Respectful Appropriation

Intellectual historians should not be Cassandras, bemoaning the current popularity of cultural studies. There is no need to repeat the hysteria that intellectual historians mistakenly felt years ago when social history was ascendent. But we do need to be aware of the affinities between intellectual history and cultural studies and at the same time to be wary of deep fissures in tone and intent between the two approaches.

Both the scholar of cultural studies and the intellectual historian are poachers, *bricoleurs*. No theory or method is sacrosanct from appropriation and appreciation. Intellectual history is at its most exciting when it is merrily eclectic, when theoretical perspectives are borrowed from diverse sources--Kuhnian history of science, Geertzian anthropology, queer theory, chaos theory, Bourdieu's sociology, gender relations--and applied to familiar subjects. Nor should intellectual history be tethered too closely to elite texts and authors in an act of blind obeisance. In some of the most vibrant work in recent years, intellectual historians have discovered the significant interplay between elite and popular culture. In the process, Melville's novels are grasped within the context of the sensationalist popular press of his time, while we also come to recognize how masses of working-class Americans were fascinated with Shakespeare in the nineteenth century.

Cultural studies offers much to intellectual historians: a Foucauldian appreciation for how relations of power may be widely dispersed, a Bourdieu-inspired recognition of how distinctions between objects are rooted in educational and symbolic capital, of how popular and elite culture are mutually related, an appreciation for the power of cultural representation, a notion of racial discourse as a cross-continental phenomenon, a reading of famous novels to see the hidden hand of imperialist discourse, and a self-reflexivity about the collective practices of the discipline of intellectual history. An ostrich approach to the valuable contributions of cultural studies will render our discipline irrelevant to some of the most bracing interpretive gestures in academe.

But caveats concerning cultural studies must be strongly registered. While not all intellectual historians are cheerleaders for the purity of the text or greatness of a particular thinker, there remains a sense of respect when intellectual historians commune with great texts and authors. Intellectual history seems to be marked by a certain type of sober reverence, tinged with the belief that by understanding the language and context of the times when a work was written and its subsequent history, we will be better able to approach the meaning of the text. This is contrasted with the cultural studies imperative to fit everything into an overweening context of domination. Repulsion with the colonialist or hegemonic aspects of every text often seems to be the master key that unlocks all the doors of cultural studies. Cultural studies and New Historicist scholars take scant pleasure in the texts or

thinkers that they study. Moreover, they confront texts in their own imperialistic manner. As Michel Foucault, a guru of cultural studies, once phrased it, when he encountered a text by Nietzsche he wanted to make it groan under the weight of his own interpretation. Intellectual historians caress the text more lightly, they seek to make the texts and thinkers that they study sing out less in pain than in appreciation for the valuable conversation that has occurred between interpreter and object of interpretation.

Intellectual historians must also recognize that cultural studies is defined by its political agenda, one based in oppositional criticism, in a left critique of the representations that capitalism produces, and which, in turn, reproduces structures of domination. The turn to cultural studies is rooted within the politics of academe, in the cultural debates that both enthuse and disable campuses at present. Cultural studies is unrelenting in its political agenda, without much internal debate, or valuable doubt, about its programmatic views on the nature of oppression. In its Foucauldian search for relations of power, distributed throughout the social body, the agenda for the scholar of cultural studies is well formed in advance. It is doubtful that a conservative, or even a liberal, could walk comfortably in the land of cultural studies.

That does not mean that intellectual history should become the province of those of the political right or faint of interpretive heart. The best work in intellectual history does have resonance with political issues, does seek to offer moral guidance for the present. Yet the best in intellectual history, for my tastes, does so in a manner that is at once less self-righteously strenuous and hence more effective. Intellectual history attempts to enter into a Rortyean conversation which might slowly move individuals toward valuable redescriptions which are rooted in a liberal discourse, marked by a healthy reverential kinship with previous texts and thinkers. And out of this alchemy, such relationships may be nudged toward reinvention and renewal. For the intellectual historian this is best accomplished with an attitude of respectful appropriation. Such respectful appropriation will allow intellectual history to accept that which is convincing in cultural studies, while also maintaining an interpretive openness which is distanced from cultural studies. Thus will intellectual history remain vital, even in the face of a new regime of the politics of truth.

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