


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Without Laslett to the lost worlds: Quentin Skinner's early methodology

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to suggest that the emergence of the so-called Cambridge School of history of political thought can best be understood in terms of two competing visions of the relationship between history and social science, focusing on Peter Laslett and Quentin Skinner. Although Laslett is often distinguished as a founder of the Cambridge School, this paper suggests an alternative view by emphasizing the theoretical discontinuity between Laslett and Skinner rather than their continuity. Laslett, a practitioner of Karl Mannheim's ideas, promoted the idea of a comprehensive scientific social history, within which intellectual history was located. This paper argues that Skinner broke with Laslett's idea. For Skinner, (1) Laslett was a positivist who applied the natural scientific model to intellectual history; (2) Laslett's positivism was actually 'contextualism'; and (3) the alternative to Laslett's contextualism was the history of ideology. Skinner's early methodology was, in part, a rhetorical redescription of 'ideology', which opposed both Mannheim and Laslett. As such, this paper focuses on the discursive disconnection between Laslett and Skinner, thus providing a clue to construct a platform for facilitating a further discussion of the history of ideas and the social sciences.

Key words: Methodology of history of political thought; Quentin Skinner; the Cambridge School

1. Introduction

In an interview, the controversial twentieth-century British historian Peter Laslett recounted the founding story of two Cambridge academic groups: the Cambridge School of history of political ideas and The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. Laslett employed in his teaching an interdisciplinary approach to political theory and its history, focusing on their relationship to philosophy, economics, sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences. Some of his students and the researchers who attended his seminars, Laslett remarked, came to develop the Cambridge School. Among the attendees were W. G. Runciman, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, John Pocock, and Philip Abrams. Furthermore, as Laslett recounted, it was through this group's activities that he more fully developed his interest in past social structures; this, in turn, catalysed Laslett to establish The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (Laslett, 1989: 127). Laslett saw 'no discontinuity between the two types of research'; in fact, he had 'tried to pursue one and the other together at the same time' (Laslett, 1989: 129).

On the one hand, this Laslettian narrative sounds a familiar story. After all, Laslett has been widely recognized as the propounder of Cambridge contextualism (e.g., Skodo, 2014: 538).¹ In fact, all core members of the School – Pocock, Dunn, and, above all, Skinner – invariably agree on the importance of Laslett and his works. When Dunn (1996: 20) referred to the Cambridge School in an encyclopaedia

¹Samuel James (2019: 86 (n14)) lists previous studies which emphasize Laslett's influence on the Cambridge School. This view also prevails in the non-European academic community (e.g., Yasutake, 2014: 187–191).

entry for the ‘History of Political Thought’, the first name he mentioned was Laslett. Likewise, Pocock was not reticent about ‘the Laslettian moment’ (Pocock, 2006a: 38) while recollecting the Cambridge School’s development in ‘Present at the Creation: With Laslett to the Lost Worlds’ (Pocock, 2006b). Skinner (2002c: 214) was no less willing to admit Laslett’s impact on his own research and he openly acknowledged his debt to the historian. Thus, we are now told that their ‘battle against the canonical theorists was (...) initiated by Laslett’ (Bevir, 2011: 14) and even that ‘the emergence of Cambridge contextualism as an intellectual tradition can be rightly explained as younger researchers simply picking up Laslett’s historical working methods and running with them’ (Koikkalainen, 2011: 317).

On the other hand, however, there is a clear gap in perception between Laslett and Skinner (and the other Cambridge School members). Unlike Laslett, notably, Skinner, Dunn, and Pocock never referred to Runciman and Abrams as Cambridge contextualists² and commentators also do not place Runciman or Abrams within the Cambridge School tradition. Yet, another revealing gap emerges in an interview with Skinner. Although talking about Laslett scholarship, Skinner noted that Laslett’s introduction to *Two Treatises of Government* was one of the most impressive works he had read during his undergraduate years. In contrast, Skinner confessed that reading Laslett’s *The World We Have Lost* made him feel that Laslett had taken ‘a wrong turning’ (Skinner, 2008: Part 2, 00:15:38). However, from Laslett’s perspective, the work must not have been a turnabout at all, but rather a halfway point in his continuous effort to reconstruct the historical context of past intellectual and political activities. Indeed, Laslett claimed that he got irritated when people asked him after his so-called ‘turn’ towards social structure ‘if I am the same Peter Laslett who worked on John Locke and his political philosophy or if it was done by my father, my uncle or anyone who had the same name in the previous generation’ (Laslett, 1989: 129).

The purpose of this paper is to explain this perception gap. This study is, accordingly, a reconsideration on Laslett’s position as a founder of the Cambridge School, since this gap suggests that the Cambridge School as we know it is completely different than how Laslett may have expected it to be. Considering Laslett’s own recollection, the Cambridge School could have been the ‘Cambridge School for the History of Population, Social Structure and Political Thought’. The Cambridge School members, however, hardly seemed to have a serious interest in studying either social structures or the history of population.

Thus, this paper argues that there must have been an ‘anti-Laslettian moment’ within the Cambridge School’s development. I trace this ‘anti-Laslettian’ moment back to Skinner. Although Laslett attempted to incorporate the history of political thought into the history of social structure based on the social sciences, Skinner rejected this vision and attempted to reconstruct the history of political ideas as an indispensable part of political history. This paper suggests that one of the most significant – and indeed most often overlooked – aspects of Skinner’s early methodology (in the 1960s and 1970s) was his breaking away from Laslett’s vision of intellectual history. By comparing Skinner and Laslett this paper illuminates their previously unnoticed methodological contributions to the history of political theory and social science in general: the Skinnerian methodological ‘thick description’ and the Laslettian moment in the new global and digital age.

Thus, rather than seeking to identify a methodological continuity between Laslett’s and Skinner’s work (as recent studies have done), this paper emphasizes their theoretical discontinuity. However, some researchers do explore their differences; for example, James Alexander (2016: 365–366, 368–370) identifies several Cambridge academic traditions, yet classifies Laslett and Skinner into different strands. Additionally, Samuel James (2019: 96–97) argues that it was Herbert Butterfield, not Laslett, who was John Pocock’s main source of inspiration, and so, he implies, Laslett’s supposed impact on the emergence of the Cambridge School should be modified. Undoubtedly, Alexander’s and James’s works are indispensable for those inquiring into the Cambridge School’s origin(s). However, neither

²By this term, I refer to the intellectual historians who attempted to revise the methods for reconstructing past political ideas from the late 1950s mainly at Cambridge University and those who accepted and developed the revised methods.

Alexander's nor James's work investigates the theoretical relationship between Laslett and Skinner, which is the critical gap in scholarship this paper seeks to fill.

Even Bevir and Koikkalainen (who, as I mentioned above, emphasize Skinner's and Laslett's theoretical continuity) address their differences. Working as co-authors, Adcock and Bevir (2007: 230) describe Laslett as both a modernist and an empiricist, while describing Skinner as a modernist but *not* an empiricist. Koikkalainen (2011: 319) astutely observes that Skinner did not share Laslett's ambition to reconcile political theory with empirical science.³ Nonetheless, in the end, they explained the Cambridge School in terms of the theoretical continuity of Skinner and Laslett, rather than in terms of their differences. One particular feature of the Cambridge School, a linguistic contextualism⁴, is, I think, best understood by exploring Skinner's conscious, intentional departure from Laslett – a fine point of distinction that Bevir and Adcock as well as Koikkalainen recognize but do not fully explore.

In the following discussion, I identify the anti-Laslettian moment in Skinner's early methodology. To that end, in Section 2, I outline Laslett's conception of a scientific approach to constructing a social history and its relation to the history of political thought, focusing on Laslett's reception of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. I then devote the subsequent three sections to illuminating Skinner's endeavour to overcome Laslett's methodology. For Skinner, I will argue, Laslett is a positivist in the sense that he applies the natural scientific model to intellectual history; Laslett's positivism is actually 'contextualism', to use Skinner's term, which holds that social contexts determine the meaning of texts; and Skinner's proposed alternative to Laslett's contextualism is the history of ideology,⁵ as exemplified in Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Thus, insofar as we consider *The Foundations* a representative work of the Cambridge School, we can claim that the School was founded on a departure from Laslett, rather than on an inheritance of the Laslettian vision of the Cambridge School.

Before presenting my analysis of Laslett's and Skinner's relationship, however, I would like to clarify what it is that I am trying to achieve in this paper. This paper is – to use Carl Hempel's term – to present a kind of 'explanation sketch' that points to a direction of further inquiry. As such, a more nuanced description of their relationship will be possible than the following discussion might suggest. When we compare, for example, Laslett's attacks on 'scripturalist tendency' and 'philosophizing tendency' to Skinner's reproach on 'textualism', we can easily identify their commonalities (Laslett and Cummings, 1967: 371; this part was written by Laslett). My work, however, sheds light on the often overlooked point of departure between these two historians. Furthermore, I suggest that the hypothesis that best explains their differences is that Skinner was actually repudiating Laslett's contextualism in writing his criticism against other historians, such as Keith Thomas, Fernand Braudel, and Lewis Namier. This argument is necessarily somewhat conjectural, since neither Laslett nor Skinner made substantial comments on each other's work. One could point to possible personal or psychological motivations for Skinner's rejection of Laslett's views: Laslett was Skinner's former teacher. However, this paper's argument is constructed on the observable implications of the aforementioned hypothesis rather than psychological inferences. In the following discussion, I demonstrate that Skinner's argument regarding contextualism constituted a significant critique of Laslett's vision of history.

³However, it is ambiguous whether Bevir is consistent on this point because Bevir (2011: 13–14) notes that Laslett 'aligned himself with a lingering logical positivism' and that Skinner 'drew on the same new philosophy to which Laslett appealed in pronouncing the death of older approaches to political philosophy'.

⁴I use this term to refer to the position that the best way to interpret texts is neither to analyse the texts themselves nor to reveal linkages between the texts and their authors' economic and social statuses, but to investigate what the authors were trying to do in particular theoretical and discursive situations.

⁵The Skinnerian history of ideology deals with political ideas not as self-sufficient units of analysis, but as interventions in real politics by legitimizing or de-legitimizing particular policies.

2. Peter Laslett and the sociological history of political thought

Peter Laslett inherited and practiced Karl Mannheim's ideas, a man whom he called 'one of the most important social thinkers of the earlier twentieth century' (Laslett, 1979: 223).⁶ Mannheim became widely known in the Anglophone world after 1936, when the English version of *Ideology and Utopia* was published with a new preface. This book greatly impacted Britain's intellectual milieu, and Laslett belonged to the youngest generation that Mannheim's book directly impacted. According to Mannheim, the sociology of knowledge does not aim primarily at an intrinsic explication and evaluation of a particular idea. Rather, it asks *who* holds and bears that idea. 'We consider', Mannheim observed, 'not merely the content but also the form, and even the conceptual framework of a mode of thought as a function of the life situation of a thinker'. Thus, according to Mannheim, ideas are not to be seen as autonomous abstractions of detached philosophers, but as ideologies produced by collective thinking, that is, as 'a function of him who holds them, and of his position in his social milieu' (Mannheim, 1954: 51, 50).

Mannheim's ideas regarding collective thinking and ideology provided Laslett with a new perspective with which he could interpret political theories within historical contexts. At the time that the English translation of *Ideology and Utopia* was published, Mannheim was teaching at the London School of Economics, where Laslett (after having read the book) visited him in search of research guidance. Although Laslett was carrying on historical research at Cambridge, he was actively 'in revolt against the traditional historicism which prevailed at Cambridge' (Laslett, 1979: 224). Laslett was unsatisfied with Ernest Barker's idealistic approach to intellectual history (Barker being one of Laslett's professors at Cambridge), and was therefore looking for another approach to history (Skodo, 2016: 96). Laslett found that guidance and methodology in Mannheim, whom he asked how the method of sociology of knowledge could be applied to his ongoing study of Robert Filmer (Laslett, 1979: 224). Indeed, Mannheim's idea of sociology was embodied in Laslett's works on Filmer and, subsequently, on John Locke (Dunn and Wrigley, 2005: 115).

Mannheim's impact can be observed not just in Laslett's activity as an intellectual historian but also in his positivist aspect (which Bevir (2011: 13) emphasizes) and in his research on social structures. Laslett accepted in his own way the two suggestions made by Mannheim to advance the sociology of knowledge in the preface to the English version of *Ideology and Utopia*. The first was 'to refine the analysis of meaning in the sphere of thought'. Such a refinement would support the reasonable hope that 'grossly undifferentiated terms and concepts will be supplanted by increasingly exact and detailed characterizations of the various thought-styles' (Mannheim, 1954: 45). The second suggestion was a proposal to improve and sophisticate the methodology of social history. As I will discuss later, Laslett's works on historical sociology is related to Mannheim's second proposal.

Mannheim's first proposal, calling for the clarification of ambiguous terms and concepts, seems to have prompted Laslett to find the parallel between the sociology of knowledge and logical positivism. Although grappling with *Ideology and Utopia*, Laslett and his friends 'who were dissatisfied with the reigning English attitude to history' were reading the works of logical positivists, such as C. K. Ogden, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus*), and Frederick Ayer (Laslett, 1979: 225). Thus, Laslett was familiar with, and possibly even favourable towards, the works of logical positivists. It would thus be misleading to infer from his later declaration of the death of political philosophy in *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* (PPS) that Laslett was against this new style of philosophy. The death of traditional political philosophy and its history should not have been deplorable for him.⁷

⁶Dunn and Wrigley (2005: 115) first pointed out Laslett's debt to Mannheim. This is also the best survey of Laslett's works. Skodo (2014: 543–550, 562) also points to Mannheim's influence on Laslett (although he seems to emphasize Oakeshott's influence on Laslett more).

⁷Laslett's misgivings about traditional political philosophy were reflected in his ambivalent attitude towards Michael Oakeshott (for their relationship, see, e.g., Skodo, 2016: 149, 215; Koikkalainen, 2005: 46, 97). Laslett seems to have held that Oakeshott's criticism of 'rationalism' was succeeded by positivist political philosophy equipped with new tools (see, e.g., Laslett, 1956a: xii; Laslett, 1956b: 184; Laslett, 1962b).

Indeed, Laslett's intellectual disagreement with Barker's traditional approach was so great that Laslett sought advice from Mannheim even as a research student at Cambridge.

Logical positivism exerted a lasting influence on the study of the history of political thought. According to T. D. Weldon (a representative positivist who was engaged in political philosophy) a political philosopher was not a transcendental and self-reliant observer of eternal issues, but rather was a political practitioner who approved or disapproved of a particular political opinion in a specific context – an intellectual shift that Laslett inherited (Koikkalainen, 2011: 317). It is with this Weldonian image of a political theorist in mind that Laslett began exploring Locke and Filmer, the latter of which resulted in the fellowship dissertation to Cambridge. However, Laslett failed to obtain a fellowship since his methodology was flatly rejected by his reviewers, Ernest Barker and David Ogg (Laslett, 1979: 224–225; see also Skodo, 2016: 149). Afterwards, he learned Japanese and worked at Bletchley Park in naval intelligence (Dunn and Wrigley, 2005: 110). This experience must have deepened his conviction for his methodology, which focused on the relationship between ideological preconditions and political conflicts: he later observed that Filmer's 'historical arguments are exactly parallel to the arguments used by the Japanese to vindicate the Emperor's claim to divinity' (Laslett, 1949: 30).

After World War II ended, Laslett resumed his research on Filmer. His first task was exploring Filmer's ideology in the historical and social contexts where his patriarchal ideology sounded convincing – a task that had not been undertaken fully by previous scholars. His intensive survey of Filmer's background led Laslett to conclude that 'the case of Sir Robert Filmer could be made into a classic instance of determined thinking, of the man who projects into his philosophy the facts of his material environment'. In short, according to Laslett, Filmer made 'the rule of domestic society into principles of political science' (Laslett, 1948: 544).⁸ After publishing two articles on Filmer and compiling a critical edition of Filmer's works at the end of the 1940s, then, in the 1950s, Laslett turned to studying Filmer's arch-enemy: John Locke. Laslett's decade-long devotion resulted in the memorable edition of *Two Treatises of Government* and its erudite introduction in 1960.

Laslett's works on Filmer and Locke have both parallels and key differences. Both studies successfully made detailed historical investigations within a broad framework of interpretation, describing their political ideas not simply as products of personal thinking but as examples of collective thinking. Nevertheless, the differences are also notable. Laslett treated Filmer's patriarchalism as reflection of collective thinking or *mentalité* that was unintelligible without referring to his contemporary social structure and his own social status. In contrast, when describing Locke's political thought, Laslett mainly focused on the political group led by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first earl of Shaftsbury, rather than on Locke's background social structure. Locke's political ideology expressed in the *Two Treatises* was characterized by the collective thinking generated in this political group (Laslett, 1960: 35–36). Although Laslett's interpretation of Locke profoundly influenced subsequent intellectual historians, Laslett nonetheless seems to have subsequently reorganized his research project along the lines of his previous study on Filmer: exploration of social structures.

While explicating Filmer's and Locke's ideologies in the 1940s and 1950s, Laslett implemented Mannheim's second proposal: 'to perfect the technique of reconstructing social history to such an extent that (...) one will be able to perceive the social structure as a whole, i.e. the web of interacting social forces from which have arisen the various modes of observing and thinking' (Mannheim, 1954: 45). For Laslett, that technique was introducing the social science methodology into historical inquiry. Like social scientists, the new social historians were expected to make use of numbers, tables, and statistics rather than relying on 'descriptive and intuitive methods' (Laslett, 1975) – that is, for example, on Shakespeare's descriptions of his contemporary England. This new social history should, he declared, 'satisfy the criteria of the social sciences' (Laslett, 1968: 434; see also 436). In short,

⁸It should be noted that Laslett did not reduce all the aspects of Filmer to social structure. He admitted, for example, that Filmer's consideration on witches was a product of his autonomous thinking.

Laslett (1965: 583) wrote: ‘The numerical study of society, over time; this is perhaps the best short description of our purpose’.

A scientific history of social structures is uniquely equipped to synthesize all the histories of social activities (Laslett, 1962a). Therefore, according to Laslett, a history of social activities, including social and political thinking, cannot be written properly without first referring to social structures. In a review of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, Laslett (1964a) bemoaned the absence of a thorough analysis of social structures in this work and declared that ‘the day has passed when even intellectual history can be written in this sort of vacuum’. Laslett (1964b) reiterated this same opinion in a private letter to Arendt, where he wrote about the content of his forthcoming book *The World We Have Lost*: the book ‘is about pre-industrial social structure but has, I believe, implications not simply for the “classics” of Political Theory but the whole content of Political Philosophy’. Laslett’s statement clearly shows how he had great hopes for the role of historical investigations of social structure.

Thus far, I have surveyed Laslett’s socio-structural contextualism, focusing on the sociology of knowledge, positivism, and the social sciences.⁹ These three were, as we have seen, the elements that Laslett seems to have found in *Ideology and Utopia*. Furthermore, I suggest that Laslett’s activities as a historian and social scientist are well understood as having been an unfolding process in which he developed what he received as Mannheim’s ideas. Indeed, Laslett (1979: 226) concluded his essay on Mannheim by observing that ‘I am still surprised when I glance again at Mannheim’s work (...) at what I reproduce as mine, believing it to be so, which yet in fact was his’. However, Mannheim’s approach has sometimes been criticized as a variation of Marxism, that is, a theory based on social determinism – if not a rigid economic determinism (Longhurst, 1989: 67–71). Rather than discussing at length whether such criticisms are fair, I focus instead on whether this was Skinner’s view on Laslett’s methodology. In the following sections, I would like to argue that, although Skinner scarcely mentioned Mannheim, he nonetheless detected a deterministic aspect of sociology of knowledge in Laslett, and thus his own work aimed at constructing a different, un-deterministic contextualism.

3. History and social science

At the heart of Laslett’s vision as a historian lay a comprehensive scheme to construct a scientific approach to social history that would synthesize all other branches of history. In the ensuing sections, I will explore how Skinner responded to Laslett’s ambition. First, in this section, I analyse Laslett’s positivism, by which is meant an attitude that presupposes that one can rigidly separate facts and values, willing to use natural scientific models to explain facts. I then depict Skinner’s attitude to Laslett’s approach to constructing social history. To some extent, my task is somewhat conjectural because Laslett never vocalized exactly how strong his conviction of positivism was; furthermore, Skinner never directly referred to Laslett as a positivist. Therefore, I focus on W. G. Runciman’s work as a frame of reference for comparing these two historians’ view of positivism. Runciman provides an ideal framework for making this comparison because he was the co-editor with Laslett for the second, third, and fourth series of *PPS* (Skinner would be a co-editor for the fourth series). Just as significantly, Runciman himself wrote theoretical reflections on the social sciences. By using Runciman as the mediating term for comparison, the difference between Laslett and Skinner becomes clearer.

Runciman’s position could be described as ‘soft positivism’. He advocated for a rigid positivism in the 1950s but, later, he qualified his earlier position. In the early 1960s, Runciman (1989: 3) realized that ‘the social sciences were more questionably “scientific” than they had looked’. Runciman had indeed ceased believing in the applicability of the natural scientific method to the social sciences, unlike, say, the associates of the Vienna Circle, such as Otto Neurath and Carl Hempel.

⁹Surely it is not a coincidence that these three were mentioned as murderers of political philosophy in the first volume of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Laslett, 1956a: viii–ix). Although his tone in talking about them was critical, these were, more or less, his own ideas.

Runciman's modification had at least two consequences. First, he distinguished between the roles of 'explanation' in natural and social sciences. Although strong positivists argued that a successful explanation is synonymous with prediction (Douglas, 2009: 448), Runciman (1969: 17) denied such a rigid model of 'explanation' in social sciences. Second, he emphasizes the limit of quantitative methods. He was willing to admit quantitative data as the indispensable tool of economists and demographers. 'But equally', Runciman (1969: 5) continued, 'there are a great variety of problems where quantitative methods would be quite out of place: a comparative assessment of the motives and character of Robespierre and Lenin will not be best attempted by equation'.

Nonetheless, Runciman is still a positivist. Although he acknowledged some key deficiencies in strong positivism, he did argue that once positivism's limitations were realized, its research method could be both appropriate and profitable. In other words, he defended positivism as a useful fiction: 'The historian (and therefore the social scientist) can never be a thoroughgoing positivist; but he must, once he has realized this, still try to behave up to a point as though he were' (Runciman, 1969: 11). Hence the intellectual milieu of the 1960s, when positivism came under concentrated attack, and when 'Collingwood's philosophy of history was receiving more attention than at any time since his death', was unacceptable to Runciman (1989: 5). Instead of abandoning positivism completely, Runciman argued for creating a cooperative of political philosophers and political scientists.

When compared to Runciman, Laslett was a more straightforward positivist. Although Runciman underlined the limits of positivism, Laslett put an unequivocal faith in it. For example, Laslett (1968: 438) found no significant difference between calculating the contribution of the railroad business to the USA's GNP in 1850 and calculating the influence of Christianity in Europe. The quantifiable data are, for him, the ideal tool for digging 'objective knowledge about the past' (Laslett, 2005: 283) out of the folded layers of human experience. The divergence of these two thinkers is even clearer regarding the question of what constitutes a successful explanation of history. Runciman found a discrepancy between social and natural scientific models of explanation. Laslett (1956b: 159) disagreed: the successful theory in social science and history, he argued, captures 'what is meant by it in the common-sense language of natural scientists: one capable of accurate prediction'. Laslett's view of what constitutes a successful theory is comparable to Hempel's identification of explanation with prediction: 'the logical structure of a scientific prediction is the same as that of a scientific explanation' (Hempel, 1942: 38).

The prefaces to the second and third series of *PPS* (which Runciman and Laslett co-authored) expressed an affinity to 'soft positivism' and opposed 'anti-positivism' – a position which both editors were at least able to share. These prefaces gladly reported the recent revival of political philosophy and the emergence of a new intellectual climate in which political philosophers and social scientists willingly cooperated with each other (Laslett and Runciman, 1962: viii; Laslett and Runciman, 1967: 4–5; see also Koikkalainen, 2005: 123). However, they were also anxious of another trend of the 1960s, hostility towards positivism, though they added the caveat that the trend should not be exaggerated because the 'philosophers who have attempted to undermine the orthodox fact-value distinction have met with only limited success'. After all, Laslett and Runciman (1967: 3) wrote, 'it has not yet had effect on the greater part of the work done under the heading of political science'. Thus, these remarks undoubtedly signalled that even Runciman, as well as Laslett, who advocated 'hard positivism', refused to abandon the methodology of positivism.

This very outlook, expressed in these prefaces, is what Skinner fully rejected in the 1970s. In 'The Limits of Historical Explanation', Skinner (1966b) partly upheld, or at least pretended to uphold, Laslett's vision (Koikkalainen, 2005: 186–187).¹⁰ However, Skinner's preface to the fourth series of

¹⁰Unlike in his other works, in 'The Limits', Skinner (1966b: 215) favourably referred to research methods of 'a statistical character'. Skinner thus seems to have fully accepted Laslett's idea at this point; his methodological contentions after 'Meaning and Understanding' might therefore seem to be a rebuttal not only of the Laslettian vision but also of the ideas he had subscribed to at a younger age. Although a lack of evidence makes precisely measuring their methodological proximity

PPS (1972) displayed his fierce opposition to positivism, renouncing Laslett's attitude towards positivism in the prefaces to the second and third series of PPS.¹¹ Skinner's preface was exclusively a repudiation of positivism; indeed, he viewed positivism an abominable legacy of the 1950s. Therefore, he perfectly welcomed 'the final release from the positivist framework imposed by the sociologists and philosophers of the Fifties' (Laslett *et al.*, 1972: 3). Those supporting the positivist belief in the rigid separation of fact and value, Skinner observed, simply failed to recognize the ideological aspect of the claim of value neutrality itself. One year after the publication of the preface, he criticized Robert Dahl's theory of democracy, arguing that value-neutral research is impossible and that the term democracy itself is a 'descriptive-evaluative term' (like 'brave' or 'reckless'). Skinner (1973: 298–301) thus concluded that using the word 'democracy' as if it were neutral *eo ipso* produces a strong ideological message.

Skinner's harsh, stinging criticism may have surprised Laslett and Runciman, but he may have felt that he had finally said what he had been considering back in the 1960s. Intellectual culture in the early 1960s, he recollected, was dominated by the drive to create 'a genuine science of politics' and value-neutral 'empirical theories'. Such 'pressure of the culture', he continued, led him to spend 'far too much time in the early 1960s reading this stuff' – although he soon found the approach unappealing (Skinner, 2002b: 37; see also Skinner, 1978a: 26). Although Skinner was describing the general mood in Cambridge specifically and in Britain more broadly, given Laslett's advocacy of positivism, one could naturally suppose that some of that 'pressure of the culture' originated from Laslett. Indeed, Skinner rejected the very idea of an 'objective truth' detached from any standpoint – something that Laslett (1962c: 333) hoped to obtain through employing the scientific method in relation to history. Rather, Skinner was sympathetic to the concept of 'paradigm', as expounded by Thomas Kuhn (in natural science) and Ernst Gombrich (in art) (Muscolino, 2012: 34–35).

Not only was Skinner's objection directed at positivism itself, but also at the scientification of history. Skinner's objection was recounted in his short review, 'The Role of History' (1974), which was a critical response to Keith Thomas's essay 'The Tools and the Job' (which was a kind of social history manifesto, published in 1966).¹² In this essay, Thomas declared forcefully that the previous hegemony of political history was finally ending, while social history, by drawing on the rapidly growing social sciences, was now leading the field. For instance, this new direction of the field of history was exemplified in Laslett's project, a construction of the history of social structures. 'Mr. Peter Laslett is right', Thomas wrote, 'to stress the indispensability of this numerical study of society for the reconstruction of social structure and mental environment of the past'. Like Laslett, Thomas unequivocally advocated for employing the scientific techniques of quantification and verification; he also insisted that ambiguous concepts like 'public opinion' and 'the climate of an age' should be clarified by statistics. If this steady development of social history continues, Thomas claimed, then this field will be 'a central one, around which all other branches of history are likely to be organized', although, he admitted, this 'dethronement of politics will encounter much resistance' (Thomas, 1966: 276).

Skinner's essay, 'The Role of History', is the locus of resistance to this movement. No matter how innovative Skinner was in history of political theory, he ultimately belonged to the more conservative

at the time of 'The Limits' difficult, for the following three reasons, I am inclined to think that even at that early stage Skinner did not accept Laslett's outlook. (1) Even in 'The Limits', Skinner (1966b: 214) rejected the rigid distinction between description and explanation as 'part of the strictest and most criticized form of positivism'. (2) Although Skinner mentioned the statistical approach, it did not play as important a role for him as it did for Laslett. Skinner did not contrast descriptive and narrative history with the comparative and numerical approaches to history. (3) As the quotation I included in the introduction suggests, Skinner saw Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* as 'a wrong turning', and this book was published in 1965, a year before Skinner's 'The Limits' appeared.

¹¹In a letter to Kari Palonen, Skinner confirmed his authorship of this preface (Palonen, 2003: 27). See also Koikkalainen (2005, 164–166).

¹²A reviewer kindly pointed out the possibility that the growing prominence of American-style empirical political science, exemplified by the establishment of the European Consortium for Political Research, may have motivated Skinner's criticism of Thomas. Although examining this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems likely that Skinner saw Thomas's and Laslett's views not as exceptional cases but as parts of a larger trend.

side when facing the challenge posed by scientific social history to the more traditional style of political history which mainly consists of narratives regarding high politics. Skinner summarized Thomas's argument in two points and disputed both. The first is about the contribution of social history to social science: Skinner broadly endorsed the significance of social history in itself because of its capacity to reveal, for example, 'the distinctions and connections between pre-industrial societies and the modern industrialised world' and to open the way for introducing 'the methods and findings of sociology and social anthropology' into historical studies. However, Skinner argued, it neither followed that social history should be considered the centre of historical studies nor that social history was the only field capable of contributing to the social sciences. Political and intellectual history also enriched social science by, for example, offering political scientists the historical information they needed about the social role of political ideologies. Hence, from Skinner's view, it is both parochial and imperialistic to insist on the centrality of social history on the grounds of its capacity of contributing to the social sciences (Skinner, 1974: 103).

Although it may seem that Skinner was willing to build closer ties between history and social science, one quickly concludes that this was not Skinner's main purpose when reading Skinner's criticism of Thomas's second point. From Skinner's point of view, Thomas erroneously presupposed that the true aim of studying history is reducible to its contribution to social sciences. Such a premise was thoroughly unacceptable to Skinner because, in Skinner's mind, history played a wider variety of roles than merely offering historical data to verify theories in social sciences. This was especially true regarding traditional political history. Skinner's reply was quite simple: it is hardly possible to understand the conduct of the USA, at present, without a full knowledge of the country's history. Even when history did not verify any hypothesis, it could be useful in helping people understand the present; this, Skinner argued, was still the central role of history. 'It would be a real intellectual loss', Skinner (1974: 103) wrote, 'if the current preoccupations of professional historians with the analysis of social structures were to lead them to abandon this role entirely to the pundits and political journalists'.

Although his criticisms were ostensibly levelled at Thomas, it is nonetheless reasonable to suppose that a Laslettian-type contextualism was another implicit target of Skinner's objections. Thomas's focus on social history's central role, coupled with his willingness to incorporate the social scientific method, was shared by Laslett. The topics Skinner mentioned in 'The Role of History' – a comparison of pre-industrial and post-industrial societies, a consideration of the cooperation among history, sociology, and social anthropology, and an analysis of social structures – are the very same topics that Laslett had emphasized. In addition, it is nearly impossible to assume that Skinner would be ignorant of Laslett's view of history. As such, it is reasonable to identify a tacit objection to Laslett behind Skinner's elaborate criticism of Thomas.

Skinner was, as we have seen, clearly distancing himself, especially after the 1970s, from Laslett's ambition to reconstruct history after the scientific model. Instead, Skinner (1975: 209) observed 'the general retreat from empiricism and positivism in recent analytical philosophy has had a markedly beneficial effect on current discussions about the theory of interpretation' and defended traditional political history against the rise of social history. However, the question remains: Why was he sceptical of a scientific social history? In answering this question, one sees a connection of Skinner's objection to the Laslett's vision with his philosophical discussion about methodology – that is, his critique of contextualism in 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas'. In the next section, I argue that, for Skinner, the Laslettian version of intellectual history is a form of 'contextualism', thus revealing a clear and strong discontinuity between Laslett and Skinner.

4. The range of contextualism

After publishing 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (1969), Skinner was known as a formidable enemy to textualism and contextualism. Although he devoted more pages in the article to refuting textualism than contextualism, his examination of contextualism occupied a more significant place in his overall project because it constituted the discursive foundation upon which he built his

own methodology and levelled his objection to textualism (Inuzuka, 2019: 8). Contextualists, according to Skinner, claimed that social contexts determine the meaning of a statement in a given text. Thus, accordingly, its meaning could be understood correctly if – and only if – the text is analysed in terms of the social contexts in which the text was produced (Skinner, 1988 [1969]: 58–59).

Skinner argued that unless contextualism was successfully eradicated, the activity of intellectual historians would be meaningless. This was so, he argued, because, according to contextualism, the true meaning of human actions (including writing a text) is to be found somewhere other than at the textual and linguistic levels. The contextualists whom Skinner mentioned in ‘Meaning and Understanding’ were essentially Marxists (mainly C. B. Macpherson), although he also referred to Lewis Namier, whom I will address later (Skinner, 1988 [1969]: 59). However, as Peter Winch (1958: 104) was aware, the theoretical framework of Freudian psychology and Vilfredo Pareto’s ‘residues’ were also similar to contextualism, to use Skinner’s term. In Skinner’s view, they were essentially contextualists because they sought to identify the cause of action within human desire, while regarding an expressed idea merely as its derivative. Indeed, Skinner (1988 [1974]: 109) later implied that Freud and Pareto were the source of inspiration for Namier, as well as for behaviourism. Additionally, Ferdinand Braudel’s concept of ‘total history’ was also a typical example of contextualism for Skinner. To cover such a variety of approaches, Skinner sometimes used such terms as ‘epiphenomenalism’ and ‘the epiphenomenal approach’ instead of ‘contextualism’ (Skinner, 1988 [1974]: 109; Skinner, 2002b: 39).

Skinner identified the basis of contextualism as a natural scientific explanatory model (Stanton, 2011: 78). Contextualism ‘may be said to illustrate, but also gain strength from, the more general and increasingly accepted hypothesis that actions performed at will are to be accounted for by the ordinary processes of causal explanation’ (Skinner, 1988 [1969]: 59). He thus argued against contextualism in an article in the fourth series of *PPS*, writing that explanation of social action is irreducible to a natural-scientific causal explanation (Skinner, 1988 [1972]). As I have noted above, Skinner vehemently attacked positivism in the preface to the fourth series of *PPS*; thus, this criticism was actually a continuation of his argument in the preface. Skinner (1997: 314) later reiterated this view, observing ‘it was undoubtedly an aspiration of classical Marxism to make use of historical materials to formulate predictive social laws’.¹³

In the following discussion, I suggest that Skinner was likely inclined to interpret Laslett’s view of social and intellectual history as a form of contextualism. I do not intend here to argue one way or another whether Laslett was indeed a contextualist because his work can be interpreted both ways. On the one hand, he ruthlessly castigated strictly Marxist interpretation and denied class struggles and therefore a social revolution in seventeenth-century England. Laslett even went so far as to insist on purging the concept of ‘modernity’ from English history (Rasuretto [Laslett], 1986: vs Rasuretto [Laslett], 1992: 125). However, at the same time, Laslett (2005: 286) was fully conscious of Marxism’s ‘explanatory power’. Unlike Skinner Laslett (1964c: 150) also wrote a favourable review of Macpherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, praising it as ‘a very important, arresting and original book, written with a zest and a clarity which is reminiscent of Maynard Keynes’. Moreover, although he rejected Marx’s class struggle thesis, his own explanation sometimes sounds reductionistic.¹⁴ Indeed, it is exactly this point that made Cesare Cuttica unsatisfied with Laslett’s works on Filmer (Cuttica, 2012: 7). My own focus with regards to this topic is, therefore, exploring Skinner’s understanding of Laslett’s project; that is, exploring whether Laslett’s social history crossed the threshold by which Skinner judged his methodology to be a form of contextualism.

¹³Skinner was not the only theorist who identified Marxist ‘contextualism’ with the natural scientific method. For example, the representative positivist Otto Neurath praised Marxism because, even though it still held metaphysical aspects, it employed a scientific explanatory model of society (Tominaga, 1984: 128). Neurath (1931: 422) observed: ‘Of the existing sociological teachings, it is the teaching of Marxism that most incorporates the empirical sociology’.

¹⁴For Filmer and Levellers, see, respectively, Laslett (2005: 222 and 220).

To this end, Skinner's opposition to the *Annales* is a useful focal point in that it provides a clue for inferring his attitude towards the Laslettian socio-intellectual history, although his objection to the *Annales* has received far less attention than it deserves.¹⁵ Although the *Annales* was a less conspicuous opponent in Skinner's works than Marxist contextualism, it was equally unacceptable to him. The *Annales*, in general, aimed at turning narrative history of political events into a social history that analyses social activity in its totality and willingly incorporates necessary, and varied, methods and techniques (Burke, 2015: 2–3). Among its members was Fernand Braudel, who disseminated their campaign to liberate history from political history's domination. Indeed, when referring to the *Annales*, Skinner almost exclusively named Braudel as its representative. Braudel's vision of history, which turned a spotlight on the *longue durée* or 'structure', except for its scale, was similar to the Laslettian history of social structure. 'The Cambridge Group', as Guy Ortolano (2009: 152) writes, 'was Britain's answer to the *Annales*'. Laslett held that social history was in a position to synthesize all historical branches with the help of the social sciences. Braudel (1980: 69) expressed the same opinion: 'history is a synthesizer, an orchestrator' and 'it finds itself regularly sharing the dish with sociology, which is also a synthesizer'.

Skinner bluntly disapproved of the *Annales*'s vision. In his view, the *Annales* was a group of 'structuralist' historians. In particular, Braudel urged fellow historians to adopt 'a far more sociological as well as deterministic perspective' to explicate the deep geographical and social structure that underlay, and secretly dominated, political events (Skinner, 1990: 18–19). However, the result of the *Annales*'s 'materialist approach' was devastating for all intellectual historians. 'With geography determining economics', Skinner (2002b: 38) said, 'and with economics determining social and political life, there was little space left for the life of the mind except as an epiphenomenon'. It thus follows that Braudel's total history completely failed to capture the vastness of human activities, such as art, literature, and philosophy (Skinner, 2007a: 104). Thus, for Skinner, the *Annales*'s discursive structure was essentially the same as that of Marxist, and its approach was just as repugnant as C. B. Macpherson's.

The traits of Skinner's criticism of the *Annales* become clearer when compared to Laslett's appraisal of it. Although Skinner responded with hostility towards the *Annales* and its alleged determinism, Laslett felt more of a rivalry with the group. Laslett considered that his Cambridge Group shared the idea of sociological history with the *Annales*, but seems to have believed that The Cambridge Group were superior to the *Annales*.¹⁶ He was proud that it was the *Annales* that sought the cooperation of the Cambridge Group and not *vice versa* (Obelkevich, 2000: 147). It is therefore not surprising that his comment on the *Annales* took the form of offering a sort of advice: The *Annales* should avail itself of the social sciences more. According to Laslett's critique, Braudel, the don of the *Annales*, was unaware of demography's development; indeed, Laslett claimed that Braudel had failed to make full use of statistics, psychology, and sociology. Worse than that, Laslett disgruntledly wrote, Braudel had recently 'complain[ed] that the social sciences are out to dehumanise history', though Braudel himself had been pursuing this same course (Laslett, 1973). Thus, unlike Skinner, Laslett did not criticize Braudel's approach as deterministic; he complained, rather, a lack of exploration of de-humanistic elements.

Skinner strongly opposed all forms of determinism, and therefore he has been sensitive to deterministic elements in other historians. When Alan Macfarlane asked Skinner to comment on Hugh Trevor-Roper in an interview, Skinner (2008: Part 2, 00:08:30–45) surprised him by responding

¹⁵For example, Fernand Braudel appeared only once even in Kari Palonen's comprehensive work (Palonen, 2003: 24). I am not insisting that Braudel was merely a disguised target and that Skinner's real target was Laslett. Skinner viewed Braudel as a genuine opponent. Instead, in the following discussion, I refer to Braudel as a convenient point of reference to demonstrate how far Skinner had departed from Laslett's methodological vision. The same can be said about Namier, who I discuss in the next section. Skinner also viewed him as a genuine opponent. I reconstructed Skinner's argument against Namier – that it is possible or even necessary to combine the history of political ideas with political history – to show how it constituted a refutation not only of Namier himself but also of Laslettian-type contextualism.

¹⁶Laslett (1965: 582) assumed that no other group more meticulously combined the analysis of social structure and demography than the Cambridge Group.

that Trevor-Roper seemed a sort of Marxist in that he supposed that every society had its ‘fundamental bedrock’ and ‘everything else was just a Shibboleth’. Even Pocock was criticized according to this perspective (Tsutsumibayashi, 1999: 71); Skinner (2007a: 107) saw Pocock as ‘a more structuralist historian’ than himself. He also found in Pocock a deterministic inclination similar to Braudel’s. Skinner’s demurrals at Pocock in ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’ was evidently a paraphrase of his criticism of the *Annales* in ‘The Role of History’.¹⁷ Skinner suspected that discourse and language themselves played the same deterministic role as that of geography and social structure in Pocock’s methodology. Although Pocock ‘stresses the power of language to constrain our thoughts’, Skinner was inclined to stress ‘language as a weapon of debate’ (Skinner, 2002b: 49; Skinner, 2007a: 107).

Considering Skinner’s perspective on both the *Annales* and contextualism, alongside his sensitivity to determinism, we have good reason to conclude that Skinner would have viewed Laslett as a contextualist. Because Skinner never failed to find contextualist aspects in other historians, it would be an odd oversight if he had not realized such aspects in Laslett. For Skinner, the contextualist approach to history degraded ideas as merely epiphenomena of other factors. In fact, he openly expressed such dissatisfaction with both Braudel and the *Annales* and, more cautiously, with Pocock as well. Given the parallel of the Laslettian and Braudelian approach to history, from Skinner’s perspective, Laslett would lie somewhere between the *Annales* (and Marxists) and Pocock, being fairly closer to the former. Thus, the range of Skinner’s definition of contextualism expanded to include Laslett and, therefore, as I will argue in the next section, his battle against contextualism was to construct an alternative to the Laslettian vision of history.

5. Overcoming contextualism

Skinner’s rejection of contextualism was accompanied by an alternative: the history of ideology. Although Laslett attempted to incorporate the history of political ideas into a socio-structural history, Skinner chose political history as the partner of a history of political thought. This fact is significant because it strongly suggests that Skinner made a clear and final departure from the path opened up by Laslett, when Skinner established the history of ideology in theory as well as in practice. Therefore, his challenge to Namierism in 1970s was, as I will argue, not merely a transitional point to overcome contextualism but was also the last step in Skinner’s rebuttal of the Laslettian project of socio-intellectual history by combining political history and the history of political thought.

From the outset, Skinner seems to have aimed at combining political history and the history of political thought. His first ambition was, Skinner (2002b: 42) recollected, ‘doing for Hobbes what Laslett had done for Locke’. As the title of his early essay, ‘The Ideological Context of Hobbes’s Political Thought’, makes clear, he put Hobbes in ‘the ideological context’ to elucidate what speech acts Hobbes had performed (Skinner, 1966a). What had already been implied in this approach came to be articulated as a methodology in his essay, ‘Some Problems’, in which Skinner (1988 [1974]: 99) wrote: ‘We can hardly claim to be concerned with history of political theory unless we are prepared to write it as real history – that is, as the record of an actual activity, and in particular as the history of ideologies’. Otherwise, history would be an accumulation of ‘myths’ rather than history in its proper sense.

In 1966, the same year that Skinner published ‘The Ideological Context of Hobbes’s Political Thought’, Skinner launched a revision of two conventional methodologies (i.e., textualism and contextualism) to justify the approach he employed in ‘The Ideological Context’. However, his first attempt to overcome contextualism ended in failure, the most important reason of which was that he had left the relation between contextualism and the natural scientific model of explanation ambiguous. ‘Historians of ideas’, Skinner (1966b: 203) had noted, ‘are seldom found to ask what *caused* a poet

¹⁷Compare, Skinner (1974: 102) with Skinner (1988 [1974]: 100). Although Skinner might have written ‘Some Problems’ first, it does not affect my argument.

or a philosopher or a composer to elaborate his most characteristic ideas'. However, as he would clarify three years later in 'Meaning and Understanding', contextualists did encourage fellow historians to identify the foundational causes of ideas in, for example, a social context. By identifying contextualism with the natural scientific model of explanation, Skinner thus refined his previous criticism against contextualism and suggested an alternative in 'Meaning and Understanding'.

Against contextualism, Skinner defended non-causal explanations of an action of writing and expressing political ideas (Palonen, 2003: 45). In other words, there remains 'meaning' that cannot be properly explained in terms of natural scientific explanations (Skinner, 1988 [1972]: 96). As Skinner (1988 [1969]: 61) argued, even if 'the study of the social context of texts could serve to *explain* them, this would not amount to the same as providing the means to *understand* them'. Here, he employed the traditional dichotomy between explanation and understanding. Its classical expression is found in Wilhelm Dilthey's work: 'We explain nature but we understand mental life' (Dilthey, 1976: 89). Collingwood (1946: 213–217) concurred, distinguishing between an external, causal explanation and an internal understanding of an agent. Skinner refined this dichotomy by introducing J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which focused not on the utterance itself, but on the action performed in uttering. Adopting this idea, Skinner argued that understanding a text is understanding the author's speech act within linguistic contexts. Skinner would continue to revise and sophisticate his objection to contextualism after the 1970s.

As Skinner developed his objections, the shadow of Lewis Namier loomed as one of his most formidable opponents. Namier was a historian, whose works on eighteenth-century England dramatically revised the traditional view of Parliament in that century. Namier saw political ideas as merely an *ex post facto* rationalization of politicians' hidden emotions, implying that political ideas held no explanatory force of politicians' behaviour (Namier, 1961: 147; see also Skinner, 1988 [1974]: 109). Skinner found the same structure of the Marxist explanation in Namier, because, for Namier as well as Marxists, political ideas were mere epiphenomena. Although sometimes misrepresented, Namier never claimed that political ideas were completely irrelevant to political events; he was quite sensitive to the tragedy produced by ideologies or political ideas (Namier, 1955: 7). Namier's hostility towards ideologies seems to have been underpinned by his belief that they only served to conceal the true motives of political leaders and, in particular, after he was confronted with the horrific atrocities of Nazi Germany. Hence, for Namier (1955: 7), the death of political philosophy was the best sign of a politically mature nation. What Namier actually insisted on was that, although political ideas could greatly influence the multitude's behaviour, it was naïve for historians to employ ideologies to *explain* political leaders' behaviour. Instead, historians must search for politicians' real motives – or 'the underlying emotions' (Namier, 1955: 4; Brooke, 1964: 338–341).¹⁸

Namier's contextualism required Skinner to construct a different kind of critique than he had before. Although the structure of Namier's argument was, for Skinner, the same as other contextualists, the difference lay in Skinner's own purpose. Because Skinner attempted to combine political history with the history of political thought, it was insufficient to invoke non-causal explanations to refute Namierism. Without moderating any substantive assumption, Namierite historians could completely accept Skinner's criticism against Marxist contextualism (i.e., non-causal explanations of political ideas). Namierite historians could ask, even after accepting Skinner's argument, what, then, political historians could explain by focusing on political ideas, if ideas did not cause political action. This very suspicion is what Skinner had to answer to, and he did so by sophisticating his theory of history of political ideology. In the 1970s, Skinner (1988 [1974]: 110) thus began buttressing his methodology, illuminating 'a further type of causal connection' between political ideas and action.

Responding to Namierite contextualism constituted not just Skinner's final repudiation of contextualism but also his last step in breaking away from Laslett's goal of incorporating the history of political thought into social history. Keith Thomas (1966: 276) called the final volume of *Oxford History of England* the 'swansong' of political history, while the *Annales* dismissed political history as a history

¹⁸Namier considered prosopography as the best method to explicate such individual emotions (Colley, 1989: 27–29).

of events that overlooked deeper structure of human activities. Likewise, Laslett was convinced that his history of social structures marked a clear departure from the descriptive political narratives. Unlike these historians, however, Skinner never dispelled the concept of political history, but rather he attempted to link political thought to political history. To accomplish this task, he first had to convince Namierite historians to open the door for historians of political ideas. To put it another way, Skinner had to demonstrate why political historians could not legitimately ignore political ideas and why political history would be deficient if historians neglected the ideological dimension of political actions.

Skinner's repudiation itself needs little explication.¹⁹ He underpinned his methodology with a recycled concept of 'evaluative-descriptive terms', an idea that he first articulated in his review of Dahl's democratic theory. This concept once used against positivist theory was reused here to refute the contextualist historical interpretation. Both political thinkers and political actors, Skinner claimed, manipulated 'evaluative-descriptive terms'. He conceded to Namier that an agent could conceivably not believe his or her expressed principle at all. However, Skinner continued, once political agents used favourable terms, such as democracy or liberty, to legitimize their actions, then the same expressed ideas in turn restricted their actions to the extent that their expressed ideas sounded convincing to the audiences. As a consequence, although an agent's expressed ideas could be *ex post facto* rationalizations, it does not necessarily follow that the ideas are useless in explaining the actions of agents (Skinner, 1988 [1974]: 116–117; see also Goldie, 2006: 8). Like 'the time-honoured puzzle about the chicken and the egg', Skinner (2007b: 129) thus declared, the question whether the 'reality' precedes ideas or *vice versa* was itself 'a *question mal posée*'. It is simply impossible to translate the question whether political agents sincerely believed in their expressed ideas into another question whether political ideas had any influence on political actions.

Thus, Skinner capably objected to Namier, arguing that political thought played an indispensable role in explaining the activities of past political agents. His confidence in this approach was evident in the preface to *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*:

The adoption of this approach might also help us to illuminate some of the connections between political theory and practice. It is often observed that political historians tend to assign a somewhat marginal role to political ideas and principles in seeking to explain political behaviour. And it is evident that, as long as historians of political theory continue to think of their main task as that of interpreting a canon of classic texts, it will remain difficult to establish any closer links between political theories and political life. But if they were instead to think of themselves essentially as students of ideologies, it might become possible to illustrate one crucial way in which the explanation of political behaviour depends upon the study of political ideas and principles, and cannot meaningfully be conducted without reference to them (Skinner, 1978b: xi–xii).

As this statement clearly presents, Skinner wrote his masterpiece with the methodological conviction that his own arguments had secured a place for political thought in political history.

Tracing the trajectory of Skinner's successive objection to contextualism from the 1960s to *The Foundations*, we can now assess the significance of *The Foundations* in terms of methodology. Commentators have often argued that *The Foundations* betrayed Skinner's methodological prescription, pointing to the alleged gap between Skinner's methodology and the narrative structure of *The Foundations* (e.g., Boucher, 1985: 242). However, as I have shown that, even if this accusation might be true regarding Skinner's textualism, no such gap is found between *The Foundations* and Skinner's criticism of contextualism. Furthermore, having considered the Laslettian history of social structure as a form of contextualism, we can now redescribe Skinner's criticism of contextualism as a process of successive steps leading to his final departure from Laslett. If *The Foundations* is a terminus of his challenge to contextualism – completed in a criticism of Namier – then it is possible to see *The Foundations* as Skinner's declaration of independence from Laslett's method.

¹⁹For detailed explications of Skinner's reply, see Tully (1988) and Palonen (2003: 51–60).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to reveal Skinner's anti-Laslett moment. The intellectual movement that Laslett began making once he put Mannheim's sociology of knowledge into practice, and then incorporated the history of political ideas into a history of social structure, laid a methodological foundation that Skinner would eventually reject. Laslett's comprehensive vision of history led him to develop the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, which Skinner claimed was 'a wrong turning'. This remark was neither accidental nor inadvertent, but was indeed significant – that reason I have tried explaining throughout this paper. Through constructing his own methodology, Skinner thus indirectly repudiated both Laslett's positivism and his vision of history, while simultaneously combining the history of political thought with political history, rather than with social history as Laslett had attempted to do. Skinner's repudiation of contextualism culminated in *The Foundations*, and therefore for those who regard the work as a quintessential achievement of the Cambridge School, *The Foundations* would serve as a barometer for how far the Cambridge School veered from Laslett's vision.

If the narrative so far is convincing, it would be legitimate to argue that Skinner's early methodology was, in part, a rhetorical redescription of the term 'ideology'. Ideology was a pivotal concept in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. His sociological analysis of knowledge suggested that a particular political idea should be explicated as an ideology, that is, as an entity produced by the collective thinking of a group situated within a particular social structure and occupying a specific social status. By employing Mannheim's approach, Laslett explored past political theorists, especially Filmer's political idea. Laslett regarded Filmer's political ideas as reflections of the familial and social structures in which he lived. Although neither Mannheim nor Laslett were rigorous determinists, their arguments nonetheless implied some deterministic elements, and Skinner seems to have focused his interpretation of their methodology on these specific deterministic aspects. When Skinner described his own vision of the history of political thought as that of ideology, he inherited Mannheim's, and partly Laslett's, terminology. However, in his work, Skinner radically removed the deterministic aspect of the term 'ideology'; rather than being determined by something else, ideology was, Skinner declared in *The Foundations*, 'one of the determinants of his [= an agent's] action' (Skinner, 1978b: xiii).

Moreover, the comparative analysis of Laslett and Skinner in this paper, focusing on the differences rather than theoretical continuity between them, elucidates their previously obscured contributions to the recurring debate between history and social science. For example, in 2015, a researcher of international politics, Hiroyuki Hoshiro, published *How to Create Theory from History: Integrating Social Science and History*, which deplors the lack of reciprocal communication of these two fields and articulates a mode of explanation that both disciplines could adopt (Hoshiro, 2015: 20). Hoshiro's work was met with an immediate response from historians, and while their replies were not necessarily harsh and their attitudes do not converge, one critic did express his anxiety that the suggested integration would simply result in the subordination of history to the social sciences (Jin'no *et al.*, 2016: 75; this part was written by Jin'no). Another critic noted that historians do not rely on any one specific social scientific method. Rather, historians 'rely, perhaps, on a perception obtained through open-minded analysis of historical documents, a way which Yoshio Yasumaru once called "methodological un-methodology"' (Jin'no *et al.*, 2016: 76; this part was written by Nishiyama). Nonetheless, both Hoshiro and all the critics did agree that further investigation on the connection between history and social sciences was indeed necessary.

If we contrast Skinner with Laslett, rather than with a Straussian or Marxist approach (as is often done), a significant contribution of Skinner's argument to such a discursive conflict becomes clear: 'methodological un-methodology' is not necessarily an alternative to social scientific explanation, but an investigation based on another type of methodology can be an alternative. Skinner's discussion of methodology, which argued against contextualism including a Laslettian-type social scientific history, would rightly remind many political scientists of Clifford Geertz's 'thick description'. Indeed, Skinner sometimes referred favourably to Geertz (Skinner, 2002a: 47 (n87), 97, and 103 (n4)).

However, this ‘thick description’ has provoked negative responses in some classical works on ‘explanation’ and research methods in the social sciences (e.g., Little, 1991: 142; King *et al.*, 1994: 36–41 and 75 (n1)); it was even criticized for its sheer lack of ‘methodological awareness’ (Kume, 2013: 221).²⁰ Nevertheless, the discussion in this paper makes clear that advocacy for non-causal explanation does not necessarily negate coherent explanation itself. Skinner attempted to position his methodology as a compelling counterapproach to the one widely employed in social sciences, of which Laslett was a vehement supporter.

However, ‘liberating’ Laslett from the status of founder of the Cambridge School – distinguishing between his and Skinner’s approaches – makes Laslett’s rich contributions even clearer than those of Skinner. Two twenty-first-century developments in the academic world would stimulate a revival of the Laslettian belief in fruitful cooperation between the history of ideas and the social sciences²¹: the development of the digital humanities and the turn towards global intellectual history. Laslett emphasized that the quantitative approach was indispensable for the historical investigations of social structure, claiming that without such investigations, as in the case of Arendt, even the history of political ideas would be defective. The development of the digital humanities, which is ‘redrawing the boundary lines among the humanities, the social sciences, the arts, and the natural sciences’ (Burdick *et al.*, 2012: 122), has made it possible to apply quantitative approaches to the history of ideas on an unprecedented scale. As a recent seminal work that employs the numerical method, ‘The Idea of Liberty, 1600–1800: A Distributional Concept Analysis’ carefully but explicitly identifies the Cambridge School as a methodological opponent (de Bolla *et al.*, 2020: 381–382); this new trend represents, as it were, a counterattack by the Laslettian vision. A Laslettian moment, which ‘the Cambridge School’ has obscured, is now unfolding virtually unnoticed and much more effectively than in 1960s when Skinner launched his methodology.

In addition to the development of the digital humanities, a global turn in historiography would require the return of the Laslettian vision. As Hoshiro noted, antagonism between social scientists and historians has long been common. However, although the development of global history has by no means prompted intellectual historians to abandon their research into smaller contexts, it has called on them to clarify the role of ideas, including their causality, on a global scale. Andrew Sartori (2016: 208) has called this outlook ‘intellectual history *in* global history’. Laslett’s approach, which made ‘comparison’ an important methodological component, rather than Skinner’s, helps us grasp the role of political ideas in such a large framework. Although Skinnerian intellectual historians would find it difficult to integrate their approach with a large-scale comparative historical analysis of, say, Acemoglu and Robinson, Laslettian intellectual historians would welcome such integration as a basis for their own investigations. Laslett’s vision provides an answer to the demand for ‘intellectual history *in* global history’ and a methodological basis for incorporating comparative socio-historical analyses into the history of political thought.

Finally, despite their differences, it warrants emphasis that, as pointed out above, both Laslett and Skinner took seriously the relationship between the history of ideas and the social and political sciences, and discussed how intellectual historians should respond to the emerging social sciences. Although David Easton once complained that historians of political thought indulge in historicism and fail to examine important social values (Easton, 1951), contemporary political scientists seem to have simply decided to ignore the history of political thought. In severely criticizing political philosophy for its lack of solid methodology, the eminent political scientist, Masaru Kohno, did not even touch on the historical approach (Kohno, 2014); indeed, the history of political thought itself tends to disappear in political science textbooks.²² Nevertheless, historians of political ideas are also responsible

²⁰For the avoidance of misunderstandings, I am not attempting here to add any comments to the discussion of causal inference itself. On this issue, see also a review on this book by Kentarō Fukumoto (2015: 139–141).

²¹In a sense, Hoshiro is pursuing, without realizing it, a goal similar to that of Laslett. The neglected rich of Laslett, an ‘integrated’ approach, is also implied in Petri Koikkalainen (2009: 357–358).

²²See, for example, an excellent textbook written in Japanese, Sunahara *et al.* (2015).

for this disappearance: unlike Laslett and Skinner, they do not seem to seriously ask how and why they should (or should not) incorporate social and political science methods into intellectual history. This situation may indeed be a consequence of a peaceful compromise, an agreement to disagree. Such a feigned *détente* is, however, a legacy that neither Laslett nor Skinner has left us with – this fact is perhaps the most important lesson one can learn from them.

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