

# Virtue, Commerce, and History

Essays on Political Thought and History,  
Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1985

First published 1985  
Reprinted 1986, 1988, 1991, 1995 (twice)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN 0-521-25701-8 hardback  
ISBN 0-521-27660-8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

# Contents

1	Introduction: The state of the art	<i>page</i>	1
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## PART I

2	Virtues, rights, and manners: A model for historians of political thought		37
3	Authority and property: The question of liberal origins		51
4	1776: The revolution against Parliament		73

## PART II

5	Modes of political and historical time in early eighteenth-century England		91
6	The mobility of property and the rise of eighteenth-century sociology		103
7	Hume and the American Revolution: The dying thoughts of a North Briton		125
8	Gibbon's <i>Decline and Fall</i> and the world view of the Late Enlightenment		143
9	Josiah Tucker on Burke, Locke, and Price: A study in the varieties of eighteenth-century conservatism		157
10	The political economy of Burke's analysis of the French Revolution		193

## PART III

11	The varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A history of ideology and discourse	215
	I From the First Whigs to the True Whigs, 215	
	II From the Financial Revolution to the Scottish Enlightenment, 230	
	III From the Seven Years' War to the Constitution of the United States, 253	
	IV From the response to the American Revolution to the reaction to the French Revolution, 274	
	V From Cobbett's <i>History of the Reformation</i> to Macaulay's <i>History of England</i> , 295	
	Index	311



## Introduction

### The state of the art

#### I

Of the ten essays that compose the remainder of this volume, nine were originally published between 1976 and 1982, though one or two were written for spoken delivery substantially earlier than their appearance in print. The last, which constitutes the whole of Part III, receives separate introduction. As a constellation they represent work on the history of political discourse in England, Scotland, and America, chiefly between the English Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution of 1789, though Part III pursues the intimations of this history into the half-century following the latter event. This work has been done at a time when perceptions of “British history” are continuing to change, perhaps more drastically than for some time past, and when perceptions of what constitutes “the history of political thought” have been undergoing intensive scrutiny and restatement. Though the present volume is intended as a contribution to the practice, not the theory, of its branch of historiography, it is necessary to introduce it with a statement of where it stands in the process of change regarding the history of political thought. To describe a practice and its entailments, however, especially when these are understood to be in process of change, cannot be done without employing, and to some degree exploring, the language of theory.

I have already used two terms, the history of political thought and the history of political discourse, which are discernibly not identical. The former term is retained here, and in the nomenclature of learned institutions and journals, because it is familiar and conventional and serves to mobilize our energies in the right directions, and also because it is by no means inappropriate. The activities it directs us to study are visibly those of men and women thinking; the speech they employ is self-critical and self-refining, and regularly ascends toward levels of theory, philosophy, and science. Nevertheless, the change that has come over

this branch of historiography in the past two decades may be characterized as a movement away from emphasizing history of thought (and even more sharply, "of ideas") toward emphasizing something rather different, for which "history of speech" or "history of discourse," although neither of them unproblematic or irreproachable, may be the best terminology so far found. To show how this movement has come about, and what it entails, is necessary in order to introduce its practice.

In a Cambridge-centered retrospect, some of this movement's origins may be discovered in the linguistic analysis favored by philosophers in the 1950s, which tended to present thoughts as propositions appealing to a limited number of modes of validation; others in the speech-act theories developed in Oxford and elsewhere about the same time, which tended to present thoughts as utterances performing upon those who heard them, and indeed upon those who uttered them. Both tended to focus attention upon the great variety of things that could be said or seen to have been said, and upon the diversity of linguistic contexts that went to determine what could be said but were at the same time acted upon by what was said. It is obvious enough what the historians of political thought have been doing with the perceptions thus offered them; but it is curious, in retrospect – and perhaps evidence of the difficulty of getting philosophers to talk about the same things as historians – that the series *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, which Peter Laslett began to edit in 1956, devoted itself almost wholly to the analysis and exploration of political statements and problems, and hardly at all to determining their historical status or to the historiography of political argument.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, at the very same time that Laslett was announcing that "for the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead,"<sup>2</sup> the history of political thought, including philosophy (if philosophy can be included in anything) was about to undergo a fairly dramatic revival, due in large part to Laslett himself. It was Laslett's editorial work on Filmer and Locke<sup>3</sup> that taught others, including the present writer, the frameworks, both theoretical and historical, in which they should set their researches.

There began to take shape a historiography, with characteristic emphases: first on the variety of idioms, or "languages" as they came to be known, in which political argument might be conducted (an example might be the language of

<sup>1</sup>The three exceptions that may be said to prove this rule are J. G. A. Pocock, "The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry," in *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series*, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1962); Quentin Skinner, "'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action," and John Dunn, "The Identity of the History of Ideas," both in *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Fourth Series*, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman, and Quentin Skinner (Oxford, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Peter Laslett, ed., *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford, 1956), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup>*Patriarcha and Other Political Works of Sir Robert Filmer* (Oxford, 1949); *John Locke: Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, 1960; rev. ed., 1963).

the common law as a constituent of what we now know as ancient constitutionalism<sup>4</sup> and second, on the participants in political argument as historical actors, responding to one another in a diversity of linguistic and other political and historical contexts that gave the recoverable history of their argument a very rich texture. The republication of Filmer's writings in 1679 was seen to have evoked responses as linguistically diverse as Locke's *First* from his *Second Treatise*, or Algernon Sidney's *Discourses on Government* from either, and at the same time to have evoked, from those concerned to reply to the *Freeholder's Grand Inquest*<sup>5</sup> rather than to *Patriarcha*, responses of yet another kind: the controversy between Petyt and Brady, or the revision of Harrington by his associate Henry Neville.<sup>6</sup> All these threads in the history of argument could be followed as they diverged and converged again; there began to emerge a history of actors uttering and responding in a shared yet diverse linguistic context. The question why all this looked like a revolution in the historiography of political thought requires one to describe the state of the art before all this happened, and it is difficult to do so without setting up straw men. The immediate point is that there has ever since been a felt (and answered) need to redescribe the historiography of political thought and its entailments, and to define its practice in terms more rigorously historical.

It has been usual to suggest that *in illo tempore* the disciplines of political theory and the history of political thought had become confounded, and that the advent of an analytic and linguistic philosophy that was severely ahistorical helped greatly to disentangle them. But if the linguistic philosophers did not concern themselves with the writing of history, the historians were slow to draw upon or to contribute to the philosophy of speech acts and propositions. The present writer is aware that he did not so much learn from the contributors to *Philosophy, Politics and Society* as discover that he had been learning from them; it was left to the practice to discover its own entailments. The analysis of scientific inquiry in the turbulent passage from Popper to Kuhn and beyond had its importance, but it was only in the middle 1960s, with the first appearance of writings by Quentin Skinner, that historians of political thought began to state the logic of their own inquiry and pursue it into fields where it encountered the philosophy of language. There began a discussion that continues to produce a vigorous and extensive literature.<sup>7</sup> It would be difficult, and might not be useful, to trace all its intri-

<sup>4</sup>J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1957).

<sup>5</sup>James Tyrrell and William Petyt regarded this work as of the same tendency as the writings published under Filmer's name, and I do not therefore enter into the present controversy regarding its authorship. See Corinne Comstock Weston, "The Authorship of the *Freeholder's Grand Inquest*," *English Historical Review* XCV, 1 (1980), pp. 74–98.

<sup>6</sup>Caroline Robbins, ed., *Two English Republican Tracts* (Cambridge, 1969).

<sup>7</sup>Bibliographies complete to the moment of their compilation may be found in Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), vol. 1, *The Renaissance*, pp. 285–6; Lotte Mulligan, Judith Richards, and John K. Graham, "Intentions and Conventions: A

cacies or attempt to write its history; yet the need to describe the present state of the art obliges us to give an account of its chief characteristics.

Professor Skinner is known for having made, at different times, two pronouncements on the objectives which a historian of this kind should pursue. The earlier of these stressed the importance of recovering the intentions which an author was carrying out in his text; the objections that have been made to this proposal have not destroyed it, but have rather pointed out the need in some respects to go beyond it. For example, it has been asked whether we can recover the author's intentions from his text without becoming imprisoned in the hermeneutic circle. The answer is that this may indeed be a danger when we have no evidence regarding the intentions other than the text itself; in practice, this is sometimes the case but not always. There may be evidence, unreliable and treacherous but still usable, from the author's other writings or his private correspondence; an admirable habit of preserving the letters of learned men has prevailed among antiquaries for hundreds of years. The more evidence the historian can mobilize in the construction of hypotheses regarding the author's intentions, which can be then be applied to or tested against the text itself, the better his chances of escaping from the hermeneutic circle, or the more circles of this kind his critics will have to construct in the attempt to dismount him.

A more penetrating objection has been that which asks whether a *mens auctoris* can be said to exist independently of his *sermo*, that is, whether a set of intentions can be isolated as existing in the author's mind, to which he then proceeds to give effect in writing and publishing his text. Do not the intentions come into being only as they are effected in the text? How can he know what he thinks, or what he wanted to say, until he sees what he has said? Self-knowledge is retrospective, and every author is his own owl of Minerva. Evidence of the kind mentioned in the preceding paragraph can still be mobilized, on occasion, in order to point out that an author of whom enough is known can be said to have had before him a number of possible actions, giving effect to a variety of intentions, and that the act he did perform, and the intentions to which he did give effect, may have differed from some other act he could have performed and may even have meditated performing. But the objection with which we are dealing cuts deeper than this. It asks not only whether intentions can exist before being artic-

Critique of Quentin Skinner's Method for the Study of the History of Ideas," *Political Studies* XXVI, 1 (1979), pp. 84–98; J. G. A. Pocock, "The Machiavellian Moment Revisited: A Study in History and Ideology," *Journal of Modern History* LIII, 1 (1981), pp. 50–1 n. 9; James H. Tully, "The Pen Is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics," *British Journal of Political Science* XIII, 4 (1983), pp. 489–509.

It should be mentioned that there are said to be levels of language – having to do with computer technology, market research, or something of the kind – at which the phrase "state of the art" has taken on some short-lived significance. The present author has no desire to be read in that sense. He believes himself to be practicing an art whose present state can be reflectively examined, and he hopes that this note may be of interest to historians.

ulated in a text, but whether they can be said to exist apart from the language in which the text is to be constructed. The author inhabits a historically given world that is apprehensible only in the ways rendered available by a number of historically given languages; the modes of speech available to him give him the intentions he can have, by giving him the means he can have of performing them. At this point the objection has raised the question of *langue* as well as *parole*, of language context as well as of speech act.

This had, of course, been part of Skinner's contention. His insistence on the recovery of intentions had been to some degree destructive in its purpose; it was aimed at eliminating from consideration those intentions an author could not have conceived or carried into effect, because he lacked the language in which they could have been expressed and employed some other, articulating and performing other intentions. Skinner's method, therefore, has impelled us toward the recovery of an author's language no less than of his intentions, toward treating him as inhabiting a universe of *langues* that give meaning to the *paroles* he performs in them. This by no means has the effect of reducing the author to the mere mouthpiece of his own language; the more complex, even the more contradictory, the language context in which he is situated, the richer and more ambivalent become the speech acts he is capable of performing, and the greater becomes the likelihood that these acts will perform upon the context itself and induce modification and change within it. At this point the history of political thought becomes a history of speech and discourse, of the interactions of *langue* and *parole*; the claim is made not only that its history is one of discourse, but that it has a history by virtue of becoming discourse.

There seems no doubt, however, that the focus of attention has moved in some measure from the concept of intention toward that of performance. At one level of theory, this is reflected in Professor Skinner's writings on speech acts and related matters; at one level of practice, in his dictum – to be seen in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* and forming the second of those pronouncements mentioned earlier – that if we are to have a history of political thought constructed on authentically historical principles, we must have means of knowing what an author “was doing”<sup>8</sup> when he wrote, or published, a text. The two words quoted prove to contain a wealth of meanings. In colloquial English, to ask what an actor “was doing” is often to ask “what he was up to,” that is, what he was “playing at” or “getting at.” What, in short, was the (sometimes concealed) purposive strategy of his actions? The notion of intention has certainly not been abandoned, as is evident also in the idiom – a favorite one with Skinner – that speaks of an author as performing this or that “move.” But we also find it

<sup>8</sup>Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. xi (the approach “might begin to give us a history of political theory with a genuinely historical character”) and p. xiii (“it enables us to characterise what their authors were *doing* in writing” the classic texts).

possible to ask whether an actor “knew what he was doing,” implying the possibility of a gap between intention and effect, or between consciousness of the effect and the effect itself; to ask this is to ask what the effect was, to whom and at what point in time it became apparent, and to confront the fact that actions performed in an open-ended time context produce an open-ended series of effects. The question what an author was doing therefore can have a great many answers, and it is even theoretically (though somewhat figuratively) conceivable that the author has not finished doing things yet. We need not, however, inquire whether history can have a present (as Michael Oakeshott seems to deny)<sup>9</sup> to discern that Quentin Skinner did wisely to employ an imperfect continuous tense. In French a future conditional perfect might have done duty, but to speak of “what an author would (turn out to) have done” is to look at a future (to us a past) from the standpoint of what he was doing, and is not quite identical with speaking, from the standpoint of our present, of “what he has done” or (*pace* Oakeshott) “is doing.” It is not clear whether an author’s action is ever over and done with; but it is clear – and the use of the future conditional underlines it – that we have begun to concern ourselves with the author’s indirect action, his posthumous action, his action mediated through a chain of subsequent actors. Such is the necessary consequence of admitting the context to parity with the action, the *langue* to parity with the *parole*.

It has been said in objection to Skinner’s position that an author’s words are not his own, that the language he uses to effect his intentions may be taken from him and used by others to other effects. To some extent, this is inherent in the nature of language itself. The language he employs is already in use; it has been used and is being used to utter intentions other than his. At this point an author is himself both the expropriator, taking language from others and using it to his purposes, and the innovator, acting upon language so as to induce momentary or lasting change in the ways in which it is used. But as he has done to others and their language, so shall it be done to him and his. The changes he has sought to bring about in the linguistic conventions surrounding him may not prevent language continuing to be used in the conventional ways he has sought to modify, and this may be enough to nullify or distort the effects of his utterance. Furthermore, even when an author has succeeded in innovating, that is, in uttering speech in such a way as to compel others to respond to it in some sense not hitherto conventional, it does not follow that he will succeed in ruling the responses of others. They may – they usually will – impute to his utterance and his innovation consequences, implications, and entailments he may not have intended or wish to acknowledge, and they will respond to him in terms determined by these imputations, maintaining or modifying those conventions of speech

<sup>9</sup>Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1983), and the present writer’s review, (London) *Times Literary Supplement*, October 21, 1983, p. 1,155.

they see as directly or indirectly affected by his real or imputed utterance. And so far we are imagining only the actions of respondents contemporary with the author, that is, inhabiting the same linguistic and historical context. Languages display continuity as well as change; even when modified by their use in specific contexts, they outlive the contexts in which they have been modified, and they impose upon actors in subsequent contexts the constraints to which innovation and modification are the necessary but unpredictable responses. The text, furthermore, preserves the utterances of the author in a rigid, literal form and conveys them into subsequent contexts, where they compel from respondents interpretations that, however radical, distorting, and anachronistic, would not have been performed if the text had not performed upon the respondents. What an author "was doing," therefore, includes evoking from others responses the author could not control or predict, some of which would be performed in contexts quite other than those in which he was doing that which he could possibly know he was doing. Skinner's formula defines a moment in the history of the interactions of *parole* with *langue*, but at the same time it defines that moment as open-ended.

## II

A review of the state of the art must at this point present an account of its practice. To describe is not to prescribe, and what follows is an account of some practices the historian of political discourse will find himself<sup>10</sup> pursuing, rather than a rigorous injunction to follow them in their order. In the perspective suggested here, however, it seems a prior necessity to establish the language or languages in which some passage of political discourse was being conducted. These "languages" will in strict fact have been sublanguages, idioms, and rhetorics, rather than languages in the ethnic sense, although in early modern history it is not uncommon to encounter polyglot texts that combine vernacular with Latin, Greek, and even Hebrew; we will chiefly be concerned with idioms or modes of speech existing within a given vernacular. Those languages will vary in the degree of their autonomy and stability. From "idioms" they shade off in the direction of "styles" and toward a point where the distinction drawn here between *langue* and *parole* may be lost; but we are typically in search of modes of discourse stable enough to be available for the use of more than one discussant and to present the character of games defined by a structure of rules for more than one player. This will enable us to consider how the players exploited the rules against

<sup>10</sup>The English language contains no third-person pronoun without gender. In writing of the authors *in* the history of political discourse, most of whom were men, I am unembarrassed to find myself using the masculine pronoun, but when it comes to the authors *of* that history, a host of distinguished names occurs to remind me that it might just as well have been the feminine.

one another, and in due course how they performed upon the rules with the effect of altering them.

These idioms or language games vary also in origin and hence in content and character. Some will have originated in the institutional practices of the society concerned: as the professional vocabularies of jurists, theologians, philosophers, merchants, and so on that for some reason have become recognized as part of the practice of politics and have entered into political discourse. A great deal may be learned about the political culture of a given society at various moments in its history by observing what languages originating in this way have become accredited, as it were, to take part in its public speech, and what clerisies or professions have acquired authority in the conduct of its discourse. But other languages will be encountered whose character is rhetorical rather than institutional; they will be found to have originated as modes of argument within the ongoing process of political discourse, as new modes invented or old modes transformed by the constant action of speech upon language, of *parole* upon *langue*. There may be less need to look outside the continuum of discourse in search of their origins; equally, there is nothing to prevent languages of the former category, originating outside the mainstream of discourse, from having entered into the process of transformation just described and from having undergone the mutations that engender new idioms and modes of argument. From all this it follows that the generalized language of discourse at any given time – though perhaps this is particularly true of early modern Europe and Britain – may possess a rich and complex texture; a wide variety of idioms may have entered into it and may be interacting with one another to produce a complex history.

Each of these languages, however it originated, will exert the kind of force that has been called paradigmatic (though it has not proved economical to labor the refinements of this term). That is to say, each will present information selectively as relevant to the conduct and character of politics, and it will encourage the definition of political problems and values in certain ways and not in others. Each will therefore favor certain distributions of priority and consequently of authority; should a concept of authority itself be under discussion – as is likely to be the case in political discourse – it will present “authority” as arising in a certain way and possessing a certain character, and not otherwise. However, once we have defined political discourse as drawing on a number of diversely originating “languages” and arguments, we are committed to supposing the presence of a number of these paradigmatic structures, distributing and defining authority in a number of variant ways, at any one time. From this it follows – what is in any case almost self-evident – that political language is by its nature ambivalent; it consists in the utterance of what have been called “essentially contested concepts” and propositions,<sup>11</sup> and in the simultaneous employment of languages

<sup>11</sup>For this term, advanced by W. B. Gallie in 1956, see William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1983).

favoring the utterance of diverse and contrary propositions. But it further follows – what is nearly but not quite the same thing – that any text or simpler utterance in a sophisticated political discourse is by its nature polyvalent; it consists in the employment of a texture of languages capable of saying different things and of favoring different ways of saying things, in the exploitation of these differences in rhetoric and practice, and in their exploration and possibly their resolution in criticism and theory. When a diversity of such languages is to be found in a given text, it may follow that a given utterance is capable of being intended and read, and so of performing, in more than one of them at the same time; nor is it at all impossible that a given pattern of speech may migrate, or be translated, from one language to another found in the same text, bearing implications from the former context and engrafting them among those belonging to the latter. And the author may move among these patterns of polyvalence, employing and recombining them according to the measure of his capacity. What to one investigator looks like the generation of linguistic muddles and misunderstandings may look to another like the generation of rhetoric, literature, and the history of discourse.

It is a large part of our historian's practice to learn to read and recognize the diverse idioms of political discourse as they were available in the culture and at the time he is studying: to identify them as they appear in the linguistic texture of any one text, and to know what they would ordinarily have enabled that text's author to propound or "say." The extent to which the author's employment of them was out of the ordinary comes later. The historian pursues his first goal by reading extensively in the literature of the time and by sensitizing himself to the presence of diverse idioms. To some extent, therefore, his learning process is one of familiarization, but he cannot remain merely passive and receptive to the language (or languages) he reads, and must frequently employ detective procedures that enable him to frame and validate hypotheses asserting that such and such a language was being employed and was capable of being employed in such and such ways. Along this line he must inevitably confront the problems of interpretation, ideological bias, and the hermeneutic circle. What evidence has he for the presence of a language in the texts before him other than his own ingenuity in reading it into them? Is he not programmed by emphases arising from his own culture to detect similar emphases in the literature of the past and devise supposititious "languages" in which these were allegedly expressed? Can he proceed from saying that he has read a certain language in the texts of a past culture to saying that this language existed as a resource available to those performing acts of utterance in that culture?

The historian is characteristically interested in the performances of agents other than himself and does not desire to be the author of his own past so much as to uncover the doings of other authors in and of it. This is probably a reason why his politics are inherently liberal rather than aimed at *praxis*. In the kind of inquiry under examination here, the historian is less interested in the "style," or

mode of utterance of a given author, than in the "language," or mode of utterance available to a number of authors for a number of purposes, and his evidence for holding that such and such a "language" existed as a cultural resource for actors in history, and not merely as a gleam in his interpretative eye, tends to be related to the number of actors he can show to have performed in this medium and the number of acts he can show them to have performed. The more he can show (a) that diverse authors employed the same idiom and performed diverse and even contrary utterances in it, (b) that the idiom recurs in texts and contexts varying from those in which it was at first detected, and (c) that authors expressed in words their consciousness that they were employing such an idiom and developed critical and second-order languages to comment on and regulate their employment of it, the more his confidence in his method will increase. Logically, perhaps, he cannot prove that the whole mass of evidence he presents is not the fruit of his ingenuity as an interpreter, but neither can he prove that he is not asleep and dreaming the whole of his apparent existence. The greater the number and diversity of performances he can narrate, the more the hypotheses erected by those who seek to imprison him within the hermeneutic circle must come to resemble a Ptolemaic universe, consisting of more cycles and epicycles than would satisfy the reasonable mind of Alfonso the Wise; in short, the more it will exhibit the disadvantages of nonrefutability.

The problem of interpretation recurs in a more pressing form when we consider that the historian studies languages in order to read them, but not to speak or write them. His own writings will not be constructed in a pastiche of the various idioms they interpret, but rather in language he has devised in order to describe and explicate the workings of these idioms. If in Collingwoodian terminology he has learned to "rethink the thoughts" of others, the language in which he reiterates their utterances will not be that used by them, but his own. It will be explicatory in the sense that it aims constantly to render the implicit explicit, to bring to light assumptions on which the language of others has rested, to pursue and verbalize implications and intimations that in the original may have remained unspoken, to point out conventions and regularities that indicate what could and could not be spoken in the language, and in what ways the language *qua* paradigm encouraged, obliged, or forbade its users to speak and think. To quite an important extent, the historian's language will be hypothecatory and predictive; it will enable him to state what he expects a conventional user of the language under study to have said in specific circumstances, the better to study what was in fact said under these circumstances. When the prediction is falsified and the speech act performed is not that expected, it may be that the conventions of language need further exploration; that the circumstances in which the language was used were other than the historian has supposed they were; that the language being employed was not precisely the language he has expected; or, the

most interesting possibility of all, that innovation and change were taking place in the language.

It will be at such moments that the historian is most confident that he is not merely the prisoner of his own interpretative ingenuity, but the fact remains that his writings about the language of others will be conducted largely in a paralinguage or metalanguage, designed to explicate the implicit and present the history of a discourse as a kind of dialogue between its intimations and potentialities, in which what was not always spoken will be spoken by him. It does not make the historian an idealist to say that he regularly, though not invariably, presents the language in the form of an ideal type: a model by means of which he carries on explorations and experiments. Since he is ultimately concerned with the performances of agents other than himself, he is constantly alert for occasions on which the explication of language has been carried out by actors in the history he is studying; by the language's own users commenting upon its use critically, reflectively, and by means of second-order languages developed among them for the purpose. These will be occasions on which the actors passed from simple discourse to discourse continued and modified by means including theory, but they will also be occasions that provide the historian with information enabling him to control his former hypotheses and construct new ones. The explication of the languages he has learned to read is his means of pursuing his inquiries simultaneously in two directions: toward the contexts in which language was uttered, and toward the acts of speech and utterance performed in and upon the context furnished by language itself and the further contexts in which it was situated. He will seek next to observe the *parole* performing upon the *langue*: upon the conventions and implications of the language, upon other actors as users of the language, upon actors in any further contexts of whose existence he may become persuaded, and possibly upon those contexts themselves. Language, as we have been using the term, is the historian's key to both speech act and context.

We have seen that the texts he studies may prove to have been compounded of many idioms and languages. The historian is constantly surprised and delighted to discover familiar languages in texts equally familiar, where they have not been noticed before – the language of prophetic exegesis in *Leviathan*,<sup>12</sup> the idiom of denouncing paper credit in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*<sup>13</sup> – though making these discoveries does not always enhance his respect for previous scholarship. But if a proposition derives its validity from the language in which it is performed, and part at least of its historicity from its performance upon the same

<sup>12</sup>"Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes," in *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield*, ed. J. H. Elliott and H. G. Konigsberger (London and Ithaca, N.Y., 1970) and reprinted in J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays in Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971).

<sup>13</sup>See chap. 10, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution."

language, it follows that a text compounded of many languages may not only say many things in as many ways, but also may be a means of action in as many histories; it may be broken down into many acts performed in the history of as many languages as there are in the text. To recognize this will commit the historian to some radical, though not always irreversible, experiments in deconstruction, but before he can pursue these or examine their implications, he needs means of understanding how an act of speech, utterance, or authorship, performed in a certain language, may perform and innovate upon it. His attention now turns from *langue* to *parole*, to the act performed in and on a context; but a knowledge of the context remains necessary to a knowledge of the innovation.

### III

Each of the distinguishable idioms of which a text may be compounded is a context in its own right: a way of speaking that seeks to prescribe what things may be said in it and that precedes and may outlast the speech act performed within its prescriptions. We expect it to be complex and sophisticated, to have been formed over time under pressure from a great many conventions and contingencies entering into combination, and to contain at least some elements of a second-order speech that permits its users to reflect on the implications of their use of it. The process of "learning" it, which has just been described, may therefore be thought of as a process of learning its characteristics, resources, and limitations as a mode of utterance which facilitates the performance of some kinds of speech act and inhibits the performance of others; any act performed in it may be viewed as exploiting, exploring, recombining, and challenging the possibilities of utterance of which it consists. But language is referential and has a variety of subjects; it alludes to those elements of experience out of which it has come and with which it offers to deal, and a language current in the public speech of an institutional and political society may be expected to allude to those institutions, authorities, value symbols, and recollected events that it presents as part of that society's politics and from which it derives much of its own character. A "language" in our specialized sense, then, is not only a prescribed way of speaking, but also a prescribed subject matter for political speech. We have reached a point where we can see that each language context betokens a political, social, or historical context within which it is itself situated; we are obliged at the same point, however, to acknowledge that each language to some degree selects and prescribes the context within which it is to be recognized.

Given that any such language has taken time to form, it must display a historical dimension; it must possess and prescribe a past made up of those social arrangements, historical events, recognized values, and ways of thinking of which it has been able to speak; it discourses of a politics from which the character of

pastness cannot be altogether separated. The historian therefore cannot easily satisfy the demand, often made of him, that he present acts of political speech as determined (in the terminology criticized by Oakeshott) by the “primordial” demands of a “present of practical action”;<sup>14</sup> because language characterizes the present in speech loaded with intimations of a past, the present is difficult to isolate or to state in immediate practical purity. Political speech is of course practical and informed by present necessities, but it is none the less constantly engaged in a struggle to discover what the present necessities of practice are, and the most powerful minds using it are exploring the tension between established linguistic usages and the need to use words in new ways. The historian has his own relation to this tension. He knows what norms the language he is studying usually implied, but he may also possess independent knowledge that these norms and the society they presupposed were changing, in ways and for reasons the language as yet lacked means of recognizing. He will therefore look for indications that words were being used in new ways as the result of new experiences, and were occasioning new problems and possibilities in the discourse of the language under study. It will be a problem for him, however, that nothing in that language denotes changes in its historical context as satisfactorily as does the language available to him as a historian, but not available to the actors whose language and history he is studying. Faced with problems such as how far he may use twentieth-century categories to explain the categories used in the seventeenth century, he may impose on himself the discipline of explaining only how changes in seventeenth-century language indicated changes in the historical context, what changes were indicated, and what changes occurred in the ways of indicating them. Since the language of seventeenth-century actors responded differently to its historical context from the language he himself uses, it may be long before seventeenth-century speech, interpreted in context, gives him occasion to use the categories of historical explanation he would wish to use – and in some cases that occasion may never arise. But the historian of discourse cannot get out of a language that which was never in it.

The present of practical necessity in which past actors found themselves is not immediately accessible, since it must come to us through the mediation of the language they used; but this does not mean that it is not accessible at all. From the texts they wrote, from our knowledge of the language they used, the communities of debate to which they belonged, the programs of action that were put into effect, and the history of the period at large, it is often possible to formulate hypotheses concerning the necessities they were under and the strategies they desired to carry out, and to test these by using them to interpret the intentions and performances of the texts themselves. We are in search, however, less of the

<sup>14</sup>See n. 9, this chapter.