The Politics of Contextualism:
Normativity and the New Historians of Political Thought

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Abstract

A central purpose of historicist contextualism, or the “new history of political thought”, the central methodological ideas of which were laid out in the 1960s and 70s, was to liberate the history of ideas from distorting influence of political ideology, nationalism, and other presentist narratives that ascribed past events under false teleologies. From the 1980s onwards, it has been possible to find explicitly normative statements in the works of the leading contextualist historians and scholars influenced by their work, for example, Skinner’s defences of neo-Roman republicanism. This article asks whether a “normative turn” has taken place in the contextualist methodology and interpretation of history. Instead of arguing that the normative element was a novelty introduced after the 1980s, the relevant claim here is that contextualist theorising was socially and politically implicated and arguably normative from its very beginning. To substantiate this, the article offers an interpretation of the normativity of early contextualism based on its relationship towards broader socio-political themes such as ideology, agency, emancipation, progress, and societies’ relationship with their pasts. Early contextualist normativity assumed that the professional research of history would be a suitable and sufficient way of generating also socially desirable outcomes. Later, as the political and academic background conditions changed, this normativity was given more explicit (e.g. republican) formulations in order to keep up its political relevance.

Keywords: contextualism, normativity, history of political thought
Introduction: A Normative Turn?

The contextualist approach to the history of political philosophy has throughout its history been associated with a programmatic attitude. In addition to developing an original methodological approach that helped identify the subject-matter of the history of political thought, contextualism has included thorough critiques of the prevailing conditions and conventions, and it is often against such that the approach has taken its outwardly recognisable shape and identity. During the stages of its inception, the programmatic attitude was easy to recognise in the attempt of a group of Cambridge-based scholars (hence the eponym “Cambridge School”) to develop a philosophically well-grounded “alternative approach”\(^1\) or even a “truly autonomous method”\(^2\) for the study of the history of ideas.

This approach was intended to challenge the historically unsophisticated conventions of the “traditional” or Great Books approach to political philosophy, as well as to contribute to the then intensifying debates on the philosophy of history and the social sciences that had received important inputs from, for example, the critiques against the Whig interpretation of history, new social historians such as E.P. Thompson, the Marxist historians of political thought such as C.B. MacPherson, interpreters of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy such as Peter Winch, the historical sociology of knowledge with practitioners such as Karl Mannheim, and the new history of science pioneered by Thomas Kuhn. Regarding the development of historical method, such trends formed the general intellectual background against which especially the early founders of the contextualist approach such as Peter Laslett, John Pocock and Quentin Skinner formulated their theses, with strong supporting elements from the empirical study of history, analytic linguistic philosophy, and Collingwoodian idealism.\(^3\)

If we next turn our attention towards the contextualist scholarship of the end of the 20\(^{th}\) century and the beginning of the 21\(^{st}\), this time the words “programmatic”, “normative”, and “political” might produce an altogether different association with the neo-Roman and republican political theories that contextualists such as Skinner, and scholars influenced by contextualism such as Maurizio Viroli and Philip Pettit, have studied as historical

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phenomena and rehabilitated, updated and defended as ideological alternatives to contemporary liberalism.\textsuperscript{4} These substantive theories, which have arisen against at least partially contextualist backdrops and have been developed around such comprehensive notions such as civic virtue, rule of law and non-dominance (and with Skinner in particular, his “third concept of liberty”) are structurally and stylistically increasingly reminiscent of the other normative political theories of the day, such as liberalism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy.

The apparent key difference between these two programmatic attitudes is quite obvious. In the 1960s and 70s, it seems, it was the philosophy and methodology of historiography that the new historians of political thought wanted to revise without wanting to directly address the question of political ideology. By the 1990s, the normative defences of republicanism were so explicit that they even led to claims that methodological rigour and historical accuracy had been abandoned for the sake of normative force.\textsuperscript{5} In order to explain what happened, one might want to compose a rather straightforward story where the contextualist effort simply moved on from a “philosophical-methodological stage” to a “political-normative stage”.

However, the starting point of this article is somewhat different. Instead of seeking to affirm the rather simple distinction between philosophy and politics, I wish to show how even the early contextualism of the 1950s and 60s included normative and arguably “political” views that related to wider contemporaneous debates on social and political issues. To understand the political aspects of the early views, one just has to keep in mind that what is intended as politically consequential need not always be articulated in the vocabulary of conventional party politics. In the social sciences generally, the then relevant debates addressed, for instance, the essence of ideology, the relationship between science and politics, and the nature and limits of expert authority. In the case of the Cambridge School in particular, it was about themes such as the political weight given to past texts, the use of historical narratives for political legitimation, and the opportunities for individual agency against what might be called political “systems” or “structures”.

Is the presence of these themes enough to qualify their views “normative” or “political”? In this article I suggest that contextualist thinking became politically implicated in at least two ways. First, many of the questions already mentioned addressed political power and its legitimation and thereby signalled a basically critical attitude towards political authority, especially authority based on tradition. Second, the range of reference of the themes handled by the early contextualists clearly overstepped the limits of professional historiography narrowly understood. Many of the wider issues gained their meaning in other contexts than only the philosophical and methodological discussions significant for a specialised profession. For example, by participating in the debates on various forms of expert authority, they contributed to the formation of opinions concerning an issue area that


had at least as much political relevance as it had historiographical relevance. Moreover, the practical solution of such broader socio-political themes does not depend on academic discussion only, but also on more widely shared social and political beliefs. All this is compatible with the idea that while the normative preferences of the early contextualists did not flow from any party-political programmes, they still may have conformed better to some political world-views than to others.

Nevertheless, the amount of their political commitment should not be exaggerated. Based on the published writings of such authors as Laslett, Pocock and Skinner, the main focus of their efforts appears to have been clearly in the improvement of the historical method and in actual historical research. Because their normative views were expressed mostly in scholarly terms and in scholarly debate, I will call their politics at this stage *implicit*: there is no much doubt that the development of an improved historical methodology and the writing of actual historical studies remained in the centre of their attention for a long time. However, also this may tell us something about their beliefs regarding the nature of politically relevant activity. Arguably, they in their own way joined the broad ranks of post-WWII intellectuals who had some social or political ambition, and who at the same time chose the academia as their medium of social or political influence. A belief in a broadly interpreted socio-political force of the humanities and social sciences had many adherents during the 1950s and 60s across the Western world, and considering the expansion the universities and the social sciences in particular together with their increasing practical influence, it was probably not without a foundation.

Thus, it would seem that there is still something to be said about the emergence of contextualism that is not covered by the existing accounts that centre on historical interpretation and method, the rehabilitation of rhetoric and the emergence of “theory politics” in the study of political thought, and the overall “modernist historicist” philosophical quality of the enterprise. The context of this article is the transformation of professions, academic fields, and political agendas from the 1950s to the early 70s. I will examine the relationship of early contextualism to ideologies such as the contemporaneous variants of liberalism and socialism, as well as to the changing constellations of the academia and its various disciplines. The contextualists wrote relatively little related to such issues directly, but given the broad social and political reach of the topics that they otherwise addressed, there is no reason to assume that they were not interested in or did not wish to influence such issues. Their preferred way of doing so, it appears, was academic research in the field of historical political thought and its methods, which provided certain inroads to promote their basic convictions regarding, for example, the preferred nature of political activity between radicalism and conservatism, and the overall nature of political and moral values. This, in turn, could create a “virtuous circle” where increased historical consciousness would illuminate the conditions of political change, thus contributing to civic political activity that critically examines the existing traditions and authorities.

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8 M. Bevir, “Contextualism”.
Contextualism was not introduced as a normative political theory, and therefore an interpretation of its normativity must partly be based on implications rather than explicit statements. Many of the key components of their philosophical analysis had been available in some form since the late 1940s, and to tell how they were combined with each other to produce an identifiable research programme is to explain the emergence of the new history of political thought as a scientific tradition. To ask what sorts of moral and ideological positions and policy choices were compatible with that tradition is the main task of this article. I will start with an examination of the ideological and conceptual anti-foundationalism of contextualism, then proceed towards the modernist professionalism that characterised the relationship between science and society, and finally to their views on political agency, emancipation and contemporary (post-1968) ideology. I will end the article with a discussion on change and continuity within contextualist normativity.

Contextualist Anti-Foundationalism and the Demise of the Public Philosopher

The most important revisions that took place with early contextualism were not as much about substantive political-philosophical doctrine as they were about how political philosophy and political philosophers came to be regarded generally. To illustrate this difference, one can recall how Karl Popper, an immediate contemporary of the Cambridge contextualists, attacked the substantive philosophies of Plato, Hegel, and Marx because of what to him were their teleological beliefs that undermined political plurality and therefore the possibility of “open society”.9 Peter Laslett, a prominent figure of early contextualism, asked a different question: How it was possible that a whole class of men, the likes of those “from Hobbes to Bosanquet”,10 had disappeared from the scene and no longer exercised their influence on political and social matters? While Laslett might have disagreed with the philosophies of Plato, Hegel, or Marx, a substantive critique addressing their doctrines never appears to have been his main point. When making his famous declaration of the at least temporary death of political philosophy,11 he was discussing the end of a particular form of social role combined with some political authority, or to generalise even more, the changing relation between science and politics in the post-war Western societies.

The death of political philosophy proclaimed by Laslett was not well compatible with the contemporaneous existence of several well-known and active political thinkers and philosophers, for example, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Leo Strauss. Even the “new” political scientists such as David Easton tried to develop alternative forms of political theory instead of abolishing the whole sub-field.12 However, Laslett’s claim was probably more insightful if taken as a diagnosis concerning a particular historical relationship between philosophical or scientific knowledge and politics. Even today, it would seem to make sense to say that “we have them no longer”:13 we generally

11 Ibid.; “For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead”.
do not take our moral and political views and definitions from a special group of men and women called “political philosophers”, nor would it appear that this function is overtaken by some other academic profession. In all fairness, it should probably be asked whether “we” ever took such beliefs from “them”, since the decisive political and moral importance of even the earlier political philosophers may to some degree be an exaggeration entertained by philosophers and theorists themselves. However, it appears that even within the philosophical profession itself, there is no longer a strong desire to elevate figures such as Locke, Marx, or Mill to a position of moral authority that they once enjoyed in the tradition.

If the key problem for thinkers such as Popper and Arendt was the malicious content of some philosophies, or some versions of contemporaneous social science, then it was precisely the social and political authority associated with a practice traditionally called political philosophy that the early contextualists questioned. To describe their goals by addressing the developments and power structures internal to academic disciplines approaches questions that are commonly posed in the sociology of knowledge. This is probably not a totally anachronistic interpretation considering Laslett’s debt to his former teacher Karl Mannheim as recently examined by Skodo, or the keen interest that Pocock and Skinner later expressed to the historical sociology of science of Thomas Kuhn. Obviously, the desire to debunk traditional philosophical authorities resonated with the general trend that favoured the social sciences at the expense of philosophy, in particular metaphysics and political philosophy.

T. D. Weldon from Oxford University was the intellectual figure whom Laslett appeared to be following most closely in 1956 when describing the philosopher and his political competence. Weldon was an analytic philosopher of language and politics, who in his wartime role as Personal Staff Officer to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris had helped justify the bombings of German cities to audiences consisting of British politicians and public. Soon after the war he wrote two in their own time rather successful monographs on philosophy and politics, called States and Morals and The Vocabulary of Politics. Both books carried a message that was austere and no-nonsensical to a degree that approached cynicism: Political principles cannot pretend to have a scientific grounding similar to the principles of the natural sciences, and therefore a choice between political or moral values is simply a choice between different opinions. Moral beliefs cannot be ranked objectively, and while one set of political principles in, say, a given national culture can be unacceptable for other cultures, it does not follow that the principles of the first culture would lack internal consistency. In the words of J. D. Mabbott in his 1946 review of

14 Skodo, “Idealism, the Sociology of Knowledge.”
16 Although Laslett’s text contained some reservations regarding Weldon’s arguments and style (see Koikkalainen, “Peter Laslett), he at the same time acknowledged how Weldon’s work was “the only attempts known to me at a general consideration in contemporary logical terms of the conventional content of political philosophy”. Laslett, “Introduction”, x.
17 H. Probert, Bomber Harris: His Life and Times (London: Greenhill, 2006).
Weldon’s States and Morals, “We should feel towards Russian or German State-worshippers as we feel towards Quaker conscientious objectors.” 19 If German State-worshipping, however, posed a threat to Britain, then strategic air-raids might have been one of the effective ways of addressing that. The philosophically significant point, however, was that abstract reasoning was not such an effective way, since conflicts between basic moral views were insoluble – “No man ever changed his moral beliefs as a result of an argument”. 20 For the present purposes, however, Weldon’s most essential lesson may be his strong conviction that philosophers – and not the least those who called themselves “political philosophers” – had no specific competence whatsoever to act as judges between the competing world-views.

Weldon’s views, although seldom mentioned as a philosophical basis for contextualist historiography, point to more than one of the key philosophical foundations of the “implicit politics” of the early contextualists. First, embedded in this version of moral relativism typical of the English philosophers of language (ordinary-language philosophers in particular) was what a couple of decades later could have been called conceptual anti-foundationalism, which denied the possibility of any “essential” meanings for concepts such as “soul” or “state”. Obviously, a similar view would become much more famous through Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, often crystallised in the dictum “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. 21 The mere existence of that position and the willingness of some of its proponents to declare it quite loudly probably much reduced the desirability of any philosophical attempts to define “state”, “society”, “liberalism”, or “citizenship” in any substantive terms. Second, and very much related to the previous point, it was now increasingly often thought that historical changes in moral and political beliefs did not result from discussions across historical time among thinkers devoted solely for that mission, but that also philosophical arguments on morals or politics took place against particular political contexts. This idea was shared by various authors such as Weldon, who insisted that what Hobbes and Locke attempted had been a change in the then-existing “rules of the game”; Laslett, who revealed the “party-political” character of Locke’s Two Treatises on Government, and Skinner, who has throughout his career written about politics as a battle over contested linguistic meanings. 22

The early contextualists were not alone in approaching epistemological or moral relativism. Similar tendencies existed elsewhere and they arguably constituted a significant part of the

19 J. D. Mabbott, review of States and Morals, Philosophy 22 (1947), 82.
20 Ibid.
22 As Skinner puts it in a recent interview: “If only because, as Nietzsche says in a wonderful phrase, the concepts we have inherited — and the interpretations we place upon those concepts — are just frozen conflicts, the outcomes of ideological debate. We just get the views of the winners, so that historians always have to engage in an act of retrieval, trying to recover wider and missing structures of debate.” In “Concepts only have histories”, interview of Skinner by Emmanuelle Tricoire and Jacques Lévy, EspacesTemps.net 2004/2007 (http://www.espacestemps.net/en/articles/quentin-skinner-ldquoconcepts-only-have-historiesrdquo-en/, retrieved 5 June 2014).
underlying ethos of the new social sciences.\textsuperscript{23} This state of affairs did not go unnoticed by those who still wished to defend more substantive visions of moral life or stronger adherence to the philosophical tradition. During the 1950s and 1960s, these critics included thinkers such as Leo Strauss, who continued to see political philosophy as perennial ahistorical wisdom; and Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, who based their political theories on a philosophical definition of “the political”. While the theories of Arendt and Wolin were perhaps not ahistorical per se, Arendt especially built her vision of politics upon the decisive nature of the experience of public life in Ancient Athens, which had been transmitted more or less successfully by the philosophical tradition until the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Thus the historical scope of application that she allowed for her central concepts was, at least, far broader than that of the Cambridge contextualists and their predecessors.

Their distance to John Rawls, who in 1971 revitalised political philosophy with his \textit{A Theory of Justice}, was probably even greater.\textsuperscript{24} From a contextualist point of view, Rawls’s way of reaching his achievement – by introducing two universally applicable principles of justice – ought to be seen as remarkably traditionalist. It was precisely the conception of political philosophy as a discipline capable of establishing and demolishing political principles that Laslett and his analytic contemporaries such as Weldon attacked in the 1950s. With the benefit of more than forty years’ hindsight, one may perhaps easier speculate on the historical limits of Rawls’s success. The liberalism-communitarianism debate that started in the aftermath of Rawls’s book formed the mainstream of Anglo-American political theory and philosophy for the next decades, but its connection to the wider public debate and political mass movements arguably remained weaker than that of the liberalist or socialist theories of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The appeal of Rawls’s egalitarian vision of distributive justice was perhaps more strongly tied than first perceived to a contingent political climate that then favoured moderate social liberalism, social democracy, and the welfare state. Here the relevant conclusion might be that Laslett’s prediction concerning the public role of the political philosopher still held in the bigger picture. The liberalism-communitarianism debate did not reinstate philosophers as a group back into their previous role of public intellectuals with moral authority. There have been attempts in roughly that direction, for example, the communitarian philosopher Amitai Etzioni’s work as a background figure of the Clinton administration, and the comparable role of the republican theorist Philip Pettit in Zapatero’s Spain, not to mention Anthony Giddens behind Tony Blair’s policy in Britain. These examples, however, are in some contrast with the traditionally assumed independence and sometimes political outsidersness of public intellectuals. Today, an example of an institutionally non-aligned prominent public intellectual might be the economist Paul Krugman, whose expertise is from a field quite different from political philosophy.

\textsuperscript{23} For two representative examples, the new ethics of the social sciences were celebrated by David Easton in sections addressing political theory of his \textit{Political System} (New York: Knopf, 1953) and criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre in his \textit{A Short History of Ethics} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

\textsuperscript{24} Also Laslett and his then co-editor James Fishkin celebrated that situation in their introduction to the fifth series of \textit{Philosophy, Politics and Society} in 1979: “we can have no sensation other than delight to be relieved of the necessity of asking anxious questions about political philosophy and the present quality of its life”. P. Laslett and J. Fishkin, “Introduction”, in Laslett and Fishkin (eds.), \textit{Philosophy, Politics and Society}, Fifth Series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 1–2.
The Professional Management of the Past

The early contextualists questioned the expert authority once enjoyed by political philosophers, but were there other means of theoretical intervention to politics that they considered more legitimate? To the extent that the answer was positive, it paralleled the overall modernist mainstream of the 1950s and early 60s. In the social sciences generally, a leading assumption then was that the rise of complex modern mass societies required new methods for their study and new theoretical concepts. Early contextualism extended that revisionist attitude to the history of thought, but instead of proposing new concepts or methods for the study of contemporary politics or policy, they concentrated on how the modern society related to its past and on the intellectual traditions that mediated that past to the present. According to the early contextualist agenda, the management of the past should be professional, comprehensive, and critical.

The disciplinary background of contextualism changed over time, but if compared with the speculative methods of earlier political philosophy, it continuously relied on an academic professionalism that sought to utilise the state-of-the-art achievements of the neighbouring fields. In Laslett’s early studies on Filmer and Locke, the result of this was a sort of historical empiricism in the form of extensive archival research and, for example, bibliometric methods, in the study of classical political thought. From the 1960s, Laslett also used population-level statistical analyses and data-gathering performed by large groups of volunteers. Skinner and Pocock, despite some early commendations of empirical and statistical methods, chose their concepts more exclusively from the philosophical and historiographical debates. Nevertheless, in their application of state-of-the-art concepts from linguistic philosophy and, for example, Kuhn’s history of science, they developed a more systematic way of embedding concepts from neighbouring fields to the history of ideas than their at least English predecessors. In fact, their engagement with such theoretical discussions was so strong that it was eventually openly disliked by those historians of ideas who preferred traditional craftsmanship combined with historical imagination, and who regarded methodological sophistication beyond that “so much waste of time”.

What Skinner and Pocock effectively did in some of their key essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s was to examine and further develop a set of philosophical concepts suitable for the study of the historical and political character of past thought. By adopting such terms as “speech act”, “utterance”, “illocutionary force”, and “paradigm”, they could articulate a

25 In the words of Laslett, “What is important for us to know is how it [the national society] works, and that I believe we can expect to learn from the psychologist, the social anthropologist, and the sociologist”. P. Laslett, “Face to Face Society” in Philosophy Politics and Society, First Series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), 184; Koikkalainen, “Peter Laslett”.
27 See Laslett’s historical works since The World We Have Lost (London: Methuen, 1965).
philosophical vision of history around the concepts of intentionality, linguistic conventions, and paradigms. Kuhn’s new history of natural sciences clearly was an influence on both Skinner and Pocock – visible in Pocock’s usage of “paradigm” in particular – but important parts of Skinner’s philosophical vocabulary came from the “Oxford” variant of linguistic philosophy, represented, for example, by J. L. Austin’s speech act theory and his theory of conventions, and Paul Grice’s theory of meaning. The influence of previous-generation British idealism, Collingwood in particular, was seen in their rejection of perennial problems and the adoption of the “logic of question and answer”, but probably also in what might be called the historical idealism of the new history of political thought. While Skinner’s “linguistic conventions” and Pocock’s “paradigms” may have differed from Collingwood’s “absolute presuppositions”, they all nevertheless studied beliefs, ideas, and concepts as responses to contingent historical problems and not, for example, economic forces or the realisation of some pre-determined conception of history. This work of selection and adaptation finally enabled the emergence of contextualism as a school of thought that was recognisable from its distinct methodology and understanding about the nature of historical forces.

To set methods and philosophical concepts aside for a moment, an important consequence of this particular approach to the history of ideas, or the new history of political thought as the Cambridge scholars preferred to call it, was that history became an increasingly professional and academic matter. Beginning from the discussion around the death of political philosophy in the mid-1950s, the focus of relevant expertise began to move from philosophy to empirically verifiable research, and the relevant producers and audiences of that expertise were increasingly much in the then-expanding universities, instead of the more general audiences that the previous generation’s public moralists sought to address. At the same time, the criteria for evaluating actual historiography became increasingly professional and academic, too. It was exactly the point of writings such as Skinner’s famous essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in 1969 to discredit such narratives that served extra-historical and extra-academic purposes, for example, the legitimisation of contemporary power, or the identity politics of some particular group. Instead, the history of ideas now became a methodologically consistent undertaking, the resources of which were concentrated in the universities, and the quality of which was assessed chiefly in terms of factual and interpretive accuracy instead of practical or political utility.

It was also clear based on the methodological writings of Laslett, Pocock, and Skinner that the new history of political thought should be a comprehensive project. As the new methods would lead to increasing accuracy, a historically more faithful understanding of potentially any intellectual event appeared to be within sight. Starting from Laslett’s 1950s writings, one gets the impression that his success in revising the received scholarly opinion of Filmer and Locke should lead to a more extensive revaluation of the tradition, which is exactly what he proposed in the famous 1956 introduction to the first series of Philosophy,
Politics and Society. With Skinner and Pocock, this attitude was even more pronounced. In 1966, Skinner called for “a complete description” of the relevant historical contexts, and “[a]n infinitely greater amount of historical research (especially of a statistical character, and of countless minor social and intellectual biographies”). Although he would soon drop the word “statistical”, the extent of his revisionism became only clearer in “Meaning and Understanding” and the other methodological essays that soon followed it. Finally, Pocock’s 1971 assessment of the discipline drew a picture of an intellectual landscape that already had witnessed a revolution, as explained in his own words: “[D]uring the last ten years scholars interested in the study of the systems of political thought have had the experience of living through radical changes, which amount to a transformation, in their discipline. These changes have had historians and philosophers at their centre, and have consisted essentially in a revaluation of the ways in this particular study; but other disciplines – political science, literature and possibly sociology – have been involved and have contributed.”

Besides professional and comprehensive, contextualism was also a critical project, and this is what perhaps best reveals its normative and political content. As noted in the English philosophy of history since at least Oakeshott, the past had its political uses, which constituted a reason for “managing” it instead of merely studying and contemplating it. The contextualists saw the exercise of power based on historical narratives mostly as a thing to be critically approached, for example, in the case of scientifically ungrounded traditions, or “mythologies”, and their established interpreters, who could exercise authority over individuals and communities. More than figuratively, false or purposeful narratives of the past could limit the power and imagination of the present generation, and the project of getting rid of them by means of more accurate and sophisticated research was something that was certainly compatible with Skinner’s exhortation to “learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.” History would continue to exist and be influential for sure, but its study would be systematised, modernised and brought under contemporary control.

Yet this increasingly accurate knowledge of the past was not supposed to be an immediate help in the solution of contemporary problems. It could perhaps provide even invaluable insights not only for scholars but for potentially anyone interested in public life by demonstrating how social and political dilemmas had been solved in the past. However, those lessons were available only on the condition of understanding that past dilemmas differed from the present ones. The caveat was mandatory in order to stay clear of the endemic anachronistic fallacies that confounded the past with the present, just as the false expert authority of the political philosopher had confounded the borderline between philosophy and politics. A rather obvious normative implication regarding that latter borderline – the demarcation of science and politics – would be that the autonomy of policy-making should be guarded against the influence of any false traditions and gurus, philosophical, scientific, or otherwise. Conceivable ways of achieving that included epistemic self-control by scholars and other experts within universities and other specialist institutions, and the building of decision-making institutions and the education of policy-

33 Pocock, “Languages and their implications”, 3.
34 Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding”, 52.
makers so that they would have capable means of judging by themselves. Either way, the idea would appear to necessitate a strong and autonomous academia, which would serve as government’s counterbalance rather than as its extension. Therefore science and politics, though obviously connected at least in the arts and humanities, are parallel rather than fully overlapping universes.

Following this line of thought, advances in the human sciences could contribute to the solution of political problems indirectly only, but perhaps paradoxically, such influence could ideally have far-reaching social consequences. For example, a revised understanding of political thought as a mode of practical action could produce something like a gestalt switch concerning prevalent beliefs regarding things that are necessary by nature, and things that depend on contingent or cultural factors only and are therefore subject to voluntary change. To put it differently, the human sciences could redraw the boundaries of such entities as, for example, “class”, “individual”, or “nation”, and their potential of changing the social conditions. Arguably, one of the underlying goals of the revisionist history of political thought thus was to rewrite the limits of historically and politically possible.

Emancipation and Ideology

If such a gestalt switch occurred, which hitherto unseen possibilities would it reveal? The philosophical rigour of early contextualism did not encourage answers that directly supported any political ideology. Yet Skinner’s remarks at the end of “Meaning and Understanding” promised that the study of history could lead to a heightened “self-awareness” about the locality and particularity of currently held beliefs, which helped overcome “constraints upon our imaginations”. In any case, this was to describe an open-ended and undetermined future, founded on an essentially rationalist belief that the use of philosophically sound methods would have a liberating and empowering effect regarding the relationship with the past. In more practical terms, that could mean the rejection of “mythologies”, the crumbling of false authorities, the widening of the political horizon, and perhaps also the sobering of the relationship between science and society. The natural environment for the concentration of intellectual resources required for such changes would be in the academia, where the historical, philosophical and social scientific insights could most easily be combined.

The contextualist approach promoted individual agency by its core philosophical views that placed the intentional use of language at the very heart of political action. According to the actual histories that they wrote, linguistic innovation had had the potential to change the course of events in the past, and, ceteris paribus, it could make a difference in the present. The critiques that Pocock and Skinner wrote during the 1960s and 70s against Marxist historiographers, Namierite “realists” and empirical political scientists all emphasised the contingency of “external structures” that others had set as limits on political agency in the forms of the material relations of production, sheer political power, or taken-for-granted

theoretical assumptions of liberal democracy.\footnote{See Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding” for his critiques against historians and philosophers; against political scientists, “The Empirical Theorists of Democracy and Their Critics: A Plague on Both Their Houses”, \textit{Political Theory} 1 (1973), 287–304.} For a truly capable innovative ideologist, Skinner especially could have said, the existing conventions and vocabularies always contained some way around such structures.

If “languages”, “linguistic conventions”, and “paradigms” were such powerful tools in the hands of progress or stagnation, sometimes even revolutionary change, how did the contextualists relate to this potential? The philosophy and methods of contextualism matured simultaneously with post-1968 ideological tensions and the rise of the New Left, which placed questions concerning the speed and direction of political change high on the agenda. These questions were ideological in conventional and party-political terms, too, and even if there was relatively little that the early contextualists wrote explicitly about contemporary politics, there is still enough material to be of interest.

To start with, there was certain emancipatory potential in their approach, especially if the term \textit{emancipatio} is understood in its classical rather than modern sense as the release of an individual from the authority of the previous generation, rather than as the collective emancipation of a whole disadvantaged group. Such “empowerment” was actually indispensable, since the autonomy of the political sphere that was clearly appreciated by the contextualists was dependent on the existence of individuals who were fluent enough in their respective linguistic conventions or paradigms to be able to produce a change. Thus the contextualist descriptions of historical individuals using their available degrees of liberty were also defences of capable and active, even virtuous, citizens and politicians. In historical terms, the development of such capabilities has usually required education, experience, and acquired or inherited networks of influence; wealth or good family background being no disadvantages. This is not to say that “ideological innovation” could not be used to promote the interests of disadvantaged individuals or groups, but it is to say that social reforms and political mass movements have to be set in motion by individuals equipped with sufficient resources.

The conception of political activity strongly linked with linguistic competence is what distinguishes contextualism from the mainstream versions of liberalism or socialism, as well as from the standard theories of “negative” and “positive” liberty, and what makes it generally complicated to pin down exactly in ideological terms. Rawlsian liberalism, for example, was first about philosophically determining general moral principles and then about individual choice and collective redistribution within the bounds of those principles – and not about the exercise of political competences that are realised against particular linguistic-historical contexts. All in all, the contextualist emphasis on linguistic competence and innovation – a “positive” capability for action, to put it differently – would not seem to correspond with the liberal and libertarian “negative” view of liberty as mere freedom of choice. It would still not appear to be much more compatible with the mainstream socialist or “positive” conceptions, where the government plays an active role in determining and nurturing the relevant socio-economic competences, and especially liberty seen as personal or collective self-fulfilment towards a substantial \textit{telos}. 
While the contextualists were critical against particular traditions, for example, the Anglophone academic tradition in the history of ideas, tradition understood in a broader sense constituted a fundamental part of their social vision. That was precisely because the development of the above mentioned capabilities of political action took place against linguistic “conventions” or “paradigms”, which were historically evolving constructs in their post-Wittgensteinian and post-Kuhnian interpretation. Pocock and Skinner, who were the chief theorists of this approach, were obviously aware that mastery of conventions or paradigms was a power resource, but still they never advocated forms of politics that would be decidedly less reliant on conventions and paradigms. Despite their criticisms they, in other words, did not the question the essentially conventional, paradigmatic or “traditional” constitution of society and this significantly qualified the political implications of their philosophical and methodological revisionism and anti-foundationalism. Ultimately, they claimed, the abandonment of the conventional nature of politics would mean the abandonment of the commonly shared meanings of natural language (itself a historical construct vested with power-resources) as the chief medium of politics, which would lead to increasingly arbitrary forms of non-linguistic politics, where physical action could take over words.

The post-1968 situation and the rise of a new political and academic left is the backdrop against which Skinner and Pocock mostly spelled out these sentiments. In even more general terms, they have constantly appeared to reject forms of politics that promise an entirely “fresh start” in the form of either leftist or rightist utopias. The radicalism of the New Left was the relevant context in the late 1960s and early 70s, and the target of especially Pocock’s polemics, but one may see here also a foreshadowing of Skinner’s later rehabilitation of the “neo-Roman” or republican tradition against the post-Thatcherite forms of liberalism. According to Skinner, late-20th century politics had led both to a curtailed understanding of political liberty and the British government becoming “an unregulated system of Executive power, with the body of the people and their representatives alike condemned to a state of corresponding dependence”. During the formative stage of contextualism, however, the emphases of Skinner and Pocock towards contemporaneous ideologies slightly differed from each other.

Starting with Skinner, his forceful Collingwoodian statements that “there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy” and “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” downplayed traditional authorities and allowed much autonomy for the present generation. His attitudes could be called moderately progressive, rationalist and reform-minded, while emphatic on the need for historical scholarship and historical interpretation. This characterised also his attitude towards some leading political scientists of the era, notably Robert Dahl, whose approach to the theory of representative democracy he blamed for implicit conservatism. An even more traditionalist and pernicious form of conservatism Skinner found in the figure of Michael Oakeshott, who had had an idealist

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38 Skinner, ”Meaning and Understanding”, 50–53.
39 Skinner, ”The Empirical Theorists of Democracy”.
and conservative following in the academia since the 1930s, but who became newly fashionable with the new wave of political conservatism of the late 1970s and 80s. In a rather recent interview Skinner recalls how he, like most students of the 60s generation “rejected [Oakeshott’s] conservatism and his anti-rationalism outright […] nothing prepared my generation for his apothecus under Thatcherism, nor the high esteem in which his philosophy continues to be widely held.”. Skinner made this point with direct reference to the political theorist Brian Barry’s argument in his popular *Political Argument*. Barry had attacked Oakeshott’s conservative critiques of the British large-scale welfare reforms, for instance, the founding of the National Health Service in 1948 and Skinner recalls “agreeing completely” with Barry.40

On one occasion Skinner has described his younger self a “welfare socialist”,41 and he mentioned in a 1997 press interview how the Labour had always felt like his party and how he had donated moderately large sums of money to the party in the recent years, which were also the early years of Tony Blair as Prime Minister.42 However, his left-modernist sympathies did not extend to the New Left. In a co-authored review of early-1970s political philosophy, Skinner, Laslett, and Runciman accused the New Left of an almost total unwillingness to theoretically articulate its political aims. This, according to them, “might indeed be said to reflect two of the key features of the morality of the movement itself – the general suspicion of the value of argued reflection, and the specific rejection of all demands to talk about consequences.”43

Pocock explored related issues more extensively in a 1968 essay published in a volume that was dedicated to the same Michael Oakeshott and continued with them in two 1971 essays, one of which carried the telling title “The Non-Revolutionary Character of Paradigms” and was written, in Pocock’s own words, in a “tone of moderate unfriendliness towards the romantic revolutionary”.44 His praise of the stabilising nature of linguistic paradigms resembled even some of the tenets of traditional Burkean conservatism, such as the incremental nature of social reform and the recognition of established social forces, but his terms of choice in the polemics against the New Left were “classic” and “civic” rather than “conservative”.

A key to understanding the difference between the “classic” and “romantic” mind-sets can be found in another area of life where revolutions were possible: science. Pocock had elsewhere celebrated the revolutionary transformation of his own discipline, the history of political thought,45 but he carefully explained how a proper Kuhnian scientific revolution was “not, at any rate primarily, a romantic act, designed and intended to re-create the self

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41 Palonen, *Quentin Skinner*, 12.
42 Interview of Skinner, *Helsingin Sanomat*, May 30, 1997. Towards the end of Blair’s era, Skinner’s remarks on the British government grew increasingly critical, see, e.g., his “States and the freedom of citizens”.
of the scientist by transforming the world he lives in". That is where a “classic” revolution differed from the “romantic”, “mod”, or “pop” radicalism: it was the fault of the latter to abandon the traditional view in which the activity of politics took place in a pre-given polity between established identities with natural language as its medium. Questioning the stability provided by them, the romantic revolutionary relied on “happenings” and other non-linguistic forms of action; and instead of mutual recognition, he tried to refashion the identities of himself as well as his opponents. Suggesting the possibility of physical violence, Pocock asked “whether a totally revolutionary politics would be anti-linguistic, in the sense that action would have replaced the words as a transmitting medium […] As Humpty Dumpty might have said: ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping? It depends whether it has a club in it.’”

Pocock’s theorising, more than Skinner’s, emphasised the overlap between paradigms and actual political communities, thus suggesting that polities could or even should be constructed around cultural-linguistic traditions, such as those built around national languages and cultures. As pointed out by Geuna, the composition and integrity of the polity became a much more important issue for Pocock than for Skinner, which may be seen also in Pocock’s later defences of British national sovereignty against European federalism. Pocock, following Kuhn, stressed the primacy of collective social practices based on linguistic paradigms, whereas Skinner focused on the intentions of historical individuals in their particular speech acts. Therefore, it appears that Skinner’s approach did not require a theory of political community nearly to the same degree as Pocock’s, whose “paradigm” had more definite boundaries and authority structures, as well as more elaborately articulated internal power dynamics, which in “normal” situations provided stability, but could sometimes culminate in “revolutions”. The later distinction between the neo-Athenian and neo-Roman theories of liberty can be helpful in understanding the difference between the two approaches. The Athenian theory contained a stronger element of “positive” freedom in the form of the self-realization of the polis that was lacking in the Roman theories, but it was also much more pronouncedly a theory of a single polity. A “Roman” emphasis, on the other hand, was a theory of the institutions of a large republic or empire – a community of communities – and therefore more indifferent towards the nature of particular communities built upon shared languages and cultures. By identifying himself strongly with the Roman tradition, Skinner perhaps tells something why he has been a much more pronouncedly “European” scholar than Pocock, who has focused on the early-modern to modern North-Atlantic tradition and its historical predecessors.

49 On Skinner’s version of the neo-Roman theory, Liberty Before Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998),
Discussion

The purpose of this article has been to present an interpretation of the political normativity of early contextualist thought. Because contextualism was not originally laid out as a normative political theory, such an interpretation is necessarily a subsequent reconstruction based on hints and traces as well as more direct evidence. Here the work of reconstructing has been done partly against the backdrop of the more general themes of the era, such as the crises of ideology and political philosophy and the development of the universities and disciplines; partly based on the desired qualities of “the political” as articulated by the contextualists themselves with their theoretical concepts such as “speech act” and “paradigm”; and, finally, based on their explicit comments on contemporaneous politics and ideology. The risk with such reconstructions is that they may produce a somewhat too stable image of contextualism as an “ideology”, while the actual topic of study is a developing scientific tradition, which by its nature is subject to both continuity and change. Their consideration is the theme of the following concluding remarks.

One of the issues that remained relatively stable during the studied period certainly was the early contextualists’ distrust in the traditional expert authorities such as the “political philosopher”, first articulated by Laslett following English analytic philosophers, and followed by Skinner and Pocock in their critiques of the Anglophone research tradition in the history of ideas. Perhaps this attitude was generalizable to all “gurus” who had built a moral or political authority on philosophical or traditionalist grounds, or scientific grounds, for that matter, since science, according to them, did not provide criteria for the determination of right morality. Another enduring feature was their conceptual anti-foundationalism which had its roots in English ordinary language philosophers such as Weldon, and which found even larger audiences after the publication of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Such basic convictions directed the attention of the early contextualists towards contingent meanings that were formed in linguistic action, which created a peculiar primacy of politics over philosophy in their research designs.

These beliefs were compatible with their combination of social and political modernism with historicism. According to their view, the social and political benefits of studying history would come only indirectly, but they could be substantial. By understanding how past individuals had succeeded or failed in responding to contingent political dilemmas, one could reach an enhanced understanding of not only the past but the present. However, such an understanding could only be developed based on a sound philosophy of history and methodology, and the problem was that the exact historical nature of the relevant dilemmas and responses had not been grasped by traditional political philosophy. These notions led to increasingly specialised methodological vocabularies and to the borrowing of state-of-the-art concepts from neighbouring fields, which continued from Laslett’s endorsements of the social sciences to the adaptations of linguistic philosophy and the history of science by Pocock and Skinner.

As argued throughout this article, contextualism was “normative”, or at least socially and politically committed, from its very beginning. Its leading developers spoke about a range
of issues examined above that can be deemed politically relevant, for example, the position of experts and the justification of ideologies. In some of their writings, they presented openly normative views on contemporary politics, as seen in their critiques against the post-1968 New Left. However, these views were still quite “academic” if compared with the brand of normative republicanism that developed around contextualism from the 1990s onwards (e.g., Skinner, Pettit, Viroli), which was conceptually closer to the language of daily politics and ideologies in discussing, for example, liberty, liberalism, autonomy, and even the British government as an unregulated system of executive power.50 This later republicanism also included extensive critiques of modern liberalism as an ideology and a form of government, and such systematic critiques against contemporary political rule were wholly absent from the early works of the Cambridge School.

Even within early contextualism, there were areas in which the arguments and emphases changed substantially over time and between individuals. One of them is the relationship between the history of ideas and the social sciences. Differing from the United States where political philosophers and theorists such as Strauss, Arendt, and Wolin perceived the empirical or positivist social sciences as a threat, Laslett and even Skinner first responded to them in generally positive terms. From the latter half of the 1960s onwards, however, one does not generally find a positive mentioning of empirical social scientific methods or research. Arguably, this was not only because of the developments internal to the Cambridge School, but because of the increasing critiques against behavioralist empiricism by philosophers and social scientists including Peter Winch, Bernard Crick, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre.51 Although their work was not very frequently cited by the contextualists, they contributed to the more general turn after the mid-1960s towards questions approaching hermeneutics, even idealism broadly defined. In practice, careful archival research and attention to historical detail was now complemented by more philosophical ruminations of what it meant for a historian to see things from the point of view of historical actors.

The universities and the opportunities provided by them changed, too. Early contextualism was characterised by its rationalist belief in the capability of historical research to produce self-awareness and rationally justifiable forms of progress. There appeared to be no desire to leave the academia and return to such traditional roles as the 19-20th century public moralist, or the even more traditional role of the advisor to the prince. There was, however, a slight contrast in this respect between Laslett and his students. Laslett, who never became a professor at Cambridge, retained some of the characteristics of the traditional public intellectual, which became apparent especially during the latter stages of his career, including his decisive role in the founding of the Open University and the University of the Third Age, his long-term co-operation with the BBC, and his studies on the British population assisted by large groups of laymen volunteers. The playing field of Laslett’s most famous students, on the other hand, was firmly within the historians’, philosophers’

and political scientists’ professional debate and they established their positions as university professors without an apparent need to seek support from institutions external to the academia. Only later did Skinner, perhaps the most notable developer of contextualism as a methodology, start approaching wider audiences with more contemporary themes.

The political ethos of early contextualism was not easily commensurable with the contemporaneous mainstream theories of liberalism and socialism. This was because of the strong emphasis on civic capacity in the form of linguistic competence instead of the more abstract philosophical concepts of freedom of choice or distributive justice. Moreover, “linguistic convention” or “paradigm” served as the historically determined particular settings for the exercise of that capacity. This is not to say that, for example, linguistic innovation, as Skinner described it, could not be used to promote the freedom of choice or the redistribution of economic resources, but it is to place a special emphasis on the historically contingent linguistic setting where politics took place, and even to give an inherent value to the activity of politicking itself.

The political attitudes of both Skinner and Pocock could perhaps be described as moderate and civic, ranging from Skinner’s moderately progressive social democracy to Pocock’s classicism or republicanism. In both cases, “conventions” or “paradigms” provided a historically mediated framework for the activity of politics that neither of these authors wished to abandon. Pocock was perhaps more emphatic about this in his critiques of the “romantic” New Left, but also Skinner let understand that his historical studies were key to understanding the deep undercurrents of contemporary ideology, for example, by the telling title of his 1978 magnum opus The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. In early contextualism, the examination of political traditions was characterised with a predominantly historical interest, which was combined with the assumption that the development of historical self-awareness through extensive research could lead to a more open, historically self-conscious and progressive society not plagued by unfounded traditions or mythologies. That the intellectual core of such processes would be in the academia did not necessarily mean that they wanted to confine the history ideas into the ivory tower. On the contrary, the message of contextualism was arguably compatible with the ambitions of rationalism and democracy associated with the expansion of the university system of the 1960s and 70s, and with the associated beliefs that modern research and research-based education would gradually increase its reach and generate a virtuous circle of social dynamics.

In this article I have argued that an important point of early contextualism was to endorse and generate political agency through historical awareness, and to give an overall account of historicity and politics that was not entirely compatible with the contemporaneous liberal and socialist normative theories. These aspects of their theorising, however, were not usually recognised by their critical commentators, who mostly concentrated on method, the accuracy of the historical work, or the allegedly “antiquarian” and therefore conservative bias of contextualism. The neo-Roman or republican normative theories introduced first

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53 See, e.g., the critical responses to Skinner compiled in Tully (ed.), Meaning and Context.
by Skinner since the 1980s and 90s can even be seen as a partial response to these criticisms, since they certainly were a new way of seeking contemporary relevance. The academia and the roles of the academics changed, too, and media publicity was more often filled with economists, psychologists and business experts than with traditional humanists, while scholars such as Giddens, Etzioni, and Pettit now occasionally worked as political advisors. The irony of republicanism, albeit a moderately successful academic political theory, may be that it is a self-declaredly “broken” tradition in need of recovery (broken, according to Skinner, by theorists such as Hobbes and the later forms of liberalism around the sovereign State). Therefore it cannot resonate well with the practically existing vocabularies – or “linguistic conventions” and “paradigms” – that the contextualists earlier saw as the essential and indispensable medium of politics. If agency, autonomy, and self-government are desired against the centralised executives, more attention could be paid to the still existing vocabularies and practices – for example, those around local government, unions, or cooperatives – where self-governing institutions and procedures still prevail against centralised authority, and where politicians are seen as persons inhabiting positions of trust instead as functionaries appointed from above. Given the changes in academic research and higher education since the 1990s, there should probably also be a renewed assessment of the desirable roles of the academia and the professional scholar, and perhaps of the sites of elite education such as Cambridge, in this equation.