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Note e discussioni

What is Intellectual History? Some Reflections on an Intellectual Crusade *

I hope I will be allowed to begin with a couple of remarks of a more personal nature. First of all I would like to say that I am very glad to be on this panel which brings together three generations of Greek intellectual historians – a good sign suggesting that the subject is alive in the country where the Western intellectual tradition can trace its origins. Things are looking up in this research field amidst the broader crisis that still afflicts the country and its academic life in so many ways. It was not like this at all three and a half decades ago when I began my own efforts to plough this field in Greece. At the time it was a very lonely business indeed. I record this impression because this too is a component of intellectual history in Richard Whatmore's understanding of the field. Things have been changing and now we have three generations of Greek intellectual historians ready to comment on Richard Whatmore's labours to make intellectual history as an academic enterprise intelligible.

This is the second reason I am glad to be on this panel: to pay tribute to Richard for his 'crusade' on behalf of intellectual history. Richard Whatmore has a serious claim on the gratitude of all of us trying to work in the field of intellectual history first of all for the enormous work he has done in running one of the foremost journals serving the subject, «History of European Ideas». Under Richard's editorship this has grown into a very important academic medium of intellectual production, dialogue and exchange of ideas that is remarkably open and welcoming to pluralism and diversity. In addition to the venerable «History of European Ideas», Richard Whatmore has inaugurated three years ago another journal, «Global Intellectual History», which is already making its presence felt in our research field as a medium of the advancement of knowledge marked by a greatly enhanced scope of coverage of the subject. Richard's other important service to us all is the book we will be discussing in this note.

This is a truly remarkable book that has managed to compress in a very short space an enormous amount of information. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that very rarely we can find a book that can say so much

* RICHARD WHATMORE, *What is Intellectual History?*, Cambridge, Polity, 2016. The text published here is a revised version of an intervention at the plenary round table «Methods in Intellectual History», International Society for Intellectual History Conference, University of Crete, Rethymnon, 4 May 2016.

in so few pages. It does happen from time to time but in intellectual history the ability to say what is essential by being laconic is a rather rare virtue. The book in fact could be seen as a primer for the introduction of the beginning student to the field. It is that, but it is also much more than that. For us at the other end of the time scale it is invaluable as a record of reminders of important subjects, names, works, dates and debates – all that make up the stock of knowledge in the field, all that one should know and remember in engaging with the subject.

There is more to the book, however, than these obvious characteristics of its content. One is its critical edge. The author does not hesitate to speak his mind, to express his disagreements and criticisms. He makes plain his admiration for the protagonists of the opening up of the field since the 1960s and especially of the growth that followed in the 1970s and 1980s but he does not engage in hagiography and proves capable to maintain and get across to the reader a critical perspective on the work of all the heroes who parade in his pages.

What all this essentially amounts to is to make the book a manifesto for intellectual history, its character and its significance as an intellectual project and its relevance to the consideration of problems in the real world. As a manifesto for intellectual history the book can be seen to fulfill the function of a Socratic gad-fly, contributing to the self-awareness and self-understanding of the intellectual historian in connection with the tasks that face her or him in transacting their work in research, teaching and writing.

After this general appraisal, I hope I will have your forbearance to refer to some more specific points among all those useful and valuable reminders which I mentioned a moment ago. The book does not solve the question of definition, a question we all feel a need to have answered in order to allay our insecurities as to what exactly we are doing. The author does not do us that favour but offers instead a number of approximations in order to illustrate the complexity and fluidity of the subject, and also the persisting uncertainties with which we must learn to live in order to reach maturity. Of the many approximations of a definition of intellectual history I have found most suggestive and evocative the idea of translation between cultures past and present, perhaps because this is what I have been doing all my life in a really existential sense. Other than that I would be quite prepared to live with John Burrow's definition which the author quotes approvingly, saying that intellectual history is «the process of recovering what people in the past meant by the things they said and what these things "meant to them"» (p. 13).

I could also understand many of the strictures voiced against intellectual history by its critics, including the charge that we are students of elites and their ideas. This too is an approximation and by now in my life I am prepared to live with it too. More serious is a warning the author records concerning the obsession with methodology – a very prudent reminder especially to the younger members of the profession who tend to worry too much about these

things. Method is important as a form of intellectual discipline but obsession with methodological purity and correctness could be a quite sterile concern. On this point what is said about methodological poverty is a good reminder of the critique of behavioural social science enunciated by C. Wright Mills more than half a century ago when he wrote of the sociologist as methodologist, incapable of addressing substantive issues and problems. In this connection *phronesis* and humility is good advice for intellectual historians.

Phronesis is also very well served in the book by two other reminders. One is the reminder that some 'old fashioned' modes of work like philological research and command of primary sources and the history of scholarship are an essential infrastructure of serious work in intellectual history. To these I would add paleography and bibliography as essential technical skills, which younger scholars should not overlook. In this connection it should be recalled that the field of intellectual history and the history of political thought in its contemporary form had its origins in the bibliographical researches of Peter Laslett around 1960 concerning the publication of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*.

The other reminder is that the terms 'history of ideas' and 'intellectual history' are both eighteenth-century terms, so the subject, despite its recent exponential growth is not a new field. It is quite appropriate therefore to call Hume and Montesquieu the founding fathers of the subject. In fact I was very pleased to notice the reference to the early eighteenth-century Lutheran pastor Johann Jakob Brucker, who already in 1723 in his *Historia Philosophicae Doctrinae de Ideis* attempted a retrospective history of philosophical doctrines. This is a rare reference to this work, in fact a fountainhead of eighteenth-century philosophical learning, whose encounter was a very instructive discovery for me when, many years ago, I was trying to locate the source of the survey of the history of modern philosophy used as a prefatory 'diatribe' in the major philosophical text of the Greek Enlightenment, Evgenios Voulgaris's *Logic*, published in Leipzig in 1766.

The lessons in intellectual *phronesis* are supplemented by what is said about method in intellectual history. This is identified as linguistic contextualism, as elaborated and practiced with very imposing results by the Cambridge School, which has dominated the field in the English-speaking world. The significance of this achievement is extensively and justly explicated by the author. At the same time the limits of linguistic contextualism are acknowledged and illustrated by the most convincing and famous example: the work of John Rawls in political philosophy, which has truly revived a subject considered moribund at about the time he had begun writing. This is no doubt one of the greatest intellectual achievements of the twentieth century and it was not the product of linguistic contextualism.

Let me bring this to a close by looking for a moment beyond the purview of the manifesto of intellectual history we have been considering. Richard Whatmore justifiably treats his subject as an intellectual achievement of English-speaking scholarship, primarily as a British 'science' of historical ideas.

His two heroes are John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, whose work has been, completely justifiably, a model and a source of inspiration for all of us. I would say, nevertheless, that the time has come to look beyond the world of the English language and appraise other examples of intellectual history as well. I would cite only one such example, the important work in the history of political thought that has been going on in Italy for more than half a century with the journal «Il pensiero politico» as its major medium of expression. This has been a true school of research in intellectual history and in the history of political thought and has been marked not only by longevity but by a remarkable capacity to absorb new methods and conceptual approaches and to renew itself, socializing new generations of scholars into the field, despite all the professional and other uncertainties that throw their shadow upon intellectual and academic life on the continent of Europe. I am sure the examples could be multiplied if we looked elsewhere in Europe and beyond in a global perspective.

This perhaps could suggest a final thought. Intellectual history as perceived in the pages devoted to it by Richard Whatmore, with its method, its practice and relevance, could look to a future of greater pluralism, a pluralism based on an expansion of the canon of sources and contexts. This would make for a more inclusive field of research, marked by enhanced relevance, in Whatmore's sense of the term, and an ever expanding horizon of intellectual exchange.

I read Richard's book under the strong impression of the discovery of a biographical detail I made by reading his preface, that in the early 1980s he had been a student at Harvard of the «incomparable», as he rightly calls her, Judith Shklar. I had preceded him in Judith Shklar's classes by a few years in the 1970s and I felt the same excitements and frustrations involved in her teaching, to which Richard refers. We are thus in a substantive if not in an exact chronological sense classmates. In fact one of the welcome contributions of the book is this tribute to Judith Shklar, a great scholar who was a protagonist in the development of the history of political thought in America from the late 1950s to her untimely death in 1992. A liberal thinker like her compatriot Isaiah Berlin (both having been born in Riga, Latvia), she did more than most in explicating the intricacies of continental political thought to the liberal mind of the Anglo-American world. Richard Whatmore's evocation of our shared American background may explain perhaps my general agreement and enthusiasm about his book but also my wish to see his argument extended in new directions.

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