Political Theorizing as a Dimension of Political Life

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ABSTRACT: Quentin Skinner's thesis 'that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist' marks a turning point in the study of the history of political thought. The Protestant princes who revised Luther's doctrine of disobedience in order to save Lutheranism as a political force are the best example of this 'Skinnerian revolution' in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. This is in accordance with his claim that principles play a legitimating and innovating role in politics. A tacit implication of the thesis is that we should not only read theorists as politicians but also read politicians as theorists. The politician possesses a special competence in discerning between various types of situation, has a distinct contestational imagination, is a person who is prepared to acknowledge the inherent paradoxes of the situation and who has the capacity to deal politically with limited time.

KEY WORDS: *history of political thought, political theory, politicians, Quentin Skinner*

> For I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate.[1]

This cryptic sentence from Quentin Skinner's preface offers a key to *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. It marks a turning point – which I have called the 'Skinnerian revolution'[2] – in the study of political thought. Skinner has, however, never returned to this sentence, and it is astonishing that it has also been neglected by commentators on his work. Practising what Max Weber would say is the *einseitige Steigerung* of a perspective,[3] my aim here is both to explicate the point of the sentence and illustrate its revolutionary significance to the study of political thought in a slightly different manner than Skinner himself. Whereas he emphasizes the reading of theorists as politicians, my attention is directed toward the possibilities of reading politicians as theorists.

In terms of Skinner's later vocabulary, the formula is an example of a rhetorical redescription of the relations between political life and political theorizing. As Skinner emphasizes in the chapter 'The Politics of Eloquence' in his *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, this opposition refers to the relationship

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between *negotium* and *otium*.[4] The traditions of philosophy and science have taken a stand in favour of *otium*, while the rhetorical and Sophist styles of thinking have preferred *negotium*. Skinner's programmatic thesis indicates a resurrection of the resources of the rhetorical style of analysis.

With his formula, Skinner illustrates a style of speaking about politics without a priori reducing its contingency. He never depreciates politics or denounces politicians. Like Max Weber, he is prepared to use contingency, in all of its different facets, as a heuristic tool of understanding politics. He recently reformulated his critique of Lovejoy with the words: 'I tried once more to speak up for a more radical contingency in the history of thought'.[5] I think that here we can detect the first dimension of the priority of political life over political thought.

The thesis presupposes a distance between agents and theorists: an aspect that is specific to Skinner's interpretation is his heuristic use of this distance. The agents' self-understanding of their situation is not an authoritative view but an indispensable condition of the intelligibility of their political activities. For this purpose, for example, the discussion of the alternative courses of action available to them, the languages in which a political struggle is presented and the normative horizons of assessing the value and significance of conceivable policies are indispensable to the political theorist. Only by considering the constitutive elements of the political agent's situation can the political theorist have the opportunity to understand them better than they understood themselves.

The distance between political agents and political theorists should, of course, be taken as a question of perspective. The existing theoretical perspectives set limits for political agents, and the problem facing the historian is frequently the precise identification of such limits – I think this is the specific point of Skinner's historicizing reinterpretation of the use of conventions.[6]

The problematics, conceptual horizons and normative languages available to political agents are, of course, already shaped by their reception of theory, whether contemporary or located in the past. The role that such a reception plays for a politician is certainly ambiguous. Not only can theories easily render the agents prisoners of interpretations or assessments that will lead the politician astray, but a deeper understanding of theoretical controversies may lead her to inaction and thus a sense of political powerlessness. The understanding of acting politicians' discussions and decisions does not, therefore, only concern questions such as whose work they have read or what and under which professor they studied, but also how a politician treats this background knowledge as a medium in her politics. The priority of political life also helps us to understand that the independence of academic fashions and a faculty of judgement that ranks theories from the perspective of their appropriateness within a situational analysis can be seen as characteristics of a remarkable politician.

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The Politics of Luther and Protestant Princes

The use of theorists as the advisers to and ghostwriters for a politician is by no means a new phenomenon. In *The Foundations*, Skinner is explicitly concerned with the relationships between theorists, princes and their advisers in Renaissance and Reformation politics. In one of the most brilliant passages of the book he discusses the role of Lutheran princes in the legal and constitutional theorizing of the time in Germany.[7] After the Speyer Reichstag in 1529, which led to a crisis that threatened the political existence of the entire Lutheran 'movement', it was not Luther himself but the princes who had converted to Lutheranism who realized the need for a revision of the doctrine. The princes of Hesse and Saxony ordered the scholars acting as their political advisers to search for a theoretical justification that would allow them to combine Luther's doctrine of non-resistance toward worldly authorities with resistance to the Emperor and his Catholic allies. Surrender to the imperial authorities would have meant the extinction of the Lutheran heresy and the destruction of its princely supporters.

In his reading of Luther, Calvin, Knox and other reformers, Skinner treats them as politicians in their own right, who were not simply content with the declaration of a doctrine, but who also understood its rhetorical dimension of legitimation. The history of Christianity and the Church offered them enough examples to make the case that a theological doctrine would never be accepted through the simple power of revelation but instead requires legitimating moves. Skinner clearly attributes to Luther a degree of political competence in his presentation of a doctrine that broke entirely with the old controversy between *sacerdotium* and *regnum*.[8] The Lutheran doctrine of non-resistance was surely also intended to appeal to the worldly authorities who longed to abolish the intervention by the clergy in the affairs of their governments. Luther's move was almost immediately welcomed by a number of such worldly authorities.

Still, we could imagine that in the wake of the Speyer Reichstag Luther could have invested himself in the role of a martyr for a lost cause. He would have left his mark in the history books, along with Hus and other failed reformers. Skinner's point is that Lutheranism at that time had obtained a princely following by means of their own established power blocs, which they were by no means prepared to sacrifice. The princes took political lead of the Lutheran 'movement' and decided that Luther's doctrine of obedience should not be followed *ad absurdum* and lead to the political suicide of Lutheranism. They realized that if the political consequences of a theological doctrine are fatal, it is better to modify the doctrine than to follow it blindly. In more general terms, no doctrine can be so indispensable that it should be accepted independently of its political costs. The 'modernity' of political thought, as expressed in the title of Skinner's book, can now be interpreted as a further consequence of the priority of political life over political theorizing. In this sense the Reformation also meant a break with a politics that was prepared to serve as a handmaid to theology.

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The example also refers to Skinner's understanding that theories are neither epiphenomena nor regulative directives for action, but rather the media of legitimating politics.[9] 'Political life itself' was such that it enabled Lutheran political leaders to face a situation unforeseen when Luther formed his doctrine and for which there were no precedents. For them, the relinquishment of their Lutheran faith was one danger, and theological excommunication by Luther and his theological friends was another obvious possibility (after the peasant revolt of the mid-1520s). The princes were facing an impasse, and they saw a modification of Lutheranism as a way out. Such a modification could not be obtained in an arbitrary or *ad hoc* manner but as a move restricted to an extraordinary situation. What they proposed consisted, as expressed in Skinnerian terms, of a reconsideration of its range of reference[10] by revising the original interpretation of the incompatibilities of Luther's doctrine with certain political commitments.

One of Skinner's further points is to emphasize that the Lutheran princes did not commit themselves to a definite conception, seeking maximum compatibility with Luther's original doctrine, but experimented with two different possibilities, judging them according to political expediency. One of them consisted of the application of the resources of imperial 'constitutional law' and the other of the explicit interpretation of the emergency clause in civil law. There was no need for the princes to commit themselves to either of these possibilities, but both principles of legitimation could be applied independently in keeping with the political requirements of the situation. According to Skinner, both interpretations had their theoretical weaknesses and, correspondingly, both of them were easily susceptible to counter-criticism. The point is that the availability of such theoretical instruments was sufficient to nuance the doctrine and to affirm the political primacy of Lutheranism as a 'movement' over Lutheranism as a 'faith' which one was obliged to either adhere to or reject.

In terms of Skinner's later work, we could also argue that the modernity of this priority of political movement over the doctrine could be understood as an expression of what Skinner later refers to as the rhetorical culture of the Renaissance. A new religious doctrine had a chance of being accepted only if it had political adherents. When the Lutherans faced a crisis, it was the political movement that gained the upper hand through the mediation of legitimizing rhetorical strategies, which allowed for a modification of the doctrine. By doing so they affirmed at least some of the available power blocs, to put it in Weberian terms.

Skinner's example of Lutherans illustrates the role of urgency in a situation that requires the reconsideration of one's own thinking. This does not necessarily suggest a rapid and unreflective shift of positions, which would be likely to lead to all too hasty interpretations. Rather, the urgency of the situation should be considered as an extraordinary chance to break with certain traditions, conventions, habits, assumptions and presuppositions within one's own thought in order to sketch modes of getting out of a political blind alley. As in the ancient *kairos*, such situations can hardly be planned in advance. The experience of an impasse

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can, however, be turned into an occasion of revising received views and experimenting with new conceptualizations. What marks a politician is not least her ability to seize the moment, to detect new possibilities in a situation that appears hopeless.

Genres of Political Theorizing

A well known implication of the Skinnerian thesis lies in the reconsideration of what should be regarded as a valuable source in the historical study of political thought. One of the points that distinguishes the narrative of *The Foundations* from more textbook-like histories of political thought is its disrespectful attitude toward the canon of classics and major works.

Skinner questions the strong dividing line between systemic and occasional works in the œuvre of a writer or the thought of a period and refrains from offering an exposition of the 'master works' of Machiavelli, Bodin or other theorists. On the contrary, he also reads their major works as moves within an argument, as interventions in contemporary debates. This does not prevent him from admitting the possibility of the existence of variable distances from the acute controversies of political agents of the day, or that there are numerous ways in which the theories can serve as interventions into daily politics. The architectonic genre can, accordingly, be understood as a rhetorical tool among others that is used to legitimate a position or a perspective on political struggles. In some cases, as in that of the famous Huguenot pamphlet *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, the genre of systematic exposition could also be selected as a tool of a given policy in the face of an acute existential crisis on the part of the Huguenots themselves.

An 'innovating ideologist'[11] is rarely a person with whom it is wise to engage, for example, in a new interpretation of the origins of civilization. The point is to construct a perspective that allows us to view the terms of the current controversy in a new light. The construction of an entire counter-system may both take too much time and require too many concessions to the old modes of thinking in order to open a politically crucial new *Spielraum*. In the study of political thought we should direct our attention to the singular yet crucial moves – or a combination of a few of them – that are involved in the presentation of a new perspective that alters the constellation. Or, when we set out in search of buried intellectual treasures,[12] we have a certain insight into the historical weight of such perspectives that were dismissed or entirely disregarded by contemporaries. Such disfavour is by no means a sufficient reason to exclude the possibility that the proposals in question could have had at least some potential to alter the terms of the debate of the time.

Skinner questions the uncontested priority of the classicist style of thought, which has been dominant not only in philosophy but also in the conventional history of political thought. The design of the discussion and presentation of *The Foundations* relativizes or even inverts the tendency to prefer the essential to the

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phenomenal, the long duration to the passing situation or the systematic to the fragmentary.[13] Alternatively, the inversion of the relationship between political thought and political life in *The Foundations* already illustrates the *paradiastolic* rhetorical redescription of the value of different textual genres as sources in the study of political thought.

In other words, any document may contribute to political thought, and it is the link between the polemics and controversies of the day which may provide the first indication of what should be studied. 'Political life' does not, however, speak for itself. Both the agents and the scholars of their writings are obliged to interpret which controversies should be evoked in order to facilitate the understanding of a text, as well as which texts (or other documents) are worth reading as contributions to a political polemic. For the students of political thought, this means, above all, that we, as Skinner once wrote, 'must learn – to do our own thinking for ourselves'.[14]

It is worth specifying Skinner's thesis regarding *how* political life creates problems for political theorists. For this purpose we can construct ideal types based on a link between questions, textual genres and authors. I shall limit the discussion to four genres of political theorizing, each with its own mediation to political practices. I call them *statements, justifications, explications* and *descriptions of performance*, and my claim is that each of them refers to a distinct type of question and to a specific mode of political agency. A further point is the distinction of these questions from each other, which must be taken into consideration when, for example, we are studying the political use of a concept 'in argument', as Skinner puts it.[15]

By *statements* I mean answers to the *what*-questions, that is, the adoption of a stand either for or against a position in a given controversy. A candidate's manifesto, a party platform, a governmental programme for an electoral term, a proposed or adopted piece of legislation or an international treaty may exemplify the genre of statements. A statement does not merely express a position for or against a proposal but also contains definite formulations which specify the stand and mark the difference between it and opposing views. When we are interested in the novelties and revisions of a standpoint, it is the minute details of the formulations that we should focus our attention on. The controversies regarding the resistance to worldly authorities also illustrate a situation in which a minute detail in the history of political thought, such as the presence or absence of one concept or the difference between its uses in singular or plural terms, may be the politically decisive point.

One obvious implication of the Skinnerian thesis lies in the acceptance of the fact that seemingly harmless formulations in the controversies of daily political life may contain points of dissolution and innovation, which should not be neglected, as the historians of ideas, who are uninterested in day-to-day politics, tend to do. When it comes to formulating a statement, it is the political agents themselves who have the last word, even if their advisers, experts and theorists

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may well play a role in the invention of alternative formulations or in pointing out their distinct political potential.

As Skinner's discussion of the Protestants illustrates, the situation is different when it comes to the *justification* of a standpoint, to answering the *why*-questions. This does not mean that politicians merely assign their advisers or think-tanks the task of finding a legitimation for a standpoint they have already taken. On the contrary, Skinner writes in the preface of *The Foundations*:

> Thus the problem facing an agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language.[16]

This quotation refers to Skinner's view of legitimation as the key problem of political theorizing, which any action requires in order to obtain the acceptance and support that is necessary in order for it to be politically significant.[17] In *The Foundations*, more clearly than ever before, Skinner presents this as a two-way problem, of both justifying an already accepted project and modifying the project in order to offer it greater chances of approval. This is precisely what the Protestant princes in Germany achieved in their relationship to Lutheranism when they modified their beliefs in order to strengthen their political position.

In more general terms, we can detect here the distance between political life and political theorizing as a subject matter with which we can play in two directions. Political theorists are obliged to understand the situation and the language of political agents in their own theorizing. Conversely, political agents are required to recognize political theorizing as a relevant part of their activity. The *what*-question cannot be treated independently of the *why*-question and vice versa.

In addition to the justification of a standpoint, political moves also need *explications*. In other words, a programmatic text is never self-sufficient, but rather requires commentaries, interpretations, elaborations, demarcations and so on, which I gather together under the heading of explication. By this I refer to *how* the statement should be assessed or where its distinct *point* lies in relation to the agent's own previous views or the position of the opponents. As every law or treaty requires a commentary in order to be understood in its precise legal and political sense, the same holds true for more informal political statements.

Skinner's thesis on the two-way movement of change can thus also be extended to the relationship between statements and explications. Political analysts, columnists and editorialists tend to shift the battle from standpoints to explications. When it comes to official documents, legal experts, academic interpreters, contemporary commentators and so on continue the struggle at the level of explications, for example, by either amplifying or reducing the differences between competing statements. It is here that the apparent consensus regarding the formulations inside the party or the government is questioned and eventually dissolved, and it is at this level that the exegetes sometimes appear as more politically

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crucial agents than the politicians who agreed upon a given text. In other words, the struggles between interpreters may encourage politicians either to revise their personal statements or to reopen the struggle over their formulations, for example, in order to dissociate them from suspicious explications that the wording may allow for. The long tradition of politicians writing pamphlets also illustrates how they enter into a debate with their interpreters and explicate their standpoints.

I would like to add to these obvious levels of political theorizing an apparently more modest level of describing the *performances* of politicians. It is concerned with the question of *how* persons act when they act politically. For example, how do they take a stand, or justify or explicate a certain standpoint? What is at stake here is what Skinner refers to as rhetorical moves, strategies, tactics and techniques.[18] Skinner emphasizes that in studying political thought you cannot strictly distinguish *what*-questions from *how*-questions, content from the form of presentation, substance from procedures and so on. It is also for this reason that he refuses to draw a strict distinction between semantic and pragmatic questions, or between the questions of meaning and linguistic action, as well as why he, consequently, deals with concepts only in the context of their 'uses in argument'.[19]

It is here that Skinner's work has most crucially changed my own work, namely with regard to the mode of studying the conceptual history of politics. In my studies on the German and French history of the concept of politics in the 1980s, the starting point was the 'phenomenological' question 'What is politics?'[20] When I recently moved from the history of an allegedly already existing concept to the more Skinnerian topic of a conceptualization of the activity-concept of politics, I was simultaneously obliged to revise my view on what the crucial textual genres are and who typically produces these kinds of texts. In order to answer such performative questions as 'What is the distinctive action of politicians?' or 'How do we act when we act politically?' I was required to direct my attention to the performative descriptions of this specific activity as opposed to mere 'definitions of politics'.[21] In textbooks, lexical items or systematic academic treatises, the modes of acting politically are rarely explicated. In examining these such performative descriptions of acting politically I was obliged to concentrate on the writings of journalists, literary authors and politicians themselves.

My task as a historian of the concept is, once again, to construct a two-way flow between the explications and performative descriptions. In other words, my problem lies in extracting from the works of theorists the way in which they regard the performative dimension as decisive for the activity of politics. Conversely, I have been led to reflect upon the range and value of the attributed qualifications of the politician with regard to the history of the concept of politics. A similar two-way relationship can be detected between performative descriptions and the justificatory level: we may identify certain performative implications of any justification, and the performative descriptions of activity must also be read in comparison to competing views on politics-as-activity. However, it seems to me

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that there is hardly a direct link between statements and performative descriptions, but, rather, the connection between them is created by the questions of explication and justification.

Recognizing Politicians as Theorists

When Skinner asserts in *The Foundations* the priority of political life for the political theorist, he not only gives new power shares to theorists but also disturbs the practices of conventional political scientists. By accentuating political theorizing, one can also say something distinct and noteworthy about the practice of political life itself. I think in this respect the challenge of Skinner is rarely taken seriously enough in political science and history departments. I will present some steps toward blurring the distinction between political theorists and other students of politics from a Skinnerian perspective.

The two-way processes that occur between the various conceptual levels indicate that both practice and theorizing may serve as a source of political innovation or reorientation. Although political conclusions can never be derived from theoretical insights, they may well serve as catalysts in the rethinking of a political project. The heuristic use of analogies, the transfer of metaphors, tropes and figures, the recourse to thought experiments and the construction of ideal-typical alternatives are just some examples of styles of thinking in the humanities which may also inspire reflections on principles, policies and practices for acting politicians. It is the political agents who decide whether or not to use such figures and, if so, how and to what extent. The situational character of the politician's insight can concern occasions of inventing or revising both the projects and their legitimation.

My thesis is that a tacit suggestion of the 'Skinnerian revolution' in the study of politics is that we should renounce our widespread academic contempt for politicians. It is time to take their acting, speaking and thinking seriously. We should not only, pace Skinner, read theorists as politicians, but we should also consider the reverse side of the coin and read politicians as theorists.

Of course, I take the politician to be a historical ideal type in the Weberian sense. This ideal type allows for considerable variation in several respects, such as the full-time, part-time and occasional politician, the politician who lives off politics and the one who lives for politics.[22] I do not use the term 'politician' simply to refer to one profession among others, but, rather, I consider it a paradigm for a person who deals with situations like a competent politician. As I have already noted, knowledge and the mastery of the requirements of the politician are also preconditions for academic political theorizing in the contemporary world.

The urgency of the situation can, as Skinner's analysis of the Lutherans illustrates, serve as a point of departure for the discussion of a politician's special position in political theorizing. Such a claim implies a rhetorical redescription of

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what is meant by theorizing. It requires, above all, a dismissal of the venerable demand that theory or knowledge should concern only that which is considered universal, timeless, invariant or law-like. Conventional modes of theorizing tend to lack the tools inherent in the discussion of that which is singular, temporal, momentary, local and historical – in a word, contingent. Here, sophistic and rhetorical styles of thinking are the exceptions, to which we must, in keeping with Skinner, direct our close attention when searching for tools to aid in our understanding of how politicians 'deal with the contingent event', as John Pocock put it.[23] The other source of inspiration for political theorists is thus what politicians themselves have written and spoken, and sometimes also what journalists and biographers have written about them.

Theorizing among politicians is thus related to a political *reading of situations* that they encounter when acting politically. The theorization of contingent activity is a prerequisite for the insight that professional politicians may be more adept at identifying, assessing and affirming the understanding of these types of situation. Accordingly, the first special competence of a politician concerns precisely their ability to discern between different types of situation. In other words, the politician is a person who has a keen sense with regard to the demands of the present situation, an ability to read the signs of the times, and who is, in keeping with this idea, even prepared to abandon long-term projects if they cannot be adapted to the singular requirements of the current situation. In this sense even the old slogan 'a statesman thinks about the next generations, a politician thinks about the next elections' illustrates how a politician possesses a keen insight into the distinctive traits of the current situation.

Situational competence refers to the assessment of the dimensions or degrees of contingency that are present in any given situation. I think we can, for example, distinguish between contingencies according to the degree of possible change involved in the situation. As such, we can estimate the role of contingency as a passing instance, an extraordinary occasion, a turning point in a process or a breakdown of a policy-line or historical tendency. A politician does not, of course, have such a ready-made typology at hand, but she can possess a certain sensibility, simply by being a politician, with which she is able to analyse the singular kind of novelty that is present in the situation she is currently facing. An essential aspect of the competence of the politician might well lie in her exposure to the learning process concerning the judgement on the recurrence and singularity of new situations. The actions or decisions of a politician are constituted to a considerable extent by such situational judgements.

A second dimension of a politician's competence can be detected in the *contestational imagination*. If we assume, in keeping with Skinner, that conflict and controversy are indispensable and valuable parts of political life, we understand that a politician is a person who always has to relate her judgement to that of her adversaries and competitors. The urgency of the situation may make an innovative politician reflect upon such questions as the extent to which she has too

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willingly subscribed to the opponent's analysis of what is possible or what is legitimate. Insights like this invite a politician to search for alternatives beyond given definitions and to assess the extent to which an extension of the *Spielraum* could be obtained through these alternatives. Or, to a politician, any claims of consensus may appear as suspicious, and when something is presented as 'inexpugnable', as Skinner quotes Hobbes as saying, a politician takes this as a challenge to contest it.[24] In an essay written in 1861, Walter Bagehot uses the example of William Gladstone to illustrate the politician's attitude as one oriented toward breaking down ready-made identifications:

> If anyone on either side of the House is bold enough to infer anything from anything, Mr Gladstone is ready to deny that the inference is correct – to suggest a distinction which he says is singularly important – to illustrate an apt subtlety which, in appearance at least, impairs the validity for the deduction.[25]

The politician is an ideal type of person who is able to assess the contribution of controversy to the improvement of our understanding of the activity of politics. She can illustrate the limits of the experts' and specialists' knowledge, or when politics is concerned, and she can also point out its irrelevance when experts fail to imagine the alternatives or a partisan way of presenting them.[26] In this sense, the politician is an heir of the sophist tradition of inverting the commonplaces and dethroning established authorities.

Furthermore, a politician can be regarded as a person who is more prepared than others to acknowledge the *inherent paradoxes* of a situation. A politician has to analyse situations in which the alternatives of action are either normatively ambiguous or cannot be placed in a definite ranking order. Weber's portrait of the politician illustrates a conceptual formalization of the alternative orientations, which reaffirm the inherent paradoxes of her situation. Weber's famous requirements for the politician – *Leidenschaft, Verantwortungsgefühl, Augenmass* (roughly translated as passionate commitment, a sense of responsibility, approximate estimation) – are both indispensable and incompatible. A politician is not a person who rejects one of them in favour of the two others. Rather, a politician is a person who attempts to construct a personal constellation out of them with the full knowledge that doing so is impossible, but that it is precisely the art of playing with the impossible that characterizes the vocation of the politician.[27]

Once again we can detect a link between the historical ideal type of the politician and the rhetorical tradition. Skinner insists in his *Reason and Rhetoric* that Renaissance rhetorical culture has a distinct and inherent character. When we consider the history of parliamentary procedures and practices, as described in a classic study by Josef Redlich, there is a distinct historical link to rhetoric in the style of speaking 'for and against', which is built into the parliamentary procedure, for example in the ideal of rotating the speakers for and against a proposal.[28] The parliamentary style of politics requires a readiness to avoid fixations and to accept the possibility of being persuaded by one's opponents. The paradoxes are a

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medium of political flexibility that might open deadlocks and alter the constellations.

Finally, the insight into the availability of a *limited time* for action is a further requirement of the politician. In politics, time is not just a background factor to be noticed but also an instrument of the game itself.[29] The point is that a politician has a special competence in 'timing' her actions. The urgency of the situation allows the politician, for example, to understand that deliberations must at some point be interrupted and a decision made, although there is no rule with regard to at what point this should be done. A politician has to make a second order judgement about how much time to allow for reflection and when to move on to making a decision. There are no set rules when it comes to such a decision, but, rather, the politician is forced to judge according to context.

The timing of activities is another subject that has been crucial in sophist and rhetorical styles of thinking.[30] The competence to deal with limited time is a special requirement of parliamentary regimes, in which elections serve as paradigmatic limits and parliamentary procedure is organized around the distribution of time between different items of speech and other forms of action.[31] A politician is someone who is able to transform the limits and distributions of time into a resource of her politics.

I have now presented some explications of the distinct position of politicians, which has thus rendered the question of politicians' role in theoretical revisions more intelligible. I have tried to understand politicians better than they tend to understand themselves, or at least to reflect upon some of the formal dimensions of their situations, with which the competent politician may have learnt to deal, although she has no need to explicate them. All this should be, in Skinnerian terms, treated contextually and historically. My point is that one of the requirements of the politician may be to specify *how* political life can set the problems that are contemplated by political theorists, as well as *how* they can come to understand that politicians may, especially in crisis situations, be obliged to act as 'theorists' themselves in order to explain their position and, if possible, to create new *Spielräume* for their own actions.

There does not seem to be a broad understanding of the fact that, particularly in democratized parliamentary regimes, there are several aspects in the very scenarios faced by politicians that require innovations from them. Politicians are acting in an environment that is much more competitive than that of most ordinary professions. Defeats, crises, dead ends and deadlocks are an inherent part of a politician's life, with which they are obliged to learn to cope in order to survive politically. The rhetorical character of the parliamentary style of politics also requires a politician to be able to improvise when giving answers and to make spontaneous interventions.

The methodological point is that such ideal-typical constructions of the judgement of the politician may also help in historical analysis of the seemingly strange actions of both past and present politicians. Understanding the politician's special

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competencies may help us to make guesses regarding their intentions and projects, or in terms of the rhetorical strategies of legitimating them. For a historical study, such reflections primarily concern the problem of judging *e silentio*, in the absence of sources. For we can take it for granted that acting politicians tend neither to reflect upon their activities in advance nor to report them afterwards, and even if they sometimes do so, we cannot take their self-presentation at face value.

A further corollary to treating politicians as 'theorists' who judge political situations lies in the insight that the writings and speeches of professional politicians should be considered as seriously as other kinds of literature, especially when studying political thought and its history. If political life sets the problems pondered by political theorists, an indispensable point of departure for its study must be what those who act in an eminently political mode say about their own activity. As fragmentary and partisan as these speeches and writings may be, the political agents themselves are, *ceteris paribus*, those who are best able to describe their own political moves, whereas theorists may be more adept in understanding the political point of these moves.

The extension of the sources of political theorizing toward those closer to political practice may lead to difficulty in identifying the crucial sources among the huge number of possible candidates. Both the discussion of the links between the textual genres, questions and agents and the situations of the politician's special competence may be used as heuristic tools in the detection and selection of the sources worth closer analysis. The main problem for the theorist is to discern moves which neither the agents nor their contemporaries may have seen as noteworthy, but which still involve novelties in the perspective of the actual controversy or tacit breaks with traditions or conventions. The difficulty for scholars is that of distinguishing the innovative or subversive speech acts from an enormous number of others, and the creation of special procedures for this purpose would probably be well worth considering. Perhaps the availability of the texts in an electronic form could help the theorist to detect such conceptual revisions. The insight that first-rank politicians are not necessarily always the successful ones is another precondition for the detective work of reading politicians as theorists.

The Revolutionary Impulse of *The Foundations*

In its own context Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* serves as a defence of politics, as some of its contemporary reviewers seem to indicate.[32] Skinner was, as is now well known, in his youth a severe critic of the then popular theses of 'the end of ideology' and 'depoliticization'.[33] By the very design of *The Foundations* Skinner affirms in Renaissance and Reformation thinking the presence of a political dimension to which the traditional 'history of ideas' approaches have directed insufficient attention. The perspective of linguistic

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action, connecting conceptual revisions to acute controversies around political events, as well as the obvious sympathy with the history of the losers, indicate a mode of reading the history of thought politically. Such a perspective also shapes Skinner's entire subsequent scholarship.

Although I have directed my attention to the key thesis of the inversion of the role of political life for political theorizing, the defence of politics can be extended to concern also the creativity of political agents. In Skinner's own case this meant, above all, a move toward a political reading of the work of theorists in their contemporary context. In this sense, the revolution in the study of political thought that he initiated with *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* has changed both our research practices and our views on the sources of political theorizing. I have constructed a scheme here to expand Skinner's two-way movement between action and legitimation to include a slightly broader palette of textual genres, corresponding to distinct questions and distinct types of political agency.

In the final part of this article I have followed the inversion of political life and the life of the politician and taken it a step further, toward a reading of the innovative theoretical and conceptual role of the politician. Putting aside the tacit prejudice that politicians are never innovative, it is, indeed, not difficult to find grounds for the argument that, when politicians tend to act in competitive conditions, merely for reasons of political survival, a business-as-usual-style would be fatal and revisions necessary. A political theorist may use these 'existential' conditions of politicians as a heuristic point of departure in the search for breaks and innovations.

My concentration on the single programmatic principle in Skinner's *Foundations* has thus allowed me to direct my attention to its revolutionary significance in the study of political thought and politics in general. My thought experiments, which mainly utilize ideal types in the Weberian sense, also illustrate, although in a different manner than Skinner's own work after *The Foundations*, how the revolutionary impulse that this work once sparked has by no means been exhausted.

Notes

1. Quentin Skinner (1978) *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance*; vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation*; vol. 1, p. xi. Cambridge: CUP.
2. Kari Palonen (2003) *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, ch. 4. Cambridge: Polity.
3. Max Weber (1904) *Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 146–214, at p. 191. Tübingen: Mohr, 1973.

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4. Quentin Skinner (1996) *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, pp. 66–110. Cambridge: CUP.
5. Quentin Skinner (2002b) *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, p. 176. *Regarding Method*. Cambridge: CUP.
6. Cf. Quentin Skinner (1970) 'Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts', *Philosophical Quarterly* 20: 118–38.
7. For the topics discussed in this chapter cf. Skinner (n. 1), vol. 2, pp. 194–206.
8. Ibid. pp. 14–17.
9. Cf. Skinner (1974b) 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action', *Political Theory* 2: 277–303.
10. Cf. Quentin Skinner (1979) 'The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon', *Essays in Criticism* 29: 105–24.
11. Skinner (n. 9).
12. Quentin Skinner (1998) *Liberty before Liberalism*, p. 112. Cambridge: CUP.
13. For the confrontation between the 'classical' and 'romantic' styles of argumentation see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*, pp. 128–131. Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1983.
14 Quentin Skinner (1969) 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8: 3–53, at p. 53.
15. Quentin Skinner (1988) 'A Reply to my Critics', in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context*, ed. James Tully, pp. 231–288, at p. 283. Cambridge: Polity.
16. Skinner (n. 1), vol. 1, pp. xii–xiii.
17. Cf. Quentin Skinner (1973) 'The Empirical Theorists of Democracy and their Critics: A Plague on Both their Houses', *Political Theory* 1: 287–304. Skinner (1974a) 'The Principles and Practice of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole', in N. McKendrick (ed.) *Historical Perspectives*, pp. 93–128. London: Europa Publications. Skinner (n. 9).
18. Cf. Skinner (1973, 1974a, in n. 17) and (1974b, in n. 9), reformulated in Skinner (2002b, in n. 5).
19. Skinner (n. 4), pp. 7–8, as well as why he, consequently, deals with concepts only in the context of their 'uses in argument'. See also Skinner (1999) 'Rhetoric and Conceptual Change', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 3: 60–73.
20. Kari Palonen (1985) *Politik als Handlungsbegriff: Horizontwandel des Politikbegriffs in Deutschland 1890–1933*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Palonen (1990) *Die Thematisierung der Politik als Phänomen: Eine Interpretation der Geschichte des Begriffs Politik im Frankreich des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
21. Palonen (forthcoming) *A Struggle with Time: A Conceptual History of Politics as an Activity*.
22. Max Weber (1919) 'Politik als Beruf', *Max-Weber-Studienausgabe* 1(17): 35–88. Tübingen: Mohr, 1994. For a commentary cf. Kari Palonen (2002) *Eine Lobrede für Politiker: Kommentar zu Max Weber's 'Politik als Beruf'*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
23. J.G.A. Pocock (1975) *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 156. Princeton: Princeton UP.
24. Skinner (n. 4), p. 300.
25. Walter Bagehot (1860) 'Mr Gladstone', in *Bagehot's Historical Essays*, pp. 236–63, at p. 250. New York: Anchor Books.
26. See Max Weber (1918) 'Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland', *Max-Weber-Studienausgabe* 1(15): 202–302, at pp. 220–6. Tübingen: Mohr, 1988.
27. Weber (n. 22), pp. 80–8.
28. Josef Redlich (1905) *Recht und Technik des Englischen Parlamentarismus*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
29. Cf. Reinhart Koselleck (1979) *Vergangene Zukunft*, p. 321. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

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30. See esp. Barbara Cassin (1995) *L'effet sophistique*. Paris: Gallimard.
31. Cf. Redlich (n. 28).
32. See John Dunn (1979) 'The Cage of Politics', *The Listener* (15 March). Keith Thomas (1979) 'Politics Recaptured', *New York Review of Books* (15 May).
33. Cf. Quentin Skinner (2002a) 'On Encountering the Past: An Interview with Quentin Skinner by Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki 4.10.2001', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6: 34–63, and further comments in Palonen (n. 2), ch. 2.