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Conference Report: *From Cambridge to Bielefeld – and Back? British and Continental Approaches to Intellectual History*

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From Cambridge to Bielefeld—and Back? British and Continental Approaches to Intellectual History. Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London and the German Association for British Studies and held at the Großbritannien-Zentrum of the Humboldt University Berlin, 2–4 June 2022. Conveners: Sina Steglich and Emily Steinhauer (GHIL).

Framed by Cambridge and Bielefeld, two clusters of intellectual history in the twentieth century, this conference aimed to elucidate the state of the field of intellectual history today and the transnational landscapes in which it operates. With nineteen scholars from Continental Europe and Britain, it opened a space for an inquiry into the diverse methodological preconditions and self-understandings that underpin the writing of intellectual history and embed it in both different academic practices and wider transdisciplinary challenges. By approaching the topic through the localized lenses of the Cambridge School and the German *Begriffsgeschichte* approach (which was centred on Reinhart Koselleck's academic circle in Bielefeld), the conference programme itself subtly highlighted the intellectual historian's proximity to the discipline of political science, with which the academic circles in both Bielefeld and Cambridge were intimately connected. This opened two axes of meta-disciplinary reflection. On the one hand, it urged the participants to question the nature of intellectual history as a scholarly field—whether, for instance, the intellectual historian is simply a historiographer of political thought. On the other, it delineated the challenges for a field rooted in specific political and geographical contexts which now needs to adapt to global conditions that entail rethinking the canon, decentring the Western perspective, and focusing on specific histories, such as of marginalized groups or thoughts. Against this background, the programme inspired reflections about the purpose of intellectual history, and how the past is used in the present.

The first panel probed the genealogies and trajectories of European intellectual history. Stuart Jones (University of Manchester) examined the extent to which it was perceived as an 'English' discipline in the early twentieth century. By focusing on figures such as Mark Pattison, W. E. H. Lecky, and Leslie Stephen, Jones argued that the trend of

historicizing ideas, especially religious ones, emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century in Britain and was perceived as a distinctive ‘style’ by philosophers such as Henry Sidgwick and John Morley. Dina Gusejnova (London School of Economics and Political Science) pursued another line of enquiry when she interrogated the relations between British and German political thought through a history of specific sites. Using examples as diverse as an attack on C. K. Odgen’s Cambridge bookshop in 1918 and John Dunn’s and Norbert Elias’s simultaneous stays in Ghana in the 1960s, she explored how waves of emigration, translation, and ressentiment shaped the influence (or lack thereof) of German thought in Britain. Another trajectory of the discipline was identified by Kai Gräf and Sebastian Schütte (Heidelberg University) in the field of intellectual history as it was practised in Germany from the 1930s to the 1990s. As they pointed out, the discipline found itself in an unfortunate position, due not only to the emigration of scholars in the 1930s, but also to the emergence of the rival field of social history, which attracted many more politically engaged scholars, such as Eckart Kehr and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Picking up this theme of political involvement, Luke Ilott (University of Cambridge) engaged with Michel Foucault’s historical approach, which operates as a mode of political thought in France. Based on archival material, Ilott argued that Foucault’s stay in Tunis in the late 1960s allowed him to draw on a range of anglophone sources that were not discussed in French intellectual circles, such as texts by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard V. O. Quine, and Robert Merton. With their focus on the extra-linguistic conditions of speech, these authors helped Foucault move away from the French structuralism of the 1960s and find a materialist historical method that could address the political in a new way.

The first day ended with a keynote lecture by Richard Bourke (University of Cambridge), who explored the enduring reception of Hegel’s ideas in Continental European and anglophone contexts. Tracing the intricate ways in which intellectuals on both sides of the Channel used Hegel’s ideas to often conflicting ends, he concluded that we can benefit most from understanding Hegel’s philosophy as a characterization of his own time. Yet this should not relieve us from the burden of making our own historical judgements. Rather, Bourke

argued, a historical reading of Hegel illustrates that each generation faces the renewed inevitability of judging its own times on the basis of criteria that have developed historically. If the Cambridge School is characterized by an insistence on the necessity to both understand history and think for ourselves, he concluded, then the Cambridge intellectual historians might have forgotten that they did not invent the contextualist methods for which they are now most famous.

The next day started with an introduction to the Fachinformationsdienst Anglo-American Culture, which provided useful information on newly available library services. The second panel then addressed the practice of British intellectual history outside Cambridge. Tim Stuart-Buttle (University of York) discussed the methodological outlook of the 'itinerant Oxonian' Hugh Trevor-Roper. Presenting Trevor-Roper as a historian who primarily assumed that the individual human mind was dynamic and resistant to static classification, Stuart-Buttle illustrated how exercising caution regarding the utility of methodological assumptions can result in an intellectual historiography that is receptive to the astonishing creativity of both historical actors and past historians. Max Skjönsberg (University of Cambridge) provided a similar portrait of the political theorist and historian Michael Oakeshott, whose attachment to the London School of Economics and Political Science likewise resulted in a distinctive style of intellectual history. In his talk, Skjönsberg introduced the audience to key concepts in Oakeshott's political and historical thinking, such as his focus on the history of ideology as opposed to the history of political thought, his distinction between the nomocratic and teleocratic styles of politics, and his different understandings of statehood, such as *societas* and *universitas*. Lastly, Cesare Cuttica (University of Paris 8) depicted the University of Sussex, home to intellectual historians such as John W. Burrow, Stefan Collini, and Donald Winch, as another significant site for the field. Shaped by a deeply transdisciplinary outlook, intellectual historians at the University of Sussex not only offered the first and, for a long time, the only undergraduate programme in intellectual history in the UK, but also managed to combine history with cultural studies, literary criticism, and philosophy, thus producing a new, special kind of essayistic writing.

The third panel emphasized the need to move beyond texts as the sole objects of study in four talks devoted to the way ideas were

embodied and put into practice in Britain from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. In her talk on ancient and modern knowledge, Heather Ellis (University of Sheffield) examined the role of classical authors in scientific discourse in Manchester from 1780 to 1840. Challenging the standard narrative of a clear break between the ‘ancients’ and the ‘moderns’, she pointed out how references to classical authors were often deployed as evidence in various modern sciences. Martha Vandrei (University of Exeter) interrogated our understanding of modern thought by illustrating the intertwined nature of philosophical reasoning and theatrical practice in the drama of the British ‘syncretic’ poets. Under the heading of ‘practical metaphysics’, she probed the impact of philosophical idealism on the genre of ‘open drama’ that combined tragedy and spoken word in early Victorian London. Laura Forster (Durham University) then explored the late Victorian period with a focus on the intellectual dynamics of political radicalism, and emphasized the need to consider the emotional sides of friendships, personal encounters, and communal events. She argued that the intellectual impact of performative rituals such as funerals should be taken seriously: more refined political reflections could often only occur after feelings—such as solidarity—had been aroused by the symbolic force of such events. Hélène Maloigne (University College London) completed the panel discussion by casting light on the emergence of forms of intellectual history in other fields, such as archaeology. After outlining a study of the debate about the occurrence of the flood as described in the Book of Genesis that followed the publication of the first archaeological findings from excavation sites along the Euphrates River in the 1930s, she concluded that positions within intellectual history regarding the credibility of the biblical sources (for example) influenced the public communication of the science.

The fourth panel was devoted to methods. Ian Stewart (Queen Mary University of London) presented Adam Smith’s method of ‘conjectural history’, which was challenged by Johann Gottfried Herder and the German philosophy of language. He argued that both approaches still influence methodological presuppositions about the nature of cognitive abilities today, such as language being either innate or a (socially) constructed tool. Stanisław Knapowski (Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznán) addressed the threat that locations

can pose when their role in historical understanding is highlighted. Linking the intellectual history of early Fourierist architecture to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, he argued that architectural objects could, under certain conditions of intellectual reception, themselves become historical agents – even if, like many early socialist architectural plans, they were never fully realized. Felix Oberholzer (University of Basel) closed the panel with an examination of the concept of 'experience' in feminist historiography and women's history. By recalling that the experience of texts has to be seen as both socially produced and socially productive, he questioned how far the appeal to a specific socially conditioned experience can be universally applicable as a source in the writing of feminist intellectual history.

The fifth and last panel, held on the morning of 4 June, returned to the theme of German conceptual history. Adriana Markantonatos (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) argued for the importance of the history of art in the understanding of Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history method. Emphasizing the extent to which Koselleck was driven by questions of visibility and invisibility, she pointed out which visual metaphors and pictorial analogies dominate key aspects of his work and thus need to be understood more than textually. In a similar vein, Olga Byrska (European University Institute Florence) made a case for the inherent interdisciplinarity of the field by interrogating the specificity of the task of writing intellectual history. Depending on which archives are available to intellectual historians, for what reasons, and for which specific audience they are intended, historiographies can become a form of social control. With no possibility of a subject being neutral, intellectual historians have to critically consider whom they are devoting attention to and why. Alec Walker (Free University of Berlin) rounded off the panel with a critical reflection on the narratives surrounding ordoliberalism in 1960s Germany. On the basis of a contextualist reading of the Social Democratic Bad Godesberg Programme, he challenged the idea that the German SPD intended to isolate markets from democratic pressures and 'introduce neoliberalism', and argued that the party instead had to come to terms with an existing market order and came to see its main task as alleviating its ills.

Discussion ranged around the topic of the disciplinarity of the field and revealed a number of shared concerns, such as the extent to which

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intellectual historians feel the need to construct an image of their discipline in response to funding requirements, to justify themselves in light of the often imprecise impact of their studies, or to defend their attention to canonical works against the charges of ‘elitism’ or an alleged lack of concern for social justice. Touching upon the need for a more trans- or even post-disciplinary self-understanding, the conference provided a valuable picture of the current state of the field and its attempt to come to terms with its own political framing.

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