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9. WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL HISTORY . . . ?

The distillation of the 'spirit of the age'? The history of abstract conceptions of intellectuals? The history of philosophy? Or the philosophy of history? The history of political ideas? What is intellectual history?

Stefan Collini

The labels of all the various branches of history are flags of convenience not names of essences, and the real question concerns the distinctiveness and validity of their claims to occupy a separate room in Clio's spacious house. For intellectual history most certainly *is* a part of history, part of the attempt to understand past human experience.

Its role in the division of labour is the understanding of those ideas, thoughts, arguments, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and preoccupations that together made up the intellectual or reflective life of previous societies. This intellectual life was, of course, continuous with, and not rigidly separable from, the political life, the economic life, and so on, of the same societies, but in practice a rough and ready distinction is intuitively recognisable: where the economic historian may, for example, want to know about the kinds of crops grown on the lands of medieval monasteries, the intellectual historian will characteristically be more interested in the ideas to be seen at work in the monastic chronicles or in the theological basis of ideals of the contemplative life.

Similarly, it is true that all historians are in practice interpreters of texts, whether they be private letters, government records, parish registers, sales lists, or whatever. But for most kinds of historians these texts are only the necessary means to understanding something other than the texts themselves, such as a political action or a demographic trend, whereas for the intellectual historian a full understanding of his chosen texts is itself the aim of his enquiries. For this reason, intellectual history is particularly prone to draw on the contributions of those other disciplines that are habitually concerned with interpreting texts for purposes of their own, such as the trained sensibilities of the literary critic, alert to all forms of

affective and non-literal writing, or the analytical skills of the philosopher, probing the reasoning that ostensibly connects premisses and conclusions. Furthermore, the boundaries with adjacent subdisciplines are necessarily shifting and indistinct: the history of art and the history of science both claim a certain autonomy, partly just because they require specialised technical skills, but both can also be seen as part of a wider intellectual history, as is evident when one considers, for example, the common stock of knowledge about cosmological beliefs or moral ideals of a period upon which both may need to draw.

Like all historians, the intellectual historian is a consumer rather than a producer of 'methods'; similarly he can claim no type of evidence that is peculiarly and exclusively his. His distinctiveness lies in *which* aspect of the past he is trying to illuminate, not in having exclusive possession of either a corpus of evidence or a body of techniques.

That being said, it does seem that the label 'intellectual historian' attracts a disproportionate share of misunderstanding, and the term 'the history of ideas' is sometimes used as a less eyebrow- or hair-raising alternative. But there is a double hazard in this. First, the emphasis on the 'history of *ideas*' may suggest that we are dealing with autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, happened only accidentally and temporarily to find anchorage in particular human minds, a suggestion encouraged by the comparable German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* or *Ideengeschichte* which drew upon the history of philosophy in general and Hegel in particular. By contrast, the term 'intellectual history' indicates that the focus is on an aspect of human activity, in the same way as the terms 'economic history' or 'political history' do.

Secondly, 'the history of ideas' was the label chosen in the 1920s and 1930s by the American philosopher-turned-historian, A. O. Lovejoy, to designate his own idiosyncratic approach to the life of the past, an approach which consisted essentially of isolating the universal 'unit-ideas' out of which, he claimed, all more complex doctrines and theories were composed. Through his many pupils and his founding in 1940 of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Lovejoy's approach dominated the field in American universities for at least a generation, leading to the compilation of immensely thorough but essentially arid lists of the sightings of particular 'unit-ideas'. Lovejoy's own practice was, as is so often the case, better either than his preaching or than the imitative practice of his disciples, and his most famous work, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), remains an extremely impressive *tour de force*. Though his influence has fallen away in recent decades (and the journal he

founded has become less mechanical and sectarian in its approach), the term 'the history of ideas' is, at least in the United States, still sufficiently often identified with his work as to cause misunderstanding all of its own.

Purely terminological matters aside, it is still the case that much of the suspicion or hostility directed at intellectual history arises out of misconceptions about what it involves, and at this point the most profitable way to respond to our initial question may be to confront these misconceptions directly.

The first alleges that intellectual history is the history of something that never really *mattered*. The long dominance of the historical profession by political historians bred a kind of philistinism, an unspoken belief that power and its exercise was what 'mattered' (a term which invited but rarely received any close critical scrutiny). This prejudice was reinforced, especially where the spirit of Namier was received at all hospitably, by the assertion that political action was never really the outcome of principles or ideas, which were, in the gruff demotic of the land-owning classes, as mimicked by Namier, 'mere flapdoodle'. The legacy of this prejudice is still discernible in the tendency to require ideas to have 'influenced' the political class before they can be deemed worthy of historical attention, as if there were some reason why the history of art or of science, of philosophy or of literature, were somehow of less interest and significance than the history of parties or parliaments.

Perhaps in recent years the mirror-image of this philistinism has become more common in the form of the claim that ideas of any degree of systematic expression or sophistication do not matter because they were, by definition, only held by a minority. As an objection, there is none more worthy of extended rebuttal than its parent prejudice (against which it is in full Oedipal revolt). Needless to say – at least, it ought to be needless to say it – much that legitimately interests us in history was the work of minorities (not always of the same type, be it noted), and, if I may repeat an adaptation of a famous line of E. P. Thompson's that I have used elsewhere, it is not only the poor and inarticulate who may stand in need of being rescued from the enormous condescension of posterity.

The second misconception is that intellectual history is inherently 'idealist', where that term is used pejoratively to signify the belief that ideas develop by a logic of their own, without reference to other human activities, or to what is loosely called their 'social context'. There was possibly some truth to this as a criticism of some of the work written a couple of generations ago, particularly that deriving from the largely German-influenced history of philosophy; but it is

simply false as a description of what intellectual history must be like. In the search for fuller understanding, the intellectual historian may well inquire into, say, the economic conditions of certain kinds of authorship, such as aristocratic patronage or serialisation in popular periodicals, just as the economic historian may have to attend to, say, the role of scientific inventions or beliefs about the legitimacy of profit.

There is no reason, however, to accord any explanatory priority to such matters. If, for example, the historian is seeking a deeper insight into the writings of David Hume, it will profit him very little to know more about the economic circumstances of other younger sons of minor Scottish land-owners in the early eighteenth century, whereas his interpretation will gain immensely from knowing something about the writings of a French soldier, an English doctor and an Irish bishop during the previous hundred years (Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley respectively). And, in general, the 'social context' of intellectual activity turns out to have a limited explanatory role in practice, however enthusiastically one may endorse a 'sociological' approach in principle, and this is particularly true the more one grapples with the details of any particular episode in the intellectual life of the past: however much we may know about the social position of the man of letters in Victorian England, we shall have to look to a quite different kind of evidence to achieve a sensitive understanding of the critical controversies between Matthew Arnold and Fitzjames Stephen.

The third misconception, one of more interest and subtlety than the previous two, is that intellectual history is nothing more than the history of the various disciplines of intellectual enquiry. This obviously has some plausibility for the most recent periods, where one could imagine an intellectual history of the nineteenth century being constructed by stringing together the history of science, the history of political economy, the history of philosophy, the history of the novel, and so on. But, other difficulties aside, this would only be to provide the raw materials for an intellectual history of the period, and might, moreover, present them so much with an eye to subsequent developments in each of these fields as to get in the way of a properly historical understanding of what it meant to think such thoughts at the time.

And what about the 'spaces' between these particular activities, or those bits of the intellectual life of the past that have not happened to mutate into labels over the doors of late-twentieth-century university departments? Who, for that matter, has a proprietary right to write the histories of these subjects? An economist *may* be able to reconstruct the proto-economic thought of the seventeenth century in a way that is not distorted by twentieth-century professional concerns, but should we really look to a professor of medicine for an informed and historically sensitive account of the theory of the four humours? And what about those parts of past thought that have *not* issued in modern academic disciplines: are we really to leave the history of astrology, so influential on so many of the most sophisticated minds of the Renaissance, to be written by gypsy ladies in tents? The intellectual historian obviously cannot be confined by such subject-divisions, and insofar as he takes any cognisance of them it may well be above all to explain the mixture of logic and accident that has led to their assuming their present form.

The fourth misconception which it is worth addressing here is that intellectual history must have a method or theory or set of concepts that is distinctively its own. Indeed, in these methodology-conscious and discipline-proliferating days the very fact that I am identifying it as a practicably separable and intellectually justifiable activity may give the impression that I am advocating a tight theoretical programme of how it should be done. But this is not so. Mannheim's *Wissensociologie*, Lovejoy's history of 'unit ideas', the *Annales* school's *Histoire des Mentalités*, Foucault's *Archéologie du Savoir* – each has proposed its own special vocabulary and its own theory of the only possible way to understand the thoughts of the past and each has been found wanting. Good work has certainly been done under the aegis of these different theories, and they have helped inoculate historians against their occupational disease of mindless empiricism. But, as always, the merits of the history written depends on qualities which no theory can adequately prescribe, and it can be argued that the richness of characterisation and fineness of discrimination needed to do justice to the expression of human consciousness, past or present, are unlikely to be encapsulated in the rigid conceptual boxes of some purpose-built vocabulary.

'By their fruits ye shall know them.' In the end, it is the very tangible merits or recent works in this field that constitute the most persuasive argument for recognising intellectual history's title to a room in Clio's house, and they suggest that the throng in the attic study is no less brilliant than that in the political historian's drawing-room, that it is discussing matters no less vital than those treated in the basement kitchen of the economic historians, and that it is dealing with human passions no less profound than those engaged in the back-bedroom of the social historians.

Quentin Skinner

The study of the great religious and philosophical systems of the past; the study of ordinary people's beliefs about heaven and earth,

past and future, metaphysics and science; the examination of our ancestors' attitudes towards youth and age, war and peace, love and hate, cabbages and kings; the uncovering of their prejudices about what one ought to eat, how one ought to dress, whom one ought to admire; the analysis of their assumptions about health and illness, good and evil, morals and politics, birth, copulation and death – all these and a vast range of kindred topics fall within the capacious orbit of intellectual history. For they are all instances of the general subject-matter that preoccupies intellectual historians above all: the study of past thoughts.

Given the almost bewildering variety of topics that intellectual historians have considered, it is hardly surprising to find that the subject has been practised in a correspondingly wide range of intellectual styles. I shall confine myself to examining a number of approaches commonly adopted by historians of social and political theory, this being the corner of the discipline in which I am mainly interested myself.

Some choose to focus their attention on the very general concepts or 'unit ideas' which have appeared and reappeared throughout our history in many different theories of social and political life. As a result, they have provided us with histories of such concepts as liberty, equality, justice, progress, tyranny and the other key terms we use to construct and appraise our social and political world. Of late, however, this kind of history of ideas has been much criticised. One worry has been that it tends to leave us with a history almost bereft of recognisable agents, a history in which we find Reason itself overcoming Custom, Progress confronting the Chain of Being, and so forth. But the main doubt about the method has been that, in focusing on ideas rather than their uses in argument, it has seemed insensitive to the strongly contrasting ways in which a given concept can be put to work by different writers in different historical periods.

Another method, currently far more popular with historians of social and political theory, consists of singling out those texts which have been most influential in shaping our western political tradition and offering as careful as possible an account of how they are put together. This too has given rise to a distinguished literature, including many classic monographs on such major figures as Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and their contemporary followers.

At the same time, however, this approach has also fallen under suspicion in recent years. Critics have pointed out that if we wish, say, to understand a work such as Hobbes's *Leviathan*, it cannot be enough to furnish an analysis of the propositions and arguments contained in the text. We also need to be able to grasp what Hobbes was *doing* in presenting just those propositions and arguments. We

need to be able, that is, to recognise how far he may have been accepting and reiterating accepted commonplaces, or perhaps rephrasing and reworking them, or perhaps criticising and repudiating them altogether in order to attain a new perspective on a familiar theme. But we obviously cannot hope to gain such a sense of the identity of a text, and of its author's basic purposes in writing it, if we confine ourselves simply to analysing the contents of the text itself.

The danger with both the approaches I have singled out is obviously anachronism. Neither seems capable of recovering the precise historical identity of a given text. For neither seems sufficiently interested in the deep truth that concepts must not be viewed simply as propositions with meanings attached to them; they must also be thought of as weapons (Heidegger's suggestion) or as tools (Wittgenstein's term). It follows that to understand a particular concept and the text in which it occurs, we not only need to recognise the meanings of the terms used to express it; we also need to know who is wielding the concept in question, and with what argumentative purposes in mind.

What kind of intellectual history can hope to do justice to this insight? Among those whose particular interest lies in the study of social and political ideas, a new and challenging answer has been emerging over the past two decades. The suggestion has been that we need to focus not on texts or unit ideas, but rather on the entire social and political vocabularies of given historical periods. Beginning in this way, it is claimed, we may eventually be able to fit the major texts into their appropriate intellectual contexts, pointing to the fields of meaning out of which they arose, and to which they in turn contributed.

By now it is possible to point to a number of distinguished practitioners of this approach. John Dunn's classic monograph, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, shows how far the familiar understanding of Locke's politics as 'liberal' derives from an anachronistic misreading, failing as it does to take account of the context of Calvinist natural theology which alone makes sense of Locke's *Two Treatises*. Donald Winch in *Adam Smith's Politics* similarly shows how much we misunderstand *The Wealth of Nations* if we treat it simply as a 'contribution' to classical economics, while ignoring the context of moral theory to which it was addressed. A further example is the book that Winch recently wrote with John Burrow and Stefan Collini, *That Noble Science of Politics*. This provides us with a fascinating survey of what the idea of political science meant to those who first conceived of the discipline, a survey completely free of the gross anachronisms that generally mark the history of the social sciences.

A similar approach to intellectual history has been emerging of

recent years in France, especially under the impetus of Michel Foucault's sensational announcement of 'the death of the author' and his allied demand for a study of 'discourses'. Finally, no survey of what has been called 'the new history of political thought' can ignore the work of J. G. A. Pocock. In a series of influential pronouncements about method, Pocock has called on historians of political ideas to concentrate not on texts or traditions of thought, but rather on what he calls the study of political 'languages'. At the same time, he has brilliantly practised what he has preached. His major work, *The Machiavellian Moment*, has uncovered the elements of a Machiavellian moralism at the heart of the republican political tradition in the United States, and has thereby pointed to a need to rewrite the entire history of American liberal thought.

I have ended, inevitably, not just by saying what I think intellectual history is, but how I think it ought to be practised. Certainly I think that, if the history of ideas is to have a genuinely historical character, the new approach I have mentioned is the one that most deserves to be followed up.

David A. Hollinger

'Intellectual history' is a convenient label for a number of scholarly activities being carried out by persons trained in a number of disciplines of which history is only one. Especially have philosophy, literary criticism, and politics produced exemplary intellectual historians. This is true in the United States as well as in Britain and on the Continent, although professional historians in America have dealt with intellectual history rather differently than have their counterparts across the Atlantic. American academia has long recognised as a subdiscipline of history itself studies of the sort that most British and European scholars still tend to see as 'history of literature' or 'history of philosophy'. But from this American perspective, what *is* 'intellectual history'?

It is, quite simply, the history of what intellectuals have said about issues that historians regard as important. This definition captures the commonsense image that generally comes to mind when someone mentions 'intellectual history'. Who are the 'intellectuals'? Although there exists a recondite literature on the qualities that render one a true intellectual (is he or she sufficiently *critical? knowledgeable? serious? smart?*), we need not put quite so fine a point on it. An 'intellectual' for my purpose here is one who, whatever else he or she may have done in life, made *thinking* enough of an enterprise to get himself or herself into the tracings

that remain of that particular human activity as carried out during his or her own time.

'Thinking' is an extremely broad category of action, comparable to the activities – 'social living'? the exercise of 'power'? – that define social and political history. The intellect, like society and politics, is subject to specific constructions that render our sub-disciplines in practice less comprehensive than they are in theory. In the case of intellectual history, two frequently overlapping constructions of the field's ideal subject matter are supported by large professional constituencies. The vocabulary by which historians distinguish between these two constructions is currently in flux, but something of the distinction is conveyed by several classical, if sometimes misleading dichotomies: élite-mass, learned-popular, ideas-feelings, analytic-symbolic, and rational-religious.

The first construction takes for its primary datum the discursive arguments of scientists, philosophers, critics, preachers, scholars, and others who self-consciously addressed 'intellectual issues'. Early classics of this genre of history include Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (2 volumes, 1876) and J. T. Merz's *A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (4 volumes, 1904–1912). It was in this tradition that the professional field of 'intellectual history' took form in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s under the influence of Vernon Louis Parrington, Merle Curti, and above all Perry Miller, whose *The New England Mind* (2 volumes, 1939–1953) has been invoked more than any other single work of American scholarship to indicate what is meant by 'intellectual history'.

The second construction focuses on the myths, symbols, and languages drawn upon by large populations for the purposes of making sense of life or of given aspects of it. Inspired in part by cultural anthropology and literary criticism, this genre of intellectual history is even broader than the first. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth* (1950) was long its most discussed American exemplar. Smith and his followers focused primarily on literary texts and the popular arts, but in more recent years, partly in response to the studies of *mentalité* carried out by French historians, the genre has been enlarged to embrace the study of rituals and other non-discursive indicators of meaning. In terms of the definition I offered above, this genre of intellectual history has expanded traditional understandings of what counts as an 'issue', what is included in the realm of the 'said', what historical artefacts are to be interpreted as 'tracings' of the activity of thought, and hence who is an 'intellectual'. William J. Bouwsma has characterised this genre's relation to the old in terms of a transition in fashion 'from the history of ideas to the history of meaning'. The two genres overlap increasingly as students of 'popular culture' seek to con-

front the dynamic element, the actual thinking, done by their subjects, and as students of 'intellectual élites' seek to confront the relatively static languages within which their subjects perform analytic acts of mind, whilst the accommodation of the 'history of ideas' to the newer scholarship that prefers to speak of 'structures of meaning' has been decisively advanced in the United States by the influence of the late Michel Foucault.

J. G. A. Pocock

What is intellectual history? You may well ask, but I am not sure I can tell you.

Whatever 'intellectual history' is, and whatever 'the history of ideas' may be, I am not engaged in doing either of them.

The two terms appear in fact to mean about the same thing: a species of metahistory or theory of history, an enquiry into the nature of history based on various theories about how intellect or 'ideas' find a place in it, with the result that what you usually get is the philosophy of history or the history of philosophy. I do not mean to speak disrespectfully of this pursuit. It was developed by Germans in the nineteenth century, and recently there have been the inevitable French – Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – who set out to destroy the enterprise altogether and succeeded in perpetuating it instead. All these have been profound, subtle, and sensitive minds, but they live several crystalline spheres further out than I do. I do not share their concerns; I am not sure I can state what these are; and I have not succeeded in learning very much from them which illuminates what I think I am doing. Nevertheless, I find myself classified as 'an intellectual historian' or 'an historian of ideas', and asked to answer questions like this one. The best I can do is describe my own practice, in the hope that it will prove informative.

I think I am a historian of a certain kind of intellectual activity, which used to be and sometimes still is called 'the history of political thought' – though I would like to find a replacement for the last word, not because thought wasn't going on, but because it doesn't adequately characterise the activity whose history I aim to write. I would like to use instead the word 'discourse' – meaning 'speech', 'literature' and public utterance in general, involving an element of theory and carried on in a variety of contexts with which it can be connected in a variety of ways. The advantage of this approach is that it enables one to write the history of an intellectual activity as a history of actions performed by human beings in a variety of circumstances; actions which have affected other human beings, and have affected the circumstances in which they were performed

(if only by making it possible to talk and argue about these circumstances).

Human beings inhabiting political societies find themselves first surrounded by political institutions and conventions, second performing political actions and third engaging in political practices. In the course of doing so they speak, write, print, appear on television, and so on; they employ words and other sign systems; and language is not just a means of talking about these actions and institutions, but a means of performing the actions and operating the institutions. And vice versa: when you speak (or write or print) you not merely perform an action, but talk about the action you are performing. (J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962.)

Political societies generate a constant flow of language and discourse, in which actions are both performed and discussed. Language furnishes not only the practice of politics, but also its theory. The language-using agents not only utter, but argue; they reply in speech to one another's speech acts, challenge one another's use of words and demand clarification of one another's meanings. As a result there arises what is known as second-order language or theory; speech about speech, in which language is used not only to practise politics and to discuss the practice of politics, but to discuss the ways in which language itself is used to do both these things. This is a point of departure at which one can take off from politics to arrive at 'intellectual history' and 'the history of ideas' in the high and far-off senses mentioned earlier. It is also the point at which the historian finds that a great deal of the discussion in the history of politics has been discussion of how language is and ought to be used in the contexts furnished by particular political societies. And it is the point at which one moves from political theory – the discussion of how political systems work and how words work in them – to political philosophy: the discussion of how statements made in political societies can have any meaning, and of how the political societies themselves look in the light of the theories of meaning and truth thus arrived at. The historian of political discourse does not have to be a historian of political philosophy, but he/she will notice that philosophy is one of the activities generated by political discourse.

And that is really all there is to it; at least, to what I claim to be doing. People develop political languages and say things in them; saying things leads them in various directions. I do not claim to be a hard-headed practical man with no need of theory; for one thing, I am writing the history of an activity which includes the generation of theory, and for another I need some theory to explain what my practice is. I have tried to supply one in the introduction to *Virtue*,

Commerce and History (Cambridge University Press, 1985). I am reasonably content with what I am doing, but like Odysseus I have to sail between Charybdis and Scylla. Charybdis, the all-engulfing whirlpool, stands for the philosphers of history who complain because I have no general theory of history; Scylla the monster with many barking heads, stands for the bullying social realists who think they already know what social reality is, assume that it is more or less misrepresented in the languages used in society, and nevertheless demand that language shall be connected with it at every possible point. I can disagree with the former and remain on good terms with them; the latter are impossible because I am already doing what they ask for and they won't see it.

Michael Hunter

What *is* intellectual history? The best approach is to begin with what might be considered the inner sanctum of the subject, and to work outwards from there.

At least as it has been habitually practised, the focus of intellectual history is the study of the 'high' ideas of past periods, the views of intellectuals who participated in the learned culture of their time, writers who – in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – often wrote their books in the international learned language of Latin. Attention has been paid both to the philosophical and other theoretical ideas of an era and to its erudition – whether in history, science or even a subject like demonology – and the characteristic techniques deployed include the exact analysis of authors' arguments and methods, the assessment of their background, sources and originality, and hence the reconstruction of the process of intellectual development at the time.

Such studies frequently focus on specific authors, if only as a means of building up a broader picture, and the writers typically selected for such analysis are thinkers and scholars singled out for the quality of their intellect rather than for their literary gifts or the size of their readership. Classic examples would include Anthony Grafton's recent study of the great historian and chronologer, Joseph Scaliger (*Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 1983), which resurrects a whole world of complex ideas which would otherwise have remained buried in voluminous, unread tomes. Equally characteristic is Richard H. Popkin's *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, originally published in 1960 (retitled *A History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 1980), or D. P. Walker's learned study of the magical ideas of thinkers ranging from Cornelius Agrippa to Francis Bacon in *Spiritual and Demonic

Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958).

But, if this is the area in which the subject-matter of intellectual history is most clearly defined, its boundaries are far from precise, as high ideas merge into middle-brow ones, and as one moves from thinkers in the vanguard of contemporary thought to others who purveyed less original notions. After all, intellectual history has a less forbidding synonym in the form of 'the history of ideas', and this is a term which is in many ways preferable, implying as it does a broader range of subject-matter of which the most abstruse ideas form only a part.

The ideas of a mediocre intellect may teach us as much about contemporary thought as those of the most original: my own study, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975), might be placed in this category, since Aubrey is interesting as much for the commonplace ideas to which he gave memorable expression as for his originality on some of the topics he studied. In addition, there is an important place for the study of the shared ideas of a larger historical group in the form of the literate class as a whole. Here one thinks of E. M. W. Tillyard's famous essay, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), as exemplifying a whole genre which has sought to reconstruct the commonly accepted ideas of a period, often in an attempt to make sense of assumptions underlying contemporary literature.

The work of Keith Thomas, and perhaps particularly his recent study of *Man and the Natural World* (1983), falls into a comparable category, chronicling widely held ideas rather then erudite ones, but ideas which, it can be argued, were frequently more significant than those of ivory-towered intellectuals. Here, different techniques may come into play, particularly the juxtaposition of statements by a range of interlocutors to give a sense of shared opinions of the time, a technique which Keith Thomas' writings exemplify well.

What is the boundary of such studies? In theory there is none, but in practice limitations are imposed by the availability of source materials. The history of ideas, or intellectual history, depends on a sufficient body of ideas being available to be susceptible to serious analysis, and this generally means a limitation to the ideas of the literate and to the habitually articulate. This may be illustrated by occasional exceptions to the rule, as with the ideas of the Friuli miller, Menocchio, preserved through the attentions of the Inquisition: these provided the materials for a study by Carlo Ginzburg in *The Cheese and the Worms* (English translation, 1980), in which many of the skills of the intellectual historian are deployed. The proliferation of radical ideas during and after the English Civil War is a comparable instance, reflected by a plethora of studies of which perhaps the most notable is Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972).

Indeed, if anything there is currently a danger of such ideas receiving disproportionate attention while those of the learned are fashionably disdained. But this would be a mistake. In fact, a proper understanding of the thought of any period will depend on knowing about all ideas that were current, from the popular to the erudite. Moreover the spectrum of ideas thus laid out should not be taken for granted but should be the subject of investigation in itself. The interconnection of ideas among different cultural strata in society cries out for attention: a study which does justice to that will have the best claims to be called the true intellectual history of its chosen period.

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