

## DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

### Prolegomena to the study of Intellectual History

Donald R. Kelley

Journal of the History of Ideas  
Rutgers—the State University of New Jersey  
(USA)

Intellectual history has become a well-recognized field in this century, but it occupies still an anomalous position. On the one hand it is regarded as a sub-department of the discipline of history; on the other hand it reaches out to aspects of thought and culture, high and low, which have not, classically and normally, been the province of most writers of history and yet which arguably offer greater challenges than war, politics, and institutions and other common preoccupations of historians. Nor have theoreticians of history confronted the problems of intellectual history nearly as seriously as they have the methods for studying the public—the economic, social, and political—world, which have customarily served to define the proper study of history. Why should this be?

The short answer is that intellectual history is an irretrievably interdisciplinary area of inquiry, and that its primary topics of inquiry—philosophy, literature, language, art, science, and other disciplines—each has its own tradition of historical inquiry. The result is that intellectual history has had to invent, or to appropriate, concepts to define its area of competence and cognizance: the history of philosophy (in an extended sense), the history of culture (in a restricted sense), or more problematic formulations, such as the history of ideas, the history of thought, the human spirit, ideologies, and more modern fashions serving the same function, such as *mentalités* and, most recently, cultural memory.

This eclecticism, with its interdisciplinary implications, is all to the good; and I should be sorry to be understood as defending a particular

approach to intellectual history simply because I happen to be the editor of a journal associated with one or more less recognizable ‘canon’, viz. that of Arthur O. Lovejoy’s philosophically oriented ‘history of ideas’, founded three generations ago. In fact in my own view, irrespective of its conceptual value, the leap of faith required for Lovejoy’s programme is too much for many historians to make. History as a discipline has lost its innocence, including its faith in metahistorical and metalinguistic ‘ideas’ and the sort of stable truth that goes along with them. As historians, in other words, we have access only to concrete expressions of ideas, which must take the form of language or an analogous mode of communication. We use words, read texts, experience communicative satisfaction; but what lies behind this process is anybody’s judgement.

With respect to the ‘past’ and the ‘dialogues’ with the dead in which intellectual historians must engage, such communication is even more difficult; and we are in something uncomfortably like the Chinese-room predicament, or even the Martians watching the football game. We hear, see, have an ‘idea’ of something, and perhaps even have a name for it; but what on earth does it mean? As scholars, moreover, however much we may study and travel, we continue to live and learn within small horizons which can never accommodate truth as philosophers have conceived it. As Barry Allen has remarked, ‘We cannot speak the truth; words cannot mimic the way the world is; language imposes subjects and predicates on a world that does not have stable, enduring units corresponding to its terms.’<sup>1</sup> How much less can historians speak the truth of the way the world was—and its languages were?

For me, in any case, intellectual history is not a department of history but rather a way, or a set of ways, of trying to view the whole range of humanity’s past—the acts and creations which have left intelligible and communicable traces.

<sup>1</sup> *Truth in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 46–7.

*Intellectual history is not a department of history but rather a way, or a set of ways, of trying to view the whole range of humanity's past—the acts and creations which have left intelligible and communicable traces.*

In terms of hermeneutics intellectual history is not really a discipline but rather a point of view (*Sehepunkt* is the term introduced by Chladenius in the mid-eighteenth century) within a discipline, which is history. The office of the intellectual historian is to explore those areas of the human past in which decipherable traces, usually written or iconographic, have survived, and then to give contemporary meaning to these traces through the medium of language. Intellectual historians may always apply to disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, and especially—given the hermeneutical condition and goals of their enterprise—the humanities, beginning with literature and criticism; but at the same time they should not forget their mission or the limits imposed by their cultural horizons and disciplinary limitations.

In general history can never 'speak' except through human ventriloquism, and (to invoke Lyotard) there can be no meta-narratives. We have, of course, founded all sorts of ideologies and utopias, but as frameworks for the story of humanity they all sooner or later come to grief. So, the doctors will always disagree and revisionisms will always recur: 'Sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses', as Hume wrote, 'is a malady which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us in every moment, however we may chase it away.' And this too, no doubt, is all to the good.

### The Rise and Decline of Intellectual History

*Anthony Pagden*

*Department of History, Cambridge University  
(England)*

There is a history of the rise and decline of Intellectual History, as a discipline in this century.

It goes something like this: The subject has murky, nineteenth-century origins in a widened understanding of a text-dependent *Kulturgeschichte*. It flourished, however, in the pre- and immediately post-war years under a new guise, as the History of Ideas and in North America. Here it became associated with Arthur Lovejoy's project of establishing 'unit ideas' that could be traced, regardless of context or authorial intention, through historical time and across space and genre. It was also linked to Lovejoy's *Journal of the History of Ideas*. This history was neither the history of the intellectual *Geist* of a given time and place (as, say, Dilthey's early work had been), nor the was it the more obviously philosophical history (most properly a *Geistesgeschichte*), which had been around since at least the eighteenth century and whose purpose was largely philosophical. As Hegel famously said, to write the history of philosophy is to do philosophy. The history of unit ideas, whatever else it was, was not doing philosophy.

The History of Ideas, although it produced some notable works (now about due for re-evaluation) did very little for philosophy—most of which at the time was resolutely anti-historical—nor did philosophy do very much for it; neither did it have very much impact on such neighbouring concerns as literary history. Historians who knew that the past was composed of events also tended to ignore it. 'Flapdoodle' as Namier, trying hard to pass for an English gentleman, once described it. Past agents, it was also assumed (if only tacitly), had nothing in their heads when they acted—nothing, that is, except personal interests, which were formed entirely by proto-rational-choice models. In the 1960s this general attitude towards the study of past thinking was replaced by a claim that, even if past agents did have things in their heads, those things were generally unexamined, unreflected-upon, and frequently imposed. Intellectual History, which was the study of reflective texts, and necessarily the texts produced by small elite, was thus deemed to be epiphenomenal. The History of Ideas died, and was replaced by histories of 'mentalities', as a subsidiary of a broader social history, which was believed to be, in some sense, about the 'real', the lived, lives of ordinary people.

'Mentality', in this context, looked suspiciously like the earlier concept of an 'ideology' but was believed to have penetrated deeper into the habits and customs of peoples, ordinary and