work in the Anglophone tradition was being done by Quine at that time: questioning the very idea of meanings. Quine's holism and Wittgenstein's holism were very important inspirations for the work I was doing. What interested me in Collingwood was a very specific feature of his hermeneutics, which he lays out best in his *Autobiography*,⁶ and which he calls the logic of question-and-answer. This was a very ambitious philosophical program which was designed as a critique of Bertrand Russell's propositional logic. Collingwood wanted to say that in the human sciences the appropriate logic is not 'propositional'. It is a logic of question-and-answer. What attracted me to that was that, if you unpack what he means by a logic of question-and-answer, it comes out looking very like what I was saying a few minutes ago about seeing texts as interventions. It says, in effect that, when confronted with a text, the hermeneutic task is to seek to uncover the questions to which the text was an answer, and that's the fundamental interpretative act.

What I found very valuable about that, in an intellectual tradition in which philosophy was seen as having a set of canonical questions, was the insight that in philosophy the questions change all the time as well as the answers. It's very difficult to recapture how far in Anglo-Saxon philosophy at the time there were felt to be something called Philosophical Questions, and that you could list them. And then the history of philosophy was seen as a series of more or less incompetent attempts to answer those questions. The task of philosophy was seen as offering better answers to those questions. What I found very liberating in Collingwood was the thought that philosophy is not a series of canonical questions to which we try to offer answers. It's far more meshed in with societies which continuously change, and therefore in which the questions that interest those societies themselves continually change. There's nothing static about the philosophical enterprise. So those were the two things that I found and still find very exiting in Collingwood.

Following Collingwood, your method emphasises the importance of the author's intention. What do you think of the sceptic notion that an author's intention can never be known because we lack the ability to 'rethink' someone's thoughts?

Well, there are several points to be made here. One is that I think it was a serious tactical mistake on my part to emphasize this very mentalist notion

6 R.G. Collingwood. *An autobiography* (Londen 1939).

of intention in talking about interpretation. I don't really need the concept of intentionality in order to make the points that I want to make about interpretation. I just need the notion of textuality or discourse, the ways of putting the point that Foucault foregrounded.

The other point I want to make, however, is that one of the reasons that people are frightened of talking about intentionality stems from a mistake about what the intentionalist is committed to. Wittgenstein is a very good guide here to how we should be thinking about intentions in relation to interpretation. Intentions are embodied, because the speech acts we utter are acts in virtue of the intentions embodied in them. But the understanding of them doesn't require us to enter into the head of the person issuing the speech act. The intentions we are seeking to recover are public, not mental entities.

The idea that we can't talk about intentions because they're mental entities is, in other words, a mistake about what we talk about when we talk about intentions. When we talk about intentions and interpretation, we're talking about speech acts, but speech acts are acts, and all acts are identified as the acts they are in virtue of the intentions embodied in them. For example, the act of waving as opposed to the act of raising your arm for no reason is a meaningful act in virtue of embodying a certain intention. And waving is an intentional act. 'Waving good-bye' is a conventional act and I infer the intention from the conventional character of the act. So the whole thing is out in the public realm. I can of course make mistakes. I can think that you're signalling that you're about to turn right, when in fact you are waving to a friend. So I crash into you. Of course things can go wrong. But the important philosophical point is that there's nothing private or mentalist about the intentions involved.

That's one of the reasons that you shifted your attention more to rhetorics?

Very much so, exactly. What I find is that the whole classical tradition of rhetoric is of the very greatest relevance to thinking about interpretation, because it's so sensitive to questions of language and all the different intentions that go into the use of it, persuasive intentions in particular. So to summarize, I'm happy to have given up a vocabulary which was tactically a blunder, but I do feel that, when people criticized me for being unduly intentionalist, they misunderstood what I wanted to say about intentionality.

In the eighties the debate in which your critics were involved was dominated by several dichotomies. For example 'text' versus 'context' and 'political theory' versus 'the history of political theory'. Do you feel that you are still under the same criticism, or has the object of that criticism changed with the changing emphasis in your scholarly work?

The criticism which I find I've been more subjected to in recent times comes from post-modern writers on interpretation. They think that I'm committed to a view of intentionality which writers like Derrida have completely exploded. Now, there's something which Derrida has, if not exploded, certainly very brilliantly criticised and that's the traditional notion of meaning. I'm more than happy to do that myself. But he does not have anything much of interest to say about the view of interpretation that we've been talking about. So I've wanted to say to my post-modernist critics that they haven't correctly identified my project.

Talking about easily engaging criticism. In the seventies and eighties where we're talking about, the criticism was that you approached the study of the past in an antiquarian way. You don't seem to think that was an unjustified accusation, because at the end of the general preface to your 2002 Visions of Politics⁷ you utter the hope, indeed your 'highest hope' that you 'may be able to contribute something of more than purely historical interest to these current debates'. So you use the very last sentence of the preface to this three-volume collection of articles and essays to express the hope not to have done antiquarian history. Why did you do that? Don't you consider the accusation of antiquarianism as a bit strange?

You mean that I'm giving in too much to the accusation? Well, I'm very grateful for your response, because what I want to say about the accusation of antiquarianism is two different things, which go in different directions. One is that I want my work to be as historical as I can possibly make it. If you can show me that I've misidentified some historical feature of a text or that I've misinterpreted it by being unhistorical or anachronistic, for me those are very grave accusations. I want to write as historically as I can. The reason I want to do that goes back to what we were saying earlier about not thinking of philosophy as a discipline with a set number of questions to which there are answers. But on the other hand, I do hope that, if we can manage historically to reconstruct what earlier traditions in the history of philosophy were talking about, this may in itself turn out to be interesting

7 Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vol. (Cambridge 2002).

for us here and now. It is this hope, for example, that has animated my work on different theories of liberty. I certainly want the history to be of some use, and I admit that I incline to be a bit philistine about forms of historical enquiry in which I can't see any current usefulness.

But still, you take the accusation of antiquarianism very seriously. For example, in your Inaugural lecture Liberty before Liberalism you address this question for about four pages and you end by trying to show that you did not do antiquarian history. So it seems a very important matter to you.

I suppose that it stems from what I've just been saying. I am professionally worried as an historian by the danger that our studies may become merely antiquarian. We've professionalized the study of history to such a degree that people are able to make honourable and important careers out of writing works the value of which for us here and now sometimes escapes me. Now, I'm not saying, I hope, that works of history are of no value unless we can say they are of 'relevance' to our present concerns. On the contrary, I'm trying to say the opposite, that we can enlarge our sense of our present concerns through the study of the past. But I do nevertheless want us to be very sensitive to the accusation of antiquarianism.

That's interesting. So by emphasizing that one should not conduct just antiquarian history, you are in a way criticizing those who do. You're taking criticism on yourself, but by doing that you're criticizing other people, or making them aware of what their history is for.

That's exactly right. That puts it better than I've put it, because of course I don't want to name names.

Jonathan Israel was here just two days ago. In his latest book Enlightenment Contested, he breaks a lance for a new method for studying the interaction of ideas and society at large. By this method, which he calls 'controversialist' he wants to combine the good aspects of the Cambridge School, Begriffsgeschichte from among others Koselleck, and the more sociological approach of the so called 'new social history'.⁸ And with this more or less new method

8 Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment contested. Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man 1670-1752* (New York etc. 2006) 23: "The result may usefully be termed the "controversialist" approach to intellectual history, a methodology envisaging the interaction between society and ideas as a series of encounters in which concepts partly shared and partly disputed are deemed not the sole motor of social and po-

the scholar will be able to be more objective than both the 'old intellectual history' and Cambridge Diskursgeschichte made possible. Professor Israel claims that: 'As a methodology it employs the general historical process itself to locate the key ideas of the time and sift out those superimposed as "key" by later schools of thought, and historians.' What do you think of the attempt of Professor Israel to merge the three different methodologies into one which he dubs 'controversialist'? And especially of his claim that this approach enables the historian to write a more objective history, which as he says, ought to be every historian's 'inescapable and constant concern and duty'.

I would have to think a lot about what Jonathan is saying here. I didn't realize that he had made a large-scale methodological pronouncement. Maybe I could just make two observations. The first goes back to what we were saying at the very beginning of our talk. He assumes that we are trying to explain the processes of social change and that the fundamental question is 'how do the ideas fit into the story of that social change?' When I was talking earlier, I was saying that that seems to me the sort of question that gets left over from a Marxist way of thinking about intellectual history, and I want to get away from that completely. I don't want to ask about the role of ideas in social change, because I don't want to think of ideas simply as parts of causal processes. I want to think of them as modes of legitimization. The process of understanding them, as it seems to me, is fundamentally the process of trying to see what role they played in the society in and for which they were written, in the legitimizing or de-legitimizing of its activities and beliefs. The project of treating them as causes of social change is not one that I think it appropriate to undertake. We are never going to be able to identify what exact role they played.

What was the order? Was it society first and then ideas or vice versa?

What I want to say is that this is a *question mal posée*. The whole thing comes to us as a package. But the idea that we can untie the package and assign a certain weight to the ideas and then a certain weight to peoples' annual incomes seems to me just the kind of Marxist history that I was trying to

litical change, since material shifts remain major factors, but the prime channelling and guiding force.' And on page 25: 'A notable advantage of such a "controversialist" method is the guidance it affords with the perennial problem of determining what is more and what less representative, what is more and what less important, who and what were talked about more and who and what less, in other words what the canon of principal thinkers and ideas *really* was.' (Italics original.)

get away from. I do think that, if what I'm being asked to say is: 'what role did Spinoza play in the French Revolution?', that's the kind of question that I think we mustn't ask, and for several reasons. One is that we shall never know the answer. You simply cannot unpack bits and pieces of the historical process, label one as the role of ideas and trace its course of influence. I don't see how you could ever come up with historically persuasive answers to this sort of question. The second point is: this is not what we should be doing. I don't think we can ever write convincing histories about the alleged influence of specific texts. As I have been saying, texts become canonical because of things that later societies want from them. The kind of history I would like to encourage would therefore focus on the changing functions of particular texts in different societies.

But the epistemological addition Israel makes is that the process shows itself to the historian in a way and the historian can thereby be objective to that history. But objectivity and history that's a kind of difficult relationship since the last sixty years. Is it important to you to be objective?

Not at all. No, I would not aspire to the notion of objectivity in my own work. And the reason would be this: that whatever questions you can ask about a text, and here Gadamer is a very important guide, will be questions that stem from a particular horizon of interest and a particular engagement with the text. That horizon is changing all the time. I become more and more persuaded by Gadamer's basic thought that what we see in the great textual traditions that we study as historians of philosophy is to some degree given to us by what our society enables us to see. And that changes in our society change our perceptions at the same time. Maybe you can end up saying that that's what objectivity is, but it's really much more a sceptical story about objectivity. It's saying that the fusion of horizons, in Gadamer's phrase, is the most you can expect.

In Visions of Politics you mention sovereignty. One attributed to the state and one to the people. Now one could maybe say there's a third and that's the one of Professor Ankersmit. As you may know Ankersmit thinks that in a representative democracy all the legitimate political power is essentially aesthetic. Because, metaphorically said, the power wells up, as he says, when a population unfolds itself into a group of people that is represented and another group of people representing the former one. Legitimate political power originates in the hollow between the two groups. 'It follows', and

I quote, 'that in a representative democracy legitimate political power is possessed by neither voter, representative, nor state'. Therefore, he claims, 'should we abandon the doctrine of popular sovereignty just like that of the divine right of kings'. The voter entrusts a group of people for four years with the use of legitimate political power, but neither the voter, nor that group of people own the state or the political powers embodied by it. And I quote again: 'Sovereign power exists but is in nobody's possession in a representative democracy'. What do you think of this reasoning?

Well, I like the sound of that very much. It seems to me that we inescapably operate a representative system in all the modern nation states, simply because of their size. We do therefore have two contrasting views about the people. One is that they are sovereign, but the other is that they can't exercise their sovereignty. That has to be exercised in their name by someone to whom they entrust it. Now, the difficulty that we find ourselves in is that this entrusting has to be for a sufficiently long period of time for there to be some stability of political order. This goes back to what we were saying at the very beginning about the extent of unauthorised power which can arise as a result. What I would want to add is that on any theory of authorisation you would want to have some feedback system built in to it. The people, or if you are a Hobbesian the individual members of the *populus*, might be held to authorise the representation of their power, but if what Professor Ankersmit is saying is that the power represented is not the power of the people, I agree with that. Because the sovereign, on the Hobbesian theory, is the representative of the state and the state is a fictive person that cannot be identified with the power of the people. That is in fact the theory we operate. But you might want to say that what makes that an acceptable system is that, although the sovereign does not represent the individual persons or even the body of the people who authorise the holding of sovereign power, nevertheless misrepresentation of the people's interests has to have some means of being voiced. So that although it is of course true that we hand over powers of action to representatives and they represent the state, that is to say some notion of the public good or the common interest, we must nevertheless in any democratic theory retain to ourselves the right to be able to insist that the public good or the common interest is not being represented.

Answering to our remark that Ankersmit prefers revitalisation of the political party above forms of direct democracy, such as the referendum.

It seems to me that I've conceded that rule by referendum runs into impossibilities, but I'm not saying by any means that the entrusting to political

parties of the authority to operate the powers of the state is the right answer. It is what we do, but of course it means that we have people operating the powers of the state who may act contrary to what large bodies of people think to be the people's interest. I'm interested in how that notion of the state, that's to say the common good or public interest, can be articulated when those whom we've entrusted with the power to represent that notion of the common interest don't seem to us to be doing so.

And Ankersmit thinks that can best be done through the political party, not through NGO's, civil society etc. Because he thinks that's an unpolitical notion.

But I was saying that it doesn't work through political parties! Because political parties in modern nation states are so well disciplined by executives that they are in the position of servitude that we talked about earlier. I hope rather little from them. We know what their commitments are. They are committed to be re-elected. They are heavily disciplined. For example, in my own country, when we were taken into war in Iraq, a referendum would of course have said 'no'. If that was the voice of the people, it would have said 'no'. Millions marched with banners saying 'not in our name'. (By the way, notice that that embodies an idea of representation, that we're being misrepresented.) But there was absolutely no possibility that the political parties would ever do anything except agree with the executive.

Well that's arbitrary too, because the Crown has the power to announce war and peace, like in the old days...

Well that's another matter and that's very important. It was rather little discussed in the debate. But it's true that war and peace remains a royal prerogative in Great Britain, and that these prerogatives are now operated by the executive. Yes, that's arbitrary.

Well, perhaps we should ask a final question. Next month you will be rewarded quite a prestigious prize in Italy. So congratulations...

Oh, that's kind of you to know that. Thank you very much!

Does this mean you will continue your research over the next years? And what can we expect?

I hope to continue my research, yes. I am obliged to retire from my university in two years time, because there's a statutory retiring-age on the position

that I hold. But I have accepted a professorship at the University of London, which will continue in my retirement and so I shall move to London in two years time and start a new job there. As to the research projects which I have, I have two, and they both arise out of issues we have talked about this morning. The first is that I am attempting at the moment to complete my work on the theory of freedom. Last year I gave the Adorno lectures in Frankfurt on freedom and obligation and they have to be published and I am just completing that script. And my next project goes back to work that I did in the 1990's on classical and Renaissance rhetoric and the theory of eloquence. I was persuaded to go back to that work by friends in the department of English literature at my university, who were producing a book on figures of speech, on *ornatus*. And I agreed to contribute to that volume. We had a little conference in which we read our drafts to each other. And my colleagues were very insistent that, in respect of all the techniques I was talking about, the most interesting writer to think about in the Renaissance period in English literature would be William Shakespeare. And I very recklessly agreed to write something about William Shakespeare and the rhetorical arts, which I did. And in fact I have now written two papers about Shakespeare and rhetoric, which are both going to be published. As a result I have been invited to give the Clarendon lectures at the University of Oxford, which is their series on English literature, and I have recklessly agreed that I shall give a course of lectures called 'Shakespeare and the rhetorical arts'. So I am back trying to write about something I pretend I know about, which is the art of eloquent speech in the Renaissance. I want to approach the drama as a genre in which there were arguments on both sides in the rhetorical style, seeing drama as rhetoric and trying to approach the drama of the period in that way. So wish me luck!

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