Andrew Skinner 1935-2011[1]

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When Andrew Skinner died on 22 November 2011, we lost the leading figure in the history of economic thought in the Scottish Enlightenment. He was well known internationally in the history of economic thought community, particularly for his outstanding contribution to our understanding of his greatest subject, Adam Smith. He was also well known for his wider leadership, including playing a major role in the bicentennial celebration of Smith in Glasgow in 1976 and in being the second President of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (ESHET). He was a meticulous scholar of great modesty considering his remarkable achievements. He was generous with his time and attention, prepared to express strong opinions when necessary and had a mischievous sense of humour.

Skinner's published contributions were legion and took various forms. His editing of classic texts has been a particularly important contribution, providing the definitive materials for others' research. In 1966 he edited a new edition of Sir James Steuart's *Principles of Political Economy* (with a four volume variorum edition, edited with N Kobayashi and H Mizuta, published in 1998), creating new interest in Steuart's work. In 1976, along with Roy Campbell and W B Todd, he edited Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (the 'Glasgow edition'). While this new edition served an existing community of Smith scholars, Skinner encouraged wider reading of Smith with popular editions published in 1982 (Books I–III) and 1999 (Books IV-V). Skinner acted as a general editor for Clarendon Press's other 'Glasgow editions' of Smith's works.

Skinner also organised and promoted the work of others. Along with Tom Wilson he edited two collections of papers: in 1975, *Essays on Adam Smith* and, in 1976, *The Market and the State: Essays in honour of Adam Smith*. In addition, with Roy Campbell in 1982 he edited *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, with Peter Jones in 1992 he edited *Adam Smith Reviewed* and with Knud Haakonssen in 2001 he produced an *Index to the Works of Adam Smith*. He compiled a biography of Adam Smith with Campbell in 1982. All

of these publications bear the stamp of his meticulous scholarship and insights. His own stand-alone work also appeared in a series of articles (beginning in 1962 with an article on Steuart), many in the *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, and in numerous contributions to others' edited works. It is hard to find an edited volume on the Scottish Enlightenment, and particularly on Adam Smith, without a contribution from Skinner. Several of these papers were gathered in his volume, *A System of Social Science*, first published in 1979, with an expanded edition in 1996, and translated into Japanese in 1997.

Andrew Stewart Skinner was born in Glasgow on 11 January 1935 to Andrew Paterson Skinner, a sales executive and a Highlander, and Isabella Bateman, a Lowlander. With the exception of five years, he spent all his life in or around Glasgow. Following attendance at Keil School in Dumbarton, he studied Political Economy and Political Science at Glasgow University, graduating with an MA with honours in 1958. We can only try to imagine now the influence on Andrew Skinner of members of staff at that time: Alec Macfie held the Adam Smith Chair in Political Economy (succeeded in 1958 by Tom Wilson) and was pursuing a new interest in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the 1950s (Skinner 1980). Alec Cairncross held the Chair in Applied Economics, while Ronald Meek was a Lecturer in Political Economy. Skinner's time as an undergraduate also saw the founding of the Scottish Economic Society (in 1954) as successor to the lapsed Scottish Society of Economists (founded in 1897). Macfie published his call for a return to the Scottish tradition in economic thought in the following year. Skinner returned to Glasgow as a postgraduate in 1959, following a year in the US with a Glasgow-Cornell Exchange Fellowship, and was awarded a BLitt from Glasgow in 1960. He spent the next five years away from Glasgow, as tutor and then assistant lecturer in political science at Queen's University Belfast from 1959 to 1962 and as a lecturer in political science at Queen's College Dundee (at that time part of the University of St Andrews) between 1962 and 1964.

Skinner devoted the rest of his employment career to the University of Glasgow where he was a key figure in the Department of Political Economy (later Economics) and latterly in senior management. From his first appointment as a lecturer in 1964, Skinner was successively promoted, to senior lecturer in 1970, to reader in 1975 and to titular professor in 1977. He was Head of Department from 1979 to 1986. He was Daniel Jack Professor during 1985-94 and Adam Smith Professor from 1994 until his retirement in 1997, when he became Adam Smith Professor Emeritus. Skinner served the Department of Political Economy as a dedicated and popular teacher, notably of the history of economic thought and particularly on the Age and Ideas of Adam Smith, giving students the benefit of his unique wealth of knowledge. His teaching style reflected his resistance to the march of technical progress in IT, his lectures being well-crafted oral presentations aided if at all by chalk-drawn diagrams and by handouts. This stance also applied to his research: he relied totally on the services of his secretary for the preparation of typescripts. It was around the time that he became Head of Department that I first met Andrew Skinner, when I spent a year in the Department as a PhD student (supervised by Tom Wilson). I remember interesting conversations with him in his office about Adam Smith (although that was not my subject), which illustrates his generosity of spirit and willingness to engage with non-experts.

Skinner served as Dean of Glasgow's Faculty of Social Sciences during the period 1980-83. His role as Clerk of Senate (chief academic administrator) up to 1990, during the principalship of Alwyn Williams, gave him particular satisfaction. This was followed by the position of Vice Principal for the arts-based faculties up to 1996. As his former colleague, Rick Trainor (2012), puts it: 'A product of the relatively stable Scottish university environment of the 1950s, Andrew played a significant role in enabling his ancient university to make a highly successful transition to the more rough-and-tumble higher education world of the late 20th century and beyond.' In recognition of his many distinguished contributions,

Skinner was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Glasgow University in 2001. In addition to following in Adam Smith's footsteps by his employment at Glasgow, Skinner did so also as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (as well as being a Fellow of the British Academy). Skinner continued to teach for some years after his formal retirement from the University of Glasgow in 1997, and also maintained an active research life.

Skinner was first and foremost an economist, but, for him, understanding modern economics required an understanding of its philosophical foundations and its context in the history of economic thought. In this he was squarely within the Scottish political economy tradition. Several years ago I would have hesitated to discuss Skinner, in a context like this, in terms of the Scottish political economy tradition. He was for a long time skeptical about thinking about the Scottish Enlightenment figures in these terms, something which I had been pursuing in a series of publications with Alexander Dow and Alan Hutton. But latterly he seemed to have been persuaded that it was fruitful to focus on the common features of a Scottish tradition and duly encouraged us with our project, something which we greatly appreciated.

Indeed in many ways Skinner was the embodiment of the Scottish political economy tradition in the breadth of his sweep, incorporating philosophy (in its modern sense and also its eighteenth-century sense of science) as well as history, institutions as well as theory. One of his earliest publications was an article about the eighteenth-century Scottish theory of history (Skinner 1965a), the lead article in that issue of the *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, the year after he had returned to Glasgow. Here he set out the Scottish approach as 'analytical history', which sought principles and causes from historical material. While it was widely held by the major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment that there was uniformity in human nature, the Scottish historian recorded the diversity of human experience, as social

systems developed through a series of stages. The purpose of analytical history was to explore the link between the two. The outcome was relativism and a critical attitude towards generalisation. (Skinner, 1972, later explored the conjectural aspect of this historical approach in relation to Smith.)

This historical approach was elaborated in terms of Sir James Steuart's views on method, which Andrew Skinner set out in another article later that year (Skinner 1965b). Here Steuart is shown to have been self-consciously empiricist in the sense of requiring short chains of reasoning which kept close to real experience. Steuart saw scope only for predicting tendencies, given the problem of induction (in the broad Humean, rather than narrow statistical, sense). But Skinner argues that Steuart went too far in spelling out the limitations on the scope for general statements, when compared to Hume's view that it is the role of the philosopher to seek some generality, even though it may fail in particular cases. This was a matter of Steuart's judgement (rhetorical as well as methodological). It probably limited the persuasiveness of Steuart's work, which otherwise held much in common with Smith. In these two remarkable papers, the young Andrew Skinner set out the ideas on which much of his later work would build.

There is a reflexivity between the way in which Skinner built up a picture of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment and the content of that picture. Thus, paralleling the Scottish theory of history, he sought much more than factual accounts of ideas, but rather the principles underpinning these ideas. Further, paralleling the particular Scottish form of empiricism (which involved a combination of induction with deduction), his analysis of the works of key figures never departed long from the original texts. The extent of quotation puts the spotlight on the source rather than the employer of the quotations. And yet it is through the judicious selection and arrangement of quotations that Andrew Skinner was able to weave a coherent causal account of the author's body of work.

Indeed Skinner (1972) himself drew attention to such reflexivity in his analysis of Smith's (1795) 'History of Astronomy' both as an exercise in philosophical history (history of science) and as setting out guidelines for the interpretation of Smith's work as a whole. Nowhere is this reflexivity more evident than in Skinner's recurring theme of systems, something which was key to his understanding of the contributions of both Steuart and Smith (Skinner 1981). As Jeffrey Young (2009: xi, xii) puts it:

> Andrew Skinner in his masterly expositions of Smith has taught us to think in terms of Smith's 'system', a coherent, consistent, multifaceted body of social science … a consistent social theory worked out in three overlapping discourses: moral philosophy, natural jurisprudence and what we now call economics.

Smith (1776: V.i.f.25) had himself referred to the psychological appeal of systems, for example referring to the 'beauty of a systemical arrangement of different observations connected by a few common principles'. Yet it was important that, for him, systems required some segmentation and so the system of knowledge is facilitated by some division of labor, with different themes explored for different purposes. Thus it would not have been appropriate for Smith to have combined the different types of argument developed in his different works into one treatise (far less one formal system).

Skinner's systemic approach to Scottish Enlightenment thought is most fully laid out in his collection of essays in *A System of Social Science*. But it is perhaps most concisely laid out in his address, as President-elect, to the 1998 ESHET Conference, 'Adam Smith, The Philosopher and the Porter' (Skinner 2001). Here he explored the concept of the division of labor as applied to knowledge, drawing on Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric*, the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, the 'History of Astronomy', the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as the *Wealth of Nations*. Skinner built the analysis on Smith's theory of human nature, in the

process explaining his historical-philosophical approach. Smith (1776: I.ii.4) had identified the core difference between the philosopher and the porter 'not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education'. Skinner shows how Smith proceeded to analyse the consequences for the division of labor in socio-psychological terms. The analysis illuminates our understanding both of the motivation for new theories and of their nature as making new connections (by means of analogy) between phenomena. Tellingly, Skinner analysed the issue of the communication of ideas (as distinct from their formulation) in terms of teaching. In concluding with respect to Smith that '[t]he argument as a whole provides a cool assessment of the working of the academic mind' (Skinner 2001: 50), the same could be said of Skinner's own account.

While Skinner's work had its greatest focus on Adam Smith, he took a systemic approach to Smith by exploring his intellectual environment, and in particular the thought of Hutcheson, Pufendorf, Hume and Steuart. He sought the common threads in their arguments as well as the differences, against the background of the general Scottish Enlightenment approach (Skinner 1990). He showed the importance of Smith's use of Hume's concepts of the imagination and of cause. Imagination provides the basis for human behaviour within society and for building and communicating systems of knowledge. The imagination generates the idea of cause from experience, providing the cornerstone of systems of knowledge, and thus the foundation for the Scottish historical approach. But, just as Skinner demonstrated the Humean influences on the dynamic, evolutionary character of Smith's systemic analysis, he also quietly set out to counteract modern static interpretations of Hume, which have set aside the provisionality of Hume's generalisations Thus, in discussing Hume's monetary theory, Skinner (1993) highlighted Hume's emphasis on the evolution of 'customs and manners' as economic organisation evolves and as economic activity increases, such that inflation did not keep pace with the stock of money. Like Steuart, Hume sought to

identify the causal mechanisms of which changes in money were the symptom. At the same time, Steuart's greater focus than Hume on particularities helps us draw back from modern over-generalisations of Hume's ideas.

But Skinner also wrote about more recent ideas, notably those of Marshall and Chamberlin (as in Skinner 1979 and 1983, for example) but still with the same historical and methodological approach and a focus on systemic interdependence. For many years he taught intermediate microeconomics for intending honours students at Glasgow, drawing on this work. He took great pains, when teaching about monopolistic competition for example, to explain how the costs for monopolistic competitors of selling and differentiation implied an interdependence between firms' demand and supply curves, while the interdependence of their demand curves within the group must have equivalent consequences within their respective input markets. On the basis of this teaching, in 1996, along with his colleagues Fred Hay and Christine Oughton, Skinner published the textbook *Intermediate Microeconomics: A Perspective on Price Theory* with Manchester University Press.

The most striking thing to notice when revisiting Skinner's work, and particularly his early work, is how far ahead of his time he was. He drew attention to the parallels between Kuhn's (1962) characterization of the historical development of astronomy through paradigms and Smith's (1795) account of the socio-psychological factors in the development and transmission of ideas (Skinner 1972, 1979). Both identified the inevitable relativism of scientific knowledge, and thus the capacity for one system of thought to supplant another. But Smith's essay on the 'History of Astronomy' is in many ways much richer than Kuhn's, being based on Smith's theory of human nature. Schliesser (2011) refers to Andrew Skinner telling him about a meeting with Thomas Kuhn in Princeton in 1975, where it became apparent that Kuhn had been unaware of Smith's essay. Similarly, Brian Loasby (in private correspondence) recalls Andrew Skinner telling him that George Shackle had been delighted

by the thought that he had managed to reinvent Smith's theory. On meeting Shackle, Skinner had referred to the parallel he had identified between Smith and Shackle's (1976) explanations of the motives and forms of knowledge creation, a parallel even stronger than that between Smith and Kuhn.

In the absence of the means for identifying demonstrable truth, scientists must be able to persuade audiences of the merits of their theories, that is, use some form of rhetoric. Here too Skinner was ahead of his time. Well in advance of the modern interest in the rhetoric of economics, Skinner was explaining Smith's innovative discussion of the epistemological role of rhetoric (alongside its other roles) (see for example Skinner 1972). Smith had also provided guidance as to the type of rhetorical devices might be most persuasive, drawing on aesthetics as well as epistemology and theory of human nature. Just as the motivation to pursue knowledge was part of his system of science, so the persuasive communication of ideas was another element of the system, drawing on the imagination as well as on sentiment and reason.

Finally Skinner was ahead of his time in applying the principles of analytical history to the exercise of historiography. Anticipating later discussions, Skinner sought to understand the context in which Smith and other subjects were writing, and their motivation. Here he was putting into practice the context-specificity of the Scottish historical approach, acknowledging for example the evolution of 'customs and manners' of economists themselves. But, in further application of the tradition, he sought provisional generalizations which would allow application to modern issues. Thus he transcended the choice as between a 'pure' form of narrative history which had relevance only to the past on the one hand and a form of history which is motivated and conditioned by modern debates on the other. Skinner's historical approach to economics also anticipated modern arguments about the contribution of history of thought to economics. More generally, his continuing emphasis on

philosophical and methodological issues in the history of economics anticipated a blossoming of such work in the 1980s.

In concluding, it is interesting to return to the reflexivity which characterizes Andrew Skinner's work in general, but his work on Adam Smith in particular. The subject and the researcher have more than their initials in common. Just as Smith sought to understand the systemic nature of social processes, Skinner sought to understand the systemic nature of Smith's thought within the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. Just as Smith approached his study of the economy through evidence from history and through philosophy, so Skinner approached his study of Smith through detailed textual and historical evidence and philosophy. But, insofar as we know about Smith's personality, there were important differences between the two (Buchan 2003: 134; A Dow 1984). Where Smith displayed 'hauteur', was forceful and loath to cite precursors, Andrew Skinner was modest, given to qualification and careful to identify precursors. Finally, perhaps most important for those who knew Andrew Skinner, Smith was more likely to have a distant look than a twinkle in his eye.

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