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Quentin Skinner

**Interviewed by Elliott Shore
February 17, 1995**

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Tape recording + transcript of Interview with
Quentin Skinner in Princeton on Feb. 17, 1995.

INTERVIEW WITH QUENTIN SKINNER

Date: February 17, 1995

Interviewer: Elliott Shore

Shore: Professor Skinner, you first came as a visitor to the Institute in 1974. Could you describe that experience and how it influenced your subsequent decision to come back for three more years? What made you come to the Institute in the first place?

Skinner: Well, thank you, I came in '74 as a result of an invitation from John Elliott of the School of Historical Studies. In the first of the four years that I was at the Institute I was attached to that School, and what attracted me to come, I suppose, was partly John's being here and the fact that he had come quite recently and was enjoying it enormously and getting a lot of work done. And that last fact was important for me because I was at a stage of my career in Cambridge where the amount of teaching and lecturing I was doing, in addition to graduate teaching, was beginning to overwhelm me. By then, I'd been working for several years on what was proving to be a very large script on the development of the theory on the

State in early modern philosophy, and I saw little prospect of being able to finish it unless I could take a good slab of leave. At first I had the (in retrospect) extraordinarily naive hope that, if I had a whole year off with nothing else to do, I would finish that book. It was that aspiration which, at that particular time, made it seem a really wonderful idea just to come.

Shore: So you actually came in the School of Historical Studies first, not in the School of Social Science.

Skinner: That's correct, yes. I had two stays at the Institute. The first was just for the '74 to the '75 academic year as a result of that invitation from John Elliott. In the course of that year I confess that what I found was that the people in the School of Social Science were, apart from John Elliott and Felix Gilbert who remained very important figures for me, all more interesting scholars. I also found them intellectually more congenial people, quite frankly, and in the course of that year I got to know them well, that is to say, Albert Hirschman and Tom Kuhn and Clifford Geertz. It was in the course of that year that they must have talked to Carl Kaysen, the then Director, about the possibility of my returning in their School.

Shore: In that first year in the School of Historical Studies, did you go to the seminars of the School of Social Science, becoming essentially a visitor in the School of Social Science or were the lines so drawn that when one came

in the School of Historical Studies, one stayed with those folks, or did one cross the line to the School of Social Science?

Skinner: Well, I think you put the point very well in speaking about crossing the line. I was made aware in the course of the year that there were certain lines, that is to say, there were ideological lines, and they had maybe in the past been battle lines, although everyone was very dignified about not involving visitors in the battles which there had been and indeed continued to be over the School of Social Science and over Carl Kaysen's aspirations for it. I was not involved in that at all, and I was always very grateful for that. But it's true that I did go to those Thursday Social Science seminars (although my recollection is that they used to be on Wednesdays) and I found what was being discussed there highly congenial and also altogether new in various ways to me.

Shore: Did the School of Historical Studies have seminars in any sort of formal sense or you were essentially left alone to do your work and to contact people like Felix and John?

Skinner: It was exactly the latter model. My recollection is that there was no formal seminar and that what happened was that one met the people one met. I was at that point writing the first volume of the book I completed while I was here, which was on Renaissance moral and political philosophy. And

a little bit gingerly, because I was rather in awe of him, I put myself in touch with Felix Gilbert, who was extraordinarily generous with his time and who read the whole script for me twice over. So that was very important to me. There was no seminar that I remember and no formal connections that I remember. But of course that answered to my aspirations at the time. I had this large project which it became clear to me in the course of the year I wasn't going to get finished in that time, and I was quite grateful to be left on my own.

Shore: You mentioned the troubles at the Institute at that time. Did you have any sense that these troubles concerning Kaysen and Bellah influenced the day-to-day running of the School or the way people interacted with one another here at the Institute?

Skinner: I came to see that they did. That was partly because the first year I was here was Carl Kaysen's last year as Director, and he gave me to understand that he was leaving in a spirit of some bitterness. That bitterness was obviously closely connected with the handling of Bellah's candidacy for a professorship at the Institute. So much one did learn during the year. But Kaysen was not a man to complain, not a self-pitying man. He was, I felt, a big man in all ways, and as I say he was also dignified about not involving junior and casual visitors in the problems of his institution. He presented

it, as I think he was right to do, as a major center with a particular mission, and he was a great man in getting on with that.

Shore: So in your subsequent appointment for three years, this was not an issue. This was not something Carl Kaysen mentioned or something that worried you about coming back to Princeton for three years.

Skinner: Well, that's an interesting point. He never mentioned it that I can recall in our negotiations about my coming back, and I wasn't made to feel that it was part of any particular political agenda at the Institute, not at all. But it was clearly part of an academic agenda which was I think very much Carl Kaysen's own, although he'd clearly worked it out with Clifford Geertz. The idea was that since they had had this tremendous difficulty about filling a really senior slot, what they might try to do would be to fill some junior slots of non-tenured people who would not be offered professorships but short-term fellowships. Three such appointments were made in the '70s of whom I was one and William Sewell, now at Chicago, was a second, an appointment made before mine. The third was Wolf Lepenies in the late '70s, and he was here I think for three years. So it was part of a particular academic agenda which I see had its politics in that this was a way of finessing difficulties about making a really major appointment.

Shore: Do you think these three-year (I think Wolf Lepenies was actually here for

five years) appointments were sort of try-outs, some of these people might be considered later for faculty posts? Or, was there a strict separation between sort of a middle-level post and a faculty post.

Skinner: My impression from Kaysen was that there was no question of its being a try-out. It was a five-year appointment and that was always clear. It never occurred to me that, if I conducted myself well, suddenly turned myself into a genius, it would all be different. On the contrary, I think that the arrangement was completely clear-edged. That was a very good thing, and indeed in my own case (just to be autobiographical about it for a moment) it led me to make a very complicated arrangement with my own university, because I wasn't sure I wanted to move myself into permanent residence in the United States. But I was sure that I wanted to be able to accept Kaysen's offer, which indeed did change my life. My university, after some negotiation, granted me a three-year leave of absence without pay but without my actually having to resign. So although Kaysen offered me five years, I accepted three years and after some further negotiation he accepted the idea of three years too. There may have been ambiguities with William Sewell that I don't know about, but in my case it was always completely unambiguous that I would be here for three years and then go back to Cambridge. And that's exactly what I did.

Shore: It's interesting to read in the files an almost casual mention of well, "why don't you get a job in America and then you can take leave because it's typical here," as if one could relocate one's self without any kind of personal or professional consequences. I don't know if you recall that.

Skinner: I didn't know that at all, no. I remember that Kaysen, whom I was somewhat in awe of -- he was a tough man and he hated fuss -- struck me as impatient, and part of his impatience stemmed from the fact that my wife was here. She wasn't my wife then, and I think she was in heavy inverted commas in Kaysen's notes as my 'companion.' She too was hoping to make an academic career in Cambridge -- which she has in fact done -- and this was a complication. I suppose that this would now be an absolute commonplace in negotiations -- that there would be a partner and you would be thinking about two people. But at the time I was made to feel that I was making a slight nuisance of myself in the face of what was, after all, a munificent offer. But it worked out.

Shore: What effect did deciding to come to the Institute have on your choice of topics, how you went about lecturing, writing, interacting with colleagues. Can you talk about the difference between being here versus Cambridge, teaching and not having to teach, the difference between America and England, small town-big town, those kinds of things?

Skinner: Well, I would like to try and pick up all of those points. They are very good points. I think that when I came I was to some degree already formed. I came in my mid 30s and had already worked out my position as a theorist, if I could so dignify myself, in that I had spent the previous many years writing a sequence of theoretical essays about explanation and interpretation in which I had tried to work out a particular theoretical stance. I also came, as I've already said, with a project which was threatening to get out of hand, which was large-scale and which I just wanted to complete. So in a way, although it seems a little ungracious to put it like this, I came formed both analytically in my approach to my subject and empirically in the sense that I had a theme and I knew that I must write a certain book which was clearly going to be a large book and in fact eventually turned out to be a two volume book. However I was enormously influenced, and have been permanently influenced in my intellectual stance, by the years that I spent here. There's no doubt about that at all. I think there are several points that I could try and pick up there. Would it be good to try to go on about that?

Shore: Why not? Yes.

Skinner: Well, one thing which struck me the first year I was here, and which has always remained with me, was an image of professionalism. It permanently

captured me. There was a sense, which we did not I think really have wholeheartedly in Cambridge at that time, that being a scholar was a twenty-four hours a day business, that the issues were far larger than we were, and that these had to occupy all your waking hours. The sense that this was a vocation was one that, although I had (as Hume says) passed through the ordinary courses of education with success, I hadn't ever gained. And in fact it produced a crisis. I remember this very clearly in my first year here, and the crisis was exacerbated by Carl Kaysen's invitation to me to return because I wasn't sure I was up to it and I wasn't sure I would be able to use the time well.

Shore: Could you explain that a little bit more. That's fascinating, the sense of vocation and the sense that you didn't have that or weren't quite ready for it.

Skinner: Well, I think it wasn't exactly either of those. It was more that I was given by my education in Cambridge, and by the way that my teaching had gone there, a sense that I was really doing extremely well by the going standards. When I came to Princeton, the people I met here both at the University and at the Institute who became my associates left me feeling I had really joined a completely different league. I didn't know at the time that these people were in some cases world-historical figures, and I comfort myself

with the reflection that in fact it was an extraordinary academic environment into which to come as a youngish man at that time if you were interested as I was in history and in philosophy and in relations between those subjects. The Philosophy Department at the University, which was the other group I got to know really well, had some extraordinary figures in it too, several of whom have remained friends of mine and whom I have collaborated with. So that was an important part of my experience. But I did find that, if I was asked to measure myself against these people, I didn't feel that I measured up. That was right, and remains right, but it did make me wonder if coming back would be wise. And it certainly did produce a crisis.

Shore: Did you feel welcomed by these world-historical figures, did they make you feel intimidated, do you think this was something that you were reading into the situation yourself?

Skinner: None of the people I've cited sought to intimidate me. I felt, by contrast, amongst some of the people at the department of history in the University, which in general I found uncongenial, that there was an intention to intimidate. In those days Princeton history had been captured by the Annaliétes in a way that I found thoroughly uncongenial: they were practicing a kind of vulgar Marxism without really knowing it. And I was

an intellectual historian interested in philosophy. There was a certain bewilderment amongst some of the people I encountered about the latter interest. As for my interest in intellectual history, they thought they had established that there was no such subject and that roughly speaking if you told me your income I could tell you your beliefs. I didn't find that congenial, and I did find a certain level of aggression with some of the people there, although others I found both gifted and delightful people to know. For example, in all the four years I was here -- it's only recently struck me as quite interesting about myself -- I never went to the Davis Seminar. I was reliably informed that there was blood on the floor, and certainly it was mainly about social history. Neither of the two seemed to me something I wanted to get involved in at all. But the people here at the Institute gave me no sense of seeking to intimidate me. No, on the contrary, it was simply that I was going to become a colleague of Albert Hirschman and Clifford Geertz, both of whom are geniuses in their way. In fact, I have remained in touch with them both ever since, and I'm deeply fond of them both. But they are really major figures by any standards, so it wasn't wrong for this to create a crisis. It's just that it created a lot of personal unhappiness for me at the time.

Shore: Could we go back to something we discussed before we started the

interview, which was a sense that I get that a number of people go through this, in fact all of the people, one could say, in one way or another who come to the School of Social Science, go through some kind of crisis of this sort. Did you see this happen and were you able to intervene or give any advice?

Skinner: Well, I saw it happen but I thought that the psychopathology of it was not very interesting, nor was it in my own case. I surmounted it and I did a lot of work when I came back here. But what I did see when I became a host rather than a guest was something that I was better placed to see than the first year I was here. This was that, if you set up a research institution and invite applicants, you invite people who have a certain level of self-importance. They think, "yes, a year off, I'm certain to do something good." Then they arrive, having internalized that thought, and have to start doing something good. This certainly produces a high level of twitchiness. Yes, I certainly felt that in a number of people. And I found it quite difficult to cope with until I identified what was going on. It didn't take a lot of social insight to identify it because it was going on with me too.

Shore: Can we get back to you for a second? Can I ask you how you did surmount this? Was this just something that time took care of, or was

there some process that went on?

Skinner: Well, I think there was a process of coming to see what I could hope to do and managing to do it. When I came back I hadn't finished the large book I was writing, but I had three years and I set myself the task of completing it in the time I had. And that's what I did. What that meant was that, of the two things that were going on in the Institute, I think there was one which I was alright at, and one which I wasn't so good at. What I was alright at was being given an office and leisure and told to get on with it: I did write a lot of words. What I was not so good at was interacting with the other people here and helping to run the seminars. I don't think I was very good at that and I connect that with something that may have a wider interest than my own academic psychology (but which is certainly central to the latter) which is this: I find that when I'm writing about any academic project, whether I'm trying to write theoretical work or purely historical work, I do not like to talk to people while I'm doing it. I find that as soon as you talk to someone who knows about the subject, they start to say what they think about it or how it should be handled, what one should do, and I'm very easily confused and thrown off balance by that. I've always found that I don't like talking about my work, and in a certain way that disabled me for an American research institute. I found myself

surrounded by people who, in many cases, weren't interested in talking about anything else except their work. By contrast, I prefer just to do it and then complete it. Then I'm delighted to show it to people, and indeed I'm a great one for sending people drafts of my work. But only when I believe the draft is finished. What I'm not good at doing is talking about my work while I'm doing it.

Shore: It seems to me that you've touched on a central contradiction in a research institute. Here at the Institute, it sounds like the School of Historical Studies, on the one hand and the School of Social Science on the other hand. One could say that perhaps the School of Historical Studies sticks more to the notion that you come here to sit in your office and to write and the School of Social Science has a sense of collaborative work, if not quite in the sense that the scientists do. But there seems to be more interaction among the social scientists than among the historians.. Can you talk about that, about the problem for the scholar who likes to sit and to write in his office, and the question of a **School** of Social Science.

Skinner: Yes. Well, I think the way you put it captures it extremely well. I found that the year I was with the historians was the year in which I was left alone. I got a lot done. I didn't finish, as I say, but I saw that I was going to be able to finish. Once I was in the School of Social Science, yes, I

found it more taxing in that there were more demands. However, I'd transferred from being a guest to a host in the course of that year, that is to say that when I returned, I returned not of course as a faculty member, but as a host in the sense that I attended meetings about choosing people and was expected to help run the seminars. So it was a different sort of experience. But I don't want to draw the distinction too strongly because although I didn't feel that I did very well about helping out in the more public aspects of the School's activities, I nevertheless did find in the course of those three years that, by some kind of osmotic process, my intellectual stances were very much changed by the experience of being here. I could certainly say a little bit about that.

Shore: I would like you to do that.

Skinner: That's not too autobiographical?

Shore: No. We're interested in hearing what **you** have to say.

Skinner: Well, I think that one change that came over me in those three years was overdue. It's part of what I was speaking about earlier -- the sheer professionalism of the place. It seems very scandalous that I can say this now, but I came here aspiring to write a book about the whole development of early modern political theory and I didn't really have the linguistic resources to do that properly. I'd been trained at school as a

classicist and so, in so far as the sources were in the classical languages, that was no problem for me. But there I was writing about the development of Renaissance philosophy in Italy and France as well as in England, without really having any proper grasp of Italian and with a relatively poor grasp of French. I suppose part of the crisis I spoke about earlier was that I came to see that this really was astonishing and that it wouldn't do at all. Certainly one of the things that I started to do when I was at Princeton was to take language lessons again. I went to night school and I became sufficiently proficient in Italian that a few years later I would be able to go to Italy and lecture in Italian. I couldn't do that now, but that's because languages acquired in advanced years disappear if you don't use them. As for French, I've never stopped taking French lessons and that has changed my life in that this is a language I now teach in, and I suppose every year I teach at the University of Paris in some way. I owe that to Princeton, in that I owe to Princeton the sense that it's really very extraordinary to pretend that you can be a serious historian without having a serious grasp of languages. Now, it's weird in retrospect that I didn't internalize that thought as a research student, but that is because I don't think I was professionally trained as a research student. So there's one way in which I was permanently changed by being here. But more interesting I suppose

were the permanent changes in my stance to my subject. I said rather self-importantly earlier that I came to some degree formed theoretically. But there was one enormously important sort of theoretical change of orientation which overcame me as a result of coming to Princeton. It's a little hard to put it exactly but I'll have a go, and it's this: I think I came still believing, in some kind of Weberian way, that the category of rationality provides the intellectual historian or the historian of philosophy with a concept which really gives a cutting edge to explanations. I left Princeton a kind of soft relativist, that is to say, I left having thoroughly internalized the thought that we are one tribe among many, and that what it is rational to believe depends on what else you believe and that the concept of rationality points inwards to systems of belief which articulate their own rules, and that the historian's task is to rearticulate those rules and to recapture that form of life. I also came to believe that, within that project, the idea of asking whether someone in some other age or society ought to have had the beliefs they had, by asking whether it was rational for them to have held those beliefs, was in tremendous danger (a danger I always felt the Annales School systematically incurred), of confusing what it is rational to believe with the truth. I left Princeton thinking that the truth was not an interesting category for the historian, that it's a fatal

category with which to operate. Instead we should be, in a kind of Quinean sense, internal realists and holists about the reasons that societies give for their beliefs and practices. Now that's where I think Clifford Geertz was a quite direct inspiration to my practice. Because I'm obviously articulating, though much less eloquently than he does, something that's been central to his sense of us as one tribe amongst others. But of course the other person from whom you could get that thought, because I suppose it's a thought central to both Quine's and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, was Tom Kuhn, and when I returned to Princeton I was put in an office next door to Tom Kuhn. Tom liked to do what he called interacting. This was simply the door bursting open and this man standing there with some serious anxiety about the theory of meaning, not on which he wanted my amateur thoughts, but on which he certainly wanted to talk for the next half hour. I remember that at the time I sometimes could barely stand it, but it was wonderful in retrospect because by that time Kuhn was finishing his work on the black--body problem and was returning to unresolved problems from his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. These problems were really questions in the theory of meaning. He was at that time articulating a set of ideas which he has never published but which I think were very influential upon me, especially

the idea that it's really our language which creates our world by creating the distinctions which we use to put together the different items in our ontology. So our concepts are really what we bring to bear upon the world in order to make sense of it. Well, of course, put the other way round, that's almost a thesis of idealism, because it implies that the world out there is actually constituted by the concepts we bring to it. But that suggestion -- again this is to parody some very deep thoughts from Kuhn's later writings -- was one that very much went with the Geertzian thought about ourselves as a tribe amongst others and reason as internal to the rules of each tribe. The two thoughts seem to go together because each tribe will want to describe the world, and each of those descriptions will be susceptible of rational defense but might be incompatible with other rational defenses that could be given. I didn't come to Princeton with any of those beliefs, but they're certainly beliefs I still hold. I would like in relation to them to mention one other person whom I got to know extremely well in Princeton who was a friend of both Geertz's and Kuhn's, and that was Richard Rorty. I spent quite a lot of time with him, especially in the last two years I was here. Those were the days before his tremendous fame struck him as a result of his publishing Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, and he talked to me quite a lot about that book in

the last phases of writing it. And that book articulates in a different way some of the thoughts I've been trying to articulate here. I remember being very proud of the fact that the New York Review of Books asked me to review Dick Rorty's book when it first came out. I wrote an essay which was a kind of *éloge*, since I thought and still think that the book was a really critical turning point in the hermeneutic sciences. To have been able to listen to those three extraordinary scholars and thinkers was an extraordinary privilege for me.

Shore: Was this triumvirate that you describe something that permeated the entire School or is this something you feel sort of privileged to have been one of the one or two or three disciples of or partakers in.

Skinner: Well, I think that Clifford Geertz's influence was permeative, and some of the ideas I've been talking about are distinctively his. And of course one of his mighty strengths has been not just that he's been a philosopher of the human sciences but a great practitioner too. In fact, he has put theory and practice together, really, as no one else. At the time I'm speaking of, the late 70s, some of his most important work was still to come. Negara had not even been published then, which I think of as one of his most important theoretical statements. He took one of the master nouns of our political discourse -- the State -- and showed how, in a different society, it

could come out looking almost unrecognizable. That was all in the future, but nevertheless by then his theory and his practice were well meshed. The theory was beautifully articulated, the practice fitted the theory, and that zapped a large number of people around here. So I'm not saying at all that I was privileged to see something arcane going on. But I did feel that more with Richard Rorty. After he published Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature in 1979, he worked out a position which enabled him all through the 80s to produce an immense outpouring of extraordinarily important work on hermeneutics. But I certainly felt that I had watched the formation of that position and his first statement of it. By contrast, Geertz's influence in the Institute was everywhere to see. It was one of the first things you noticed, because everyone talked about him. I didn't know his work at all well when I came here. I'd read some of it, of course, but I suppose only The Interpretation of Cultures did I know at all well. Reading Geertz and trying to find out more about his work was a fruit of everyone finding him a hegemonal figure here.

Shore: Could you talk about him a little more in terms of the meetings, the kinds of things that happened behind closed doors: how did his theory and practice work together in choosing members for the School, in organizing seminars in the day to day life of the Institute for Advanced Study?

Skinner: Well, my sense of it was that there wasn't much organized life. It was very informal. When I came back I think I was grandly called the secretary of the School. But this really meant I was the most junior person in the School and could therefore keep the paperwork. But I don't actually remember very much paperwork. I remember that we had meetings of course. We read dossiers and we made decisions and I remember that was very democratically done in the sense that we all met and we had our views and discussed them. There were four of us. I don't think Tom Kuhn was involved, but there was Albert Hirschman and Cliff Geertz and William Sewell and myself. But I also remember that Cliff's sense of the mission of the School and of what they were trying to shape had a big impact, and although his instincts were very democratic his presence was enormously powerful. And he did, I always felt, have a sense of how things would fit together even if he didn't know these people. He always seemed to have read everything, that was an extraordinary and remains an extraordinary thing about him. And he conveyed a sense of how particular scholars fitted his sense of how the human sciences should be conducted and yes, I think that was reflected in who came.

Shore: Did that rule certain people out or did it actually bring in "irritants" from the outside, people who he thought might force some other view, or did he

look, or did you look, for people who were more or less congenial in the sense that is normally understood.

Skinner: Yes, I think there was a bit of both. I mean, I think that someone who applied and said they were exclusively interested in games theory, and proposed to work by mathematical modelling, would have had to be a very good candidate. That's to say, I don't think there was prejudice. I think that such a person could certainly have come. But there was a sense of mission I did feel in an informal way. On the other hand, some of the people who were invited were specifically invited because they had a different approach. I can remember one year, when Tom Kuhn was very much involved, we had a group of people here on the history and philosophy of science. We had some people, especially a man called Barry Barnes, who believed in something called the Strong Program, which was a kind of Durkheimian skepticism about hermeneutics and the human sciences, which was certainly an irritant. I remember it certainly irritated me. I can't speak for Clifford but I'd be surprised if he wasn't irritated by it. But that was fruitful I think.

Shore: So there can be a productive irritation. I assume it can go overboard, or there can be a point where this tends to split the year into two camps.

Skinner: Yes.

Shore: That did not happen?

Skinner: No, not that particular year. I don't remember that. But I certainly remember a level of aggression towards Cliff from certain quarters. I don't know if he experienced it as such but if he did, then as Thurber says, he simply went away. He didn't engage with it so perhaps it didn't irritate him. I can't speak for him. It certainly irritated me.

Shore: My first years here were several years after that and I recall a series of Thursday seminars where almost each paper began in praise of Cliff, almost turning him into some kind of figure that then one would wrestle with in the rest of the paper. Did that happen also in the period of the late 70s or were his ideas still something that were on the table in some way and not an established set of practices or theory and practice?

Skinner: Yes. I don't think there was any idolatry. The idea that, if you came here, you had to have some position vis à vis his thinking, would never have been his aspiration. But I understand that it did come to be what happened to some degree in the early 80s, and I'm interested in your saying that. I never experienced that. Cliff was of course a very powerful presence, but he never sought to be a powerful presence by way of imposing himself aggressively on these occasions. There were people who were aggressive on these occasions but they were generally people who

came from the University. I can remember seminars where there was a feeling that it had got very adversarial. But I can never remember Cliff generating that, and you can't imagine Albert generating that. Nor do I remember his having to respond to what would have I think embarrassed him, the sense that these were footnotes to his own projects. I think there were lots and lots of different projects going on. And after all, I myself was not and never have been a social theorist. I mean, I was writing intellectual history all the time I was here and I was writing it from a particular theoretical standpoint. But we didn't have anything to say to each other about the work I was doing. Nor I think did he feel that that to be a failing on my part. He did I think very much respect the sense, as I think Albert did also, that people were getting on with their projects.

Shore: You remind me of something that Albert Hirschman told me in an interview with him, that at the first Thursday seminars papers were handed out and read beforehand, like the Davis Center, and that he felt that he recalled that there was a level of some hostility. Therefore there was a change to a paper read after lunch instead of sort of a blood letting ala the Davis Center.

Skinner: Yes.

Shore: Did that happen when you here?

Skinner: It did. Exactly. And I think it's apposite to mention the Davis Center because the notoriously adversarial manners of that assembly were I think to some degree imported from the University to the Institute. I never attended the Davis Center when I was here as I mentioned earlier, but I ought to add that I was invited to give a paper there last academic year and came back to do so. I found it a wonderful occasion so I'm not sure why I seem to be speaking with some aggression towards them.

Shore: Could you be speaking of two different figures, of Lawrence Stone and Natalie Davis?

Skinner: That may well be, because it was Natalie who invited me back. I don't think Lawrence has ever been interested in the sorts of things I do, although he has always been courteous about them. But while I was here he was on one hand the great Annalist (it was before he was Geertzified) and on the other hand he appeared to think intellectual history the name of a nonsubject. And so although he was always very nice to me personally I didn't have anything interesting to say to him nor did he to me. When I talked at the Davis Center last year, and Natalie Davis was in charge, she had become -- but of course the whole world had become -- a lot more interested in language, in linguistic change, in the relations between the world and the way the world is represented -- in fact, all the things I'd been

trying to work on in Princeton in the 70s.

Shore: I think we were talking about the Davis Center and about the bloodletting and about the differences between Natalie Davis and Lawrence Stone and I just wanted to ask you one further question: it always appeared to me that the Lawrence Stone style was a particularly British one and I found it interesting that you feel it more congenial at least here at the Institute as opposed to being in what would have probably been an atmosphere you were used to.

Skinner: Yes. I think the truth is that that's another way in which my experience of living in the United States changed me as an academic . The manner that you describe -- gladiatorial and extremely adversarial -- was how I was brought up. As a young academic, if I was invited to give a paper at (say) Oxford, that's how I would have expected to be treated. I found here something which I think is an interesting cultural difference, and it affected me greatly. It's difficult not to put this in a way that seems to praise the English system, and I don't really mean to do that because I think it's pathological actually. But the English seminar style presupposed tremendous ego distance of the person from the work. I've always felt, with the really major academics I've known from the English system, that

they were people who had superb self-confidence. I feel that if you were able to show them that their work didn't survive, they would not feel threatened existentially at all. There would be everything going for them except maybe that this wasn't as good a book as they had thought. There was no sense--which I was given strongly to feel when I came to the Institute -- that someone who had given a paper and who was subjected to a barrage of criticism was being treated with personal hostility. As it were, if you attack my paper you attack me. I found, in short, less ego distance, very little sense of an existential difference between the self and the scholar because the scholar is the self.

Shore: Does this have to do with the sense of vocation? It seems to me they're tightly connected.

Skinner: It may be that, it may well be so. Or it may just be that there was some greater sense of ease or of the self as a multiple self and the scholar as just one aspect of it. But, yes, I think that's well put now that I think about it, that maybe the sense that my project is myself, is the fruit of its being my vocation. But mainly it was a matter of cultural style. I should add that I brought the English cultural style with me, and quite quickly came to see (and was quite firmly given to understand) that this was not the cultural style here. When I went back to England and set up my own seminar

again in Cambridge I started by being quite horrified by the way it went on, and I did as much as I could, chairing it in subsequent years, to lend it a less discouraging tone. Now the world has caught up with us all and the style has gone out of fashion in any case.

Shore: You use the word cultural style. I wonder if you could talk about the cultural style of the Institute as opposed to that of the University and the town of Princeton. It also seems to me you were moving between the Institute and the University as a British person in a town that has some pretensions of an Anglophile sort. Could you talk about that?

Skinner: Yes, I'd be interested to. I certainly felt that coming to Princeton from England, and maybe perhaps particularly from one of the ancient universities in England, my wife and I were welcomed into a social scene which was not part of the Institute and wasn't altogether a part of the University. It included the sort of people whom we wouldn't have met in England, the sort of people who not only took their holidays in France, but owned houses in France in which they took their holidays. In short, there was an element of social snobbery that it was expected that we would tap into, which gave us a slightly different social experience in Princeton than we would have had if we'd been coming to the Institute from another American university, I guess.

Shore: Let's come back to the Institute itself and to some of the figures at the Institute. Maybe you would like to say a few things about each of the following people. I'll mention one at a time. Obviously the most important for our purposes is Clifford Geertz. You spoke about his effect on your work, maybe you could talk a little bit more about his relationship to the School, to the people around him, to the way that his personality might have shaped the development of the School in the years that you were here.

Skinner: Yes. Well, I think it did. But as I've said, I think that the way in which his personality shaped the development of the School was not by his being a powerful personality imposing himself on people. It seemed to me that what happened was that people read his work and were powerfully impressed by it and quite rightly too. He was not actually very strongly present as a person. He tended to be in his study getting on with writing the next book. And I didn't get to know him particularly well until the last year I was here. I suppose I found him a little bit unapproachable. He seemed a little bit ferocious and he seemed and still seems more than a little bit preoccupied by his thoughts. He also had a quality which made me -- and still makes me -- slightly anxious, although I'm enormously devoted to him. It's a quality not uncommon with extremely intelligent

people, which is that it's very easy to bore him, and it's very easy to seem too dogged about asking him to explain himself. He's someone whose thought processes are very, very quick. They're also very darting, and he expects you to be able to follow. And so, in short, I didn't find him very approachable. His works are very approachable and I read them more here than before and of course part of that approachability is their extraordinary literary power. But I suppose it was only when I perhaps became more confident at the end of my stay that I began really to ask him about his work and to learn more about him. And I suppose the irony is that it's since I've been back in Cambridge that I've got to know him better and have kept in touch. This is partly because I seem to come back here quite frequently. Also because we sometimes write to each other. And of course he's a frequent visitor to Europe.

Shore: Just to follow up on one other thing that we talked about. In the seminars themselves, what was Cliff's contribution in general, did he set the tone of them, or was he just one of ten or fifteen participants?

Skinner: Yes, well my recollection is that he and Albert alternately chaired the meetings. By the way my recollection is that it wasn't ten or fifteen, it was more like forty or fifty. They were large groups, the lunchtime seminars, and they regularly filled the room in which we lunched around all the

available parts of the table. A lot of people came from the University and from other Schools. For example, Felix Gilbert and John Elliott would always have been there from the School of Historical Studies. I don't remember either Albert or Clifford being very prominent in discussions. I think they probably both, for all I know, had it as a principle that this was an occasion for other people to debate and for them to chair. So I don't remember them being very prominent.

Shore: Were there smaller seminars? Now the tradition is that there is the Thursday public performance and there is a smaller seminar on the topic of the year, and that's what I was asking about. I assume that the Thursday seminar took its shape and has continued in the form that you are describing. It's that smaller seminar that I wanted you to talk a little bit about.

Skinner: Yes. Well, there was such a seminar in each of the three years that I was here in the School, and they were not run by either Cliff or Albert. My memory may be at fault here, but my recollection is that one or other or maybe a collective of the visitors ran these seminars, and that they were from the core group. The truth is that I was in no year a very faithful follower of those seminars. I remember giving a paper to two of them in each of the two years, but as I think I said at the outset, I don't think I was

very good at that interactive aspect of being at the Institute. It so happened that in none of the three years I was here was the topic very close to what I was doing, and there was great tolerance for one getting on with what one was doing. I never felt that I was coerced into discharging any sorts of duties, even as a host. Except that it was understood that one went and it was certainly understood that one went to the Thursday seminar. But what was mainly understood was that you were writing your book.

Shore: How about lunch? Did everyone assume that they had to sit together at the same table? Was that a time during which a lot of interaction took place?

Skinner: Yes. I do remember that very much. And one would invite guests, sometimes from the University as well, and the spaghetti was flying. Definitely. I remember that with great affection. Not the food, the food was supposed to be good but I found it somewhat austere. But yes I found the company and the informality of those occasions, and the friendliness of them was just as it was intended to be. But of course I come from an academic community in which the idea that the eating of food is, as it were, symbolically significant of the academic life remains absolutely central, so I suppose that was bred in the bone for me. I'd already been a

Fellow of a Cambridge College for about twelve years when I came here and that's all to do with eating. And, of course, drinking.

Shore: Could you say a few words about your other major colleague, Albert Hirschman?

Skinner: Yes. Albert was important to me and to my wife and Albert and Sarah were very important to us both. I think in two ways. One was that they formed a great social center. They were wonderful hosts in the strong sense that their house was an open house and they made a point of making sure that they introduced people to each other. They entertained rather formally, but these were circumstances in which people would meet and eat and spend an evening. They were wonderful at doing that. The other way in which they were important for me stemmed from their sheer cosmopolitanism as intellectuals. Both of them had this wonderful gift for languages, and the enormous openness to experience that that gave them. I think that's been a tremendous strength of Albert's work. Intellectually I wasn't able to learn from Albert very much. He was of course still at work on his essays in economic development and on more theoretical essays stemming from Exit, Voice and Loyalty. I could see and salute the importance of these works, but they didn't impinge on my own work in a way that I could make use of. So intellectually speaking, in its narrowest

form, Albert's influence on me was not as direct as I can see, when I reflect on it, the influence of both Cliff Geertz and Tom Kuhn was. But he was of course an influence as a kind of picture of a cosmopolitan intellectual, and that certainly had a big impact on me.

Shore: You were part of a group of three-to-five-year visitors: Bill Sewell, Tom Kuhn and yourself. Could you talk in turn about the two of them. First Bill Sewell.

Skinner: Bill was already on a five year fellowship when I came here. So he must have been here a year earlier and he must have stayed a year later. I didn't get to know him well. I think he found me fairly Martian, actually, and I found him more American than I found any of the other people. Albert is of course a European, who came as an adult to this country and retained very strong European links (although a healthy suspicion of England, which one certainly had to overcome). And of course Clifford is interested in all societies, and doesn't suppose that one of them is more interesting than the others. Whereas I felt that Bill Sewell was a very American figure who had been trained in a particular American way, then very fashionable. He was doing technical and I'm quite sure brilliant work of a numbercrunching kind on French social history. But I was never interested in social history, I was never interested in numbercrunching, I couldn't master the

techniques, I couldn't pretend I was interested in any of that. And so intellectually speaking we did not have much to say to each other. I regret that, because I liked him very much, but I didn't get to know him well at the time and I haven't kept in touch with him, whereas by contrast I've kept in touch with a lot of other people who were from our age group who were here around those times.

Shore: Tom Kuhn, who was a member in both the School of Social Science and the School of Historical Studies.

Skinner: Yes. Tom Kuhn was in the next office to me as I mentioned, and I knew of course The Structure of Scientific Revolutions , which everybody had read in the 60s. (I even at some point managed to persuade him to tell me how many copies it had sold.) Certainly that was a text of almost incomparable importance for anyone interested in the methodology of intellectual history in the 60s. It came out if I correctly remember in '62. I certainly remember reading it when it was still published as part of the Chicago Project for the Unified Sciences. Since it was, of all texts, the one that did the most damage to the idea of a unified science, that was quite a historical irony. When I came to the Institute he was certainly a mighty name. I was awestruck, but also fascinated to find that I was certainly going to get to know him well because he was a very friendly person. He

was in the next office, he came in a great deal, he liked to talk about what he was doing, his interests were enormously congenial to me because he was interested in intellectual history and what sort of philosophical standpoint you needed to adopt to write it and that was exactly what I was interested in. And of course he'd done classic work in both genres. So I learned a lot from him, although I can't say he was receptive, because he was preoccupied by his own thoughts and he was also a very dominating person.

Shore: Was he active in the small seminar ever or was that something he stayed away from?

Skinner: He was working very hard on the big book on the black body problem. He had a few phrases for what he did. He liked to speak of tuning out, and he also liked to speak of checking out. Even if he was present he would sometimes tune out, but more often he checked out. That meant he checked into his office, where he was really getting on with it. He wasn't very prominent in the seminars, except in the year when it was about history and philosophy of science. There I remember several marvelous occasions where he talked about the work he was doing on the philosophy of language, on the theory of meaning, and I remember one or two evenings where I felt simply riveted by what he said. So, yes, he was very

active in that year. But he wasn't in general very active. He was working very hard on his own project. But I got to know him quite well and talked to him face to face quite frequently about matters of mutual concern and I'm quite sure that I was influenced by his stance.

Shore: How about your countryman, the professor in the School of Historical Studies, John Huxtable Elliott.

Skinner: Well, he was and is an important person in my life; indeed both he and his wife are. As I mentioned it was John Elliott who had the idea that I should come here in 1974. It must have been through his influence that I was originally invited, so I owe everything to him in a chronological sense. When I was here -- I saw this more when I was in the School of Historical Studies -- I felt that he was a model of how to be at the Institute. That's to say, he was, like Albert, an immensely ambassadorial sort of person, he had a great gift for languages, he could welcome people in many tongues, he entertained everyone, he was very receptive in listening to what people had to say, he was a great enabler, a great introducer of people to people. But at the same time you had a strong sense that large works were being written; and indeed they were. One of them was enormous, the book on Olivares that I think crowned his time here, but there were earlier important works as well. So I felt that he was a great role model.

Shore: But you didn't discuss his work with him?

Skinner: No. His work and my work don't intersect very much. He was a very willing reader of my work and very helpful to me about it but we didn't very much talk about what he was doing. I don't think he would have expected me to know about it or to be particularly interested in it -- except of course that we are both early modernists. But we saw, my wife and I, a lot of John and Oonah, and maybe it was nice for them to have another English couple here. I don't know about that. Certainly they were generous and hospitable to everyone, so I don't think we were particularly singled out, but we did become friends of theirs while we were here. And now of course John is my opposite number, because he's Chair of the Oxford Faculty of History and I'm chair of the Cambridge Faculty of History, and we ring each other up late at night to complain about our alienated labor. So we've remained very much in touch.

Shore: Did the two of you ever talk about the Princeton years as instructive for what you do now, or is there really no connection between the Oxford-Cambridge academic scene and what the two of you did here at Princeton.

Skinner: We always talked about it when he used to come back in the summers to Cambridge, where he kept a house, and we always saw him in those summers. Ironically, now that he's in Oxford, I rarely see him, because I

suppose we feel it's so close we don't have to make sure we do see each other. But he always came with news from Princeton, and he was always very interesting. He's not of course someone who gossips, and he never speaks against anyone, so we didn't hear of any scandals or problems at the Institute, but he kept me in touch with it, yes. And I think those were enormously important years for him, for his productivity, for what he achieved here. I don't know that I feel it changed him. He arrived wanting to write more about French and Spanish politics and culture of the seventeenth century and he did. His time here culminated in the writing of that extraordinary book on Olivares, where all the documentation had been scattered and had to be reassembled before you could get the framework of a book. It's a masterwork. But it's interesting that, although up the road at the University biography was in very bad odor, because we'd been instructed by Braudel that there was no such art form, John wasn't as far as I could see affected by that. He continued in the way he had been working when he came here. He seemed to me to be a very autonomous scholar here. He had a line mapped out and he followed it.

Shore: How about that other great early modernist for whom biography was also an important form of writing, Felix Gilbert.

Skinner: Yes, he was very important to me also. The first year I was here was the

year that Felix retired. I suppose that, if I was at all made aware of the divisions there had been in the Institute in the immediately preceding year, this happened when Felix retired. To me he was one of the great Renaissance scholars of the age, and I do remember being shocked that the School of Historical Studies as a body had no particular intention to celebrate his retirement in any way. The retirement was celebrated privately in John Elliott's house with a large and wonderful dinner party that my wife and I both attended. It was a fine occasion and I'm sure that Felix enjoyed himself because he was very fond of John Elliott and also that year Richard and Mary Dunn -- Mary had been a pupil of Felix's at Bryn Mawr -- were both visitors and were wonderful people for him to have around him at that time. So I don't think he felt unacknowledged. But I remember being astonished that someone who was of such extraordinary importance in the discipline should be allowed simply to evaporate, as it were, from the point of view of the School of Historical Studies. And I suppose that must have been in some way connected with quarrels that were still very recent. So I remember being sorry about that. He was terribly kind to me. During the three years I was here I was writing my book on early modern political theory, of which one of the volumes is on Renaissance political theory, and I talked a lot to Felix about books, and

about approaches. He read my drafts, and seemed to me to have an unsurpassed understanding of the political theory of that period. I already knew that because his book of 1965, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, is an absolute classic. In a subject where there is immense historiography, I still think of that book as being one of the very best. So when I came to the Institute he was already one of my heroes. And he certainly didn't disappoint me. In addition, of course, he was by then a man in his 70s who had a fascinating story to tell, and of an evening you could get him to reminisce about being in Berlin during the great inflation and how one survived, and about his student days, and about Meinecke, and about the whole of that German Historismus tradition of which he, one sees in retrospect, was one of the last and greatest exemplars. So he was a remarkable figure for a younger scholar to come across. He was very much a European figure, that's to say, he was recognizably out of that German tradition in which the techniques of philology had been applied to intellectual history. You didn't just work from the texts, you made it a manuscript-based subject, you spent time in the archives. I've subsequently tried to follow that approach and I still think that he's a great exemplar of it. Of course, his views about the Europe he'd left were enormously ambiguous because of the persecutions. But he was someone

who was willing to talk about that experience and the experience of exile. I remember his talking very movingly about going back to Berlin, I think in the American army, at the time of the liberation. It was an experience which, although painful, he was very interested in talking about if you asked him. So I found him historically a very fascinating person, quite apart from the fact that he was I think a great historian.

Shore: You describe something that is interesting about the tradition of the two Schools. The School of Social Science had no emeritus figures in the time you are speaking of, but since Albert Hirschman's retirement, he continues to be an active member of the School, who helps to select members, for example. In the School of Historical Studies it seems to me from the beginning on, there was a tradition that after you retire, you stay here, and you can continue to work, but you have nothing further to do with the conduct of business, and there is no formal acknowledgement of that transitional moment. I don't know if there is anything you would like to say about that.

Skinner: Yes, that's very interesting. I don't think I was particularly aware of that. But there is something to be said about it which relates to Albert Hirschman. He seems to me, more clearly now even than twenty years ago, a figure whom it's not going to be possible to replace. His kind of

interest in political economy requires great economic expertise. But the expertise is not used for model making, it is used to describe the world in a certain way, and to understand it, and indeed to issue predictions as well, but as part of a quasi-humanistic pursuit. Now that is recognizably a European tradition which has been abandoned in Europe and in America. I don't think that there would be an economist now who would be regarded as a first rate economist, in the way that Albert Hirschman obviously was and is, but who had that stance to his or her subject. That's just not the way the subject is now taught and learned.

Shore: Let's change gears a little bit. I would like to ask you about the director who was here when you were here, Harry Woolf, who had just started when you came back for your three-year period. I understand that Carl Kaysen was an active participant in the social science seminar in his years as director. Was there much of an interaction between Harry Woolf, the director, and the School, either in its seminars or at lunch or in any significant way?

Skinner: Well, it's difficult to answer this without being perhaps franker than one should be. But certainly Carl Kaysen, who was still director in the first year I was here, was a very prominent figure in the purely intellectual life of the Institute. He struck me as a brilliantly clever person and enormously

self-confident. It would be wrong to say he didn't suffer fools gladly -- he didn't suffer them for a second. I found him very quick, very impatient, quite dogmatic, very confident, very impressive intellectually. Harry Woolf was brought in more, I think, as an administrator than as someone who was expected to be an intellectual powerhouse, and I think that Woolf's relationships with the faculty were more distant. It was my impression that the very great respect in which, I sensed, Kaysen was held as an intellectual did not so much, or did not so clearly, extend to Woolf. That is perhaps speaking rather more frankly than I am entitled to, but that was my sense. There was a very big difference of administrative style between those two men as well. It was Kaysen, as I say, whom I first encountered as head of the Institute, and it was his idea that I should be invited to return. I didn't find him an easy person to negotiate with because I was a young man and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do whereas he was exceedingly decisive. I shan't say he was bullying; he was just a very powerful presence and someone who was used to speaking rather laconically and then things happening. Harry Woolf by contrast I found someone who was rather anxious to please. You would never have said of Carl Kaysen that he was anxious to please. And I sensed that some of Harry Woolf's anxiousness to please was not altogether authentic, whereas

Kaysen was a highly authentic person, although I could see he was someone who might put people's backs up. So the styles they adopted in dealing with their colleagues were very strongly contrasting.

Shore: Did Harry Woolf's style extend to trying to bring the scientists together with the social scientists in any way or was there almost no interaction.

Skinner: Well my sense of it was that, when Woolf came, as I say, he came very much more as a person brought in as an administrator. He was a good scholar, and he'd written some interesting work in eighteenth century history of science. But he had changed career direction quite early, since he came to the Institute from a distinguished career at Johns Hopkins as an administrator. So I don't think there was such a strong feeling, as there was with Kaysen, that they'd appointed someone who was both a very powerful administrator and a very powerful intellectual presence. I don't remember Woolf playing a prominent role in the intellectual debates of the Institute in any of the years that I was here.

Shore: Were there any scientists that ever came to the seminars, especially in year on the history of science?

Skinner: Yes. There were, although they were not people that I got to know at all. But Professor Bahcall I certainly remember coming to some of those lunchtime seminars. Also Freeman Dyson, who was I think personally a

friend of both Cliff's and Albert's, was a quite frequent visitor.

Shore: And also contributed or mostly were just paying calls?

Skinner: I remember them as people paying calls . But they were people evidently of wide interests.

Shore: Let's go back to you and to the Institute itself. How did you deal with the freedom that this Institute provides? This is one of the most wonderful things that I hear from annual members, this incredible sense of having the time to devote to one's own topic.

Skinner: Yes.

Shore: That can also be a double-edged sword, I would imagine. And I'd like you to talk about that.

Skinner: Yes, I think it is a double-edged sword. When I came to the Institute I was suffering from some level of alienation from my job in Cambridge. I was carrying too heavy a teaching and administrative burden to be able to do as much research as I wanted. But I must confess that there were moments during the times when I was at the Institute when I was able to see that alienation is a less severely disabling condition than anomie. What I think I have to say about the issue of freedom is that it was wonderful when you knew exactly what you were doing and were able to do it. I had the experience of coming to the Institute with a, by my

standards, large intellectual task incomplete, with anxieties about whether it could be completed, and being given the freedom to complete it. That was an extraordinary privilege which I've had neither before nor since. The freedom was an enormous bonus to me and I benefitted enormously from my time here. I mean that in a very straightforward way. By the time I went home I had written the books that got me the job I still have. But I finished my main projects six or so months before permanently going back to England. So during my final year here I began to try to work on a new project and it didn't work out and I wasn't sure what I should be reading. Then I found that the freedom, instead of being an opportunity, became a threat. And then I saw that there could be circumstances in which you might be quite grateful at the end of some particular day for the thought, "Well, at least I've given this lecture, attended that meeting, taught that student." When you've done none of those things, but are also very acutely aware that you haven't managed to think the thoughts you'd hoped to think, then of course you become anxious and less happy.

Shore: Is this a prescription for right time for a scholar to come to the Institute?

Skinner: Well, it's a very good question. I've thought a lot about it and I think that the School of Social Science has done very well to have the people it has. All four of the members of the School (if we still count Albert, as we rightly

should) seem very inner-directed people who don't seem to suffer from this existential angst. I can't speak for any of them but it's clear that they don't -- or rather, they don't appear to suffer from the level of anxiety I suffer from if my work is not going well. I'm not sure that I would now have the courage, so I'm not sure that I desire to be back in a research institute. That's a slightly privileged thing to say, because the job I have does not impose very heavy teaching burdens on me. But I like the slightly greater variety. I like the fact that, since I came back to Cambridge in 1980, I have had a string of wonderful PhD students who have worked with me. I have learned an enormous amount from them, and I wouldn't have been without that for anything. Then again, I really enjoy lecturing, and I don't mind helping to run the ship. So I suppose that although my years at the Institute enabled me to write at a higher rate than I have managed before or since, I don't really have the confidence in my own thoughts to feel that I would ever have had what I think amounts to the courage to accept a permanent research post.

Shore: I also had in mind the question of the annual member. That there's a time in a scholar's life when it's appropriate to come here, it seems that you're saying, and there's a time it may not be. In other words, to put words into your mouth, perhaps not the time when you're doing general reading but

a time when your thoughts have ripened to the point where you are ready to sit down and write.

Skinner: Well, I'm happy to have those words to put in my mouth. I think that's exactly right and I think that puts, better than I was doing, what I want to say. I think it has some general application too, in that I would never recommend someone to come here for a whole year who wasn't writing. If you were just reading about your project, you would be surrounded by people who seemed to be better employed and if you were me you would also be continually thrown off course by people advising you about how you ought to be doing what you were doing. A good time to come here would be like those first three of the four years that I had here, when I knew exactly what I was doing and I was given these magnificent facilities for getting on with it.

Shore: It also sounds as if one year may not be enough, that maybe a two-year membership makes more sense than one-year. The first year you described as being slightly intimidating, I suppose intimidating for many people. The second year one feels...

Skinner: Yes. Well, I think the problem with that is that these positions are heavily competed for. Once you start offering people two years you've halved the number of people who can have them. So I don't think I would be in favor

of that. What I would be in favor of the School doing in the future is what it did in the past: to have some people for a short span and some for a longer span, and neither to be counted as faculty members.

Shore: Were you ever offered a faculty position here at the Institute?

Skinner: Well, not while I was here, no, and I would have been amazed to be. The question did come up many years later, but that was back in the School of Historical Studies, and I have no particular reason to think that my sponsors would have succeeded in getting me appointed. But I do remember a formal letter soliciting my interest in the post. But by then I was back in Cambridge in a job which I very much enjoy, and I had children who were English and a wife who also had a tenured position in the same university. We are effectively immovable.

Shore: Let's see if we can end this wonderful interview, and I want to thank you for the time you've given to it, with words that you used in an acknowledgement. They are especially relevant now that you're here to look at the Institute critically, to look at the School of Social Science as a member of a Visiting Committee. You wrote, "I have also been privileged to discover that as a setting for scholarly work, the Institute is beyond praise." Would you comment?

Skinner: Yes, I know what I meant and I meant something rather specific. I don't

suppose that I meant it was beyond criticism, but it was certainly not for me to criticize it, and although I've come back on a Visiting Committee, I don't plan to criticize it at the meetings tomorrow. What I meant was that what I found moving -- I think I can use so strong a word -- was the trust that was embodied in me as a rather young scholar by these senior and significant figures. The way that I remember it, in relation to the particular book you've mentioned, is this. I certainly came fully intending to complete that book, and I did. But what I saw was that it wasn't particularly **expected** by the people who had invited me back that I would finish it. I remember that, when I gave Albert Hirschman a copy of it, he said to me: "Well, you seem to have come here and written what you said you were going to write." I've always remembered that because I thought, "Well, of course! I mean, I've been paid a large salary and given a beautiful house, and I've had no other obligation." But the trust seemed to me extraordinary. The feeling seemed to be: "Well, it will probably come out alright, and we're willing to trust him to do it." Since then I've lived through the Thatcherism of the 1980s. This was a story, from a University point of view, of a populism so philistine that what we really experienced was what it was like for major universities to lose the trust of their paymasters that they were doing anything that mattered. The absolute

trust I experienced here, (that I would probably get on with my work and it would probably be fine) now seems to me like a voice from another and better world.

Shore: Thank you.