

Week One: Introduction

1/ Skinner's first critique

If we begin with Elton's first and fullest consideration of the methods and purposes of historical study, his book entitled *The Practice of History*, we find a revealing metaphor running through the argument. The aspiring historian is pictured as an apprentice – at one point specifically as an apprentice carpenter – who is aiming to produce a first piece of work to be inspected and judged by a master craftsman. [...] The first important lesson that the apprentice learns from the opening chapter of *The Practice of History* is that 'history deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are'. From this it is said to follow that historians must think of their analyses 'as steps in a chain of events, as matters explanatory of a sequence of happenings'. They must therefore 'concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description'. Subsequently this activity is equated with providing explanations of events. The historian's basic duty is 'to consider and explain change', and this ability is identified with the process of 'deducing consequences from disparate facts'.

[...]

I am not sure how much headway we are to imagine that the apprentice may already have made in his historical studies. But he will not need to have read very much to know that all these contentions are highly debatable. Suppose he has at least turned the pages of some works in the history of art or philosophy. In that case he will know that by no means all historians are preoccupied with explanation, especially if by that process we mean (in Elton's formula) the deducing of consequences. Some are instead concerned with the provision of interpretations, and thus with the process of placing texts and other such objects within the fields of meaning from which their own individual meanings can arguably be inferred. If, in addition, the apprentice has read any religious or economic history, he will know that even historians concerned with explanation are by no means always interested in explaining events. Some are interested in accounting for such matters as the prevalence of particular belief-systems or the ways in which past systems of production and exchange have worked.

Quentin Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 9-10.

2/ Reasons for history

Elton's fundamental reason for wishing to emphasise technique over content appears to have been a deeply ironic one: a fear that historical study might have the power to transform us, to help us think more effectively about our society and its possible need for reform and reformation. Although it strikes me as strange in the case of someone who spent his life as a professional educator, Elton clearly felt that this was a consummation devoutly to be stopped. Much safer to keep on insisting that facts alone are wanted.

Quentin Skinner, "The Practice of History and the Cult of the Fact," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 26.

The Athenian-Melian Dialogue

It is 415 BC, the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian War between the two great empires of **Athens** and **Sparta**. For the last six years they have avoided open hostile action against each other. But now, with hostility rising, a number of small, 'independent' states are now being forced to take sides. One such state was Melos.

After strategically positioning their powerful fleets at the shores of Milos, the Athenian generals send envoys to the island to negotiate the island's surrender...

Break into 2 groups (one side Athenians, the other Melians) and negotiate the best outcome for your people.

Athenians	Melians
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Empire of 170 city-states● 13,000 troops● You have overwhelming military and naval power and surround the island before landing● You send envoys to negotiate the surrender of Melos● Your offer to the Melians is simple and unpretentious: submission or annihilation● You are engaged in a proxy war with Sparta.● You are representatives of an empire - you cannot afford to look weak with all your subjects looking on● You are under orders from the empire to return with either the Melians dead or under Athenian control● Rational	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The leaders of Melos face a terrible choice: Have their countrymen die as free men or live as slaves.● Island nation of 3000 people with no trained army● Friendly with Sparta but neutral in the war● Melian negotiators meet Athenians in private, out of sight of the population● You have been a free state for 700 years● The law of nations gives you the right to remain neutral and be free from unprovoked attack● Religious● Hopeful that your Spartan cousins will come to your aid● Proud - to submit would be cowardly and shameful● Believe in the justice of your cause