

EDITORIAL

In recent decades the discipline of history has experienced an unprecedented expansion of its range of subjects. As rich as the new diversity is, it may seem to sacrifice disciplinary coherence to sprawl. More striking, however, is the discipline's capacity to retain its grip on the interpretive and explanatory agenda that continues to make history a distinct way of understanding the human condition. Intellectual history has developed in much the same way. Not so long ago it was regarded by many as an endangered species, its natural habitat having been laid waste by social and cultural historians who rejected its elitism and by historians of ideas who preferred a habitat free of historical clutter. This prognosis notwithstanding, intellectual history has re-emerged as an expanded but still focused disciplinary enterprise, anchored in the belief that texts and the discourses in which they are embedded are multiple points of entry into human creativity in its profuse variety of historical forms, and that their study is essential to understanding the nature of cultural life and the meaning of civilization itself.

Modern Intellectual History is concerned with the historicity of textual performances, whether written, printed, visual or musical. Our aim is to encourage scholarship that illuminates the interactions between texts and contexts and thereby recovers contextually the meanings of texts, their significance, and the processes of their reception. By describing texts as performances we want to imply, first, that they are products of individual agency, and, second, that agency is a more complicated matter than has often been supposed. We do not mean to deny that a text may have an “integrity” of its own, transcending any particular context. We are, in fact, eager to encourage debate about that possibility. We also realize that as there are many kinds of texts, so there are many kinds of contexts, from intellectual traditions fashioned over the *longue durée* to immediate social milieus. What a contextual approach means and entails will therefore vary with the ideas explored and the questions posed. However, we also find a growing convergence of views across several disciplines about what distinguishes contextual understanding from other kinds of knowledge—and that too is a matter on which we are eager to encourage discussion in these pages.

Hence, even as we seek to identify what makes intellectual history a distinct form of inquiry, we intend to open it out to its neighbors in and beyond the discipline of history. This turn outward requires moving beyond binaries that close off possibilities. For example, it seems overly restrictive to locate intellectual

history on the “elite” side of any putative distinction between elite and popular culture; our criteria for inclusion make the provenance of textual performances less important than what the scholar does with them. Likewise we see no point in neatly dividing intellectual from cultural history: many forms of the new cultural history are also intellectual history as *MIH* defines it. And we do not believe that intellectual historians have to choose between an “idealist” history of ideas and an approach that reduces ideas to rationales for social interests. Between those two extremes there is plenty of room for original and significant work on the relations between ideas and social experience.

And so *Modern Intellectual History* will serve as a meeting ground and a mediator for hermeneutically minded scholars with an historical orientation, whether their interest is in the history of literature, science, philosophy, law, religion, political thought, economic thought, social theory, psychology, anthropology, art, or music. It defines “modern” to include the entire period from the origins of the Enlightenment in the mid-seventeenth century to the present. Because we believe that Europeanists and Americanists can profit greatly from each other’s work, and because there is a growing body of historical scholarship on the trans-Atlantic world, the early issues will devote roughly equal space to Europe and the United States. But—as several contributions to this issue attest—we are also keenly aware that, with the demise of empires and the end of the Cold War, intellectual history is in a new and unique position to give itself and the larger discipline a global reach. To that end, we are committed to promoting new ways of understanding cultural exchanges between the West and non-West over the past two and a half centuries.

Intellectual history is best thought of as a discipline in the making. We warmly welcome all who are interested in furthering that process to read and contribute to *Modern Intellectual History*, the first journal explicitly devoted to its propagation.