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Thinking Historically

Jack Turner (bio)

Abstract

Skinnerian approaches to political thinking strictly bifurcate “past” and “present.” I argue that this is a simplistic understanding of political time—one sustainable only within a worldview where history is not felt as personally haunting. I substantiate my argument through an analysis of key passages in African American political thought. Thinkers like Du Bois and Baldwin center their inquiries on the very questions that the Cambridge School evades: When does the past begin to be past? When does the past cease to be present? How do we forge a language fully adequate to past and present’s complex relation?

In “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” (1969), Quentin Skinner argued that political theorists who avail themselves of the insights of the Western tradition of political thought show a failure of intellectual nerve. In addition to risking anachronism, they fail to think for themselves. Skinner was rightly contemptuous of the tendency among some political commentators to foist their political agendas on to the tradition’s illustrious figures. Yet Skinner went further. It wasn’t just historically careless invocations of the tradition that drew his ire; it was the very effort to use the intellectual resources of the past to think through the problems of the present. Those problems needed to be addressed on their own terms—using conceptually appropriate vocabularies, free of the obfuscating authority that names like Aristotle, Locke, and Tocqueville evoke. Let us stop arguing from authority, he propounded; let us start arguing on the basis of reason we exercise on our own.¹

Skinner’s indictment of the very attempt to think *with* the past suggested an intellectual division of labor between the history of political thought, on the one hand, and contemporary political theory, on the other. The history of political thought should be primarily *historical* in orientation—recovering the historical identity of past works and understanding their intentions as the authors themselves understood them. Contemporary political theory, on the other hand, should direct its energy to thinking through present political problems with as little mediation from historical sources as possible. Over time, Skinner came to concede that there was a gray area between the history of political thought and contemporary political theory.² Two of his allies in political philosophy, John Dunn and Raymond Geuss, also retreated from the strict division of labor as they increasingly insisted that contemporary theory needed to be more historically informed. Dunn and Geuss were especially critical of what they saw as the ahistorical abstract theorizing of Rawls and his disciples.³ They counseled historically educated realist political analysis.⁴ At the same time, both Dunn and Geuss endorsed Skinner’s historicism, and urged the most extreme caution in using the analytics of bygone eras to illuminate the politics of present.⁵

Nearly 50 years after the Skinnerian revolution in the history of political thought, we can say both that the historicism he urged has paid off beautifully in the increase of scrupulously-acquired knowledge of the historical identities of political ideas,⁶ and that the division of labor with contemporary political theory has proved unsustainable. Skinner himself has gravitated toward prescriptive political theorizing in his recovery of a third concept of liberty that he thinks can help us recognize contemporary dangers to freedom.⁷ Likewise, Philip Pettit’s republicanism draws inspiration from the republican tradition of political theory that Skinner and his students have so carefully excavated.⁸ Given the breakdown in the division of labor, what then is the methodological upshot of the Cambridge School? Be careful; be very careful; pay attention to the historical identities of past ideas and think hard before importing them into present analysis. Recognize also that past ideological configurations are highly contingent, as are the ideological configurations of the present. We *can* think differently; our present and future *can* be otherwise. Why has it taken decades to come to these much more modest and sane conclusions? Methodological tunnel vision prevented the Cambridge School from acknowledging what was obvious all along: we can distinguish between the historical identities of ideas and the ways we use those ideas for the present, and so long as we keep track of that distinction, the risks of anachronism are manageable.

What was lost in the meantime is the opportunity to think *through* the question of how to think *with* the past in a responsible manner. What does *thinking with the past* even mean? And how could it ever be consistent with thinking for oneself? I come at these questions as a student of both racial injustice in America and African American political thought. My experience as a student of these subjects teaches me that the strict bifurcation of past and present underwriting Cambridge analytics is a highly artificial understanding of political time—one sustainable only within a worldview where history is not felt as personally haunting. Study of authors like W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison precludes neat bifurcation of past and present. Half the point of their writings is that past and present are politically confounded, requiring us to divest ourselves of a historically innocent understanding of history as a series of nows. A famous passage from W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—beautifully analyzed in Lawrie Balfour’s 2011 book *Democracy Reconstructed*—illustrates the falsity of neat bifurcation. Reflecting on the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Du Bois writes:

[I]t is doubly difficult to write of this period calmly, so intense was the feeling, so mighty the human passions that swayed and blinded men. Amid it all, two figures ever stand to typify that day to coming ages,—the one, a gray-haired gentleman, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes;—and the other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforetime quailed at that white master's command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife,—aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after "cursed Niggers." These were the saddest sights of that woeful day; and no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present-past; but, hating, they went to their long home, and, hating, their children's children live to-day.⁹

Cambridge analytics would hold that this passage reflects the point of view of a particular writer in a particular time and place, separated from us by a gap we must bridge slowly and carefully, using rigorous empirical methods that locate the passage in its immediate contexts. And this is all well and good—for it is indeed the case that Du Bois' words had temporally local audiences and were strategic moves in temporally local ideological debates. Yet to stop there is to miss a large part of the passage's power—for in its figurative elaboration of the idea of the "present-past" Du Bois means to raise the questions, when does the past begin to be past? When does the past cease to be present? And how do we work our way through a language that still bifurcates past and present and is still inadequate to their complex relation? Du Bois is asking his audience these questions in 1903, but if the questions are a problem for them, they are also a problem for us. For I take Du Bois to be saying to his audience in 1903—and by implication to us—that the relation of past and present is an open, political question, and that it can never be assumed that the power of the past recedes in proportion to the earth's orbiting of the sun. The relation of past and present is a matter of interpretive judgment. Consequently, whether a work of political thought is dated or timely is also a matter of interpretive judgment, and cannot be decided arithmetically.¹⁰

To think historically is to brave the uncertainties of these judgments, to be willing to assess timeliness and untimeliness. Thinking for ourselves also means making judgments about what is required to interpret the present, to make it productively strange, productively unfamiliar, so that we may decide if we need something new. In the wake of Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, for example, debate rages in the United States about why police forces across the country err on the side of deadly force in their dealings with darker-skinned citizens.¹¹ Theoretical reflection on this question must indeed confront the novelty of the situation: the strange co-existence, for example, of racially biased state killing with racially diverse police forces; the strange combination of public insistence on colorblindness with inveterate racial profiling. Yet in this contemporary political debate we still stand to gain from a perspective offered by James Baldwin in 1966—a perspective that fails to account for changes in the situation in the 50 years since, but which nevertheless may capture important continuities and provoke us to ask whether the changes do in fact outweigh the continuities, as hegemonic narratives of racial progress assume:

... [W]hat I have said about Harlem is true of Chicago, Detroit, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and San Francisco—is true of every Northern city with a large Negro population. ... [T]he police are simply the hired enemies of this population. They are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function. They are, moreover ... quite stunningly ignorant; and, since they know that they are hated, they are always afraid. One cannot possibly arrive at a more sure-fire formula for cruelty.¹²

Besides registering parallels between "post-civil rights" and "Civil Rights" America—and thus prodding us to question the division between them—the passage offers a general assessment of black Americans' political situation that is as applicable to the slavery era as it is to Baldwin's era as it is to Ferguson: "To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect."¹³ Thinking *with* Baldwin helps us overcome ideologically ingrained myths of racial progress—for it brings historical continuity into sharp relief in a present saturated with insistence that "Things have changed."¹⁴ Thinking *with* Baldwin upsets Whig histories designed to blind us to historical continuity and therefore prevent us from bringing our harsh judgments of bygone periods of white supremacy—slavery and Jim Crow—to bear on one of its main contemporary configurations—the modern American police state. Thinking *with* Baldwin, in this sense, assists rather than impedes precisely what Skinner calls for—"doing our own thinking for ourselves"¹⁵—for though individuals must draw their own conclusions about the significance of white supremacy's continuity, thinking *with* the past makes that continuity discernible. The example of Baldwin on police power urges us to resist hard and fast distinctions between the history of political thought and contemporary political reflection. The history of political thought may productively inform contemporary political reflection by serving as a counterweight to prevailing "common sense," helping us see the present more clearly.

One of the ironies of modern American political culture is that seeing white supremacy anew requires us to see it as continuous—to see the undeniably distinct phenomena of mass incarceration, Jim Crow, and slavery as part of a unified pattern of white domination. The voices of historical denial are so loud—the insistence that America is post-racial so ubiquitous—that we must evoke parallels between past and present to provoke citizens to question whether the past is as past as we would like to believe. When a figure like Baldwin evaluates a past phenomenon—police brutality in Harlem in 1964—in terms that resonate eerily with our present—excessive force in Ferguson in 2014—it forces us to ask how much *political time* has really passed. The recognition that political time is out of step with chronological time then compels us to come to grips with the conservative forces—in this case, forces conserving white supremacy—at play. In bringing this conservatism into sharp relief, the history of political thought performs an invaluable service: subverting the notion that history is progressive. Margaret Leslie's words powerfully capture the way uncanny historical parallels emancipate thought: "[T]he perception of similarity in otherness, of unity in difference, is the very life-blood of analogical thinking, one of the commonest ways in which we extend the limits of our thought and break out of the straight-jacket of commonplace assumptions."¹⁶

To refuse to use the history of political thought to interpret the present because one distrusts one's own ability to do so responsibly is to close off potential illumination out of fear of judgment's vagaries. But the vagaries of judgment are always with us, even and especially in our choice of method. Better to choose methods that allow us to confront the artificiality—the constructedness—of the distinction between past and present over methods that assume that that distinction is easy to make.

Jack Turner

Jack Turner is associate professor of political science at the University of Washington and Director of the Washington Institute for the Study of Inequality and Race (WISIR). He is the author of *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2012). His many articles include "John Locke, Christian Mission, and Colonial America" (*Modern Intellectual History*, August 2011). Jack can be reached at jturner3@uw.edu

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Notes

1. Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 52, 13.
2. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112; Quentin Skinner, "On the Liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns: A Reply to My Critics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 1 (2012): 128.
3. John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, Canto ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127; Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chap. 1 and 2.
4. John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: HarperCollins, 2000); Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
5. John Dunn, "The History of Political Theory," in *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-38; Quentin Skinner, Partha Dasgupta, Raymond Geuss, Melissa Lane, Peter Laslett, Onora O'Neill, W.G. Runciman, Andrew Kuper, "Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2002): 1-19.
6. Among the works I most admire from Skinnerian tradition are David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
7. Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*; Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 237-268. Keith Thomas notes how Skinner employed his historically recovered "third concept of liberty" to criticize Tony Blair's security policies in the wake of 9/11. See "Politics: Looking for Liberty," *New York Review of Books*, May 26, 2005.
8. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, [1903] 1997), 54-55. For Balfour's analysis, see *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11-13.
10. My thoughts on interpretive judgment have benefitted from Michelle T. Clarke, "The Mythologies of Contextualism: Method and Judgment in Skinner's *Visions of Politics*," *Political Studies* 61, no. 4 (2013): 767-783. See also Ian Ward, "Helping the Dead Speak: Leo Strauss, Quentin Skinner, and the Arts of Interpretation in Political Thought," *Polity* 41, no. 2 (2009): 235-255.
11. See Melvin L. Rogers, ed., "Ferguson and the Tragic Presence of the Past: A Collection," *Theory & Event* 17, no. 3, Supplement (2014).
12. James Baldwin, "A Report from Occupied Territory" (1966), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 734. Thanks to Christopher J. Lebron for drawing my attention to this passage.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Kirstine S. Taylor, "Racial Violence and the Politics of Innocence: From the Postwar South to Post-Racial America," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2015); Kirstine S. Taylor, "Untimely Subjects: White Trash and the Making of Racial Innocence in the Postwar South," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2015): 55-79.
15. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 52.
16. Margaret Leslie, "In Defense of Anachronism," *Political Studies* 18, no. 4 (1970): 442.

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