THE STATE OF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY, THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Richard Whatmore,1
University of St Andrews

I
The novelist Irish Murdoch, in a letter to the polymath Raymond Queneau written in 1947, noted that she was about to take a class discussing “whether Socrates was a utilitarian?” Had we been able to communicate with Murdoch at the time, we would have informed her that the question was a foolish one, if her aim was to understand either Socrates or utilitarianism. The point of intellectual history is to illuminate the past by taking seriously the utterances and arguments of historical actors. Taking seriously the thoughts of previous generations does not, as is so often claimed, lead to scepticism and relativism, developing a perspective somehow above and distanced from the present, and necessarily disdainful of political commitment or particular decision today. Rather, the very point of intellectual history has always been to deepen engagement with issues in question. It might be the case that contemporaries recognised limits upon argument that are now in shadow for us. There are lost traditions of intellectual endeavour, the recovery of which, sometimes entailing an understanding of why they failed, can only enrich those that have survived or which are of recent vintage. The result is always a better sense of action, of why someone advocated a programme or practice, of why a stand was taken, and of the range of options open to our ancestors.

One of the major criticisms of intellectual historians has been that we make the study of history a purely antiquarian enterprise, by severing any relationship between past and present. In a global world, where we look to history to help illuminate the problems of the present, this can be a devastating critique. In being overly ‘local’ and in ignoring the present, the intellectual historian becomes irrelevant to the world, a relatively pointless addition to any faculty. The argument of this paper is that this attack is misconceived. Intellectual historians underscore how difficult many of the choices faced by historical actors are. We are the inheritors of the tradition of searching for unintended consequences in the history of ideas that so marked the brilliant scholarship of Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith, and so many fellow luminaries of the enlightenment era. An example of an unintended consequence of great relevance to the present is the association of radical agrarian critiques of commercial society with dictatorship, genocide and extremist forms of nationalism. When François Fénelon, in his Telemachus composed in the 1690s, defended the strategy of transferring populations from the towns to the countryside, it was an element of a careful strategy to protect modern populations from the worst effects of luxury and selfishness. That such a strategy became a blueprint for the brutal crushing of ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and intellectuals that later defined the

1 rw56@st-andrews.ac.uk

regimes of Mao Zedong or Pol Pot, is a story worthy of recollection. Another example is
the unintended association of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen
with terror and civil war in the 1790s, which was obvious to contemporaries on the
grounds that the assertion of universal rights purportedly derived from nature, were
accompanied by the abandonment of every existing law. A further fact of profound
historical importance is the admiration of so many republicans and democratic for
generals or strongmen, who clothe themselves in the garb of a patriotic monarch
expressing the interests of all of humanity. Intellectual historians, in making connections
between traditions and ideologies that today are presumed antithetical, or in puncturing
the commonplace assumption of the superiority of the contemporary west, have a
significant role to play in the formation of successful civic identities. By reconstructing
historic ideologies in their richness and diversity, we can better understood the choices
we face in the present.

In many respects intellectual history is the form of historical enquiry most suited
to our global world. Intellectual historians are used to dealing with long spans of time,
the translation of ideas across cultures and their necessary adaptation to new
circumstances, and the inevitability of the revision of ideas and of their
misunderstanding.

II

Should we therefore be celebrating? Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn have written
that, “It is difficult to remember a time when intellectual history figured so centrally in
the larger historical enterprise as well as in the humanities as a whole.” David Armitage
has gone further, arguing that intellectual history is best placed to deal with the kinds of
questions about long-term historical change across continents raised by the way we live
today. Armitage has called this “a history in ideas”. Increasingly we seem to have
accepted John Burrow definition of intellectual history as the process of recovering “what
people in the past meant by the things they said and what these things ‘meant’ to them”,
employing the metaphors of the intellectual historian as an eavesdropper upon the
conversations of the past, as a translator between the cultures identifiable today and
those of the past, and of an explorer studying worlds full of assumptions and beliefs alien
to our own. Donald Winch used to say that as intellectual historians we are always
playing away-matches, because we can never presume home support wherever we
happen to be, whether among historians, literature scholars, philosophers or social
scientists. I think we can now say that we have a home team, because we have support in
certain institutions, where cross-disciplinary engagement is encouraged; but we still
have a lot of work to do to be certain that what we are doing today will continue into the
future.

2 Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, ‘Introduction: Interim Intellectual History’, in Rethinking
Modern European Intellectual History. 3.

3 David Armitage, ‘What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée’, History of
Thought, 32/1 (2011), 63-82.

Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), Advances in Intellectual History (London: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2006).
Another reason for not celebrating is because the history of ideas or intellectual history tends to flourish in times of uncertainty about the future, and when people are seeking alternatives to scepticism, cynicism and utopian schemes for the end of history or the construction of near-perfect societies. As such, both the history of ideas and its new variant, intellectual history, especially marked late twentieth-century thought. Both subject areas can be seen to be products of twentieth-century speculation about the relationship between ideas and historical processes, which became ever more prominent within humanistic scholarship. Part of the reason was a growing scepticism about the claims of the positive sciences of the nineteenth century, themselves founded upon definitions of rational human activity, and of human health and wellbeing that could be universalised. If the confidence of nineteenth-century philosophers, or the nihilism of those who rejected their philosophies, could be shown to have a relationship with the outbreak of world wars, or the unparalleled institutionalised violence of the first half of the twentieth century, then something was amiss with the human sciences, and they needed to be rethought. Another significant issue was the relationship between the disciplines that were organised within universities, and more especially the nature of social science and its relationship to arts and humanities disciplines. A further factor was uncertainty about the veracity of Marxism, in its various forms, and more particularly about the capacity of Marxist states to maintain themselves both economically and militarily against the capitalist West. More philosophers began to argue, with the sceptic Ludwig Wittgenstein, that language determined every aspect of human behaviour. Wittgenstein, in Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty, described language as a phenomenon so intimately connected with human action that the kinds of language available to actors could be said to constrain or facilitate change; words really should be conceived to be deeds. With no human science on the horizon that will restore the kinds of certainty that generated the Whig historiographies of the past, intellectual history may well flourish, but only because of trouble we are in.

II

It is always wise if you know who your enemies are. As such, we need to recall the kinds of criticism levelled against what might be termed the ‘first generation’ of intellectual historians, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. Identifying such a generation is contentious of course. Many of you may believe, with good reason, that your work is rather inspired by Begriffsgeschichte or “conceptual history”, founded on the scholarly monument of the multivolume lexicon of the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe that appeared between 1972 and 1997. Reinhart Koselleck was a genius, and Begriffsgeschichte, if it failed to make the study of language in different historical contexts scientific, nevertheless established a framework for understanding the transition from early modern to modern thought during the Sattelzeit between 1750 and 1850, that has yet to be bettered. The aspiration of combating extreme ideologies employing false historical teleologies was shared by the so-called ‘Cambridge School’, and as many of you will know through the process of doing your own research, there is a great deal of overlap. Alternatively, you might be following a method associated with Michel Foucault, seeking out the ‘epistemes’ or discursive formations operating beneath the consciousness of

historical actors, constructing an archaeology of linked historic concepts, and a genealogy showing the often irrational employment of such concepts in human social relations. Again, I would argue that there is much in common with the Cambridge method.

The reason for associating intellectual history with a generation of Cambridge historians who were undertaking research, and in Pocock’s case writing books, in the 1950s, and who then became well known towards the end of the 1960s, is because no one can doubt that the term has become synonymous with such figures, and is more associated with the work especially of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner than anyone else. In other words, the majority of people who have thought about intellectual history have associated it with something called the Cambridge School for decades.

What were they advocating that was different? Pocock, Dunn, and Skinner proposed that texts be treated as products of specific historical contexts, by which they meant ideological contexts formed through linguistic practice. In working out the meaning of the texts, Dunn and Skinner identified the intentions of an author as the principal guide to the nature of the text, although neither unproblematic as an intellectual objective, nor sufficient in terms of understanding an author’s work. Skinner memorably said that the goal of the historian was to reveal what the author of a particular text ‘was doing’, encompassing what the author had intended to do and had succeeded in doing as interpreted by the responses of other authors. One of the anticipated consequences of the method was indicated by the original title of Skinner’s essay: ‘The Unimportance of the Great Texts in the History of Political Thought.’

Among the most significant claims asserted by Pocock, Dunn and Skinner, but emphasised especially by Pocock in all of his methodological writings, was that the language or discourse in which an author was working, meaning the set of assumptions that he or she was adopting and employing in the articulation of their arguments, set limits to the argument itself. Language or discourse comprised a grammar and a rhetoric, and sets of assumptions about the use and implications of ideas, which amounted to a complex structure. Authors living within communities of language users could innovate and alter existing languages, but the point was to search for exactly this because existing languages were employed in articulating what was happening in the ideological and material present. The three authors opposed approaches founded on the presumption of fixed concepts of historical analysis, of meta-theoretical assumptions about human nature, and of opaque or a-historical theoretical vocabularies.

Pocock went on to say that in communicating through speech acts, individuals drew upon the existing traditions or languages that were available to them in formulating arguments. In so doing language in Pocock’s view acquired a structure, often called discourse, where discourses were series of speech acts performed by individuals in particular social and historical contexts. The speech acts confirmed or modified the discourses or paradigms that they operated in, and did so sometimes consciously and explicitly and sometimes unconsciously and implicitly. Working historians needed to search for paradigms or discourses that operated historically, such as the kind of

---


Whatmore, State of Intellectual History

republicanism that fuelled argument across the Atlantic world in early modern times, the equally prominent advocacy of ancient constitutionalism or of Enlightenment historiography in the eighteenth century in its Arminian, Anglican, and Voltairean variants. The key fact was that such paradigms became prominent through use, imposed particular ways of thinking upon historical actors, could be seen to have evolved and transformed in different circumstances and sometimes to have collapsed and disappeared; Pocock’s work has entailed the study of the ascent and near disappearance of a series of paradigms. The student who follows this method in Pocock’s view discovers numerous rationales for advocating particular political strategies and learns that a number of rationales at any one point, often contradicting one another, can be seen to have made sense to historical actors and to have been justified accordingly. The historian learns prudence in consequence. History becomes the study of the making of decisions in circumstances where there is no black and white. Necessity cannot be found. Rather, history becomes a series of contingent choices, several of which make sense. Prudence requires the historian to distinguish between the background ideological traditions or languages that authors drew upon in formulating their ideas, and the specific utterances that made up a claim or argument. Pocock distinguishes between 'langue' and 'parole', the language and the utterance, and has continued to refer to this distinction in all of his work.8

The assumption, of course, that Pocock, Skinner and Dunn were doing identical things in researching historical ideas is a mistake. John Pocock was older and associated himself with Michael Oakeshott’s view that research questions formulated within the humanities are best described as an on-going conversation. He also prioritised paradigms over intentions.9 Quentin Skinner had been trained in Oxford language philosophy, and had a clearer sense of the need to address problems posed by Wittgenstein for the human sciences. John Dunn, having written a brilliant account of the relationship between John Locke’s politics and Calvinism, quickly moved towards the study of present politics rather than the history of ideas. In so doing he was following Peter Laslett, for Pocock the true founder of intellectual history between the late 1940s and end of the 1950s, who had, significantly, decided that intellectual history was too divorced from social problems and incapable, unlike the social sciences, of doing much social good. In other words, the first modern intellectual history rejected the discipline he had created.

III

With such definitional problems in mind, how did critics respond to the Cambridge historians? With vitriol is the answer. Skinner in particular was attacked for being too much of a philosopher, for not being able to pin down an author’s intentions, for pursuing research questions of purely antiquarian interest, and for leading the humanities down a


cul-de-sac characterized by narrowness and irrelevance. The claim that intellectual history was not connected to present politics in particular was reiterated time and time again. This was seen to be pure madness, because the study of ideas historically had always been connected to the issues of the present. In making the study of ideas a matter of history meant that intellectual historians were retreating into an ivory tower. A presumed contrast between such writers as Isaiah Berlin and the Cambridge historians was particularly marked here, or indeed with Foucault. The Cambridge historians just got it wrong. Lewis Namier, the advocate of prosopography in historical analysis, seemed to have it right in stating that the study of ideas was 'flapdoodle', in his England in the Age of the American Revolution (1930), because what really motivated human beings was self-interest. Ideas were misleading because they masked the true source of social action.

The different accusation Antonio Gramsci levelled at Benedetto Croce is also worth recalling, of practising 'despicable Pontius Pilatism', for not taking a stand on issues of concern to the mass of the people, for not wanting to take responsibility in public argument, and for not engaging directly in contemporary politics. E. P. Thompson took the position of Gramsci with regard to Cambridge school historians. In his Customs in Common (1991) Thompson reconstructed the views of ordinary people in the eighteenth century supportive of the 'moral economy', which Adam Smith and the advocates of capitalist social relations were stated to have sought to refute and undermine. Cambridge authors, in refusing to condemn Smith's position and defend the moral economy, were continuing the longstanding position of assaulting the poor with intellectual tools. Although Edward Said never engaged with Cambridge School authors in Orientalism or in Culture and Imperialism, it is easy to generate accusations of Eurocentrism by looking at intellectual history through Said's lens. In focussing on the original intentions of elite, male, European authors, the prejudices of the past are passed on to the present. The voices of minorities, especially women, and the oppressed, especially from non-European cultures, are neglected. Most intellectual historians who have worked in academic faculties today will recognise such criticisms. We are not seen to be doing things of direct

---


relevance to the contemporary world. We are not reconstructing the life histories of the oppressed or revealing hidden scandal and injustice. We are not directly supporting a New Left, or New Right for that matter. As such, colleagues sometimes see us as aloof and sometimes as purposeless antiquarians, interested in books that no one would read today, and issues that most people have forgotten, or could only understand after several hours of explanation. In a monetized world where everything is valued against a utilitarian calculus putting a priority upon immediate results, and where sustained engagement with something that may be only of indirect relevance is discouraged, what is the place of the intellectual historian?

One of the great achievements in recent decades that has made intellectual-historical research valued today has been Quentin Skinner’s research into the history of liberty, and the restoration of a definition of freedom as non-domination, which can be applied directly from past to present, and employed as a tool evaluating the health of a societies with regard to liberty, across the globe. Many of us will have had enquiries from potential students who have been inspired by Skinner’s research into the history of ideas about liberty, and who want to apply the model to their own national histories. This is perhaps the most successful refutation of the claim that there is no relationship between intellectual history and contemporary politics, and I don’t want to go into more detail here.

Another point to make is that if historical research is associated with the recovery of lost voices, then intellectual history has done more than any other branch of historical learning to do this. Canonical figures in the history of philosophy are no longer studied, at least outside philosophy departments that have turned against history, as if the tallest trees from Plato and Aristotle to Aquinas, Hobbes and Rawls were engaged in a dialogue with one another, concerning eternal problems that only their works can be said to have truly illuminated. Perhaps the greatest achievement of intellectual history has been to shatter the canon, by showing the benefit of reading a text within its ideological context, and using the texts of innumerable forgotten authors who were considered brilliant and relevant in their own time, to work out the meaning of the better-known texts whose reception was more fortunate. In expanding vastly the range of texts and authors that need to be studied in order to understand the past, intellectual historians are especially suited to the age of Google.

What about the argument that Cambridge school intellectual historians teach scepticism, and a particularly elitist form of scepticism associated with the collapse of the British empire and of British influence abroad, being themselves the product of an elite culture in decline? One of the benefits of beginning the local, or starting with particular facts and seeing the world from the vantage point of a specific historical actor, is that the distinctiveness of such actors becomes quickly apparent, and the falsity of commonplace generalisations underlined. With this in mind, let us look in more detail at the case of John Pocock.

IV

Pocock was born in London and has retained his British citizenship. But he moved at the age of three to New Zealand because his father, Lewis Greville Pocock, was appointed professor of classics at Canterbury College. After graduating MA from Canterbury himself, Pocock moved to Cambridge in 1948, where he completed a PhD under the supervision of Herbert Butterfield in 1952. After holding academic posts at Otago, at St John’s College, Cambridge, and at Canterbury, Pocock moved to Missouri in 1966 as the William Eliot
Smith Professor of History, and then on to Johns Hopkins, where he became professor of history in 1974. Pocock was shaped by a childhood and early adulthood spent in New Zealand, still considers himself an outsider in North America, despite having spent most of his life there, and is as far from being a member of the British Establishment as it is possible to be. Nor is he a normal member of the liberal establishment, as his recent note underscores in the London Review of Books, telling readers not to be so afraid of Brexit. Pocock has spent his intellectual life telling new stories about the past, and challenging the way history has traditionally been perceived in the process.

In 1957 Pocock's *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* showed the extent to which English lawyers, addicted to a notion of immemorial common law and an immemorial constitution, were inhibited in their historical investigations by comparison with their French counterparts. English lawyers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were obsessed with history, but their approach to the past was essential unhistorical. For the French, such as the monarchomach François Hotman, whose work on feudal landholding appeared in 1572 (*De Feudis*), the contrast between the legacy of Roman Law and the customary law of the French provinces facilitated a comparative study of laws through time. Pocock charted the revolution that followed the appearance of Sir Henry Spelman's *Glossarium Archaeologicum* (1626), which traced the rise and fall of feudal tenures, and in turn facilitated the new kinds of political thinking that could be found in James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656), where land ownership determined the operation of political structures. In revealing that perspectives on the past both shaped and limited political theorising in early modern times, Pocock supplied the most detailed illustration of the fact that new kinds of history were being produced.

In his *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), Pocock supplied a history of the Aristotelian impulse to live a civic life in a free city as a citizen from early modern to modern times, charting the foundation of the philosophy called civic humanism in the warring communities of Renaissance Italy. Small states that thrived in central and southern Europe from the eleventh century onwards began to assert their independence against marauding princes, and against the imperial aspirations of Popes and of the Holy Roman Emperor. They also fought one another. The result was a ceaseless speculation concerning the means of maintaining cities in a state of liberty. It was this issue that concerned Machiavelli above all others. The Machiavellian moment denoted Machiavelli's appearance as a political thinker and actor but more particularly the consequences of his speculations concerning the foundation and formation of a republic, and the point at which the life of the republic became precarious. The creation of the republic was always associated with crisis, and it generated controversies about the origins and possibilities of politics.

The history of Machiavelli's speculation about the prolongation of the life of the republic and of its natural death was extended chronologically and geographically, describing James Harrington’s adaptation in the mid-seventeenth century of Machiavelli’s perspective on the history of Rome, according to which the practice of arms and inheritable landed property were the precondition for the enjoyment of liberty and the exercise of civic virtue. Pocock went on to detail the controversy over this perspective

---

in the eighteenth century, in the very different context of ideas about liberty and autonomy that accompanied the end of the wars of religion and the rise of large and competing commercial monarchies in Europe. Maintaining these new forms of state required the development of standing armies and public credit; these were defended by association with modern forms of politeness, and praised by such men as Daniel Defoe alongside consumption and financial independence, in societies organized in accordance with the division of labour. ‘Neo-Harringtonians’, as Pocock termed them, such as Andrew Fletcher, favoured ancient virtue, protected and sustained by militias and an elite of landowners, whose interest in the state ensured their political wisdom and the moderation of their laws. The neo-Harringtonians despised modern politeness, believing it to entail the corrosion of masculinity, the growth of forms of corruption accompanying the rise of parties and the specialist politician, and far greater uncertainty in civil society and in politics, exemplified by the reliance of the state upon the expertise of the stock-jobber.

The clash between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ ideas about liberty occurred across the Atlantic world through concerns about the likely stability of real and of moveable property, and was in turn complicated both by the domestically uncertain identity of composite states comprised of different ‘nations’, and by discussions in Protestant and Catholic states of the likely consequences of commercial society for religious belief, some of which questioned the compatibility of different forms of Christian worship with a polity competing for survival by commerce and by war. This state of affairs in turn generated an influential literature of jeremiad that was particularly marked in the writings of historians, politicians and philosophers in the late eighteenth century. Pocock’s central claim was that it was absolutely vital to distinguish between political discourses founded on ideas about rights, being inspired by jurisprudential speculation, and those that were founded on the aspiration of restoring virtue and the capacities deemed necessary to human flourishing in societies. How to maintain free states had become a commonplace of political argument in late medieval times, and Pocock revealed that they always rested on ideas about the historical development of liberty, whether liberty had been established in the ancient world and rediscovered, or whether ideas about liberty had only been established after the decline of Rome, by the barbarian tribes that brought down the Empire, in part by asserting their own right to create sovereign nations.

The on-going debate entailed the definition of Europe as a continent composed of a multitude of sovereign powers seeking to live in harmony with one another, or the basis of a new empire, on the grounds that empires alone were capable of bringing peace to a world marred by ceaseless war since the beginning of the ‘Christian Millennium’ that began with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. For Pocock political thought in Europe has been pervaded by jurisprudence, contributing to what he has termed ‘the ideology of liberal empire’. By contrast, historiography, the writing of grand historical narratives, has been concerned with the story of the transformation of the republic into the empire or of the story of the incompatibility of liberty and empire.

Rather than being purely antiquarian, Pocock has always contended that such issues remain identifiable in the political cultures of modern states. The fears that the lone individual who relied upon himself to assert his liberty would lapse into barbarism, or that the individual who had numerous capacities but refused to bring them together in public activity for the freedom of the whole society, would become corrupt and ultimately subject to a tyrant, could be found across modern political cultures. His
contention that the legacies of civic humanism or classical republicanism can be discerned particularly within the political languages of the North American Republic has been one of the reasons for the controversial reception of his work, with numerous attacks charting 'liberal' rather than 'republican' origins of the American state. Pocock’s Barbarism and Religion series of six volumes describes Gibbon’s intellectual journey from his Swiss exile as a young man and criticisms of the Encyclopédie to the growth of his historical interests through his reading of the ‘Enlightened Narrative’ of western historical development in the work of such authors as Giannone, Voltaire, Hume, Robertson, Ferguson and Adam Smith among others. Pocock is as concerned with what Gibbon might have written as with what he actually did write. As such he underlines the extent to which Gibbon is misunderstood when he is presented as a classical humanist rhetorician. Rather, Gibbon is revealed as the historian of Afro-Eurasia, encompassing regions that can be described as Chinese, Arab-Iranian in addition to Greco-Latin. Pocock has explained why it is necessary to study sacred history, erudition, patristics, Christology and ecclesiology if we are to understand Gibbon’s world. Pocock is arguing that Gibbon’s Decline and Fall was not written with the intention of rejecting belief in the Christian revelation. Gibbon was rather responding to what in the parlance of today would be called a global cultural heritage.

Pocock has revealed that historical narratives more often than not combine a story about the origin of the community in question in addition to a narrative about the continuity of the community. These narratives are challenged, revised and challenged again in an endless cycle. In Pocock’s view, such narratives form an element of the personality of an individual that is as important as traditional definitions of personal identity. Pocock has been concerned in recent years that the process he identified in the enlightenment era is accelerating today because of the loss of sovereignty that has accompanied the growth of federal relationships across Europe and elsewhere. It is unsurprising that Pocock is especially interested in the collapse of identities and their consequences. Exactly this occurred in 1973 when the British abandoned New Zealand and other members of the longstanding Commonwealth to their own fate when it joined the European Common Market. For decades now Pocock has been demanding that British history be perceived from the broad perspectives generated by perceiving it as a sometime empire, the peripheries of which are as revealing as its Little England centre-point. Pocock has been concerned particularly to emphasise the importance of Britain within what he termed the ‘Atlantic archipelago’. For Pocock, the approach generates the always-contested narratives of dominion, subject-status and sovereignty when reflections on history and national identity occur. His own journey has turned him into the rarest of breeds, in Colin Kidd’s words a ‘liberal Eurosceptic intellectual’. His


historical writing, culminating in *Barbarism and Religion*, has attacked the notion of Europe as a continent, arguing that it was never anything more than a sub-continent, a peninsula of the gargantuan Eurasian land-mass.

In contemporary historiography Pocock attacks what he has called a ‘post-historical culture’ which, especially when influenced by post-modern narratives about the death of the author or the inaccessibility of knowledge about past or present, abandons historical narratives altogether. Pocock has asked whether what he has termed ‘post-historical ideology’, characterised by the view that all history is invention on the part of the author, marks the final break up of the historical personality?\(^{19}\) At the same time he reminds his readers ‘that the contest continues and is not over yet’.\(^{20}\) The liberal polity where multiple identities are intermixed and respected is the ideal for Pocock, sustained by historical narratives that are always being rejected and revised. Pocock states that the task of establishing such a polity has only increased in difficulty at a time when means of communication and information are being transformed, causing further shifts of identity in turn. Given his belief that the self will never dissolve and that history is unlikely to end, the process of creating historical narratives will continue.

\(^{19}\) Pocock, ‘Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity’, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 293.

natural law that explained the ideological make-up of humanity in time periods of time and in different social structures.

In the hands of someone like David Hume or Adam Smith, the history of ideas combined with economic histories of the rise and fall of states, resulted in a comprehensive analysis of modern Europe and its prospects. For Smith, luxury unleashed by commercial development had undermined both the Roman Empire and the polities of feudal Europe. When Rome fell, however, several Roman cities devoted to commerce survived and maintained their long-established trade routes to the east. It was the addiction of the feudal elites in large monarchies to luxury consumption, supplied from the east, which undermined their social and political authority. Crucially for Smith, Renaissance republicanism was not the source of European liberty. The Italian cities had developed economically, and promoted the aristocratic regime of self-government in consequence, only because they transported the armies of the monarchies of Europe during the Crusades. Smith’s doleful conclusion was that European liberty was not the product of political liberty. Commerce rose only because the economic needs of warfare created military elites who valued civil liberty. The spread of civil liberty across Europe was a consequence of luxury and war together. Smith, following Hume, destroyed the illusions about the history of European liberty and the presumption of its connection to ancient traditions of liberty, or to modern forms of political liberty.

The association of intellectual history with doleful conclusions about the past is therefore far from new. In promoting historiography that has the potential to tell the truth to power, and to challenge the still-dominant forms of historical writing that are entirely supportive either of the present status quo favoured by dominant politicians or of utopian revolutionary projects, it is worth being an intellectual historian, both local and global.