



Intellectual History and Its Bearing on American Literature

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ABSTRACT

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. 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.

KEYWORDS : philosophy, beliefs, thought, orthodox, pragmatism

Intellectual history is basically a branch of history. For this reason, it has an overriding concern with how and why particular human experiences have followed one another through time. Intellectual history is concerned with a distinctive subject matter, focussing attention on the experiences of thought rather than external behaviour. For the intellectual historian, states of mind make up the foreground of interest and the focus of curiosity. This choice of subject matter imposes additional obligations on the intellectual historian. Since every state of mind contains a belief, the intellectual historian should care a good deal about the acceptability of beliefs. He should feel the appeal of an idea, and weigh critically its tenability. In this sense, he is a kind of philosopher. We must assume that the ideas and feelings present in the mind of an individual or group at any given time constitute an interlocking structure, the parts of which are shaped and defined by their relation to one another. To understand ideas historically requires some analysis of the intellectual structure in which they were located. The process that the intellectual historian studies relates to the movement in or of such a system. His achievement becomes more considerable as the magnitude of the system increases, and as it brings an increasing variety of ideas and feelings into meaningful relation. The largest distinctive aim of the intellectual historian, therefore, is to describe and explain the spirit of an age. This was also the traditional objective of intellectual historians. The long established conception of intellectual history broke down after World War I, when the great amateurs who had dominated and defined the subject gave way to men absorbed in particular academic disciplines. Probably the first major change came from the professional historians. They had conspicuously avoided intellectual history. Intellectual history became a subject of professional interest only after James Harvey Robinson and his followers challenged the narrow positivism of their guild. Robinson's challenge came under the name "the New History", of which intellectual history was to be an important part. A philosophic view of intellectual history found little favour in professional circles. A more or less pragmatic outlook also restrained the New Historians from studying ideas systematically. They took a tough-minded, realistic view of beliefs, emphasising environmental contexts. The relation between ideas and interests became an insistent problem. The fascination with popular thought suited the temper of the new History: it made intellectual history democratic. To write broad based kind of intellectual history, the common man had to be linked with the intellectuals. During the twenties, thirties and forties of the twentieth century, men in several disciplines were discovering intellectual history and adapting it to their own purpose because of their professional background, teachers of literature, religion and Philosophy could be expected to have a deeper interest in ideas and values.

In radical opposition to the New History was the school of Arthur O. Lovejoy. This school had a genuinely historical interest in the intrinsic character of ideas, a sublime disregard of instrumental considerations, and a determination to approach intellectual history without respect to the limits of individual disciplines. Lovejoy brought an unprecedented precision to intellectual history, but he did so at the expense of a unifying vision. Lovejoy's impact on the study of American thought was, however, peripheral. At any rate, history in general

and American Intellectual history in particular aroused only sporadic interest outside the two disciplines most directly concerned: history and literature. Literary scholarship was greatly influenced by the contemporary intellectual thought. In dealing with American intellectual history, literary scholars since the 1930s have been guided by the American Studies movement. It has enjoyed an influence comparable to that which the New History had on the society and which represented a protest against narrowly specialized horizons. Just as the New Historians wanted to go beyond the orthodox kind of political history, so the professors of American Literature who were usually the prime movers in establishing American studies programmes were trying to break out of the orthodox kind of literary history. One group appealed for integration of ideas and events in a comprehensive view of the past; the other called for integrated study of art and society in a comprehensive of "culture" or national character. Both hoped to link that past to the present--- one in pursuit of reform, the other in search of identity. Both groups turn to intellectual history not because it is a natural focus of their respective endeavours but because it seems an appropriate way of synthesising heterogeneous materials. Thus the New Historians readily join hands with their literary colleagues in sponsoring American studies. In spite of the similarities between the new history and the American studies movement, the latter brought a different emphasis into the writing of intellectual history. American studies derived from its origins in literary scholarship a humanistic emphasis that was foreign to the New History. Literary criticism and even literary history are fundamentally unhistorical. Since an independent object controls the range of inquiry, the literary scholar is not impelled to give a complete account of how things were, to feel the density of a milieu or to appraise the relative weight of diverse factors in a situation. Another circumstance that is making for a more manageable and definite conception of intellectual history is the revival of American social history, unhappily eclipsed in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. Social history enjoyed a brilliant development in the 1920s. In the ideological thirties, social history fell into the background, and the livelier young minds turned to an extended kind of intellectual history, confident that an understanding of social history could best be attained in this more inclusive medium. Since the 1940s, pragmatism and indeed the whole revolt against formalism have lost their freshness and charm. The activist temper of the new history, with its emphasis on direct, continual interchange between ideas and interest, seems out of fashion. The decline of a pragmatic approach to thought made for a greater interest in first principles, in values that have some ultimate claim and not a merely instrumental role. The celebrated "return to religion" may have failed in other respects but it certainly roused the secular intellectual to a sympathetic scrutiny of religious ideas. Accordingly, the history of religious thought constitutes one of the outstanding cumulative achievements of American intellectual history in recent years. Just as the modern theological renaissance began before World War II, so the beginnings of a new kind of American intellectual history go back to Perry Miller's puritan studies in the 1930s and most explicitly to H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). In that book the author confessed that his earlier sociological approach had failed to explain either the underlying unity or the distinctive force of

American Christianity. Since World War II, the history of religious ideas has entirely superseded the old "church theory". Literary scholars will undoubtedly continue to explore the relations between ideas and action. From one point of view, history must remain contributory to an appreciation and understanding of cultural achievements; from another point of view, intellectual history must remain contributory to that general history in which the whole of an age is dimly perceived. This is not to say that any intellectual historian can afford to ignore concrete events and institutions. Even the most austere kind of intellectual history should, if it is fully historical, take account of the circumstances in which ideas arise and terminate. In the light of modern knowledge, the traditional aim of intellectual history calls for a paradoxical concentration of effort and rigorous training. The "pure" intellectual historian may have to leave the task of synthesis to the general historian, who moves between topical fields without final commitment to anyone.

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