

# What is Intellectual History?

*A frankly partisan introduction  
to a frequently misunderstood field*



**Peter E. Gordon**

Amabel B. James Professor of History  
& Harvard College Professor  
Harvard University

**What is Intellectual History?**  
**A frankly partisan introduction to a frequently misunderstood field**

Peter E. Gordon  
Amabel B. James Professor of History & Harvard College Professor  
Harvard University

Revised Spring, 2012  
Please do not cite or circulate without author's permission

*Introduction*

Harvard University now boasts of a great number of accomplished historians whose interests and methods align them primarily—though not necessarily exclusively—with intellectual history. These include (in alphabetical order): David Armitage, Ann Blair, Peter Bol, Joyce Chaplin, Peter Gordon, James Hankins, Andrew Jewett, James Kloppenberg, and Emma Rothschild. But just what *is* intellectual history?

Intellectual history is an unusual discipline, eclectic in both method and subject matter and therefore resistant to any single, globalized definition. Practitioners of intellectual history tend to be acutely aware of their own methodological commitments; indeed, a concern with historical method is characteristic of the discipline. Because intellectual historians are likely to disagree about the most fundamental premises of what they do, any one definition of intellectual history is bound to provoke controversy. In this essay, I will offer a few introductory remarks about intellectual history, its origins and current directions. I have tried to be fair in describing the diversity of the field, but where judgment has seemed appropriate I have not held back from offering my own opinions. The essay is frankly partisan, in that it reflects my own preferences and my own conception of where intellectual history stands in relation to other methodologies. I hope it will be of some use for students at both the undergraduate and graduate level who are thinking about pursuing work in intellectual history.

*Intellectual History and the History of Ideas*

What is intellectual history? Broadly speaking, intellectual history is the study of intellectuals, ideas, and intellectual patterns over time. Of course, that is a terrifically large definition and it admits of a bewildering variety of approaches. One thing to note right off is the distinction between “intellectual history” and “the history of ideas.” This can be somewhat confusing, since the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably: “history of ideas” is a rather old-fashioned phrase, and not currently in vogue (though there is an excellent journal for intellectual historians published under the title, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*.) But if we are worried about precise definitions rather than popular usage, there is arguably a difference: The “history of ideas” is a discipline

which looks at large-scale concepts as they appear and transform over the course of history. An historian of ideas will tend to organize the historical narrative around one major idea and will then follow the development or metamorphosis of that idea as it manifests itself in different contexts and times, rather as a musicologist might trace a theme and all of its variations throughout the length of a symphony. Perhaps the most classic example is the book by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (originally given as the William James Lectures at Harvard University in the mid 1930s). This kind of exercise has many merits—for example, it permits us to recognize commonalities in thought despite vast dissimilarities in context, thereby calling attention to the way that humanity seems always preoccupied with certain seemingly “eternal” thoughts. But this advantage can also be a disadvantage. By insisting that the idea is recognizably the same thing despite all of its contextual variations, the history of ideas approach tends to encourage a kind of Platonist attitude about thoughts, as if they somehow preexisted their contexts and merely manifested themselves in various landscapes. Lovejoy was in fact rather more nuanced than this suggests, however: his study of the “great chain of being” (as one example of what he called “unit ideas”) demonstrated that there was an internal contradiction in this concept, a tension which eventually transformed the original idea and led ultimately to its self-destruction. As Lovejoy practiced it, the history of ideas was much like a history of large-scale concepts, in which the historical narrative showed how intrinsic tendencies in those concepts “worked themselves out” as if of their own internal logic.

Intellectual history is often considered to be different from the history of ideas. Intellectual history resists the Platonist expectation that an idea can be defined in the absence of the world, and it tends instead to regard ideas as historically conditioned features of the world which are best understood within some larger context, whether it be the context of social struggle and institutional change, intellectual biography (individual or collective), or some larger context of cultural or linguistic dispositions (now often called “discourses”). To be sure, sometimes the requisite context is simply the context of other, historically conditioned ideas—intellectual history does not necessarily require that concepts be studied within a larger, non-conceptual frame. Admittedly, this last point can be controversial: some intellectual historians do adopt a purely “internalist” approach, i.e., they set thoughts in relation to other thoughts, without reference to some setting outside them. This method is usually most revealing when the relations between ideas helps us to see a previously unacknowledged connection between different realms of intellectual inquiry, e.g., the relation between theological and scientific modes of explanation, or between metaphysical and political concepts of causality. But this method tends to reproduce the Platonism which beset the older-style history of ideas approach. Even today, many intellectual historians remain—stubbornly or covertly—internalist in their method. They may pay lip-service to contextualism, but they are chiefly interested in conceptual contexts only. But because internalist styles of argumentation have in recent decades fallen out of favor amongst historians and humanists more generally, those who write intellectual history in the internalist manner often look rather tweedy and traditionalist to their more “worldly” colleagues both within and beyond of the historical discipline. Indeed, intellectual historians who practice this sort of concept-contextualism will not infrequently meet with accusations of quietism,

elitism, or political naiveté. Internalism is nonetheless defensible on methodological grounds, though it is important to acknowledge its risks and its limitations.

As this discussion makes plain, there are many types of intellectual history, and each of them has its own methodological peculiarities. Perhaps the most helpful way to think about the various tendencies in intellectual history today is to compare them with those disciplines—within and beyond the discipline of history itself—which they most closely resemble. These are: philosophy, political theory, cultural history, and sociology.

### *Intellectual History and Philosophy*

Intellectual history can frequently involve a close reconstruction of philosophical arguments as they have been recorded in formal philosophical texts. In this respect intellectual history may bear a noteworthy resemblance to philosophy, and most especially, the history of philosophy. But intellectual history remains importantly distinct from philosophy for a number of reasons. Most importantly, philosophy tends to disregard differences of history or cultural context so as to concentrate almost exclusively upon the internal coherence of philosophical arguments in themselves. One often says that the task for intellectual historians is that of “understanding” rather than philosophical evaluation. That is, intellectual historians want chiefly to “understand”—rather than, say, to “defend” or “refute”—a given intellectual problem or perspective, and they therefore tend to be skeptics about the philosophers’ belief in decontextualized evaluation. Philosophers, too, of course, will frequently appeal to historical-contextual matters when they are trying to figure out just why someone thought as they did. So the difference between philosophy and intellectual history is merely one of degree rather than kind.

Yet intellectual historians tend to be more relaxed about crossing the boundary between philosophical texts and non-philosophical contexts. Indeed, intellectual historians will tend to regard the distinction between “philosophy” and “non-philosophy” as something that is itself historically conditioned rather than eternally fixed. They will therefore be wary of assuming one can ever concentrate one’s attention upon a purely philosophical meaning uncontaminated by its surroundings. Because they are historians, intellectual historians believe it is important to understand why people thought differently about things we may not agree with today. This pronounced awareness regarding historical difference makes historians generally reluctant to draw strongly evaluative claims about past ideas. Of course, historians cannot bracket out their own moral or intellectual commitments entirely and it would be foolish to believe they could do so. But history nourishes a certain skepticism about the permanence of any philosophical or moral commitment, and it therefore promotes a certain readiness to entertain differences in philosophical perspective whereas philosophers would likely think that the differences are either superficial or evidence of philosophical error.

This interest in reconstructive understanding as against strict evaluation has at least two notable consequences for the practice of intellectual history. First, it enables intellectual historians to draw sometimes surprising and creative connections between different sorts of texts. Second, it allows them to think about intellectual “meaning” in a rather

capacious or open-ended fashion, such that the canon of what counts as the proper topic for intellectual history remains remarkably loose. Intellectual historians are interested in “ideas” of all sorts, not only ideas as they are defined within the current guidelines of academic philosophy.

These two features of intellectual-historical practice may invite charges of eclecticism or lack of philosophical rigor. Such criticism is not without merit. Some intellectual historians seem so concerned with contextualizing philosophical ideas they miss important details in the ideas themselves. Philosophers are right to complain that philosophical comprehension should not be sacrificed for the sake of broad-mindedness. But every opportunity for creativity is accompanied by risks. Intellectual historians are likely to defend their efforts by noting that philosophy carries a correlative risk that, by fixing itself so narrowly upon the details of philosophical argument, philosophy can miss the reason why such an argument was ever considered significant. Still, it is important to see that the boundary-line between philosophy and intellectual history remains highly flexible. There are of course differences of methodological emphasis, some of which are outlined above. (For another perspective, insisting on a strong divide between intellectual history and philosophy, one should consult the introductory pages of Bernard Williams’ book, *Descartes, The Project of Pure Inquiry*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1978.)

It is critical to recognize that the boundary between intellectual history and philosophy has been drawn differently at different times and places. Philosophy in Europe tends to be far more historical than in the United States; much of what passes for “intellectual history” in the United States would therefore be practiced in Europe within the confines of a department of philosophy. On the other hand, many scholars in the United States who teach in philosophy departments and do work categorized as “history of philosophy” quite frequently adopt the contextualist methods of their intellectual-historian peers.

This prompts the question as to why the historians of philosophy are in philosophy departments at all, especially when some of their peers dismiss their work as “merely” historical. It often seems the distinction can seem to have very little to do with actual disagreement over method, and far more to do with contingent factors such as competition over funding and the institutional reproduction of group-identities (e.g., a person with a degree in one discipline is usually considered unqualified for another discipline) Despite all the talk about professional training in the methods appropriate to a specific discipline, there is really almost as much heterogeneity within any given discipline as between one discipline and another. Disciplines can be and have been carved up in all sorts of ways, and one would be justified in thinking there is no deep logic in current distinctions between them. In recent years, much of the truly groundbreaking scholarship by philosophers and historians appears to span the divide between their two disciplines. To classify such work exclusively as philosophy or history would be challenging indeed; some noteworthy examples would include: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1989); John Toews, *Hegelianism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1980); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984); and J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975). In such cases, the distinction between philosophy and history seems so slight

as to be almost negligible, more a matter of institutional affiliation and nomenclature than substantive disagreement over canons or method.

Still, the rough distinctions between intellectual history and philosophy outlined above hold generally true for most if not all scholarship. Intellectual historians often write about philosophical topics, but as compared to their peers in philosophy, intellectual historians are: a) more interested in understanding than strong judgment, b) more willing to cross the institutional boundary-line separating the philosophical canon from the larger world of ideas, and c) more ecumenical about what sorts of ideas deserve our intellectual attention.

### *Intellectual History and Political Theory*

As it has been customarily practiced, intellectual history has more often than not devoted itself to understanding the history of political thought. Why this should be so is an interesting question and merits some comment. The traditional emphasis on politics surely has something to do with the origins of modern historical scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany. The earliest practitioners of historical *Wissenschaft* (“science,” or “knowledge”) were heirs to the Greek ideal of political-historical narration, an ideal traceable to Thucydides. Modeling themselves consciously after the Greeks, German nationalist historians of the nineteenth century tended to believe that history is first and foremost a study of political narrative. This idea gained reinforcement from philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel, who saw world history as the unfolding idea of freedom. And, for historians such as Leopold von Ranke, “history” and “political history” were taken to be nearly synonymous. The German conception of history as a political narrative proved especially attractive in the nineteenth century, when, following Napoleon’s defeat, a great number of German intellectuals (many of them liberal if not quite democratic in their political commitments) were preoccupied by the question of what distinguished the German states from the rest of continental Europe. Yet the idea had earlier precedents. A similar tendency can be detected in the work of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher of history, J.G. Herder, who believed that history is the expression of national differences. All of these tendencies conspired to reinforce the view that history should be chiefly about political change, and this is the view that still implicitly governs the practice of history throughout most of Europe and North America.

Intellectual history, too, continues to reflect the broader historical emphasis on politics. Even today, most intellectual historians continue to believe that their primary task is to understand not just ideas in general, but rather *political ideas in particular*. If one looks at the publications and syllabi of intellectual historians, this assumption is immediately evident. This political emphasis has many roots. It is a noticeable feature in the works of Friedrich Meinecke, one of the earliest and most significant practitioners of what the Germans called *Geistesgeschichte* (“the history of ideas”). Meinecke wrote mostly about political thought; he was especially concerned with the question of what distinguished the history of German political thought from the “cosmopolitan” philosophies fashionable elsewhere in Europe. The nationalist tenor that pervades his earlier works now seems somewhat dated. It is interesting to note that in his very last book, *The German*

*Catastrophe*, Meinecke abandoned his overtly political nationalism but still managed to preserve a certain cultural nationalism, as is evident, e.g., in his suggestion that small cultural “societies” should be organized throughout post-WWII Germany for the rebuilding of national consciousness upon the sturdy foundations of Goethe and Schiller.

But Meinecke is merely one example. The larger point is that most intellectual historians were trained as historians and therefore absorbed the normative emphasis on political matters that continues to govern much of the historical discipline. But intellectual historians have modified this emphasis according to the intellectualist focus of their own practice; they accordingly construe intellectual history as a discipline that is primarily concerned with political ideas and ideologies. It is therefore sometimes difficult to distinguish between intellectual historians and historians of political thought.

In Great Britain, the emphasis on political thought within intellectual history has drawn inspiration chiefly from two accomplished practitioners—Isaiah Berlin (who taught at Oxford) and Quentin Skinner (who teaches at Cambridge). Berlin, a Russian-born polymath, was the author of numerous essays and books on the European intellectual tradition. An ardent believer in individual freedom, he devoted much of his scholarship to exposing the danger in the political-theoretical notion he called “positive liberty”, i.e., the notion that an individual’s true freedom is only realized when it is shaped according to the ostensibly “higher” needs of society or the state. Against this tradition of “monism” (so-called due to its metaphysical drive to subsume all perspectives within a single, apparently rational unity), Berlin defended a kind of “pluralism,” emphasizing the primacy of personal liberty and the irreducible diversity of individual as well as cultural perspectives. He discovered the resources for this pluralistic philosophy in a dissenting intellectual tradition he called the “Counter-Enlightenment”, which included such thinkers as Herder, Vico, and Burke. In a 1953 essay on Tolstoy’s philosophy of history, “The Hedgehog and the Fox”, Berlin offered a famous distinction between these two intellectual traditions in allegorical terms borrowed from the Greek poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” (Berlin’s essay was originally published under the title, “Leo Tolstoy’s Historical Skepticism” in *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 2; 1951.)

Needless to say, such baggy categorizations are unlikely to capture the actual details of philosophical dispute. An obvious flaw in Berlin’s monism-pluralism distinction is that thinkers such as Herder and Burke, though ostensibly pluralists about the relation *between* various cultural traditions, tended to be monists about the integrity *within* a given culture. Herder was in this respect an important precursor of German Romanticism. And Burke went so far as to embrace a quasi-organicist theory of political culture, such that any sign of internal disunity or dissent seemed to him an indication of pathology. The irony is that Berlin himself had a penchant for hedgehog-like generalizations, but was most successful only when he remained a fox. He authored an astonishing number of essays on disparate themes and thereby introduced people to specific topics they might otherwise have missed. But his grander intellectual pronouncements about the history of political thought now seem almost dilettantish in their generality, and, the closer one examines them, the more they seem to demand qualification.

Quentin Skinner remains today one of the most important figures in intellectual history, and he stands at the epicenter of what is commonly called the “Cambridge School” in the history of political thought. The author of a great variety of essays on intellectual-historical methodology and early-modern (chiefly English) political theory, Skinner is perhaps most famous for advocating a certain contextualist approach to intellectual history, as set forth in the path breaking essay, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” (originally published in *History and Theory*, 8;1969, pp. 3-53, subsequently revised and amended). While the fuller spectrum of its theoretical commitments defy summary, Skinner’s basic methodological posture amounts to a kind of historicist contextualism, according to which the meaning of an idea can only be understood when it is placed within the larger, historical context of linguistic utterances, written or verbal, of which it is a demonstrable part. Skinner has put this method to work in numerous studies on the history of political thought, most famously, perhaps, in works devoted to understanding the ideas of Thomas Hobbes within the larger context of seventeenth-century political debate. Skinner has been criticized on a number of grounds, perhaps most vigorously for the quasi-idealistic implication that non-linguistic features of a given historical context (such as class or economic arrangements more generally) play no role in determining the meanings of a political idea. Another, quite different line of criticism might be that Skinner’s contextualism seems to presuppose an implausibly holist view of cultural meaning, i.e., that for every idea, there just is one, pre-given context that must be described, with the happy consequence that ideas seem to be fixed entirely within self-contained but objectively identifiable spheres of significance. This presupposition seems to neglect the obvious fragmentation or disunity within linguistic contexts, and it also resorts (implicitly) to a spurious objectivism about the identification of contexts, as if the historian’s choice of linguistic context were a matter of brute empiricism rather than interpretation.

An interesting feature shared in common by both Berlin and Skinner is the emphasis on political ideas, largely at the expense of other sorts of ideas (metaphysical, scientific, aesthetic, and so forth). One might excuse this emphasis merely as an expression of scholarly preference, but it has played an enormously influential role in validating the sorts of topics that are considered proper for intellectual historical inquiry. As noted above, the political emphasis is grounded in traditional assumptions as to what counts as “history.” Curiously, while the larger historical profession has slowly jettisoned this traditionalist commitment to the primacy of politics and has broadened its sights to address a rich variety of non-political themes, intellectual historians have remained largely more conventional in their approach: they still tend to equate intellectual history with the history of political ideas and ideologies, or, more recently, with the history of socially-effective “discourses” or “representations.”

Skinner exemplifies this political emphasis to an extraordinary degree. Indeed, his methodology itself—linguistic contextualism—seems to favor the study of political ideas over and against other sorts of ideas. On Skinner’s view, the linguistic context for an idea consists in the larger environment of theories, documents, and utterances—categorizable as “speech acts”—all of which bear implicitly or explicitly on the idea in question. This methodological requirement may be generally applicable to a wide variety



of historical topics. But it seems somehow best suited to understanding the world of English seventeenth-century politics, a “public sphere” teeming with literate and silver-tongued gentlemen whose occasional forays into political theory were rarely dissociable from the more practical business of Parliamentary debate. The pragmatic character of Anglo-Saxon political thought lends itself quite readily to Skinner’s methodological conviction that linguistic contexts are theoretical and practical at once. That *all* intellectual contexts have this practical character seems doubtful. This caveat notwithstanding, Skinner remains one of the most influential and philosophically sophisticated intellectual historians writing today. Indeed, his influence reaches well beyond intellectual history into the discipline of political theory, such that it is sometimes difficult to see whether his work belongs exclusively to either field. Because of his strong commitment to the notion that meaning depends upon historical context, he has been a fierce critic of “presentism,” the attempt to judge past ideas wholly in accordance with present needs while disregarding obvious differences of history. But on this point Skinner has not always been entirely consistent. One senses in much of his work that he is striving not only to *understand* certain ideas but also to *promote* them. This is especially true for the idea of “neo-Roman liberty”, which has made a frequent appearance especially in his more recent books. But to recognize this element of advocacy in Skinner’s scholarship is hardly a strike against him. Even the most scrupulously non-partisan historians are motivated in some way by their own interests, both personal and political, and Skinner is no exception.

In Anglo-American scholarship, the preference among intellectual historians for writing primarily on topics in political theory may be due in part to the marginalization of these topics elsewhere in the academy. Anglo-American philosophy departments frequently seem to regard political philosophy as an inferior branch of the discipline (well below, for example, epistemology, logic, or the philosophy of language), so those who wish to study the history of political thought are likely to seek a warmer reception beyond the walls of philosophy; intellectual history has doubtless been one of the chief beneficiaries of this disciplinary migration. Departments of political science may present a similar challenge to those interested in political ideas. As the discipline has increasingly adapted itself to the social-scientific research agenda with its emphasis on decision theory and generalizable models, the space for purely reflective study of political themes and values has been much constrained. Given the often fractious divide in political science departments between scientists and theorists, intellectual history has often seemed a more hospitable disciplinary alternative.

But alongside these purely disciplinary explanations one must take note of a crucial historical factor. Around the mid-twentieth century, the institutions of higher learning throughout North America underwent a dramatic transformation under the impact of émigré scholars fleeing persecution in Europe. These scholars—Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Cassirer, to name just a few—sustained an intimate but conflicted bond to the world that had expelled them. They brought to the American scene a new sensibility—deference for the European intellectual tradition combined with an acerbic, insider’s recognition of its potential dangers to human freedom. Political theorists such as Arendt, Strauss, and Adorno, along with émigré historians such as George Mosse, Georg Iggers, and Fritz Stern, were especially consumed with the

question of what elements in the canons of European thought were most to blame for the rise of National Socialism. They each proposed different answers—they disagreed bitterly, most of all with one another—but collectively they helped to create an entire field of intellectual history organized around the notion that Nazism had a richly philosophical character that could only be defended against if it were exposed at its intellectual roots.

This type of inquiry tended to emphasize intellectual factors often at the expense of social or economic ones. But notwithstanding its many shortcomings, it has left a considerable mark on the practice of European intellectual history. Even today, many intellectual historians of modern Europe still seem to work on the assumption that it is their primary charge to expose and combat the various legacies of fascism wherever they appear. And they will sometimes extend this exercise to the study of newer intellectual traditions, such as postmodernism, in which they discern similarly dangerous political tendencies. While one can learn a great deal from such scholarship, I must confess that in my view this style of intellectual history often seems animated more by a desire to prosecute than to understand. But when prosecution overwhelms understanding, intellectual history devolves into a genre of writing that academics should in principle avoid: *anti-intellectual history*. Still, it bears repeating that responsible and temperate political criticism has an important place in intellectual history, since it is one of the basic principles of intellectual history as a discipline that ideas are never entirely innocent of their worldly entanglements.

### *Intellectual History and Cultural History*

Over the past three decades, the historical profession has seen a dramatic shift—away from social and political history and toward the study of a greater variety of themes and topics in a field broadly termed “cultural history.” The line between intellectual history and cultural history is not always easily discerned. To understand the distinction, it is worth pausing first to consider in greater depth what cultural history means.

Cultural history is a blanket term for a wide variety of topics and methods addressing everything that has to do with “culture,” from the fine arts to popular crafts, from religious rituals to folk magic, from the public symbolism of commemoration and national identity to the most intimate matters of sexuality and the body. Cultural history arose partly thanks to the early-twentieth century practitioners of the “Annales School” in France, who investigated long-duration patterns of European life as experienced by the broader populace as against the conventional historiographical concern for statecraft and the maneuvers of political elites. But in the 1970s and 80s, cultural history made a second appearance—in North America and also in Europe—as a reaction against the more economic or statistical-structural methods of “social history”. This new wave of cultural history was spearheaded by scholars such as Carl Schorske, who examined the many facets of fin-de-siècle Viennese culture, Natalie Zemon Davis, who opened the way for a culturally attentive study of early modern popular life (especially in France), Lynn Hunt, who helped to inaugurate study concerning the “political culture” of the French Revolution, and Robert Darnton, who investigated the history of the book and is

especially interested in habits of popular reading in eighteenth century France. Cultural history today also reflects the impact of new French theoretical models in structuralist anthropology and literary theory; it has especially adopted many of the broader insights and methods developed by the French social theorist, Michel Foucault.

Cultural historians can often write about the same topics as intellectual historians do. The difference is chiefly methodological: whereas an intellectual historian may investigate a given idea for its own sake, a cultural historian is more likely to examine the cultural circulation of that idea, its diffusion beyond the confines of an intellectual elite and into the wider sphere of society. Whereas intellectual historians frequently limit themselves to understanding the precise conceptual systems developed chiefly by intellectuals themselves, cultural historians tend to be less interested in the finer points of concepts alone and more interested in what happens to such concepts when they are taken up within the realm of public discourse. The difference is sometimes dramatic, sometimes a matter of degree. The historian Dominick La Capra is without question one of the most influential intellectual historians in North America—see, for example, his book on Jean-Paul Sartre. But he is also a cultural historian; indeed, his work stands at the crossroads between intellectual and cultural history: most recently, LaCapra has contributed a great deal to our understanding of how the Holocaust and other experiences of historical trauma are conceived, both by intellectuals, but also within cultural “texts” such as literature and film. Carolyn Dean would be another important example of a scholar whose work crosses the cultural-intellectual divide—her official title at Brown University is “Professor of History and Modern Culture and Media”. Her work combines theoretical sophistication with marked sensitivity to the way that complex ideas (about, e.g., homosexuality, selfhood, pleasure, and empathy) are integrated into broader patterns of cultural fantasy and representation. There are many other scholars whose works illustrate a similar ingenuity in combining intellectual and cultural methodologies. Overall, it is fair to say that some of the most path breaking and creative work in recent years lies precisely at the intersection of intellectual and cultural history.

Perhaps the most significant representatives of the new cultural history are those who practice the so-called “new historicism” (among whom one may count Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, and Thomas Laqueur). For the new historicists, a culture has some of the same features as a literary text: it has characteristic themes, metaphors, or habits of perception, all of which serve to organize cultural experience and manage or contain cultural anxieties. The new historicists do not limit themselves to the study of formal or bounded “texts” (such as Shakespeare’s plays). Instead, they delight in the disciplinary transgression of conventional boundaries—between high and low, aesthetic and political, sexual and religious—so as to reveal surprising homologies across diverse precincts of culture. Their method depends a great deal upon the interpretive acumen of the historian, who must “read” a culture with the same attention to metaphor and detail as a literary critic might read a poem. Greenblatt refers to his method as “cultural poetics.” Some members of the historical profession have sometimes complained that the new historicist emphasis on topical diversity has descended into mere eclecticism. Yet there can be little doubt that the new historicism has resulted in some of the most creative and stimulating scholarship of recent memory. (A helpful summary and critical assessment of their methods is Sarah Maza, “Stephen Greenblatt, New

Historicism, And Cultural History, Or ,What We Talk About When We Talk About Interdisciplinarity” in *Modern Intellectual History*. Volume 1, Issue 2, pp 249 – 265.)

What distinguishes intellectual history from cultural history? Intellectual history is sometimes faulted for its seeming indifference to the question as to whether a given idea enjoyed any wider social influence: Why, after all, does an abstract concept merit one’s historical attention if it had little effect on its historical surroundings? A purely intellectual historian is likely to protest that ideas are worth understanding quite apart from questions of their cultural efficacy. But a cultural historian will insist that a concept takes on far greater significance when we observe its cultural circulation, especially if we can show that that concept played a truly authoritative role, for example, in the way a culture reinforced its own norms. For the cultural historian, this is what makes an idea interesting: ideas are markers of cultural belief, or symptoms of a deeply-rooted cognitive schema. In current parlance, a cultural historian will likely argue that ideas are socially effective elements in what Michel Foucault called a “discourse”. Ideas are accordingly both “knowledge” and “power”: they betray the anxieties as well as the desires that govern the social imagination.

Intellectual historians may explain that they, too, are interested in the relation between ideas and culture. But they may express concern that the cultural historian is too quick to range distinct ideas in indistinct categories: when an idea gets taken up within the larger circuit of culture, it rarely manages to retain its original shape; it sheds its conceptual substance to become instead something diffuse, atmospheric. There are many cases of intellectuals’ rejecting the larger movements they originated: “Marxism” grew into the everyday texture of European life; but Karl Marx famously declared he was not a Marxist. “Positivism” became something far greater though less precise than the doctrine formulated by August Comte. “Nietzscheanism” became culturally fashionable in the fin-de-siècle and, for young soldiers in World War One, it became almost a religion—something Nietzsche himself would have despised. Historical inquiry concerning the cultural efficacy of a given idea may therefore stand in direct conflict with historical research concerning the precise contours of the idea itself.

But the difference is usually one of degree: a cultural historian devotes greater attention to the circulation of ideas; the intellectual historian pays greater attention to the ideas within their conceptual context alone. Both methods are fruitful and neither method taken alone is likely to satisfy the expectations of every practicing historian. The strictly intellectual historian may seem too narrowly interested in ideas themselves as if thought were dissociable from the wider world. The cultural historian may seem too easily intrigued by the sheer variety of cultural representations as if everything were equally deserving of scholarly attention. For this reason the cultural historian may appear as more of a methodological “populist” whereas the intellectual historian may appear to be guarding a rather traditionalist precept of intellectual hierarchy, i.e., that some ideas are intrinsically of greater importance. Some cultural historians therefore regard intellectual historians as methodological elitists. But intellectual historians are likely to counter this charge with the observation that the popularity of an idea is hardly a good measure of its value. After all, cultural historians must themselves resort to intellectual theories in their study of cultural phenomena. And this appeal to theory is revealing; it demonstrates that

notwithstanding their populism about topics of study, cultural historians are themselves committed to the principle that certain concepts have a value seemingly irreducible to their cultural circulation. For the intellectual historian, the apparent populism of cultural history can look very much like an instance of bad faith: a symptom that intellectuals have themselves absorbed the anti-intellectualism of a market-driven culture.

The difference between intellectual and cultural history may appear at times rather slight; there is certainly room enough in the historical discipline for diverse methodologies and the political dimension of such disagreements should not be exaggerated. It is worth repeating that the chief difference has to do with the *sorts of questions* that motivate historical research. Cultural historians pay attention to ideas mainly because they are seeking evidence for larger patterns of culture; intellectual historians pay attention to ideas for their cultural significance but also because they find the ideas themselves of interest.

### *Intellectual History and Sociology: Persons, Institutions, Social Structures*

Readers may have felt it surprising that this essay has not yet mentioned the role of intellectuals. I have written at length about ways to study “ideas” and their “contexts” all without noting the rather obvious fact that there are always thinkers who are thinking those thoughts. But the history of intellectuals is indeed a significant dimension of intellectual history. One can approach the history of intellectuals in a variety of ways, amongst which perhaps the most prominent are: biographical, institutional, and social-structural.

It may seem strange to note that intellectual biography is really a form of intellectual history. Still, to study the biography of an intellectual—her childhood, her education, her travels, her friendships, personal idiosyncrasies, and so forth—is one means of understanding a thinker’s thought “in context”, by which here one means the most immediate context of the intellectual’s own life. Of course, not all biographies of intellectuals merit classification as intellectual history: the biographer has to devote some significant portion of their study to the thinker’s ideas, and must offer insights as to how the ideas relate to life-experiences. Malachi Hacoheh’s book, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years*, is an excellent example of a biographical work of intellectual history: it tells us about Popper’s theories of science, but also seeks to explain how those theories developed out of Popper’s experiences as an Austrian Jew educated in Vienna. Other great works of intellectual biography are: Ray Monk: *Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Duty of Genius* (1991); Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (1982); Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (1998), and Ernst Cassirer, *Kant’s Life and Work* (English translation, 1981).

Most intellectuals do not live out their lives in complete solitude; they live and think in the midst of other intellectuals, engage in frequent and passionate debate, and to do so they often forge informal groups for conversation (such as the salons of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century), or they help to establish institutional settings devoted chiefly to the life of the mind. One very important facet of intellectual history is

the history of intellectual institutions; this includes, though is by no means limited to, the history of universities.

Many of the most accomplished intellectual historians have found that it is helpful to describe ideas and institutions in parallel: a classic example is Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research* (1973; new edition, 1996). This book was a landmark in scholarship on the so-called ‘Frankfurt School,’ established in the early 1920s in Frankfurt, Germany. The book is chiefly about a core group of social philosophers—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal, and Herbert Marcuse—and the Marxian variant of social criticism, or “critical theory,” for which they are best known. Most of the book provides a lucid introduction to critical theory itself. But these intellectuals were also leading lights of a new institution officially founded in Frankfurt under the name, “The Institute for Social Research.” Jay’s book therefore spends considerable time discussing the institutional history of the school, e.g., its funding, its membership, its relocation from Germany to North America, and so forth. The result is a book which combines several different approaches at once: it is a collective biography, an institutional history, and also an expository study of ideas.

Another example of intellectual biography in an institutional mode is Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (2001). Menand’s book offers us what one reviewer called “a quadruple intellectual biography,” in that it focuses on the lives and thoughts of four intellectuals associated with the rise of pragmatist thought in the United States: Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey. But it is also a sort of institutional history of Harvard University and also of the “metaphysical club” itself (the name these intellectuals attached to their own informal philosophical society). Finally, Menand sets this institutional story against the backdrop of the history of America in the wake of the Civil War. This manifold approach to telling the story of philosophy in its biographical, institutional, and political context makes Menand’s book one of the more popular and engaging works of intellectual history to be published in recent years.

Historical attention to the character of particular institutions—such as churches, universities, or scientific societies—can provide crucial insight into way that ideas both condition and are conditioned by their social contexts. Many intellectual historians write about intellectuals who occupy some professional position, as theologians or academics, for example. It is therefore natural to devote some attention to the professional institution itself. But usually an intellectual historian will make only passing mention of the institutional history—e.g., of a certain seminary or university—before moving on to discuss the substance of the ideas. Other intellectual historians believe it is important to spend a far greater share of their time studying the institutional setting, its origins, its relationship to the government, and so forth. Of course, it is quite possible to write histories of intellectual institutions that concentrate almost *exclusively* on their social or economic character. But such works should probably not be classified as intellectual history; they are simply social-institutional histories that happen to be about institutions where intellectuals do their work.

In addition, there is a sub-category of intellectual history which concentrates on the practical or infrastructural features of intellectual life: habits of research and rhetorical skill, notions of evidence or proof, or the history of the book itself. Scholarship on these sorts of infrastructural details may sound to the unacquainted like the sort of thing that only academics would write only for the interest of other academics; but the underlying premise in such studies is a crucial one. After all, intellectual practices are signals for what counts in a given historical period as a “fact”, “knowledge” or indeed, “truth” itself. There is, for example, the enchanting and suggestive book by Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (1999). A footnote is far more than a line at the bottom of the page; it is the way modern intellectuals reinforce both their own legitimacy and the veracity of their claims. Intellectual practices are the everyday tools that bring ideas into alignment with cultural beliefs: How, for example, does a controversial scientific theory become a new consensus? Part of the answer is trust: scientists have to develop standards of proof and institutions for the circulation of knowledge, all of which function only because the participants implicitly agree upon the validity of the standards and institutions involved. This is the lesson, for example, in Steven Shapin’s book, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (1995). It is interesting to note that most of the writing on such “practices” of intellectual life has been confined to the history of science (and it has been especially focused on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the epoch of the “scientific revolution” when many of our own modern theories of knowledge and evidence were first born). Historians of science are perhaps more quick to recognize that intellectual life is not all theory; it is tied to experimentation and “experience”. A history of scientific theory will therefore quite frequently involve a history of the various instruments and experimental methods that were current in a given historical era.

Finally, intellectual history is sometimes combined with sociological explanation, yielding what is often called the “sociology of knowledge.” The sociology of knowledge is a discipline developed chiefly by sociologists in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. One of its first major exponents was the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, who argued in the 1920s that the Marxist concept of “ideology” should be expanded as a general method for relating all ideas in a non-deterministic fashion to social position. On Mannheim’s account, all thought is the expression of a socially-conditioned “worldview”: one’s views of the world are shaped according to social-positional factors such as class, institutional status, political orientation and generational membership. All reality is dependent upon social perception; and accordingly no intellectual conception of reality can claim to be “true” in an ultimate or unconditioned sense. Mannheim believed that political ideologies were especially interesting as objects of inquiry for the sociologist of knowledge: a political ideology is chiefly an expression of social position; even the most intellectually sophisticated statements of political conviction cannot escape the sociologist’s disenchanting eye.

In more recent years, intellectual history has frequently adapted many of the methods first developed in the tradition of sociology of knowledge. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has helped more than perhaps any other scholar to revive the sociology of knowledge at an incomparable level of theoretical sophistication. He has applied it to many topics with great success, to explain e.g., the political habits of French intellectuals

in the 1960s (*Homo Academicus*; English translation, 1988) and the social preconditions for early-modern scholasticism (*Pascalian Meditations*; English translation 2000). Bourdieu has been especially helpful for intellectual historians who are trying to understand the way knowledge functions in an intellectual milieu as a vehicle of social prestige. Building upon a Marxist lexicon (but without the Marxist's commitment to economic reductionism) Bourdieu conceives of education as "symbolic capital": intellectual life is a field of power, in which intellectual rivalries may be understood as strategic moves in a symbolic system where one's success is ultimately translated into socio-economic domination over the entire intellectual field.

The sociological study of ideas is distinguished by its commitment to the notion that intellectual affairs are no different than other aspects of human experience in their susceptibility to social-functional generalization. This can have numerous applications; for example, intellectual hierarchies can be explained using sociological concepts of class and status; the vagaries of intellectual reputation can be explained using statistics and by appealing to the power of publishing houses and accessibility of information networks; the seemingly mysterious phenomenon of intellectual originality itself can be understood as a function of quite prosaic matters such as institutional authority and educational advantage. Theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (among many others) have contributed to the now-commonplace historical principle that ideas are best understood as elements in systems of "discourse"; indeed, authors themselves are best conceived as discursive "effects" rather than agents of unconditioned creativity. Such claims can seem counter-intuitive and even paradoxical (after all, isn't Foucault an author?). But such theories usually insist upon their own "self-reflexive" application: Bourdieu, for example, believes that his own sociological practice is itself a strategy within the field of symbolic-intellectual power. Some critics have worried, however, that sociological theories that regard ideas as mere instruments fall into the trap of social reductionism: they cannot take ideas seriously, because they see ideas as masks for something ostensibly more "real." Bourdieu, for example, despite his theoretical acumen, often seems far too ready to reduce intellectual and aesthetic judgments to class position, and it is difficult to see what distinguishes his sociology from the cruder sort of Marxian "economism" (i.e., the theory that the economy alone is the ultimate causality behind human experience). (For a criticism of Bourdieu's economism as an implausibly objectivistic theory of meaning, see the essay by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "Can there be a Science of Existential Structure and Social Meaning?" in Richard Shusterman, Ed. *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1999), pp.84-93.

### *Sociology, Intellectual History, and the Implications of Discourse-Theory*

Despite what I have noted above, sociological or discursive approaches to intellectual history can have a tremendous appeal. No doubt part of their attraction is due to the fact that they nourish an attitude of critical suspicion or generalized skepticism—an attitude that is the rightful province of intellectuals. From the sociological or discourse-theoretical point of view, grand categories of human meaning such as "Truth", "Knowledge" and "Objectivity" turn out to be socially-conditioned values: the



historian's task is not to judge whether certain ideas are right or wrong, but instead to comprehend what counts as right or wrong in a particular historical and social setting. This approach is inspired most especially by Michel Foucault's earlier writings—on the discourses of sexual pathology, criminality, and madness—and it has now spawned a growing field of intellectual-historical inquiries on discourses of every possible variety. Among the most influential is the book by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), a path breaking study of the way that the Islamic “East” has been constructed and imagined in Western scholarship and literature. Historians of discourse often appeal to Foucault's anti-realist principle that the things a discourse describes can only be said to exist—to count as “real”—because the discourse has produced them as objects of knowledge. For Said, the discourse about the “Orient” has its own life and its own consequences quite apart from the world it purports to describe: To speak about the East is to structure social space in a certain way. Indeed, the world we live in is ultimately the world *as it is discursively structured*.

Some critics have complained that such theories are too bold in their disregard for questions of historical truth or cultural exchange: Said, for example, occasionally lapses into metaphysical hyperbole when he describes Orientalist discourse as “producing” the East, both its “truth” and its “reality.” Such claims are potentially irresponsible, since they presume the self-enclosedness of conceptual schemes, making it difficult to imagine the possibility of dialogue between cultures, where intellectual constructs would remain susceptible to ongoing criticism and discussion.

Moreover, such claims appear to disable historians who might wish to fault Orientalist discourse for sometimes misrepresenting what the Islamic world is actually like. Accordingly, a noteworthy feature of much historical scholarship on discourses is the implicit assumption—sometimes the historian is reluctant to state this point in a direct fashion—that the discourse is false. Theoretical sophistication may forbid the historian from bald pronouncements as to whether a discourse is actually “correct”—after all, the premise in such scholarship is that social reality is a function of discourse rather than its precondition. But such historians are usually animated, however implicitly, by a kind of emancipatory impulse: to expose the contingency and constructed quality of a discourse in the hopes that it might then be destabilized and even dismantled. This is especially the case for intellectual and cultural historical work on discourses that are most dramatic in their social or normative effects, e.g., discourses that regulate sexual behavior, discourses that promote colonial activities in the name of civilizational betterment, discourses that justify extremist forms of governmental intervention or even torture in the name of public safety, or discourses that articulate the rules for membership within a certain national community. In sum, scholars who adopt the Foucauldian view of socially effective discourses often appeal covertly to the reader's understanding that *of course* we are meant to disapprove of the discourses in question. But this judgment and its theoretical supports remain unstated: the scholar's own stance remains “crypto-normative.” (A famous and highly influential critique of Foucauldian discourse-theory along just these lines can be found in the book by Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990).

The political motives behind such discourse-histories are frequently laudable. But it is important to notice when such motives come into conflict with the metaphysical anti-realist position that discourses are the only reality there is. Is torture merely its representation? The historical condemnation of past inhumanity seems to require that we can say such inhumanity actually occurred, that certain individuals died or suffered, especially when agencies of government may insist they did not. Some critics have accused Foucault of quietism, since they regard his narratives as disabling our capacity for moral and political judgment. But we should take care to note that Foucault himself was deeply committed to the political betterment of the world, and he would have objected strenuously to the suggestion that his theories somehow obstructed efforts at achieving greater freedom. He actually saw himself as continuing the eighteenth-century project of both intellectual and practical enlightenment, as summarized by Immanuel Kant's formula, "*sapere aude*," or "dare to know."

On a more technical note, we should realize that there is nothing all that novel or strange about the thesis that the social world as we live it is shaped by language or discourse. Such a thesis has an old and distinguished pedigree, which reaches back from European structuralist theories of language to Kant himself, who believed that the world is only intelligible to us thanks to a certain set of *a priori* or necessary forms (called "categories") that the mind itself brings to experience. Foucault's thesis that the world is shaped by discourse might well be understood as an historicized and socialized version of Kantian categories, i.e., the basic forms that govern human experience are on Foucault's view not eternal structures of reason but changeable elements of a given social order, and they therefore yield a host of practical or power-laden effects. And just as Kant believed there is a world out there independent of the categories (though Kant was careful to note we have no access to that world "in itself," since without the aid of the *a priori* forms that world is unintelligible), so too Foucault believed historical events are not reducible without remainder to their discursive effects. Although he is sometimes dismissed as an "anti-realist" (i.e., as a theorist who denies there is any reality external to discourse), there is very little in his actual work to support so radical and implausible a position. In Foucault's writing about torture and punishment, for example, he never suggests that the events he describes were somehow unreal. And, to take another example, when Foucault writes about sex, he suggests that various sexual behaviors or identities became thinkable or real only because a certain discourse arose permitting society to categorize them as such. Thus, "the homosexual", on Foucault's account is really a creation of the nineteenth century. In this sense there just *were no homosexuals* prior to the discourses that named them as such. But this is hardly to deny there were activities or experiences that *only later* were attached to certain persons identified as homosexual. Foucault therefore speaks about the "putting-into-discourse" (*mis-en-discours*) of various sexual practices, a phrase which strongly suggests that the practices pre-existed their discursive identification. In sum, Foucault's point is epistemological, not ontological. In this regard, it is useful to note that Arnold Davidson, a scholar who has helped us perhaps more than just about any theorist in North America to understand Foucault's work, describes Foucault's method as "historical epistemology."

The various ramifications of Foucault's methodology are difficult to summarize, in part because his most successful works are those that set out to investigate a given historical

phenomenon; and their appeals to method often appear to be more afterthoughts than strictly reasoned statements of historical philosophy. This in itself has opened the door for all sorts of interpretations and transformations, some of which adopt the dramatic language of full-blown anti-realism. So it is important to emphasize once again that Foucault himself was not an anti-realist, though many scholars who profess deep admiration for Foucault's theoretical contributions have misunderstood him on just this point. Intellectual historians are supposed to be highly attentive to the philosophical ramifications of their own method. One of the most regrettable features of the turn to discourse amongst intellectual and cultural historians today is their frequent yet unthinking recourse to philosophical theories that ultimately work to disable any reference to an independent world. The "discursive turn" is nonetheless a critical and important innovation in recent historical method, and one that has opened the way to a better understanding of the symbolic or representational dimension of both culture and social power.

### *Conclusion*

I have tried in this essay to outline some of the main trends in intellectual history, and to discuss what binds them with, and distinguishes them from, other practices in history, the humanities and social sciences. I have also offered some of my own remarks on these trends. While some of these remarks are no doubt controversial, their purpose is not so much to promote my own opinions as to stimulate further reflection and debate about what intellectual history presently is and where it should go from here. I do not feel sufficiently confident to endorse any one definition as generally correct. Naturally, I have my personal preferences, but laying out methodological guidelines that may be applicable only for myself seems at once immodest and irrelevant. The only desideratum which perhaps deserves mention is my deeply-felt conviction that intellectual history should continue to promote the attitude that intellectual life is valuable for its own sake. I therefore remain wary of methodologies and argumentative strategies that encourage us to regard ideas as nothing more than ideological weapons or instruments of social power. To be sure, ideas *also* have an instrumental character; to deny this would be naïve. But thought also makes a claim upon us which remains irreducible to its instrumental function. To universalize the view that ideas may be reduced wholly to something other than themselves is to call into question the basic premise of intellectual history.

It should be obvious that intellectual history continues to mean many things. I believe this is very much for the good. Indeed, one of the great benefits of intellectual history today, in my view, is that it functions as a kind of preserve for interdisciplinarity within an increasingly streamlined and regimented university system, where most disciplines are quick to police their boundaries against methodological transgressors, and where departmental administrators cast anxious glances at the numbers that indicate funding and enrollment rates in rival departments. Intellectual history sustains its intellectual character in part because it recognizes the protean nature of thought itself: its boundlessness, and its refusal to confine itself to any one discipline. It is of course helpful to erect canons of legitimacy, to insist that certain topics or methods are proper to a given discipline whereas others are excluded. But such canons often function as barriers

against creativity. Intellectual history at its best traces out the paths of thinking, without excessive regard for the rules of the disciplines, wherever those paths may lead.

Recommended reading:

- Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (originally Harvard University Press, 1936)
- Arthur Lovejoy, "Reflections on the History of Ideas, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, I, 1 (Jan, 1940)
- Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 8 (1969)
- Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing" in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, repr. 1988)
- Mark Bevir, "The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism" in *History and Theory*, 31 (1992).
- Martin Jay, "Two Cheers for Paraphrase: Confessions of a Synoptic Intellectual Historian," in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna and other Essays* (1988)
- Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in *History and Theory* (1980)
- John Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn" in *American Historical Review* (1987)
- M. Richter, "Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (April 1987)
- Anthony Grafton, "The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (January, 2006)
- Arthur Lovejoy, "The Historiography of Ideas," in Lovejoy, *Essays on the History of Ideas* (1948)
- Peter Gay, "The Social History of Ideas, Ernst Cassirer and After" in Wolff and Moore, Eds, in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (1967)