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The Cambridge School and world politics: critical theory, history and conceptual change

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Abstract. The study of the history of political thought has undergone significant advances in recent years, yet these changes have not been reflected in the academic study of International Relations (IR), where an often naïve and methodologically unsophisticated approach to historical interpretation still reigns. In this paper, I seek to introduce the Cambridge School of historical interpretation into IR, focusing in particular on the work of Quentin Skinner. I argue that the School's emphasis on the linguistic-conceptual roots of political legitimacy, and consequently the normative ordering of social and political life, has important implications for contemporary critical IR theory.

I. Introduction¹

'One reason for the vitality of the states system is the tyranny of the concepts and normative principles associated with it.'²

The role of language in the constitution of social and political life has long been overlooked in the academic study of International Relations (IR). The most influential theoretical approaches, those that today dominate debate in the hallowed halls of American political science, remain wedded to a correspondence theory of truth and the 'elusive quest' for a scientific understanding of the world.³ Concerns about language and inter-subjectivity are thus deemed irrelevant in the mission to explain the pattern(s) of international affairs. It is as if much of twentieth century social theory and philosophy had never been written. Nevertheless, over the last few years an increasing number of critical voices in IR have sought to challenge this prevailing attitude.⁴

The starting point for many of these new approaches – which are here taken to include post-modernism(s)/post-structuralism, most flavours of feminism and some constructivists – has been work produced in the wake of the 'linguistic turn' in social and political theory.⁵ This turn has followed a number of diverse, winding

¹ I would like to thank the following (in no particular order) for their insightful comments and for reading earlier drafts of this paper: Quentin Skinner, Anders Stephanson, Steven Lukes, Charles Jones, Roland Bleiker, Richard Wyn Jones, David Armitage and Paul MacDonald. All the usual disclaimers apply.

² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p.275.

³ Yale Ferguson & Richard Mansbach, *The Elusive Quest: Theory and International Politics* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

⁴ See, for example, Ken Booth, Steve Smith and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ For a useful overview see Thomas Clay Arnold, *Thoughts and Deeds: Language and the Practice of Political Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp.1-29. Also see Michael Shapiro (ed.), *Language and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1983) and Michael T. Gibbons (ed.), *Interpreting Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). In IR see, in particular, Mark Neufeld 'Interpretation and the "Science" of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 19, 1993, pp. 39-61 and Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995). This is not the place in which to construct a typology of IR theorists who do/do not display the profound influence

routes including the universal pragmatics developed by Habermas and Apel, the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, the ordinary language analysis of Wittgenstein and Austin, and the hermeneutics of, amongst others, Heidegger, Ricoeur and Gadamer. Nevertheless, in social and political theory in general, and IR in particular, there are still other complementary approaches that remain under-explored. One such approach is that developed by the 'Cambridge School' of intellectual historians, and in particular by Quentin Skinner. Charles Taylor has for example stated that Skinner has succeeded in developing an '...interesting and challenging position in the field of political theory'⁶, whilst Kari Palonen has claimed that he can be regarded as one of 'the few dissidents in the contemporary academic world' who concentrate on the role of conceptual and linguistic change in the study of politics.⁷ The purpose of this paper can therefore be seen as an attempt to introduce and outline this position in relation to IR, and as such it is a partial response to Ken Booth's argument that it 'is vital that students of IR give language more attention than hitherto, as words shape as well as reflect reality.'⁸ This paper is not intended to add anything substantially new to the history/theory debate which spawned much of the Cambridge Schools methodology, nor does it claim that emphasising the role of language is something alien to IR, for it is increasingly common around the dissident margins of the field.⁹ Nevertheless, the Cambridge School approach has much to offer the contemporary IR theorist, especially through its focus on the role of history and conceptual change, as well as its understanding of how political legitimacy is embedded in the set of political vocabularies available at any given time, and I will further be arguing that it can form the basis for a critical theoretic orientation to world politics, but not one that slots easily into any of the traditionally recognised schools of Critical theory.

Why have the implications for political theory inherent in the Cambridge School project been overlooked? Partly, I would argue, due to the fact that the approach is not a fully developed alternative to any of the aforementioned positions, drawing as it does on a number of insights from various traditions, including both Anglo-American and continental philosophy, as well as social theory and historiography. Rather, the authors associated with the school have sought to draw

of the turn. However, for the record, I would claim that Alex Wendt - and other mainstream American constructivists - through accepting Keohane's challenge to conform to a 'scientific research programme', do not. See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Robert Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', in Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989).

⁶ Charles Taylor, 'The Hermeneutics of Conflict', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Oxford: Polity, 1988), p. 218.

⁷ Kari Palonen, 'Rhetorical and Theoretical Perspectives on Conceptual Change', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 1999, vol.3, p.43.

⁸ Ken Booth, 'Discussion: a Reply to Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, 23, 1997, p.374. Roland Bleiker has also recently lamented that '[m]ost prevailing approaches to the study of world politics pay too little attention to issues of language' in the 'Editor's Introduction', *Alternatives*, vol.25, no.3, July-Sept. 2000, p.269.

⁹ See, for example, David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Michael Shapiro & James Der Derian (eds.), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1989).

our attention to certain key features about language and how it is employed in society, and also how this understanding has evolved historically. Secondly, and more significantly, is the fact that the authors, and Skinner in particular, are usually bracketed as historians rather than political theorists, and aspects of their work that directly relates to political theory are either overlooked or assumed to refer primarily (and sometimes only) to the study of the history of ideas.¹⁰ I will argue that this characterisation is a mistake, and that within the arguments sketched by the Cambridge School authors can be found an important and coherent approach to understanding social and political life. By concentrating on conceptual change, and the constitutive role played by language in shaping the normative architecture of (any given) society, we can begin to gain a more sophisticated understanding of language in both the reproduction of social norms and conventions, and in the process of change itself. Furthermore, such an understanding helps to highlight the limits and possibilities for challenging the current construction of social being. In an age of paradox and uncertainty this is of great importance.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section introduces the methodological position elaborated by the Cambridge School, concentrating in particular on the historical interpretative arguments of Skinner. Whilst not delving into the labyrinthine depths that the debate over this work has sometimes provoked, it is hoped that the outline will provide a suitable introduction to the aims, methods and assumptions of the School. It will be argued that the adoption of this methodology, and the writing of conceptual histories in particular, could help to develop and improve the debate over the history of political thought in IR, and as a consequence shed some light on contemporary theoretical debates. Following this, in the second section, it will be argued that within Skinner's methodology is an important, but usually overlooked, approach to social and political understanding, and that this can be employed as the foundation for a critical theoretic approach to world politics.¹¹ In particular, I will concentrate on the role of conceptual change and the normative structuring of society through the evaluative dimension that these concepts inherently contain. However, it is also argued that such an understanding of the School's work does not have to be rooted in, or confined by, the 'traditional' sources of critical social theory – whether of the Frankfurt School or French inspired post-structuralism – although it draws insights from both of them.

¹⁰ See also Max Edling & Ulf Mörkenstam, 'Quentin Skinner: From Historian of Ideas to Political Scientist', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 18, no. 2, 1995, pp.119-132.

¹¹ Although Skinner has outlined the most substantive methodology, of the authors associated with the 'school' it is Dunn who has been most concerned with employing a historically derived understanding of political theory to examine contemporary issues, most recently in his excellent *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: Harper Collins, 2000) and the illuminating discussion in chpt.1 of N.J. Rengger, *Political Theory, Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1995).

II. History and Theory: The ‘Cambridge School’ Methodology

Meaning and Understanding

Let it be said...that during the last ten years scholars interested in the study of systems of political thought have had the experience of living through radical changes, which may amount to a transformation, in their discipline.¹²

During the 1960's a number of young historians, either based in or trained at Cambridge University, helped to re-orient the study of the history of political thought. Three scholars in particular stand out in this endeavor, namely J.G.A Pocock, John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. For the sake of convenience, and following convention, I will term these authors representatives of the ‘Cambridge School’ methodology.¹³ I will be concentrating in particular on the work of Quentin Skinner, who is probably the most influential figure associated with this approach, and who has most fully developed the methodology in writing.¹⁴ These scholars were reacting to what they saw as widespread methodological naivety in the study of the history of ideas, a naivety which has, until recently at least, characterised the history of thought in IR. The main criticism that they leveled at other historians concerned the attempt to interpret de-contextualised works of political thought, thereby treating them in a resolutely non-historical manner. In contrast, John Dunn has summed up the Cambridge School approach as one that ‘...takes the historical character of the texts as fundamental, and understands these, in the last instance, as highly complex human actions.’¹⁵ As such, it is regarded as essential that the texts are treated in a self-consciously historical manner, through locating them in time and place and,

¹² J. G. A Pocock, ‘Languages and Their Implications: The Transformation of Political Thought’, in Pocock *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen, 1972), p.3. For further (auto)biographical reflections see also Pocock, ‘Introduction: the State of the Art’, in his *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Dunn, ‘The History of Political Theory’ in Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Richard Tuck, ‘History of Political Thought’ in Peter Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

¹³ This is a convenient, though not wholly accurate term (Pocock, for example, spent most of his career based in the US), and so should be seen more as a loose affiliation than a tight category. Despite their professed similarities, there are notable differences between the key characters in the story. Nevertheless, I contend that they share enough of a similarity in outlook and approach that they can, for the time being at least, be classed together.

¹⁴ The key early papers are: J.G.A Pocock, ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry’, in P. Laslett & W. G. Runciman, (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp.183-202; John Dunn, ‘The Identity of the History of Ideas’, *Philosophy*, 43, 1968, pp.85-104; Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’ *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), pp.3-53. The last, in particular, is usually regarded as the paradigmatic, and final, methodological statement advanced by the School. However, as Skinner has repeatedly stressed, he has updated and refined his position throughout the years, and ‘Meaning and Understanding’ should only be regarded as a starting point. The most fully developed and lucid summary of his thinking can be found in ‘A Reply to my Critics’ in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context*.

¹⁵ Dunn, ‘The History of Political Theory’ p.19.

moreover, examining them in their linguistic context(s). The Cambridge School authors thus sought to introduce a reflexive historical sensitivity to the process of interpretation.

More specifically, the main targets for Skinner's ongoing critique are what might be termed the 'textualist' and 'social contextualist' approaches to interpreting (and consequently teaching) the classic texts in political philosophy. The textualist approach is defined by the study of seminal works for the purpose of uncovering some timeless wisdom presented in answer to perennial questions, whether they concern the nature of the state, of justice, or of human behaviour. Thus in order to answer the question 'what way is best to live?' the textualist would dutifully pull out her well-thumbed copy of the *Republic*, of *Leviathan* and of *A Theory of Justice* in the search for answers that can be compared and contrasted. The pitfalls inherent in such an approach should be apparent to the contemporary reader, in brief: the meaning of the words themselves may have changed, if they could even be translated into contemporary English at all; there is the danger of fixing present categories of thought onto the past, of reading it in terms of today; furthermore there is the problem of imposing *ex post facto* coherence and ascribing knowledge where there could not have been any, of searching for views that the author is unlikely to have had access to ('as *x* would have said if...'); and finally, and most obviously, there is the isolation of the text from the environment, whether institutional, intellectual and/or social-political, in which it was conceived and written. A text is not produced in a vacuum, against a blank milieu, and the author will have had his or her own reasons and purpose in writing what they did, and also how they did. There is a long tradition of textualism in the study of politics, exemplified most powerfully by Leo Strauss¹⁶, and it can still be seen in some of the more naive works of IR theory; the simplistic re-creation of a trans-historical realist canon springs most readily to mind.¹⁷

More common now, and on the ascendant when Skinner wrote his early polemical papers, is the social contextualist mode of interpretation. This is a more sophisticated method, whereby a text is located in the social - defined broadly to include political, religious and cultural - context in which it was written. Hobbes can here serve as an illustrative example. The social contextualist might note that *Leviathan* (1651) was written in the aftermath of the English Civil War, and that the disastrous Thirty years war, which wrought devastation across the length and breadth of Europe, served as a grim backdrop. As such, Hobbes' call for a strong state can be seen as a response to the events of his times, as an attempt to construct

¹⁶ Strauss and his followers were among the main targets of Skinner's initial attack (see especially, 'Meaning and Understanding'). For the influence of Strauss and his disciples in IR see the discussion in Nick Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory, and the Problem of Order: Beyond International Relations Theory?* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.67n58 and p.69n85.

¹⁷ For representative examples see (most of) the essays collected in Benjamin Frankel (ed.), *Roots of Realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996). Skinner is not, in principle at least, opposed to the idea of a 'tradition'. However, he is extremely wary of any attempt to draw out the thread of an 'idea' through different historical epochs. See also J.G.A. Pocock, 'Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and their Understanding', in Pocock, *Language, Politics and Time*; Peter L. Janssen, 'Political Thought as Traditionary Action: the Critical Response to Skinner and Pocock', *History and Theory*, 24, (1985), pp.115-46; Tim Dunne, 'Methodology or Mythology: Traditions in International Theory', *Review of International Studies* (19), 1993, pp.305-318.

and justify a constitutional structure that could offer resistance to turbulence and serve as an antidote to the ever-present threat of chaos.

Whilst this approach is of greater utility, it is still not satisfactory, for it rests on a conceptual error; namely, that ‘...even if the study of the social context of texts could serve to explain them, this would not amount to the same as providing a means to understand them.’¹⁸ In other words, knowledge of the social context in which an author wrote a work is not the same as understanding the meaning of the work, for it cannot account for the intention of the author.¹⁹ Thus, in the case of Hobbes:

‘Unless we are prepared to ask what Hobbes is doing in *Leviathan*, and to seek the answers by relating his work to the prevailing conventions of political argument at the time, we can never hope to elucidate the precise character of his counter-revolutionary theory of political obligation, nor can we hope to understand the precise role of his epistemology in relation to his political thought.’²⁰

Thus whilst the social contextualist approach may help us to locate the text in time and place, and in so doing furnish the historian with much needed information, for the social environment obviously acts as a framework within which texts are written and should be viewed, it leaves too many questions unanswered, and indeed unanswerable. What did the author mean when she wrote in the first place? To whom were the arguments addressed and why? Was she supporting or improving upon a given and widely understood argument, or was she attacking the conventions of the time? Was she being ironic? What can her silences tell us, for do they not often speak louder than words? Why did she write in the *specific* manner in which she did?

In order to answer these questions we must examine and interpret texts in the linguistic context in which they were written, for it is only within this milieu that utterances assume their meaning.²¹ Skinner argues that the best way to do this is to

¹⁸ Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding’, p.61.

¹⁹ The notion of intention(ality) is one of the most controversial in Skinner’s thought, and one of the main sources for the post-structural critique of his work. However, it is worth noting that he is careful to distinguish between intention *in* and intention *by* writing, through arguing that there is a difference between intention and motivation. Motivation is contingent and antecedent to acting, and thus lies outside of the text; to locate intention, in his understanding at least, means instead working out what an author meant in saying something, as embodying an intention in the writing itself. He can thus equate intention with understanding, arguing that the two are logically equivalent, and as such claim that he largely endorses the anti-intentionalist case. See, Skinner, ‘Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts’ in Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context*, esp. pp.75-77 and Skinner, ‘A Reply to My Critics’, pp.269-273.

²⁰ Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’, in Tully, *Meaning and Context*, p.104.

²¹ This is not to say that the idea of a linguistic context is unproblematic, for, as David Boucher has noted, it seems impossible to provide a clear definition of the extent of the context which should be examined. However, this in itself does not refute the argument that is being put forward; rather, it highlights the practical difficulties inherent in following it through. See Boucher, ‘The Character of the History of the Philosophy of International Relations and the Case of Edmund Burke’, *Review of International Studies*, 17, 1991, esp. pp.128-129, and also Boucher *Political Theories of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an argument, though one I believe to be somewhat overstated, that Skinner’s

develop the insights of speech-act theory, which views the performance of linguistic utterances as a form of action.²² The writing of a text itself can therefore be seen as an intrinsically *political* act: it has a purpose, and it is aimed at persuading an intended audience of a certain set of arguments. (Which is not to say that this is the only way in which it is received by a given audience). In order to elucidate the point, both Dunn and Skinner have drawn on the work of J.L. Austin, the originator of the theory, who proposed a useful distinction between the ‘locutionary’ and ‘illocutionary’ force of words, and consequently of texts.²³ The locutionary point - or ‘force’ - of a text refers to the actual meaning of words, sentences, theories and hypotheses; to their sense and reference. The illocutionary force, on the other hand, refers to what the author was actually doing in saying what was said. Both the locutionary and the illocutionary force need to be grasped in order to try to understand and explain the text, to gain ‘uptake’. In particular, Skinner argued, the illocutionary force had often been overlooked in the interpretation of texts.

However, interpreting both the locutionary and illocutionary force of concepts presents difficulties, as can be demonstrated by referring to Machiavelli - a favoured writer in IR, as one of the major figures in the realist canon. For example, in chapter 16 of *The Prince* Machiavelli argues that ‘Princes must learn when not to be virtuous.’²⁴ On the face of it this is a simple statement, and yet it has been the source of much debate. Excavating the locutionary meaning of this piece of advice is not easy, and Skinner has argued that the original Italian word that is often translated as ‘virtuous’ - *virtú* - is impossible to render directly into English, representing a complex of different attributes, and that it should be left in its original form.²⁵ The perils of misinterpretation are thus readily apparent. This also helps to highlight the elusive nature of concepts, of words themselves – justice, the state, law, security etc. – that are often taken for granted in IR theory; it helps to demonstrate that a thorough understanding of the actual meaning and employment of terms, which are often historically contingent and contested, is required if the theorist is to proceed in a suitably self-reflective manner.²⁶

However, even if we assume that the meaning is transparent, that a perfect translation is possible, and also if we are fully cognizant of the historical circumstances in which the text was written – if, for example, we were experts on

position is actually ‘suprahistorical’, see Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.53-69.

²² Skinner notes that the idea of speech acts should not be seen in terms of a ‘theory’ as such, but more as a way of describing and thus highlighting a number of important dimensions of speech which we need to understand if we are to embark upon the task of reading and interpreting a text. See Skinner, ‘A Reply to my Critics’, p.262. Thus attempts to discredit the approach based on an undermining of speech act theory itself, somewhat miss the point.

²³ See J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Also, see Aletta J. Norwal, ‘Review Article: The Things we do with Words – Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Ideology’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 30, 2000, esp. 317-321.

²⁴ This example is used by both Skinner and Tully. See, ‘Meaning and Understanding’ p.61 and ‘The Pen is a Mighty Sword’ pp.8-10.

²⁵ See for example Skinner, ‘Machiavelli’ in Skinner et al, *Great Political Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For further references see Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*, p.268n.115.

²⁶ For a recent discussion of Machiavelli in IR that fails to heed this advice see Jack Donnelly, *Realism in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. pp.160-193.

sixteenth century Italian history - we would still not be able to claim a comprehensive understanding of it. We would not know to whom it was aimed, and why; we would remain unsure if it was meant ironically or in earnest; whether it was common advice, just more eloquently and bluntly stated by Machiavelli than others, and so forth. These questions, and others like them, are of vital import if we are to understand Machiavelli's thought, and assess its originality and power. They cannot be answered by merely locating Machiavelli in time and place.

So, can we ever hope to successfully interpret historical texts, or at least provide better interpretations of them than can be achieved through the more traditional methods? The answer is a suitably qualified, and modest, yes, as the search for understanding is '...not the mysterious empathetic process that old fashioned hermeneutics may have led us to suppose.'²⁷ Of course this is not the same as saying that such understanding comes easily, and the impressive erudition displayed by the various authors affiliated with the school serves as a humbling reminder of this. Nevertheless, it is at least possible, although the conceptual historian should always retain a sense of humility in the occluded face of the past, remembering that the story they construct will always be only partial at best, and never finished. The Cambridge School method should be seen as essentially archaeological²⁸, concerned as it is with tracing through time and space the concepts through which human collectivities organise and constitute themselves, and the shift(s) in such understandings. The actual practical method for conducting these conceptual histories is not our concern here, although it can be briefly summarised as demanding a comprehensive study of the set of texts, both minor and major, well known and almost completely forgotten, that existed at the time of writing of the particular text under examination, in order to gain an understating of the political languages employed, and relating them to the general historical environment.²⁹

International Relations and the 'Historiographical Turn'

I have argued elsewhere that IR is currently undergoing an historiographical turn, though a slow and uneven one, in that the study of the history of thought as it relates to world politics, and also the actual historiography of the field, is regarded as being of increased importance and is furthermore being pursued with heightened vigour and sophistication.³⁰ This turn is related to, indeed should be seen as a direct

²⁷ Skinner, 'A reply to My Critics', p.279.

²⁸ The term is, of course, from Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Tavistock, 1986). Skinner has acknowledged his debt to the (early) Foucault; see, for example, Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.112n.19.

²⁹ More detailed discussion can be found in J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'Historien*: some Considerations on Practice' in Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Tully, 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword'.

³⁰ Duncan Bell, 'International Relations: the Dawn of an Historiographical Turn?' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (forthcoming). See also, Richard Little, 'Historiography and IR', *Review of International Studies*, vol.25, no.2, 1999, pp.291-301.

result of, the increasing methodological awareness that has been in evidence in the field in recent years.³¹ In turning their attention towards the structure of thought and the nature, limits and possibilities of theory, IR scholars have come to a greater understanding of the failings (indeed total failure) of positivism, of the necessarily situated nature of knowledge, of the complexity of the link between epistemology and ontology, between thought and action, ideas and praxis, and so forth. This has laid the foundations, however fluid and shifting, for a much more reflexive approach to theorising world politics, which has taken different and often competing forms, but which can nevertheless be seen as bound by what Keohane labeled, rather simply but nevertheless conveniently, a 'reflectivist' as opposed to a 'rationalist' orientation.³² Part of this turn towards (self) reflection, towards interpretation, has been a greater awareness of the difficulties encountered in interpreting (historical) texts.

The evidence for the historiographical turn can be seen in the recent spate of books and articles that have sought to modify, or destroy, some of the proud 'self-images of a discipline'³³ and in the process provide a more accurate picture of the historical evolution and trajectory of the field, and also in work that succeeds in offering more nuanced interpretations of key figures within the history of (international) political theory. For example, Brian Schmidt has convincingly demonstrated that the discourse about international politics, rather than emerging in the aftermath of WWI, as is traditionally understood, in fact developed, in the US at least, alongside the embryonic discipline of political science in the latter decades of the 19th century. Furthermore, he argues that the disciplinary dominance of 'idealism' in the inter-war discourse is essentially a myth, for the period was rather characterised by a theoretical shift towards a pluralistic conception of the state, based in particular on the work of Harold Laski and Roscoe Pound, and consequently a heightened awareness of the multiplicity of actors in world politics.³⁴ Likewise, Tim Dunne has shed light on the origins and institutional development of the influential 'English School' of international theory, and consequently helped in the reevaluation of the thought and legacy of E.H Carr, a pivotal figure in British IR and a scholar long regarded as an archetypal realist, but now interpreted in a more sophisticated

³¹ See, for example, Richard Little, 'International Relations and the Methodological Turn', *Political Studies*, vol. XXXIX, no.3, Sept 1991, pp.463-478 and Martin Hollis & Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³² Robert Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches'.

³³ Steve Smith, 'The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory' in Smith & Booth (eds), *International Relations Theory Today*. For a more detailed list of references see Bell, 'International Relations: the Dawn of an Historiographical Turn?'

³⁴ Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), esp. chpt. 5, and 'Lessons from the Past: Reassessing the Interwar Disciplinary History of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42 (3), 1998, pp.433-459. Schmidt draws particularly on the methodological work of John Gunnell in order to pursue his project, and it is worth noting that Gunnell has been a fierce critic of Skinner. Skinner, in turn, has accused Gunnell of radically misunderstanding his work, of approaching philistinism in his approach to the history of thought, and of sketching a 'self-defeatingly incoherent' position. See, in particular, Gunnell, 'Interpretation and the History of Political Theory: Apology and Epistemology' *American Political Science Review*, 76, 1982, pp.317-327; Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, p.107 and 'A Reply to my Critics', pp.232-33 & 286.

and sympathetic manner.³⁵ Both of these authors have helped to challenge some of the simplistic assumptions that many in IR have taken for granted, and in so doing have helped to shed light on the contemporary state of the field by exposing some of the myths which underlie it, and indeed which help to shape it.

Nevertheless, there remains much to be done in clearing up the misunderstandings and mythology, as well as in reaching a better understanding of the thought of figures from the past who have reflected on international affairs. The employment of the Cambridge School methodology promises much in this regard, especially due to the generally under-explored nature of the history of political thought as it relates to world politics. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of the Cambridge School is that its adherents have generally failed to study thought that relates to international affairs, tending to concentrate instead on the state itself.³⁶ This can be seen as analogous to, and as perplexing as, the narrow state-centric focus of much Anglo-American political theory. There is thus much scope for historically sensitive investigations into past social and political thinkers, especially in relation to their *international* political theories, and also into the much neglected and often radically misunderstood history and development of the field itself, and the Cambridge School approach offers a suitable method to embark upon such studies.

As our knowledge about the actual evolution of the field continues to expand, this should help not only our collective self-understanding, but also lead to a greater awareness of the historicity of ideas, the interaction between thought and action and the evolution of the key concepts that are so often taken for granted in contemporary theory. The study of history, and in particular intellectual history, can help to problematise that which is considered unproblematic, by demonstrating that what is now taken for granted has not always been so, and that concepts themselves have proved the site of great contestation and subject to significant change.³⁷ Every concept, every idea, every term has a history, and that history is often littered with battles waged over their employment, their reach and their suitability and application. It is a myopic theorist who fails to understand the provenance and often historically diverse meanings of the terms that they employ so confidently, and usually without reflection. This in itself leaves much scope for intellectual and historical archaeology, and from such excavations critique can commence.

For example, political science in the United States, at least as it is currently practiced (and preached), is obsessed with the 'idea of science' and with matching the relevant strict canons of investigation.³⁸ But this has not always been so, and

³⁵ Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (London: Macmillan, 1998). For further examples of the booming 'Carr industry', see Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Michael Cox (ed), *E.H.Carr: a Critical Reassessment* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

³⁶ See, for example, Richard Tuck *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁷ The most comprehensive collection of papers relating to changing political concepts is Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁸ The best known example is, of course, the first chapter of Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979) but see also Gary King, Robert Keohane & Sidney

indeed is far from common in the study of IR elsewhere in the world³⁹, and it is an interesting question to ask why and how the discipline developed as it has, indeed why it helps to act as what Timothy Luke has called an ‘ontological stabilizer’, defending and helping to reproduce the social and political status quo.⁴⁰ Such a question is necessarily historical, for to answer it we must delve into the intellectual and institutional evolution of the methods so confidently employed today. Furthermore, in so doing we can see what approaches, what methods, what theoretical endeavours were overlooked, sidelined and suppressed, and furthermore why this occurred, and this interpretative process can help us to comprehend the dynamics of conceptual change and dominance. It can thus help us to understand why ‘Traditional Theory’, in Horkheimer’s sense of the term, emerged and subsequently came to reign in the study of politics and society in the US, and the conceptual foundations upon which this position is constructed.⁴¹ It is in this intellectual space that the Cambridge School methodology can help to serve a critical theoretic function, due to its inherent historical sensitivity and self-reflexivity. Moreover, re-inventing the intellectual wheel seems a pastime of which IR theorists are particularly fond, and a wider knowledge of intellectual history can help to alleviate this problem, or at least place it in a more sophisticated perspective.⁴²

III. Language, Legitimacy, and the Possibility of Critical Theory

Language Conventions and Conceptual Change

The methodology outlined above, whilst providing a necessary and important corrective to the often simplistic and de-contextualised approach to intellectual history found in IR, and whilst furthermore providing a means to help de-stabilise the (pseudo) scientific pretensions of much contemporary mainstream theory through interrogating its prevailing conceptual ‘givens’, also serves as the basis for a more important project: the development of a critical theoretic imagination, which paces center stage social and political transformation. This (meta) theoretical orientation is rooted in the role of language in the establishment, communication and

Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³⁹ For a useful survey of continental European IR, for example, see Knud Erik Jørgensen, ‘Continental IR Theory: The Best Kept Secret’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, no.1, 2000, pp.9-42.

⁴⁰ Timothy Luke, ‘The Discipline as Disciplinary Normalization: Networks of Research’ in Rudra Sil & Eileen Doherty (eds.), *Beyond Boundaries: Disciplines, Paradigms, and Theoretical Integration in International Studies* (Albany, NY.: SUNY Press, 2000), pp.208-210.

⁴¹ For Horkheimer’s distinction between the different types of theory, see his ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essay*, trans. Mathew J. Connell, (New York: Seabury, 1972).

⁴² For example, the arguments over positivism, which were originally explored in the German *Methodenstreit*. See Patrick Baert, *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge Polity: 1998), esp. pp.129-141 & 174-182; William Outhwaite, ‘Naturalisms and Anti-Naturalism’ in T. May & M. Williamson (eds.), *Knowing the Social World* (Buckingham: Open University Press) and the essays collected in Anthony Giddens (ed.), *Positivism and Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1974).

reproduction of political (and moral) legitimacy, and is based in the idea of speech as a form of action. In particular, it concentrates on the role of politico-moral concepts, through which we order social and political life and by which we are in turn ordered, and the manner in which such concepts are manipulated and embedded in the construction of world politics.⁴³

Skinner has primarily been concerned with examining the role of political thought in moulding action, and in particular the part played by political principles in this process. Writers in various traditions, including some Marxist and many behavioural approaches, argue that professed principles play little, if any role in guiding political action, and that the real motives remain hidden behind a screen of pernicious and false justification.⁴⁴ As such, the subject of study should be the prevailing social and economic conditions, the concrete material base. Principles therefore are not regarded as causes, but mere epiphenomena. Meanwhile, another line of argument could be that political principles do indeed motivate political action - that liberals do as and because of what liberals believe - and that therefore the direction of causality is fairly clear; all one has to do is try and understand the principles being professed, assess whether they are coherent, and then try and match them to the behaviour of the agents under investigation.

However, neither of these arguments are satisfactory, for the former is too dismissive of the power of ideas whilst the latter is too naïve, and Skinner approaches the problematic relationship between thought and action, between language and behaviour, through switching the causal arrow. Here lies part of his originality. Thus, whatever the reason for an agent adopting a certain course of action, that agent will need to be able to justify it through reference to a given set of language conventions, a political vocabulary in Pocock's terms, and this will lead to the shaping of what is and is not possible for the agent to say, and therefore do. It is important to note that we are not here concerned with establishing the motive(s) behind the agents' actions, for this both falls outside the scope of the investigation, and the theoretical claims being made, and furthermore it is probably impossible in light of the philosophical and psychological difficulties involved in knowing other minds. Language thus acts as both a resource and a constraint, simultaneously setting limits and opening up opportunities. This is particularly relevant for behaviour that Skinner (quaintly) terms 'untoward'. By this is meant behaviour that falls outside the conventions of the time, action that somehow transgresses the boundaries of the 'acceptable'. Thus the task of the 'innovating ideologist' is to legitimate, to somehow justify, 'untoward social actions' through manipulating the meaning and/or application of concepts in order to alter political behaviour.⁴⁵

This argument is developed - as might be expected - through recourse to speech-act theory, and in particular by concentrating on the class of words that

⁴³ Unfortunately there is not space to elaborate on the significant similarities (as well as differences) between the Cambridge School understanding of conceptual change and that found in the German *Begriffsgeschichte* approach, articulated most powerfully by Reinhart Koselleck. See, for example, Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (trans. by Keith Tribe) (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ See Farr 'Understanding Conceptual Change Politically', in Ball et al, *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, pp.31-32.

⁴⁵ Skinner, 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Thought and Action' p.110.

perform both an evaluative and a descriptive function ('evaluative-descriptive' terms). These are terms that, as the name would suggest, both describe an action (or set of actions) and evaluate (in a normative manner) the action under description. Examples could include 'courage', 'paedophile', 'patriotism', 'security' and 'freedom'; as can be imagined, the list is almost endless. Such terms can serve to either commend or condemn – '[t]o call an action courageous is at once to describe it and to place it in a specific moral light.'⁴⁶ - although it is certainly possible to imagine them providing a less clear, more ambiguous evaluation.⁴⁷ Through the inter-subjective meanings attached to these terms, the normative parameters of a given society are established and reproduced, its 'moral identity' set. However, it should be clear that these concepts are, to some degree, floating, or at least unstable, in that their sense/reference is open to challenge, manipulation and therefore transformation. The essence of conceptual change thus lies in the malleable, shifting relationship between sense and reference through time and space. How this change occurs is necessarily political, for it involves conflict over meaning and action.

Thus the task of the innovating ideologist, the agent who wants to adopt a non-conventional course of action, is clear but by no means easy, for it entails the manipulation of concepts in order to legitimate a chosen course of action (whatever the motive for that action may be). Without such manipulation, without the co-option of existing moral-political conventions, the task of legitimation is doomed to failure. However, in being forced to adopt a set of conventions, the parameters of realisable action are established, although certainly not fixed. The key issue, then, is the communicative role of language: the fact that political thought is a form of political action, and that in order to be able to communicate intelligibly the agent must employ elements from the set of languages available at any one time.⁴⁸ Of course, this is not the same as saying that the agent is rigidly bound, indeed imprisoned, by language, for conventions are not fixed and are open to manipulation and challenge.⁴⁹ Rather, the point is that, to a degree at least, the speaker must employ the linguistic and conceptual tools to hand and that this sets intrinsic limits on what it is possible to say, and consequently to do, meaning that 'Every revolutionary is to this extent obliged to march backwards into battle.'⁵⁰

This understanding of political concepts is most fully developed, at least in historical form, in Skinner's essay on the role played by language in establishing the

⁴⁶ Skinner, 'Language and Social Change', p.122.

⁴⁷ I would prefer to see such terms providing a continuum of evaluation, although it would of course be impossible, and rather pointless, to try and construct a typology or matrix of the different dimensions of evaluation. Thus one could instrumentally understand, for example, 'paedophile' at one end of the spectrum and 'saint' at the other, with an infinite number of intermediate evaluative positions.

⁴⁸ Carr noted: 'Political thought is a form of political action'. See E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (London: Macmillan, 1939), p.7.

⁴⁹ It is also possible, of course, to operate 'outside of language', in that no form of externalized communicative legitimation would be required. For example a gunman walking into a McDonald's is unlikely to need to be able to justify his/her actions to others, although as Heidegger notes, it is impossible to escape language completely as our thought processes are bound up with it. However, we are here concerned with collective action in the public sphere, and by operating outside of language in this forum and in this sense the agent is automatically closing down the possibility of intelligibility and therefore of gaining support and legitimacy from others.

⁵⁰ Skinner, 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Thought and Action', p.112.

reach and purpose of parliamentary opposition in 18th century England.⁵¹ Here, he starts by noting that at the time it was regarded as unjustified to engage in 'general opposition', which is to say being openly critical of the government in most, if not all, of its policy decisions, but that Lord Bolingbrooke, the Tory leader, was intent upon following this course.⁵² Bolingbrooke was thus forced to confront, and try and alter, political convention. In order to succeed, and to legitimate this change in practice, Skinner argues that Bolingbrooke had to embark upon a mission to offer a 'rival evaluative description' for his and his parties' behaviour. He did this through cleverly arguing that his actions could, and indeed should, be regarded as 'patriotic', because it was essential 'to be able to refer to some already accepted political principle as a means both of characterizing their approach and their alleged motive for engaging in it, and thus as a means of seeking to legitimate as well as to redescribe their own behaviour.'⁵³ It is thus clear why he chose 'patriotism' as the key term, the legitimating principle, for who could argue against patriotism, at that time one of the highest of virtues? (Of course, it is symptomatic of the changing meanings of words – and of the possibility to change them - that today patriotism is far from being regarded as an unproblematic high ideal⁵⁴). Thus

...the range of actions which it was open to Bolingbrooke and his party to perform in opposing Walpole's Ministry was limited to the range of actions for which they could hope to supply recognizable justifications, and was thus limited by the range of recognized political principles which they could plausibly hope to suggest as favourable descriptions (and thus as justifications) for their actions.⁵⁵

From this argument it then follows, as would be expected, that once this set of principles have been employed then they set the parameters for action, opening up some channels and closing down others. There is therefore a form of path-dependency involved in the choice of legitimation vocabulary for although it is of course possible to attempt to manipulate the principle again, this can only be done in reference to other sets of concepts and arguments, and so on. This would at first

⁵¹ Skinner, 'The Principles and Practice of Opposition: the Case of Bolingbrooke versus Walpole,' in Neil McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society* (London: Europa, 1974).

⁵² In particular Bolingbrooke concentrated on two areas: the maintenance of a large standing army and the role of the ministry of finance in parliamentary affairs.

⁵³ Skinner, 'The Principles and Practice of Opposition', p.111. For a detailed account of the changing conceptual status of 'patriotism' see Mary G. Dietz 'Patriotism' in Ball et al (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*.

⁵⁴ See for example the claims to patriotism of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, and the US militia movement, highlighted in Mathew Sparke, 'Outsides Inside Patriotism: the Oklahoma Bombing and the Displacement of Heartland Politics' in Gearóid Tuathail & Simon Dalby (eds.), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁵⁵ Skinner, 'The Principles and Practice of Opposition', p.128. It should be noted that recently Skinner has begun to concentrate more on the use of rhetoric, and the problems this poses in examining conceptual change. See Skinner 'Rhetoric and Conceptual Change', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, vol.3, 1999, pp. 60-74.

seem to indicate that change is only possible, if at all, slowly and gradually.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, with clever manipulation the innovating ideologist can indeed bring about a radical change in the normative parameters of society, for which one needs only to look at the tragic case of Nazi Germany, where within the space of a generation it became acceptable for certain forms of behaviour - the extermination of minorities based on ethnicity being the most obvious and horrific example - which were previously considered unacceptable, and which were elsewhere regarded as abominable.

By examining the role of language intelligibility and communication in the legitimation of political and social action, it can be shown that the constitutive role of language in shaping the normative architecture of (any given) society is open to challenge, that the parameters are far from fixed, but at the same time that there are intrinsic limits to what can practically be achieved. Theory and practice are shown to be interwoven, and constitutive of social life. Thus language, and especially the politico-moral concepts through which action is structured, both enables and constrains, providing opportunities and establishing the limits of potential social-political transformation.

The Possibility and Practice of Critical Theory

‘Eventually a judgment day may come when all social theorists are summoned before the pearly gates to declare their allegiance. Were you with Habermas, the Archangel will ask, or with Deconstruction?’⁵⁷

The label ‘critical theory’ has become increasingly widely employed in the study of world politics, yet it remains ambiguous and open to confusion. Traditionally the label has been associated with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and increasingly with the work of the most important contemporary heir to this approach, the massively prolific Jürgen Habermas. In IR this important approach is exemplified by the work of Andrew Linklater.⁵⁸ However, there are a large number of other competing approaches that also claim the critical mantle, and they are often opposed to many of the central ideas and assumptions - not least the claim to universality - of the Frankfurt School(ers). The most prominent of these approaches - critical of Critical theory, as it were - is loosely termed postmodernism, although sheltering under this broad discursive umbrella can be found a large number of

⁵⁶ A similar conclusion can be inferred from Pocock, ‘On the non-Revolutionary Character of Paradigms: A Self-Criticism and After Piece’ in Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*.

⁵⁷ Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History and the Challenge of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p.xv.

⁵⁸ For an excellent introduction to the Frankfurt School see David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (London: Hutchinson, 1980) and also Raymond Guess, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). The most comprehensive examination of critical theory in IR is Richard Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Reiner, 2001). See also Andrew Linklater *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

diverse theorists.⁵⁹ However, it is possible to argue that, in some senses, there is an increasing polarisation between the two positions, at least in social theory, and that this leads to contention over the very nature and purpose of a critical theory⁶⁰ (a neat example of the Cambridge School understanding of language if ever there was one). This need not be so.

Critical theory, in the broad sense that I am here using the term, understands itself to be irreducibly situated within that which is under investigation - 'society', the 'polity' - and is consequently self-reflexive and non-objective. It proceeds from an awareness of the theorists' partiality, and serves as critique based on the possibility of transcendence, of the here and now, of actually existing social relations, of current structures of thought and action. Most work produced under the auspices of 'Political Science' fails to meet these essential criteria, falling instead into the warm and comforting embrace of 'Traditional' theory, while many (but not all) of those who would classify themselves as post-structuralists, Gramscians, Frankfurt School(ers), feminists and some constructivists would satisfy this definition. In other words, a critical theoretic approach to world politics does not have to be linked with any one particular school of thought, nor should it be confined primarily to those influenced by the Frankfurt School (in either its earlier or later manifestations), impressive as their work is. Critical theory is not synonymous with Habermas, Adorno or Linklater, nor indeed with Foucault or Derrida. Rather, it is more broadly concerned with what N. J. Rengger has called 'a project of critique'.⁶¹

In order to align the Cambridge School approach with this broad project of critique it is first worth asking in slightly more detail what a critical theory should consist of, and exploring the ways in which it can serve as the basis for critique as well as opening up the possibility of transformation. Calhoun has neatly encapsulated the outlines of the general critical theoretic position, or more accurately orientation, by arguing that for a theory to be critical it is necessary to meet a number of linked aims:

1. a critical engagement with the theorist's contemporary social world, recognizing that the existing state of affairs does not exhaust all possibilities, and offering positive implications for social action;
2. a critical account of the historical and cultural conditions (both social and personal) on which the theorist's own intellectual activity depends;
3. a continuous critical re-examination of the constitutive categories and conceptual frameworks of the theorist's understanding, including the historical construction of those frameworks; and

⁵⁹ For a brief introduction see Devetak, 'Postmodernism' in in Scott Burchill & Andrew Linklater (eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1996). A recent assault on 'subversive' postmodernism in IR, though one that ends with an endorsement of broadly critical approaches to the subject, is D. S. L. Jarvis, *International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism: Defending the Discipline* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

⁶⁰ For an argument relating to the polarisation in social theory, see Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, pp. xv-xxi and for IR theory see Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order*, pp.145-146.

⁶¹ Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order*, p.145.

4. a critical engagement with other works of social explanation that not only establishes their good and bad points but shows the reasons behind their blind spots and misunderstandings, and demonstrates the capacity to incorporate their insights on stronger foundations.⁶²

Most of the current modes claiming the critical mantle, in IR and beyond, would rightly claim that they fall within these parameters, at least in principle.⁶³ What is most interesting about the above list, though, is that the project that Calhoun outlines is *necessarily historical*, in that all of the above categories call for historical investigation and (self) understanding; they require theory and practice to be positioned in time. Furthermore, they demand a high degree of conceptual awareness, of intellectual history, and of the location of the theorist within an ever-evolving set of political vocabularies. As such, the Cambridge School approach is particularly appropriate to the above tasks, and in particular numbers 2 and 3, and can rightly be envisioned as a method suitable for inclusion within the project of critique. Although none of the Cambridge School authors have explicitly sought to pursue a critical theoretic position, its potential to act as such has been recognised, as demonstrated by Skidders recent argument that

Not only is our moral and social world held in place by the manner in which we choose to apply our inherited normative vocabularies, but one of the ways in which we are capable of re-appraising and changing our world is by changing the ways in which these vocabularies are applied.⁶⁴

Indeed it might be argued that Skidders current work on articulating an historically derived republican alternative to contemporary liberalism can be seen in this critical light.⁶⁵

Although not by necessity a critical theory – how could it be, when Hitler has been one of the most successful proponents of the manipulation of language for the purpose of legitimation – this interpretative understanding of society allows for the possibility of one. It is here worth noting an important distinction that Charles Taylor has made between ontological issues and advocacy commitments in regard to

⁶² Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, p.35. Richard Wyn Jones argues that what should unite the disparate strands of critical theory is a shared desire for emancipation; although I agree with this formulation in regard to a strict understanding of Critical Theory (whether Adornoesque, Habermasian or Gramscian, for example) I think that the broader project of critique can and should incorporate approaches which although not intrinsically emancipatory, can be read in terms of providing a foundation for such an ethical imperative, either through their understanding of how social and political being is constituted, or through what they can tell us about the possibility of transformation. See Wyn Jones, 'Introduction: Locating Critical International Relations Theory', in Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics*.

⁶³ Note, however, Calhoun's castigation of postmodernist history as 'pseudohistory' and as 'trivializing epochal change' in Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, pp.97-132. Similarly Neufeld argues that postmodernism struggles to meet the requirements for ethical judgment necessary for a true critical theory. See, *Restructuring International Relations Theory*, pp. 110-116.

⁶⁴ Quentin Skinner, 'Rhetoric and Conceptual Change', p.63.

⁶⁵ See Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* and Edling & Mörkenstam, 'Quentin Skinner: From Historian of Ideas to Political Scientist'.

social and political theory, for they bear directly on the relationship between the Cambridge School understanding of being and the world, and the ethical possibilities that this engenders. Ontological concerns are those which 'you recognize as the factors you will invoke to account for social life', whilst advocacy relates to 'the moral stand or policy one adopts' as a result of the ontological account.⁶⁶ Thus whilst this linguistic-conceptual understanding of social construction is an ontological one, and whilst no moral commitments or positions flow automatically from it as such, through its positing of the possibility of transformation, certain advocacy claims can be brought to bear. For if one believes that the normative parameters of society, the conventions which shape what can and cannot be legitimately done in society and polity, are structured and reproduced through linguistic constructs, namely politico-moral concepts, then this obviously opens up the possibility of change through the manipulation of such concepts. They become sites of contestation, spaces of political conflict. It is thus possible to embark upon the project of critique, and to call for and aim at, transformation. The world is not necessarily doomed to forever repeat its violent and unjust past, it is not *naturally* a realm of 'repetition and recurrence', to paraphrase Martin Wight. It is humanly constructed, and therefore open to human(e) transformation.

By manipulating language, and in particular the aforementioned class of evaluative-descriptive terms, it is possible, in principle at least, to re-configure the normative parameters of a human society, or indeed of any social-political unit (don't try this at home kids?). This is not to say that such change is easy - far from it (and who ever claimed it was?) - but at least it is possible. Of course, this approach does not suggest which direction the critical theory should take, which re-configuration of the world should be aimed for, or what emancipation and freedom would actually mean in practice. Nor does it pin-point the exact locus at which to achieve the greatest possible success; it is as likely that the attempt to manipulate concepts will fail as succeed. There is no easy answer, no linguistic-conceptual panacea. However, it does allow for the possibility, and to start with at least, that is enough. The rest follows from this.

However, whilst affirming the possibility of a critical theory, this approach also sets intrinsic limits on the endeavour, on what can practically be achieved, and why. By stressing that the agent of change, the innovating ideologist, must conform, at least to some degree with the linguistic conventions of the time, that they must rely on, and engage with, the political vocabularies that are available to them, the limits are delineated. The practice, or at least the practical import, of critical theory is constrained. One can search for a new language, a medium or trope that attempts to break all barriers, subvert and transgress all conventions, invert currently existing norms, but if nobody is listening, because they cannot understand, because understanding itself is impossible, then to what avail?⁶⁷ The practice of a critical theory is thus irreducibly bound up with the conditions of its possibility.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, 'Cross Purposes: the Liberal-Communitarian Debate', in Nancy Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.159.

⁶⁷ This, I believe, is the difficulty faced by those who attempt to totally subvert language in order to offer resistance to oppression. Because language sets limits, it can only be stretched so far before it breaks. For a different viewpoint and an examination of the potential role of postmodern poetry in Cold War East

A brief example of the potential role of this understanding for a critical theory of world politics will hopefully help to highlight both the role and limitations that the structure of political language imposes on an agent, but also the possibilities that it engenders. Such an example can be found in a recent analysis of the innovative linguistic forms employed by 'Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos', leader of the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico. Nicholas Higgins argues that Marcos' use of poetry, prose, and various playful tropes in his communiqués to the outside world are attempts to '...disrupt and disturb the government's monopoly on information.'⁶⁹ On one level this demonstrates the practical difficulties involved in attempting to manipulate the linguistic conventions of a society for those without recourse to power and the dominant role of the media.⁷⁰ It demonstrates the difficulties involved in attempting transformation in a world of vast power asymmetry.

However, the prior difficulties encountered by Marcos are equally revealing. As an early convert to the Zapatista cause, and with a background as an academic, Marcos was initially set the task of spreading *la palabra politica* – the political word – to the indigenous communities in the remote Chiapas region. Schooled and steeped in Marxist-Leninist doctrine he soon encountered apparently insurmountable difficulties in his task, for the local populations could not understand his teachings. Marcos has since spoken of the problems that he had communicating his message to these populations, and has noted 'the absurdities that we have been taught; of imperialism, social crisis, the correlation of forces and their coming together, things that nobody understands, and of course neither did they.' He proceeds, 'They would tell you that they had understood nothing, that your words were not understandable, that you had to look for other words...'⁷¹ Marcos thus soon found that the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric was thoroughly unsuited to motivating and recruiting this population, for the simple reason that it fell outside of their own politico-moral vocabulary(s) and linguistic conventions, and he was forced to try and find 'the words with which to say it.'⁷² Thus he had to find new ways of speaking, in short, a new conceptual vocabulary with which to communicate.

The answer, Marcos found, was not simply in translating his ideas into a language that the Indians could understand, which is to say that it was not simply a

Germany, see Roland Bleiker, 'Stroll Through the Wall: Everyday Poetics of Cold War Politics', *Alternatives*, Vol.25, no.2, July-Sept 2000, pp.391-409. The role of linguistic intelligibility in political activism is usefully explored through comparing the early and late poetry of Paul Celan in Bleiker, "'Give it the Shade': Paul Celan and the Politics of Apolitical Poetry", *Political Studies*, vol.47, no.4, Sept. 1999, pp.661-677.

⁶⁸ For an incisive discussion of the Kantian nature of critique in critical theory, see Kimerly Hutchings, 'The Nature of Critique in Critical International Relations Theory', in Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics*.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Higgins, 'The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance', *Alternatives*, Vol. 25, no. 3, July-Sept. 2000, p.360 and also Paul Routledge, 'Going Globale: Spatiality, Embodiement, and Media-tion in the Zapatista Uprising' in Tuathail & Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*.

⁷⁰ On the role of the media, see John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

⁷¹ Interview published in Adolfo Gilly, Carlo Ginzburg, and Subcomandante Marcos, *Discusion Sobre la Historia* (Mexico City, 1995), quoted in Higgins, 'The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance', pp.361-2.

⁷² Quoted in Higgins, 'The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance', p.362.

matter of translation *per se*, of removing the jargon and attempting to find relevant local terms for ideas. Rather, it involved coming to an understanding of how the indigenous population constituted their society through their own radically different concepts, for example of time. In order to talk to and with them, to become intelligible and to recruit them to his cause, Marcos had to learn to speak their language(s), to immerse himself in their conceptual construction of being and the world. In so doing both he, and the nature of the Revolutionary movement itself, was forever changed; Marcos lost much of his dogmatic Marxist zeal, and the movement adopted a more explicitly indigenous character.⁷³ As this brief example helps to demonstrate, language is a complex medium central to the constitution of social being, and vital in shaping political action. It further helps to demonstrate the key role of the media and governmental authority in the reproduction of certain conceptual understandings, and the difficulty of formulating a coherent and effective response. This is a vital area of study for IR scholars, yet one only fully appreciated at the interpretative margins of the discipline. It is in this intellectual space that the methodology developed by the Cambridge School theorists can play an important role, and provide a means of critique.

IV. Conclusion

Jan Aart Scholte has called for IR to shift its energy and concentration to the study of social change.⁷⁴ Phillip Allot, meanwhile, has forcefully argued that ‘...the proper study of International Studies is humanity.’⁷⁵ The two, I would argue, are intimately connected, and are conjoined, through the constitutive medium of language, and its manifestation in the conceptual ordering of society. The study of world politics can thus fruitfully be (re)conceived of as the study of conceptual stasis and change. By exploring the manner in which vital concepts – the state, the nation, justice, security, sovereignty, globalisation, human rights - emerge, are defined, redefined, and become embedded we can see how they shape action, and are likewise shaped by it. We can consequently hope to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms through which social and political transformation is brought about, and how it can be (and has been) achieved in practice.

By understanding ‘politics itself as a language-system and language itself as a political system’⁷⁶ we can therefore begin to discern the forces that both constrain and enable us, as active agents, and which are both used against us and can in turn be employed by us. As such we can hope to gain a better understanding of how human beings shape the world around them, and consequently we can reach a more fully

⁷³ See Higgins, ‘The Zapatista Uprising and the Poetics of Cultural Resistance’, p.362-366.

⁷⁴ Jan Aart Scholte, ‘From Power Politics to Social Change: an Alternative Focus for International Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 19, no.1, 1993, pp.3-23.

⁷⁵ Phillip Allott, ‘Kant or Won’t: Theory and Moral Responsibility’ (The BISA Lecture, 1995), *Review of International Studies*, 23, 1997, pp.339-357.

⁷⁶ J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Verbalizing a Political Act: Towards a Politics of Speech’, in Shapiro (ed.), *Language and Politics*, p.26.

developed conception of the role of agency itself, its inherent limitations and transcendent possibilities. As Keith Michael Baker has reminded us

Human agents find their being within language; they are, to that extent, constrained by it. Yet they are constantly working with it and on it, playing at its margins, exploiting its possibilities, and extending the play of its potential meanings, as they pursue their purposes and projects. Although this play of discursive possibility may not be infinite, in any given linguistic context, it is always open to individual and collective actors.⁷⁷

A critical theoretic understanding of this position, as outlined in this essay, sees the role of the theorist as being to actively engage in and pursue the process of transformation, achievable through the malleability of the evaluative-descriptive concepts through which we order social and political life. Theory is thus regarded as an active intervention in practice, however limited and marginal. However, whilst affirming the possibility of a critical theory, of the project of critique, the understanding that this approach engenders sets practical limits on the endeavour, on what can realistically be achieved, as well as pointing out potential lines of action, all of which should be heeded by those studying IR. By stressing that the agent must conform, at least to some degree, with the linguistic conventions of the time and place, that they must partially rely on the political vocabularies available, the limits are sketched. Nevertheless, if change is possible, as I believe the Cambridge School approach helps to demonstrate, then it is the responsibility, if not the moral imperative of the (critical) theorist to attempt it.

⁷⁷ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.6, quoted in Edling & Mörkenstam, 'Quentin Skinner: From Historian of Ideas to Political Scientist', p.121.