

# Context(s)

DIALOGUES BETWEEN THE  
HISTORY OF IDEAS AND  
POLITICAL THEORY

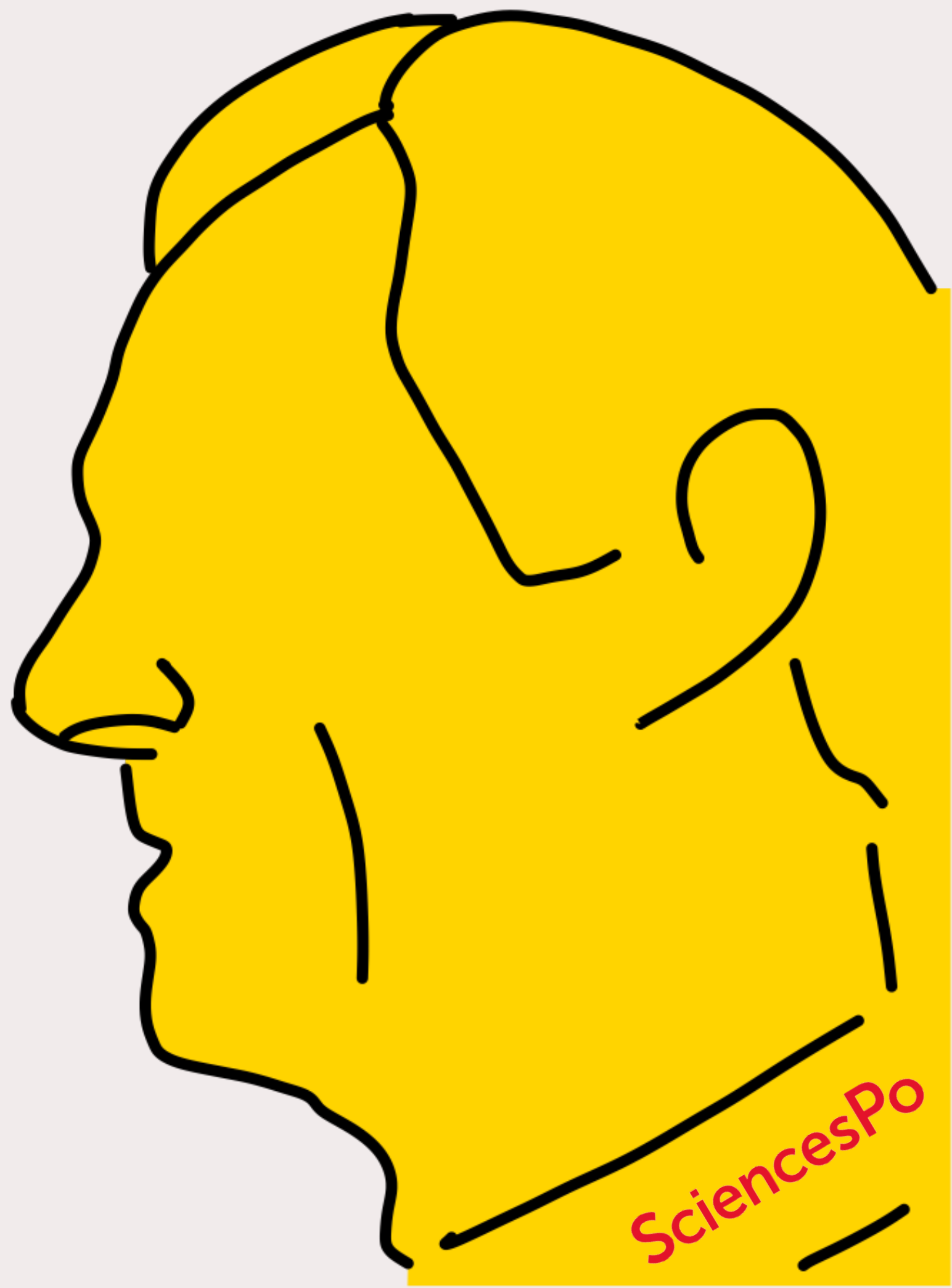
8TH GRADUATE CONFERENCE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

QUENTIN  
SKINNER

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2021  
PARIS, FRANCE

CEVIPOF - ECOLE DOCTORALE



# Context(s)

## **DIALOGUES BETWEEN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS AND POLITICAL THEORY**

We are pleased to announce that the Eighth Graduate Conference on Political Theory will take place at Sciences Po (Paris) in a hybrid format (both face-to-face and remotely) on the 4th and 5th of November 2021.

For this occasion, we are looking for contributions from PhD students in French or English. The conference is open to different approaches in political philosophy and theory (analytical, historical, normative, critical, etc.) but also from other disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, literature or linguistics. Our aim is to bring together doctoral students from all over the world with different methodological approaches. In recent years, the Graduate Conference has established itself as one of the major events in Europe for PhD students in political theory.

This 2021 edition will be dedicated to the work of Quentin Skinner and the dialogue between history of ideas and political theory. Prof. Skinner will honour us with his presence at the event. He will give a lecture entitled 'History, Political Philosophy and the Cambridge School'.

From the 1970s onwards, Quentin Skinner and the "Cambridge School" have renewed the methodology of the history of political ideas. Against an ethereal approach to theoretical texts, conceived as answers to universal questions, they have insisted on the importance of taking into account the context of the discourse. But this contextualism does not mean thinking of ideas as pure products of their time. Political theory then seems to find a home in this ambiguity between freedom and dependence on its context.

The conference will be organised around workshops, during which the following themes will be addressed (subject to change according to the contributions received):

- The place of the History of Ideas in political theory
- The implicit in political theory texts
- The position of the researcher: should we contextualise our own research and how?

# 1) THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS IN POLITICAL THEORY

In this section, we are interested in the history of political thought: when we study authors of the past, we are led both to distance ourselves from their thought (notably by contextualising it) and to detect bridges without which these past contributions would be unusable for us (because they are radically other, with concepts and reflections that are unsuitable to speak to our contemporary political questioning). It is this tension between distance and proximity to past political thought that we wish to explore. Can we weave a red thread through the history of political thought via its main concepts (the state, justice, etc.)? What role should the history of political thought play in the formation of solutions to contemporary political problems?

## SOME IDEAS OF CONTRIBUTIONS:

### • TRUTH AND HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

Is there a true discourse on past political realities?

Should we still be looking for the truth of the past?

Should the question of the truth of statements be set aside when doing the history of political thought?

### • ONTOLOGY OF POLITICAL OBJECTS

Is there a permanence of political objects and issues over time?

Are there any transhistorical and de-temporalized political questions that can be taken out of their discursive context?

Are all political concepts, including the most abstract ones, historical?

Is there a linguistic illusion that leads political scientists to believe that the same words can be used to question different realities?

### • EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

What are the epistemological premises of the genealogical approach to political concepts?

Is the epistemological impossibility of moving beyond our contemporary conceptual frameworks problematic in political theory?

Is there an emic (immanent) study of past political problems, or is it necessarily etic (transcendent)?

Can the concepts of the past inform our contemporary political questions?



## **2) "TEXTS ARE ACTS": REVEALING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THEORETICAL DISCOURSES**

Drawing on Austin's theory of the illocutionary act, Quentin Skinner argues that the historian of ideas should interpret texts as acts. In order to grasp the meaning of a text, it is therefore necessary to understand what positions the authors have taken with regard to the ideas and conventions of their time.

How can we reveal the beliefs, myths, and imaginary that are specific to an era and shared by the author in question? We expect author studies that allow us to understand the implicit intentions of a theoretical text and the 'subjectivity' of an era.

### **SOME IDEAS OF CONTRIBUTIONS:**

- **EXAMPLES OF CASE STUDIES**

The meaning of the word 'people' in revolutionary discourse in 1848

The situation of an 18th century text in relation to the colonial imaginary of its time

The myth of progress in "X [author]"

- **HOW TO REVEAL THE IMPLICIT IN THEORETICAL DISCOURSES?**

What methods should be used to select a corpus?

How to delimit a (con)text?

What dialogue between the text and its period?

How and whether to prioritise the types of texts (primary and secondary)?

### **3) THE IMPLICATIONS OF STANDPOINT THEORY FOR CONTEMPORARY RESEARCHERS**

In his work, Skinner insists on the necessity of contextualizing the texts we read and aim to understand; but can and should we do the same for the texts we write? Some contemporary works stress the importance of theorists adopting a more reflexive attitude to their work and methods, so as to interrogate the potential links between their intellectual production and their social and political positioning.

From this perspective, recognising the situated nature of one's own thinking would facilitate a critical enterprise that aims, among other things, to highlight certain structures of power or oppression, and the ways in which these affect how we produce and access knowledge. The aim here is to question this postulate and to question the place that the figure of the researcher should take in research itself.

#### **SOME IDEAS OF CONTRIBUTIONS:**

- **RESEARCH ETHICS**

Is it possible and/or desirable for a theorist to seek to contextualise their own work?

Does research ethics require such reflexive work?

- **STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY**

Are we better able to understand the mechanisms of a form of oppression when we experience it ourselves?

Does the recognition of the situated nature of knowledge production necessarily lead to relativism?

Should political theory strive for neutrality, or can it legitimately claim to be activist?

## **PRACTICAL INFORMATION:**

Only contributions from doctoral students will be accepted. Each workshop (about two hours) will be devoted to the presentation of two or three papers, followed by a discussion with the audience. All workshops will be chaired by a Sciences Po doctoral student.

Breakfast and lunch will be provided for both days of the conference. Transportation and accommodation for participants will not be reimbursed.

### **• HOW TO CONTRIBUTE**

If you wish to submit a contribution, please send to [gradconf2021@gmail.com](mailto:gradconf2021@gmail.com)

An anonymous 300 word abstract (in PDF format)

A document (Word format) indicating your name, the title of your contribution and the institution with which you are affiliated. Please specify whether, given present knowledge of your circumstances, you would participate in the conference in person or through Zoom - this information would be helpful for organisational purposes but we are aware that your preference might change based on the evolution of the sanitary situation in France and in your home country.

Please submit your contribution by July 10th, 2021.

Proposals must be written in French or English.

The organising team will select about 20 contributions. The selected participants will be notified on July 31st, 2021. Doctoral students will have until September 20th, 2021 to submit a written version of their contribution. In November, they will be able to present their work in person or online, based on each participant's preference/ability to come to Paris in November 2021.

For any other question, please contact the organising team at the following email address: [gradconf2021@gmail.com](mailto:gradconf2021@gmail.com)

The organising team: Justine Brisson, Evan Grégoire, Lucille Lacroix, Alice Lasvergnas, Arnaud Miranda, Ana-Maria Szilagyi.