

Kari Palonen:

*Quentin Skinner. History, Politics, Rhetoric*

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003

207 pages (bibliography, indices)

ISBN: 0-7456-2857-5

Price: £15.99 (\$24.95)

Appearing in the Polity Press series on 'key contemporary thinkers', Kari Palonen's *Quentin Skinner. History, Politics, Rhetoric* is an introductory book with a self-avowedly broad appeal. "The book will be essential reading for students and scholars of political and social theory, history, philosophy, and cultural studies", we are told on its back cover. That it could also be of interest to rhetoricians is an implicit claim of the subtitle, and the claim is reinforced by the table of contents, which announces that the title of chapter six is "From Philosophy to Rhetoric". It is with the specific intent of determining Skinner's relevance to rhetorical scholars that the book has been read by the present reviewer.

On the very first page Palonen declares his agreement with Skinner's proposal that "novelty should be used as the main criterion for assessing the quality and significance of scholarly contributions" (p. 1). It is Palonen's declared purpose to apply this test to Skinner's own academic work, and one could argue by extension that the reviewer should apply a similar measure to Palonen's efforts. Using such a standard has the benefit of being in hermeneutical correspondence with both Palonen and his subject, but it also displays the problematic meta-position of the review: it is a presentation and evaluation of Palonen's presentation and evaluation of Skinner. In undertaking this task I shall seek to remain loyal to Palonen's (and Skinner's) declared purposes and explicit criteria of success. Yet, just as Palonen ends his presentation of Skinner on an independent note (p. 177), so I shall conclude by considering whether other understandings and criteria than those presented in the book are relevant to the appraisal of it.

Palonen uses a dual strategy for the presentation of Skinner: "my reading of Skinner's work both does justice to the internal history of his work and looks for certain recurrent *topoi* in different writings of Skinner" (p. 7). Palonen here understands *topoi* in the broad sense of general themes or abstract modes of argumentation, that is, he uses *topoi* as a means of locating general tendencies in Skinner's work. Chronologically, Palonen divides Skinner's scholarly career into five phases, each of which proves to correspond particularly well with one of the recurring *topoi*. The comprehensive presentation of Skinner's work can, therefore, be divided into five substantial chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Each of the five chapters constitutes an independent argument in support of the "general thesis on the novelty and singularity of Skinner's work for political theorizing" (p. 7).

In the "Introduction" Palonen accounts for the perspective from which he will be presenting Skinner (1941-); this perspective is in itself Skinnerian, building on principles that Skinner applies in his work. Thus, Palonen's is a reinterpretation that does not claim objectivity (pp. 1-2), but rather sees the contingency of all understanding to be heuristically valuable (p. 4), and seeks to prove its worth in competition with other partial perspectives (p. 2). The angle of inclination characteristic of Palonen's perspective is set by the assumption that "thinking politically is an aspect of the activity of politics itself" (p. 3), an assumption which Palonen

terms “the Skinnerian revolution”. While Palonen sees his own perspective as being very close to Skinner’s, there is also an insistence on detachment and distance, mainly obtained by reading Skinner’s Anglophone work against a Continental background (p. 6).

The second chapter, “History as an Argument”, surveys Skinner’s first years in academe and his earliest scholarly contributions that should be seen as interventions into the debate about the value of philosophical and historical approaches to politics. Skinner argues for the dissolution of the disciplinary lines of demarcation: “he blurs the distinction between ‘purely’ philosophical and ‘merely’ historical approaches by insisting on the value of a historical argument for the philosophical question of interpretation” (p. 20). Thus, according to Palonen, Skinner insists that political theories should be understood and evaluated in their proper historical contexts and in relationship with the active political life of their time. Skinner denies that political philosophy can be abstracted from time and place and rejects the possibility of establishing and understanding principles and concepts independently of the actual circumstances. While this position leads to an insistence that historically held beliefs should be evaluated on their own terms, it also entails a recognition of the inescapable distance between past and present. As a result of this distance, past events and ideas always retain a degree of strangeness to present interpreters. Skinner does not think the distance should be overcome; rather, we should “appreciate both the discontinuity with the past and the contingency of the present” (p. 26).

In chapter three, “Theories as Moves”, Palonen investigates Skinner’s turn to Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s theories of linguistic action as well as his subsequent reappraisal of texts and politics as such linguistic actions. With the speech-act theory Skinner gains a platform for both criticising other scholars and performing more refined variations of the kind of historical analysis he was already advocating in his earliest years. When the meaning of words is assumed to be located in their use, attention is drawn to the active dimension of politics and to the political dimension of the history of ideas:

All tendencies to treat ideas as if they are universally valid or widely shared appear dubious to [Skinner]. A history of ideas should instead consist of the singularization of the use of words (in statements) in relation to agents, situations, and intentions. The historization of the uses marks a discontinuity between ideas, conceived as moves of the agents. The singularization politicizes intellectual and conceptual change in so far as in a political situation a plurality of agents are always competing with each other, and in some respects striving for specific shares of power. (p. 36)

The turn to linguistic action also means that Skinner comes to understand texts (concrete speakers’ intentional utterances) and contexts (the range of constraints placed on the speaker, in particular the formal and substantial conventions of the time) as interrelated rather than in opposition (p. 39). Again, the historian’s problem of seeking insight into a situation from which he or she is always distanced is highlighted, and this limitation is turned into a possibility. In Skinner’s action-theoretic perspective, the historian becomes “someone who intends to mediate an understanding of past contexts and their conventions as contributions to current debates about other topics” (p. 42). The consequence of the argument presented in this chapter is that historians should study how theories have been used as moves in political arguments in order to present past conceptualisations as alternatives to present presuppositions.

The ‘Skinnerian revolution’ – the shift from “thoughts about politics to thinking politically” (p. 67) – is presented in chapter four, “*The Foundations: A History of Theory Politics*”. This chapter deals with Skinner’s two-volume book *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), the first of which covers the Renaissance period and the second the age of the

Reformation. ‘History of theory politics’ is Palonen’s generic term for Skinner’s work. It designates “a political action that deals with striving for shares of power based on theorizing, as opposed, for example, to those based on the sheer number of the adherents” (p. 68). According to Palonen, the ‘foundations’ to which Skinner refers are historical processes, not a fixed basis of any kind, and the main aim of the two volumes is to investigate how the state came to figure as a “master noun” or an “indispensable *topos* of modern political debate” (p. 70). Palonen appraises *The Foundations* as a significant renewal of the genre of studying political thought, and highlights the shift in perspective from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa* as its main contribution (pp. 93-94). The idea that theorising about politics is itself a political activity offers a paradigm “according to which we can use the perspective of studying thought, the horizon of the possible, as an indispensable perspective on studying politics-as-activity in general” (p. 94).

“Rethinking Political Liberty”, the book’s fifth chapter, in a sense provides an exemplification of Skinner’s approach in that it presents the application of thought-as-politics to the concept of liberty. As Palonen sees it, Skinner’s main purpose in studying liberty is to recover “lost treasures”, that is, now forgotten understandings of the concept. Skinner investigates various conceptualisations of liberty, but pays special attention to Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’ understandings. In particular the possibility of combining personal freedom with state intervention is discussed, and Skinner uses his historical studies to pose a number of arguments against currently dominant positions:

Against ‘liberals’ or contractarians, in his discussions on Machiavelli Skinner emphasizes that historically it has been possible to combine a negative conception of liberty conceptually with a ‘republican’ polity and with a participatory and interventionist view of public activity, even making use of such figures as service and duty. Against the Neo-Aristotelians or ‘communitarians’ Skinner holds that Machiavelli is an example of defending the polity, participation and intervention without hypostasizing ‘community’ or ‘society’ or upholding the ‘common good’ only as a necessary condition for the negative and individual liberty. Against both the contractarians and the communitarians, Skinner points out that by revaluing dissensus and struggle Machiavelli rejects consensualist assumptions of the polity, so characteristic to both. (p. 109)

Hence, Skinner’s point is not to propose a definite idea of liberty, but to use historically salient views of the concept as a means of recovering the series of choices that have become foreclosed in our present understanding. By becoming aware of these choices and the alternatives that are left out we can reconsider our intellectual heritage and broaden our political possibilities, whereby we could come to realise that “we may be freer than we sometimes suppose” (p. 132).

In chapter six, “From Philosophy to Rhetoric”, Palonen presents Skinner’s ‘rhetorical turn’ with its aim of rehabilitating the rhetorical culture of the Renaissance. Skinner’s rhetorical understanding, Palonen claims, is neither akin to the view of present day rhetorical critics of media and communication, nor to the ideas presented by rhetorical theorists such as Kenneth Burke and Chaïm Perelman, and not even to the rhetorical historiography practised by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. Instead of following any of these rhetorical approaches Skinner establishes a perspective that, says Palonen, is unique in its intimate linkage with politics understood both as practice and as *scientia civilis* (pp. 169-70). The notion of a ‘rhetorical culture’ – historically specific, commonly accepted ways of speaking, arguing, and conceptualising – leads to a rejection of the divide between literary and rhetorical texts (p. 149), and it allows for an analysis of conceptual change as the result of rhetorical redescription (pp. 161-69). As Palonen puts it:

[Skinner] turns the intelligibility of the contingency, controversiality and historicity of concepts into a heuristic instrument. Rhetoric is the name for the orientation towards the world, which makes such an approach possible, at the same time fully acknowledging the constitutive role of politics in conceptual changes. (p. 171)

The rhetorical culture, in which Skinner is most interested and which he finds in both ancient Rome and Renaissance England, is a culture of debate, dispute, controversy, contestation, and politics (p. 155). With its ideal of arguing *in utramque partem* this rhetorical culture is considered to represent an alternative to the authoritative claims of philosophy (p. 146). In turning to rhetoric, Skinner finds an alternative to the philosophical approach to concepts, which aims at settling their true meaning once and for all, and he is thereby able to support his own view that even the most theoretical of concepts are subject to perpetual change.

Following this 'rhetorical turn', Skinner understands meaning-formation as being a linguistic action without remnant: "we cannot make a distinction between 'plain' and 'figurative' language, but only between different modes, styles and degrees of figuration in a political argument" (p. 160). This understanding implies a turn to investigations of the tropes and figures employed by speakers, but it also has deeper methodological consequences. Palonen illustrates the broader rhetorical mode of analysis through an account of the interrelated dimensions included in Skinner's recent studies of Hobbes: "He interprets the history of Hobbes's political theory in terms of its relationship to rhetoric against the background of an extensive discussion of the rhetorical culture of the English Renaissance, which leads him to a historical re-interpretation of the political thought of that period" (p. 145). Skinner not only includes the historical context in his study of Hobbes' rhetorical practice, but also draws on the history of rhetoric in order to cast light on the expectations and norms by which Hobbes' formulation of his views was conditioned. As part of his investigation Skinner recovers the 'lost treasure' of the rhetorical culture of the Renaissance, and the rhetorically informed historical study – which is simultaneously a historically informed rhetorical study – thereby also becomes an exposition of a particular moment in the history of rhetoric. The main gem of the recovered treasure is that the perspective it offers is truly liberating:

The rhetorical attitude of questioning all authorities and theory monopolies and arguing in a mode making the weaker *logos* stronger can be understood as a strong resource against all depoliticising claims in the name of order and in the name of truth as well. More offensively considered, the rhetorical resources also induce a questioning of commonplaces, established 'facts' and the standardized meanings of concepts, to politicize the situation by indicating a presence of *Spielräume* for contingency and controversy where none of this is commonly believed to exist. (pp. 171-72)

In the seventh and final chapter, "Quentin Skinner as a Contemporary Thinker", Palonen summarises the arguments presented in the preceding five chapters in order to conclude that "in his singular manner of being a historian of political theory Skinner also becomes a first-order political theorist himself" (p. 174). Moreover, Palonen now forwards his personal understanding of Skinner's perspective as entailing a particular vision of time, namely one in which the temporal distance between past and present is highlighted but not established in one dramatic instance. Rather, speech acts are performed at all points in time and the possibility of conceptual change is always present. The task for the student of conceptual developments is to actualise the possibility for change by pointing to the contingency of the concepts that are taken for granted. Or, in Palonen's words:

Skinner's project of recovering lost treasures indicates an enrichment of the present horizon of the possible by possibilities actualized in the past. Such an actualization of past possibilities remains

---

[...] to Skinner a procedure for increasing the available alternatives, without suggesting to political agents which of the alternatives should be chosen. (p. 180)

\* \* \*

Naturally, the last phase of Quentin Skinner's authorship in which he performs his 'rhetorical turn' is of most pressing interest to the rhetorician. Reading her way towards this 'rhetorical turn', both the historically, theoretically, and critically oriented rhetorician will, however, find plenty to interest her and to convince her that the work of Quentin Skinner in its entirety is of relevance to the field of rhetoric. In Palonen's congenial representation Skinner offers original insights into the relationships between the theory and practice of rhetoric and politics, as well as into the historical context in which both political and rhetorical theories and practices are performed. Moreover, Skinner's example of how these insights should be converted into analytical practice could profitably be emulated by critics of both past and present rhetorical texts. Of particular interest is the close relationship between history, politics, and rhetoric that Skinner establishes. This linkage may not be as unique as Palonen claims, but it is certainly worthy of rhetorical scholars' sustained attention.

As to the evaluation of Palonen's own effort, I beg to differ with his and Skinner's common assertion that all scholarly contributions should be judged by their novelty. Surely, in the case of an introduction to a scholarship such as Palonen's presentation of Skinner criteria of faithfulness, precision, and clarity rank much higher than novelty, although the occasional original point is not to be spurned. The book's chronological-thematic structure is clear and lets the reader acquire the Skinnerian perspective little by little while also providing an immediate overview of Skinner's thoughts. The reader may, therefore, ascertain the coherence and continuity as well as the tensions and modifications that are all constitutive of the perspective. Palonen explains Skinner's main concepts and ideas clearly, and he engages in detailed presentations and discussions without ever losing sight of the overarching purpose.

In sum, Kari Palonen's introduction provides ample evidence that Quentin Skinner merits the label 'key contemporary thinker,' and it entices the reader to engage Skinner's own writings next. Moreover, Palonen, through his sublime performance of the introductory task, more than convinces the reader of his own right and propriety as presenter of Skinner's work.

Sine Just  
Centre for Communication Studies  
Faculty of Languages, Communication and Cultural Studies  
Copenhagen Business School  
Dalgas Have 15  
DK-2000 Frederiksberg  
Denmark  
snj.kom@cbs.dk

Sine Just is a Ph.D. student at the Copenhagen Business School. She is working on a research project on the public debate concerning the future of the EU.