The Idiosyncrasy of Intellectual History

Gregory Jones-Katz, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Morten Haugaard, Jeppesen, Frederik Stjernfelt, and Mikkel Thorup. *Intellectual History: 5 Questions.* Automatic Press/VIP, 2013, 200 pp. 978-8792130488

In *Intellectual History: 5 Questions*, Morten Haugaard Jeppesen, Frederik Stjernfelt, and Mikkel Thorup intend to "provoke scholarly self-reflective thought" and offer material for those looking for the larger account of intellectual history (v). The volume accomplishes this goal with the *5-Questions* format, a format that, in this case, asks five questions that link "personal experience with scholarly work" and perspectives on the state of the discipline as well as related "changes in politics, society and university"(v). There are twenty-six interviewees. The editors hope that contributors' answers, by tapping into the truth of the interviewees' biographies, provide a "glimpse into the diverse cacophony of our field" (v), a glimpse that discloses the historical and contingent nature of the history of intellectual history.

The volume comes at a moment when the field of intellectual history is emerging out of its "embattled past" (iii). This past weighs heavily on the shoulders of intellectual historians, especially those in the United States. U.S. intellectual historians, responding to charges of elitism and irrelevance from a wide range of critics in the 1970s and 1980s, have often wrestled with the questions, "What is Intellectual History? Who are Intellectual Historians?"[1] In contrast, Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup want to focus on the exciting new work of intellectual historians and decline to frame this work with the attacks the field has received. The editors, for example, quote Andrew Hartman, president of the Society for U.S. Intellectual History in 2011, who stated at the annual USIH conference in the *New York Times* article "Embattled Intellectual Historians Make a Stand": "We still want to talk about ideas, *but* we see ideas everywhere" (iv, emphasis mine).[2] The editors present the existence of the conference and Hartman's statement as evidence of the resurgence of intellectual history in America. They are, but Hartman's statement also indicates his and others' (perhaps unconscious?) sense of the still-besieged position of U.S. intellectual historians, because it implies that, though most people view "ideas" as equivalent to the "ideas" of high culture, U.S. intellectual historians do not, as they see "ideas" all around them. Hence the "but" in Hartman's statement.

By overlooking the situation in the U.S., Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup tacitly suggest that we are beyond the crisis of intellectual history, beyond its marginalization. Rather, the editors "understand intellectual history in its broadest terms": it "encompass[es]" various "traditions" that take "the structures of ideas in their historical context as their point of analysis" and that it was in this "inclusive spirit" that they "approached a large number of prominent scholars" from around the

Redescriptions, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn 2014), © Redescriptions Association
http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/R.17.2.8

world to contribute to *Intellectual History* (iv). The editors never intended, as they make clear in their preface, to make a comprehensive statement about, offer final definitions of, or provide a program for intellectual history. And yet, if one follows the editors' approach, it may very well be that, regardless of (U.S.) intellectual historians' handwringing, any explanation as to what constitutes intellectual history is fated to remain somewhat murky, slightly vague (more on this below). Nevertheless, the volume's organization reflects the editors' aims and views of intellectual history as an expansive and expanding field. Though the volume is organized in alphabetical order, giving the volume some coherence, and though *Intellectual History* does not follow a free-flowing interview format, as in, say, Ewa Domanska's *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*,[3] the contributions are never, in any way, coordinated chronologically, thematically, nor by period or place. There's more discord than accord, at least at first glance.

The expansive (or fractured, depending on your perspective) state of the field is not only reflected in Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup's aims and organization of their text, but also becomes an underlying message of the volume itself. Though the editors admit the "inevitable narrowness of any sample" of scholars for their volume and that there "are gaps (continental gaps even), a gender imbalance and maybe a possible disproportionate amount of people doing 'politics stuff' (iv),"[4] *Intellectual History* achieves a degree of harmony, notwithstanding the editors' disavowal of an overarching program, a programmatic statement. Not the plan of the editors, but the contributors' spontaneous answers achieve this coherence, specifically when touching on the sore spots of the identity of the intellectual historian, a topic interviewees often broached when answering the editors' first question, and the role or place of intellectual history in the academy and beyond, a theme contributors frequently opened when answering the editors' third question.

For instance, when asked to recount what initially attracted them to the field of intellectual history (the first question), many interviewees outright rejected or at the least expressed extreme skepticism toward the presupposition of the question. This opposition becomes somewhat of a leitmotif: Roger Chartier states: "I do not consider myself as an 'intellectual historian'" (43); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes: "I don't even know whether anyone has ever referred to me as an 'Intellectual Historian'" (68); Kari Palonen explains that he "consider[s] [himself] to be a historically and rhetorically oriented political theorist rather than an intellectual or conceptual historian" (127); and Philip Pettit: "If I am to count as an intellectual historian, that can only be in a very extended and charitable use of the phrase" (137). To be sure, the above scholars are only four of the twenty-six interviewees. Yet, is not something odd about what is intellectual history and who is an intellectual historian if contributors neither recognize their work as intellectual history nor themselves as intellectual historians? Are there generational (*besides Richard Whatmore, Darrin McMahon, and Duncan Bell, who received their doctorates in 1995, 1998, and 2004, respectively, the interviewees are senior scholars)* or geographical (Eu-

ropeans provide most of the contributions) differences between those who describe themselves as intellectual historians and those who do not? The editors do not want to answer these questions, merely noting that they "begged to differ" with a number of scholars who declined to participate in the volume because these scholars "didn't consider themselves intellectual historians" (iv). Knowing the editors' criteria of selection would have been helpful, though.

This peculiarity of intellectual history in *Intellectual History* extends beyond the quirks of contributors to the institutional level. The intellectual historians of *Intellectual History* often do not occupy academic positions with the title of intellectual history, but instead hold positions elsewhere, as in departments of political thought (iv). In fact, only four (six, if one includes the term "history of ideas") of the contributors' academic titles include the phrase "intellectual history." Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup's overlooking of the lack of institutional support for intellectual history occurs in other places. They, for instance, thank the "philosophical community…for showing interest in this project" (acknowledgements page, unnumbered). The fact that they did not thank the historical community perhaps indicates the continuing marginal place of intellectual history in the academy. And there is a bit of irony in the fact that Jeppesen and Thorup are located in the department of the history of ideas.

Another way contributors express harmony among the cacophony of the field of intellectual history is regarding the issue of the "proper" role of "intellectual history" in relation to other disciplines, which comprises the topic of the editors' third question. It's true that Mark Bevir unabashedly confesses his imperialist program, in that he views intellectual history "not just a niche discipline, but the master discipline of all the human sciences" (31). Unlike Bevir, a clear exception, many of the interviewees shy away from defining the intellectual or institutional role of intellectual history and disavow the premise of the very question. Duncan Bell, for instance, writes: "I don't think that there is either a (single) proper role for intellectual history or a specific relation that it should have with other academic disciplines" (20); Warren Breckman: "I think intellectual history as a kind of 'interstitial practice" (39), implying that he believes it lacks a core function; Michael Friedman claims: "I am not sure that there is such a thing as 'the' proper role of intellectual history" (54); John G. A. Pocock politely responds: "I don't regard 'intellectual history as *an* 'academic discipline'…I don't see 'intellectual history' as unified" and thus declines to explore the role of intellectual history (144); Hans-Jørgen Schanz prefers to "talk about the history of ideas" (148), which he considers to offer a larger umbrella; and Edoardo Tortarolo notes that "[o]pinions about intellectual history vary so widely that it is hardly possible to answer this question" (173). We are once again left with the impression that, contrary the editors' wish, interviewees collectively oppose the notion of a proper function of intellectual history in the academy.

The above difficulties this reviewer has with Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup's treatment of intellectual history do not detract from the virtues of their *Intellectual History*, however. The editors' expansive understanding of intellectual history certainly matches the tenor of many scholars currently working in the field. And, by combining the personal with the institutional and beyond, the volume demystifies the life and work of scholars, giving a human face to what stereotypically is portrayed as the abstractness, the analytic coldness, nay, even the obtuseness, of practitioners of the field. Several contributors, for instance, are refreshingly candid. Allan Megill discusses the shortcomings of his *Prophets of Extremity* (109-111) and his reluctance to fulfill requests for its translation into Russian; Darrin M. McMahon reflects on the "sense of wonder or inspiring ignorance that has never left" him after "sitting in the undergraduate lectures of Martin Jay…in the 1980s" (104); and Patricia Springborg offers a fascinating and endearing reflection on the relationships between her family, her attraction to intellectual history, and career as an intellectual historian (161-165).

Moreover, interviewees, especially when commenting on what they deem the most important topics and/or contributions in intellectual history (question four), offer guidance to younger scholars, not only by way of concisely describing their work, which may lie outside junior scholars' area of expertise. Many interviewees also often helpfully provide straightforward explanations of the historiographical issues and theoretical schools they confronted or contributed to. As a result, this American reader learned a great deal of "on-the ground" knowledge about the enduring influence of Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and John Dunn (the "Cambridge School" of the history of political thought) as well as Reinhart *Koselleck* (*Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of concepts or conceptual history). U.S. historians, too often attending to British, German, and French scholars, do not get enough exposure to scholars from other countries, such as Sven-Eric Liedman from Sweden (93-101). And, lastly, the volume points to potential futures for the field, the topic covered by the fifth question. *Intellectual History*'s preface, for example, lists key journals in the field (iv), many that unfortunately do not receive enough attention in America, while each contributors' answers, often linked to their lifelong intellectual projects, are followed by a list of the primary and forthcoming contributions—Warren Breckman's recent work on "transtemporality" looks particularly fascinating (37).

Intellectual History: 5 Questions is worth the price of admission. The volume is an example of, and speaks to, the expansion of the field in the early twenty-first century, an expansion which could rightly be called an explosion, an explosion of journals, conferences, even academic jobs. As Jeppesen, Stjernfelt, and Thorup intend, *Intellectual History* provides a glimpse of the "diverse cacophony of our field." It is certainly refreshing to read a volume on intellectual history in which the editors as well as the contributors do not struggle with the dominance of cultural history and the often-accompanying categories of race, class, and gender, as remains

the situation more or less in the U.S.. The volume nevertheless begs the question as to what constitutes "our field." Rather than demanding an answer, however, perhaps *Intellectual History* can instead best be seen as registering the fractured state of knowledge production in general, the ongoing identity crisis of intellectual historians as a manifestation of this rupturing. On the other hand, maybe the field can speak to the fracturing of knowledge in a manner other fields cannot precisely because of its tormented past, its attempts to overcome this past, and the constant struggle to define itself born of this history. Intellectual historians' precarious institutional position could grant them unique insights into our epistemological crisis. Only Mark Bevir seems comfortable with entertaining this type of possibility, a possibility that may still become a reality, a reality generated by the discordant harmonies of intellectual history/*Intellectual History*, an idiosyncratic field/volume if there ever was one.[5]

Endnotes

1 See, for example, Wickberg, Daniel, David A. Hollinger, Sarah E. Igo, and Wilfred M. McClay. "A Forum on the Current State of Intellectual History." *Historically Speaking* 10:4, 14–24.

2 Quoted in *Intellectual History: Five Questions*, iv.

3 Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism, with introduction by Allan Megill and afterword by Lynn Hunt (Charlottesville: University of Press of Virginia, 1998).*

4 The volume could have also benefitted from the inclusion of "radical" intellectual historians, such as Keith Jenkins, Hayden White, or other "postmodern" historiographers.

5 Thanks go to *Brad Baranowski, Erik Hmiel,* Dan Hummel, *Rivka Maizlish*, and Kevin Walters for their helpful comments and suggestions.

References

DOMANSKA, Ewa, 1998. Encounters: *Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*. Charlottesville: University of Press of Virginia.

WICKBERG, Daniel, David A. Hollinger, Sarah E. Igo, and Wilfred M. McClay. "A Forum on the Current State of Intellectual History." *Historically Speaking* 10:4, 14–24.