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*More theses on the philosophy of
history**

*From James Tully (ed.), 1988, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, Princeton University Press. Chapter 12, pp. 204-17.

1. Political argument, it is often observed, comes into its own only during crisis conditions, when conventional beliefs and unargued assumptions begin to disintegrate and to be questioned. It is recognized less often that crisis periods also prompt awareness of the crucial political importance of the past for the present. As a rule, crises are times during which the living do battle for the hearts, minds and souls of the dead. They are also times in which controversies erupt about the prevailing definitions of how to understand the past in relation to the present. The belief that history is simply history tends to be undermined during crisis periods, as is the belief in the neutrality of methods of accounting for the past. How the past is understood and explained comes to be seen as a crucial determinant of what is supposed to have happened in the past.

2. Recent controversies surrounding the history of political thought are exemplary of this rule. Since the 1960s, in Anglo-American political philosophy circles at least, established methodologies for interpreting the history of political ideas have been subjected to intensive scrutiny and rethinking. Quentin Skinner's 'new history' of political ideology has played a prominent role in catalysing this development. His contributions have prompted many historians of political thought to reflect upon the methodological status of their own inquiries. They have also forced many historians, often for the first time, to take seriously the linguistic turn in philosophy, as it has developed during the past half-century in the writings, say, of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Kuhn and Feyerabend. Inspired by the new history, old historiographies of political thinking - for instance, C. B. Macpherson's historical materialism and Leo Strauss's predilection for 'understanding authors as they understood themselves' - have been put into question. They are being replaced by an emphasis on understanding past political thought as political argument, as the discourse of particular historical actors situated in specific contexts, which are subject to reinterpretation, fierce

arguments and political transformation. The success of the new history in facilitating this shift of emphasis is no small achievement. Yet the confident and often self-congratulatory posture adopted by some of its supporters - the suggestion, for instance, that the new history has effected something of 'a revolution in the historiography of political thought'¹ - is unwarranted. While the new history indeed broaches the possibility of reformulating genuinely interpretive approaches to understanding the political past from the standpoint of the present, it is also crippled by several fundamental weaknesses. This self-crippling character of the new history weakens its credibility and undermines its stated ambition to be the proper method for studying political ideas in a genuinely historical way.

I

3. The weaknesses of the new history project are evident in all three of its central propositions. The first of these propositions might be termed 'the intentionality claim'. This is indebted to a basic insight of speech-act theory: In as much as agents both say and do something through their performative utterances (and objectify them in, say, the form of a political treatise), the historian's understanding of such utterances necessitates a grasp of their illocutionary force (Austin). Such force corresponds to what agents saw themselves as doing in issuing those performative utterances. The proclamation of the death of the author² is declared to be wholly premature. Against the idea of the author-subject as an ideological construction and texts as autonomous, 'worldless' objects whose meaning is produced through the interplay of their inner structures and shifting themes. Skinner invokes a promising hermeneutic rule: Historical interpretation is synonymous with explications of what authors were self-consciously attempting in their creative acts of writing (2:63 - 4; 3:74, 76, 78; 5:102). According to the new history, texts do not speak, only authors do. This means that writers are not merely prisoners of the discourse within whose boundaries they take pen in hand. Nor are they transcendental

egos. Authors always exercise a certain (developed) 'practical' consciousness of the conditions and possibilities in the field of action within which they write.

This intentionality claim is directed against not only textualist theories of meaning. It is pointed equally at the 'New Criticism' of Leavis and others³. It is argued that texts, duly pondered *as* texts, never yield their secret meanings to their interpreters' intelligence. Texts are not authorless entities that produce their own meaning. On the contrary, they are intentional objects of their creators. Thus, to know what writers saw themselves as doing in issuing utterances in the form of a text is *equivalent* to understanding their performed illocutionary speech-acts (of promising, warning, criticizing, etc.). When searching for the meaning or 'message' of texts, the historian's range of descriptions must focus on what 'motivated' authors' speech-acts, that is, on what they were intended to mean and how this meaning was intended to be taken. Skinner often speaks casually about the 'dynamic' relationship between writers' professed principles and the actual practices of political life, (2:56 — 9; 5:107— 8) but the implication is clear: Professed intentions (which serve either as genuine motives for actions or as legitimating rationalizations of given or recommended states of affairs) make a crucial difference to the production and reproduction of political life and *a fortiori* must therefore be cited in order to explain that life.

4. It should be noted in passing that the intentionality claim presupposes two highly problematic points, the implications of which cannot be pursued fully here. In the first place, the new history's methodology rests on the exaggerated claim that agents always have a privileged access to the significance of their own intentional utterances. This assumption is vulnerable to the insights of the work of Hirsch and others on the unconscious, symptomatic meanings that typically escape the self-understanding of agents⁴. Such work is indebted to the insights of classical psychoanalysis, for which dream analysis is central: the dream is understood as an ensemble of disguised and substitute representations

which have been formed on the boundary between the impulses and civilization, and recovered through the deformed utterances of the dreamer⁵. The idea of deformed utterances is alien to the new history. At best, it can admit of the possibility of intentional deception, of authors attempting to legitimate their untoward claims through commendatory or cunning language.

A second presupposition of the intentionality claim is equally vulnerable to criticism. The new history assumes that language, far from displaying a 'productivity' of its own, comes in the form of transparent wrappings within which intentional utterances are enclosed and issued. To be sure, Skinner cleverly censures defenders of the fallacy of the absolute text by insisting that any political text is always a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something. Yet this point results in a misleading *volte face* — it exposes itself to the old and telling criticisms of the intentional fallacy by structuralist theories of the text, which in turn draw on the classic Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Ricoeur's distinction between the subjective and objective moments of meaning is helpful in clarifying this point. The new history focuses only on the former - on the utterer's meaning, in the three-fold sense of the self-referencing of speeches their illocutionary dimension, and the author's intention of receiving audience recognition for his or her utterances. The consequent subjectivist bias of the new history results in the eclipse of the objective dimension of authors' utterances, or what has been called the semantic autonomy of their texts. This autonomy (which is expressed in the commonplace distinction between what authors intend to say and what their texts mean) is conditioned by the logic of textual intersignification, that is, by the cluster of objective' generative rules and devices which preside over authors intentions, the formal structure of their discourse and their reception by readers.⁶

5. These serious difficulties within the first argument of the new history can be set aside, in order to consider its second guiding claim: the thesis of authors'

dependency on a field of conventions (3:77)⁷ In Skinner's view, to redescribe the intentions guiding authors' utterances is to anticipate an explanation of their meaning. Historical interpretation, in this view, consists in the recovery of agents' intentions as they are expressed in relation to an ensemble of extra-textual conventions of political argumentation within which these agents already and necessarily stand. The speech-acts of authors consist in their meaning something by saying or doing something in relation to others. Speech-acts are not simply 'precipitates' of their context as Skinner points out convincingly against the reductionist treatment of language in Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (6.130 - 2). Speech-acts are nevertheless always 'situated' or conventional, in the sense that they standardly intend to communicate arguments to others and therefore must be recognizable *as* intentions. In so far as they are addressed to strictly limited, precisely identifiable audiences, all works of political argument are bound up - though never absolutely so - with the established universe of permissible communication.

This reason does not bring into play (as Parekh and Berki have claimed)⁸ the simplistic and erroneous assumption that prevailing conventions are immutable. In principle, Skinner's new history admits correctly of the possibility of inventive discourse, of writers consciously or unintentionally extending or even subverting radically prevailing conventions of political argument. The new history's concern with conventions is even more subtle than this. In the process of understanding the past it is argued, contexts serve as courts of appeal for assessing the plausibility of interpretations of speech-acts which have a polysemic and sometimes obscure character. That is to say, through the invocation of contexts, the historian can more readily understand the extent to which a particular situated author intentionally ignores, criticizes or wilfully apologizes for prevailing political conventions. The relationship between an author's text and its context is an instance of the hermeneutic circle: particular authors' utterances can be explicated as 'meaningful' only if it

is recognized that they always allude 'outside themselves' to prevailing assumptions, local styles of argumentation and contemporary or past political personalities, groups and struggles. Written discourse both refers back to its writer at the same time that it alludes beyond itself to the wider world of political action. This means that a text's meaningfulness cannot be conceived as immanent within that text, a meaning that can be unearthed by reading the text 'over and over again' (to repeat words once used by Plamenatz)⁹. Through the thesis of conventions, Skinner seeks to question the commonplace fetishism of texts which have been elevated in mysterious ways to the status of 'classics' and 'masterpieces'. As Skinner's own work on Hobbes has tried to demonstrate¹⁰, and as he repeats against Mesnard and Sabine in the methodological introduction to *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, an historical approach which dwells abstractly on the 'classics' must be decentred. (It is another matter whether this claim is contradicted by Skinner's actual historical research. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* contains surprisingly 'classical' biases, omitting any reference, for instance, to La Boetie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, or to texts in the 'Utopian' tradition, such as Campanella's *La citta del sole*.) At most, according to the new history, 'classic' texts are to be treated as foci around which redescriptions of the range of intentional meanings of past political discourse can be organized.

6. The new history's two inter-related claims - that the hermeneutic appropriation of texts must recognize their status as codified objects intentionally produced within a horizon of extra-textual conventions - presuppose a third claim: The aim of the history of political ideologies is the sympathetic recovery or redescription of the *mentalité* of past phases of political life. Skinner submits that honest historians of political thinking must set themselves the modest goal of reproducing 'real history' through a 'strictly historical approach' which provides 'realistic pictures' of how 'actual' political speech acts unfolded in the past (5:99)¹¹. Interpreters must cast themselves in the role of good-natured and unbiased observers bent (as Skinner's more recent

methodological writings stress (5:107- 18)) on establishing the complex connections between the history of political ideology - understood in the positivist sense of an action-orienting *Weltanschauung* - and its implication within conventional situations of political action. The new history is concerned to identify the logic of processes of ideological formation and transformation through careful, patient and exact descriptions of the past. The iniquitous *imposition* of 'distorting perspectives' on this past must be avoided. 'The business of the historian... is surely to serve as a recording angel, not a hanging judge [and] to recover the past and place it before the present, without trying to employ the local and defeasible standards of the present as a way of praising or blaming the past.'¹² Writers' conventionally mediated intentions must be treated

7. For the new history, then, the task of interpreting the past is posited as a process of mimetic reproduction of the immediately given intentions of actors within their respective conventional fields. The new history invokes the idea (drawn from Collingwood's maxim that historians must re-enact past experience)¹³ that there can be an untrammelled identity between present-day knowers and past producers of political argument. In principle, it is argued, intentionally produced utterances are capable of being reenacted fully. Here the new history embraces a covertly positivist model of interpretation - a model long since abandoned within the most sophisticated circles of interpretation theory. This copy model presumes that valid understanding is identical with the loyal reproduction of the intentionally produced and meaningful utterances of others. It thereby revives a form of objectivism, against which the project of the new history has consistently (and convincingly) rallied from the beginning.¹⁴ For the empathy model of imitating or 'recovering' the meaning of others' utterances, of empathetically looking them in the eye and stepping into their shoes, rests on the supposition of an initially uninvolved observer whose specific identity and prejudices can be selflessly repressed in the act of interpretation.

II

8. At least two inter-related arguments can be adduced against this model of the empathetic historian with innocent eyes. Both counter-arguments cast serious doubts on the viability of the new history. In the first place, a theme common to hermeneutics since Heidegger ought to be reaffirmed: Not only those whose utterances are to be interpreted, but interpreters themselves are always situated within a field of historically bound conventions and practices mediated by ordinary language. It is surprising that this point is missed in Skinner's account - especially given his references to Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas, the occasional (yet never developed) hints that interpreters' 'experience and sensibility' are a necessary precondition of interpretation¹⁵, and, finally, the rather different claim (directed against Butterfield)¹⁶ that 'realistic pictures' of past political thinking are possible only in as much as interpreters structure their interpretations through prior choices about 'what deserves to be studied and what is best ignored' (5=100)¹⁷. The vital point which is merely hinted at here is that interpreters are always implicated within, and must always draw upon, the universe of linguistically structured activities within which their own subjectivity has been formed. This is true even in the most elementary sense that historians live, socialize and work within forms of everyday life enmeshed in an ordinary language framework, which in turn shapes their aesthetic judgments about which narrative and explanatory structures to adopt for the purpose of simplifying and rendering intelligible to their fellow historians the infinite quantity of 'raw historical material. Indeed, this framework and its tacit conventions serve as a hermeneutic point of departure, a condition of *possibility* of generating historical interpretations in the first place. Interpreters always a ready stand within this field of intersubjectively shared conventions and preunderstandings, with the necessary 'bias' of which they approach the past. They cannot jump freely over the boundaries of this field and walk contentedly on the *terra firma* of the past. There can be no 'contemplative' or

'presuppositionless understanding of the past or present speech and action of others.

This is not to insist, fallaciously, that interpreters are cast necessarily in the mould of situated spectators surveying an alien past. The interpretive understanding of the past is neither identical with its immediate, empathy grasp (as the new history suggests) nor with the simple and motivated subjection of this past to the situated concerns of the present-day interpreter. The logic of interpretive understanding defies such a dualism. Here the new history overlooks a second crucial insight, which it ought to have sensed from first-hand experience: Historical interpretation is possible only through the mutual participation of interpreter and interpreted in the medium of a common language that provides 'access' to the forms of life activity with which it is intermeshed. In order to understand their past, interpreters at the very least must have mastered its language, a mastery which in turn allows that past to be rendered into the words and actions of the present. This, shared, ordinary language framework permits, through the medium of intersubjectively valid symbols, the negotiation of the meaning of past actors' speech-acts. In spite of the ineradicable difference between past and present which results from the flux of historical time and space, interpreters are always (in the rudimentary sense mentioned above) 'members' of the universe of communication that they seek to understand. This *a priori* participation of 'prejudiced' interpreters within the realm of past communication under interpretation is concealed by the old-fashioned positivism of Skinner's new history. Its presupposition of selfless researchers who are (initially) detached from their object of interpretation fails to consider that, in order for interpretation to be possible at all, both must already be conjoined in and through a shared linguistic *point de depart*, in accordance with the generative devices and rules of which interpreters are able to proceed with their interpretive acts.

This line of argument implies that historians' understanding of past political

speech-acts is possible only in so far as they assume the role of partner in dialogue with those acts. The actual meaning of past text is always co-determined by their presently situated interpreters. Voltaire's quip (in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*) that history is a pack of tricks played by the living on the dead still contains a profound grain of truth. All historical interpretation is inescapably 'subjective'. Whether they recognize it or not, historians in every age encourage the dead to perform whatever tricks they prefer or deem necessary. To be sure, the proper relationship between interpreter and interpreted is not one of an absolute subject who stands as 'authority' over and against its 'object' (authors engaged in speech-acts). It is, rather, a relationship between situated (if unequal) partners conjoined through the medium of a common language. In this sense the interpretive understanding of the past is a form of interlocution or communicative action. It is an instance of the dialectic of distancing and appropriation (Ricoeur) - of the endless struggle between the alien otherness of a spatially and temporally distant past and the appropriation of precisely this past that is separated from us - and therefore unfamiliar and alien. In other words, historical interpretation effects what Gadamer has called a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). This fusion of the world horizons of the reader with the writer rescues the meaning of his or her text from the threat of distancing only by placing it in a new proximity to those in the present. (In this respect as has been argued within the hermeneutic tradition from Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*) the historian's acts of interpretive understanding are neither a mere method nor a privileged mode of enquiry; rather, they are a more systematically articulated form of what is in fact practised routinely by situated subjects living, socializing and working within any particular society.) Contrary to the new history's unconvincing attempts to revive Collingwood, interpretation cannot be conceived as a reproductive act which rehabilitates a primal or original past. The annexation of the past always assumes the form of a productive achievement (an *inventio*) that draws on *present* meanings¹⁸.

9. If it is the case that every attempted recognition of what has been written or said is a newly produced understanding mediated by the social horizons and language of the interpreter, then the new history overlooks two additional methodological points of considerable significance. First, Skinner's conviction that the meaning of a text is equivalent to redescription of what situated agents saw themselves to be doing in issuing certain utterances must be revised thoroughly. It cannot grasp the fact that unintended consequences are a chronic feature of all speech-acts, past and present. Against the new history's intellectualist precept that agents always act in a 'rational' manner (3:76), it must be emphasized that the meaning of such utterances *always* goes beyond their authors' intentions, in the specific sense that the meaning of these intentions, to repeat an earlier thesis, must be co-determined by the interpreter. The significance of a past author's action is never over and done with, for the restitution of its meanings is possible only to the extent that they are reconstructed and expressed 'in other words', and by way of their interpreters' judgements. Accordingly, there can be no absolute knowledge of a text. It is part of the fate of any text that its meaning is dependent on an indefinite number of readers and, hence, of multiple interpretations. Each age must therefore understand a transmitted text in its own way. History, as Burckhardt observed, is always the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another. In spite of their best intentions, those in the present are always parochial with respect to their indefinite interpreters in the indeterminate future. Conversely, as Habermas has remarked, present-day historians are always cast uncertainly and temporarily in the role of the ultimate historians.¹⁹

10. The uncritical character of the new history constitutes a second consequence of its disavowal of a negotiation model of interpretation. If the understanding of the past is a productive achievement of a situated interpreter, then the new history's assumption that the tasks of explicating and evaluating the past can be separated in favour of the former is false, and must be rejected. As might be expected, this assumption derives from Skinner's prior

claim that historical interpreters can assume the role of detached and selfless chroniclers -'recording angels' - who look at the past with innocent eyes. On the basis of this implausible claim, historians' critical reflection on the power of tradition is ruled to be illegitimate.

Complacent political theorists are allowed to breathe easily: texts must be accurately understood first, and then (in accordance with their readers' whims) judged only later, if at all. It seems clear that the (unintended) effect of this rule is to celebrate the power of the past over the present. The new history suffers from a definite lack of critical imagination, as several critics of its 'dusty antiquarianism' have intimated²⁰. It seeks to maximize the quantity of treasured 'reproductions' of the political past for those living in the present. It thereby forgets the need, in certain cases, to shake off the legacies, burdens and distortions of the past. In other words, it devalues the historian's capacity to question critically and weaken the grip of 'realistic' interpretations of the past over the present, self-consciously to appropriate, preserve or break up tradition, and therefore to enhance the (potential) subjectivity of those living in the present. (The false sobriety of the new history can be contrasted with the energetic and critical powers evidenced within some contemporary works of feminist political theory, such as Hanna Pitkin's *Fortune is a Woman* or Carole Pateman's *The Problem of Political Obligation*, or with the stimulating and iconoclastic works of contemporary historical reinterpretation, such as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* or Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie*. None of these contributions claims to be a sober reproduction of our historical past, and yet each contributes to fundamental shifts in our shared sense of the past, present and future).

The pseudo-detached 'contemplativeness' of the new history is at least consonant with the ideological positions of both liberalism and conservatism (as Mannheim observed in another context)²¹ and it is reinforced by the presumption (discussed above with reference to the intentionality claim) that

agents always have a privileged access to the significance of their utterances. The new history turns a blind eye to the important dictum that unrecognized power is everywhere, that (at least in all hitherto existing societies) relations of command and obedience have become routinized or 'sedimented' in the institutionalized forms of life within which speaking and acting subjects are formed. Political argument is presumed to be a fully transparent play of self-conscious intentionality. It is supposed to be unhindered by 'invisible' relations of power, interest and ideological self-deception. As a consequence, the new history fails to account for the possibility that particular authors may unconsciously or half-consciously 'rationalize' their power-ridden forms of life as universal. (Throughout *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, for example, various authors' defence of 'the people' against absolutism is treated at face value; this results in the false impression that these authors included women, the propertyless, the indigent, the colonized and others within their universal category of citizenry.) Conversely, it fails to ask the familiar set of questions concerning the relationship between given utterances of authors and their clarification and explanation through the listing of probable causal antecedents²². True, Skinner acknowledges the need for an explanatory account of past actors' self-declared intentions. Yet the form of explanation he has in mind is flaccid and uncritical, and accepting of the immediacy of these intentions. In Skinner's view, to explain authors' utterances is to redescribe their guiding intentions (3:76; 5:107ff., esp. 112 - 13). Notwithstanding an allusion to the explanatory significance of judging the rationality of agents' utterances and motives (4:90-4), he maintains, misleadingly, that to know what authors meant is to know how they intended their utterances to be taken and, therefore, why they performed their particular speech-acts. The post-Enlightenment insight that we cannot so simply judge an age and its constituents on the basis of their own understanding is thereby lost.

III

11. It may be objected that the arguments raised here against all three premises of the new history are self-contradictory, in that they secretly lay claim to a 'true' historical methodology which is wholly at odds with their avowed rejection of attempts to generate indisputable knowledge of the past. This suspicion would be unjustified, since no such claim in support of a fundamental interpretive standard is intended or presupposed. The methodological proposals of the new history can be interpreted in a *variety* of ways - as a survey of the contributions to this volume confirms. The particular interpretation defended here does not lay claim to be exhaustive or comprehensive. It has been concerned neither to summarize exhaustively the new history in its own terms nor to extract from it systematic and irrefutable generalizations. It has instead pursued a modest type of hermeneutic approach, one which has aimed to reconstruct and interpret the deliberately organized arguments of the new history, in order to indicate the ways in which they 'wander' from, and sometimes contradict, the arguments advocated by its author'²³. In foregrounding these 'adventures' of the new history's arguments, this particular approach has not overlooked the heteromorphous and wholly conventional nature – and therefore irreducible *plurality* - of interpretive language games. On the contrary, it covers itself against being trapped in a performative contradiction of this kind by relying on the logic of occasion, as it is found, say, within the writings of Greek sophism. The unique feature of this logic of argument is its rejection of claims in support of one universal truth by pointing to the ways in which both itself and these claims are only individual cases of the logic of the particular, of the special case, of the unique occasion.

12 This methodological reliance upon the logic of particularism in matters of historical interpretation is well-suited to modern conditions. In modern capitalist societies, at least those in which a measure of democracy still prevails, the old presumption that there can be one true historical methodology - a presumption evidently still embraced by the new history - has worn thin. In

modern democratic societies, the shared sense of the past - as well as the foundations of social and political order - are permanently unstable. These societies severely weaken the efficacy of forms of life whose legitimacy draws on either transcendental standards (such as God) or beliefs in a naturally given order of things (as in traditional societies). Modern democratic societies also begin to pluralize the prevailing definitions of the past. It is not only - as supporters of the new history might claim - that the nineteenth-century efforts of professional historians to explain the riddles and laws of motion of history, or to distinguish between scientifically based 'proper history' and common-sense beliefs about the past, have become wholly unconvincing. Professional historians also come to quarrel openly about both the substantive meaning of the past (i.e., about historical 'facts' and their meaning) and *how* to interpret the past. It slowly becomes evident in modern democratic societies that the specific tactics used by historians - their initial designation of certain historical 'facts' as important; their favouring of certain plot structures to narrate sequences of past events as significant; their choice of particular forms of explanation of 'what happened in the past' and their normative judgements about these past events - are entirely conventional, and therefore highly variable in scope and number. Consequently, the belief among historians that 'history is history' is replaced gradually by the sense that history is always history as it is narrated, interpreted, explained and judged by particular historians with particular interests and concerns. These quarrels about the methodology and meaning of history are consonant with the broader tendency of modern democratic societies to destroy slowly all reference points of ultimate certainty. This tendency encourages social actors within these societies to doubt the reality of 'reality'. They begin to perceive, in other words, that they are not in possession of any ultimates (based on knowledge, conviction or faith), and that they are continually, and forever, forced to define for themselves the ways in which they wish to live. Modern democratic societies are in this sense the first (potentially) historical societies. Marked by a deep socio-historical indeterminacy, these societies are permanently in crisis. Their members begin

to perceive, if only dimly and sporadically, that the ends (and corresponding means) which they set themselves are neither ultimate nor incontrovertible, and that these goals and techniques are therefore subject to debate, conflict and resistance and, hence, to temporal and spatial variation.

13. The self-revolutionizing, self-questioning character of modern democratic societies no doubt renders them vulnerable to morbid attempts to restore absolute historical certainty. It also makes them prey to sickly forms of nostalgia, the negative political effects of which (such as blind complacency or fervid nationalism) can be checked only through the diffusion of *memories*, through the active interplay of a *plurality* of definitions of the past. This is why history ought to become a field of study *without* a consensus about which narrative strategies to adopt, which explanatory approaches to rely on, and which normative commitments should guide the enquiries and findings of historiography in the first place²⁴. Historical memories can be prevented from becoming History only by preserving a variety of historical methodologies and, thus, by extending votes to the most disenfranchised of all constituencies - our silenced ancestors. Democracy among the living requires democracy among the dead. A genuine plurality of historiographical approaches and substantive accounts of the past - including highly non-conformist approaches - is a *sine qua non* of democratic societies²⁵.

14. In his 'Theses on the philosophy of history' (1940), Walter Benjamin urged that history had until now been written from the standpoint of conformists and conquerors²⁶. Following Nietzsche's advice on the need for 'critical history'²⁷, he insisted that prevailing definitions of the past are always those of the oppressor and that, in so far as the dead are not safe from their clutches, official 'History' must be doubted, interrogated and rejected. Arguably, Benjamin's proposals for rewriting history against the dominant power groups and in anamnestic solidarity with the oppressed of the past and present are illusory in certain respects. His theses on the philosophy of history depend, for instance,

on the mythical assumption (gleaned from historical materialism and the Romanticism of works by B. G. Niebuhr, Michelet and Carlyle) that the dead voices of lost generations can be resurrected that the viewpoint of the downtrodden classes can be recovered fully by their politically motivated allies living in the present. Benjamin's proposals for rescuing and critically redeeming the lost past rested on several other unconvincing premises: a theory of language as representational naming - as the positing of a golden past, in which there was not yet a need to struggle with the discursive dimensions of language; and the belief (derived from Goethe) that historical interpretation is capable of redeeming the authentic origins of the discordant elements of contemporary life.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Benjamin's rejection of the stubborn belief in progress among his contemporaries remains compelling, as does his advice on the need to remember the dismembered, to recollect fragments of the broken past. Every image of the past that is neglected by the present can disappear forever into oblivion or the dusty obscurity of archives and museums. This is why every democratic society requires constant efforts to pluralize definitions of history, to break the power of the officially recognized dead over the living. It is also why, conversely, there is a need to awaken those souls who are dead, buried and forgotten to rescue those authors, texts and events that can increase our affection for democracy, despite the fact that they have been pushed aside (as irrelevant, confused, 'bourgeois' or 'obscure') or incorporated falsely into the prevailing definitions of history²⁸. In an age threatened by growing state authoritarianism and a multiplicity of other anti-democratic trends this goal of rescuing beleaguered democratic traditions can be realized only through the struggle to make 'foreign' what has become habitually 'our own' to distance ourselves from the conventional accounts of 'real history'. It has been argued above that the process of understanding the past defies the logics of subjection and simple reproduction, and that it is better analysed as a form of interlocution. If this argument is plausible then non-conformist historical

interpretations must explore the possibility of developing a type of critical history which orients itself to past authors, texts and contexts, in order that their conformist definition and consequences can be buried through an active, future-oriented process of forgetting and remembering. Analogous to the self-understanding of psychoanalysis, a non-conformist historiography must strive to break the grip of the past over the present - by way of a defence of a possible if indeterminate, future that is sustained by certain past memories.

By contrast with this task of defining a future-oriented memory which brushes history 'against the grain', the new history's misguided quest to grasp descriptively what past authors 'could in practice have been intending to communicate' is implicitly conformist. Its aim of producing a 'real history' of political ideologies more closely resembles an official history that unwittingly defends the spell-binding hold of past ideologies over the present. In spite of its modest and detached intentions, the new history clings to an old and suspect motto: *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*.

¹ J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History, Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3.

² Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?' *Screen*, 20 (spring, 1979), pp. 13-33 (with replies by Lucien Goldmann and Jacques Lacan); Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath, (Glasgow, Fontana Collins, 1977), pp. 142-8.

³ F. R. Leavis, 'The responsible critic or the functions of criticism at any time', in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. F. R. Leavis (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968): cf. the classic argument of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The intentional fallacy', *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946).

⁴ Eric D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 51-7; Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, Polity Press, 1979), pp. 56-9.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York, 1965).

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas Christian University Press, 1976), chap. 3. This point is admitted in J. G. A. Pocock's recent survey of the achievements of the new history: 'Skinner's method ... has impelled us toward the recovery of an author's language no less than of his [sic] intentions, toward treating him as inhabiting a universe of *langues* that give meaning to the *paroles* he performs in them'. *Virtue, Commerce and History*, p. 5.

⁷ Q. Skinner, Cf. 'Conventions and the understanding of speech-acts'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1970), pp. 118-38; 'Hermeneutics and the role of history', *New Literary History* 7 (1975-6), pp. 221, 227-8.

⁸ B. Parekh and R. N. Berki, 'The history of political ideas: a critique of Q. Skinner's methodology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), pp. 167ff.

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- ⁹ John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 2 vols, (London, Longmans, 1964), vol. I, p. x
- ¹⁰ Cf. Q. Skinner, 'Conquest and consent: Thomas Hobbes and the engagement controversy', in *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement*, ed. G. E. Aylmer (London, Macmillan, 1972), pp. 79-98; and 'History and ideology in the English Revolution', *Historical Journal*, 8 (1965), pp. 151-78.
- ¹¹ Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), vol. I, p. xi.
- ¹² Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 88.
- ¹³ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 282-302.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Skinner's sympathetic discussion of certain anti-positivist trends in historical research in an early essay, 'The limits of historical explanations', *Philosophy*, 41 (1966), pp. 199-215.
- ¹⁵ Skinner, 'Hermeneutics and the role of history', p. 228.
- ¹⁶ 5:000. Here Skinner explicitly exposes the objectivist claims of H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973).
- ¹⁷ This point resembles Collingwood's thesis (*The Idea of History*, pp. 29-45) that historians' attempts to find out what actually happened in the past is facilitated by their 'constructive imagination'. Neither Collingwood nor Skinner grasps the subversive implications of this thesis for their copy model of historical explanation. They assume that the 'constructive imagination' is a *neutral* medium in the process of composing historical narratives. Thereby, they overlook the essential point, argued below, that this constructive imagination always and inescapably conditions both the form and content of historians' pictures of the past, which therefore cannot be understood as stories of 'what really happened' in a given time and place.
- ¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pp. 43-4, 89-95; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* ed. G. Barden (New York, Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 273ff, 337ff, 358; cf. Manfred Frank's recent criticisms of the hermeneutic approach in *Was ist Neostrukturalismus?* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984) and *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität: Reflexionen über Subjekt, Person und Individuum aus Anlaß ihrer postmodernen Toterkldrung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986)
- ¹⁹ J. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), p.273.
- ²⁰ C. D. Tarlton, 'Historicity, meaning and revisionism in the study of political thought', *History and Theory*, 12 (1973), pp. 307-28; M. Leslie, 'In defense of anachronism'. *Political Studies*, 18 (1970), pp. 433-47
- ²¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946), pp. 180-2, 206—15, and 'Conservative thought', in *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York, 1953), pp. 74-164
- ²² For example, see H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), and Charles Taylor, 'Explaining action', *Inquiry*, 13 (1973), pp. 54-89.
- ²³ This approach is elaborated in my 'The modern democratic revolution: reflections on Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'La condition post-moderne', *The Chicago Review* vol. 35, no. 4, 1987, pp. 4-19.
- ²⁴ This conclusion is almost reached by Hayden White's insightful discussion of contemporary historiography in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. chaps 1-4. Arguing at length that all historiography entails the telling of many and often different kinds of stories, White draws back from the pluralist implications of his thesis. He argues, tentatively, that different types of narration, explanation and normative commitment in different 'schools' of historiography consist in the projection of a limited number of identifiable tropes — metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony — which prefigure the historian's fields of perception of historical events. Stimulated by Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969), White's attempt to ground and explain different modes of interpretation in a tropological theory of poetic language prompts *tu quoque* questions - which remain unanswered – about the exhaustiveness and validity of this generalizing theory itself

²⁵ The idea that democracy requires a plurality of memories can be inferred from two quite different, if extreme, possible situations. At one extreme, it is possible to imagine a former society - such as Palestine - whose members' historical senses have been interrupted, uprooted violently against their will, and scattered to the winds. Lacking shared memories, the citizens of this former society without history find themselves virtually powerless in a world that seems to them impermanent, empty and threatening. A quite different, and equally extreme possibility is that of a political order - such as contemporary Czechoslovakia - which permits only *one* view of history among its subjects. This gives rise to a strange feeling of a-historicity among the subjects of this political order. Time appears to stand still. Even though individuals continue being born, growing up, falling in love, having children and dying, everything around them becomes motionless, petrified and repetitious. Under these circumstances, any attempt, however limited, to preserve past memories represents an act of citizens' self-defence, a resistance against the oblivion of non-time, while the struggle of memory against the officially-enforced forgetting, as Kundera says, is also a struggle against authoritarian power.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, New Left Books, 1973), pp. 257-8.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The use and abuse of history', in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. O. Levy (London, 1921), vol. 5, pp. 1-100.

²⁸ This type of future-oriented memory guides my recent attempts to develop a political theory of civil society. See *Democracy and Civil Society* (London and New York, 1988) and John Keane (ed.). *Civil Society and the State. New European Perspectives* (London and New York, 1988). For their comments on an earlier draft of this essay, I should like to thank Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Quentin Skinner, and Patrick Wright.