

The Uses of Intellectual History

Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *A Companion to Intellectual History*. Wiley Blackwell. 2016. 459 pages. ISBN 9781118294802.

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A Companion to Intellectual History is a collection of papers that assess some of the central issues of intellectual history. Its appraisal as a discipline with recognisable contours is approached from the outlook of its multidisciplinary uses. The main innovation of intellectual history lies arguably in its capacity to shed further light on the advances of disciplines as diverse as economics, education, sociology, philosophy, art history, linguistics or legal theory. Recent interpretive improvements were originally, since the 1970s, methodological changes inspired in the works of historians, most remarkably Thomas Kuhn, John Pocock, and Quentin Skinner, who revised some traditional patterns in the history of science and the history of political thought – “each of whom was taken to have provided a theoretically grounded template or paradigm of far-reaching applicability” (p. 9). In so doing, historical disciplines appeared both as practices interwoven with other disciplines and as distinct endeavours. Drawn on this interconnected condition, intellectual history has become a scholarly field of its own.

In the Introduction to the volume, Bryan Young presents the interdisciplinary character of intellectual history as the outcome of debates on the limits of humanities and social sciences disciplines to render properly the historical, multifaceted character of intellectual controversies. Hence intellectual history underlines the historicity and complexity of those controversies, ranging from philosophical to scientific and political matters. The volume brings up in this respect an internal debate on the scholarly status of intellectual history as a discipline challenging the traditional limits of the languages of history.

Stefan Collini, one of its most eminent practitioners, points out that, compared to traditional historical disciplines, intellectual history bears a weak identity because of its diffuse limits and the different methodological practices characterising it. Yet its weak identity, or even its lack thereof, becomes an asset more than a hindrance, Collini argues (p. 7). Unlike the view dominant until the mid twentieth century, intellectual history is no longer a mere auxiliary, propaedeutic study, as different research programmes attest ever since. Besides, its traditional elitist repute, which confined its utility to a sort of archaeological enquiry, has faded away in front of a booming interest in intermingling research methods from the humanities and the social sciences. Intellectual history is a representative example of that kind of methodological experimentation.

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Thematically, though, the range of issues is ever expanding. That makes especially elusive the question of identity. In practice, instead, reveals a more accurate characterisation of intellectual history, for through its different uses it entails a reflexive exploration of the senses of historicity in the writing of history. Richard Whatmore quotes Quentin Skinner to underline that condition: “The intellectual historian can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds” (p. 108).

Yet the very idea of combining techniques and practices suggests a relativising grasp, and self-perception, of each discipline’s own method. From the perspective of intellectual history, that compound articulation has opened over time a readjustment process of the discipline’s aims. Further, its closeness to the history of ideas has produced a comparative understanding of its own limits. A revealing example are the criticisms from Marxist historians that draw attention to traditionally dismissed aspects in intellectual history, such as power relations, class conflicts, or social conditions. In this regard, Gerald Cohen’s *Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy* overcomes that flaw, as pointed out in the Introduction (p. 3), confirming the interpretive potential of interdisciplinary revisions of traditional philosophical accounts.

Contributions to the volume are distributed in three parts. The nine chapters of the first one, *Approaches to Intellectual History*, provide a panoramic view of the ways of practicing the discipline. The second part, *Two Disciplines of Intellectual History*, portrays in eight chapters the uses of intellectual history in combination with eight other fields of study. In the third part, *The Practices of Intellectual History*, twelve chapters detail some of the outcomes of the interdisciplinary uses of intellectual history.

Of the contributions to the first part, especially three of them represent what entails the search for new scholarly paths in the practice of intellectual history: Stefan Collini’s “The Identity of Intellectual History”, Richard Whatmore’s “Quentin Skinner and the Relevance of Intellectual History”, and Kenneth Sheppard’s “J. G. A. Pocock as an Intellectual Historian”. Underscoring the futility of attempts to define accurately the specialty, Collini argues that it is in debates on the interpretation of languages and contexts where the salient features of intellectual history can be reliably found (pp. 13–5). Whatmore notices how the attention to language in historical discourses has been a characteristic feature of intellectual history. Quentin Skinner’s work gives proof of that scholarly interest. In his chapter, the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein on language and reality are presented as the most influential antecedent to Skinner’s “linguistic textualism” (pp. 97–9). In an almost parallel way, Sheppard highlights the methodological significance of the early writings of John Pocock. More relevant than his adoption of Kuhn’s concept of paradigm to historical

research was Pocock's attention to linguistic discourses in the study of history (pp. 123–4). Probably no other innovation has become more determinant of the current practice of intellectual history.

In the second part of the book, a number of chapters fairly describe the interdisciplinary uses of intellectual history: Leo Catana's study "Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy: Their Genesis and Current Relationship"; "Intellectual History and the History of Political Thought", by Duncan Kelly; "Intellectual History and Global History", by Andrew Sartori; and Peter E. Gordon's "The Idea of Secularisation in Intellectual History". Catana claims that intellectual history has been applied with indubitable success only to the history of ethics and the history of political thought (pp. 133–5) – a view that strongly contrasts with the series of close affinities that can be found in the practice of conceptual history, as Keith Tribe demonstrates. The title of his chapter is evocative enough, "Intellectual History as *Begriffsgeschichte*". Regarding the history of political thought, Kelly points out that the interest in language analysis has been lately replaced by a focus on global history, which reformulates previous patterns of analysis yet keeping attention to the contexts where political ideas are produced (pp. 141–3). Sartori's chapter is a methodological reflection on the diverse epistemological foundations of global history. Studying the effects of China's westernisation, he notes how the exploratory character of global history can be enriched by the advances of intellectual history in comparative research and no less important, by its analytic sharpness (pp. 208–10). Part of that clarity comes from the internal search for a scholarly status. Secularisation is a case in point that shows how the practice of intellectual history has to a great extent redefined the study and the understanding of that core constituent of modernity, secularisation, as Gordon holds (pp. 242–5).

The third part gathers examples of how approaches in intellectual history distinctly present historiographical debates (for example, in the chapter on "Natural Law: Law, Rights and Duties", by Knud Haakonsen and Michael J. Seidler), thematic discussions (Ioannis D. Evrigenis's chapter "Liberty and Law") or comparative accounts (Sophus A. Reinert's "Wars and Empires"). In his study, "Republics and Monarchies", Koen Stapelbroek discusses whether republics can be interpreted historically as an antithesis of monarchies. The analysis reconsiders the thesis that presents republics as a form of government whose institutional and intellectual tradition is thoroughly independent from that of monarchies (pp. 267–7). "Barbarism and Civilisation", the chapter by Michael Sonenscher, dissects how the concepts of barbarism and civilisation have forged historically as opposites (pp. 288–9). "Religion Natural and Revealed" is an argument evincing that the divergence, and contradiction, between natural and revealed religion is a historical product – Kant and Hegel being responsible for that intellectual outlook, Norman Vance contends (pp. 312–3). Manuela Al-

bertone, in her “Democracy and Representation”, searches the origin of their conceptual opposition, which she claims was the outcome of a debate on the meaning of representation in the context of the reconfiguration of some large states into republics during the eighteenth century (pp. 331–2).

Intellectual history, as the volume shows, is a discipline that has grown in methodological diversity over the past century. Yet a feature is shared by most approaches, namely, the exploration of contexts where ideas, and the texts harbouring them, are argued and made public. This reasonably speaks of the philosophical background of intellectual history, which goes beyond its traditional closeness to the history of ideas as the contributions to the book profusely describe. Intellectual history has become a distinct scholarly practice precisely because of its ties with a number of disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences.

This articulation of different practices and methods has produced novel approaches and interpretations of historical accounts. It is by no accident that many chapters are not intellectual history pieces, in the traditional sense of the term. *A Companion to Intellectual History* is a collection of studies on the state of the art in a scholarly practice that has of late gained esteem in the academia becoming a recognisable discipline. More interestingly, along with other historical approaches, the revamping of intellectual history over the past decades is contributing to critically reappraise the practice of history.