

Paul-Erik Korvela

“NASCONO LIBERI E NON SCHIAVI”

Quentin Skinner (2002): *Visions of Politics, vol. II. Renaissance Virtues*. Cambridge: CUP.

The second part of Skinner’s three-volume “Visions of Politics” includes the revised versions of his principal essays on Renaissance political theory – many of which are nowadays regarded as classics. As always, Skinner’s book is rich with profound philosophical argumentation. Yet it is exceptionally lucid in exposition¹. Skinner has an enviable ability to deliver his message in an elegant package combining both of these features.

Generally, Skinner’s interest is in the revival of *studia humanitatis* and what followed of that revival during the Renaissance – namely the wider study of ancient rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. That revival took place when, from the twelfth century onwards, the commentators of Roman law noticed that persuasive delivery, along with actual legal proofs, forms a part of successful forensic oratory and thus revived the interest for rhetoric and the language of ancient Rome. Skinner has little to say about the revival of poetry, but the revival of the other three elements of the *studia humanitatis* are discussed at great length and with outstanding expertise. However, the element apparently most important to Skinner is the revived study of ancient moral and political philosophy.

Reading political theory contextually, Skinner shows how actual political alterations had their effect on theories. He shows, to take one example, how the genre of advice-books for city magistrates transformed into the so-called mirror-for-princes literature, Machiavelli being the most famous exponent of the latter. This shift did not happen only in the realm of theory but also in actual political life, for there was a widespread shift during the period of *dal' commune al principato*, from traditional systems of elective government to the strong governments of a single *signore* or hereditary prince. Of the more important states, Venice alone preserved the forms of a republican aristocracy (the leading group known as the *ottimati*). But also Florence managed to cling onto its status as independent city-republic for a relatively long time. The outcome of this was a debate about the rival merits of self-government and princely rule, a debate that according to Skinner is of unparalleled historical significance. One of the chapters deals with that debate. Skinner's analysis of the genre of advice-books deals also with visual attempts to represent the virtuous rule and distinctive forms of government of the city-republics. The greatest surviving attempts in this genre are the so-called *Buon governo* frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, analysed by Skinner in two distinct chapters.

These ideals of citizenship and self-governing republicanism initially arose in the city-republics of the *Regnum Italicum*. One of Skinner's main points throughout the whole book is that this development actually pre-dates the Aristotelian revolution, the acquisition and translation of Aristotle's moral and political writings in the mid thirteenth-century, and also lived through that 'revolution' virtually unchanged, even though many previous studies have stressed the decisive role of that revolution. The writers of the *dictamina*, like Giovanni da Viterbo, Guido Faba, and the anonymous author of the *Oculus Pastoralis*, had no direct acquaintance with the works of Aristotle, and they completed their treatises before the translations of Aristotle's moral works began to circulate. Surprisingly, as Skinner shows, among the writers of the *dictamina* and similar compilations in the next generation, the doctrines of Aristotle appear to have had virtually no impact. Instead of ancient Greek authors, the writers relied on Roman sources.

Skinner's discussion of Renaissance political theory is also motivated by his wish to contrast certain features of it with the astonishingly pervasive 'gothic' visions that have surpassed them. According to Skinner, the archenemy of the Renaissance view of freedom, freedom endorsed in the writings of e.g. Machiavelli, is Hobbes. Nowadays that gothic vision is carried on in the writings of Rawls, Nozick, and their endless disciples. In this sense, Skinner's pursuit reminds me of Maurizio Viroli's "unrepentant nostalgia", the latter claiming that the evolution of political theory away from rhetoric toward analytic philosophy, which began with Hobbes and attained its perfection with John Rawls, has been in stylistic terms a decay, not a progress (cf. Viroli 2002, 18). Skinner labels 'gothic' the vision of politics in which liberty is a natural right, the antonym of liberty is coercion, and the maximising of liberty is seen as the chief, or even the sole, duty of enlightened governments. The opponents of this view, Skinner argues, are the classical and especially neo-Roman theories of government, in which freedom is oxymoronically seen as a form of service, since devotion to public service is held to be a necessary condition of maintaining personal liberty. Analysing Machiavelli's account on how to maintain civic and personal liberty, Skinner concludes that this account reverses the relationship between liberty and the law expressed by many contemporary theorists of liberty. According to the Machiavellian perspective, the law needs to be viewed as a liberating agency, without which there would not be a greater degree of personal liberty, but a rapid slide towards a condition of complete servitude due to the selfish nature of men. Skinner's Machiavelli has no quarrel with the Hobbesian assumption that the capacity to pursue our various ends without obstruction is what the term liberty properly signifies. Machiavelli merely argues that certain duties and the cultivation of virtues needed for performing them prove upon examination to be instrumentally necessary to the avoidance of coercion and servitude, and thus for assuring any degree of personal liberty in the Hobbesian sense of the term. We have been born in freedom and not as slaves, asserts Machiavelli, but for things to remain that way we must keep our community free from any *dependenza* or *servitù*.

Same kind of formulae can be found in the debates about the liberties of subjects prior to the English civil war, also analysed by

Skinner. From the parliamentary perspective, the civil war began as a war of national liberation from servitude, in defence of a free people, who are not born slaves. After the regicide, the newly established republic stood in urgent need of legitimation, and several different strands of political thought were immediately pressed into service. Thinkers defending the commonwealth, like John Milton for instance, drew extensively on classical ideas, and one of Skinner's aims is to sketch the evolution of this neo-Roman vision of the British polity.

Instead of being strictly philosophical or 'scientific', political disputes and conflicts in the real world tend to be rhetorical in character. In regard to Renaissance rhetoric and later English discussions, Skinner highlights the inability to agree about the proper application of evaluative terms. Challenging former interpretations, Skinner argues that the anxiety expressed by the seventeenth-century philosophers about moral ambiguity stems less from the rise of Scepticism than from the Renaissance revival of classical eloquence. The writers in question were seeking to overcome the humanist insistence that in moral reasoning it will always be possible to construct a plausible argument *in utramque partem*. Against this view, writers like Hobbes sought ways to limit the play of ambiguity and to arrive at authorised versions of potentially subversive texts.

For Renaissance humanists, *ratio* and *oratio*, reason and speech, were closely related. But the basic assumption, from which the whole idea of rhetoric springs, is that words and deeds, or words and things, are necessarily disjunctive – that there is no natural affinity between words and things. If *res* and *verba* were fixed together steadfast, there would be no room for rhetoric. In my view, Machiavelli is among those who ponder over the impossibility of correspondence between *cose* and *discorsi*. Machiavelli argues that things have often happened apart from (*fuora* – 'outside of') the discourses and concepts one forms about them. During the Renaissance, Lorenzo Valla's historically grounded linguistics offered an alternative to the traditional view that had held that words stand for things, and that this relation between word and thing is neither random nor contingent (cf. Najemy 1995). The wish to harness language to a mimetic, representational function emerges from the ambivalence we feel towards the use of words. This anxiety expressed by Valla, and to some extent by

Machiavelli, can be seen as challenging the entire tradition central to Renaissance humanism, that had accepted the beneficent power and utility of language and eloquence in politics, but in my view this is more like a confirmation of the fact that there is no such evaluative description that could not be contested with a rival one. As Skinner shows, faced with the problem of moral ambiguity and paradiastolic speech, some proposed the creation of a new language, some suggested the abolition of language altogether, and some proposed the regulation of meanings and definitions by fiat. The legacy of the Renaissance in this matter is that we cannot hope to solve our problems of moral ambiguity within the framework of our existing linguistic resources.

Sometimes, the most important clue in a criminal investigation is the fact that the dog *did not* bark. This fact is of the highest importance especially if it normally barks at strangers and the leading suspect is well known to the dog. Thus we can infer, as Sherlock Holmes does in the episode *Silver Blaze*, that the dog most likely knew the nightly visitor. This Holmesian form of inference is quite handy for scientists too. It is often quite relevant to ask why something did not happen, or why a given book does not deal with certain topics². To conclude this review, I briefly raise one such question concerning Skinner's book.

While reading both this and some earlier works of Quentin Skinner, I have always wondered why it comes about that there is no sustained discussion on reason of state in his works. That term, almost formulated by Guicciardini in his *Dialogo* when he spoke of *la ragione e uso degli stati*, mentioned for the first time by Giovanni della Casa in 1547, and finally coined as a European literary *topos* by Botero in 1589, had its heyday during a period expanding roughly from 1580's to 1680's. It is inseparably connected with the emergence of the state, and, as far as I can see, plays quite an important role in that development. For even though the term *ragion di stato* was in fact used for the first time by della Casa in an oration composed around 1547 to the emperor Charles V, the seeds of reason of state can be found in classical antiquity and a number of medieval sources. For both Guicciardini and della Casa the concept intimated a distinction between the demands of (Christian) morality, justice, legality and the exigencies of the state. As Skinner among others has shown, the

use of the term ‘state’ during the period was ambiguous and could refer to the ruler’s status, regime, territory, and finally, with the flowering of Renaissance republicanism, to an independent apparatus of government. But the gap between this new language of the state and the traditional republican public language of legitimation was exceptionally wide. Thus reason of state carried overtones of political cynicism, since it aimed at stabilising the position of the new and *eo ipso* illegitimate princes (cf. Höpfl 2002). Furthermore, reason of state was most commonly associated, and sometimes even felt interchangeable, with the interest of the state. However, as Sheldon Wolin has noted, the vital interests of the state were not necessarily identical with the interests of those who happened to be ruling, and consequently *Staatsräson* could not be invoked simply because rulers believed that it was in *their* interests to exercise exceptional powers or ignore recognised norms (Wolin 1987, 480). This is a development that, in my opinion, is perhaps not adequately emphasised by Skinner. Rulers quite often separated their own interest from the interest of the state, royal marriages being more than once the ultimate test. Even though it was considered a sin, many, if not most princes of absolutism, in their *Maitressenwirtschaft*, proceeded along the line that princes ought to have two wives, one for *ragione di stato* and the other to please themselves. Later, marriages overriding true love and arranged solely for state reasons, or forbidden by them, are standing subjects of e.g. the *Staatsroman* of the Baroque age³. In my opinion, when we discuss the emergence of the state, we should also discuss the interest and reason of the state. After all, as Meinecke put it, *raison d’Etat* is the “State’s first Law of Motion” (Meinecke 1984, 1). Even though it is naturally debatable what is the ‘reason’ of the state, the crucial question is, what is meant by the word ‘state’ in the formula ‘reason of state’. That is something that would require more research.

Notes

1 We may also note the fact that the book is edited with meticulous attention, and one cannot find many misprints. In fact, I noticed only two: in the

Index, Hegel's initials are G. F. W., when it should have been G. W. F., and on page 369, the German word 'staat' should have been 'Staat'.

- 2 In fact, with regard to classical texts, this resembles something that Skinner has called "polemical ignorance". Skinner's example concerns the fact that Locke in his "*Two Treatises of Government* makes no appeal to the alleged prescriptive force of the ancient English constitution" (Skinner 1978, xiv), which could only have been seen by Locke's contemporaries as a remarkable lacuna. When a given writer dismisses certain common topics of the time, we should get interested of that omission, since it may turn out to be very revealing and illuminate those topics that are in fact discussed by the writer. But this is also a point where we must proceed with extreme cautiousness. We must be careful not to impose the context on the text – we cannot disregard the text in favour of the context, since we cannot know better than the thinker the thinker's stance toward a given context. J. G. A. Pocock, to take one example, argues in respect of Machiavelli that the air of Florence was heavy with apocalyptic, and "Machiavelli could not have been as impervious to it as he may have liked to pretend" (Pocock 1975, 113; see also Sullivan 1992, 315). Especially as regards Machiavelli this kind of assertion is rather daring, for we know that Machiavelli omitted many topics that his contemporaries felt important. No references to natural law, to the artistic grandeur of Florence, to the emerging banking industry, trade etc. No greater discussion on the importance of colonies or navy. Machiavelli was, or pretended to be, impervious to many things, and we can not assert that he "could not have been" ignorant of something. We can always think that he really was acquainted with those matters and only pretended to ignore them or ignored them polemically, but if we follow the dictate of Ockham's razor, we must take into account the possibility that if he seems to be ignorant of those things, then he possibly was.
- 3 For the discussion, see Vagts 1969

References

- Höpfl, Harro (2002): Orthodoxy and Reason of State. *History of Political Thought*, Vol. XXIII, No.2, Summer 2002, pp. 211-237.
- Meinecke, Friedrich (1984): *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Najemy, John M. (1995): Language and *The Prince*. In Martin Coyle (ed.): *Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince. New interdisciplinary essays*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Pocock, J. G. A. (1975): *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Skinner, Quentin (1978): *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. I. Cambridge: CUP.
- Sullivan, Vickie B. (1992): Machiavelli's Momentary "Machiavellian Moment": A Reconsideration of Pocock's Treatment of the *Discourses*. *Political Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2, May 1992, pp. 309-318.
- Vagts, Alfred (1969): Intelligentsia versus Reason of State. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 84, Is. 1, March 1969, pp. 80-105.
- Viroli, Maurizio (2002): *Republicanism*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Wolin, Sheldon S. (1987): The Political and Theoretical Connections Between Staatsräson and Wohlfahrtsstaatsräson. *Political Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 4, November 1987, pp. 467-500.