INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

ELÍAS J. PALTI

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

How does long-term intellectual change occur? Can we develop a theoretical framework for understanding past systems of knowledge?

In this ambitious study, Elías José Palti seeks to reassess the main concepts in the field of intellectual history. Evaluating modes of thought from the seventeenth century to the present, this book aims to prevent an anachronistic understanding of the texts of the past. Palti rejects the idea of the renewal of this field of studies as a coherent process deriving from one single source. Instead, he offers a convincing explanation of converging developments emanating from three different sources: namely, the Cambridge school, the German school of conceptual history, or Begriffsgeschichte, and French politico-conceptual history. *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* also closely examines the temporality of concepts, questioning how and why political languages mutate.

ELÍAS JOSÉ PALTI is a professor at the University of Buenos Aires and the National University of Quilmes, and a principal researcher at Argentina's National Research Commission (CONICET). Palti has published widely in the field of intellectual history across six different languages. His previous publications include *An Archaeology of the Political: Regimes of Power from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (2017).

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Skinner, Pocock, Koselleck, Blumenberg, Foucault, and Rosanvallon

ELÍAS JOSÉ PALTI

University of Buenos Aires

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Preface

"I Would Prefer Not To"

The path that the series of lectures at Cambridge followed somehow replicated my own intellectual trajectory. It began a long time ago, when I was preparing my undergraduate dissertation on Argentine romantic thought. The search that I then initiated was prompted by my disappointment while reading the literature on the subject. I soon noticed that the same topic was repeated countless times. Basically, the whole historiographical debate then revolved around the issue of how historicist or rationalist the ideas of each of the different authors were. Yet, as I also could see, it was not a merely local concern. In fact, that binary scheme has served as a basis for the interpretation of the whole of Western intellectual history. All forms of thinking would necessarily be inscribed within the frameworks of that basic antinomy, in its different versions (individualism–holism, mechanism–organicism, rationalism–spiritualism, "liberty of the moderns"–"liberty of the ancients," and so on). Eventually, after noticing that the ideas of the authors under study did not coincide with either of these two models, historians posited them as being inconsistent mixtures of the opposite terms. A historian of ideas, Coriolano Alberini, in his studies on French doctrinarism, indeed assigned relative percentages to the different authors according to the Enlightenment–Historicism coordinates.[1] He thus asserted that Théodore Jouffroy was 80 percent Enlightened and 20 percent Historicist, while Victor Cousin was 40 percent Enlightened and 60 percent Historicist, and so on.

[1] Coriolano Alberini, *Precisiones sobre la evolución del pensamiento argentino* (Buenos Aires: Docencia, 1981), 122–123.

In the last instance, what underlies this perspective is a problem of an epistemological nature that is intrinsic to the approaches founded on models of thinking or ideal types, since they are not historical entities, but *a priori* constructions. They could be perfectly defined regardless of whether or not someone ever said what the model states. If nobody did, the problem would be of the authors, who would not have succeeded in adequately formulating the putative model, and not of the models. As the old saying goes: "If reality does not match the theory, too bad for reality."[2]

The point is that the results of these approaches are always predictable, since the very framework restricts the range of possible options from the start. We will find nothing that we did not know in advance, except merely *empirical* matters, such as where to place the ideas of this or that author or current of thought within the pre-established grid, yet nothing of a *conceptual* nature. In short, it turns historical research into a tautological endeavor: its point of arrival will actually replicate its very point of departure, except for the details. At that juncture, I swore to never, ever do that. If I had to discuss in my dissertation whether this or that author was more Enlightened than Historicist, or the other way around, more individualist than organicist, and so on, I would, like Bartleby, say "I would prefer not to."[3]

Now, I already knew what I *did not* want to do, but I still needed to know what I *did* want to do and what other kinds of questions could be posed to the texts of the past. It was then that my disappointment yielded a theoretical search. I was aware that, to overcome the perspective of intellectual history as a mere succession and opposition among "models" of thinking or ideal types, it was necessary to critically undermine the epistemological assumptions on which this perspective was founded. It was then that I started to become familiar with the different theories that were then producing the transition from the "old history of ideas" to the "new intellectual history."

[2] This expression has been attributed to Hegel, although there is no certainty that he really said it.

[3] See Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.* Available at: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11231 (last accessed January 2, 2024).

What I show in these following pages is the result of my search. The guiding thread for this exposition is the issue of the *temporality of concepts*, how each of the different schools and theories conceives *why* and *how* political languages mutate, what the *source* and *dynamics* of conceptual change are. I understand that the topic contains fundamental keys for a better understanding of these theories, their conceptual foundations, as well as the nature of the problems currently at dispute in the field. The final goal is to explore the possibility of integrating their respective contributions and, thereby, try to overcome the epistemological problems that I still observe in the theories of each of these schools when explaining conceptual change.

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Introduction
From the "History of Ideas" to the "New Intellectual History," and Beyond

In 1989, J. G. A. Pocock underlined the profound transformation undergone in the field of politico-intellectual history, which he defined as "a movement away from emphasizing history of thought (and even more sharply, 'of ideas') toward emphasizing something rather different, for which 'history of speech' or 'history of discourse,' if not unproblematic or irreproachable, may be the best terminology found so far."[1] He referred to a series of theories elaborated in the 1970s and 1980s conveying the transit from the older tradition of "history of ideas," whose main representative was Arthur Lovejoy, to what would be known as the "new intellectual history" (hereafter, *NIH*). The key figures that initiated this transformation, in the Anglo-Saxon world, were Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and Pocock himself, authors normally grouped together under the collective name of the "Cambridge School."[2]

[1] J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–2.

[2] The foundations of that school are normally considered to be established by three methodological essays. J. G. A. Pocock's *The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), John Dunn's "The Identity of the History of Ideas," *Philosophy* XLIII.164 (1968): 85–104, and Quentin Skinner's "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* VIII,1 (1969): 3–52, which has been the most influential of them. As Annabel Brett says, in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is taken to be the "manifesto" of that school, whose work on intellectual history, in turn, is currently identified there with the history of political thought at large. Annabel Brett, "Between History, Politics and Law: History of Political Thought and History of International Law." in Annabel Brett, Megan Donaldson and Martti Koskenniemi, eds., *History, Politics, Law: Thinking through the International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 19–48. In reality, this school was not formally constituted as such, but it was initially associated with the abovementioned authors, and others close to them, such as Peter Laslett, Stefan Collini, Anthony Pagden, Richard Tuck, James Tully, and Donald Winch.

It converged, in turn, with developments that at that moment were taking place in other regions. The most prominent are the works by Reinhart Koselleck, in Germany, and Michel Foucault, in France. Koselleck was the main theorist of the "school of the history of concepts" (*Begriffsgeschichte*) that he himself initiated along with his teachers Otto Brunner and Werner Conze. In the manifesto Koselleck published in 1967, he established the premises that presided over the elaboration of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (hereafter *GG*), a truly monumental work whose elaboration spread over twenty years.[3]

In these same years, Michel Foucault produced a true revolution in the French scholarly milieu with the publication of *Les mots et les choses* (1966, appeared in English as *The Order of Things*). His project of "an archaeology of knowledge" represented a *tour de force* in the discipline. Like the above-mentioned authors, he sought to systematically demolish the traditional methodologies of the history of ideas. Although their respective premises were very different, they shared the concern regarding the ahistoricism of that tradition. And in the realization of that enterprise they also faced very similar problems.

THE "HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVOLUTION" AND ITS LIMITS

Albeit they are not the only ones we will discuss, the names of Skinner, Pocock, Koselleck, and Foucault take center stage in the present essay. As I have said, they were fundamental figures in the renewal of the discipline, the "historiographical revolution," in Pocock's words, whose repercussions were felt indeed beyond the borders of the historical profession. Intellectual history then became a source of renewed perspectives and theoretical tools for the different branches of the humanities. Basically, it is to these authors, and their works, that we will refer under the generic rubric of the *NIH*.

[3] *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur Politische-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1972–1992). It was followed by two other dictionaries: the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, and the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820*.

That rubric is certainly problematic. Actually, it is not so "new," it emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s.[4] In the following decades, however, its very expansion blurred its contours, making it difficult to keep talking about it as a consistent current.[5] Thus, that label does not intend to encompass all the authors, theories, and approaches produced in the last decades in the field of intellectual history, but it is merely a shorthand label to refer to a specific set of authors in a specific period of time (as when we talk of the first "Annales school" to refer, basically, to Marc Bloch's and Lucien Febvre's work during the 1930s and 940s). Now, if the label is not unproblematic, it is not completely arbitrary either. In fact, most studies recently published under the title of "What Is Intellectual History?" and the like, centrally refer to these same authors too and, when they mention other authors, it is normally in the role of their predecessors, commentators, or critics (as is also the case here in the corresponding chapters of the present book).[6] Ultimately, even though these authors are not the only ones that have made contributions to the theory in intellectual history, they have certainly been the most influential, their proposals being particularly revealing of the main tenets that have presided over the recent elaborations in the field.

[4] "Such was the impact of what was then called the 'New Intellectual History'," says Edward Baring, "that in 1992 it merited a 'Forum' in the *American Historical Review*." Edward Baring "Intellectual History and Poststructuralism," in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, eds., *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 48.

[5] The book edited by Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (2014), addressed the issue of what currently unifies the field. It is intended as an up-to-date revision of the state of the art described in *Modern European Intellectual History*, which gathered the works presented at a 1980 Conference at Cornell University, organized by Steven Kaplan and Dominick LaCapra. What emerges from it is that the expansion of the studies and the proliferation of topics have made the discipline turn into a very loosely integrated field of studies, in which a plurality of perspectives and methodologies co-exist. In the midst of this dispersion, it is difficult – if not impossible – to identify clearly perceivable trends, currents, or schools. See Steven Kaplan and Dominick LaCapra, eds. *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) and Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds. *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[6] Richard Whatmore, *What Is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016). See also, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, eds., *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016) and François Dosse, *La marche des idées. Histoire des intellectuels - histoire intellectuelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003).

This leads us to the first goal of the present essay: to recreate the theories of the above-mentioned authors, highlighting their fundamental contributions and how they reformulated traditional approaches in the field. In short, it intends to show why the reorientation of the focus from "ideas" to "discourses" or "languages" that Pocock talks about was not a merely nominal change but involved a fundamental redefinition of the very object of analysis and, as a consequence, the modes of approaching it. This is closely associated, in turn, with the so-called linguistic turn.[7] Briefly stated, it could be defined as a metacritical turn, the folding of criticism upon itself in order to objectify and render thematic the categories with which we construct our objects, and also how they changed, how the very means of production of concepts (the base-languages) shifted over time. However, the ways in which each of them intended to achieve that goal were very different.

In large measure, the theoretical differences among these authors derive from the different intellectual traditions that dominated, respectively, in their local milieus. This determined that each of them focuses on one particular dimension of language. Following the postulates of the Anglo-Saxon linguistic theories, Skinner and the members of the Cambridge school emphasized the need to introduce into studies of the texts of the past the consideration of a dimension of language neglected by the old tradition of the history of ideas, focused exclusively on their semantic contents: the *pragmatic*, the illocutionary force of the uses of language. Thus, they sought to understand not only what past authors said but also, and fundamentally, what they were *doing* in saying, or by saying, what they said.

Koselleck's approach, instead, remained on the same dimension of language as the history of ideas, the semantic (the referential contents of discourses), but problematized it by introducing the question of the indefinability of concepts. As Koselleck shows, insofar as concepts are historically changing constructions, they do not accept univocal definitions. Finally, the weight of structuralism in the

[7] See Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) and Elías J. Palti, *Giro lingüístico e historia intelectual* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998). The latter contains the list of the main bibliography on the topic up to the moment of publication.

French milieu led Foucault to focus on the third dimension of language: the *syntactic* or the *forms* of discourses. According to this, what distinguishes a given language from others is not the ideas contained in them, which, considered in themselves, are always very diverse and unspecific (they can be found repeated in very different conceptual contexts), but the ways that, in each case, they are mutually articulated, the structure and the kind of logic that presides over the given type of discourse.

However, these developments converged toward a common point: to transcend the level of the explicit contents of discourses and analyze their historical-conceptual conditions of possibility; that is, not merely describing what the authors of the past said, but understanding how it was possible for them to say what they said. This is what allows us to speak, beyond their differences, of a common trend that has redefined the very object of analysis of intellectual history.

The attempt to grasp the conditions of possibility of discourses was associated, in turn, with the goal of preventing conceptual anachronisms: to avoid projecting upon past authors ideas which were alien to the conceptual universe in which their thinking was produced. To do so, we must be able to delimit what was sayable and thinkable within each given conceptual horizon. This is the fundamental difference between an anachronism and an interpretation error. For example, if I say that an author said something that they actually did not say, it is an interpretation error, but not necessarily a conceptual anachronism. To affirm the latter, it should be demonstrated that the author in question not only did not say that, but also that they never *could have said* that since it was foreign to the conceptual universe of their time, the set of categories that were available for them to articulate their discourse. To identify an interpretation error is rather simple: it would be enough to read the text in question carefully. Instead, to detect a conceptual anachronism is not that easy; we must open the text to the conceptual universe that lay beyond it but was inscribed in it as its own condition of possibility. And this is what makes intellectual history a truly hermeneutical enterprise, one which is not reduced to the mere paraphrasis of what the texts at stake said. Yet, as we will see, it also proved difficult to carry out to practice.

The underlying assumption there is the contingent nature of our categorical frameworks, that they are not eternal, inherently human, as Kant postulated. This must be interpreted in a double sense: not only that they are historical constructions, changing over the centuries, but also that they are inherently precarious, that none of them is able to perform its systemic closure and constitute itself as a rationally founded and logically integrated system. Conceptual formations inevitably contain inherent logical fissures, constitutive blind spots, that is, a series of premises which are at their basis but cannot be conceptualized within their own horizons of intelligibility. Lastly, these premises have an axiomatic nature, they are simply accepted as valid without ever becoming thematic, since their thematization/problematization would imply the demolition of their working logics.

Now, the same must be said of the theories under consideration, which leads us to the second goal of the present work. Although, as we have seen, they made fundamental contributions to intellectual history, we can also observe some inconsistencies which are constitutive of them, making both their achievements and their theoretical faults inextricably tied, mutually undetachable. This is, more precisely, the paradox that the book intends to unravel in its first part (Chapters 1–5). The cases of Skinner's and Koselleck's theories are particularly revealing in this regard. As we will see, those inconsistencies which are inherent to them become manifest at the moment of trying to explain conceptual change.

In effect, while these theories were founded on the assumption of the radical historicity of discourses, that conceptual formations are contingent entities, changing historical constructions, they faced fundamental problems to explain in which sense they are so and why they are so. Lastly, these problems have deeper conceptual foundations, which leads us to the third and fundamental goal of the present book.

The last aim the book addresses is to situate these historical-conceptual theories themselves within a historical-conceptual perspective. Actually, this book is not intended to argue in favor or against them, to endorse or reject the *NIH*, but to try to understand their own conditions of possibility, what the conceptual ground that made their emergence possible was. Thus, these theories serve here as sorts of windows to observe the broader conceptual universe of which

they participate, and from which they take their sense. And it also renders it possible to explain the deep nature of the problems they faced to address the issue of the temporality of concepts.

This is, more precisely, the object of the last part of the book. It intends to analyze the regime of knowledge that underlies the perspectives of the *NIH*, the epistemic conditions that rendered them possible. At this juncture, I will resort to Foucault's idea of an "archaeology of knowledge," which, suitably reformulated, will allow us to place these theories in the particular epistemic niche to which they belong, rendering them intelligible and meaningful as specific historical-conceptual formations. As we will also observe, in the subsequent decades (from the last quarter, and especially from the last decade of the twentieth century onward), this epistemic ground became undermined. At that moment, the conceptual premises on which the *NIH* was founded were rendered problematic. And, lastly, it is this that allows us to retrospectively perceive the conceptual roots of the problems they faced to explain conceptual change.

The introduction of Hans Blumenberg's and Pierre Rosanvallon's perspectives in the last part of the book is revealing. The analysis of their theories allows us to observe how the issue of the temporality of concepts then became redefined. And why this redefinition entailed, in turn, the profound reconfiguration of their whole conceptual universe. Their perspectives are already founded on very different premises from those proper of the authors that had given rise to the *NIH*. In the context of this new conceptual universe, the series of antinomies that ran across the entire thinking of the period started to lose their former sense.

These are, briefly stated, the central concerns that have motivated the present reflections. They do not intend to provide a full picture of the different approaches and studies in the field, nor is their intention to discuss all the issues and problems present in them. It addresses, instead, a specific group of authors and theories, and revolves mainly around one particular question: the temporality of concepts. However, the analysis of these authors' theories, their contributions, as well as the problems they contained, especially in reference to the topic here at stake, is enlightening as to their fundamental aspects which are normally neglected by the available literature on the topic. More importantly, their theories are revealed,

in the process, as platforms to recreate the broader conceptual universe out of which they emerged, the particular regime of knowledge that underlies them, and, finally, how that epistemic ground started dissolving, making manifest the logical fissures present in these theories.

The ultimate sense of the following elaborations must not be sought in the answers it provides to the problems addressed here. It is not its aim but, more modestly, it tries to clarify the questions at stake in the discipline today, and to open a debate around them, knowing in advance that we will not find definite solutions or answers that could be free from fundamental objections. Nevertheless, the same persuasion remains that motivated the works of the authors under consideration: even though the very same problems will eventually re-emerge at the different levels of discourse, the permanent folding of criticism upon itself to problematize its own premises would not be in vain. In the process, we will have achieved self-awareness regarding the contingency of our own fundamental assumptions, gained critical distance with respect to them, thus allowing us, after each folding, to render thematic and objectifiable broader realms of phenomenological reality.

CHAPTER 1

Pocock, Skinner, and the "Historiographical Revolution"

In the Anglo-Saxon academic world, the term "history of ideas" is commonly associated with Arthur Lovejoy's name.[1] He was one of the founders of the *History of Ideas Club* at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC, and he provided the theoretical foundations that presided over the elaborations of that school. His key text in this regard is the one that appeared in 1940 in the first number of the journal that he also founded, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.[2] In the 1940s and 1950s, it was a fundamental scholarly journal. To a considerable extent, its influence was due to the fact

[1] This school took institutional form in 1923 with the foundation of the *History of Ideas Club* at *Johns Hopkins University*. Its founders were Arthur Lovejoy, Gilbert Chinard, and George Boas, with the participation, among others, of Marjorie Nicholson, W. F. Albright (archeologist), Ludwig Edelstein and Harold Cherniss (classicists), Bentley Glass (biologist), and Owsei Tomkin (historian of medicine). Philip P. Wiener, ed. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas (New York: Ch. Scribner's Sons, 1968–1975) represents a kind of culmination of Lovejoy's project. For a review of the trajectory of this school, see George Boas, *The History of Ideas* (New York: Ch. Scribner's Sons, 1969), Donald Kelley, "Horizons of Intellectual History: Retrospect, Circumspect, Prospect," *Journal of History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 143–169; "What Is Happening to the History of Ideas?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* L.1 (1990): 3–26; and Anthony Grafton, "The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950–2000 and Beyond." *Journal of the History of Ideas* LXVII.1 (2006): 1–32. Issue XLVIII.2 (1987) of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* is dedicated to reviewing the work of this school fifty years after the publication of *The Great Chain of Being*. It contains articles by Daniel Wilson, Gladys Gordon-Bournique, Edward Mahoney, Francis Oakley, and Melvin Richter.

[2] The most important works by Arthur Lovejoy (1873–1969) are: *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938); "Reflections on the History of Ideas." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1.1 (1940): 3–23; *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948); *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961); *The Reason, the Understanding, and Time* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961); and *The Thirteen Pragmatism and Other Essays* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963).

that it helped to forge the idea of the existence of an American intellectual tradition (at that time, there was a sense of cultural inferiority in the United States vis-à-vis Europe). Yet, beyond the – let us say – "ideological" function of the journal, it played a key role in the affirmation of the history of ideas as a particular discipline in North American academy.

Lovejoy's fundamental achievement was to delimit a proper object and methodology for the history of ideas, distinguishing it from neighboring disciplines, such as the history of philosophy or the history of civilizations. Its demarcation from the history of philosophy was not difficult, since the history of ideas included other branches of knowledge and types of discourses beyond the philosophical, such as the history of science, the history of fine arts, and so on. More difficult was the distinction vis-à-vis the old tradition of the "history of civilizations."

It is at this point that Lovejoy established one of the fundamental methodological premises for the discipline. He affirmed that the trait that characterizes ideas is their ability to migrate, to move from one discipline to another, from one epoch to another, and so on. And for him this showed the limits of this history of civilizations that studies, for example, the history of the Greek or the Ancient civilizations, but cannot provide a broader picture of how ideas circulated historically. The case in point is the idea that Lovejoy analyzed and to which he dedicated his most important book: *The Great Chain of Being*. It was a traditional motif in Ancient thought: the postulate of the presence of a continuous gradation of beings, from the polyp to the gods. Lovejoy showed that that motif, which is found in Plato and indeed in the pre-Socratics, also served as a basis for Linnaeus's taxonomy of plants, and appeared in Leibniz as well, being closely associated to the elaboration of the infinitesimal calculus. In the nineteenth century, finally, we can observe what Lovejoy called the "temporalization" of the chain of being. Until then it was considered in a static sense, as indicating a certain order of nature; thereafter, however, it was understood as indicating a successive unfolding and, in this way, it was at the origin of the evolutionary theories of nature as well as the philosophies of history of the epoch.

In short, that idea, whose origins are found in the cosmologies of Antiquity, would traverse the entire history of philosophical thought

and would also give rise to biological, physical, and mathematical theories. Hence, the *History of Ideas Club* proposed establishing itself as an interdisciplinary research group. Specialists from different historical periods and disciplines converged in it. This gave that school its particular imprint: its interdisciplinary nature.

Lovejoy's second postulate sought to substantiate the choice of his unit of analysis, his focus on what he called the "unit-ideas," which would later become the target of criticism. His theory would then be seen as prone to relapse into a kind of conceptual atomism, which would be at the basis of the ahistoricism of this school. However, although this criticism was not entirely misleading, it missed the goal toward which that postulate was addressed, the concern that led Lovejoy to focus on the unit-ideas, which, I believe, is still perfectly pertinent.

Lovejoy was overly critical of the generic categories normally used to periodize intellectual history. Ultimately, he intended to dismantle those great "systems of thought," such as the "Enlightenment," "Romanticism," and so on, revealing the heteroclite character of the conceptual formations placed under those labels. The book *Essays in the History of Ideas*, a collection of his fundamental theoretical texts, provides some examples of it. One of the articles discusses, for example, the concept of "Romanticism." In it, Lovejoy reviews all the different definitions that the concept accepted and shows why none of them are really appropriate. A given definition could apply to some Romantic authors, but not to others. And none of these definitions could account for all the ideas that normally fall within the category of "Romanticism," which was a very complex movement of ideas containing a large variety of currents and postulates, covering a plurality of fields (from the philosophy of history, fine arts and music, to biology and physics).

This explains the confusion among specialists about this concept, the fact that different authors have proposed very different, and indeed mutually contradictory definitions. This is inevitably so because there is no way to fix this concept, to offer an unequivocal definition of it, given, precisely, its heteroclite nature.[3] It is this

[3] See Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," in *Essays in the History of Ideas*, 228–253.

vision of the heterogeneity of conceptual systems that led Lovejoy to raise the need to disaggregate them into their elementary components and observe, in each case, the mode of their articulation. For him, with conceptual systems something similar happens as with crystals, which are formed out of embedded particles. Somehow, he considered that systems of thought have a crystallographic structure. They are always heterogeneous conglomerates of different motives, coming from different intellectual traditions, which eventually fit better or worse, but never come to compose a coherent organic whole.[4] For Lovejoy, the fundamental mistake at the basis of all misunderstandings and errors in intellectual history derived from considering conceptual systems as if they were *all-of-a-piece*.[5]

However, it is not for this postulate, which is very interesting, and which gave rise to his aforementioned great book, *The Great Chain of Being*, that Lovejoy will be remembered. The controversy later unleashed against him and his school tended to obliterate it and to emphasize the weakest points in his theory. In this way, his key contributions were disregarded. What remained of his proposal was the postulate, much more banal, that it is about breaking up systems of thought into their elementary components and tracing the history of how individual ideas moved over time, and eventually how, in the process of their loans and reappropriations, they became redefined. This led to his being accused of conceiving ideas as transhistorical entities, which, although their meanings change throughout history, they have a fixed entity that is preserved beyond the transformations they undergo. The different definitions would be mere declinations from a common root.

Now, that criticism, although somewhat unfair, is not ungrounded. Lovejoy's approach to unit-ideas was based on the assumption that, although systems of thought are changeable and heterogeneous, it would not be the case with unit-ideas, taken as a whole. The unit-ideas on the basis of which all Western philosophical systems are

[4] As Daniel Wilson remarks, Lovejoy's perspective took shape, in large measure, as a reaction against theology (his father was a theologist) and the monist philosophies that reduce phenomena to one single principle from which all of them would derive. See Daniel J. Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy and the Quest for Intelligibility* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[5] Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas*, xiv.

founded would be limited in number. The aim of this school was precisely to identify the set of those that would constitute a kind of basic alphabet on which all the different philosophical doctrines were built. These doctrines would be just diverse ways in which unit-ideas became combined. By analyzing the history of thinking we could thus perfectly determine the fundamental elements that would compose it, elements that would reappear in the different systems of thought. In the end, there indeed was an essentialist premise in his theory.

Finally, the postulate that was crucial for the constitution of the discipline was joined to the question about why the study of ideas matters. This was also another point that would subsequently be questioned and would be responsible, to a large extent, for the eclipse of this school, and the whole subdiscipline, in the following decades. According to Lovejoy, albeit ideas are rationalizations of other types of motivations, such as economic interests, passionate drives, and so on, the truth is that, once such rationalizations are produced, the subjects become compelled to behave accordingly. Ultimately, underlying this view is an assumption of an anthropological character: the inherently human need to justify our actions, given our rational nature. For Lovejoy, denying it is tantamount to ignoring what distinguishes us as a species, our very condition.

In the sixties and seventies the last assumption was bitterly criticized. At that moment, Lewis Namier's questioning of the very sense of the history of ideas gained new relevance. Namier was a fundamental student of eighteenth-century British political history, known as the founder of a "cynical view" of history. Basically what he put in question was the relevance of the study of the history of ideas to the understanding of history in general, and political history in particular, showing that what works in actual practice is a sheer logic of power.[6] Throughout history, he said, political actors never had any problem contradicting their own ideas whenever they deemed it necessary. The history of ideas would thus reveal historiographical naivety. If we take at face value what politicians say, we would end up accepting that they have always been patriotic, honest, principled, etc., which, as we know, is not actually the case.

[6] See Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978).

This is not a minor criticism. What was at stake here was the very sense of the discipline. It raised nothing less than the question of why we should study the history of ideas; that is, what is the point of studying the principles formulated by the subjects we know were themselves unwilling to follow them? Such declarations of principles would serve to cover up rather than reveal the true motivations of the agents. This makes the history of ideas fall into disrepute, being identified as a naïve and idealistic view of history.

The revival of the Namierist perspective was associated with the new predominance of economic and social history, and the diffusion of Marxist historiography, which at least in its most vulgar versions conceived intellectual history as a merely superstructural epiphenomenon of socio-economic determinations.[7] If this were the case, the labor of intellectual historians would make little sense. If we want to understand how ideas arise and change, we should see how societies change, since it is this that determines and explains ideological changes.

This was the challenge to which the new intellectual history sought to respond: how to give meaning to the discipline, even accepting that Namier was right. The members of the Cambridge school were already well aware that the assumption on which the old history of ideas was founded was very fragile, that it could not be taken for granted that the agents found themselves compelled to be consistent with their ideas, and that the whole discipline could not rest on such flimsy ground. The case that Skinner cites is that of Herbert Butterfield, who, against Namier, claimed that "many political figures were sincerely attached to the ideals" that they claimed to profess.[8] However, the question is: what happens with the situations in which it is not the case? In short, the crucial point is: Why study intellectual history even after accepting that ideas, indeed, are not, or at least are not always the determining factors of the actual behavior of political actors? As we can see, it was a not-that-easy-to-solve question, yet inescapable, since, if we cannot find an answer to it, then intellectual historians had better devote their time to something else.

[7] The best expression of this, for Skinner, was C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[8] Herbert Butterfield, *George III and the Historians* (London: Collins, 1957).

THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL AND THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE

In fact, thus posed, the question admitted no answer; answering it necessarily demanded its reformulation. As Skinner points out, the weakness in responses like Butterfield's is that their authors "have been excessively willing to accept the basic premise of their adversaries"; and it is this, he says, that allowed the latter "to present an unrepentantly Namierist story in the form of a simple appeal to reality and common experience."[9] The attempt to respond to this challenge thus required dismantling the premises on which these traditional perspectives were founded, and re-founding the discipline on different ones.

In "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," Skinner seeks to tackle that problem by appealing to the linguistic theory of *speech acts* elaborated by John Austin and John Searle.[10] In *How to Do Things with Words*, the former develops his idea that speeches are more than sets of ideas, they constitute material events, which produce concrete effects.[11] This is what he calls the *performative* dimension of language. Its incorporation in the analysis of texts

[9] Quentin Skinner, *Vision of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 146. Quentin Skinner (1941–) is a professor at London University and previously at Cambridge University. His most important works are: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Ambrogio Lorenzatti: The Artist as Political Philosopher* (London: The British Academy, 1987), *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and *Visions of Politics*. 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Detailed bibliographies, up to the moments of publication, can be found in James Tully, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 342–344 and Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 181–190.

[10] For a review of the origins and history of the different doctrines of language and their connections with philosophical and social thinking, at large, see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[11] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

was to be the fundamental contribution of the "Cambridge school," and Skinner's in particular.[12]

Skinner takes up an original proposal from his former dissertation director at Cambridge, Peter Laslett. Laslett had written a very influential text, a prologue to an edition of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), in which he showed that, contrary to previous interpretations, Locke's writing was not a refutation of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, a kind of liberal counterpoint to it. He pointed out that, if we were to interpret Locke's text that way, we would not be able to understand it, since Locke never argued with Hobbes in it.[13] That image was constructed much later and does not have textual support. His interlocutor was, in truth, an author little known at that time, except to specialists: Robert Filmer, whose book was called *Patriarcha* (1680).[14] As Laslett shows, Locke's *Essays* were intended to discuss each of Filmer's arguments. Therefore, we cannot understand how that work is constructed unless we place it in the specific dialogical context in which it was created.

"Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" was intended to provide a theoretical support to what Laslett had done. And it is here that Skinner appeals to Austin's and Searle's theory of speech acts. According to that theory, when we say something, we are not only saying something but we are also *doing* something by saying what we say (warning, threatening, etc.). This implies a shift in focus from the semantic contents to the *uses* of language. The uses of language entail realizations of a practical order; they belong to the

[12] In a 1968 text, John Dunn had already made a similar point on the need to incorporate the analysis of the pragmatic dimension of language into intellectual history. See Dunn, "Identity of the History of Ideas." John Montfort Dunn (1940–) is Emeritus Professor of Political Theory at King's College, Cambridge, and Visiting Professor in the Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Chiba University, Japan. His most important works are: *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986); *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); *Political Obligation in Its Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises of Government"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and *Rethinking Modern Political Theory: Essays 1979–83* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[13] See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[14] See Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Laslett edition of *Patriarch and Other Political Works* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1949).