

CHAPTER ONE

The Identity of Intellectual History

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Introduction

Intellectual history has no identity. But then, nor does social history or cultural history or any of the other subdivisions of history – at least, not if ‘identity’ is taken to indicate exclusive possession of a set of distinctive practices or a clearly delimited territory. What is done by those who are, for some purposes, regarded as ‘intellectual historians’ overlaps or is continuous with – and is at the margins scarcely distinguishable from – forms of scholarship that sail under flags as different as ‘history of science,’ ‘history of art,’ ‘history of political thought,’ and any number of others. As the metaphor of sailing under a flag suggests, these forms of identification can be useful for certain kinds of classifying and policing purposes, but all such flags are in a sense flags of convenience. Most often, instead of (to change the metaphor) seeking a quasi-Linnaean classification, with each species, defined by its unique characteristics, taking its place in a systematic taxonomy, we do better to ask a version of Pragmatism’s question: what purposes does the use of such a label serve? In what contexts does it matter and why? There are scholars who find themselves in a variant of M. Jourdain’s position and realise that they have been doing intellectual history all along without calling it by that name. That usually suggests they have been exceptionally fortunate in their professional or institutional lives, allowed to pursue their idiosyncratic interests without penalty. But more often, when scholars reach out for the label ‘intellectual history’ and use it in self-description, they do so in an attempt to establish the legitimacy of their interests, sometimes in the face of various kinds of hostility, scepticism or neglect. That was certainly the case during, roughly, the first three-quarters of the twentieth century when the dominance of the historical profession by political and, to a lesser extent, economic history could appear to make an interest in the intellectual life of the past seem an amateur or antiquarian activity, not based on the rigorous exploitation of archives and not dealing with those forces in society that ‘mattered.’ From this point of view, the relative autonomy and (not quite the same thing)

respectability now enjoyed by intellectual history – and exemplified by the existence of this *Companion* – is an achievement of the past generation or so.

Of course, it would not be difficult to show, given a little frisky conceptual footwork, either that there is no such thing as intellectual history or that all history is intellectual history. One could, for example, argue that history can only be a series of accounts of the doings of human beings and the only evidence we ever have of thinking is the trace left by action, which is all that historians ever have studied or can study: *res gestae*. Conversely, one would not need to subscribe to R.G. Collingwood's Idealist conception of human action to see the sense in which one might want to say that 'all history is the history of thought' (Collingwood, 1946). Indeed, any notion of anachronism – one of the defining notions of historicity itself – implies a kind of brute intellectual-historical sense, an awareness that past minds might have had different assumptions and expectations according to their time and place. Seen thus, all historians cannot but be versions of M. Jourdain, doing a primitive kind of intellectual history without knowing it. By the same token, it would not be manifestly false, though it would be wilfully irritating, to describe Herodotus as 'the first intellectual historian;' perhaps a marginally more credible, but still tiresome, case could be made for Plutarch. But in such instances the label seems to lose any useful specificity; it merely functions as a near synonym for 'historian.'

If we are seeking some kind of genealogy, a more plausible case might be made for beginning with the late-seventeenth-century argument about the respective merits of the Ancients and the Moderns and moving on to figures from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Vico and Voltaire, where a self-conscious interest in charting phases or stages of human thought and sensibility prompted various departures from the canons of Classical and medieval historiography (for a general overview of these developments, see Kelley, 2002). But such enquiries tended to be animated by larger philosophical or polemical purposes, and before the nineteenth century, it is not easy to identify anything like a separate branch of historical enquiry devoted to recovering episodes in the history of human thought. Even then, and indeed into the early decades of the twentieth century, such enquiries were often undertaken by those who might be primarily identified as philosophers or critics rather than historians. For example, two works widely cited as early instances of what came to be labelled intellectual history were Leslie Stephen's *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (1876) and J.T. Merz's *The History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 4 vols (1896–1912): the first was by a writer primarily known as a literary critic and biographer, the second by an author described as 'an industrial chemist and philosopher.'

In Britain, this pattern continued deep into the twentieth century. Four of the figures who did most, albeit in quite different ways, to encourage a thickly textured interest in the intellectual life of the past were Aby Warburg, Isaiah Berlin, Arnaldo Momigliano and Herbert Butterfield: the first was primarily an art historian, the second a lapsed philosopher, the third a Classicist, the fourth a historian of European diplomacy. It is also significant that three of these four were immigrants to Britain from continental Europe; the broader Germanic inheritance of tracing the expressions of *Geist* was a significant predisposing factor in developing their respective scholarly interests. In imported form, this inheritance was also influential in the United States, where A.O. Lovejoy, another strayed philosopher, elaborated one of the first methodological

programmes for studying what he called ‘the history of ideas’ (understood as the story of ‘unit-ideas’ which combined and re-combined across time, as in his celebrated *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea* (Lovejoy, 1936)).

Despite the intrinsic interest of these various bodies of work, it remained true that in the middle of the twentieth century intellectual history was frequently treated as the ‘background’ for something else – by implication, something more important, more deserving of occupying the foreground. The widely used books by Basil Willey, a literary scholar, made a virtue of this function, as *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion* (1934) was followed by *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of ‘Nature’ in the Thought of the Period* (1940). From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, ‘background’ tended to be replaced by ‘context,’ a term that came to be brandished as though it had the power of a magic spell: claiming to place ideas ‘in their historical context’ became the professionally approved way of asserting one’s scholarly seriousness. The two more specialised areas in which such contextualising work had greatest impact in the years from the 1960s to the 1980s were the history of science and the history of political thought; in both cases, especially the latter, there was a concentration on the long ‘early-modern’ period (circa 1450 – circa 1800). It was work in these areas that generated the methodological programmes associated above all with the names of Thomas Kuhn, J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, each of whom was taken to have provided a theoretically grounded template or paradigm of far-reaching applicability. For contingent historical reasons, the history of political thought was the form in which intellectual history – often in unstable compounds with elements of political theory, moral philosophy and political history – achieved a certain level of scholarly and institutional recognition in the USA and, especially, Britain in the first two or three decades after 1945 (see Collini, 2001). On a broader front, work on the borders of fields such as cultural history and literary theory subsequently prompted a greater plurality of approaches and a more expansive sense of the available modes of writing, while the impress of other political or theoretical formations, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, extended the reach and style of intellectual history in other ways, especially for the modern period. The most recent turn has been, inevitably, to embrace ‘global intellectual history:’ this involves an admirable avoidance of parochialism and a strenuous effort to undertake comparative studies, though in practice it can be hard to avoid superficial or tin-eared characterisations.

This brief characterisation necessarily condenses and simplifies a complex story, and several caveats must be entered. To begin with, these remarks primarily refer to what has come to be identified as intellectual history in the world of Anglo-American scholarship, particularly (in view of the provenance of this *Companion*) its British variants. A fuller account would need to discriminate more carefully among the various traditions which have tended to dominate at different periods, especially in the United States where versions of the history of ideas or intellectual history tended to enjoy greater recognition, and to be located more securely within History departments, than was the case in Britain until very recently. For example, a preoccupation with ‘American exceptionalism’ generated major studies of the distinctiveness of intellectual life in that country, from Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington early in the twentieth century, through Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind* (2 vols, 1939–53), to the work of a distinguished group of recent scholars including Thomas Bender, David Hollinger,

James Kloppenburg, Bruce Kuklick, Daniel Rodgers and Dorothy Ross (for an early conspectus of this group, see Conkin and Higham, 1979). European intellectual history has also tended to be cultivated with more confidence, and perhaps with more methodological self-consciousness, in the United States than in Britain, from the work of earlier figures such as Jacques Barzun and H. Stuart Hughes, through that of Peter Gay and William J. Bouwsma to more recent scholars such as Martin Jay and Anthony Grafton (for an overview, see Grafton, 2006; for contributions from a mainly Foucauldian or deconstructive perspective, see LaCapra and Kaplan, 1982; and for a more recent, and more quizzical, survey, see McMahan and Moyn, 2014).

A focus on other national cultures would produce a still more varied picture. The traditional centrality of philosophy and the aesthetic in German thought, for example, continued to inflect scholarly engagement with past intellectual life throughout the twentieth century, just as in France the field tended to be divided between the formalist studies by historians of philosophy and the more anthropological enquiries by social or cultural historians attempting to reconstruct the *mentalités* of entire communities (Dosse, 2003). In both these traditions, the term ‘intellectual history’ has retained a somewhat alien flavour, while various native enterprises from *Geistesgeschichte* and *L’Histoire de philosophie* to, more recently, *Begriffsgeschichte* and *L’Histoire du champ intellectuel* have divided up the terrain in different ways. These and other national traditions are all covered in more detail elsewhere in this volume; this chapter will concentrate on issues raised by work done in the English-speaking world.

A generation or more ago, those seeking to describe, and usually to vindicate, the distinctiveness of intellectual history largely felt themselves to be on the defensive, but there has been a notable increase in collective self-confidence in the last two or three decades. Elaborate exercises in definition and self-justification seem much less called for now. Labels are only labels, but the term ‘intellectual history’ has become commonplace, part of the furniture of institutional life, regularly appearing in the titles of books, journals, appointments and so on. I am not here offering a sunny narrative of disciplinary ‘progress’, but merely noting major changes in the setting and mood within which work is now undertaken, and hence in what it *feels* like to be an intellectual historian in 2014 in contrast to, say, 1974 or 1964. In any case, there are countervailing trends at work which should constrain any triumphalist note in this account. One is that developments growing primarily out of literary theory, and sometimes summarised as ‘the linguistic turn,’ have meant that all kinds of opportunist uses of texts from the past, primarily fuelled by ideological or deconstructive purposes, have increasingly presented themselves under the title ‘intellectual history’ even though they are not part of any sustained attempt to recover and understand the intellectual life of the past in its knotty, irreducible pastness. The potential for misperception and misidentification in practical matters such as appointments and reviews has increased correspondingly: literary scholars sometimes use ‘intellectual history’ as an honorific denoting an interest in theory or politics, while philosophers occasionally employ it as a derogated label for any interest in past thinkers that is not strictly philosophical. Another constraining development is institutional. For all the good work that is being done in intellectual history in Britain and America at present, there is still a paucity of established posts in the field. Very often, again especially in Britain, a scholar initially appointed to teach some other area (and themselves sometimes coming from a background in quite another discipline) makes a mark in the field and adopts ‘intellectual

history' as part of the description of their chair or other senior appointment, only for their post to revert to its original disciplinary allegiance upon their departure or retirement. There are very few institutions where one can properly speak of a succession or a continuing graduate programme.

Nonetheless, the enhanced sense of legitimacy and shared values consequent upon the flourishing of intellectual history in the last couple of decades is itself an enabling condition for further good work. This healthy state is perhaps particularly evidenced by the cluster of journals that now serve the field. *Intellectual History Review* is the most recent, launched in April 2007, but it joins *Modern Intellectual History*, launched in April 2004, *History of European Ideas*, re-founded on new lines in 1995, and the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, which is more venerable but which has also recently undergone a welcome reshaping of its identity. (I should declare an interest here, since I am, or have been, on the Editorial or Advisory Boards of these last three journals.) Of course, good work in intellectual history is also published in a variety of other journals; I single out the above quartet simply because their simultaneous flourishing is a new phenomenon, and because they provide places for intellectual historians to publish without having to adapt to the protocols or expectations of scholars working in other disciplines or subdisciplines.

All this means that we can say, in a manner at once more confident and more relaxed than might once have been possible, that in the present, 'intellectual history' is a label applied to a wide range of enquiries dealing with the articulation of ideas in the past. At its core has been the close study of written expressions of thought, especially those crafted at a fairly sophisticated or reflective level. A constitutive part of such study is the attempt to recover the assumptions and contexts which contributed to the fullness of meaning that such writings potentially possessed for their original publics. All these phrases raise more questions than they answer but, for my present purposes, they are as far as it seems necessary to go by way of general description.

The practice of intellectual history

The manner in which I have been attempting, in these opening paragraphs, to address the question of the 'identity' of intellectual history by providing a primitive history of the activity may be seen as characteristic of work in this field more generally. That is to say, the historical impulse, where ideas are concerned, inevitably has a relativising effect, making particular expressions of an idea seem more tied to time and place than is the case with the fundamentally conceptual or theoretical disciplines, such as philosophy and several of the social sciences. But I would go further and say that, in the present, intellectual history is above all a form of practice, or a cluster of related practices, and the best way to exhibit its character at any given time may be by assembling a body of exemplary work. Systematic 'methodological' or 'theoretical' pronouncements may serve various purposes – philosophical, hortatory, exclusionary and so on – but they can only play an ancillary role in representing the nature and diversity of such scholarship. The succeeding chapters in this *Companion* give some indication of the range of such exemplary work, and it is not the task of an introductory essay to summarise, still less to preempt, those accounts. But perhaps three inferences, each of a loosely practical character, can be drawn from the diversity of work that has flourished in recent decades.

First, ‘context’ is never something given, never one fixed range of neighbouring activities: what can fruitfully count as context will depend on what we already understand about the text which we are choosing to surround with other elements, what questions we are seeking to answer or puzzles to resolve. Anything that helps to make or restore sense may be seen as an essential context, but there will necessarily be a plurality of such framing moves, always involving a selection from the almost limitless residues of the past. We like to think that the judicious selection of context is what helps protect us from misinterpreting what we read, and so it does in the best cases. But there can be no recipe for calling such contexts into play: the journeying between past and present which is constitutive of the historian’s activity includes an increasing familiarity with the mental worlds to be found at either end of those journeys, but the judgement about what needs explaining, what needs saying, is, like other forms of practical judgement, something built up by experience, not arrived at by applying a template.

Second, it is no accident that intellectual historians so often refer to debates, controversies, arguments, exchanges and so on: these represent ideas in action, living ideas being expressed and used in a highly specific setting. This is one indication of the deeply anti-individualist character of the most considered work in this field. The focus is always on what is shared and disputed with others – assumptions, expressions, arguments – not on an idea that can be treated either as self-sufficient or, in any meaningful sense, strictly singular. Even ‘intellectual biographies’ necessarily involve the reconstitution of networks of discourse: no writer or thinker creates the language they use *de novo*, and language is a social practice that expresses and is shaped by a collective history. There can, of course, be due recognition of the importance of the ‘original’ thought of a notable individual, but there can, strictly speaking, be no ‘great man’ school of intellectual history.

Third, while it is true that intellectual historians make use of a wide variety of genres of publication, it remains the case that three rather traditional forms predominate, and for good reason. The first of these is the essay – the essay rather than the article, in so far as that distinction has any force. Many of the best intellectual historians have been notable essayists – this was conspicuously true, to take contrasting examples, of Isaiah Berlin and Hugh Trevor-Roper – and this relaxed conversable form has proved itself particularly well suited to the tasks of heuristic questioning and intellectual portraiture. The second is the scholarly edition, often an underrated genre where the making of professional reputations is concerned, but a form that can be both the distillation of a lifetime’s learning and the bedrock of others’ investigations. Consider, to take two notable seventeenth-century examples, the fabulous wealth of erudition undergirding the Clarendon edition of the works of Thomas Hobbes or the Newton Project, which aims to make available an edited version of everything Sir Isaac Newton ever wrote, on any topic, published or not. These and comparable editions are monuments of intellectual history, and usually the result of collaborative endeavour. But, third, it probably remains true that the monograph continues to be the genre that best exhibits the distinctive virtues of the kind of work that combines an argued analysis of the character and functioning of a body of thought in a particular historical setting and a cultivated familiarity with a concentrated body of primary sources. (For this reason, intellectual history, along with some other fields in the humanities, has a lot to lose from the pressure currently exerted by modes of research assessment in the

UK to publish a number of short articles in the pattern favoured in the natural and social sciences.) No brief list of titles could adequately illustrate the depth and range of the best work in this form, but anyone who doubts the influence of such publications or their continuing vitality should attend to the impressive array of examples cited elsewhere in this *Companion*.

‘Read like a critic’

Since methodological prescription and dispute are modes particularly prone to fall into scholasticism and aridity, I find myself, in responding to the invitation from the editors of this volume to reflect on the identity of intellectual history, drawn to a more informal, even personal, idiom. Some years ago when casting about for a snappy slogan to represent the hybrid approach I understood to be essential to the practice of intellectual history, I inclined to say that one should ‘read like a critic, analyse like a philosopher, explain like a historian.’ This has the crudity of any slogan, and on reflection I have come to feel that it considerably exaggerates the extent to which anything approaching philosophical or conceptual analysis is necessarily a part of the work of the intellectual historian, and perhaps overstates the part played by ‘explanation,’ too. By contrast, however, the injunction to ‘read like a critic’ has, in recent years, come to seem to me more important and central than ever. Not that these days ‘literary criticism’ can be taken to denote a single or univocal practice, but it still stands for an especially close attentiveness to the verbal texture and formal properties of texts, ranging from traditional matters of tone and register to tricky questions such as a text’s implied reader or the positioning of its authorial voice. Such attention contrasts with that kind of ‘rational reconstruction’ of past thought which tends to confine itself to what might, in the brisk idiom of analytical philosophy, be termed the ‘propositional content’ of the texts it considers.

In lieu of extended justification for this point, let me simply cite two emblematic statements. The first is from the incomparable mid-twentieth-century English critic, William Empson. Discussing what he called ‘complex words,’ Empson contrasted the ‘formulae’ of abstract doctrines and systems with what he termed ‘a kind of shrubbery of smaller ideas’ and the language in which they were expressed: ‘A man tends finally to make up his mind...much more in terms of these vague rich intimate words than in the clear words of his official language’ (Empson, 1951: 158). We may properly be interested in much more than how ‘a man makes up his mind,’ but Empson’s partiality for the ‘vague rich intimate words’ helps nudge us away from an exclusive focus on the kinds of clear, abstract terms that make up the building blocks of ‘ideas.’ The other quotation is from a book published much more recently by the critic Angela Leighton: ‘Form is a word which gives writers a figure for something essential to literary work: for that obliqueness of style and matter, music and meaning, which demands attention, and becomes, in its way, a new kind of knowledge’ (Leighton, 2007: 240). Of course, not all writing is usefully described as ‘literary work,’ but it does all have a ‘form’ to a more or less marked degree, and we miss something essential about such writing if we do not give that form the proper quality of ‘attention.’ Henry James, in one of his ruminations on the art of fiction, suggested that the novelist must strive to be ‘one of those on whom nothing is lost’ (James, 1884). To apply that directly to intellectual history might be to set the bar rather too high, but it at least helps to

encourage an alertness to *all* dimensions of a past piece of writing. (I also like the *mot* that, by contrast to those who, from past writings, plunder only those extracts that serve their present-minded purposes, ‘an intellectual historian is somebody who reads the whole book.’) So, one description of the type of work that I find I increasingly admire might be that it consists of a greater attentiveness, informed by having attended to a lot else from the same milieu.

Alongside analysis, explanation, and the other heavy-duty tasks, one of the things intellectual historians regularly find themselves doing, though they may not always acknowledge it, is what I would term ‘characterising.’ Put otherwise, this is that activity of re-description which we constantly carry on in our own ‘vague, rich intimate words,’ but in this case it is informed by a cultivated familiarity with the author or period in question. This is clearest when we consider how much is condensed into judgements about what is characteristic (or uncharacteristic), of a person, a literary or artistic style, a body of thought, a milieu or period. From one perspective, this is the positive obverse of anachronism, the ability to recognise what does and does not belong to a particular time. From another, it is to become familiar enough with past voices to be able to recognise, as we do in the case of those we associate with in the present, what is and is not ‘in character,’ and thus to ask ourselves different questions about those statements which are uncharacteristic. It is a part of our intellectual labour that may most often find issue in the apparently inconsequential and everyday adverbs which serve as rhetorical markers in our prose, signalling relation, attitude, expectation, as well as in those with which we qualify active verbs, indicating degrees of agency, features of manner, levels of intimacy or distance. All this, it will be evident, stays in what Empson termed the ‘shrubbery,’ but concentration on larger, more abstract, methodological issues may have led to a neglect or under-estimation of just how much historical insight and intellectual cogency may be involved in the deft, apposite deployment of the rich vocabulary of everyday characterising.

Two of the intellectual historians whom I most admire have spoken of their work as a form of ‘eavesdropping’ on the conversations of the past (Burrow, 1987; Winch, 1996: 28). Part of what is appealing about the metaphor is the suggestion that this allows those past conversations to go on in their own terms, without any distorting intervention by the historian (I have elsewhere suggested what a contrasting role is suggested by the fashionable metaphor of ‘interrogating’ the past (Collini, 2000: 15)). But as both Burrow and Winch have also acknowledged, intellectual historians do more than ‘listen secretly to a private conversation,’ which connotes a somewhat passive role: beyond that, the eavesdropper must then return to report the fruits of his listening to another audience, and at that point has to become not only a ‘translator’ (from, at the very least, the language of the past to the language of the present), but also in some measure a portrait painter, using light and shade, perspective and proportion, to bring out what was always there, but not previously so distinctly seen and grasped. What form our own work should take as the best expression of the fruits of that informed attentiveness is not easy to say – or, rather, the appropriate forms are potentially limitless and will vary with circumstances. In high, pronouncing mode, Oscar Wilde declared that ‘the critic is he who exhibits to us a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself’ (Wilde, 1891: 157). Perhaps this dictum holds even when dealing with writings not normally classified as ‘works of art:’ we attempt to capture and ‘exhibit’ the quiddity of past writing by whatever means seem adequate

to the task, and that may require not just an alertness to those questions of form and tone traditionally associated with literary criticism, but also, perhaps, a willingness to experiment a little with the forms of our own writing in search of the best way to achieve that exhibition.

I realise that the foregoing paragraphs may have seemed to underplay those matters of logic, argument, rigour and so on that are usually to the fore when we are solicited to methodological self-consciousness. I trust I do not scant or undervalue such matters; it is simply that I assume they will not lack for other champions in this *Companion*, and so there is something to be said for beginning by tilting the balance a little in the other direction.

Intellectual history and the history of disciplines

Thus far, I have touched on some of the history and characteristics of intellectual history considered in its own terms as a form of scholarship. But in reflecting on its 'identity,' it is also important to consider its place within the modern university and indeed within wider cultural debate. In institutional terms, intellectual historians are, of course, most likely to be found within History departments, but part of the activity's distinctiveness lies in the way that it cannot be contained within the limits of an academic subdiscipline. One of the less noticed characteristics of intellectual history, especially when its subject-matter is drawn from the past couple of centuries, is the way it colludes with an unease about, or even resistance to, the whole process of disciplinary specialisation. This is one reason why it has functioned as a kind of safe house for refugees from a variety of disciplines, a protected space within which an interest in the questions that may once have been understood as part of literature or philosophy or sociology or other enquiries in their earlier or pre-professional manifestations can be cultivated at one remove from the sometimes constricting professional requirements of those fields in their purest contemporary forms.

Putting the matter in necessarily bald and schematic terms, one could say that the period from the late-nineteenth century until at least the middle of the twentieth marked the 'heroic' phase during which the establishing of the intellectual identity and institutional position of the separate disciplines within the modern university seemed a sufficient goal in itself. During this period, the very processes of professionalisation and specialisation – those processes by which disciplines established their legitimacy and their autonomy – necessarily involved a concentration of attention *within* individual fields rather than upon the relations *between* fields and upon the resulting overall pattern. 'The very notion of academic "seriousness" came increasingly [in the nineteenth century] to exclude reflection upon the relation of one "field" to another, and concomitantly, reflection upon the historical process by which individual disciplines established their boundaries. Or the historical dimension was regarded as extrinsic to the actual practice of research and scholarship: history itself became one discipline among others' (Weber, 1987: 32).

It is only within the past generation or two that reflection on the character and development of disciplinarity itself has been nourished by properly historical enquiries into the constitution of the modern disciplines in their present forms. Before that, the earlier history of individual disciplines tended to be celebrated in the internalist and triumphalist mode represented by the *A Hundred Years of...* series (of Psychology, or

Economics, or Philosophy, and so on). There had been, of course, some reflection from sociologists (such as Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton and their students) about academic careers as examples of wider processes of credentialising and validating expert knowledge, but this had not entailed a comparable relativising of the historical development of the *content* of various disciplines. The work of Michel Foucault and his followers was one important prompt to taking a more quizzical perspective on any classification of forms of knowledge, but the very growth of intellectual history itself as a subfield of history was another. Intellectual history tends to be slyly corrosive of fixed disciplinary identities and boundaries; what had seemed natural or inevitable is thereby revealed to be contingent and in some respects fortuitous, shaped by assumptions and practices that now have no standing or even recognition in the modern form of the discipline. And on closer, properly intellectual-historical, examination, it turns out to be very rare for those who have been retrospectively fingered as the ‘precursors’ or ‘founders’ of modern disciplines to have been intent on being anything of the kind. Returning the work of such figures to the settings in which it and they flourished, and excavating the – possibly very distant and alien – assumptions that prevailed in that setting, has been one of the main ways in which intellectual history has provided a vantage point from which the current character and disposition of disciplines can be understood and criticised.

All scholarly writing is partly shaped by the anticipated interests and responses of its readers, and by its relation to the place its subject-matter occupies in the wider culture. Intellectual historians, more even than most other kinds of historians, are thus bound to be drawn into a series of implicit dialogues with those who want to claim ownership of a particular academic territory in its modern form, as well as with those who have some reason to challenge that claim. The development of the history of science over the past half-century might seem the most obvious illustration of this pattern, but it is not difficult to see how intellectual history has been drawn upon by those intent on challenging a dominant paradigm or legitimating an unorthodox approach, as in the case of literary scholars uneasy with the implicit universalism of traditional critical practices, or of economists troubled by the exclusionary effect of neoclassical mathematical modelling, or of philosophers discontented by the emphasis on quasi-logical techniques, and so on.

Most of those who engage in this sort of reflection today tend to agree that there can be no transcendent or presupposition-free standpoint from which to appraise the nature of disciplines and the relations between them. ‘Theory’ is often the name given to the continuing effort to engage in such ‘non-transcendent’ reflection, but just as we are always being told that there is no such thing as ‘theory-free history,’ so it is equally true that there is no such thing as ‘history-free theory.’ Theorising about disciplines involves, however implicitly, an intellectual history, and in practice the history implicit in much recent critical and cultural theory is schematic, poor, and downright wrong. One of the most common ways the intellectual historian is drawn into what I have elsewhere termed ‘the academic public sphere’ (Collini, 1999: 324) is in attempting to improve or correct this history. But this can be a fraught process for the intellectual historian, since it necessarily involves a tension between, on the one hand, cultivating his or her own patch with due scholarly circumspection, and, on the other, engaging in hard-to-delimit polemics about the bearing that such work has on the wider discourse about the disciplines. Doing the kind of work that cannot but

have the effect of dismantling long-held clichés and sabotaging deeply-cherished assumptions does not always win friends or make for a quiet life. Intellectual history helps to provide the modern university with its self-understanding, both about its internal departmental structures and its external relations to lay culture. As universities become ever more central and important features of contemporary societies, the role that intellectual history plays in illuminating the dynamics and ramifications of the organisation of knowledge seems likely to expand correspondingly.

Conclusion

If, in conclusion, I were to permit myself three wishes for the future of intellectual history, I think they would be these. First, I would hope that a wider range of intellectual historians might become more attentive to, and properly value, what I have characterised as the ‘literary’ or ‘formal’ properties of the texts they discuss, not just their propositional content. Any piece of writing may operate on several levels, some of which can only be adequately characterised by borrowing from the working practices of the literary critic. In addition, intellectual historians study the past uses of words: words have histories, histories that include their expressive, evaluative and other tonal properties, and attentiveness to these forms of verbal power is necessary not just to help avoid the obvious dangers of anachronism, but also to ensure that the rich variety of past forms of expression is not reduced to the flat monochrome of a series of ‘statements.’ Second, I hope it will continue to emancipate itself from dominance by the history of political thought, especially in Britain. As I indicated earlier, the importance of the contribution made by historians of political thought a generation or more ago to the development of a properly historical approach to the intellectual life of the past cannot be doubted, but parts of that field, especially the early-modern period, have since been tilled very intensively indeed. As a result, there is a risk of this area coming to be regarded as the most significant intellectually or the most prestigious in professional terms, and some re-balancing of attention seems desirable. And third, I would hope that in any search for the ‘identity’ of the activity – that is, for ways of demarcating and delimiting what is to count as a professionally recognised ‘contribution’ to intellectual history – future generations will not take a too-restrictive or closed-shop view of who is eligible for membership. Scholars educated in departments of History will, it seems safe to assume, always make up the majority of practitioners in the future, unlike in the past, but that is no reason to exclude illuminating work by those originally educated as philosophers, literary critics, art historians, social scientists and so on. If intellectual history is, as the dead metaphor has it, a ‘field,’ then I hope it will remain an enticingly open meadow rather than a fenced-off enclosure. In other words, although I hope that intellectual history continues to flourish and grow in confidence, I also hope that it never develops too pure or restrictive an ‘identity.’

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