

ARTICLE

# Context, reception, and the study of great thinkers in international relations

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## Abstract

While the discipline of International Relations (IR) has a long tradition of celebrating ‘great thinkers’ and appropriating their ideas for contemporary theories, it has rarely accounted for how these authors came to be seen as ‘great’ in the first place. This is at least partly a corollary of the discipline’s long-standing aversion to methodological reflection in its engagement with intellectual history, and it echoes IR’s infamous tendency to misportray these great thinkers’ ideas more broadly. Drawing on existing attempts to import the methodological insights of historians of political thought into IR, this article puts forward a unified approach to the study of great thinkers in IR that combines the tenets of so-called ‘Cambridge School’ contextualism with those of what broadly falls under the label of reception theory. I make the case for the possibility of developing a coherent methodology through the combination of what is often seen as separate strands of intellectual history, and for the value of such an approach in IR. In doing so, the article ultimately offers a more rigorous methodology for engaging with the thought of great thinkers in IR, for analyzing the way a specific author’s ideas come to have an impact in practice, and for assessing the extent to which these ideas are distorted in the process.

**Keywords:** international political thought; intellectual history; great thinkers; reception; context

International Relations (IR) has a long tradition of analyzing, celebrating, and appropriating the thoughts of those it considers great thinkers. For much of the history of the discipline, these figures have been considered sources of trans-historical wisdom: ‘Machiavelli is a theorist of necessity and reason of state... Hobbes is the quintessential theorist of anarchy, Grotius of international legal order...’ while ‘Rousseau has a structural realist theory of war, Kant a progressive theory of the democratic peace and global confederation and so on...’<sup>1</sup> They have

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<sup>1</sup>Bain and Nardin 2017. Bain and Nardin cite various classic texts that rely on great thinkers in this particular way, including Doyle 1998; Wendt 1999; Waltz 2001; Bull 2002.

also commonly been used as ornaments for relatively ahistorical theories, in order to give a sense of timelessness to the theory being elaborated.<sup>2</sup> Methodological debates aside, great thinkers thus have been – and continue to be – an important component of IR scholarship. Intellectual history and IR, however, have had a rather tumultuous relationship. After a so-called ‘fifty years rift’,<sup>3</sup> the past two decades have witnessed a rapprochement of the two fields, which now share a particular interest in the history of international political thought, that is, political thought on the relations between states, empires, and other political entities,<sup>4</sup> an area that long remained a blind spot of the history of political thought (HPT), which has generally focused on the state and its internal politics.

A fair part of this rapprochement stems from attempts by IR scholars to ‘take both history and the history of political thought more seriously’,<sup>5</sup> and to study some of these great thinkers more rigorously. Scholars involved in IR’s ‘historiographical turn’<sup>6</sup> have made the value of their endeavor eminently clear, including those who specifically study the history of political thought, as exemplified by the contributions to a recent forum on IR and intellectual history.<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, in their ability to reveal ‘the contingency of prevailing conventions’,<sup>8</sup> historical works in IR undermine the pervasive tendency in the discipline to elevate ‘relatively recent structures and orientations to the status of enduring historical essences’.<sup>9</sup> With respect to intellectual history specifically, Bain and Nardin point out that rigorous engagements with canonical and non-canonical texts lend themselves to rethinking crucial topics in the discipline, including ‘the primacy of the state, the emergence of the ‘states system’, the consequences of anarchy and the principles of a just international order’,<sup>10</sup> to name but a few important examples. It has also been noted that intellectual history provides the tools to challenge disciplinary myths by helping IR scholars ‘understand how the IR canon was constructed and for what purposes’,<sup>11</sup> another particularly valuable endeavor for IR scholars of a more critical bent.

With this renewed interest in intellectual history, IR scholars have moved beyond the selective and rather tendentious misreadings of various great thinkers by earlier IR theorists – particularly those of the English School<sup>12</sup> – and foregone the tradition of preemptively confining them to procrustean categories.<sup>13</sup> At the

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed discussion of the use of great thinkers in IR, see notably Vigneswaran and Quirk 2010, 115–222.

<sup>3</sup>Armitage 2004. For a detailed analysis of the changing relationship between International Relations, political theory, and international political theory, see Brown 2017. See also Martin’s Wight’s classic text, Wight 1960.

<sup>4</sup>See most notably Keene 2005; Armitage 2012a.

<sup>5</sup>Bell 2001, 115.

<sup>6</sup>Bell 2001.

<sup>7</sup>See especially Bain and Nardin 2017; Brown 2017; Devetak 2017; Hall 2017.

<sup>8</sup>Vigneswaran and Quirk 2010, 109.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 110. The literature around the ‘myth of 1648’ is a case in point. See especially Osiander 2001; Teschke 2003.

<sup>10</sup>Bain and Nardin 2017, 215.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>12</sup>The criticisms of this approach are numerous and wide-ranging. As Duncan Bell puts it, ‘gross abuse of the history of thought’ is ‘inherent in various attempts to delineate the Grotian, Machiavellian, and Kantian traditions.’ Bell 2001, 123. More broadly, see Armitage 2012a, parts II and III.

<sup>13</sup>These include Martin Wight’s classic ‘realist,’ ‘rationalist,’ and ‘revolutionist’ categories. Wight and Porter 1991.

same time, IR scholars have come to reflect much more critically on the history of the discipline, accounting for the contingent development of certain approaches and theories and bringing to light their respective normative underpinnings.<sup>14</sup> At the intersection of these two developments, a few works have specifically analyzed the reception of certain ‘great thinkers’ into IR, examining the processes through which their ideas became considered foundational.<sup>15</sup> This study of the reception of texts and ideas pertaining to the international echoes a broader move within intellectual history towards the study of the circulation, transmission, and reception of texts, thinkers, and ideas across time and space.<sup>16</sup>

These works open two notable types of paths for methodologically rethinking the study of great thinkers in IR. The first entails elaborating a more rigorous approach for studying these figures in their context, taking stock of the numerous advances in the neighboring field of HPT. The second consists in developing an explicit methodology for examining the reception of these authors’ ideas. Some strands of IR have had a tendency to substantially overestimate the impact that single thinkers can have on the form and conduct of IR, seamlessly associating the thought of Grotius with the emergence of the modern states-system, to name but one of the most famous examples. Notwithstanding the delightful anecdote about the King of Sweden going to war with a copy of Grotius’ *De iure belli ac pacis* under his saddle,<sup>17</sup> the actual impact of the famed author’s text is often assumed away. The emerging literature on the reception of what we now know as canonical texts thus seems a particularly productive avenue for the discipline to turn to in order to track the actual impact of great thinkers. This article seeks to build on these efforts by teasing out how this might be done in a systematic manner.

Essentially, and to put it bluntly, the discipline of IR simply does not provide a methodology for studying the reception of great thinkers. There appear to be two main reasons behind this lacuna. First, it is partly a corollary of the discipline’s rather infamous misportrayal of great thinkers’ ideas more broadly, and of its long-standing aversion to methodological reflection on this front. Second, and more importantly, it probably stems from the fact that historians of political thought in the Anglophone academy have seldom explicitly theorized the methodologies required to study the reception of authors.<sup>18</sup> This is of course not to say that historians of political thought have not studied the reception of authors in practice; to cite but one example, in his main works, Quentin Skinner extensively studies the reception of ancient classics such as Aristotle,<sup>19</sup> Cicero,<sup>20</sup> or Quintilian,<sup>21</sup> as well as the reception of continental rhetorical works in Britain in the early modern period.<sup>22</sup> The point here is that while reception theory is a well-established

<sup>14</sup>Efforts to make explicit different theories’ normative underpinnings include Reus-Smit and Snidal 2008. Critical works on the history of the discipline of International Relations include Schmidt 1998; Guilhot 2011; Vitalis 2015.

<sup>15</sup>Keene 2002, 12–39; Keene 2006; Reid 2006; Williams 2006; Keene 2015. For a related but somewhat different approach, see Nabulsi 1999.

<sup>16</sup>Armitage 2012a, 7. See for instance Moyn and Sartori 2013.

<sup>17</sup>Ringmar 1996, n. 174. See also Grotius 2005, 69.

<sup>18</sup>Though one notable call to address this problem is Thompson 1993.

<sup>19</sup>Notably in Skinner 1978, Vol. I.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Skinner 2002, I: 175–187; II: 264–285; III: 87–141.

<sup>22</sup>Skinner 2014b.

sub-field in literary studies, in the not so distant field of HPT, the methodology for studying the reception of famous texts and authors has hardly been theorized in any explicit way, leaving little for IR scholars interested in the reception of great thinkers to draw from. As Thompson puts it, ‘the practice of writing history and the practice of theorizing about it remain two quite distinct activities;<sup>23</sup> this article is explicitly concerned with the latter.<sup>24</sup>

The first issue has been addressed to some extent in recent years, with the dawn of a ‘historiographical turn’ in IR.<sup>25</sup> Since this historiographical *prise de conscience*, some attempts have been made to import the methodological insight of HPT – particularly the contextualism of the so-called ‘Cambridge School’<sup>26</sup> – into the discipline,<sup>27</sup> and this article draws explicitly on this move. Additionally, there have been two main attempts to combine these contextualist insights with a concern for the afterlife of classic works and famous concepts. The first is the call to pair Cambridge School contextualism with the tenets of *Begriffsgeschichte*.<sup>28</sup> This approach entails ‘tracing the different meanings and usages of political concepts over time, tracing the shifts and rupture in their employment’.<sup>29</sup> The focus on the history of concepts is presented as a potential remedy to the ‘temporal problem’ of the Cambridge School approach,<sup>30</sup> that is, the overwhelming emphasis that scholars associated with the Cambridge School label (most notably Skinner and Pocock) are – perhaps wrongly – considered to place on the context of writing at the cost of the context of reception.

This approach shares much with a second proposal, which is what David Armitage has termed ‘history *in* ideas:’ a new history of ideas based on ‘a model of transtemporal history, proceeding via serial contextualism to create a history in ideas spanning centuries, even millennia’.<sup>31</sup> Like historians working within the tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Armitage puts forward a means for doing intellectual history over the *longue durée* through the study of specific concepts over time, such as the idea of civil war.<sup>32</sup> While Armitage’s call for a shift towards ‘serial contextualism’<sup>33</sup> is a particularly interesting development for the study of

<sup>23</sup>Thompson 1993, 257.

<sup>24</sup>For a related recent attempt by IR scholars to systematize the discipline’s engagement with history, see MacKay and LaRoche 2017.

<sup>25</sup>Bell 2001.

<sup>26</sup>The label ‘Cambridge School’ has often been criticized in light of the ‘profound disagreements between its main figures, most notably Skinner and Pocock. I use it here, as historians of political thought often do, as a shorthand for a loosely coherent set of premises for how to study historical texts that does not preclude remaining well aware of the sharp differences between the scholars associated with this approach.

<sup>27</sup>See especially Bell 2002; Bell 2003.

<sup>28</sup>Bell 2002, 334. For a similar call in HPT, see especially Richter 1995; Palonen 2014. See also Lehmann and Richter 1996; Palonen 1999. For a critique, see Bevir 2011, 20.

<sup>29</sup>Bell 2002, 333.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>Armitage 2012b, 494. There has been an explosion of works in *longue durée* intellectual history over the past decade. Other examples of studies of conceptual transformation (works sometimes called ‘neo-Lovejoyian,’ despite the significant differences) include Jerrold Seigel on the idea of the self (2005), Darrin McMahon on the ideas of happiness (2005) and genius (2013), Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison on objectivity (2007), Peter Garnsey on property (2007), Sophia Rosenfeld on common sense (2011), Rainer Forst on toleration in conflict (2013), and James Kloppenberg on democracy (2016).

<sup>32</sup>Armitage 2012b; Armitage 2017. Another example would be the concept of ‘empire,’ as analyzed in Muldoon 1999. A particularly interesting corollary to this new approach to the diachronic history of concepts is the recent turn towards the role of translation in the diffusion of concepts. See notably the

international political thought – to which I will return – both of these proposed approaches are geared towards the study of the reception of specific concepts rather than of specific authors. Conversely, while there is indeed a handful of studies that do examine the reception of great thinkers in IR<sup>34</sup> they do not theorize their methodological approach explicitly.

Therefore, what I put forward in this article is an alternative form of ‘serial contextualism’, focused on the reception of an author rather than of a concept, and anchored in that author’s original context of writing. The approach is based on a two-part method. The first part entails what may be termed a conventional contextualist analysis, based on a synchronic understanding of context. It is geared first and foremost towards attempting to recover the original intention that the author had in writing the relevant text, and particularly her intention in making one or more conceptual moves within that text. The second part takes stock of the recent shift in intellectual history towards a diachronic understanding of context and seeks to understand the impact of that author’s move by tracing the reception of her text over time. In doing so, it parts with concept-based methods that stem from the history of ideas and draws on the precepts of what is broadly known as ‘reception theory’, focused on analyzing the reception of a specific author. The serial contexts that are examined are therefore not those in which a concept appears, but those in which the author – or one of the author’s most famous texts – is explicitly drawn on, reinterpreted, and re-used.

In developing this approach, I will make the case that rather than constitute two separate and potentially irreconcilable forms of methods, that is, a classic contextualist analysis of an author’s idea versus a diachronic study of the reception of the said author, these two paths can actually be combined in highly productive ways. There is nothing in the contextualism associated predominantly with Quentin Skinner that precludes the study of reception; on the contrary, contextualism does in fact provide some theoretical and conceptual resources for addressing the issue of reception; the main issue is that its adherents – whether in HPT or in IR – have failed to discuss them adequately and to utilize them explicitly in their work. In this article, I therefore bring together some of the methodological insights of Skinnerian contextualism and of reception theory, developing an explicit methodology for the study of great thinkers in IR and beyond that aims to be eclectic while avoiding the pitfalls of indiscriminate association.

In the first part of the article, I begin by outlining the core insights of a conventionally contextualist approach, before highlighting both the possibility and the current limitations of contextualism when it comes to understanding the reception of a particular thinker’s ideas. In the second part, I turn to reception theory and I argue that the latter can be effectively paired with a more conventional contextualist methodology in order to better evaluate the journey of an author’s ideas over time. I ultimately put forward an approach for the study of great thinkers in IR that is both synchronic and diachronic, but that, unlike recent attempts to reinvent the history of ideas based on the return of the *longue durée*, is focused not on the reception of a particular concept but on that of a particular author. While

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introduction to Burke and Richter 2012. In IR, see Wigen 2015. More broadly, on global intellectual history and analyzing the way concepts travel, see the introduction of Moyn and Sartori 2013.

<sup>33</sup>Armitage 2012b, 494.

<sup>34</sup>See *supra* note 15.

this approach is relevant to the study of political thought in general, it is particularly potent within IR, where the tendency has been to think about great thinkers diachronically, if without articulating a specific methodology for doing so and resultantly committing a number of considerable blunders. Using IR's reliance on Kant and Thucydides as brief examples to illustrate my claim, I show the extent to which a more systematic use of this approach would benefit the discipline's engagement with historical works. Importantly, this article does not take a stance on the question of whether or not IR scholars ought to draw any philosophical insights from classical texts without extensive concerns for historicity. The aim here is merely to take into account the very concrete consequences of the frequent anachronistic readings of texts, and to consider these moments of rediscovery and reinterpretation in their own historical right, teasing out the stories they tell us about our constructions of the past.

### Taking context seriously: Tracking the aims of innovating ideologists

In light of the numerous critiques of IR's abuse of the history of political thought in the construction of its canon and its traditions,<sup>35</sup> the value of contextualist methodologies seems fairly self-explanatory. This avenue is particularly promising in light of the recent surge of interest in international political thought, both from IR scholars and from historians.<sup>36</sup> In its broad commitment to historicism, contextualism urges scholars not to consider great thinkers as taking part in perennial debates across time and space, nor as speaking a common language and providing insights into solving timeless problems, including those of our own period.<sup>37</sup> More specifically, contextualism emphasizes that texts must be 'regarded as extremely complex historical objects, which were written with a purpose in mind' and thus as 'a form of action'.<sup>38</sup>

What exactly this entails in terms of conducting research has been the subject of fierce methodological battles. Skinner is of course the most famous of the 'Cambridge School' contextualists, and his brand of contextualism, sometimes called 'Skinnerian contextualism' or 'Skinnerian linguistic contextualism'<sup>39</sup> is often associated with the broader label. However, as Bell notes, 'not all contextualists are Skinnerian'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Skinner himself seems to have evolved quite significantly over the course of his career, and is now rather difficult to place in terms of his own commitment to his initial methodological claims as well as his evaluation of more recent alternatives, most notably post-analytical historicism.<sup>41</sup> Much of the problem here stems from the incredibly demanding character of Skinner's original methodological recommendations, which resulted from his stark philosophical

<sup>35</sup>Bell 2002. More broadly, see Jahn 2006.

<sup>36</sup>This body of works is to be distinguished from the 'problem-solving' approach to IPT discussed (and criticized) by Beate Jahn, in Jahn 2006. In IR, see especially Keene 2005. In history, see for instance Tuck 2001; Armitage 2000.

<sup>37</sup>For the seminal critique of such approaches (most notably that of Leo Strauss), see Skinner 1969.

<sup>38</sup>Bell 2002, 116.

<sup>39</sup>Sometimes also called 'conventionalism', particularly by Mark Bevir. Bevir 2011.

<sup>40</sup>Bell 2003, 153. Bell is thinking here of the other Cambridge School historians, particularly Pocock and Dunn. See his note 11.

<sup>41</sup>Bevir 2009. See also, for instance, Skodo 2009. On Skinner's "genealogical turn" and its methodological implications, see Lane 2012.

stance and which even he struggled to accommodate in his own historical research.<sup>42</sup> Despite these unresolved tensions and debates, some broad principles for investigation can be drawn out. Indeed, these issues around Skinner's original philosophical position notwithstanding, contextualists virtually all agree with the general aim of Skinner's project, that is 'the historicization of political thought and the attempt to locate texts within their original terms of reference'.<sup>43</sup> Studying texts with no regard for the context in which they were written, they argue, is bound to lead to gross errors of interpretation.<sup>44</sup>

Outlining all the theoretical underpinnings of this broad contextualist project is beyond the scope of this article,<sup>45</sup> but it is important here to note a few essential aspects of a contextualist approach. While Skinner's early methodological writings were part of a general intellectual wave now known as 'interpretivism' (written in dialogue with scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Clifford Geertz) that made claims about society as a whole, and while Skinner would hardly have considered his early methodological writings to be solely aimed at instructing readers about how best to read old texts, Skinnerian contextualism is now associated first and foremost with the objective of recovering the intention of the author, and with the idea that the author's intention is necessarily suited to achieving a particular objective in a particular context. This entails acquiring a deep understanding of the socio-political context as well as – very importantly – the linguistic context of the author. There are some broad guidelines for achieving this understanding, mainly the study of 'both minor and major texts that existed at the time of writing of the particular text under examination, in order to gain an understanding of the various political languages employed, and the links between them', and the attempt to relate them to 'the general historical environment'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, in reading the text of interest, it is essential to grasp both its locutionary and its illocutionary force. This distinction, drawn by Skinner, separates the mere lexical meaning of words (locutionary force), from what the author was actually doing in using them (illocutionary force). The two are deeply intertwined, and capturing the intention of the author ultimately depends on being able to distinguish them and truly grasp the illocutionary force of the text. In order to achieve this aim, Bell suggests that it is 'highly advisable' to use 'a dose of methodological pluralism'<sup>47</sup> rather than strictly follow Skinner's original methodological precepts, as suggested by Skinner's own practice in *Liberty before Liberalism* and even more strikingly in his *Genealogy of the Modern State*.<sup>48</sup>

Before delving deeper into the specifics of this form of contextualism, I would like to pause here for a moment to reflect on what is essentially a certain *parti pris* in this article. There is, of course, a broader debate within hermeneutics about whether it is at all possible, or even desirable, to recover authorial intention in the

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<sup>42</sup>On the tension between Skinner's metatheoretical projects and his actual historical research, see Richter 1995, 135–6.

<sup>43</sup>Bell 2003, 153.

<sup>44</sup>Skinner's seminal critique provides numerous examples of these errors. See Skinner 1969.

<sup>45</sup>For comprehensive theoretical accounts of contextualist methods in intellectual history, see Hunter 2006; Hunter 2007; Skinner 2002; Pocock 2009, Vol. I.

<sup>46</sup>Bell 2002, 332.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid. More broadly, see Dunn 1996.

<sup>48</sup>Skinner 1998; Skinner 2008.

first place. For one, there is much to be said about Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that we are bound to read historical texts through our own historically determined situatedness, that is, through our often unconscious interests, prejudices, and broader imaginaries. In Gadamer's own words, the 'tyranny of hidden prejudices... makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition'.<sup>49</sup> Yet, I agree with Skinner that 'instead of bowing to this limitation and erecting it into a principle, we should fight against it with all the weapons that historians have already fashioned in their efforts to reconstruct without anachronism the alien *mentalités* of earlier periods'.<sup>50</sup> In other words, while it may be impossible to entirely free ourselves of unconscious prejudices in our attempts to reconstruct the past and specifically the authorial intentions of long-dead writers, we can at least try to avoid them as much as we can.

A related but deeper critique suggests that we should problematize the concept of the author itself. The most radical version of this critique is arguably Roland Barthes' idea of the 'death of the author',<sup>51</sup> according to which the meaning of a written text and the creator of that text are only tangentially related. For him, the idea of the all-important author is a product of modernity, an illusion from which we must distance ourselves in establishing the meaning of texts. Barthes argues that the meaning of a text depends not on the text's author but on its readers, creating an almost endless array of interpretive possibilities. This presumably goes directly against the idea that we can – or even should – recover authorial intention, as well as, more broadly, some kind of 'truth' about the settled meaning of a text within a context, and it opens the door to a much more relativist approach to the study of historical texts. Again, this form of postmodernist critique is something Skinner has explicitly addressed,<sup>52</sup> and I side with his view of what contextualist intellectual historians are trying to achieve. The problem, he tells us, stems from a confusion about the term 'meaning'. What contextualists like him seek to recover is not the meaning of a text as in the French *signification*, but its meaning as in the French *vouloir dire*, as a linguistic act of a public or social character. In other words, there is a clear distinction between the linguistic meaning of a text (which arguably cannot be recovered or even settled) and what an author meant by what he or she wrote.<sup>53</sup> It is exclusively with respect to the latter that authorial intention is crucial, and it ultimately decenters authorship without entirely abolishing it.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond these debates between historians, philosophers, and literary theorists, it is highly significant for the purposes of this article that within IR, one would be

<sup>49</sup>Gadamer 2004, 282.

<sup>50</sup>Skinner 2002, II: 195.

<sup>51</sup>Barthes 1984, 61–67.

<sup>52</sup>Skinner 2014a.

<sup>53</sup>On the importance of distinguishing between the "meaning" of a text as determined by authorial intention, and the "significance" of a text as determined by readers' response, see also Hirsch 1967; Hirsch 1976.

<sup>54</sup>While, of course, this does not entirely settle these profound disagreements, the fact is that after decades of debate on hermeneutics and methodology, Skinnerian contextualism has essentially won its battles within political philosophy, to the extent that historical studies of political theory are flourishing and gradually squeezing out the alternatives (see Bevir 2011, 19). This does not necessarily undermine the validity of competing methodologies, particularly as Skinner's approach continues to be criticized (for a broad overview, see *Ibid.*, 19–22), but it should make the further and more systematic use of Skinnerian contextualism in IR, as suggested in the present article, relatively uncontroversial.

hard pressed to find a scholar who does not present her interpretation of a great thinker's text as a historically accurate rendition of that thinker's thought. While some may argue that the references to the works of great thinkers are often meant as interventions in the present rather than truly historical forays, virtually no IR scholar has claimed to be using the likes of Grotius and Kant on purely analytical or instrumental grounds. On the contrary, they present their understanding of these thinkers' works as historically informed, as what these thinkers 'really thought'.<sup>55</sup> Great thinkers are almost invariably used as more or less opportunistic appeals to authority specifically because they confer a sense of historical pedigree and continuity to the argument at hand. Using great thinkers solely and explicitly as heuristic devices, with a stated lack of concern for what these thinkers actually meant in their text, would in many ways defeat the purpose of using them in the first place. As such, it is precisely because of IR scholars' broad claims to historical accuracy that it is warranted to take them to task on the question of authorial intention, as this article ultimately seeks to do.

With this in mind, let me now return to the basic tenets of Skinnerian contextualism. Crucially, to the extent that one can recover authorial intention through a contextualist methodology, the purpose of doing so is not mere antiquarianism. In Skinner's words, it enables one to speak to contemporary concerns by showing 'how the concepts we still invoke were initially defined, what purposes they were intended to serve, what view of public power they were used to underpin'.<sup>56</sup> Here, it is important to note that if Skinner has expressed a certain skepticism towards the history of concepts, and particularly the study of unit-ideas as advocated by Lovejoy, he does not reject the study of concepts altogether. In his own words, the argument is simply that 'there can be no histories of concepts; there can only be histories of their uses in argument'.<sup>57</sup> This caveat does not mean that it is impossible to write about concepts altogether; ultimately, Skinner himself finds it sufficiently manageable to still write on concepts such as liberty or the state. Simply, Skinner reminds us that 'concepts must not be viewed simply as propositions with meanings attached to them; they must also be thought of as weapons (Heidegger's suggestion) or as tools (Wittgenstein's term)'.<sup>58</sup> As a result, one can only understand a particular concept and the text in which the concept occurs if

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<sup>55</sup>A relevant example is Graham Allison's enormously influential *Destined for War: Can the US and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Allison clearly believes his reading of Thucydides is an accurate reflection of what the Athenian historian actually meant in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, see Allison 2017, xiv–xvi.

<sup>56</sup>Skinner 1998, 110.

<sup>57</sup>Restated by Skinner in 1988, in Skinner 1988a. It is worth noting that Michael Freeden has criticized Skinner's 'hostility to the study of "the 'idea' itself as a 'unit'",' arguing that his hostility is too dependent on a critique of Lovejoy's concept of the idea-unit, and 'does not do justice to the different ways in which an idea unit may be handled.' To discuss ideas, Freeden argues, is 'not tantamount to insisting that they have a life of their own, and it is not therefore necessary to adopt some of the excesses of Idealism or to offend against historical canons. For when those ideas are located within ideologies and their existence is empirically ascertained to relate to concrete groups in specific historical situations, much of the force of the old criticisms of the history of ideas as a discipline is dissipated.' Through this claim, Freeden argues for the political concept to remain the central unit of analysis of the history of ideas, for '[a]fter all, one cannot just disregard the plausible contention that the history of (political) ideas should be about ideas.' Freeden 2008, 110–111.

<sup>58</sup>See Quentin Skinner's contribution in Collini 1985.

one knows 'who is wielding the concept in question, and with what argumentative purposes in mind'.<sup>59</sup>

Skinner provides some specific tools for analyzing the use of concepts under this specific angle, two of which are of particular importance for our purposes: the idea of an 'innovating ideologist' and the related notion of what Skinner calls 'evaluative-descriptive terms'. The innovating ideologist seeks 'to legitimate a new range of social actions which, in terms of the existing ways of applying the moral vocabulary prevailing in his society, are currently regarded as in some way untoward or illegitimate'.<sup>60</sup> The innovating ideologist does so through speech acts centered on 'evaluative-descriptive terms', that is, words that are used both to describe, and to either commend or condemn certain actions. These terms are of particular importance, because as Skinner puts it, 'it is essentially by manipulating this set of terms that any society succeeds in establishing and altering its moral identity'.<sup>61</sup> The innovating ideologist thus seeks to manipulate the meaning of concepts (and/or their application) with the aim of modifying political behavior.

The insights provided by a close analysis of innovating ideologists and of their use of evaluative-descriptive terms, and by a contextualist approach more broadly, present a real potential for critique in IR. This potential has been laid out in some detail by scholars such as Duncan Bell,<sup>62</sup> Beate Jahn,<sup>63</sup> Gerard Holden,<sup>64</sup> as well as Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk<sup>65</sup> and to some extent Richard Devetak,<sup>66</sup> and I will not restate their arguments here. Suffice it to say that this approach can shed significant light on the role of language in the constitution of political and social life, particularly in terms of how the vocabularies of a given time can both enhance and constrain political legitimacy, and how they can be consciously manipulated in attempts to impact political behavior. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, 'since to possess a concept involves behaving or being able to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances, to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to alter behavior'.<sup>67</sup>

There are, however, two broad types of limitations to this contextualist approach. First, as mentioned earlier, Skinner has not always been consistent in applying his own methodological precepts, and various critiques have been made of Skinner's original philosophical stance, most notably by Mark Bevir.<sup>68</sup> These are part of an ongoing debate on the modalities of textual interpretation, the details of which stem from disagreements about the philosophy of history that is beyond the scope of the present article. Second, and more urgently for our purposes, Skinnerian contextualism currently presents some limitations when it comes to analyzing the reception of texts. Once they have been published, texts take on a life of their own – sometimes for centuries – which often leads them to be understood in novel ways and used for purposes that have little left to do with the author's

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Skinner 1988b, 112.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Especially in Bell 2002; Bell 2003.

<sup>63</sup>Especially in Jahn 2006.

<sup>64</sup>Holden 2002.

<sup>65</sup>Vigneswaran and Quirk 2010.

<sup>66</sup>Devetak 2014a. For a more skeptical view emphasizing the limits of contextualism in IR, see Hall 2017.

<sup>67</sup>MacIntyre 1966, 2–3.

<sup>68</sup>For an introductory discussion, see Bevir 2011.

original intention so carefully unearthed by a Skinnerian approach. In other words, there is often an important divide between the context of writing and the context of reception.

Skinner has repeatedly come under fire for what is perceived as his overly restrictive understanding of context, focused almost exclusively on the immediate context of the author at hand, and for his resulting failure to address the reception, transmission, and translation of texts.<sup>69</sup> This is not so much inherent to Skinner's methodological approach, as merely the result of his deliberate prioritization of the recovery of authorial intention over other pursuits, a point which Skinner has made explicitly.<sup>70</sup> Though his methodological writings have focused predominantly on the question of how best to recover authorial intention, in his substantive works Skinner has in fact analyzed processes of reception and the multiplicity of contexts they call upon. In examining, for instance, the revival of Aristotle's *Politics* in the second half of the thirteenth century or in qualifying its impact through an emphasis on the weight of Roman moralists and historians (especially Cicero and Sallust) decades earlier,<sup>71</sup> Skinner makes it very clear that classical texts were participants in a range of different debates across time and space.

If anything, questions of reception and transtemporal transmission have long been staples of 'Cambridge School' contextualism, both in Skinner's famous *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* and, even more conspicuously, in the works of another Cambridge historian, John Pocock, who gradually came to place 'much more emphasis upon the historical significance of reception, reading, and the modes of interaction among author, text, and reader',<sup>72</sup> and whose concerns for Kuhnian 'paradigms' and competing 'languages' speak directly to these issues.<sup>73</sup> As such, the claim here is not so much that the study of the reception of texts constitutes an addition to 'Cambridge School' contextualism, but rather than it is an immanent possibility within this form of contextualism that has not been sufficiently theorized as a methodological approach for studying great thinkers in IR and beyond.<sup>74</sup> In order to further develop and systematize this approach, I therefore turn to the tenets of what broadly falls under the label of 'reception theory'.<sup>75</sup>

### From context to contexts: the diachronic lives of great thinkers

First, it is worth noting that, within the study of international political thought, an important attempt has already been made to address the perceived shortcomings of

<sup>69</sup>For various critiques of Skinner's strict understanding of and emphasis on context, see notably McMahon and Moyn 2014, particularly the essays by McMahon, Gordon, Müller, and Moyn.

<sup>70</sup>Skinner 1988a, 271–273.

<sup>71</sup>See notably Skinner 2002, II: 10–38.

<sup>72</sup>Thompson 1993, 271.

<sup>73</sup>See notably Pocock 1972.

<sup>74</sup>The fact that, in a certain sense (and depending on how one defines a "text"), historians who focus on authorial intent ("intentionalists" such as Skinner) and historians inspired by reception theory undertake compatible tasks that simply seek to unpack different aspects of given texts is briefly discussed by Bevir, see Bevir 1999, 58.

<sup>75</sup>Importantly, reception theory is in fact a broad form of 'contextualism' as well. The so called 'Cambridge School' contextualism is merely the dominant strand of contextualism amongst historians of political philosophy, see Bevir 2011, 11.

Skinner's brand of contextualism: David Armitage's notion of a history *in ideas*, based on the notion of 'serial contextualism'. Echoing the usual line of critique, Armitage argues that since Skinner's famous 1969 piece,<sup>76</sup> intellectual historians who identify as contextualists have 'construed context synchronically and punctually: that is, defined with a narrow chronology and implicitly discontinuous with other contexts'.<sup>77</sup> By contrast with this approach, Armitage suggests 'deploying the distinctive procedures of Anglo-American intellectual history, but by doing so diachronically as well as synchronically'.<sup>78</sup> His method entails 'the reconstruction of a sequence of distinct contexts in which identifiable agents strategically deployed existing languages to effect definable goals such as legitimation and delegitimation, persuasion and dissuasion, consensus-building and radical innovation'.<sup>79</sup> As I have noted, in practice, this approach is actually hardly different from what historians associated with the Cambridge School label – including Skinner – have done in their own work. And indeed, Armitage concedes that Cambridge historians have pursued this approach to a certain extent, pointing to Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment*,<sup>80</sup> Tuck's *Rights of War and Peace*,<sup>81</sup> and Skinner's *Genealogy of the Modern State*.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, he seems to suggest that what is revolutionary in his approach is not the practice of studying series of contexts, but the fact of explicitly theorizing context in diachronic terms.<sup>83</sup>

Generally speaking, the renewed focus on *longue durée* intellectual history is a promising move for IR scholars who share with intellectual historians an interest in international political thought. Constructing diachronic histories of 'big ideas', that is 'central concepts in our political, ethical and scientific vocabularies',<sup>84</sup> based on serial contextualism is certainly a fruitful enterprise, if also a tremendously challenging one in light of the knowledge of each context required for a rigorous application of this method. The present article, however, is concerned with the impact which specific authors have as such, in light of the reception of their texts, rather than with the broader impact they may have once a concept they have contributed to shaping travels and is applied by others, with the author's name receding into the background. As such, the article also takes stock of the potential of diachronic histories, but it does so from an altogether different angle. Concept-based diachronic approaches, whether those like Melvin Richter's stemming explicitly from *Begriffsgeschichte* or those like Armitage's that seek the 'reinvention' of the history of ideas altogether (hence the 'history *in ideas*'), do not provide an explicit methodology for the study of how a specific author – rather than a specific idea – travels. In order to outline such an approach, it is necessary to turn to reception theory and examine the value of combining its insights with those of contextualism in the study of great thinkers in IR and beyond.

<sup>76</sup>Skinner 1969.

<sup>77</sup>Armitage 2012b, 498.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 497.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 498.

<sup>80</sup>Pocock 1975.

<sup>81</sup>Tuck 2001.

<sup>82</sup>Skinner 2008.

<sup>83</sup>Armitage 2012b, 499.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 497.

Though it initially struggled to travel from its German bases to the Anglophone academy,<sup>85</sup> reception theory has now been used extensively across numerous fields,<sup>86</sup> but it has not had much success in IR despite the existence of a handful of works that directly examine the reception of certain great thinkers.<sup>87</sup> These few forays have emerged in the context of the aforementioned turn towards the study of international political thought, but they very much remain the exception in a field that continues to acclaim and appropriate original texts without examining how these texts came to form part of the disciplinary canon in the first place. The neighboring field of HPT has a longer and more sustained tradition of engaging with these questions in practice, but as Armitage argues, it has not explicitly theorized how to study context in diachronic terms either. The extensive literature on the reception of classical thinkers in the medieval and the early modern period<sup>88</sup> – with Aristotle and Tacitus being two of the most famous cases – is an obvious testament to this substantive engagement, while the literature on the reception of late medieval and early modern thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth century, though noticeably slimmer, is another promising avenue of research in the discipline. In another closely related though much younger field – the history of international law – some work has notably emerged on the revival of Vitoria by James Brown Scott in the late nineteenth century,<sup>89</sup> with Anne Orford making an explicit call for the wider study of the anachronistic revival of great thinkers in international law, a call that is now beginning to be applied in practice.<sup>90</sup>

Examining the reception of great thinkers is an obvious – if, in IR, insufficiently exploited – means of assessing the actual impact of their ideas by evaluating the way their concepts were used, re-used, and misused in their intellectual afterlife. While IR scholars can draw some insights from the way the reception of various authors has been analyzed in HPT, it is essential to develop a clearer, explicit methodology for doing so systematically. In what follows, I thus draw two core insights from reception theory that allows for a more rigorous study of the reception of particular authors, and then highlight two crucial payoffs of applying these methodological precepts.

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<sup>85</sup>For the original texts, see mainly Jauss 1970; Grimm 1977; Iser 1984. For a discussion of the lukewarm reaction to reception theory in the United States, see Holub 1982.

<sup>86</sup>For a brief survey of the history of reception theory, see Burke 2013. For a general introduction to reception theory see Holub 1984.

<sup>87</sup>See *supra* note 15.

<sup>88</sup>Ancient historians and classicists who focus on the legacy of classical antiquity in the later history of political thought include Peter Garnsey, Fergus Millar, Wilfried Nippel, Paul Rahe, Elizabeth Rawson, and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts. Cited in Straumann 2016, 13.

<sup>89</sup>Orford 2013. See also Paolo Amorosa's doctoral work, Amorosa 2018.

<sup>90</sup>One example – although it is not quite what Orford is referring to in her call to study the revival of famous jurists and the anachronistic use of their work for new purposes – is the work of Elisabetta Fiocchi Malaspina on the reception of Vattel's *Le Droit des Gens* in the nineteenth century. Fiocchi Malaspina 2013; Fiocchi Malaspina 2014. Fiocchi also provides some broader, fascinating insights into processes of appropriation and reproduction of the doctrines of international law during the 19th century. Fiocchi Malaspina and Keller-Kemmerer 2014. Another piece that discusses anachronisms and the history of international law – though from a different angle – is Warren 2017. For a broader analysis of the insights International Relations can gain from a more sustained engagement with the critical history of international law, see Pitts 2017.

First, recipients are not passive followers, and what is received or inherited is not necessarily what was given or handed over.<sup>91</sup> In other words, those who ‘receive’ the texts of great thinkers have a considerable amount of agency, and they may alter the text in significant ways, whether they directly add elements to it or simply reinterpret it for their own purposes.<sup>92</sup> Aquinas’ famous formulation is often cited on this point: *Quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur*: whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.<sup>93</sup> It is thus much more useful to think of the process of reception as one of translation rather than transmission. This is a crucial point in thinking about the impact of a specific author’s ideas, but as Peter Burke remarks, ‘[a]lthough the famous epigram attributed to Karl Marx, “I am not a Marxist,” has been circulating for a long time, the implications for intellectual history of the distance between founders and followers have rarely been made explicit’.<sup>94</sup> A particularly useful tool for further conceptualizing these differences is the concern with the ‘horizon of expectations’ (*Erwartungshorizont*), found notably in the works of the aforementioned Hans-Georg Gadamer and his student Wolfgang Iser. The underlying idea here is that different readers will approach a specific text with different expectations – including different questions and concerns associated with their own environment – and that this will shape the way they understand the text in various respects. The results can be conceptualized through terms such as ‘appropriation’ (Ricoeur) or ‘re-employment’ (de Certeau), or as a form of intellectual ‘*bricolage*’ (Lévi-Strauss) that turns consumption into a form of production in itself.<sup>95</sup>

Second, and relatedly, this emphasis on active/creative rather than passive/faithful reception suggests that in order to understand the importance of an author’s text, we must examine it not just in its original context but in the various contexts in which it came to play an important role. In other words, it is crucial not just to examine the ‘reception’ of a text, but its multiple receptions, across different groups, countries, and epochs. Through this process, one may conceptualize the multiple embodiments of the same author, used for different purposes under different circumstances – or, for example, under the same circumstances but for different political purposes. For instance, Kinch Hoekstra speaks of ‘multiple Thucydides’ in the early modern period, notably highlighting the gap between Alberico Gentili’s Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes’ Thucydides.<sup>96</sup> The impact of a particular text can thus become kaleidoscopic, refracted through the many contexts in which it is creatively put to use. In analyzing this process, two related avenues of investigation seem particularly fruitful. On the one hand, one should compare the original reception of the text, the impact the author had in her original context, with later receptions, that may have altered the author’s reputation quite drastically.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, one should pay particular attention to the impact the

<sup>91</sup>Burke 2013, 22.

<sup>92</sup>On this phenomenon in the context of international law, see notably Wallenius 2017.

<sup>93</sup>Aquinas 2015, 1a, q. 75, a. 5; 3a, q.5, cited in Burke 2013, 29.

<sup>94</sup>Burke 2013, 23. Burke points to Benjamin Schwartz on Confucian Thought as an important exception. Schwartz 1959.

<sup>95</sup>Ricoeur 1981; Certeau 1980, cited in Burke 2013, 25.

<sup>96</sup>Hoekstra 2008; Hoekstra 2016.

<sup>97</sup>This is the approach taken in *A Handbook of the Reception of Thucydides*, for instance. The Handbook juxtaposes a chapter on Thucydides’ ancient reputation with one his reception in the Renaissance. Lee and Morley 2014.

text will have when it is seized on by influential individuals who actually have the means of giving the text a renewed importance and of redefining what is in fact important about it.

Applying these two methodological tenets opens the way for a number of productive intellectual moves, two of which stand out as especially fruitful payoffs. First, studying an author not just in her original context but through her different receptions over time is a methodological approach that answers David Armitage's call for a return to *longue durée* intellectual history, though in a different way from his own application of it.<sup>98</sup> It is an approach that is deeply committed to examining the author and her work diachronically, sacrificing some of the depth of traditional contextualist investigations for the breadth of trans-epochal comparisons. This seems a particularly useful approach within IR, a discipline in which scholars almost invariably analyze great thinkers diachronically despite lacking an explicit methodology for how to do so adequately. Of course, the point of a diachronic approach based on reception theory is not to study authors in a decontextualized manner, applying their categories and concepts indiscriminately across time and space, but rather to pay close attention to the various contexts in which they were explicitly received, potentially stretching the story of their impact over continents and centuries. As such, it distances itself from the English School's concept of traditions<sup>99</sup> as well as from the broader practice of diachronically examining the history of a concept through a long collection of great thinkers.<sup>100</sup>

Second, reception theory provides a particularly useful set of tools for analyzing the construction of intellectual canons.<sup>101</sup> The importance of 'canons' and 'traditions' has not escaped IR scholars,<sup>102</sup> and indeed, Bell points out that while Skinner is right to be suspicious of 'claims about easily delineated transhistorical ideational bodies', we must also 'recognize the vital role of *perceived* traditions', that is 'the relationship theorists sustain with those they consider to be their intellectual progenitors'.<sup>103</sup> As Freedon explains, '[i]nasmuch as people come to attach importance to reified traditions, however erroneously conceived the latter are, they become factors in the formation of human thought and in the explanation of human behavior'.<sup>104</sup> Perceived traditions can of course be based on various

<sup>98</sup>Armitage and Guldi 2014; Guldi and Armitage 2014. For a brief discussion of the study of receptions as an example of *longue durée* intellectual history, see Straumann 2016, 20.

<sup>99</sup>For an early discussion of these features, see Dunne 1993. For a more recent analysis, see Keene 2013.

<sup>100</sup>For instance, this is a particularly popular approach in the field of just war theory with regards to the study of the 'just war tradition,' see notably O'Driscoll and Brunstetter 2017.

<sup>101</sup>Thompson 1993, 249.

<sup>102</sup>Though some have been explicitly critical of any attempt to construct them, such as Brian Schmidt, who sees these traditions as developed either for polemical purposes or as a way to legitimize contemporary ideas. Schmidt 1998, 24. For a more sympathetic approach, see Nabulsi 1999, 66–79; Nabulsi and Hazareesingh 2008.

<sup>103</sup>Bell 2002, 333. For a similar emphasis on the importance of 'invented traditions' in IR, see also Jeffery 2005.

<sup>104</sup>Freedon 2008, 110. This echoes Hobsbawm's concern with 'invented traditions,' the study of which 'throws a considerable light on the human relation to the past... For all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.' Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 12. Importantly, these approaches differ from Mark Bevir's own concept of tradition as explained in Bevir 2000. Bevir is also concerned with traditions and their legitimating power, but he has a much more specific understanding of what a tradition consists of. For him '[a]n account of a tradition must identify a set of connected beliefs and habits that intentionally or unintentionally passed from generation to

elements, including concepts, as in the case of liberalism,<sup>105</sup> or authors, as in the case of a ‘Grotian tradition’ of international law and political thought.<sup>106</sup> With respect to the latter, an approach that focuses first and foremost on the reception of the author’s text(s) appears essential, and fulfills a distinct purpose from one focused on the transformation of concepts. As such, for author-based traditions, it becomes essential to track the complex story of the reception of the author, particularly as in the case of a discipline such as IR, the interpretation of an author will have been shaped and re-shaped many times before entering the field. Ultimately, the novel interpretation put forward by the receivers ‘may have shaped core concepts in the discipline’, in which case ‘a historical recovery of their roots is one way of opening up these concepts for critical reflection’.<sup>107</sup>

If one wishes to understand the emergence, evolution, modification, and reproduction of a canon,<sup>108</sup> and ultimately the development of perceived traditions or legacies based on particular authors, it thus becomes imperative to investigate the context(s) of an author’s reception, closely examining the shifting representation(s) of that author over time and space. The attribution of ‘greatness’ to a thinker, her enshrinement into a disciplinary canon, is an active, conscious process. Forgotten thinkers are unearthed and branded as great by those who want to claim them for their own camp, while the rightful legacy of an established ‘great thinker’ can be a source of extensive debate.<sup>109</sup> Inventing a tradition linking one’s ideas to those of a long-dead, respected, famous mind is one of the many ways in which one can defend something by giving it ‘the sanction of perpetuity’.<sup>110</sup> As a result, once an author is placed in the category of ‘great thinkers’, her name comes to bear a certain weight, to provide a certain degree of legitimacy to those who invoke her as their forerunner. Since reception theory is explicitly geared towards understanding the factors that ‘shape’ the reception of a text,<sup>111</sup> it is thus particularly relevant for shedding light on the dynamics behind the canonization of an author. It is notably attuned to the role of political agendas in shaping reception,<sup>112</sup> a factor that is likely to be found at play in the construction of disciplinary canons.

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generation at some time in the past’ (Ibid., 46.), which is a separate endeavor from the study of retrospectively established ‘traditions’ that often rest on imaginary links between otherwise separate individuals and pursuits.

<sup>105</sup>Bell 2014.

<sup>106</sup>Lauterpacht 1946; Bull 1966; Kingsbury 1997; Jeffery 2006; Van Ittersum 2016. See also Nabulsi 1999b.

<sup>107</sup>Jahn 2006, 13.

<sup>108</sup>Bell 2002; Jahn 2006.

<sup>109</sup>For example, for the role of Hobbes as the presumed founder of liberal political theory, and the emergence of this conception of his legacy in the twentieth century, see Farneti 2002. See also Vaughan 2000. For a critique of IR’s perilous caricature of Hobbes, see Malcolm 2002. On the divergent receptions of Rousseau, see Lifschitz 2016.

<sup>110</sup>Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 2.

<sup>111</sup>Burke 2013, 32.

<sup>112</sup>Consider, for instance, the various receptions of Erasmus, notably in Spain and Italy. Silavana Seidel Menchi emphasizes the fact that Erasmus’ Italian readers had their own agenda, which included disguising their Protestant beliefs and legitimating a political attack on the papacy. Menchi 1987, cited in Burke 2013, 26–27. Another example is the case of Locke, whose diverse receptions come to light in Mark Goldie’s fascinating anthology, see Goldie 1999. On the diverging receptions of Locke in the nineteenth and the twentieth century and the ultimate establishment of his ‘liberal’ credentials, see Bell 2014. For a fascinating case beyond the history of political thought, see notably Martial Poirson’s work on the reception of Molière

As an illustration, it is worth briefly considering here the processes that led to the canonization of two of IR's main great thinkers, Thucydides and Kant (the other 'greats' of the discipline being primarily Machiavelli, Hobbes, Grotius, and Rousseau). As Keene has shown, the coronation of Thucydides as the father of realism was by no means inevitable.<sup>113</sup> It emerged out of a rather contingent series of moves, and culminated 'when a group of highly influential scholars in US academia, such as Robert Keohane, Kenneth Waltz, and Robert Gilpin, identified him as a paramount realist thinker in the late 1970s and 1980s'.<sup>114</sup> These scholars did so because Thucydides served a crucial purpose for them: he 'could be used to illustrate what they saw as a fundamental underlying continuity in IR – a vital point for scholars seeking to develop a general, trans-epochal theory of IR – and more specifically, a story could be weaved around his name to support the claim that this continuity 'was expressed through the persistence of power politics and the logic of the balance of power'<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, as Keene puts it, 'their reading of Thucydides's *History* was, in a sense, an especially juicy cherry to be picked',<sup>116</sup> and they did so with a lasting impact in the discipline. Indeed, although a real cottage industry has developed since the 1990s around identifying realist misreadings of Thucydides,<sup>117</sup> these works seldom question the reliance on Thucydides in the first place and as such have exacerbated rather than undermined his prevalence in the discipline.<sup>118</sup> This is despite the fact that, as Keene suggests, 'Thucydides needs not be our only contemporary',<sup>119</sup> and perhaps even more critically, it says absolutely nothing about the need to perhaps consider whether Thucydides – or any other classical figure for that matter – should be our 'contemporary' to begin with.

Kant, as the presumed father of liberalism, is a neat counterpart to Thucydides in IR textbooks, and the story of his reception in the discipline shares much with that of the Athenian. Kant is of course invoked in the discipline almost exclusively for his essay on *Perpetual Peace*, which is seen as forming the historical foundational stone for the sub-field of democratic peace theory. Yet, as Easley explains in *The War over Perpetual Peace*<sup>120</sup> – which surprisingly remains to this day the only in-depth work on the reception of Kant in the discipline of IR<sup>121</sup> – the interpretation of Kant's essay has been a profoundly divisive debate since its publication in the late eighteenth century. Essentially, scholars have consistently disagreed as to

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in France from the seventeenth century onward, the evolution of which was dictated by political events from the necessity to reclaim Molière for the republican tradition in the late eighteenth century to the desire to challenge the supremacy of an overbearing Britain and her equally imposing Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, see Poirson 2012.

<sup>113</sup>Keene 2015.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 356.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 360.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 359. Citing Welch 2003, 307.

<sup>118</sup>Graham Allison's wildly popular concept of "Thucydides's trap" is an obvious example of this continued prevalence, see *supra* note 55.

<sup>119</sup>Keene 2015, 367.

<sup>120</sup>Easley 2004.

<sup>121</sup>Though for a recent reassessment of Kant's thinking on International Relations, see Molloy 2017.

whether Kant endorses peace proposals at the state level or above the state level.<sup>122</sup> More importantly still, Easley shows that the popularity of each line of interpretation varied primarily with the rise and fall of hopes that international organizations could bring about a lasting peace, with the meaning of Kant's essay ultimately ending up a veritable hostage to the zeitgeist of different historical periods. In the discipline of IR, the turning point was Doyle's seminal article on 'Kant, liberal legacies, and foreign affairs',<sup>123</sup> prior to which 'there was no mention of *Perpetual Peace* as intellectual forebear of the liberal peace phenomenon'.<sup>124</sup> Hailing Kant's contested essay as the 'source of insights, policy, and hope' for 'appreciating the liberal legacy',<sup>125</sup> Doyle latched onto the interpretation of *Perpetual Peace* that seemed most fitting for his time, namely the statist one over its cosmopolitan counterpart, and brought it into the discipline with lasting consequences. Today, evoking Kant in IR is often a shorthand for the theory that democracies do not go to war with each other, and that as a result long-lasting world peace will only be achievable once the vast majority of states have become liberal democracies. The cracks in this eminently policy-relevant intellectual edifice should perhaps encourage pause for thought.

Ultimately, and in light of these two examples, while the claim here is that we must distinguish between a study of the reception of ideas based on concepts and one based on authors, it may be said that in the case of the canonization of an author, the author itself becomes, in some way, a form of concept. Invoking the author in question becomes a means to refer to a set of ideas, to a particular understanding of what abstract and contested terms such as 'power politics', 'sovereignty', or 'liberalism' might mean. In the broadest sense, Bell reminds us that '[t]raditions are usually constructed around a canon of renowned thinkers, which serves simultaneously as a reservoir of arguments, an index of historical continuity, and a powerful source of intellectual authority'.<sup>126</sup> But more specifically, an author's name can become associated with a precise position, providing a shorthand for what may otherwise necessitate extensive – and possibly contestable – elaboration. When one invokes, for instance, Thucydides, Hobbes, or Kant within a tradition, the reference is often not so much to the individuals, with their idiosyncratic lives and the specific aims they had in writing their canonized treatises, but rather to the intellectual statement they provide within a debate, to the positions that are automatically associated with their person. Their name entails a set of arguments (or many different sets, if one takes into account the different interpretations of a single author), a collection of assumptions and their associated ramifications, in a way that is not dissimilar to the role played by a concept such as 'absolute sovereignty' or 'liberalism'. In using great thinkers as such, the receivers of the text come to 'decontextualize' the author they are engaging with in order to make her fit their own context and aspirations while nonetheless claiming her historic heritage. In this sense, the emphasis in this article on the distinction

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<sup>122</sup>For an earlier consideration of the diverging interpretations of *Perpetual Peace* amongst IR scholars and an attempt to impose a more definite one, see Hurrell 1990. Easley in fact discusses Hurrell's piece and its place within the broader debate; Easley 2004, 88–90.

<sup>123</sup>Doyle 1983.

<sup>124</sup>Easley 2004, 74.

<sup>125</sup>Doyle 1983, 206, cited in Easley 2004, 74.

<sup>126</sup>Bell 2014, 686.

between the study of authors and the study of concepts is made primarily to highlight a shift in terms of the object of study and therefore of the chosen methodology, keeping in mind that a more diligent study of authors and of their reception may in fact underline the extent to which authors can become concepts, fulfilling similar discursive functions and sharing the same purposes as heuristic devices.

### III. A combined approach

While it is frequent to read studies of authors in their original context, and possible to find a number of works that examine the subsequent reception of their ideas, contributions that combine the two have remained the exception. In this final section, I wish to conclude by emphasizing the methodological potential of an approach to the study of great thinkers that combines a synchronic analysis based on the methodological insights of Skinnerian contextualism with a diachronic analysis drawing on the tenets of reception theory.

An emphasis on the reception of a great thinker's idea may seem at first as a complementary – but separate – project from the examination of the author's ideas in their initial context, and particularly, from a close analysis of the author's original intentions. Indeed, reception theory long ignored the question of authorial intention or 'authorial intended meaning' altogether, preferring to focus on the issue of 'received meaning',<sup>127</sup> and historians of political thought traditionally kept reception theory at bay just as cultural and intellectual historians were engaging with it at length. Yet, two main arguments can be made for a unified approach that relies on these two avenues of inquiry at once in the study of great thinkers. First, and in the most obvious sense, any project that seeks to understand both the emergence and the impact of a particular author's idea will find this methodological approach greatly relevant. In IR, a discipline that has historically paid significant attention to the thought of a few great authors, emphasizing the continued importance of specific concepts within their thought (whether it be Hobbes on sovereignty or Kant on perpetual peace, to name but the most famous ones), developing an approach that encompasses both a rigorous understanding of the author's context and an analytical commitment to the *longue durée* would seem a valuable endeavor.

The call for such an approach is reinforced by the fact that the discipline of IR has sometimes erred in its appreciation of authors' ideas specifically because it remained abysmally unaware of the process of reception. This is particularly obvious in the case of the English School, which built its 'traditions' based on 'a conflation of nineteenth-century appropriations of seventeenth-century thinkers, such as Grotius and Hobbes, with the ideas of those thinkers themselves'.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>127</sup>For a detailed discussion, see Thompson 1993, 257–265.

<sup>128</sup>Hutchings et al. 2014, 389. A different, but similarly concerning claim, is the argument that because Hedley Bull studied Grotius through the works of Cornelius van Vollenhoven, Lassa Oppenheim and Hersch Lauterpacht, who were all 'instrumental in the development of the "Grotian tradition" of international law in the twentieth century' and whom 'Bull considered members of a wider "Grotian tradition," his understanding of 'Grotius as an intellectual entity separable from the 'Grotian tradition'... is in fact situated wholly within what he constitutes as the tradition itself.' As a result, Jeffery rightly notes, it is therefore 'not at all surprising that Bull is able to draw a set of "remarkable" resemblances between the two sets of ideas,' see Jeffery 2005, 79.

Systematically untangling what these thinkers actually thought – to the extent that it is possible – from what later generations of historians, lawyers, and other practitioners claimed they did is an essential part of clarifying this muddled field while shedding light on the actual provenance of our disciplinary narratives. If greater efforts have been made to tease out the normative assumptions of each theoretical approach,<sup>129</sup> surely the fact that IR textbooks continue to propagate a history of the modern states-system and of its presumed intellectual architects constructed by nineteenth-century counter-revolutionary historians<sup>130</sup> should be an immediate source of concern. If the study of IR's 'great thinkers' continues to be an important part of the discipline, particularly in light of the turn to international political thought,<sup>131</sup> this untangling exercise can form the basis for a more rigorous approach both to the nature of their thought and to the impact they had through their actual reception over time.

Second, and more specifically, there is a rather straightforward case to be made for the continued methodological relevance of a more traditional, synchronic analysis of an author as a highly insightful component of the study of an author's reception. Naturally, reception studies encourage scholars 'not to limit themselves to the reconstructions of major thinkers, but to ask a much wider range of questions about recontextualizations, responses, uses, and so on',<sup>132</sup> pointing to 'the illusion of perfect communication' and, in that process, 'undermining the importance of the intentions of writers'.<sup>133</sup> However, the intention of the author remains an important component of reception for a simple reason: it constitutes a benchmark against which one can measure the extent to which the text has been re-interpreted by the receivers. Burke emphasizes that in studying reception one must 'look for what is "lost in translation", or what is distorted', reminding us of Cervantes' famous observations that reading a text in translation is 'like viewing Flemish tapestries from the wrong side'.<sup>134</sup> In other words, he explains, one has to measure the 'degrees of distance from the original'.<sup>135</sup> It is not clear, however, how one might be able to achieve this without some understanding of what the text was originally intended to achieve.

In other words, and to push Cervantes' metaphor a step further, is it only by viewing both sides of the tapestry that one can appreciate the contrast between the two images. If we only view the 'wrong side', we may well be aware that it is indeed 'wrong' to some extent and that the actual image is bound to differ in some way, but we remain within the realm of speculative abstraction; the actual image may be slightly different, or it could be entirely unrecognizable – we will never know. To the extent that one is interested in analyzing the construction of traditions and

<sup>129</sup>Reus-Smit and Snidal 2008.

<sup>130</sup>Keene 2002b. For a more detailed analysis, see Devetak 2014b. Noting Armitage's remark that 'the pivotal moments in the formation of modern international thought were often points of retrospective reconstruction,' Devetak shows the extent to which historians played a role in the depiction of the modern world as a 'world of states.'

<sup>131</sup>Though for a call to locate 'international political thought' beyond a canon of 'great thinkers,' see especially Keene 2017. For a related call to examine the thought of practitioners, see also Rothschild 2006, 220.

<sup>132</sup>Burke 2013, 32.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 35.

unveiling the scaffolding of intellectual canons, having a concrete understanding of what the gap between the original and its derivatives entails becomes essential. In fact, an awareness of the original is much more critical within this context than suggested by Cervantes' example. If in the example of the tapestry, the original and its flip-side are literally co-constitutive of each other, this is clearly not the case when we speak of the reception of texts. Indeed, the re-interpretations can depart from the original to remarkable extents, as some receivers may use the text with few concerns for the dead author's original intentions.<sup>136</sup> One particular instantiation of this point is the fact that certain parts of an author's text can be heavily emphasized<sup>137</sup> while others are entirely ignored or even concealed.<sup>138</sup> As Bevir puts it, speaking of traditions more broadly, 'because people want to improve their heritage by making it more coherent, more accurate, and more relevant to contemporary issues, they often do respond selectively to it; they accept some parts of it, modify others, and reject others'.<sup>139</sup> In this context, authorial intention truly has an essential role to play in the study of an author's reception, and a commitment to the *longue durée* can thus be paired with a more traditional contextualist investigation.

There are, of course, certain limitations to this approach, or at least certain challenges that should be flagged. First of all, in studying the reception of an author, one must address the various silences that can occur around the author's work. This can be the case when, as I have suggested, certain ideas or elements of the text appear to be central to the original work but disappear during the reception process. Under such circumstances, one is left to carefully speculate as to what might explain the surprising omission. Even more strikingly, one must consider the fact that over the course of an author's afterlife, there will be periods during which her work may recede into the background or be ignored entirely. This can occur for various reasons, including mere neglect, a controversial reputation, or a falling out of favor of certain types of argument. In light of this, a serial contextualism based on an author rather than on a concept may well be episodic, with important chronological gaps between the different receptions. There is thus an important difference between the *longue durée* entailed by an author-based serial contextualism and that entailed by a concept-based one, as concepts are more likely to appear under different iterations in the work of various writers. When

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<sup>136</sup>Though a notable point is that other receivers will read the text through their own understanding of the author's original intention. According to one approach ("reader-response criticism," broadly speaking), what the author actually intended is in this case ultimately a moot point; it does not matter, and it cannot be recovered. Mark Bevir has put forward a compelling attempt to bring together the insights of intentionalism with those of reader-response criticism, emphasizing that the meaning of a text stems from the meaning it was given by individuals, whether these are the author herself or her later readers, see Bevir 1999.

<sup>137</sup>For instance, in the case of Locke, Bell explains that '[w]hereas parliamentary constitutionalism was central to the British appropriation of Locke (via the retrojection of the Whigs), it was religious toleration (via the retrojection of key elements of Puritanism) that did much of the ideological labour in the United States.' Bell 2014, 701.

<sup>138</sup>One notable example is the dismissal of Grotius' arguments for the legitimate character of divisible sovereignty, see Keene 2002a, 40–59. This particular move in the reception of Grotius' writings in International Relations arguably had a significant impact on the discipline, as it restricted the available set of conceptual tools in a way that largely undermined the study of empires.

<sup>139</sup>Bevir 2000, 39. More broadly, see Bevir 1999.

studying an author and her reception, a *longue durée* approach is just as much about continuity as it is about discontinuity; the expansive chronological coverage allows one to analyze the moments during which an author's popularity surged and to trace the construction of a seemingly continuous tradition of thought around that author's name, but also to shine a light on the various moments during which the author was not in fact considered particularly remarkable. The latter, of course, is a way to problematize the existing stories of continuity and to highlight the contingency of the established canon.

## Conclusion

Though some scholars have sought to account for the reception of certain authors in IR, there has been a little explicit methodological reflection on what these types of studies entail. The purpose of this article has been to dissect the different elements involved, drawing on reception theory to highlight the most significant methodological insights to keep in mind if one is to examine processes of reception rigorously and systematically. Additionally, I have made a case for the importance of first examining an author in her initial context in order to acquire a benchmark against which the characteristics of the reception process can be measured. This is in contrast to current approaches to intellectual history that focus either on analyzing an author's thought within her original context, or on examining the reception of the author at various points in time, without explicitly linking the two. The dual contextualization I propose may be applied to a single work, by analyzing it closely both in the author's original context and in the various contexts of the author reception. Alternatively, a study seeking to focus more heavily on the reception process may establish this benchmark by drawing on the more classically contextual (i.e. Cambridge School, broadly speaking) secondary literature to acquire a sufficient sense of what the author's original intentions were if these are already relatively well established. It is worth noting that while processes of reception have received quite a bit of attention in the case of the rediscovery of classical authors between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the same cannot be said for the reception of early modern authors in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The proposed methodological approach will be particularly relevant for future studies that seek to account for these understudied, more recent processes – which are of course particularly relevant to the discipline of IR – and its precepts can be applied to authors beyond the specific field of international political thought.<sup>140</sup>

The few aforementioned studies notwithstanding, the reception of great thinkers in IR still remains a vastly under-researched area in the discipline, and this comes with some significant costs. Systematically applying the present methodology in IR will allow for a better understanding of what great thinkers actually intended to express in their original context, and of what type of interests shaped their legacies and gave us our contemporary interpretations of their works in the discipline. This is important for three reasons. First, as I have sought to highlight through various examples about the treatment of early modern authors in IR (Grotius, Hobbes, etc.) as well as through my brief discussions of the receptions of Thucydides and Kant,

<sup>140</sup>One example is the recent work on the emergence of a field of scholarship around Adam Smith, see Tribe 2015, 139–170.

the histories of these authors' receptions into the discipline underline the extent to which our dominant understandings of their works were produced by later individuals with agendas of their own. As long as we simply accept these narratives, we are bound to remain the slaves of these past agendas and to have little understanding of what insights these 'great thinkers' can presumably provide us with.

Second, and more importantly still, the approach I put forward provides the tools for investigating the processes of instrumentalization – or even mere unintentional misreading – of famous texts by both scholars and practitioners and to assess the impact of this phenomenon on IR. As I have discussed, great thinkers are often rediscovered or celebrated anew at opportune moments, when they can be put to various broadly political uses. The glorification of their ideas and the novel forms under which these authors are celebrated in their new contexts often result from a conflation of contingent elements, be they for instance of a personal, institutional, social, or more traditionally political kind. In providing an explicit methodology for studying these processes, the proposed approach offers a way to study how ideas actually come to have an impact in practice, when they are for instance used as legitimating devices.

Third, and relatedly, this approach calls for those interested in 'great thinkers' in IR to perhaps turn a more significant part of their attention to the makers of greatness: the intermediaries who select various authors for canonization and seek to use them in particular ways and for particular purposes. Whether as scholars or as practitioners, they might not be particularly well known, but in their choices of whom to glorify, they can indeed have a significant impact both on disciplinary developments and – if they are lawyers or diplomats for instance – on the conduct of IR. When great thinkers are used as weapons to defend particular projects or ideologies over others, the agency lies with those who wield their name, and the intellectual force of a Hobbes or a Grotius comes to be heavily mediated through the minds of those who claim these authors' legacy for themselves.

Ultimately, and as I noted at the very beginning of this article, great thinkers have been and continue to be an important component of the discipline of IR. As long as this remains the case, IR scholars must possess the tools to critically evaluate the provenance of their presumed forebearers' ideas. This article is an attempt to begin filling what currently appears to be a significant lacuna on this front.

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