zeitenblicke
Online journal für die Geschichtswissenschaften

zeitenblicke 12 (2013), Nr. 1

Doing Things with Intellectual History:

An Interview with Martin van Gelderen

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urn:nbn:de:0009-9-36170

Introduction

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Doing intellectual history is *eo ipso* to do something political. A key assumption to both contemporary and past masters of the discipline, intellectual history carries with it a normative scope that takes historical scholarship to be a subversive genre. In this sense, what sets intellectual history apart from other genres of history is its insistence on the passions, the intentions and motivations of the historian, an emphasis that is often suppressed in other genres of history. *Doing things* with history (to paraphrase J.L. Austin's famous and very telling book title)[1] does not, however, entail doing things exclusively for our own purposes: intellectual history should not be reduced to the kind of presentism favoured by, for example, David Harlan.[2] As the discipline has escaped the 'postmodern challenge' (as some commentators have phrased it),[3] what remains is a genuinely historical way of thinking, a way of thinking that stresses not only the historical entanglements or historicity of concepts, languages, discourses, political rhetoric, actors and ideas, but also the subversive nature of re-covering past political thought.

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Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s in both Europe and America alike, such figures as Quentin Skinner, John Pocock, John Dunn, Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck and others began (independently of each other) doing intellectual history as a form of political theorizing. As a major theme in current historiography, this endeavour has taken on as many different faces as there are historians practicing intellectual history. History became a way of relativising or questioning dominant normative political theories. For example, in his 1984 essay on negative liberty and in subsequent works (perhaps most notably in his *Liberty before Liberalism*), Skinner has launched a stanch critique of what he takes to be the predominant liberal concept of liberty today.[4] By unravelling a forgotten or lost conception of liberty and tracing the history of this concept, he points to a number of aspects in the modern debate on liberty often neglected by normative political theorists like John Rawls. In a general critique of the anachronistic aims of normative political theory, Skinner makes active use of historical contextualism or historicity as a subversive mode of

[1] John Langshaw Austin: How To Do Things With Words, Oxford 1962.
[2] David Harlan: Intellectual History and the Return of Literature, in: The American Historical Review 94 (1989), 581-609.
[3] Georg Iggers: Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge, with a New Epilogue, Middletown Connecticut 2005.
[4] See particularly Quentin Skinner: The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives, in: Quentin Skinner / Richard Rorty / Jerome Schneewind (eds.): Philosophy in History, Cambridge 1984, 193-225; Quentin Skinner: Liberty before Liberalism, Cambridge 1998; Quentin Skinner: Visions of Politics, Cambridge 2002.

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political theorizing – a project which, in recent years, has been adopted and adapted by political philosophers and theorists like James Tully, Philip Pettit and Maurizio Viroli.[5]

<3>
Independent from the developments in Anglo-American intellectual history, a similar trend was developed in Germany.[6] Working on a collective project on the history of key political and social concepts, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Koselleck developed an approach that aimed at historicizing contemporary normative concepts.[7] Through multiple studies of key political and social concepts, Koselleck and his co-workers (most notably Otto Brunner and Werner Conze) demonstrated how these concepts were not only setting normative standards for contemporary politics but also how they emerged out of contestation, out of specific political debates. Further, in French historiography, the – perhaps – most influential and innovative development of intellectual history was carried through by Foucault. Contrary to both Skinner and Koselleck, Foucault placed emphasis not on political language or concepts but rather on the sciences. Approaching fundamental discourses, practices, and institutions (within such fields as the humanities and medicine) as forms of power-relations, Foucault has sought to demonstrate how what were normally considered to be apolitical spheres were in themselves exponents of quasi-normativity.[8]

<4>
The author of numerous books, articles and essays on early modern religious and political thought as well as modern political theory, Martin van Gelderen has been a key figure in intellectual history over the past decades. Already from an early stage in his intellectual career, Martin van Gelderen developed strong connections to historical contextualism and political theory. Whilst writing his Ph.D. at the European University Institute (EUI), Skinner became the supervisor of Professor van Gelderen's dissertation on the Dutch Revolt. After finishing his Ph.D. in 1988, Martin van Gelderen took up a position in Technische Universität Berlin in 1989, where he was faced with the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte*. When he became Professor in Intellectual History in Sussex in 1995, he met a vibrant intellectual environment ready to engage with French post-structuralist philosophy, which had had a significant influence on Anglo-American cultural history. In 2003, Martin van Gelderen returned to the EUI, where he has held a Chair in European Intellectual History for the past 9 years.

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[5] On Skinner see especially Kari Palonen: Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric, Cambridge 2003. For the reception of this emphasis see James Tully: Philosophy in a New Key, Cambridge 2008; Philip Pettit: Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government, Oxford 1997; Maurizio Viroli: Republicanism, New York 2002.

[6] On the Cambridge School and *Begriffsgeschichte* in comparison see Melvin Richter: The History of Social and Political Concepts: A Critical Introduction, New York 1995; Kari Palonen: Die Entzauberung der Begriffe: Das Umschreiben der politischen Begriffe bei Quentin Skinner und Reinhart Koselleck, *Münster 2004; Kari Palonen: The History of Concepts as a Style of Political Theorizing: Quentin Skinner's and Reinhart Koselleck's Subversion of Normative Political Theory, in: European Journal of Political Theory 1 (2002), 91-106.*

[7] See for example Reinhart Koselleck: Richtlinien für das Lexikon politisch-sozialer Begriffe der Neuzeit, in: Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte 11 (1967), 81-99; Reinhart Koselleck: Einleitung, in: Otto Brunner / Werner Conze / Reinhart Koselleck (eds.): Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, Stuttgart 1972-1997, vol. 1. On Koselleck see also Niklas Olsen: History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck, New York 2012.

[8] See for example Michel Foucault: The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, London 1970; Michel Foucault: The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception, London 2003; Michel Foucault: Subject and Power, in: Hubert Dreyfus / Paul Rabinow (eds.): Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, Brighton 1982.

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We meet Martin on a December evening in his office in Villa Schifanoia, which is conveniently located in the hills of Fiesole with a view of Florence. As this is his last year at the EUI, Martin will once again move to Germany, where he will take up a position as Director of the Lichtenberg-Kolleg in Göttingen. In light of his many years as a practicing historian we asked Martin to reflect on his experiences with intellectual history (its past, its present and future), and to assess its prospects in terms of being both an intellectual and a political practice.

The Interview

<6>
Dear Professor Martin van Gelderen, you currently hold a chair in Intellectual History here at the Department of History and Civilization (HEC) at the European University Institute (EUI), the same place where you defended your doctoral thesis on the political thought of the Dutch Revolt in 1988. Before returning to the EUI in 2003, you worked at Technische Universität in Berlin and at University of Sussex. Could you begin by telling us a bit about why and how you entered the field of intellectual history? Where did you see the main sources of inspiration for your work, and has it changed since then?

<7>
Martin van Gelderen: I entered intellectual history because I was fed up with John Rawls. At the time, I studied social and cultural sciences in Rotterdam. The studies were a mixture of various fields, basically something between social history and political theory. In the 1970s political theory meant Rawls, so for five years I read Rawls. But one day I found a book in the university bookshop called *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, which seemed to fit well with my historical interests, most of all, perhaps, as it dealt with Lutheranism and Calvinism. I then asked my tutor whether I was allowed to include *The Foundations* for my exam. He did not find the book important in terms of political theory, but turned instead to the so-called Skinner debate on methodology that was taking place at that time. So, by working on this debate I was allowed to take the exam. During the exam I was asked if I had any critiques of the book and my immediate response was that it did not say much about the Netherlands. My tutor then proposed to me, 'Well, why don't you do that yourself!' That was how it all started.

<8>
And has it changed? First of all, when I first entered the field, it was not called intellectual history. In England, intellectual history was associated with Sussex where I happened to go in 1995. Initially, however, I did straightforward history of political thought and that was during the formative years of what is now called the Cambridge School. Back then it was actually not so clear what we were doing. What might seem like platitudes or common sense today (Quentin's writings on approaches to the history of political thought, for instance) were not that clear back then. It was, in that sense, quite exciting to be there.

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I think the field has changed enormously during the last thirty or forty years. Firstly, the history of political thought has become an established field, a Kuhnian paradigm if you want. Secondly, there are many rival approaches in the field. Finally – and for me, perhaps, most importantly – intellectual history as it was done in Sussex has taken over. The triangle of John Burrow, Donald Winch, and Stefan Collini did a completely different kind of history compared to the history of political thought as it was done in Cambridge by historians such as Quentin, John Dunn, and even G. Stedman Jones. So, the scholars I worked with, and those from Oxford, tried to distinguish themselves from the other paradigm in an attempt to bring history and literature together. I have, I may add, never done that in their way, as I did not have those literary skills. My interest, then, was to bring in things like painting and other visual sources (I was working on the Dutch 17th century) as

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well as religion, which was always a permanent factor in Sussex. In that sense, the changes have been huge, just inside the confines of Europe.

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Does your German experience play any role here?

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MvG: Yes, actually this was deeply embarrassing. I went to Germany in April 1989, and I was invited to a German professorial party. I was told that I was going to meet Jürgen Kocka, but I had never heard of him! Unless you were engaged with the Second World War, Germany was not on the intellectual horizon of a Dutch history student. So, neither the Bielefeld School nor the tradition of German *Geistesgeschichte* was part of my intellectual interests in 1989. One of the most confusing questions I faced at the time was to what extent I was doing the same thing as Meinecke. This was a question largely left unanswered by the Cambridge School. So, I started to investigate the issue much later when people constantly asked how modern approaches to intellectual history relate to the classical traditions, especially German idealism and the Meinecke School. I got engaged with these questions around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall. I got an invitation to give a lecture to the East German Dutch Society for the Study of Cultural History on the relationship between Prussia and the Netherlands. This brought me to the work of Gerhard Oestreich, who was a pupil of Fr. Meinecke. And, as it turned out, during my German period, the relationship between the Dutch and German cultures in the 17th and 18th centuries became a central point of interest.

<12>
Looking at the past few decades, we can count a wide variety of approaches to intellectual history, differing on such key issues as the object of study as well as the aim and scope of writing this kind of history. Martin, with your background in Cambridge School contextualism, how do you see your position in relation to competing approaches to intellectual history such as Begriffsgeschichte or more genealogical perspectives? On what issues do you share a common ground with these approaches and where do you part ways?

<13>
MvG: Due to my German experience, my encounter has mostly been with *Begriffsgeschichte*, and I've been reluctant to say that this is all the same. But let me start by saying that the Cambridge School is a slightly elusive concept as it stands for a variety of approaches. What binds it together is the Cambridge University Press. As I often say, the fact that there is a Cambridge School is not only due to the intellectual endeavours of Quentin, Dunn, Stedman Jones, John Pocock, Peter Laslett and so on, who are all very individualist scholars, but above all due to a fact that there was a publisher, Richard Fisher, who kept it all together in terms of publications. That has created more unity than their historical approaches.

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Of course, *Begriffsgeschichte* and contextualism share some common principles but they differ in terms of their philosophical background. The Cambridge School has been involved with authors like Collingwood, Wittgenstein, and Austin. If you compare that with *Begriffsgeschichte*, there is an immense difference. The latter was born out of the philosophical engagement with Carl Schmitt (at least in Reinhart Koselleck's case), Martin Heidegger, and Hans Georg Gadamer, as well as the works of historians like Werner Conze and Otto Brunner, whose pasts were slightly stained. From a philosophical perspective these backgrounds do not square.

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The historical situation in which *Begriffsgeschichte* arose is also quite different. For Koselleck and for all his pupils, the immense domination of social history induced and forced them into an engagement with social history. Koselleck's main interest has always been to ground social history *in* discourse and, in particular, *in* concepts, but also to see the changes *in* concepts and to investigate the constitutive interaction between the social and discursive forces that shape history. These interests came from his engagement with German historiography. In the English case, social history was not the dominant other, and the division of labour between social history and intellectual history was clear. The target of Skinner and others was traditional political history as practiced by Geoffrey Elton (here you have to read Quentin's most venomous attack on Elton to understand what that meant) and John H. Plumb. Those were the people they were reacting against. So, if we talk about the relationship between intellectual history and social history, there was sort of a division of labour. Only Stedman Jones and his followers tried to contribute to a more systematic engagement between intellectual history and social history, which was mainly triggered by Jones' interest in 19th century Marxism.

<16>
Looking at intellectual history today, it is easy to say that there is a plurality of approaches but, at the same time, there is common ground. However, I think there are very important philosophical differences between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the Cambridge School and I do not regard myself as a conceptual historian. In terms of changes, French cultural and literary theory ranging from Foucault to Baudrilliard to Derrida as well as the new social theorists in France have been much more important for the Anglophone world. They often work in the same areas as intellectual historians. And in addition to this I would also single out the rise of cultural history, the history of the book and the history of reading.

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Over the past decades, Kevin Sharpe (a good friend of mine who sadly passed away some time ago) has been a major source of dispute, discussion and friendship – and he was a cultural historian. He came to the study of political thought from a very different perspective than I did; he came from the background of revisionism, the rise of cultural history in England, which was closely linked to an engagement with French thinkers. Again, the French thinkers were of crucial importance. That, however, changed after 1995. French cultural theory went down and so did, perhaps, French culture in general, at least as a point of reference for Anglo-American scholars.

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Today you have a plurality of approaches that no longer have the same methodological identity that they had 20 years ago. I find that quite healthy but they are not all the same. And what is driving the field today are many pragmatic concerns. At the EUI, for example, we are talking about comparative and transnational issues. You can pick up the term freedom and ask what does it mean in French, German, English or Dutch? Or even in Korean or Brazilian, as today we are searching for global history. So, from that perspective the history of concepts is quite promising. But, if you work on the border line of literature and history, which continues to be popular in England, then what happens in cultural history or literary theory is much more important there than what happens in the history of concepts.

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Did postmodernism play any role here?

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MvG: My experience of postmodernism, which I encountered above all in my Sussex-years, is that it has been incredibly enriching. The postmodernists asked pertinent questions about crucial

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notions such as objectivity, truth and meaning; they widened the scope of the political and brought to our attention a much richer notion of culture. Postmodernism has raised a number of questions that historians have refused to engage with. I think that is a vital failure; to withdraw oneself from these methodological debates. Postmodernism, though, probably did not give many answers, it mainly raised questions. The challenge for your generation lies in this: more clashing, no more methodological stillness. Historians are way too happy withdrawing into their empirical canon.

<21>
Now, considering what you call 'a plurality of approaches' as well as more culturally inspired approaches, you have argued that neither the Cambridge School nor Begriffsgeschichte is equipped to deal with visual sources. Do you see this as a contribution to the kind of cultural approach to intellectual history of which we have been talking?

<22>
MvG: What I often discussed with Kevin was what we nowadays call the material turn, particularly the materiality of paintings. I am currently working on a book about Rembrandt and you cannot talk about Rembrandt if you do not recognize the material aspects of his work: the thickness of paint, the kind of paper he uses for his engravings, the popularity of his engravings. How to deal with all that is a major issue that comes out from cultural history. The question is what do we gain from visual approaches? Are there more to visual sources than to words? How do you relate word and image to each other? The wariness of people in art history and in the new visual studies has led people to think that you can read Rembrandt. But you cannot read Rembrandt in the same way as you read Spinoza and Grotius. In Rembrandt there is something different; you have to take into account the materiality of his work, its spatiality. Paintings and engravings, for instance, often deliberately engage you in a mathematical and geometrical perspective, where a special interaction is of crucial importance. Considering texts and books, all this is very different. Reception, or the gaze as it is called in visual studies, is different from reading. The consumption and the reception of the visual is a different kind of experience. This, I think, is important when you start to widen your horizon beyond the canonical perspectives that have dominated the Cambridge School.

<23>
What, then, has changed? To put it in another way: what has not changed in the Cambridge School's engagement with the past is the centrality of figures such as Locke and Hobbes. In this sense, I was always a bit of an outsider as I was working on Dutch pamphlets. Later, though, I saw that one needs big names, so I started working on Grotius. But, in principle, I have always felt a bit hesitant. I have always thought that one of the crucial innovations of the Cambridge School is the idea that the pamphlets are at least as important as the canonical texts of Hobbes, Locke, Grotius, Spinoza or Kant; in their own way, these second rate popularisers can be as important and innovative as the classical texts. I still cling to that, I think we should do more about it and try to recognize it much more strongly. It helps to widen your perspective. For instance, if you begin asking questions about arguments on religious tolerance in the 17th century, one of the main contributors to this debate, at least in the Netherlands, would (perhaps) be this painter rather than Grotius or Spinoza. So, in that sense, things have changed.

<24>
There is a rich plurality not only in Europe but also in the US, where we encounter the Straussians, the group formed around Martin Jay, the group associated with the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (which has revived or brought back classical history of ideas), and New Historicism. But not everything has changed. In Anglo-American circles, for example, what has not changed much is the immense focus on the canon. The only thing that has happened here is that the canon has

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been slightly broadened. Where you traditionally would jump from Machiavelli to Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, today you would see that as a little short sighted. Instead you would do Machiavelli and Erasmus, Luther and Calvin, Vitoria and Grotius and Hobbes; you would do Spinoza, who has been subject of one of the most important rehabilitations of past decades, and you would do Locke, Toland and Montesquieu before moving on to Rousseau. The canon has become bigger but it is still made up by important texts by individual writers, and much less the kind of discursive formations put forth, for example, by the pamphleteers that I worked on.

<25>
In relation to this, it is interesting to note that you are currently working on a book about Rembrandt, which combines contextualism and the visual turn. Not many intellectual historians work with these kinds of sources, so would you say a few words about the methodology you apply as well as the aim of the book?

<26>
The aim of the book is to show that there were possibilities in the 17th century for dialogues between religions, from which we can learn a great deal in the present day. There were media that enabled these kinds of discussions and painting was one of them. The medium of painting enabled Rembrandt to discuss political issues that could not have been discussed in another form. What I think I can see in Rembrandt's engravings is a possibility of leaving many elements of meaning to the viewer, that is, without explicitly deciding what exact meaning and interpretation they should have. This is a kind of toleration. This is very much my personal interest.

<27>
It seems that the traditional argument of Cambridge school, and what you are now doing with Rembrandt, is that you have classical problems discussed by figures like Locke and Hobbes. And in order to understand them we need to broaden the perspective. So what the Cambridge School traditionally did was to look at pamphleteers, minor political figures, as part of the context of these major figures. And it seems what they are doing now is also to take into account visual sources in this broadening context.

<28>
If you look at the *Ideas in Context,* which is *the* expression of the Cambridge School, you see a remarkable continuity. Many of those books are still focusing on canonical figures. I do not think that we pay enough attention to pamphleteers, for example, nor to the wider range of sources we encounter with the visual turn. In fact, Quentin's own work is to some extent an exception, particularly if we consider what he is doing today. And, as for the visual sources, they were a hobby, which I shared with Kevin.

<29>
Skinner also wrote some pieces on Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Buon Governo, which can be seen in the Palazzo Publico in Siena. But this is, as you see it, more along the lines of reading the artwork?

<30>
That is the artist as a political philosopher. What it is striking to see here is that when you look at the methodological writings of the Cambridge School, visuality does not play much of a role. Lorenzetti is being read *as* a pre-Republican thinker, so there is not much about the colour of his paintings – even though we talked about it in private. From the perspective of visual studies, however, that would be a major source of critique. There has not really been a systematic, methodological engagement with visual sources. On the other hand, however, art historians who have been very keen on linking painters to broader intellectual trends have not presented that

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much either. Their attempt to contextualize painters has not been that rigorous and certainly do not live up to the contextualism of the Cambridge School, *Begriffsgeschichte*, or even classical History of Ideas.

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You have mainly worked on early modern European history. This period has also been the main focus of many Cambridge School historians in the history of political thought. Looking at your work as well as the work of these historians, it seems there is a strong link between method, periodisation and empirical focus: that is to say, that in working on early modern history, the Cambridge School historians seem primarily to be interested in particular kinds of debates as well as particular kinds of people engaged in these debates. Considering this, is the Cambridge School approach limited to early modern intellectual history? Would it be prosperous to apply this methodology to other historical periods or different empirical sources?

<32>
MvG: Absolutely, and for several reasons. First of all, if you write about Grotius or Hobbes, you must realise – and this is absolutely essential – that you can only do this if you have a rather erudite knowledge of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian; or to put it differently, you must master the classical tradition, the medieval tradition, the early modern tradition as well as the seventeenth century tradition. So, while the focus may be seventeenth century, the requirements of the kind of history represented by the Cambridge School is that you must have a profound knowledge of everything that went on before. In that sense, intellectual history is the branch of history that is least affected by the periodisation debate. Periodisation simply is not important in intellectual history, and, therefore, I never regarded myself as an early modernist.

<33>
This is also related to a second point. Right from the beginning, the choices of topic and the debates on which intellectual historians would focus were highly political. Republicanism as a shared European heritage, for example, was a strong cultural and political choice. To argue that this was an alternative European tradition, culture or line of thought was something political right from the start. The study of political thought was never art for art's sake; history of political thought always aims at opening up historical perspectives that may have been forgotten and that could shed light on debates that we are involved in today. The Freedom and the Construction of Europe Project, which we recently did here, was, perhaps, the most outspoken example of that. With that project we sought to present a number of perspectives on freedom, which happened to be early modern, and to show that we could actually learn something from these past debates on freedom, not in terms of direct applications, but in terms of broadening our own horizon – to put it in a Gadamerian way – and as a sort of inspiration. That has always been the constitutive moment in what we have been doing. Indeed, anybody who has met Quentin or any other member of the Cambridge School realises after five minutes that these are very political figures, they are not just scholars who sit in their studies only to do "scholarly" work. It is, I think, a fundamental misunderstanding to think that historical contextualism as propagated by the Cambridge School had no political dimension to it. Quite to the contrary. In recent years, this has become more evident, and for several reasons. Partly because of the publication of Quentin's inaugural lecture, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, which put it out into the open (although it had been going on before that as well), and partly because politics has become more infantile. Indeed, as politicians have become less and less intellectual, I strongly believe that we have to be engaged, it is our civic duty as historians and scholars always to be politically engaged.

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In my country, in the Netherlands, to take an example, when people think that you can appeal to traditions of Dutch freedom and use them to condemn integration, then I take it to be my civic duty to point out that the founding fathers to which they appeal were actually defenders of the right of immigration, and that modern politicians, as far as the concept of freedom is concerned, got it completely and utterly wrong. This is my civic duty, and since the early 1990s I have felt this way about it – although I now, like Skinner, state it much more openly. That is, I think, an important trend.

<35>
Further, being politically engaged is also important because, in being so, it yet again becomes possible to build bridges with political theory. One of the things I have found most problematic over the past few decades was the widening gap between history of political thought and political theory. Rawls, to name one, became immensely influential due to this gap. So, there were two industries, and both political theory and history of political thought were successful in terms of publishing, and both were going their separate way. But now, perhaps, we have the opportunity to start building bridges, and I think that is extremely important. So, to be an early modernist does not only require knowledge of the classics but also knowledge about current day politics and society. In that sense, the Cambridge School has not been so predominantly interested in the early modern period as people often think. That would entail only looking at what they write on, which is to say that if you write a book on Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza or Grotius then you are engaged in early modern history. But actually you are also engaged in contemporary political theory and you are engaged in the classics. So, if you write a book on Hobbes and have no knowledge about Carl Schmitt or *vice versa*, then something is absolutely wrong. You are therefore never only engaged in early modern intellectual history. The scope is much wider, and that is, I think, what makes intellectual history so interesting. I am not really worried about any gaps between medieval history and early modern, nor any gaps between early modern history and contemporary history: I fundamentally think that such distinctions are of no importance as far as intellectual history is concerned.

<36>
Lets return for a moment to the research project Freedom and the Construction of Europe, which you directed together with Skinner and is soon to be published. The project title implicitly suggests that the European intellectual heritage holds a certain value. In what sense is it possible to talk about Europe or European values? What are these in the first place and how can we, if at all, avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentrism in writing about the old continent and its values?

<37>
I do not mind being Eurocentric. I find it big enough and that is partly autobiographical: I am part of the first generation in three that did not fight against Germany but worked in Germany. It is a country I have come to love very much. For my father and my grandfather that would have been difficult. But one of the reasons why you engage with Europe is because of that legacy: Europe is at peace. We sit here, at the EUI, in peace and we talk about intellectual history; 70 years ago, we were fighting against each other. It was a continent at war and that is what Europe was all about.

<38>
Today, I find it quintessential for intellectual historians to recover what other kind of European values have been constitutive for the current debates on Europe. So, we called the project Freedom and the Construction of Europe but, in the two volumes which will soon appear, we sought to open a whole range of perspectives on freedom. We tried to argue that Freedom is enforced in religious debates, in debates on the freedom of the person, on the freedom of the state as well as in debates on the boundaries of freedom: where does freedom stop, and what kind of

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freedom exists outside of Europe? How did it feed into historical thinking and what role did freedom play in the construction or constructions of "Europes", in the plural. At the same time, of course, we sought to explore to what extent such a crucial concept as the concept of freedom – perhaps *the* most central Western value ever to exist – actually was constitutive in the construction of Europe. Whether freedom as a political value actually underpins Europe in any sense. And if so, which Europe does it underpin and what conception of Europe comes out of these debates? This transcends a mere geographical conception of Europe. Is it a conception of Europe as a group of intellectuals, the republic of letters, people involved in networks of correspondence, or is it a vision of Europe as a cultural entity or a religious entity?

<39>
In that sense, you try to contribute to debates on European values without giving direct answers because that is what you do as a philosopher or political theorist. The two volumes in question still try to be distinctly historical, although almost every chapter makes a bridge and opens up various kinds of perspectives that are not just historical. And in this sense, this particular kind of intellectual history has become highly important. That is something we share and that is why we have done two huge projects together, which both feature Europe in their titles. That is a concern for Europe along cultural, intellectual and historical lines, but again also political lines. We do not consider it as the task of giving the right answers or recipes but to insist that if you are engaging in debates on such crucial questions as freedom, it is absolutely of the essence that we do not forget history or its historical dimension.

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In fact, here at this Institute, as we become driven more and more towards policy, one of my big concerns is that when public policy-makers, political scientists, lawyers and economists talk about the fundamental values that underpin Europe, the values that are debated at the moment in Europe, they have no idea of the historical dimension. They talk about immigration, and they have not got a clue that we have been discussing this for the past 500 years. Actually, the writings of the Spanish neo-scholastics in 1530 are historically and philosophically much more sophisticated than anything I have read on this issue by contemporary political theorists in the last twenty years. And that is the case if you are missing the historical dimension, there's something wrong with a project that claims to be European. And I think there is a crucial task for intellectual historians. And to make it clear, the aim is not to be presentist or not solely to be presentist, but neither is it to shy away from the present.

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Do you see this as an issue that is interesting only for Europeans or also for the rest of the world, i.e. Freedom and the Construction of Europe?

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I want to be very modest here. I come from a colonial country and the colonial past, as I see it, is a black page – the worst part of Dutch history. I am a bit afraid that the current drift towards globalisation, however useful and important, can also take us away from the black pages of European history. I would rather stay with that for the moment. I find it a somewhat pretentious to go to, say, Jakarta and tell people there that they should look at freedom in this or that way after we have been ruining the place substantially for 300 years or so. That is not, I think, a very useful approach, and certainly it is not my approach.

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Now we would like to ask you about the normative or political role of the historian. In the past decade or so, one of the main divides within the field of intellectual history has been the question

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of normativity and this problematic has once more directed our attention to the public role of the historian as well as to the relations between the historian and the past. Whereas some historians have taken a somewhat critical stand on this issue, others have been more appreciative, seeing it as a way of influencing current policies. Consequently, this could add to the study of the past a normative flavour, potentially upsetting the fine balance between historicity and the situated nature of historical understanding, including political, social or even racial motivations. Now, taking into account your work on republicanism as well as your reassessment of Carl Schmitt's reading of Hugo Grotius and international law, you seem to engage with key concepts of current political debates. When, or where, does the historian of political thought stop being an historian and enter the realm of politics?

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MvG: I have never seen any distinction here. I cannot imagine doing history of political thought without being engaged or taking an interest in current politics; I cannot imagine any kind of history that has no political ramifications. When I study discourses on freedom, of course I am intersecting with politics from a historical perspective. This emphasis on current politics, which is the one that the Cambridge School faces, is not at odds with historicity and the respect for the past other. Indeed, I think, the kind of historicity that we favour implies the respect for the historical other, it implies trying to understand authors, pamphleteers, painters, philosophers and politicians in their own right. In itself, this is a normative adventure; it is based on a certain idea of normativity that entails an ethical respect for the past thinkers with whom we are engaged. But I have never seen this kind of historicity as being at odds with any kind of questions engaged with current politics, with ethical or economic thought. As I take it, these questions can benefit immensely from this kind of historical perspective. I think, for example, that if you want to understand the current debates on economics, you should start by reading *Riches and Poverty* by Donald Winch, which will teach you about the richness of the debates on riches and poverty – both in terms of political, ethical and economic aspects. So, in studying political, ethical or economic thought we can uncover something that has otherwise been lost (it has certainly been lost by bankers who have ruined this world) and that is quite an important lesson.

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I have always thought that this kind of approach means an engagement with a range of current issues, be they political or religious. I am not, for example, writing about Arminianism, predestination and free will without thinking that these kinds of debates are important to current issues, nor without thinking that these debates are of immense importance within Christianity. The same is true, say, for scholars doing 18th century aesthetics. This is, perhaps, one of the things setting intellectual history apart from other kinds of history; it is outspokenly presentist and it is thoroughly entangled (as far as the history of political thought is concerned) with current politics. But still, doing intellectual history in this way cannot exist without a certain combination of historicity, as this concept is understood by different schools of intellectual history, and contemporary concerns. Just before, we talked a little about Koselleck. Koselleck was preoccupied with present concerns and his whole work was driven by his worries about or his experience of 1945, that is, his coming to terms with German history, his own past, as well as his worries for liberal democracy in Germany. This makes him a quintessential political figure.

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As you put it, there are a number of ways of dealing with this question. But it is not like there is anyone today who would, like Geoffrey Elton did, say that we have to be interested in the past for it's own sake. History has usefulness. Some would say that we, by way of analogy, can use past politics in order to understand contemporary politics and that would be on the level of understanding. Others would be more interested in influencing contemporary politics, in moving the

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debate and, again, there are numerous ways of doing that, for instance, by acting as 'public intellectuals' or by thinking more subversively about contemporary politics. Where would you place intellectual history?

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MvG: Sure, you can move the debate in many ways. You can become a direct participant and then you should, perhaps, join a political party. You can, as you mentioned, become a kind of public intellectual, which also includes a kind of direct political participation. It is perhaps more the political commentator who does not have to be at the front line of politics. And, of course, you can be the kind historian who does not seek to influence political debates directly but to contribute to the preservation of some cultural legacy. Historians, however, have been much too shy in asserting the centrality of their vocation in regard to contemporary politics and culture. They have become much too submissive. Of course you can only assert that if you are willing to become a public intellectual in one or another way. But historians in many countries have taken a sort of a backseat role and they are very happy with that role. One of the things that, quite frankly, irritate me here at the EUI, where many public policy-makers come to visit, is that this also goes the other way. I do not like public policy-makers who do not know anything about history. As I see it, they can only make the wrong choices. And if you, as an institution like the EUI, think that you should be engaged in public policy-making, then you need to recognise the role of history. At the moment, this recognition is certainly not strong enough in this Institute – or anywhere else, for that matter. Perhaps one of the biggest failures of European integration is that policy-makers do not realise the essential importance of the study of history. This neglect is, perhaps, not catastrophic but certainly detrimental.

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Indeed, to return to Elton, he strongly believed that the figure of the political historian was of essential relevance. History was a vital part of culture and Elton could not imagine any proper education without it. He could not, I think, imagine any banker who had no culture. Along this general line, Elton shared something with intellectuals like Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom and with the current writings of Tony Grafton, who is an excellent intellectual historian: each of these writers stress the intrinsic cultural value of history – of writing history and of reading history.

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In this regard, one of my main educational worries is that it has become too much driven by questions of utility and instrumentality. We have become too focused on 'skills' as something you can apply directly. If you have writing skills, you become a writer; if we teach you managerial skills, we think you can become a manager. Now that is a utilitarian conception of education which I think is highly detrimental for the future of our cultures – within Europe and across the world. This notion fundamentally under-appreciates and misrecognises the importance of culture as one of the things that keep human beings friendly, gentle and kind to each other – that is, not killing each other. It is one of the things that prevent you from pursuing greed forever because, for instance, you may have read something about virtue. I really think that education should go back to this. As Grafton wrote recently, slow food is better than fast food, and we should learn once again that slow research is better than fast research – and there is great wisdom in those words. It is going to be a huge fight to do that. It is one of the things I will try to do in Göttingen, to replace this utilitarian notion of education with a humanist notion of the human sciences – the function is humane.

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One of the most pressing issues we face today is that a lot of people in policy-making positions or high economic positions have no idea of culture. They might consume it but they do not interiorise it. I think, at the moment, as far as history and culture are concerned, there is too much

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consumption, not enough engagement. You cannot just consume culture, you have to engage with it; and you have to learn to engage with it, otherwise we go back to being barbarians. I strongly believe in that. Edmond Burke is quite right in this regard, civility is something that you have to learn, you have to educate it, it does not come automatically. So, as far as you put your emphasis on utility, making money and economic growth, you should not be surprised that bankers have no culture – that is what we taught them, that is how we asked them to be. Now that also means that if you then think that this has become a problem, the answer is not – or not just – to increase the competence of the European Central Bank but to reflect on the fact that maybe these people needs some civility and that maybe the educational sector has a responsibility here: and maybe historians should actually claim that responsibility. That is something we do not do often enough. Of course, there are historians who appear in the media and who like to do so. But there is a fine line between entertainment and cultural formation, and maybe you need to be entertaining these days in order to be influential in education and the formation of culture. Entertainment and culture do not exclude each other, not at all, they go together, but you cannot reduce history to entertainment. On the other hand, you cannot say that historians have their own ivy-tower and that that is the world we live in. It is not an either-or situation. That is something we have not done enough of.

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Now, if we take it that doing intellectual history also includes doing something political, what, then, is it that we can offer? What Elton offers, what Strauss, Bloom and other Straussians (some of whom made it to high political office) offer, and what the Cambridge school offers is rather different in the end. They look at some of the same figures and traditions, but they do so in completely different ways. What figures and what kind of traditions should we look at in dealing with contemporary problems? And what can we gain from this?

<52>
Republicanism has, of course, been absolutely central to me, and I am not only writing about it out of historical interest but also because I am a republican. If you talk about citizenship, and if you talk about notions of politics, then I do think these notions or ideals of civility are of primary importance. So if you want to shape society, it is done not only by good laws, as Machiavelli puts it, but also by good manners. We have forgotten some of that. If you talk about citizenship in a European context, if you waffle about what it means to be a European citizen then please tell me what it entails in terms of rights and in terms of duties. If you are not able to do that – as is the case with current politicians – then it is very good to turn to Madison and Grotius in order to learn what citizenship actually means. To begin with, citizens talk, they do not listen – that is a lesson they have not yet learned in Brussels. That is something you can do with republicanism. Likewise, republicanism entails a separation of powers, it argues against factionalism and the power of money. As John McCormick points out in his book on *Machiavellian Democracy*, republican ideas were born out of an enormous concern that money and luxury would corrupt politics and how to keep them under control – and I think he is absolutely right. So, you go back to the republican tradition in order to learn virtue, decency and to be wary of money. That is a very good lesson these days. You go back to natural law theory if you are worried about human rights. As the work of Jeremy Waldron shows, you cannot really write about torture or genocide or the rights of integration if you have not got any notion of what such things as right and human nature is all about. In this regard, natural law theory is an immense reservoir of intellectual and political richness. So, if you want to talk about these issues, then you should go back to Vitoria, who can tell you much more about almost any current issue in the human rights debate than any current political theorists are able to do. These are crucial concerns.

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This is also why we did the book on freedom. Today, people talk about freedom in a thoroughly simplistic way. Let us open up the dimensions of freedom. We often forget, when talking about freedom, that it used to be about religion. That is an important lesson that somehow seems to be forgotten. If we, for example, look at the current debates about Islam, this does not seem to be affected by the kind of religious freedom for which the Reformation was fought.

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Now, to sum up the argument, it seems that if politicians today do not take into account these rich intellectual traditions, they will fall prey to the accusations made by Jeremy Bentham, namely that when they talk of, for instance, human rights, it will become nonsense on stilts.

<55>
Politicians these days run the risk that everything they talk about becomes nonsense upon stilts, and it is, I think, up to the historian to tell them that they are becoming factious. I do not, of course, claim that everybody should be as intellectually important as Gladstone or that all liberals today should be like John Stuart Mill but, for goodness sake, how good would it be if every European liberal party had just one Mill in their midst. Likewise, I do not say that the socialists should all become like Marx again but it would be extremely useful for them to have someone in their midst of the same intellectual quality as Marx, one who would put into their writings the same intellectual standards that Marx had for himself. Not to have figures of the same intellect as Mill or Marx is highly risky for democracy. In a democracy, there must be a marriage between culture and politics. You cannot have one without the other – you cannot have culture without politics, nor politics without culture – and at the moment in Europe, we run the risk of having politicians without culture.

<56>
Thank you for your time and your answers.

Interview Panel:

All interviewers are currently PhD researchers at the European University Institute in Florence.

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Secelcted publications of Martin van Gelderen:
http://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/410553.html

Empfohlene Zitierweise:

Martin van Gelderen: Doing Things with Intellectual History: An Interview with Martin van Gelderen By Brian Kjær Olesen, Jonas Gerlings, Kaarlo Havu, Daniel Knegt, Matti La Mela, and Thomas Ø. Wittendorff, in: *zeitenblicke* 12, Nr. 1 [10.06.2013], URL:
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