

Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki

INTERVIEW WITH QUENTIN SKINNER

Quentin Skinner (b. 1940) belongs among those prominent academics who have made their reputation by openly challenging the then prevailing paradigms of scientific inquiry. By contrast with the fate of many another radical view originating in the 1960s, the theoretical and methodological ideas presented by Skinner have become neither redundant nor marginal. Together with such scholars as John Pocock and John Dunn, he has been one of the central figures of the ‘Cambridge’ or ‘revisionist’ approach to the study of the history of political thought. At least from the mid-1970s, this approach has decisively influenced the writing of intellectual history and the reception of ‘classical’ political thinkers.

Regarding the content and style of his earliest published articles, Skinner now admits to having presented a rather polemical and confident stance. *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* (written in 1966-67 and published in 1969), together with the subsequent methodological articles, indeed sufficed to guarantee his reputation as an unswerving reformer of the history of political ideas. His strategy, at least according to common preconceptions, consisted of a strong denial of the possibility of ‘perennial questions’ in political philosophy, and a fervent critique of ‘anachronisms’ in all their occurrences. As his critiques were explicitly directed against the pre-

vailing 'traditionalist' and the rising Marxist approach to the history of political ideas, Skinner – in his own words – “called down a storm of abuse upon [his] head”. However, it took only a few years for the profession to notice that this was also the beginning of a remarkable academic career. In the 1970s, Skinner worked with Clifford Geertz, Thomas Kuhn, and Richard Rorty in Princeton, published his widely acclaimed *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought I-II* (1978), and became Professor of Political Science in Cambridge, also in 1978. Of the later 'small' books, perhaps the most widely read is *Machiavelli*, published in 1981 and revised and republished in 2000. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (1996) is the major work of the last decade. *Visions of Politics I-III* (2002) presents the variety and scale of his articles written in the last three and a half decades.

In the interview at hand, Skinner openly describes his relations to different schools of inquiry and considers the soundness of his own theoretical and philosophical commitments. As a whole, the interview presents what might be called the outline of his intellectual autobiography. He describes the evolution of his academic life and singles out the most important philosophical and methodological problems he was to encounter. At the same time, he assesses the content and style of some of his earlier works. He concludes that, while he has remained faithful to many of the commitments adopted in his early writings, the emphases and even the direction of some of his arguments have changed over time – a fact, which he refuses to think of as a shortcoming. From this viewpoint, especially interesting are his remarks on 'foundationalism', on the political choices that a scholar of history is likely to face, and on Gadamer's philosophy and the increased significance of tradition in his own work.

The interview was conducted in October 2001 by Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, who wish to express their warmest thanks to Professor Skinner. The interview was first published in Finnish in the philosophical magazine *niin & näin*, and is here republished with its permission.¹

¹ Koikkalainen, Petri & Syrjämäki, Sami: “Intellektuaalihistorian uskonpuhdistaja”, “Menneisyyden kohtaamisesta – Quentin Skinnerin haastattelu”, *niin & näin – filosofinen aikakauslehti*, 4/2001, pp. 8-23.