

International intellectual history and IR: contexts, canons and mediocrities

Abstract

This article reviews contextualist methods in intellectual history, and discusses some of the specific challenges involved in their application to the study of international relations, and hence international intellectual history. While the broad thrust of these developments has been highly positive, the article argues that a distinction between classic and lesser works is a crucial part of the apparatus of the contextualist approach, which poses a problem in IR, where the idea of an established canon of great works has historically been less well developed than in the study of Political Theory or Law. As a result, the move towards contextualist methods of interpretation can force authors to restrict their focus onto a newly-conceived, and somewhat narrow, canon, with a strongly political and legal flavour. The eclectic range of earlier, albeit less methodologically-sophisticated, histories offer considerable resources for defining the scope of new empirical enquiries in international intellectual history, and the article concentrates on early modern journalism as an example of this opportunity.

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The study of the history of international political thought has undergone striking changes since roughly the last decade of the twentieth century. As practiced by scholars either self-identified with or trained within a field known as 'International Relations' (IR), international intellectual history used to be dominated by three main types of approach, which were not mutually exclusive, and which indeed are often found in combination. The field was organised around studies of specific ideas, such as sovereignty or non-intervention;¹ the analysis of certain individual thinkers in search of the wisdoms that they were presumed to offer for us today;² and the construction of traditions of thought, often conceived in terms of debates between realists and utopians, or between realists, rationalists and revolutionists.³ This has changed considerably, not unlike similar methodological developments within intellectual history more broadly conceived.⁴ IR theorists have increasingly embraced new historiographical approaches, such as contextualism or critical disciplinary history.⁵ Moreover, historians working within intellectual history, and new currents such as global history, have begun to develop their own reflections in this field, often breaking new ground both methodologically and substantively.⁶ Notwithstanding important differences of emphasis, there is much in common across these efforts, and one of the principal tasks for the future may well be to encourage greater engagement between scholars self-consciously working within the IR discipline and those from fields of history or law in this new international intellectual history.

To explore some of the opportunities, and potential problems, in this bridge-building exercise, I will begin by looking back to some of the ways in which the contextualist approach to the study of the history of political thought was originally conceived by Quentin Skinner, and ask how the kinds of concerns that animated him relate to the specific circumstances of doing intellectual history within the context of the disciplinary field of IR. At first glance, it might well appear that intellectual history is intellectual history in whatever context one does it, and that IR should present no specific difficulties or challenges of its own. However, I argue that when one brings these two fields together, the fit is not quite so straightforward. It is not simply the case that a new research programme for international intellectual history would be to add contextualism, and stir.

The main focus of my argument is to enquire into the relationship between context and canon, suggesting that the two need each other, at least in the way that Skinner's contextualism was originally framed (but also recognising that his own work has evolved over time). One aspect of this is that a key pay-off from contextualism was that it led to radical new readings of generally accepted 'classical' works; indeed, Skinner was explicit that he saw that as the 'main reason' for going to the immense trouble of digging up all the micro details of the social, political and intellectual environment within which the seclassic texts were written. At the same time, and made less explicit by Skinner himself, I suggest that contextualists may *need* a canon, because the latter provides a kind of skeleton around which the context can be built up. Without a clearly delimited set of classical works which one is endeavouring to situate it is not easy to know where to look for a 'context', or how to know when one has reached its outer limits.⁷ Before one can get started with this kind of

enquiry, one has to know which text one is trying to read in context, and the canon provides a ready-made set of these, conveniently already pre-loaded with disciplinary impact.

One of the oddities about IR as a site for intellectual history, in this particular respect, is that its sense of its own canon has always been less secure than in Political Theory, so the set of classical works that is to be revised through new contextual readings is not nearly as extensive, nor as clearly defined, as it was for historians of political thought such as Skinner. There is a striking eclecticism to the historical texts and authors that formed the basis for early, foundational studies such as Martin Wight's work on international theory.⁸ Over the last couple of decades, even as the methodological sophistication of international intellectual history has come on apace, the range of authors that form the object of our discussion can be seen even as contracting to some extent. While it is hard to assess all the positive and negative consequences of this shift, it at least suggests that there may have been a price to pay for the adoption of an exciting new set of historicist approaches to the study of international thought, and we should be careful not to lose sight of some of the possible riches that are to be found in a trawl through earlier scholarship in this field.

I conclude by reflecting on the relationship between these new currents in international intellectual history and the historical study of international orders. As has been suggested before, there are obvious connections here with constructivism.⁹ Indeed, for many years, going back at least through to the earliest works of the English school, this connection has been recognised. This is an especially important point of connection because disciplinary identity can be important to international intellectual historians. For those

operating as Historians the credentials of this kind of enquiry are fairly easily secured. Scholars working in departments of Politics or International Relations, or even Schools of Social Science face a bar that, if it is not actually higher, is at least placed in a more awkward position. They often find that they must justify themselves to analytical political philosophers (in the history of political thought) or to IR theorists who either adopt an extremely ahistorical perspective, or demand that there must be some contemporary or generalisable pay-off from an historicist enquiry; history for its own sake is seldom tolerated here, and perhaps not entirely without justification. So this raises the question of how the new international intellectual history can contribute to what is perhaps its most obvious point of connection: the historical understanding of the reproduction and transformation of international orders.

The purposes of contextualism

At the beginning of that seminal text, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Quentin Skinner offered three justifications for what he drily acknowledged as his 'somewhat elaborate approach' to the situated reading of texts. The first reason for contextualism was about the role that the history of thought plays in terms of historical enquiry more generally, and specifically what Skinner took to be the 'commonplace' view that 'if we wish to understand earlier societies, we need to recover their different *mentalités* in as broadly sympathetic a fashion as possible.'¹⁰ This could not be done, he argued, if one focussed exclusively on classic texts written by great minds, because they were by definition operating at 'a level of abstraction and intelligence unmatched by any of their contemporaries'; so here the purpose was to use the wider intellectual context of these

works 'to build up a more realistic picture of how political thinking in all its various forms was in fact conducted in earlier periods.'¹¹

Skinner's second reason was to illuminate the connection between theory and practice. The complaint here was that a focus on classic texts – treated in isolation as works of timeless philosophical wisdom – obscured the various ways in which political discourse is both shaped by and an intervention in political and social life more generally. At the beginning of *Foundations*, Skinner talks about this in terms of 'the explanation of political behaviour', which almost makes it appear as if he is intending to treat his analysis of ideas merely as a more nuanced kind of causal variable.¹² However, in both his earliest methodological writings and in the way his own research has developed, this could also be seen as an extended reflection first on the importance of understanding the intentionality of speech acts in the classic texts studied by the historian, but especially in Skinner's later work, the analysis of how innovations in political thought through 'rhetorical redescription' are connected to political change.¹³ Contextualism, then, is one sort of answer to the long-standing concern of both the historian and the social scientist to understand the relationship between structure and agency.

Skinner's third, and for him most important, reason was in some respects more traditionalist, at least in terms of the goals of intellectual history. Studying context is an aid to textual interpretation: 'My main reason...for suggesting that we should focus on the study of ideologies is that this would enable us to return to the classic texts themselves with a clearer prospect of understanding them.'¹⁴ This is perhaps the area in which the influence of Skinner and others working along similar lines (such as J.G.A. Pocock) has been most

keenly and widely felt. As Kipling famously put it, 'What should they know of England, who only England know?'; fewer and fewer intellectual historians believe that we can know Hobbes when we know only Hobbes. Central themes to Skinner's own evolving historical work have been the reinterpretation of classic texts by Machiavelli and Hobbes in light of their wider context.¹⁵ Even those who have been critical of Skinner, such as Mark Bevir, agree that 'historical studies of political theory are flourishing,' and are 'squeezing out studies that mine past texts for jewels of wisdom without bothering with either historical or philosophical defenses of the alleged jewels.'¹⁶

One point that I would like to highlight about Skinner's justifications for contextualism, especially the first and third described above, is their dependence on a pre-supposed contrast between works that are merely parts of some 'ideological' soup that is almost bovine in its lack of reflectivity or self-awareness, and those that deserve the status 'classic texts'. There is a certain irony here, because contextualism is widely understood to have displaced classic texts from their central position, enshrined at the heart of our attention as purveyors of timeless and philosophically profound wisdoms, in favour of the wider study of a myriad of 'lesser works'.¹⁷ Indeed, one can go further to say that there is a genuine tension here with Skinner's first justification for contextualism – to get at different historical *mentalités* – where classic texts are deliberately relegated to a more minor role, since they do not allow us the window into what one can only call the 'common' mind that is offered by less celebrated works on politics, written by those who were presumably unable to elevate themselves to the idiosyncratic genius of a Machiavelli or a Hobbes, and so offer a more authentic representation of the ordinary and everyday. Thus, on the one hand, contextualism is about the classic texts, in the sense that its essence is presented as a

novel method for interpreting them. On the other, it is about shifting attention away from those same texts, in order to work towards the better understanding of a widely shared *mentalité*. This duality is perhaps why much of Skinner's own work since *Foundations* has operated in the intersection between these two focal points, trying to understand how the innovations of the classic texts form a crucial part of the transformation of the wider ideology out of which they emerged, but against which they work to redescribe and so remake the everyday language of politics.

Of course, Skinner's contextualism was a project directed at more traditionally-minded intellectual historians, rather than theorists of international relations or even historians of international political thought. So the question I would like to take up now is how these justifications relate to the situation in the latter fields. It might seem as if this research agenda could simply be transferred straightforwardly to the study of the history of thought about the international, but I believe that there are some important respects in which this is not so straightforward. Moreover, if we are to persuade IR theorists that this 'somewhat elaborate approach' to historical interpretation is worthwhile, rather than indulging fantasies about what Thucydides would say if we were alive today, we need to consider how exactly the purposes of contextualism relate to wider debates in IR theory, rather than relying on the re-interpretation of classic texts as our central task or our opportunity to add value to the research programmes that characterise the field of IR.

Context and canon in IR

My first point here concerns the distinction between 'classic texts' and the 'lesser works' that make up their 'ideological' context. I have argued that Skinner's contextualism begins with and from a reasonably well defined canon of great thinkers and classic works, such that when he talks about the reinterpretation of classic texts, there would be a reasonable shared understanding of what these were. There is nothing especially controversial or innovative about placing Machiavelli or Hobbes at the centre of the enquiry; the novelty lies in how one reads them by situating them in context rather than in glorious isolation. The canon of classics itself is fairly intact and unchanged. Things are not so simple in IR. Indeed, one of the consistent themes in much early writing about the history of international thought was about the lack of any kind of canon here that could be stood alongside that which existed in political theory and philosophy.

Let us take Martin Wight's famous essay 'Why is there no international theory?' as an example. Precisely the opening theme of Wight's provocation is to bemoan the lack of an established canon of thinkers on the model of Political Theory, where the student is directed to classics 'of the stature of Aristotle or Hobbes or Locke or Rousseau.'¹⁸ Wight then refers to a lecture by Alexis de Tocqueville to suggest that the principal alternative for international thought, to the extent that there is one, is most likely to be drawn from speculation on the law of nations, with Grotius and Pufendorf standing in for the perhaps more illustrious political theorists.

In addition to the well-trodden path of international law (which continues to this day as a major source of canonical inspiration for would-be contextualists in IR¹⁹), Wight suggests four further place where relevant work might be found by someone interested in

the history of international theory. These are: 'irenists', or authors of speculative proposals for new peace arrangements; 'Machiavellians', or those who expound the doctrine of *raison d'état*; scattered reflections from political philosophers, philosophers and historians; and memoirs, etc., of diplomats and statesmen. Considered as 'sources' of international thought this is rather a haphazard bunch. It is clear that they are not precisely distinguished from one another, and nor are they exactly comparable, in the way that one might expect from Wight's alternative notion of a set of distinct 'traditions' of thought. Wight mentions some thinkers (e.g. Ranke) in more than one category, and the various '*paregra*' of philosophers etc. naturally lacks the focus of the more doctrinally-defined 'Machiavellians'. Moreover, Wight's main point in introducing these various sources of international thought is to lament their obscurity and doubtful intellectual quality: 'international theory, or what there is of it, is scattered, unsystematic, and mostly inaccessible to the layman. Moreover, it is largely repellent and intractable in form.'²⁰ Specifically in reference to the 'Machiavellians', Wight approvingly quotes their 'great interpreter' Friedrich Meinecke, to the effect that we have 'real catacombs of forgotten literature here by mediocrities'.²¹

Despite Wight's dismissive attitude it is instructive to review the list of names that he attaches to these five sources of international thought, since they provide a kind of starting-point for understanding how he saw the scope of a potential landscape for an intellectual history of the field. Altogether throughout the essay Wight mentions 46 different authors, the bulk of whom are simply part of lists associated with each of the various sources. For the irenists, Wight mentions 'Erasmus, Sully, Campanella, Cruce, Penn, the Abbé de Saint Pierre, and Pierre-André Gargaz', and brusquely dismisses them as 'curiosities of political literature'. As to the Machiavellians, he acknowledges that there are

a couple of names here made famous by achievements in other fields of intellectual or practical endeavour: Frederick the Great, Hegel, Ranke and Treitschke. But he is dismissive of the rest: 'Botero, Boccacini, Henri de Rohan, Gabriel Naudé, Courtilz de Sandras and Rousset: can we see in them forgotten or potential classics?'. Of course, with the third group the point is less about the obscurity of the authors as the marginal character of the texts in which they deal with international questions. It is still not uninteresting that the ones he chooses to mention are Hume, Rousseau, Burke, Bentham, Ranke (again) and Mill; not exactly the obvious choices for a canon of IR theory, before Wight rounds up with an even less familiar set of names in Bolingbroke, Mably and Gentz. The statesmen and diplomats that Wight singles out for comment are Canning, Bismarck and Salisbury, each of whom is given as an exemplar for the writing of, respectively, dispatches, memoirs and essays. Several others are then discussed at various points in the text as Wight tries to expand on what the central themes of international thought might be, and especially the problems of a progressivist vision. This includes well-known figures such as Hobbes, Kant, Vattel and Vitoria, but also less obvious ones such as Edward Gibbon, Johann Jakob Moser and Palmerston. The names invoked in Wight's lectures on *International Theory* are similarly eclectic, and in other classical works from this early period in the development of IR one can find an equally wide range, including a mix of familiar and unfamiliar figures.²² Even in Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society*, where the move to Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian traditions certainly signals a sharper focus for understanding international intellectual history, his discussion of 'theorists of the period' includes a number of authors – for instance, Ancillon, Heeren and Gladstone – who do not seem exactly canonical.²³

There is a sense in which Wight's picture of international theory is all context and no canon. The field is stocked richly with the 'lesser works' by 'mediocrities' that are the normal fodder for a contextualist analysis of the ideology and political vocabulary characteristic of a period. But whereas they are supposed, in contextualism proper, to form the backdrop for a magisterial reinterpretation of the superior classics, in IR the unfortunate fact is that the classics are few and far between, if they are present at all. Wight offers Thucydides as his only truly unchallenged great, which is not much help in terms of the blatantly early modern and nineteenth-century stock of authors who inhabit the rest of 'Why is there no international theory?' As Wight makes clear, the frustrating fact is that many of the 'greats' that we would really want to be talking about deal with international questions, concepts and themes in rather marginal ways.

As the discipline has matured, while it has not exactly developed a settled canon, it has nevertheless emphasized some of the sources of international thought more than others. A survey of articles in the *Review of International Studies*, chosen because it has a stronger emphasis on intellectual history than many other leading publications in the field, reveals that Hobbes and Kant are referenced in well over a hundred articles each, while Burke, Grotius, Hegel, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Thucydides appear in about eighty to a hundred each. Beyond them the most frequently mentioned secondary figures are either political thinkers (such as Bentham or J.S. Mill), or lawyers, particularly Pufendorf, Vitoria and Vattel.²⁴ After that, the drop off in references to past thinkers is immense. Some of Wight's statesmen – Bismarck, Salisbury, and so on – are remembered, but seldom in the context of their contributions to the history of international thought. The persistence of progressivist forms of international theory mean that irenists such as the Abbé de Saint

Pierre, Penn and Sully get the odd mention. But some have disappeared almost entirely. Among lawyers, Johann Jakob Moser has dropped out of the conversation; even though to Wight he was the author of 'the first great work of positivist jurisprudence...which came as near to codifying *Realpolitik* as any work of international law can do'.²⁵ The Machiavellians more generally have been particularly poorly served. One looks through the *Review* almost in vain for any hint of Botero, Courtilz de Sandras, Naudé, Rohan and Rousset de Missy.

This is only one journal, of course, and the situation is not quite so bleak if one looks further afield. Martti Koskenniemi, for instance, looks more closely at Mably, Naudé and Rohan, among others; while Jens Bartelson has written extensively on some of the Machiavellians, notably Courtilz de Sandras and Rousset, but also Mably and Rohan as well.²⁶ The expansion of the canon for other periods has also been developed by others in ways that go beyond Bentham, Marx and Mill.²⁷ But these are still relatively isolated examples, and it is telling that in the wider, on-going conversation that is sustained by contributions to highly prominent academic journals over time, the canon appears not only persistent, but to have *narrowed* since the early days when Wight and others were originally trying to construct their surveys of the field. This serves to correct any presumption that the direction in which international intellectual history moves is inevitably onwards and upwards towards an increasingly comprehensive and inclusive understanding. In fact, and despite the efforts of the scholars mentioned above who have sought to expand our understanding of the canon, such as Koskenniemi, Bartelson and Bell,²⁸ the periodical literature suggests that if anything has happened over the last fifty years, it has been a movement away from an originally wide-ranging and eclectic view towards a much more restricted canon that is essentially based on leading figures from the histories of political

and legal thought. The student who is introduced to the history of international theory today is very likely to be presented with a smaller, more familiar, but possibly less interesting, set of key thinkers than those who attended Wight's original lectures at the LSE in the 1950s.

One reason why groups such as Wight's (and Meinecke's) 'Machiavellians' have been relatively poorly served is that the canonical skeleton around which the new contextualism in international intellectual history is fleshed out largely comes from Political Theory and Law, rather than having been created *de novo* by IR scholars themselves. An example of this is the way that the thinkers Wight discusses – particularly the Machiavellians, and early positivist lawyers such as Moser – who were crucial to the development of international thought during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have been pushed aside by figures such as Vattel.²⁹ In a host of recent literature, Vattel has come to be seen as *the* pivotal thinker in the emergence of a new way of conceptualising the law of nations that was capable of embodying both the modern 'Enlightened' understanding of human nature, natural law and its moral implications; and the emergent practice of balance of power and *raison d'état* among sovereign states.³⁰ What is striking about some of this work is that, while extolling the importance of Vattel as a bridge between the philosophical and the more practical dimensions of statecraft, it barely engages Wight's Machiavellians, and virtually neglects his own alternative proposal that it was Moser who was the crucial point of linkage here. Vattel, instead, slots neatly into a discussion that can ultimately be traced back to the grand names of law and political philosophy – notably Hobbes, Pufendorf and Wolff – and which draws a convenient veil over the forgotten 'mediocrities'.

One interesting point here is what an account centred on Vattel misses out. As Devetak himself notes, 'Vattel's *Law of Nations* does not pretend to provide a detailed empirical or historical account of interests in the European states-system.'³¹ Indeed, Vattel himself remarks that, while he aims to cover the general legal principles that govern the making of treaties, he does not concern himself with the substantive content of contemporary treaties for the reason, revealingly enough, that they are matters more for the historian than the jurist. It is precisely Wight's Machiavellians, and his early positivists like Moser, who supply these gaps in the Vattelian scheme. In order to reconstruct that, we need to abandon not only the idea of the canon, but even that the places we should be looking are 'classic' works from the history of political and legal thought, such as Vattel's *Law of Nations*, or Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Instead, as Meinecke and Wight were well aware, our forgotten literatures lie in less impressive genres of writing, but nevertheless important sites where international thought was being practiced.

'Catacombs of forgotten literature by mediocrities'

Consider, for example the most ephemeral of all contributions, alongside and increasingly taking over from the political pamphlet, was the newspaper, gazette or periodical journal. This mode of disseminating both ideas and information flourished across Europe, with its origins in the later sixteenth, but taking off during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³² It embraced the complete range of literary and intellectual interests, but political writing was from the outset a crucial part.³³ Moreover, from the outset this had a distinctively international flavour. The importance of foreign news to the emerging journalism was in part a product of the difficulties of reporting domestic news in view of

government censorship, but it was also driven, as Simon Davies and Puck Fletcher remark, by the fact that 'their readership had a genuine and extensive interest in international events.'³⁴ Within this context, 1618 marks a decisive shift thanks to what Carmen Espejo calls 'the news fever sparked by the start of the Thirty Years' War'.³⁵

The flow of news was to a large degree channelled through centres such as Amsterdam and Hamburg, which occupied (not coincidentally) important brokerage positions within networks of both commerce and printed communications.³⁶ In the case of Dutch sites, this was only partially due to the relatively liberal political climate in the Netherlands, because there (as elsewhere) governments exercised a significant degree of control and were prepared to interfere with printers for political advantage. Equally, if not more, significant factors were the existence of a commercialised print industry – printers and booksellers such as Adrien Moetjens served as entrepreneurs for new forms of political reporting – and particularly after 1865 the growth of the Huguenot diaspora, which further strengthened not only the networks for transmitting news, but also the appetite for information on foreign affairs.

The Netherlands were the base for one of the key journals on contemporary international affairs, *Le mercure historique et politique*, founded by Courtilz de Sandras, and described by Meinecke as 'the first real monthly political review' which introduced an 'epoch-making arrangement of combining political news with independent observations'.³⁷ This journal ran, on and off, for almost a hundred years (it was founded in 1686), and Rousset de Missy, another of Wight's Machiavellians, was one of its eighteenth-century editors. Journals such as *Le mercure historique et politique* were intended for the wide

readership across Europe that were beginning to devour the new periodical literature. It offered an up to date account of the 'present state of Europe', a formulation that was to become commonplace during the eighteenth century. The basic register in which it was written was firmly in line with the tradition of *raison d'état*. Among his numerous other literary interests, including the invention of the Mémoires of a certain Captain d'Artagnan,³⁸ A year before establishing the journal, Courtilz de Sandras had written *Nouveaux interets des Princes de l'Europe*,³⁹ a work that self-consciously drew on Henri de Rohan's earlier *De l'interet des princes et des états de la chrétienté*.⁴⁰

As the periodical literature evolved, so we can see important developments taking place within 'Machiavellian' thought on reason of state. As the above point about Rohan's influence on Courtilz de Sandras indicates, it was certainly not the case that the periodicals were responsible for introducing a new discourse on the interests of states, or on related ideas such as balance of power. Several commentators have noted that these had origins stretching back into the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, expounded by authors such as Slingsby Bethel or James Howell who had picked up ideas from Botero and others, and produced vigorous polemics on the international political issues of the day.⁴¹ Others, perhaps the most famous among whom was Pufendorf, produced more measured surveys of the interests of the various European rulers.⁴² In the latter case, interestingly, the work acquired something of the character of an on-going commentary, since 'For more than half a century, there was a steady stream of new editions and imprints, with Pufendorf's account typically corrected, improved, continued, expanded, or entirely recast by a series of translators, editors and compilers'.⁴³ This captures one of the key shifts as new forms of commercial printing evolved. The movement from pamphlet to periodical was, as Simon

Davies and Puck Fletcher remark, a 'paradigm shift': 'periodicity creates the expectation of more news to come in the future, and it allows for much greater detail as reports are built up slowly and from a variety of perspectives across multiple issues.'⁴⁴ Whereas Pufendorf's study, although amendable, nevertheless provided a set of structural constraints on its subsequent editors, a publication such as *Le mercure* was capable of much more fluid reinterpretation of the changing European scene.

Le mercure itself was effectively reproduced for some time (1690-1706) in England by John Phillips, the poet John Milton's nephew, under the title, *Present State of Europe, or, An Historical and Political Mercury*.⁴⁵ The title anticipates one of the most successful of all the periodical treatments of European affairs, namely John Campbell's *The Present State of Europe*, which first appeared in Robert Dodsley's *The Museum*, but which was subsequently published as a monograph and went through multiple editions.⁴⁶ Campbell himself explicitly drew attention to Rohan, Bethel and Pufendorf as his predecessors, and noted that his own work was conceived on a different plan, namely 'without any Bias in favour of a particular System, or the least view of recommending it to the Favour of any Party'.⁴⁷ He then went on to explain that his own work was largely drawn from the various gazettes current around Europe, which, although imperfect and often coloured in themselves, nevertheless 'are all the Evidence we have.'⁴⁸ As I have previously observed, one of the chief interests of Campbell's work lies in its incorporation of a primitive form of statistical analysis into its analysis of the interests and relative standing of the European powers.⁴⁹ This, of course, was something that readily lent itself to the easily up-datable form of the periodical, culminating in later nineteenth-century productions, such as the *Statesman's Yearbook*.

Conclusion: understanding international orders

All of the above discussion has focussed on the relationship that Skinner identified between contextualism and the interpretation of 'classic texts' in the history of political thought. However, to close these reflections out I think it is helpful to note that not only is IR arguably lacking in a settled canon of such texts to be contextualised, but also this very purpose requires justification within this specific academic field. Historical understanding is of course valuable, but the IR theorist is entitled to ask how the better interpretive insight promised by contextualism helps them in their purposes. A new reading of Machiavelli, Hobbes, or anyone else does not in itself serve this role, unless the wider theoretical implications of that reading can be conveyed. Ironically, the older style of intellectual historical reflection was less vulnerable here, since perennialist interpretations of timeless works fit very neatly indeed with similar perennialist understandings of political problems. Indeed, a certain twist to the mind-set of the strategist perhaps explains the remarkable cult that still seeks to mine Thucydides for insight, especially in the US.⁵⁰

Contextualism, and historicist approaches to intellectual history more generally, have an obvious kin-ship with constructivist approaches to IR theory. This has been noted by intellectual historians as well as IR scholars.⁵¹ Christian Reus-Smit has offered one account of both the points of contact, and the intellectual differences, that may serve as a useful starting-point here. According to Reus-Smit, the broad philosophy of history that constructivists adopt is very close to Skinnerian contextualism, particularly in its understanding of the importance of 'history as a knowable realm of human experience, about the role of ideas in constituting that that experience, and about the appropriate

methods for interpreting the constitutive role of ideas.’⁵² Nevertheless, Reus-Smit notes that the kind of histories that constructivists tend to write don’t look exactly like Skinnerian studies of ideas. Their work has an historical sensibility that Reus-Smit describes as ‘big-history’: it tends more towards the historical sociological than contextualist intellectual history, it works with comparative case studies and macro processes. ‘But in this dance strict fealty to the Skinnerian injunction is compromised; constructivist history frequently explores several ideas in several historical contexts, gaining answers to a set of large-scale questions while sacrificing the kind of “thick” analysis of individual cases that Skinner might recognise.’⁵³

As we saw earlier, Skinner did not completely eschew this larger-scale of historical reflection in his original construction of the purposes of contextualism, most notably in his identification of one of its tasks as fitting into the ‘commonplace’ idea that the historian should concern herself with the sympathetic understanding of different historical *mentalites*. The latter term, with its obvious echo of the *Annales* philosophy of history certainly suggests an opening for ‘big history’, albeit perhaps not a route that has been so fully developed by Skinner or other historians working along similar lines. This may be due to changing historiographical fashions as much as anything else, but it also reflects the sheer difficulty in the construction of a context – or a *mentalite* – from scratch, as it were, and calls attention to the need to have something to contextualise in order to get the enquiry started.

Rather than look to contextualism specifically conceived in terms of Skinnerian methods, it might be easier to get this kind of connection going more at the level of

conceptual history, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, which perhaps offers a looser understanding of the taut linguistic structure that informs Skinnerian contextualism, and hence an easier transition from small to big history, and back again.⁵⁴ It might alternatively follow the ‘practice turn’ and use practitioners – identifiable, and hence limitable, by their professional or quasi-professional competences and credentials – as a way to bridge the gap that can otherwise exist between the lesser works and the classic texts that otherwise structure contextualist historical enquiry.⁵⁵ As I noted earlier, following Mark Bevir, the development of historicist approaches to the study of political thought has certainly not produced any kind of hegemonic method. In fact, Bevir provocatively alleged that contextualist methods were never more than a kind of philosophical facade constructed *ex post* on a fairly standard form of modernist empiricism in intellectual history with roots in pre-Skinnerian scholarship such as the work of Peter Laslett; in some of its contemporary variants even this superficial scaffolding has been sloughed off altogether, resulting in what Bevir describes as ‘anti-methodological empiricism’.⁵⁶

Conceptual history and the history of practices may provide platforms that can be integrated with more detailed, ‘thick’ readings in a Skinnerian sense to produce methodologically eclectic but empirically rich histories of international thought. In this vein, it is important to acknowledge that significant transformations in the linguistic and intellectual structure of international thought are not the exclusive products of ‘classic works’. Neither the various editions of *Le mercure* nor *The Present State of Europe* could be described as classics, but they played extremely important roles in re-shaping the vocabulary through which Europeans conversed about their states-system. I am fully aware that this is by no means the *only* dimension of the history of international thought that

should command our attention, but nor is it one that can simply be ignored. The way into it is precisely *not* to construct a canon for IR that apes those that have grown up over many years in Political Theory and Law; and then to locate its classical works and thinkers, such as Vattel, within a new kind of intellectual context. Indeed, it is instead to return to these very early works on the history of international thought – often unsophisticated, or innocent, of profound methodological and philosophical speculation – but with a surprisingly good set of instincts about the varied, messy, often slightly shabby, sources from which a history of international thought can be derived.

¹ Alan James, *Sovereign Statehood: The Basis of International Society* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966); R.J. Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

² A very traditionally-minded example is Kenneth Thompson, *Fathers of International Thought: The Legacy of Political Theory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); for a somewhat more innovative view, see Ian Clark & Iver Neumann (eds.), *Classical Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

³ Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992); again, variations on this long-standing theme can be seen in David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴ On the rise of historicism, in a wide variety of methodological approaches, see Mark Bevir, 'The Contextual Approach', in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011).

⁵ On these historiographical innovations, see respectively Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁶ Among many others, see David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). For my comments on Armitage in this respect, see 'Where should we look for international thought', *Contemporary Political Thought*.

⁷ I will not go into it in any detail here, but this strikes me as one possible point of difference between Skinnerian contextualism and some other similarly radical approaches, such as the 'conceptual history' associated with Reinhart Koselleck.

⁸ I have made this argument previously – and discussed several specific works from the early history of international thought-- in Edward Keene, *International Political Thought: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

⁹ For instance, Christian Reus-Smit, 'Reading History through Constructivist Eyes', *Millennium* (Vol. 37, No. 2, 2008), pp. 395-414.

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume One, The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹³ The development of Skinner's thought in this regard can be traced through the essays in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume One, Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Skinner, *Foundations*, p. xiii.

¹⁵ Again, this development can be seen in *Visions of Politics*, Volumes Two and Three.

¹⁶ Bevir, 'The Contextual Approach', in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), p. 19.

¹⁷ See, for example, discussions in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Martin Wight, 'Why is there no international theory?', *International Relations* 1960 (Vol. 2, No. 1), p. 35.

¹⁹ For instance, Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Wight, 'Why is there no international theory?', pp. 37-38.

²¹ Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and its Place in Modern History*, trans. Douglas Scott (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 67n.

²² For example, Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; and even Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War*.

²³ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

²⁴ These figures were recovered through digital searches of the *Review* conducted in July 2016. See also my analysis of a wider range of journals, specifically with reference to Thucydides in relation to other classical authors (e.g. Cicero, Herodotus or Tacitus) and modern writers: Keene, 'The Reception of Thucydides in the History of International Relations', in Christine Lee and Neville Morley (eds.), *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

²⁵ Wight, 'Why is there no international theory?', p. 46. A similar judgement can be found in Koskenniemi, 'The Advantage of Treaties', p. 59. See Johann Jakob Moser, *Versuch des neuesten Europäischen Völker-Rechts in Friedens- und Kriegs-Zeiten...* (Frankfurt am Main:

Barrentrap Sohn und Wenner, 1777). See also Koskenniemi, 'International Law and Raison d'Etat: Rethinking the Prehistory of International Law', in Benedict Kingsbury and Benjamin Straumann (eds.), *The Roman Foundations of the Law of Nations: Alberico Gentili and the Justice of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 297-339. It may be worth noting that, as far as I am aware, Moser is not even mentioned in some studies here: for example, Richard Devetak, 'Law of Nations as Reason of State: Diplomacy and the Balance of Power in Vattel's Law of Nations', *Parergon* (Vol. 28, No. 2, 2011), pp. 105-28.

²⁶ Koskenniemi, 'The Advantage of Treaties'; Bartelson, *Genealogy of Sovereignty*. I discuss some of these authors in *International Political Thought: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); 'The Age of Grotius', in David Armstrong (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Law* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 126-40; 'The Naming of Powers', *Cooperation and Conflict* (Vol. 48, 2013), pp. 268-82; 'International Hierarchy and the Modern Practice of Intervention', *Review of International Studies* (Vol. 39, 2013), pp. 1077-90.

²⁷ For instance, Bell, *Victorian Visions*.

²⁸ Some, but by no means all, of Wight's thinkers are discussed in the recent piece by Stella Gervas, 'Balance of Power vs. Perpetual Peace: Paradigms of European Order from Utrecht to Vienna, 1713-1815', *International History Review*, published online Nov 2016. I came to this article very late in the preparation of the present piece; it is more focussed on the English literature, but even then seems to neglect what I would see as key works here, such as John Campbell, *The Present State of Europe* (as discussed below).

²⁹ Another, which might strike a bit closer to home for the present author, would be Grotius.

³⁰ Although the suggestion of this interpretation can be found as far back as Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, for a more recent statement see especially Devetak, 'Law of Nations as Reason of State'. See also, for similar if broader appreciations of Vattel's significance, Vincent Chetail and Peter Haggenmacher, *Vattel's International Law in a XXIst Century Perspective* (London: Martinus Nijhoff, 2011); and Emmanuelle Jouannet, *The Liberal-Welfarist Law of Nations: A History of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For another work that covers Enlightened thought in this area, again with an almost exclusive focus on key political philosophers, see David Bates, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

³¹ Devetak, 'Law of Nations as Reason of State', p. 125.

³² See Brendan Dooley and Sabrina A. Baron (eds.), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001); T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 154-61. For the geographical distribution, see also Stéphane Haffemayer, 'La Gazette en 1683-1685-1689: Analyse d'un système d'information', *Le Temps des Médias* (No. 20, 2013), pp. 32-46. This is one of the key themes of Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991),

³³ Purely from the perspective of international thought, the data presented in Blanning, *Culture of Power*, is unhelpful because it subsumes

³⁴ Simon F. Davies and Puck Fletcher, 'Introduction', in Davies and Fletcher (eds.), *News in Early Modern Europe: Currents and Connections* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 10.

³⁵ Carmen Espejo, 'European Communication Networks in the Early Modern Age', *Media History* (Vol. 17, No. 2, 2011), p. 192.

³⁶ See G. C. Gibbs, 'The Role of the Dutch Republic as the Intellectual Entrepot of Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiednis der Nederlanden* (Vol. 86, 1971), pp. 323-49; Otto Lankhorst, 'Newspapers in the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century', in Dooley and Baron (eds.), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 151-9.

³⁷ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 245.

³⁸ Benjamin Woodbridge, 'Gatien de Courtitz, Sieur du Verger, a Precursor of Lesage', *Modern Language Review* (Vol. 9, No. 4, 1914), pp. 475-92.

³⁹ Cologne, 1685.

⁴⁰ Ed. Christian Lazzeri (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995). Both were followed later by Rousset (again), in his, *Les intérêts presens des puissances de l'Europe*, 4 vols. (The Hague, 1733).

⁴¹ Herbert Butterfield, 'Balance of Power', in Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays on the Theory of International Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966); Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴² Samuel Pufendorf, *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe*, trans. Jodocus Crull, ed. Michael Seidler (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2013).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Appendix I, p. 606.

⁴⁴ Davies and Fletcher, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁴⁵ Gordon Campbell, 'Phillops, John (1631-1706?)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁶ John Campbell, *The Present State of Europe, Explaining the Interests, Connections, Political and Commercial Views of its Several Powers*, Third Edition (London: Longman and Hitch, 1752). On Dodsley, see Harry Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley: Creating the New Age of Print* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 110; on *The Museum*, see James E. Tierney, 'The Museum, the "Super-Excellent Magazine"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* (Vol. 13, No. 3, 1973), pp. 503-15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Keene, 'The Naming of Powers'.

⁵⁰ For a recent illustration, see Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?', *The Atlantic*, September 2015. I am indebted to David Armitage for this example.

⁵¹ For example, Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*.

⁵² Reus-Smit, 'Reading History through Constructivist Eyes', p. 400.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁵⁴ For an example in IR scholarship, I would particularly note the fascinating and very rich work of Evgeny Roshchin, 'The Concept of Friendship: From Princes to States', *European Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 12, No. 4, 2006), pp. 599-624; and '(Un)Natural and Contractual International Society', *European Journal of Internatonal Relations* (Vol. 19, No. 2, 2011), pp. 257-79. I attempted something more along these lines in 'The Naming of Powers', *Cooperation and Conflict* (Vol. 48, No. 2, 2013), pp. 268-82.

⁵⁵ I discuss this in 'Where should we look for modern international thought?', and for a very sustained illustration of the argument, see Julia Costa Lopez, *The Legal Ordering of the*

Medieval International, Oxford, D.Phil thesis, 2016. See also Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International Practices', *International Theory* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2011), pp. 1-36.

⁵⁶ The exemplar Bevir gives of this empiricism is Brian Young, 'The Tyranny of the Definite Article: Some Thoughts on the Art of Intellectual History', *History of European Ideas* (Vol. 28, Nos. 1-2, 2002), pp. 101-17; see also the symposium there on Bevir's own work. Bevir also identifies 'homogenising eclecticism' and 'post-analytical hermeneutics' as alternative successors to contextualism. Historicism comes, as it always has, in many guises.