
H-France Review Vol. 15 (January 2015), No. 11

Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. Index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-19-976924-7.

Review by Kathleen Wellman, Southern Methodist University.

This rich collection of articles explores the relatively recent past of the intellectual history of modern Europe in intriguing ways. Many articles trace the roots of the field to Arthur Lovejoy, concede the epistemological challenge of the linguistic turn, and its methodological displacement, first by social history and then by cultural studies. Almost all articles herald a revitalized field. Authors typically isolate a specific approach to ideas or a subfield closely related to intellectual history. They then provide a historiographical map through the recent history of their approach or topic and identify areas for future development. Accounts range from the philosophical and theoretical, to more concrete applications, and to introspective and subjective accounts. All of the authors are intellectually engaged with what intellectual history offers, intrigued by its future prospects, and aware of possible pitfalls of applying their proposals uncritically.

In their introductory essay, editors Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn contend that intellectual history now enjoys a revival but paradoxically, the field is neither theoretical nor contentious. Unlike its earlier history, it seems characterized by a “live and let live” ethos and an openness to any topics or methods that might prove fruitful. Perhaps, the editors suggest, with the current assault on the humanities, intellectual historians consider it counter-productive to wage internecine battles.

The first two articles assess challenges to intellectual history since Arthur Lovejoy began the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Darrin McMahon asks how intellectual history became old and what a new intellectual history might look like. He discusses Lovejoy’s approach to intellectual history and challenges to it by Robert Darnton’s social history of ideas and Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School’s emphasis on ideas in context. But the new subsequently provoked criticism as well. Context was critiqued as totalizing and the social history of ideas for privileging low ideas, for example. McMahon suggests specific ways intellectual history might be reinvigorated: by expanding its purview to avoid provincialism; by entertaining comparisons between the past and present; by focusing on the travel and migration of ideas; and by emphasizing the “writerly craft” (p. 26).

Peter Gordon also focuses on the Cambridge School to examine what it means to study an idea in context. He distinguishes his critique from what he deems praiseworthy about Skinner’s approach and questions only the too rigid application of a quest for context, which he calls a “strong version” of ideas in context. This approach, he claims, has turned the study of ideas away from movement to stasis. As a corrective, Gordon urges intellectual historians to recognize that “ideas in context” can freeze ideas and to resist any move to enclose an idea in a totality. Instead the quest to determine context should be limited. Intellectual history should break down barriers between history and philosophy and political theory and become more eclectic. Other articles in this collection demonstrate the eclecticism Gordon proposes and call into question the inhibiting effect of ideas in context on current practices of intellectual history.

The next two essays take readers beyond English-language scholarship, the predominant focus of the collection. Antoine Lilti explains the failure of intellectual history to thrive in France. Other disciplines claimed the terrain held by intellectual history: literary studies were the preserve of textual exegesis; philosophy treated the history of philosophy. And the study of history in France remains tied more to the social sciences than to the humanities. The emergence of micro-history and an increasingly pragmatic approach to the social sciences was a missed opportunity for intellectual history to develop in France. Jean-Claude Perrot's work, with its expanded corpus and careful attention to social context, offered an intriguing possible model. Even if others have not yet followed Perrot's promising lead, Lilti believes intellectual history could still flourish if it focused on topics such as the history of intellectual work and reading and treated a broader array of sources, including personal archives, official manifestos, and debates within disciplines.

Jan-Werner Müller traces the evolution of *Begriffsgeschicht* (translated as conceptual history). This complex fusion of philosophy and history, particularly influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, emerged in West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. Müller discusses its most significant figures and tensions among them, as well as critiques it provoked. He argues that, because conceptual history occupies an indeterminate terrain between social history and the history of consciousness, intellectual historians could apply it broadly. Conceptual history could study political terms as deployed by non-elites. Histories of how concepts travel could be correlated to the linguistic turn. Such histories could focus on lived experience and the appropriation of ideas. Müller also sees conceptual history as a constructive means to theorize historical processes.

Several authors explore relationships between intellectual history and other sub-disciplines they consider insufficiently exploited to date. Judith Surkis examines the conjuncture of scandal and women's history (which she describes as a "supplemental history" to the conventional narrative) as useful to intellectual history. She discusses the connection between intellectual history and cultural history since the 1980s, particularly due to the influential work of Robert Darnton and Dominic LaCapra. Although cultural studies initially seemed to offer an open-ended way to study ideas, the cultural turn provoked criticism as implicitly totalizing and foreclosing possibilities. Thus cultural history requires supplementation in Surkis's sense, and intellectual history could contribute to histories of race, gender, and culture without replicating the reductionism of cultural studies. For Surkis, the anthropologist Maynathi Fernando's work on the head scarf controversy in France is an example of how the alliance of scandal and supplement challenges conventional ideas. The conflict, Fernando's work reveals, is not between France and Islam but rather within the French Republic where rights and obligations and freedom and equality are at odds.

Samuel Moyn claims that, while intellectual history has avoided engagement with social theory, the concept of the social imaginary gives intellectual history a new ability to incorporate it. Moyn traces intellectual history's trajectory from Lovejoy to Skinner and through the linguistic turn. He finds all of these approaches wanting because they share a commitment to the autonomy of thought and to an idealist intellectual history. Moyn invokes the social imaginary, particularly as articulated by Cornelius Castoriadis, as a potential means to break down distinctions between representation and practices. Although Moyn cites Pierre Rosanvallon's work as a particularly productive model, he is optimistic about the many individualized approaches to intellectual history targeting the distinction between representation and practice without reducing one to the other. Nonetheless, Moyn expresses some concern that, as social and cultural history have waned and intellectual history is applied to many different fields, intellectual history itself is in question.

Suzanne Marchand's essay is even more pessimistic, answering her question, "Has the History of the Disciplines Had Its Day?" with a resounding yes. She focuses primarily on post-WWII challenges to positivist histories of sciences. Not surprisingly, Michel Foucault's work resonated with historians

already aware that elites imbricate power in cultural forms. With Foucault's critique and understanding of the construction of identity, the 1980s and 1990s became the highpoint in the history of the disciplines. Such histories used discourse theory, explored the circulation of ideas, and studied different kinds of practitioners. But Marchand sees a dimmer future for the history of disciplines: modern intellectual historians depend on historians of science whose vocabulary may not attract publishers; studies of colonial knowledge production fill the niche the history of disciplines formerly held; and scholarly interest in the nineteenth century is dwindling. Marchand sees other troubling implications of disciplinary history's decline: the history of disciplines has been a victim of the assault on the humanities and positivist science has carried the day. In light of these developments, Marchand urges her fellow academics to make the significance of their scholarship clear.

John Tresch begins his treatment of the relationship between the history of science and history of ideas by claiming that, for the past thirty years, historians of science have turned to the sociology of science. This close relationship between the history and sociology of science raised concerns that the history of science could become merely a series of disjointed case studies, unsustained by an underlying critical stance. Tresch asserts, to the contrary, that the history of science remains vital, in part, because of its association with the history of ideas. The two fields are clearly and fundamentally related over a long history of shared interest in cosmology, for example. Where Tresch sees the history of scientific ideas materialized and disaggregated, he urges the corrective of reintegration. Intellectual historians of science should treat broader periods of time through a series of connections. Comparative cosmologies offer useful ways to connect them. Historians should not only be skeptical of totalizing but also incorporate the material. And, if historians of science follow Tresch's lead of looking to "materialized cosmologies," they could productively turn their attention to topics such as the influence of science in the post-WWII period, in the global economy, and in the environment.

Tracie Matysik explores the relationship between the history of sexuality and European intellectual history. She discusses Freud and Foucault as the central figures who articulated the relationship between knowledge and sexuality in ways that proved so productive during the twentieth century. However, Matysik contends that tensions between the Freudian and Foucauldian understandings of human sexuality and identity ultimately frustrated scholars as they came to see both theoretical foundations as too narrow. They chafed under the constraints of sexually defined identity as well as with the liberation-repression dichotomy. Matysik points to recent, more positive research which has decentered sexuality. Scholars have thus applied psychoanalytic theory to the history of trauma, transference, and other topics without focusing solely on sexuality. They have studied the emotions, affect, attraction and repulsion without viewing identity as entirely sexual.

Marci Shore asks the intriguing questions "Can we see ideas?" and "How clearly can we perceive them?" What follows is a highly personal account of Shore's path through intellectual history. She refuses to do battle, explicitly rejecting divides between empiricist and idealist or the intellectual and the emotional. Contending that ideas develop in dialogue, Shore sees certain kinds of sources as particularly revealing—personal correspondence, for example. She urges historians to pay attention to emotions, as well as ideas in such conversations. But she also addresses the problem Heidegger poses for intellectual historians of Germany, that is to say, they cannot explain his association with the Nazis. If historians cannot determine causation, she argues, they can make an "imaginative leap" into the past. They should also seek the lived experience in which the ideas developed without reducing one to the other. This quest, Shore warns, raises challenges for the historian, including the line between empathy and apology and between observation and voyeurism. If, as Shore contends, history cannot provide ultimate meaning, it can allow historians and their readers to commune with others from the past.

John Randolph cites a "spatial turn," when spatial thinking and practices became influential and had an impact on intellectual history as well. Works mapped the diffusion of ideas onto institutional and social settings. The many ways to conceive space as absolute, relative, or tied to the social have productively

been explored in a variety of ways from the humanities to digital technologies. But Randolph contends that studies of space without time have reified the status quo and thus reinforced inequality and injustice. As a corrective, he proposes the study of movement perhaps through massive, digitally-driven data. Useful current examples are databases of the correspondence of seventeenth-century Dutch scholars or of Voltaire's correspondence network. Randolph wonders whether the best way to study the history of motion through space is through GIS or more conventional methods, when he asks the question, "Will an interactive graphic of 'Enlightenment' in space ever take the place of an essay like this?" (p. 225). He concludes that it already has; we might hope it has not.

Although many authors advocate a more global intellectual history, only two address it explicitly. When David Armitage considers the international turn in intellectual history, he contends that intellectual history has always been international and, as such, cannot easily execute an international turn. Few intellectual historians have explicitly claimed an international perspective, perhaps because many practitioners of the global and transnational history take a materialist perspective. But Armitage dates a revived convergence of intellectual history and international history to the 1990s in studies of international thought. Intellectual historians have corroborated the skepticism of international historians about the "myth of 1648" that the Peace of Westphalia was foundational in international relations, for example. An international intellectual history could be productive, Armitage suggests. Historians could study the media of intellectual thought through the methods of the history of the book. International institutions have archives available for the study of ideas of war, public health, and others. But Armitage tempers his optimism with several cautions. International intellectual history must avoid a reification of ideas, presentism, elitism, and the infinite expansion of context.

Seeing the turn to "global international history" as important but unspecified, Shruti Kapila offers a specific model. She explores the evolution of European intellectual history and the global perspective from the postwar disillusionment with the Enlightenment, to the problematizing of India and the dismantling of Europe, to the extension of European ideas through studies of empires, and finally to post-colonialism's concern with the dissemination of ideas as coercive. Recent approaches to global history have focused on metaphors of capital, exchange, and circulation, but Kapila criticizes all these as failing to recognize India's creation of a democratic nation state. India developed the Indian national state and a democracy with a social justice agenda, Kapila insists, informed by the ideas of Indian political actors including Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. This case, she argues, should compel global intellectual history to focus on disjuncture. Kapila makes a compelling case for the value of the intellectual history in understanding India's political development, but has she argued for a global intellectual history or to a more nuanced intellectual history of India?

With "interdisciplinary" a buzzword on every campus, Warren Breckman looks skeptically at what "interdisciplinary" might mean for intellectual historians. He compares the embrace of cultural studies by scholars of English literature and sees history as more firmly tied to a discipline. He surveys the various ways of construing interdisciplinarity in relation to disciplines and sees the humanities and social science as currently arrayed on a continuum of strong to weak interdisciplinarity. Breckman describes intellectual history as a sub-discipline with "weak disciplinarity" in its relationship to history and only a "weak interdisciplinarity" in relation to other disciplines (p. 286). He advises historians to acknowledge the difference between disciplines but to learn the terminology of other disciplines to better converse with its practitioners. Historians should also cultivate sensitivity to the *habitus* or practices of different disciplines. Intellectual history might be considered a rendezvous discipline, where several disciples meet, Breckman suggests. He embraces eclecticism as skeptical but open and thus most appropriate for engaged and constructive conversation between disciplines.

Intellectual history may not be divided by raging battles around schools of interpretation, as the editors contend. However, as this collection amply attests, there is such diversity in current approaches to intellectual history that any attempt to establish a consensus might well prove futile or produce

contention. Even if these articles suggest little basis for consensus, they examine the field critically. They weigh the field's development, its past successes and limitations, and propose future directions balanced by cautious caveats. Many articles share the sense that intellectual history should adopt both a transnational or global approach and focus less on elites and more on daily experience.

The variety of approaches explored in this collection show a vital field, but one in the process of considerable reassessment and reorientation. Readers might share the discomfiture some authors express that the field is too untethered by theory or that it could devolve into unintegrated studies of ideas across a vast range of topics following any number of approaches. Ultimately, with so many different ways to develop and topics to treat, will intellectual history remain a distinct sub-field or simply an approach deployed to serve other fields or sub-fields? It is telling that each author's article describes quite different historiographies of this field, reflecting the tradition within which he or she worked—geographically, methodologically, and topically. And these authors cite a dizzying number of turns intellectual history has taken.

This collection documents a field in an exciting state of evolution with many intriguing paths open to scholars and will be invaluable for anyone interested in understanding the current state of intellectual history. Many scholars will doubtless appreciate the clear paths through recent historiography of the various themes and sub-disciplines this collection treats. They will find a guide, a bibliography, and a thoughtful analysis of topics they might wish to pursue in their own work.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, "Introduction: Interim Intellectual History"

Darrin M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?"

Peter E. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas"

Antoine Lilti, "Does Intellectual History Exist in France?: The Chronicle of a Renaissance Foretold"

Jan-Werner Müller, "On Conceptual History"

Judith Surkis, "Of Scandals and Supplements: Relating Intellectual and Cultural History"

Samuel Moyn, "Imaginary Intellectual History"

Suzanne Marchand, "Has the History of the Disciplines Had its Day?"

John Tresch, "Cosmologies Materialized: History of Science and History of Ideas"

Tracie Matysik, "Decentering Sex: Reflections on Freud, Foucault, and Subjectivity in Intellectual History"

Marci Shore, "Can We See Ideas? On Evocation, Experience, and Empathy"

John Randolph, "The Space of Intellect and the Intellect of Space"

David Armitage, "The International Turn in Intellectual History"

Shruti Kapila, "Global Intellectual History and the Indian Political"

Warren Breckman, "Intellectual History and the Interdisciplinary Ideal"

Kathleen Wellman
Southern Methodist University
kwellman@smu.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172