



# Geography and other disciplines: genealogy, anamnesis and the canon



Andrew Barry

Department of Geography, University College London, 26 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AP, UK

## Abstract

This article argues that the idea of the geographical canon has continuing value, although its constitution and scope need to be rethought. The argument draws on three sources of inspiration. One is the work of Quentin Skinner, who offered a critique of the idea of the canon of political thought before subsequently going on to act as the co-editor of a series of *Texts in the History of Political Thought*. The second is the method of genealogy, developed by Michel Foucault. Drawing on both the methodological writings of Foucault and their interpretation by Stuart Elden, I argue that the substance of a genealogy of geographical thought should not be confined to the work of geographers. The third inspiration for this article is the idea of anamnesis, introduced by the philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers in her study of the history of the physical sciences, *Cosmopolitics*. The practice of anamnesis, I argue, invites us to re-read texts that should continue to animate our thinking in the present.

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In an essay on 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' first published in 1969, the historian Quentin Skinner launched a sustained and influential attack against the idea of the canon in political thought. The notion of a canon, Skinner contended, implied that there were a number of 'classic texts' that contained 'dateless wisdom' and 'universal ideas.' Moreover, belief in the value of the canon had rested, he suggested, on a series of questionable pre-judgements 'about the defining characteristics of the discipline to which the writer is supposed to have contributed.'<sup>1</sup> In opposition to what he termed the 'mythology' of the canon, Skinner's counter-proposition was straightforward. Drawing inspiration from the historical method proposed by R.G. Collingwood and the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin, he urged historians of political thought to focus on the meaning and use that texts had at the time they were written. Rather than read classic texts in terms of their relation to so-called 'canonical doctrines', Skinner argued that texts should be read in relation to the specific

questions and problems with which their authors and readers were concerned.<sup>2</sup> In this light, the historian's dissatisfaction with what he took to be the then dominant approach to the interpretation of, for example, Descartes' *Meditations* 'stems from the fact that it leaves us without any sense of the specific question to which Descartes may have intended his doctrine of certainty as a solution.'<sup>3</sup> As Collingwood had argued, 'thinking is never done *in vacuo*: it is always done by a determinate person in a determinate situation.'<sup>4</sup>

I begin by referring to Skinner's essay for two reasons. One is to recall that recent discussions about the value of a geographical canon come in the wake of a series of critiques of canonical thinking in other fields, including political theory.<sup>5</sup> In this context, Skinner's intervention was but one of a series of critical accounts of the notion of the canon spread across the social sciences and humanities in the late twentieth century, drawing inspiration not just from the philosophy of Austin, Wittgenstein and Collingwood, but more

E-mail address: [a.barry@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.barry@ucl.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Q. Skinner, Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas, in *Visions of Politics volume 1: Regarding Method*, Cambridge, 2002, 57–89 (original publication: *History and Theory* 8 [1969] 3–53).

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas (note 1), 79; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (note 2), Oxford, 1946, 283. Robert Mayhew argued that this approach had particular relevance for the history of Geography see R. Mayhew, Contextualizing practice in intellectual history, *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994) 323–328.

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas (note 1), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (note 2), cited in P. Burke, Context in context, *Common Knowledge* 8, 1 (2002) 162.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, the paper by I. Keighren, C. Abrahamsson and V. della Dora, On canonical geographies, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 296–312 and the responses to this paper by Hubbard, Maddrell, Mayhew, Monk, Powell, Schein, and Withers.

broadly from a growing body of post-colonial, post-structuralist and feminist criticism. The idea of the canon, it was argued, not only led to the misinterpretation of texts, but was also associated with the exercise of power. As Charles Withers observes, ‘even as some critics have defended the idea of a canon but recognised that the Western canon... has changed..., others have rejected such notions *tout court*, since there cannot ever be an agreed-upon measuring rod against which “good” canonical literature can be marked apart from the “bad”’.<sup>6</sup>

A second reason for recalling Skinner’s influential intervention is more surprising, and forms the heart of my argument. As we shall see, Skinner’s work has not been associated with the rejection of the idea of the canon *tout court*, as one might expect from his 1969 essay, but with a development of a sense of an ‘expanded’ canon of political thought. In this paper I follow Skinner in rejecting the traditional idea of the canon, conceived as a given body of texts that defines the ‘timeless essence’ of a discipline, and instead endorse the idea of an expanded canon. The aim of the paper is both to clarify what kinds of texts might be included in an expanded canon of geographical thought, and to suggest why the existence of such a canon has some value. My proposition is that an expanded canon cannot and should not be confined to the discipline’s ‘classic texts’; rather, an expanded canon contains a shifting and necessarily contested body of work, including the work of authors and practitioners who are not typically thought to be geographers.<sup>7</sup>

The paper is organised in three parts. First, I discuss the idea of the expanded canon of political thought associated with Skinner’s work as editor, together with the political philosopher Raymond Geuss, of the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*. Despite my endorsement of the idea of an expanded canon, I depart from Skinner and Geuss’s approach, while also observing significant differences between the teaching of politics and the teaching of geography. The second part the paper turns to consider how Foucault’s genealogical method, which is often taken as the starting point for criticism of the traditional canon,<sup>8</sup> may also suggest how the canon might be rethought and expanded. Here, I draw on Stuart Elden’s recent critical reinterpretation of Foucault’s lectures on governmentality and his *The Birth of Territory*. Elden’s work, I argue, indicates the possibility of an expanded sense of the geographical canon that includes, amongst others, many of the authors contained in Skinner and Geuss’s canon of political thought. In the third part of the paper I turn to the work of the philosopher Isabelle Stengers. Her anamnesis of the physical sciences, I argue, directs us to consider both the value of reading an expanded range of canonical texts and the importance of those disciplines, including geography, that give value to diverse forms of knowledge production, including field research. Stengers, like Foucault, views concepts not as abstract ideas, but as elements of what Foucault once termed ‘an ensemble of practices’.<sup>9</sup> While both authors implicitly reject the traditional understanding of the canon, their work shows us why the existence of an expanded canon should continue to matter.

## The expanded canon

If Skinner’s polemic is a reminder that debates about the value of the canon have been on going in a range of disciplines, it also directs us to an intriguing paradox. For Skinner himself, in his role as a series editor of the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* went on to play an instrumental role in expanding the range of texts considered to be part of the canon. Far from destroying the canon of political thought, Skinner’s intervention, along with others, appears to have generated the conditions for its progressive evolution and reinvigoration. Cambridge University Press makes its ambitions for the series clear:

Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought is now firmly established as the major textbook series in political theory in the anglophone world, with more than half a million copies distributed since its launch in 1988. The Cambridge Texts series presents to students all the core texts in the Western political tradition, from ancient Greece to the early twentieth century. All the familiar classic texts like *Leviathan* or *The Prince* have been or will be included, but much of the appeal of the series for teachers *derives from its expansion of the traditional canon with a substantial range of less well-known works*, many translated into modern English for the first time.<sup>10</sup>

This statement is not just an exercise in marketing; it also appears to reflect a shift in Skinner’s own thinking over time. In a recent interview, in which he addressed the meaning and significance of his 1969 essay, he admitted that he was now ‘ambivalent and perhaps confused’ about the idea of the canon, acknowledging that he had become progressively less ‘dogmatically reluctant’ about the question since the publication of his original argument, and had come to recognise that ‘leading thinkers have always attended to the work of other and earlier thinkers.’<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the older (pre-1969) understanding of the canon was clearly now untenable in his view, the notion of an ‘expanded canon’, promoted by Skinner and his co-editor, the philosopher Raymond Geuss, along with others in the Cambridge School, had acquired a new importance. In this revised account, ‘a substantial range’ of other texts formed part of the context that gave specific classical texts their meaning and significance. Notwithstanding the influence of Skinner’s earlier essay, the reading of the canon has remained a core element of the undergraduate curriculum in political theory and philosophy.

Despite some differences, the broad terms of Skinner’s original critique of canonical thought should be familiar to readers of the history of geography. Robert Mayhew, for example, echoed Skinner’s argument in observing that earlier historians of geography have tended to project their particular account of the ‘timeless essence’ that defines the discipline: ‘being timeless this essence is conflated with what geography has always been, and, switching from indicative to imperative, with what geography ought to be.’<sup>12</sup> Charles Withers has stressed the importance of a ‘contextual

<sup>6</sup> C. Withers, ‘Geography’s evolving traditions and textual critique’, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 318.

<sup>7</sup> D. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, Oxford, 1992, 3.

<sup>8</sup> D. Matless, Effects of history, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20 (1995), 407. See also R. Mayhew, Geography’s genealogies, in: J. Agnew, D. Livingstone (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, London, 2011, 21–38.

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, Questions of method, in *Power: Essential Works 1954–1984*, London, 2002, 230.

<sup>10</sup> Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, <http://www.cambridge.org/aus/series/sSeries.asp?code=CTPT> (last accessed, January 2014), emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> P. Koikkalainen and S. Syrjämäki, On encountering the past – an interview with Quentin Skinner, [http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/research/Yearbook%202002/Skinner\\_Interview\\_2002.pdf](http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/research/Yearbook%202002/Skinner_Interview_2002.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> R. Mayhew, *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Languages of British Geography 1650–1850*, Basingstoke, 2010, 11. See also, Mayhew, Contextualizing practice in intellectual history (note 2).

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