

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

General introduction

I

It may be that there is no longer any need to justify the term ‘intellectual history’ or the practice for which it stands. If this is so – experience can, alas, still occasionally cause one to wonder – then it is a very recent development indeed, at least in Britain. Only two or three decades ago, the label routinely encountered more than its share of misunderstanding, some of it rather wilful, especially perhaps on the part of some political and social historians. There was, to begin with, the allegation that intellectual history was largely the history of things that never really *mattered*. The long dominance of the historical profession by political historians tended to breed a kind of philistinism, an unspoken belief that power and its exercise was what ‘mattered’ (a term which invited but rarely received any close scrutiny). The legacy of this prejudice is still discernible in the tendency in some quarters to require ideas to have ‘influenced’ the political elite before they can be deemed worthy of historical attention, as though 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 histories of policies and parliaments. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the mirror-image of this philistinism became even more common, particularly in the form of the claim that ideas of any degree of systematic expression or formal sophistication did not merit detailed historical scrutiny because they were, by definition, only held by a small educated minority. The fact is, of course, that much which legitimately interests us in history was the work of minorities (not always of the same type, be it noted), and it remains true, to repeat an adaptation of a famous line of E. P. Thompson’s that I have used elsewhere, that it is not only the poor and inarticulate who may stand in need of being rescued from the enormous condescension of posterity.

A further, related misconception has been the charge, which still has some currency, that intellectual history is inherently ‘idealist’, where that term is used pejoratively to signify the belief (or, more often, assumption)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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 originating in the history of philosophy, but it is simply false as a description of what intellectual history must be like. The intellectual historian is someone who happens to find the reflective and expressive life of the past to be of interest: it is the vulgarest kind of reductivism or ideology-spotting to presume that this betrays an unspoken belief in the superiority of one form of human activity, still less an underlying commitment to a monocausal view of history.

In some quarters, the very term ‘intellectual history’ itself generated unease, with the result that ‘the history of ideas’ has sometimes been preferred as an alternative label. However, the danger here is that the emphasis on the ‘history of *ideas*’ may precisely suggest that we are dealing with autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, happened only contingently and temporarily to find anchorage in particular human minds, a suggestion encouraged by the long German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* or *Ideengeschichte* which, revealing its Hegelian ancestry, looked to the history of philosophy to provide the pattern of human history as a whole. By contrast, the term ‘intellectual history’ signals more clearly that the focus is on an aspect of human activity and is in this respect no different from ‘economic history’, ‘political history’, and so forth.

One final, more local, form of resistance took the form of the suggestion – only partly facetious, one fears – that there is no need for intellectual history in the case of Britain since it, at least in the modern period, has been a society with no worthwhile or significant ideas, or, in another version, one where ideas are of no consequence, or, marginally less crass, one where the preferred idiom is that of the practical or the implicit (as though these, too, were not susceptible of historical analysis). In each of these claims, not only is the premise deeply disputable but the logic is, anyway, plainly faulty, as though one were to conclude that there could be no economic history of sub-Saharan Africa or no constitutional history of post-war Italy.

Given this still-recent history of prejudice and misunderstanding, one of the striking features of the essays in these volumes is their lack of defensiveness: they are written as contributions to an area of scholarship which is already rich and complex, and their tone does not suggest any felt need to justify the larger enterprise. And it is indeed the case that the last couple of decades have seen an impressive efflorescence of work in intellectual history understood in the broad terms sketched here. Where previously the ‘history of ideas’ was often, especially in the modern period, a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

pursuit cultivated by philosophers, political theorists, literary critics, social scientists, and others pursuing the ‘pre-history’ of their own disciplines, recent work in ‘intellectual history’ is much more likely to be done by those with a trained and cultivated interest in a particular period of the past, seeking to apply the same standards of historical evidence and judgement to the intellectual life of that period as their colleagues have traditionally displayed towards its political, social, and economic life. Instead of works which cut a ‘vertical’ (and often teleological) slice through the past with titles like ‘The History of Sociology from Montesquieu to Weber’, ‘The Growth of Economic Theory from Smith to Friedman’, ‘The Making of Modern Historiography from Gibbon to Braudel’, and so on, the tendency of recent work has been towards excavating a more ‘horizontal’ site, exploring the idioms and preoccupations of a past period as they manifest themselves in thought and discussion about various issues that cannot readily be assigned to current academic pigeon-holes. In other words, rather than constructing a ‘history of ideas’, where the emphasis is on the logical structure of certain arguments that are seen as only contingently and almost irrelevantly located in the past, the informing aspiration has been to write an ‘intellectual history’, which tries to recover the thought of the past in its complexity and, in a sense which is neither self-contradictory nor trivial, as far as possible in its own terms.

However, although I have been suggesting that intellectual history is now becoming an established and, on the whole, accepted sub-discipline even in Britain, it would be a disagreeable consequence of the hyper-professionalism of modern academic life were this to result in the formation of a new disciplinary trade-union, with all the characteristics of parochialism and exclusiveness, together with the attendant demarcation disputes, that threaten to characterise such bodies in their militant phase. It is surely a sign of cultural health rather than of corporate weakness that several of the contributors to these volumes would not wish to be constantly or exclusively classified as ‘intellectual historians’, and indeed that their institutional affiliations span several academic departments, including English, History, Politics, Law, and Religious Studies.

It will, I trust, be obvious that the brief characterisation of intellectual history offered in the preceding paragraphs is open to dispute and has in fact been vigorously disputed in recent years. The work of Michel Foucault and his followers has encouraged a rather different form of engagement with the ‘discourses’ dominant in past societies – one which often displaces purposive historical agents from the scene altogether – and more recently still, styles of work deriving from literary theory and cultural studies have attempted to shift attention yet further away from

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the meaning-laden utterances of those who can be identified as members of some kind of ‘elite’. Meanwhile, detailed historical work on a broad range of aspects of the intellectual life of the past continues to be carried on in a variety of less noisy or self-advertising modes. The result of these developments has been an inevitable and largely healthy pluralism of approaches: now that the legitimacy of the activity itself no longer needs to be argued for, intellectual historians can be allowed the same luxuries of disagreement and rivalry as have long been enjoyed by the more established branches of the historian’s trade. And precisely because this plurality of approaches *is* now coming into being, it may be appropriate to switch the focus of attention from these general considerations to examine at slightly greater length the specific contributions to this field made by John Burrow and Donald Winch.

II

Insofar as the activity of intellectual history *has* received institutional embodiment and cultural recognition as an academic discipline or sub-discipline in Britain in the last generation or so, it has been particularly identified with the University of Sussex. Sussex was the first British university to offer a degree programme in the subject and to establish posts explicitly defined as being in the field of ‘Intellectual History’. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, some observers, claiming to find certain shared characteristics in the work published by some of those responsible for this programme, began to refer to ‘the Sussex School’. This label can, at best, only ever have served as a piece of academic shorthand or argot, while at worst it was a culpable form of exaggeration or reification. No such ‘school’ exists or ever existed if that term be taken to imply common adherence to an explicit and exclusive methodological programme. It would be more accurate to say that the comparatively flexible and interdisciplinary structure of Sussex in those decades provided a congenial berth for a group of like-minded scholars whose interests typically tended to fall across or between the domains of the better-established academic disciplines. (I shall return to a consideration of the nature of this ‘like-mindedness’ in section III below.) In any event, what most certainly *is* beyond dispute is the fact that Donald Winch and John Burrow were for many years the leading figures in this group at Sussex.

Since this is not the place to attempt to recap the entire career of either Burrow or Winch, I shall merely touch on some of the more significant stages in their respective formations as intellectual historians. It is, of course, sobering for the historian above all to be brought to realise just how hard it is to reconstitute, let alone account for, the intellectual trajec-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

General introduction

5

tories even of one's close friends, a difficulty compounded as much as eased by the risks of relying overmuch on one's own rather randomly accumulated personal archive. And anyway, perhaps writings that are in the public domain are merely the by-product or end-result of some primal process of self-fashioning – indirect records of some now undetectable early shifts in the tectonic plates of temperament and disposition. Perhaps the ministrations of any number of careers advisers were otiose from the moment in which the young John Burrow stumbled on Figgis's *Gerson to Grotius* in his school library and was enthralled rather than baffled; perhaps all that has followed was already prefigured in the scene in which the teenage Burrow, crouched on the floor next to the family wireless, took notes, no doubt of a daunting illegibility even then, from a series of talks on 'Freedom and its Betrayal' by a speaker he had up till that point never heard of called Isaiah Berlin. And why it was that, at almost exactly the same time, the young Donald Winch was to be found rather self-consciously reading Plato's *Republic* while on holiday by the shores of the Baltic, or why it was that, though a student of economics, he chose to attend, for two years running, Michael Oakeshott's lectures on the history of political thought – these may be matters which defy further explanation, though in each case the temptations of teleology are strong (and have here not been altogether resisted).

Academically, both men were shaped in the 1950s. For John Burrow, an undergraduate at Christ's College from 1954 to 1957, the initial scholarly context was provided by the Cambridge History Tripos, and more especially its options in the history of political thought where he was particularly stimulated by the teaching of Duncan Forbes. At an early stage, Burrow had found the dominant genres of political and economic history less than wholly congenial, and after graduating he embarked, under the benign but necessarily somewhat distant supervision of Kitson Clark, on an ambitious Ph.D. on Victorian theories of social evolution, which was submitted in 1961. More broadly, his mentor at this time in the ways of the world, no less than in the duties and opportunities of being a historian, was J. H. Plumb, an academic talent-spotter and trainer with an unmatchably successful record. A research fellowship at Christ's was followed by a college lectureship at Downing, but by the time the revised version of his thesis appeared as a book in 1966, Burrow had moved to a lectureship at the recently founded University of East Anglia.

Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory was an extraordinarily assured debut. The book decisively challenged the assumption that the source of mid-Victorian ideas of social evolution was to be found in the application of Darwin's biological theories, and instead traced the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

attempts of figures such as Spencer, Maine, and Tylor to address questions of cultural variety within the framework of a (sometimes profoundly troubled) belief in progress. As a result, the book immediately established itself as a pioneering contribution to the history of anthropology as well as a provocative exploration of a central aspect of Victorian culture. That the argument of *Evolution and Society* certainly did not reflect any lack of appreciation on Burrow's part of the intellectual change that Darwin had wrought was demonstrated by his introduction to the Penguin *Origin of Species* in 1968, while his familiarity with European, and especially German, sources in the Romantic period was evident in his substantial introduction to his new translation of Wilhelm von Humboldt's *The Limits of State Action*, published in 1969.

In Donald Winch's intellectual formation, the LSE and the discipline of Economics occupied something of the same place that Cambridge and History did for John Burrow. An undergraduate between 1953 and 1956, Winch opted to specialise in international economics under the tutelage of James Meade, but he was already revealing himself as being at least as interested in Popper's teaching on scientific method or, as mentioned earlier, Oakeshott's on the history of political thought. Moving to Princeton for graduate study, he fell under the influence of Jacob Viner, of whom he later wrote a perceptive and affectionate memoir, and began to specialise in the history of economic thought. On returning to Britain after a year's teaching at Berkeley, a post at Edinburgh was followed in 1963 by a lectureship at Sussex, which soon led to rapid promotion, and he became Reader and then, in 1969, Professor of the History of Economics.

His first book, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, published in 1965, already displayed what were to become trademark qualities: the substance combined a quiet mastery of the technicalities of the history of economic theory with a sure grasp of the historical embeddedness of such ideas, while the manner exhibited a seemingly unforced alliance between clarity and argumentative vigour. The book compelled the historians of government policy in the period to learn their economic letters, while at the same time infiltrating some awkward complexities into the standard chronicles of 'the rise of political economy'. A certain distance from his initial disciplinary formation was already manifest in his declared intention to 'steer clear of the history of economic analysis for its own sake in order to remain close to the issues as seen by the participants' (*Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, p. 3). In other ways, too, Winch was already contesting that canonical account of early political economy which confined itself to the Holy Trinity of Smith the Father, Ricardo the Son, and Mill the Holy Ghost, one fruit of his historical attentiveness to less fash-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ionable figures being the substantial editorial labour of his edition of James Mill's *Selected Economic Writings* which was published in 1966.

Both men, therefore, began by initially pursuing a somewhat unfavoured branch of a powerful discipline (respectively History and Economics) and then progressively reacting against the coerciveness and complacency of representatives of mainstream traditions of those disciplines. Both had encountered the constraints of orthodox 'discipline' history as written by present practitioners of a given discipline, especially the 'pre-history of anthropology' in Burrow's case and the 'pre-history of economics' in Winch's. By the late 1960s, partly as a result of this experience, their respective scholarly interests were, quite independently of each other, moving closer together under the broad rubric of the history of social thought or of the social sciences. From his arrival at Sussex, Donald Winch had been closely involved in teaching a 'contextual' course, compulsory for all final-year students in the School of Social Sciences, called 'Concepts, methods, and values in the social sciences' (always known, not always affectionately, as CMV). In the mid-1960s he was instrumental in adding an option in 'The historical development of the social sciences' to the existing course which had previously been confined to philosophical and methodological issues. In those expansionary days, it was possible to think of making appointments to match such academic initiatives, and it was Winch, in his role as (a notably young) Dean of the School of Social Sciences, who first invited John Burrow, by then Reader in History at East Anglia, to Sussex, initially to lecture for the new course, and eventually to take up a post teaching it. (The first exchange of letters – 'Dear Mr Burrow'/'Dear Mr Winch' – has, in retrospect, something of an 84 Charing Cross Road feel about it.) As a result, in 1969 Burrow was appointed to a post principally responsible for teaching the historical part of CMV; a few years later he transferred to the School of English and American Studies.

The University of Sussex had been founded in 1961 with the deliberate aim of 're-drawing the map of learning', and institutional expression had been given to this ideal by not establishing conventional academic departments, but instead grouping scholars with related interests into schools of study, usually with an area basis such as the School of European Studies or the School of English and American Studies. Within and across these schools, 'majors' were taught in particular subjects, while students had also to spend approximately half their time on school 'contextual' courses (such as CMV). 'Subject groups' were responsible for these majors and these were the nearest Sussex came in those days to having orthodox departments. Both the ethos and the structure of Sussex in the late 1960s and early 1970s were favourable to innovation, and it was this supportive

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

setting that permitted the establishment initially of an MA and then, in 1969, of a undergraduate ‘major’ in Intellectual History, the first such degree programme to be set up at a British university. These early initiatives were undertaken by members of staff who had initially been appointed to more traditionally defined posts, such as Peter Burke in History and Michael Moran in Philosophy; crucial support was provided by James Shiel from Classical Studies and the then recently retired Helmut Pappé. A new lectureship in Intellectual History, the first to be formally designated as such, was established in 1972 and initially held by Larry Siedentop, and then, from 1974, by Stefan Collini (to whom I shall, for the sake of narrative propriety, sometimes have to refer, as here, in the third person).

The years during which these institutional arrangements were being established and consolidated – roughly the late 1960s to the mid-1970s – also saw shifts, or perhaps just modulations, in the intellectual interests of both Donald Winch and John Burrow. Winch’s interest in the interaction between economic expertise and political exigency was for some time principally focused on the twentieth century, and his *Economics and Policy: A Historical Study* (1969) broke what was then new ground in its exploration of the ways in which Keynesian arguments came to penetrate the policy-making establishments of both Britain and the United States. In terms of both chronology and of sources, the book’s range was impressive, moving from Alfred Marshall’s attempts to accommodate the challenge of ‘the social problem’ within the absorbent framework of his *Principles of Economics* in the 1890s to the measures undertaken by the Kennedy–Johnson administrations of the 1960s. The interest in the role of economic advisers was sustained, and supported by a daunting display of expertise in the official and archival sources, in a study of the Economic Advisory Council of the 1930s, which was jointly written with Susan Howson and published in 1976. But, as already indicated, his earliest work had been on the foundations of political economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an area of research which he never entirely deserted, as evidenced by his substantial introduction to the Penguin edition of books IV and V of Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* in 1970 and his Everyman edition of Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1973. Moreover, by the mid-1970s, Winch had begun to read widely in recent work by early-modern intellectual historians on the roles played by the languages of ‘civic humanism’ and ‘natural jurisprudence’ in the development of political thought during that period, and he brought the fruits of this reading to bear on the interpretation of the most canonical of all figures in the history of economic thought in his *Adam Smith’s Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

which was published in 1978. This characteristically combative book sought to rescue Smith from the retrospective teleologies of the historians of economics, and to restore him to his eighteenth-century context, principally but by no means exclusively his Scottish context. This relatively short, tightly argued book was to have considerable impact both within and beyond the confines of the history of political economy, not least through its firm insistence on the distinction between the goal of recovering the historicity of a past writer and that of using the name of that writer to legitimate a variety of political or academic enterprises in the present.

During these same years, the focus of John Burrow's scholarly work also underwent some change, essentially away from its initial concentration on the history of social and political thought towards a broader engagement with Victorian culture and historiography. His essay for J. H. Plumb's *Festschrift*, published in 1974, "'The Village Community'" and the Uses of History in Late-Nineteenth-Century England', signalled an early step in this direction by focusing on the historical writings of figures such as Maine, Freeman, and Maitland. At the same time, partly through the structure of teaching at Sussex (especially after his move into the School of English and American Studies), Burrow was drawn more deeply into the relations between history and literature in nineteenth-century Britain; some incidental fruits of this experience may be found in his contributions to *The Victorians*, edited by Laurence Lerner, a volume in the 'Context of English Literature' series which appeared in 1978. This phase of Burrow's work culminated triumphantly in *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, which was published in 1981 and was joint winner of the Wolfson Prize for History for that year. The book's principal sections discuss the vast, sprawling narrative histories of Macaulay, Stubbs, Freeman, and Froude and the intellectual and historiographical traditions within which they worked, but this flat inventory signally fails to do justice to the book's widely ramifying explorations of Victorian cultural sensibility. There is now abundant evidence of how its account of the nineteenth-century Whig tradition of historical writing has left its mark on scholarship across a wide range of topics, some far removed from the confines of the history of historiography. Yet for many readers, the book's distinctiveness and charm lie in the ways in which the writing allows a cultivated sensibility to direct, inform, and give appropriately modulated expression to its historical analysis, simultaneously catching and doing justice to the idiosyncrasy of his chosen historians while placing them within intellectual and literary traditions which are characterised with great richness and subtlety.

In the early 1980s, Collini, Winch, and Burrow collaborated in writing *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63018-4 - Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750–1950

Edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Stefan Collini

History, whose publication in 1983 marked, both practically and symbolically, the high point of their collaborative endeavour. Perhaps the least awkward way to provide some characterisation of the book here is to quote from the preface which was specially written (in 1996) for the Japanese translation.

In the nature of things, a book that sets out to challenge or repudiate accepted disciplinary boundaries is likely to run the risk of baffling some of its readers. As one reviewer sympathetically put it: ‘This is going to be a perplexing book for many. Librarians will wonder how to classify it. Specialists in politics and economics will be embarrassed at its demonstration of how what they thought sewn up can be unstitched. Tutors will wonder what passages their pupils can be trusted not to misunderstand.’ As the Prologue to the book was intended to make clear, some of the intellectual energy that fuelled its writing came from our shared negative reaction to certain prevailing disciplinary dispensations. Most obviously, we repudiated those forms of ‘the history of the social sciences’ which consisted in finding ‘precursors’ and ‘founding fathers’ for contemporary social scientific specialisms from among past writers the specificity and integrity of whose concerns thereby came in for some very rough treatment indeed . . . We also repudiated the coerciveness of the priorities encouraged by ‘the history of political theory’, an enterprise which has enjoyed such a strong institutional position in the Anglo-American scholarly world that political, economic, and social historians all too easily take it to *be* intellectual history. And, more obviously, we took our distance from those kinds of approaches which are united in little else than in assuming that intellectual activity is best understood as a reflection or by-product of some allegedly more fundamental social or economic process . . . Without wishing to set up a new meta-discipline or to propose a panacea for wider cultural ailments, we continue to regard intellectual history of the kind exhibited in this book as a flexible and responsible approach to the intellectual life of the past. In certain respects, intellectual history pursued in this manner may itself be regarded as having a kind of ‘anti-specialist’ identity, both because it cannot be equated with the history of one subject-matter or discipline and because it cannot be reduced to one methodology or vocabulary.

Although there has been no further attempt at direct collaboration, it is clear from the prefaces and acknowledgements in their subsequent works (to cite only evidence that is in the public domain) that the ties of friendship and intellectual exchange between the three authors remain close. However, the partly parallel and partly divergent trajectories followed by Winch and Burrow since that period must also be noted here.

John Burrow’s stylish ‘Past Masters’ volume on Gibbon was published in 1985, and in the same year he gave the Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, which were then published in 1988 under the title *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*. This slim volume testified, as its preface acknowledged, to Burrow’s ‘long-standing interest in the impact of historicist ways of thinking on European, and above all