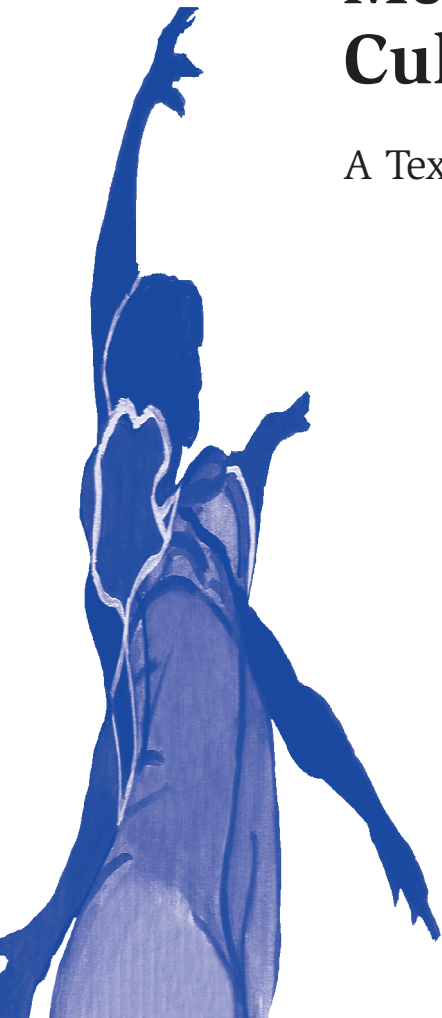


Neil Foxlee

Albert Camus's 'The New Mediterranean Culture'

A Text and its Contexts

Peter Lang



Modern French Identities

On 8 February 1937 the 23-year-old Albert Camus gave an inaugural lecture for a new *Maison de la culture*, or community arts centre, in Algiers. Entitled 'La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne' ('The New Mediterranean Culture'), Camus's lecture has been interpreted in radically different ways: while some critics have dismissed it as an incoherent piece of juvenilia, others see it as key to understanding his future development as a thinker, whether as the first expression of his so-called 'Mediterranean humanism' or as an early indication of what is seen as his essentially colonial mentality.

These various interpretations are based on reading the text of 'The New Mediterranean Culture' in a single context, whether that of Camus's life and work as a whole, of French discourses on the Mediterranean or of colonial Algeria (and French discourses on that country). By contrast, this study argues that Camus's lecture – and in principle any historical text – needs to be seen in a multiplicity of contexts, discursive and otherwise, if readers are to understand properly what its author was *doing* in writing it. Using Camus's lecture as a case study, the book provides a detailed theoretical and practical justification of this 'multi-contextualist' approach.

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**Albert Camus's
'The New Mediterranean Culture'**

Modern **F**rench **I**dentities

Edited by Peter Collier

Volume 38



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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*This book is dedicated to my mother
and to the memory of my father*

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Abbreviations

Full publication details will be found in the bibliography.

Works by Albert Camus

I–IV	<i>Œuvres complètes</i> , I–IV
<i>Corr. JG</i>	<i>Albert Camus – Jean Grenier. Correspondance</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Essais</i> (1981 printing)

Standard Abbreviations

<i>AC</i> _I	<i>Albert Camus</i> I, etc. (numbers of the <i>Albert Camus</i> series of the <i>Revue des Lettres Modernes</i>)
<i>CAC</i> _I	<i>Cahiers Albert Camus</i> I, etc.
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>NRF</i>	<i>Nouvelle Revue Française</i>

The use of other abbreviations from time to time is noted in the text.

Introduction

This book applies a multi-contextualist approach to ‘La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne’ (‘The New Mediterranean Culture’),¹ an inaugural lecture given by the French-Algerian writer Albert Camus to mark the opening of a new *Maison de la culture*, or community arts centre, in Algiers in 1937. As an early and ephemeral text, Camus’s lecture has usually been viewed against the background of his life and work as a whole, where it is seen as one of the first expressions of what is regarded either as his ‘Mediterranean humanism’ or his essentially colonialist mentality. Whereas some critics of both a humanist and a postcolonial persuasion have thereafter adopted a predominantly text-focused approach to the lecture, there have been two corresponding approaches which contextualize the lecture at a discursive level: while humanist critics have placed it in the context of French discourses on the Mediterranean, postcolonial critics have studied it in relation to French colonial discourses on Algeria. In adopting a multi-contextualist approach, however, my study suggests that an adequate account of Camus’s lecture also needs to take account of other contexts, notably the argumentative contexts provided by interwar French intellectual debates on culture and the East/West question, the contemporary Algerian political context and the biographical context provided by Camus’s personal background and intellectual development. In so doing, this study sheds new light on a number of important themes that recur in Camus’s later work, both fictional and non-fictional.

1 For the benefit of non-French-speaking readers, all passages and, where appropriate, titles in French have been translated into English. Except where indicated, all translations are mine. The terms *Occident* and *Orient*, it should be noted, have been translated as ‘West’ and ‘East’ respectively.

Given the vast amount of secondary literature on Camus,² it should be noted at the outset that ‘The New Mediterranean Culture’ was described in an article published by Ray Davison in 2000 as ‘under-discussed’³ and that the only previous study of the work in its own right is an article I myself published in 2006.⁴ That said, previous critics have frequently referred to Camus’s lecture, especially in studies of his early writings and his much-discussed ‘Mediterraneanism.’⁵ This has become a central focus for Camus studies, as is shown by the fact that no fewer than five conferences on Camus and the Mediterranean were held between 1997 and 2006: two in Algeria and the others in France, Israel and the United States.⁶ This makes it all the

- 2 See Robert F. Roeming, *Camus: A Bibliography Microform*, 15th edn (Milwaukee: Computing Services Division, University of Wisconsin, 2000), and, for more recent studies, Raymond Gay-Crosier, *Selective and Cumulative Bibliography of Recent Studies on Albert Camus* <<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gaycros/Bibliog.htm>> accessed 18 May 2010.
- 3 Ray Davison, ‘Mythologizing the Mediterranean: the Case of Albert Camus’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 10 (2000), 77–92 (p. 80). Davison’s study, however, is primarily a critical examination of Camus’s ‘Mediterraneanism’, and his own treatment of the lecture (pp. 80–84) is predominantly descriptive.
- 4 Neil Foxlee, ‘Mediterranean Humanism or Colonialism with a Human Face? Contextualizing Albert Camus’ “The New Mediterranean Culture”’, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21:1 (June 2006), 77–97. Part of Chapter 3 and most of Chapter 8 of the present study are based on this article. See also my notice “‘Un manifeste dégradant’ comme objet de la polémique camusienne dans “La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne””, *Bulletin de la Société des Études Camusiennes* 77 (2006), 28–30, which I draw on in Chapter 6.
- 5 To take a recent example, Peter Dunwoodie begins a study of Camus’s early writings with a long introductory paragraph on the lecture, as a way into examining what he describes in his conclusion as Camus’s ‘problematic *méditerranéité*’ See ‘From *Noces* to *L’Étranger*’, in Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 147–64 (p. 162). For an overview of studies of Camus and the Mediterranean written up until the turn of the century, see Paul-F. Smets, ‘Albert Camus. Sa vraie Méditerranée: “la vérité avant la fable, la vie avant le rêve”’, *L’Europe et la Méditerranée. Actes de la Vième Chaire Glavertel d’études européennes, 2000–2001* (Brussels: PIE–Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 249–67.
- 6 See <<http://webcamus.free.fr/conferences.html>>. In chronological order, the conferences were: ‘Albert Camus: parcours méditerranéens’ (Jerusalem, 1997), the

more surprising that there has been no detailed study of the lecture, which – apart from an untitled 1933 poem (I, 976–78) – represents Camus's first sustained piece of writing on the Mediterranean.

In the course of my discussion of the various contexts in which the lecture needs to be situated, I bring a considerable amount of fresh evidence to bear, not only on the text itself and the development of Camus's ideas, but also on the discourses and debates in which the lecture participates. The other main claim to originality of this book is, of course, the multi-contextualist approach itself, which is based on a critical synthesis of existing methodologies in the history of ideas. In Chapter 1, I examine the approach to textual interpretation developed by the leading intellectual historian Quentin Skinner and the related approaches of J.G.A. Pocock and Reinhart Koselleck. (The fact that Skinner's, Pocock's and to a large extent Koselleck's approaches have hitherto been applied to texts of the early modern period constitutes a further claim to the originality of this study.) In his theoretical writings, Skinner rejects both 'textualism' – the view that it is sufficient to study the text itself to understand its meaning – and a crude 'contextualism' (the view that the meaning of the text is determined by external factors). Instead, he argues that texts need to be understood in relation to not only their sociopolitical context but also their argumentative context: the context of previous texts on the same subject. In practice, however, Skinner also refers to other contexts as a guide to interpretation: the biographical context, the context of the author's work as a whole and the context of reception. Since different parts of a text may best be illuminated with reference to different contexts, I therefore argue that only a multi-contextualist approach can do justice to the text as a whole, avoiding the reductivism inherent in mono-contextualist approaches.

proceedings of which were published in *Perspectives: revue de l'Université hébraïque de Jérusalem* 5 (1998); 'Camus et le rêve méditerranéen: de l'Algérie à la Grèce' (Marseille, 2003); 'Les valeurs méditerranéennes dans l'œuvre d'Albert Camus' (Algiers, 2003); 'Albert Camus : Oran, l'Algérie, la Méditerranée' (Oran, 2005) and 'Albert Camus, précurseur: Méditerranée d'hier et d'aujourd'hui' (University of Madison-Wisconsin, 2006), the basis for a collection of the same name edited by Alek Baylee Toumi (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

Chapter 2 consists of an annotated translation of ‘La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne’, while in Chapter 3, I examine the two main existing approaches to interpreting the lecture, humanist and postcolonial. At the level of an immanent reading, both approaches illuminate various aspects of the text and indeed both can be taken further than hitherto. Ultimately, however, neither is satisfactory. Whereas the humanist approach fails to take account of the lecture’s Mediterranean particularism and the colonial context in which it was written, the crude contextualist version of the postcolonial approach glosses over Camus’s positive emphasis on the Mediterranean as the meeting-point of East and West, which contradicts the view that the lecture expresses a purely Eurocentric, colonialist perspective. At a more sophisticated level, postcolonial critics have placed Camus’s lecture in the context of French literary and paraliterary discourses on colonial Algeria, seeing it as a manifesto for the utopian Mediterraneanism of the so-called *École d’Alger* (‘Algiers School’), centred round Camus and Gabriel Audisio. This reading, however, fails to take account of the text’s status as an inaugural lecture for the *Maison de la culture* in Algiers and of Camus’s stance on the colonial issues that the text is alleged to evade.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the humanist discursive contextualisation of the lecture in terms of French discourses on the Mediterranean. From this perspective, the lecture is seen as part of a tradition of discourse, going back to the Saint-Simonians of the 1830s, which promoted an idealistic vision of the Mediterranean as the meeting-point of East and West. From a postcolonial viewpoint, however, French discourses on the Mediterranean from Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt to the end of the Algerian War were inextricably bound up with French colonialism in North Africa, a viewpoint which is confirmed by an investigation of the tradition in question.

Chapter 5 examines contemporary writings on the Mediterranean by the most important influence on Camus’s lecture, Gabriel Audisio. A study of articles on the subject that Audisio wrote between the two volumes of essays published as *Jeunesse de la Méditerranée* (‘Youth of the Mediterranean’) reveals the polemical context(s) in which they were written and identifies the manifesto on the Ethiopian war which Camus attacks in his lecture as Henri Massis’s ‘Pour la défense de l’Occident’ (‘For the Defence of the West’). Although a close examination of Audisio’s writings

confirms the similarities between the views of Camus and Audisio, it also shows significant differences between them.

In Chapter 6, I argue that the beginning and end of Camus's lecture in particular are polemical responses to some of the central tenets of Maurrassian ideology and to Massis's 'Pour la défense de l'Occident' respectively. Massis's manifesto itself is discussed in the context of an interwar French debate in which left- and right-wing intellectuals clashed over their attempts to appropriate concepts such as 'culture', 'intelligence' and 'mind' for their respective political causes – concepts that Camus similarly tries to reappropriate from the right in the final section of his lecture.

Chapter 7 identifies a further, overlapping debate on the relationship between East and West as part of the argumentative context for Massis's manifesto and ultimately Camus's lecture. Massis's manifesto took its title from a book that he had published in 1927 as a contribution to this debate, which reached its high point with a special double issue of the periodical *Les Cahiers du Mois* entitled *Les Appels de l'Orient* ('The Calls of the East'). This title was itself borrowed from an earlier article by Camus's mentor Jean Grenier, while other contributors to the debate included Audisio and André Malraux, a hero-figure for Camus in his youth. The importance of this debate as a context for Camus's lecture is confirmed by its references to the relationship between East and West, and specifically to India, where his remarks echo Grenier's writings on the subject.

In Chapter 8, I place Camus's lecture in its immediate Algerian political context. Although he was expelled soon after, Camus was still a member of the Communist party at the time, and the *Maison de la culture* that his lecture inaugurated was a Popular Front organization. In attacking the doctrine of Latinity in what was essentially an anti-fascist cultural-political polemic, Camus was indirectly taking issue with the exploitation of this notion by European Algerian political groups sympathetic to fascism. Although the lecture makes no reference to colonialism, the *Maison de la culture* that it inaugurated adopted a pro-Muslim stance that extended to supporting equal rights for the indigenous population, as shown by a manifesto in favour of the reformist Viollette Bill that was published in the second issue of its monthly newsletter.

Chapter 9 situates Camus's lecture in the context of his earlier life and intellectual development. I begin with a critique of a biographical contextualization that interprets the lecture in terms of Camus's eventual expulsion from the Communist party, showing that the passages it discusses can best be understood in relation to other writings by Camus. I then examine the impact of Camus's family background on the attitudes he expresses in the lecture, specifically his rejection of jingoistic rhetoric and his attitude towards intelligence, the development of which is explored through a selection of his early writings. The influence of Nietzsche, Grenier and (possibly) Bakunin on the lecture is also investigated.

Chapter 10 looks at the legacy of Camus's lecture in his later work. After discussing the editorial that Camus wrote for the first issue of *Rivages* ('Shores'), a review of Mediterranean culture, I focus on two important aspects of his Mediterraneanism that continued to shape his thinking in later life. First, I examine how the lecture's Mediterranean particularism – its pro-Mediterranean and anti-Nordic bias – is also reflected in 'La pensée de midi' ('Noonday Thought'), the final part of Camus's historico-politico-philosophical essay *L'Homme révolté* (Eng. tr. *The Rebel*, literally 'Man in Revolt'). Second, I investigate how, during the Algerian War, Camus both retained and modified his view of the Mediterranean, and North Africa in particular, as the meeting-point (*confluent*) of East and West.

On the face of it, 'The New Mediterranean Culture' may seem a slight text, and the degree of contextualization it receives here disproportionate to its length and its lowly status in the canon of Camus's writings. This study will show, however, not only that the lecture is a seminal text in Camus's development, but also that it is in large part constituted by – to borrow Camus's own metaphor – a confluence of discourses and debates, which need to be reconstructed if the text, its meaning and its broader significance are to be properly understood. That these discourses and debates are of considerable interest in themselves is another reason why 'The New Mediterranean Culture' is such a fascinating and rewarding text to study.

Towards a Multi-Contextualist Approach

The Choice of a Methodology

Contrary to what one might expect from its title,¹ Camus's lecture on 'The New Mediterranean Culture' demands to be read, not as a polite talk on contemporary artistic or social trends, but as a highly charged piece of political rhetoric. From the outset, Camus emphasizes that he is speaking on behalf of a group of left-wing intellectuals against those, such as Maurras, he attacks as right-wing doctrinaires. And in his subsequent references to Hitler, Mussolini, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War, he makes it clear that he is speaking out specifically against fascism and in favour of what he calls a 'Mediterranean collectivism', concluding by affirming the possibility of a new Mediterranean culture that will be compatible with the social ideal he shares with his comrades.

Given Camus's self-identification as an intellectual, his explicit references to the historical context in which he is speaking and the overtly political nature of his speech, 'The New Mediterranean Culture' would seem well suited to the approach developed by Quentin Skinner, the pre-eminent theorist and practitioner of intellectual history in the political sphere (in the English-speaking world at least). Together with J.G.A. Pocock, Skinner is the leading figure in the so-called 'Cambridge School' of intellectual historians. His major publications, which have been widely

1 As noted in my introduction to Chapter 2, Camus's lecture was printed under the heading 'La culture indigène' ('Native Culture'). See Chapter 8 for a discussion of the significance of this.

translated, include: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*,² a two-volume study that established his international reputation; monographs on Machiavelli, Hobbes and pre-nineteenth-century conceptions of liberty; and, most recently, the essays – on methodology, republicanism and the political thought of Hobbes, respectively – collected in the three volumes of *Visions of Politics*.³ Skinner is also the co-editor of two important series published by Cambridge University Press: *Ideas in Context*, of which over seventy volumes have appeared so far, and *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, whose more than a hundred volumes to date seek to offer an outline of the entire evolution of political thought in the West.

As Pocock noted in a 2004 review of *Visions of Politics*, the work done by the Cambridge School has been mainly concerned with the history of political thought between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in the English-speaking world (the thought of the Italian Renaissance is a notable exception). Assuming that it remains the case, as Pocock puts it, that '[a] Skinnerian approach to the modern and the postmodern has not yet been tried',⁴ applying this approach to a twentieth-century French-language text will therefore provide an opportunity to test its broader validity. For an account of Skinner's methodology, I shall refer to both his theoretical writings and his historical studies.⁵ Rather than repeating Skinner's detailed theoretical justifications of his approach, however, which draw primarily on the post-analytic Anglo-American philosophy of language, I shall focus on its fundamental principles and practical application. I shall also argue that in certain respects, it should be refined and supplemented

2 Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

3 *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

4 J.G.A. Pocock, 'Quentin Skinner: the History of Politics and the Politics of History (2004)', *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 123–42 (p. 141).

5 A selection of Skinner's original methodological essays, together with 'A Reply to My Critics', was published in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988). Substantially revised versions appear in *Visions of Politics*, I: *Regarding Method*. Where appropriate, subsequent references to these editions will be abbreviated to *M&C* and *RM* respectively.

with the complementary approaches of Pocock and the German school of *Begriffsgeschichte* or conceptual history associated with the late Reinhart Koselleck. First, however, I shall give a brief account of the emergence of the Cambridge School.

The Origins of the Cambridge School

The origins of the Cambridge School can be traced back to the pioneering editorial work of the historian Peter Laslett.⁶ In 1949 and 1960 respectively, Laslett produced authoritative editions of two key seventeenth-century political texts: *Patriarcha* by Sir Robert Filmer and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, in which, as Laslett emphasized in his introduction, Locke made Filmer's work his main polemical target.⁷ What Laslett demonstrated was that both works had been written significantly earlier than had previously been supposed. *Patriarcha* was first published by a group of activists in 1679, together with Filmer's other political works, which had originally appeared between 1648 and his death in 1652. Laslett, however, argued persuasively that what was then the only known manuscript of *Patriarcha* dated from between 1635 and 1642 – between six and seventeen years before the publication of Filmer's other political writings.⁸ This implied a corresponding broadening in the gap between, on the one hand, the context in which *Patriarcha* had originally been written and to

6 See Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 14–15.

7 Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1949); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

8 The rediscovery of an earlier and significantly different manuscript version of *Patriarcha* subsequently led Richard Tuck to conclude that Filmer's work can be dated even earlier, to between 1628 and 1631. See 'A New Date for Filmer's *Patriarcha*', *The Historical Journal* 29: 1 (1986), 183–86.

which it referred, and on the other, the context in which it was published and read, most notably by Locke. Similarly, Laslett showed that although Locke's *Two Treatises* were published – anonymously – after the English Revolution of 1688, they had in fact been written some years before it, in about 1681. This meant that Locke's treatises, far from being a retrospective justification of the events of 1688 – as he had claimed in his Preface – were in effect written as a call *for* revolution: they were not so much works of political theory or philosophy, in other words, as political acts. In its own way, the effect of Laslett's scholarly editorial work was equally revolutionary, forcing historians to consider not only *Patriarcha* and the *Two Treatises*, but the whole of seventeenth-century English political thought in a radically different light.

Both Pocock and Skinner have acknowledged Laslett's seminal influence on their different, but complementary approaches to intellectual history.⁹ In his 2004 review of *Visions of Politics*, Pocock gave his own account of the emergence of the Cambridge School. He stated that his own research in the wake of Laslett's edition of Filmer's political writings led him to conclude that the republication of these writings in 1679 had given rise to two different debates in two different fields: one in the field of political theory, to which Locke's *Two Treatises* was a contribution, and another, equally political in its nature, but conducted in the field of English history, in which Locke did not participate.¹⁰ In turn, this led Pocock to postulate the existence of a plurality of 'languages' of political thought, by which he means not national languages, but what are nowadays more commonly known as discourses. Thus Pocock has stated that in his usage – and, he claims, in that of Skinner and others: 'a language or discourse is [...] a

9 Laslett also influenced a third important figure in the original Cambridge School, John Dunn, whose postgraduate research on Locke was supervised by Laslett. See Dunn's *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

10 Pocock, 'Quentin Skinner', *Political Thought and History*, pp. 126–27. It was this latter debate that Pocock studied in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent book *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

complex structure comprising a vocabulary; a grammar; a rhetoric; and a set of usages, assumptions and implications existing together in time and employable by a semi-specific community of language-users for purposes political, interested in and extending sometimes as far as the articulation of a world-view or ideology.¹¹ According to Pocock, although a 'language' in this sense can exist by itself, 'more commonly, a number of such languages exist concurrently, in confrontation, contestation, and interaction with one another'. He has also emphasized that a single complex text may be not only written, but also read in 'a diversity of languages'.¹² ('The notion of reading a text in a 'language' is perhaps best exemplified by the variety of theoretical approaches – deconstructionist, feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic and so on – that academic critics apply, sometimes in combination, to literary works.)

For Pocock, then, Laslett's editorial work on Filmer and Locke led to a way of writing history that was both essentially pluralistic and focused on the reception, rather than the production of works. The historian, in Pocock's view, was 'less an interpreter than an archaeologist of interpretations performed by others'.¹³ This Laslett-inspired approach, Pocock wrote, had two characteristic emphases: 'first, on the variety of idioms or "languages" [...] in which political argument might be conducted [...] and second, on the participants in political argument as historical actors, responding to one another in a diversity of linguistic and other political and

11 J.G.A. Pocock, 'Concepts and Discourses: A Difference in Culture? Comment on a Paper by Melvin Richter', in Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter, eds, *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996), pp. 47–58 (p. 47).

12 'The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'Historien*: Some Considerations on Practice (1987)', *Political Thought and History*, pp. 87–105 (p. 95).

13 'The Reconstruction of Discourse: Towards the Historiography of Political Thought (1981)', *Political Thought and History*, pp. 67–86 (p. 83). The term 'archaeology', it should be noted, is associated with the early approach of Michel Foucault. See *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), translated as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

historical contexts [...].¹⁴ This second emphasis was exemplified in Pocock's best-known work, *The Machiavellian Moment*,¹⁵ in which he studied the revival of the 'language' of classical republicanism, first by Machiavelli and a number of his Italian Renaissance contemporaries, then by James Harrington and his followers in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England and finally by the Founding Fathers of the United States. Pocock showed in this way how one 'language' had been appropriated in three very different socio-historical contexts, contexts which nevertheless shared a certain structural similarity (the 'moment' of the title).

If Pocock drew much of his initial inspiration from Laslett's edition of Filmer in particular, Skinner was stimulated to adopt a rather different approach by Laslett's edition of Locke's *Two Treatises*.¹⁶ In his introduction, Laslett made clear that his aim was 'to establish Locke's text as he wanted it read, to fix it in its historical context, Locke's own context, and to demonstrate this connection of what he thought and wrote with the Locke of historical influence'.¹⁷ But whereas Pocock, as we have seen, is interested in the question of historical influence in the sense of the different ways in which a political discourse has been appropriated, Skinner has been consistently suspicious of the very notion of influence.¹⁸ And although Skinner once wrote that '[t]he historian primarily studies what Pocock calls "languages" of discourse', he immediately went on to recall his own 'stated aim of recovering what individual writers may have intended or meant' (*M&C*, 266–67). In this respect, as he has acknowledged, he

14 'Introduction: The State of the Art', *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1–34 (pp. 2–3).

15 *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

16 Skinner has also acknowledged the influence of – among others, notably R.G. Collingwood – Pocock himself. As Skinner puts it: 'One way of describing my original essays would be to say that I merely tried to identify and restate in more abstract terms the assumptions on which Pocock's and especially Laslett's scholarship seemed to me to be based' ('A Reply to My Critics', *M&C*, p. 233).

17 Laslett, 'Introduction', in Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 4.

18 See 'The Limits of Historical Explanations', *Philosophy* 41 (1966), 199–215 and *RM*, 75–76.

is indebted to Laslett's introduction to the *Two Treatises* in two ways: 'First for [Laslett's] insistence that Locke was basically replying to Filmer, a claim that served to highlight what Locke was *doing* in the *Two Treatises*. Second, for the consequential emphasis on the specific and local character of Locke's arguments, and on the need to undertake a detailed study of their intellectual context in order to explain their distinctive emphases and shape.'¹⁹ For Skinner, then, the importance of Laslett's edition of Locke was to underline that, rather than being studied in isolation, individual political texts needed to be seen as responding to other texts in the context of debates about contemporary political issues.

The Choice of Skinner's Approach and the Question of Intention

Although the present study will retain Pocock's resolutely pluralist perspective, there are three reasons why I will broadly follow Skinner's approach rather than Pocock's. First, and most obviously, although I shall be examining the role of various discourses in both Camus's lecture and its subsequent critical reception, the primary focus of this study is a single text. The second reason has to do with the methodological priority of textual interpretation over a reception-history approach such as Pocock's. For although a text only acquires meaning in the minds of its readers (beginning with its author), those readers do not approach the text as a series of blank pages on to which they can project whatever meanings they please, but as embodying an intentional act of communication by another human being (however they may subsequently interpret it).

Conversely, of course, the minds of readers are not blank slates on which authors inscribe their intended meaning or meanings: different readers approach texts with a whole host of different presuppositions, ranging

19 *M&C*, 327, note 12.

from expectations regarding the text, its genre and its author to fully blown theories ('languages' in Pocock's sense). In practice, however, even historians of reception give priority to 'author meaning' and authorial intentions – which, it should be emphasized, are always inferred and imputed, and never simply given (assuming they can be relied upon, even explicit statements of intention by authors need themselves to be interpreted and contextualized). This is because, as Martyn P. Thompson has pointed out, the sources that historians of reception study 'are *themselves* texts [...] which have to be decoded in terms of *their* authors' (the recipients') intended meanings' (my emphasis).²⁰ There is no ontological difference, in other words, between the 'primary' text and the 'secondary' texts that respond to it and constitute the data for reception-historians (whose own responses to these 'secondary' texts take the form of further texts that are themselves historically situated). The third reason is related to the second and has to do specifically with Pocock's focus on discourses. From a historical viewpoint, Pocock rightly stresses the logical priority of discourses over texts: as he points out, the 'language' an author employs 'is already in use'.²¹ From a methodological viewpoint, however, the order of priority is reversed: as the very title of Pocock's article 'The Reconstruction of Discourse' implies, the discourses which Pocock studies have to be reconstructed *from* texts.

Some forty years ago, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault famously announced the 'death of the author'.²² In practice, however, everyone who studies texts, and particularly historical texts, tacitly acknowledges the primacy of the author in at least one respect, insofar as they base their

20 Martyn P. Thompson, 'Reception Theory and the Interpretation of Historical Meaning', *History and Theory* 32: 3 (1993), 248–72 (p. 257).

21 Pocock, 'Introduction', *Virtue, Commerce and History*, p. 6.

22 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968), in *Image–Music–Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–48; Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?' (1969), in Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141–60. See Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), which provides an invaluable corrective to over-literal Anglo-American interpretations of the pronouncements of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida on the subject.

interpretations on what they believe to be reliable editions and – in the case of foreign-language texts – reliable translations of the works they study. ‘Reliable’ here can only mean ‘in conformity with the author’s intentions’ – or rather what, on the best available evidence, are presumed to be the author’s intentions. A good example here is George Orwell’s *1984*. As Peter Davison points out in a note to the 1989 Penguin edition of the novel, there was a serious error in the 1951 printing of the Secker & Warburg text that was repeated in all subsequent editions. The ‘5’ in the famous formula ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ at the end of the novel dropped out of the printer’s forme, giving the false impression that Winston has not submitted entirely to Big Brother – an impression that clearly affected interpretations of the novel as a whole for over forty years.²³ Similar considerations apply to translations, a fact that monoglot Anglo-American scholars whose interpretations are based on English-language renderings of primary or theoretical texts would do well to bear in mind.²⁴ Inaccurate translations can sometimes have far-reaching effects: Jeremy Bentham’s highly influential utilitarian principle of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’, for example, was based on a faulty rendering of the Italian jurist Cesaria Beccaria’s phrase *la massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero*, or ‘the greatest happiness *shared* among the greatest number’ – a very different proposition.²⁵

If every interpretation of a text is based on the implicit assumption that the text faithfully reflects its author’s intentions, however, it would be futile to insist that every interpreter should restrict themselves to constructing persuasive hypotheses as to what those intentions were. Once an author has published a text, it becomes public property and can be appropriated

23 Peter Davison, ‘A Note on the Text’, in George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. xx. The ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ formula in question appears on p. 303.

24 For a study of how the reception of one of Camus’s best-known works was and may have been affected by the way it was translated, see Konrad Bieber, ‘*Traduttore, traditore*. La réception problématique de *L’Homme révolté* aux États-Unis’, *AC19*, pp. 143–48.

25 See Robert Shackleton, ‘The Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number: the History of Bentham’s Phrase’, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 90 (1972), 1461–82. I owe this example to Terry Hopton.

by its readers for their own purposes: as Pocock reminds us, a text can be (re)interpreted in a variety of contexts and reinscribed in a variety of discourses.²⁶ It is these diverse appropriations that are studied by historians of reception. By contrast, the approach of the historically minded interpreter of texts as products is to relocate them in the contexts, discursive and otherwise, in which their authors wrote them. It is a question, as Skinner puts it, of ‘seeing things their way’ – or at least attempting to do so.

‘Seeing Things Their Way’: The Need for a Properly Historical Approach

In the general preface to *Visions of Politics*, Skinner gives the following outline of his approach:

to write the history of ideas in a properly historical style, we need to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts and frameworks of discourse as enable us to recognise what their authors were *doing* in writing them. [...] My aspiration is not of course to perform the impossible task of getting inside the heads of long-dead thinkers; it is simply to use the techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way. (*RM*, vii)

From a viewpoint that can be regarded as either radically sceptical or simply realistic, it can of course be objected that Skinner can never know for certain when or whether he has achieved this aim. Although he acknowledges that it is impossible to ‘get inside the heads’ of long-dead thinkers, his stated aspiration – ‘to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way’ – might seem

26 As Brian Rosebury has argued, the authors of some kinds of literary work in particular take this fact into account when writing, deliberately designing their works to be self-sufficient and open to various interpretations (‘Irrecoverable Intentions and Literary Interpretation’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (1997), 15–27 (pp. 26–27)).

to require precisely this. Equally, however, we can never be certain that we have *not* managed to understand the thinkers of the past more or less on their own terms: in practice, as we do in our dealings with other people in everyday life, we have to rely on inference.

By the very nature of things, then, what Skinner is doing is not 'recovering' the actual beliefs, concepts and distinctions of the thinkers he studies, but rather – and in the full sense of the word – *reconstructing* them, working on the assumption that the best evidence for this will be provided by situating the texts he studies in their intellectual and discursive contexts. The results may be more or less persuasive, but inevitably they will only be an interpretation, a construction placed on the texts in question. As Skinner himself observes: 'Even our most confident ascriptions of intentionality are nothing more than inferences from the best evidence available to us, and as such are defeasible at any time' (*RM*, 121). In this respect, the position in which Skinner finds himself is no different from any other historian or any other interpreter of historical texts. By giving the introduction to *Regarding Method* the subtitle 'Seeing Things Their Way', however, Skinner makes clear that his whole approach is based on the rejection of two commonly held beliefs. First, the belief that it is impossible to (metaphorically) see things the way people in the past saw them – something, as we have seen, that cannot be proved either way – and second that even if this were possible, it should not be the aim (or one of the aims) of the historian to try to do so.²⁷ Although Skinner is aware, in other words, that anachronism is an occupational hazard for historians, he firmly rejects the belief that it is either unavoidable or unimportant: on the contrary, Skinner regards the avoidance of anachronism as one of the historian's prime duties.

27 There is an obvious parallel here with the literary-critical notion of the 'intentional fallacy', according to which, as the 'New Critics' Wimsatt and Beardsley argued in a famous 1946 article, 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable' as a guide to either evaluating or interpreting a literary text. See W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', in David Newton-De Molina, ed., *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp. 1–13 (p. 1). For Skinner's discussion of this and related issues, see 'Motives, Intentions and Interpretation', *RM*, 90–102.

The importance of this point may best be brought out by substituting a cultural for a historical perspective, recalling the famous opening line of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' What Skinner is attacking is the historical equivalent of the belief that it is impossible to see things the way people in another culture see them, and that even if this were possible, it would not be desirable to do so. For a historian to embrace anachronism, in other words, would be the equivalent of an anthropologist embracing ethnocentrism or of a professional Orientalist embracing 'Orientalism', in the pejorative sense that Edward Said uses the term.²⁸ For if we do not even *try* to 'see things their way', we will inevitably be restricted to seeing things *our* way, even as we acknowledge that ours is not the only way of seeing. (How could we know this if we cannot in fact get outside our own heads?) It is notable that, as Kari Palonen has pointed out, Skinner himself has explicitly justified a historicist approach in quasi-anthropological terms: 'The investigation of alien systems of belief provides us with an irreplaceable means of standing back from our own prevailing assumptions and structures of thought [...] [S]uch investigations [...] enable us to recognize that our own descriptions and conceptualizations are in no way uniquely privileged.'²⁹ A historicist approach, in other words, offers us a way out of what would otherwise be a perverse form of solipsism. To pursue the analogy suggested earlier, it is like learning the language of a country we are visiting, rather than obstinately persisting in speaking our own.

28 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1978]).

29 Skinner, 'A Reply to My Critics', *M&C*, p. 286, quoted by Palonen, *Quentin Skinner*, p. 26. See also *RM*, p. 125.

Skinner's Approach

I shall now examine Skinner's approach more closely. The first point that needs to be made here is that Skinner's practice often departs from his theoretical pronouncements, many of which were originally made in a polemical context. In the original version of his seminal 1969 article 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas',³⁰ for example, Skinner mounted a scathing attack on orthodox approaches to the history of ideas, accusing them of imposing a false coherence on their subject-matter, whether they focused on ideas in themselves or the thought of individual thinkers. It was a mistake, Skinner concluded, 'even to try either to write intellectual biographies concentrating on the works of a given writer, or to write histories of ideas tracing the morphology of a given concept over time' (*M&C*, 63). In 1981, however, Skinner published *Machiavelli*, which took the form of an introductory intellectual biography, and in 1998, *Liberty before Liberalism*, which traced the history of different conceptions of liberty in the early modern period.³¹

The two broad approaches that Skinner attacked in 'Meaning and Understanding' were textualism (the view that it was sufficient to study the text itself to understand its meaning) and a crude 'contextualism' (the view that the meaning of the text was determined by external factors). Although he conceded that a knowledge of the social context of texts was essential, Skinner argued for a third approach, which focused on what he emphatically described as 'the *linguistic* context'. This he defined as 'the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance' (*M&C*, 63–64; cf. *RM*, 87). The key to interpretation was to establish the relationship between the utterance and this broader linguistic context.

30 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8: 1 (1969), 3–53, reprinted in *M&C*, 29–57.

31 *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Once this had been done, a study of 'all the facts' about the social context could be undertaken, with this serving, if necessary, as the ultimate criterion for deciding between incompatible interpretations.

This early and decidedly abstract formulation of Skinner's approach raised the obvious question of how it could be applied in practice. By referring to 'the' linguistic context and using the technical term 'utterance' (which could be taken as referring to anything from a single statement to an entire text), Skinner glossed over the fact that, as Pocock puts it, '[a] complex text may turn out to contain a wide range of "languages" and be interpretable as performing a wide range of acts of utterance.'³² In saying, on the other hand, that we should not only attempt to determine the 'whole range' of communications that make up the linguistic context, but also that we should study 'all the facts' about the social context, Skinner seemed to be setting an impossibly ambitious task, involving nothing less than the reconstruction of the entire linguistic and social universe in which texts were written.³³ What Skinner offered, in short, was an ideal programme rather than a practical methodology.

In *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), Skinner dropped the term 'linguistic context' in favour of what he now called the 'ideological' and 'intellectual' contexts. And however he may have arrived at his interpretations of the individual works he examined, Skinner presented his study in a format that was the exact reverse of the procedure he had outlined in 'Meaning and Understanding'. His starting-point in *The Foundations* was not the relationship between the texts and their linguistic context, but the social context, on the assumption that 'political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate' (Preface, p. xi).

32 Pocock, 'The Reconstruction of Discourse', p. 84.

33 Cf. the conclusion of 'Motives, Intentions and Interpretation': 'We need, in short, to be ready to take as our province nothing less than the whole of what Cornelius Castoriadis has described as the social imaginary, the complete range of the inherited symbols and representations that constitute the subjectivity of an age' (*RM*, 102).

As in 'Meaning and Understanding', however, Skinner rejected crude social contextualism, arguing that the 'intellectual context' of the major texts also needed to be studied: 'the context of earlier writings and inherited assumptions about political society, and of more ephemeral contemporary contributions to social and political thought' (Preface, p. xi). According to Skinner, another factor in determining the ways in which particular questions came to be singled out and discussed was 'the nature and limits of the normative vocabulary available at any given time'. This normative language constituted what Skinner termed the 'ideological context' of the major works – and, by implication, of the other works that helped to make up the intellectual context. Instead, then, of beginning with texts and placing them first in their linguistic context, and then in their social context, Skinner started with the social context, then examined the ideological and intellectual contexts and only then the texts themselves. (To be fair, this apparent inconsistency in Skinner's approach may simply reflect the kind of book he was writing – a history of political thought, rather than a study of an individual thinker or work.)

In 'A Reply to My Critics' (1988, *MC&C* 231–88), Skinner gave a carefully considered restatement of his theoretical and methodological position. The final section of this essay was later adapted and developed for 'Interpretation and the understanding of speech acts', which Skinner describes in the introduction to *Regarding Method* as laying out his approach to interpretation (*RM*, 3). In what he therefore presumably regards as the definitive formulation of this approach to date, Skinner summarizes his case as follows, using the term 'argumentative context' to replace the earlier 'intellectual context':

My contention, in essence, is that we should start by elucidating the meaning, and hence the subject matter of [...] utterances [...] and then turn to the argumentative context [...] to determine how exactly [Skinner presumably means 'exactly how'] they connect with, or relate to, other utterances concerned with the same subject-matter. If we succeed in identifying this context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what it was that the speaker or writer [...] was doing in saying what he or she said. (*RM*, 116)

Two preliminary observations can be made here. First, Skinner abandons the order of procedure he used in *The Foundations* and reverts to that outlined in 'Meaning and Understanding', beginning with the text (or utterance) rather than its context. Second, Skinner's reference to 'the' meaning and subject matter of utterances and 'the' argumentative context seems, once again, to foreclose the possibility raised by Pocock: that complex texts may contain a wide range of utterances and that, as a result, they may have not only many meanings, but also more than one subject matter, and be taking part in more than one argument. Skinner himself appears to acknowledge this point later. Using the terminology of J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts,³⁴ he talks about having encouraged a misconception by often having often spoken, 'grammatically in the singular, about the recovery of intended illocutionary force' (*RM*, 123) – what, in other words, the writer or speaker was doing in saying what they said. Any text of any complexity, he stresses, 'will contain a myriad of illocutionary acts, and any individual phrase in any such text [...] may even contain more acts than words' (*RM*, 124).

The formulation of Skinner's approach that I have quoted, however, still leaves at least three crucial problems unresolved. First, it glosses over the problem of elucidating meaning at the textual level, in effect reducing this to a question of identifying 'the' subject-matter. Second, it assumes that the meaning of the other texts which make up the argumentative context is unproblematic, for otherwise they too would need to be contextualized, and so on. Third, it emphasizes the argumentative context at the expense of all other contexts, whether social, biographical or otherwise. It is these problems that I shall now address.

34 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1962]).