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Editorial

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Editorial

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1. Preamble

We present here six contributions concerning the methods of interdisciplinary research in the history of ideas and intellectual history, as they are being or have been practised in specific researches. The contributions have been written by young Italian scholars; the intention behind this collection is both to make more broadly available Italian research in the history of ideas that can be considered from this particular point of view, and to illustrate thereby the point of view itself.

The connection between the authors of this volume has been provided by an ongoing activity of methodological reflection that has been taking place since 2010 at the University of Turin, Italy, during the annual meetings on the methodology of interdisciplinary history of ideas and intellectual history organised by the local Interdisciplinary Group in History of Ideas ('Gruppo interdisciplinare di Storia delle idee', to be found at <http://www.gisi.unito.it>). It mainly connects researchers from the University of Turin, but is also open to common initiatives with researchers from other institutions and universities.¹ The Group aims to encourage exchanges between specialists from different disciplinary backgrounds, and to promote interdisciplinary research in the history of ideas. With this objective in mind, we have started to organise (as in all scholarly cooperation) workshops, discussions on recently published books, and methodological seminars on interdisciplinary issues, with special attention to research by younger scholars. It is in these seminars that the contributions that compose this issue of the *History of European Ideas* have been first presented and discussed by a host of young Italian researchers with different historiographical backgrounds and diverse objects of study.

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¹ Mainly Richard Whatmore and the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History, André Tiran and the Laboratoire Triangle in Lyon, and Seizo Hotta at the Fukuyama City University.

2. Interdisciplinary History of Ideas and Intellectual History

The notion of a history of ideas as a global history, and, as such, intrinsically interdisciplinary, lies at the heart of our principal publishing project, the open-access *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas*, founded in 2011. Here we review some of

our points of reference enunciated in the first number:

- The interdisciplinary nature of the history of ideas, following Lovejoy's classic definition right up to the debates of the 1990s;
- The concept of intellectual history as the study of historical actors whose ideas derive from the interaction of different contexts, which was wrought by the University of Sussex team over the past three decades;
- The methodological reflections which emerged from the focus on language by what has been termed the 'Cambridge School';
- The awareness, in the field of the history of philosophy, as in the field of the history of sciences and other specialised histories of ideas, of the indissoluble connections between their subjects.

These trends have all contributed to create a potential interdisciplinary space in which the history of ideas must and can correspond to the intersection of different disciplines.

Proceeding from this intellectual frame our journal was established to offer such a space on a systematic interdisciplinary basis. In fact, instances of methodological innovation are likely to be offered only within the practice of challenging research. Thus we have been offering space for methodological reflection, not only in the journal, but in a series of meetings as well.

We are confident that threading this path, intellectual history and the history of ideas can contribute to a reflection on the intellectual foundations of our present culture. The circulation of ideas on which interdisciplinarity is based is not only the offspring of a present-day sensibility, but originates in the very historical objects we are dealing with, and in their context, perhaps not holistic but certainly dynamically interrelated: both requiring from the historian, to repeat John Burrow's words,

a conscious effort not to treat [them] in isolation, but to be aware of its place in the wider culture, of the cultural and political influences playing on it, and of the ways in which it fostered, transformed and transmitted them.²

A history of ideas relating itself in multiple ways to the corpora and languages of specific fields (the history of science, of economic ideas, of legal ideas, of mathematics, of medicine, etc.) will encourage the conscious development of a global and comprehensive historical understanding.

We have so far privileged, in our public initiatives as in these lines, the denomination of 'history of ideas', and this choice might require the declaration of a rationale of some sort. First and foremost, it has been intended to help bring together scholars who trod those historical fields that deal with specific disciplinary history. The 'history of ideas' label seems to cope better with the exigency to abide by the intradisciplinary technical constraints and the relative conditions of validity: the

² John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the XX Century* (London, 2007), xviii.

need to avoid the pitfall of approaches which are too externalist or generalist, which often drive towards a history of circumstances with no content.

In reality, both situations—the disparities and commonalities of particular aspects of ideal productions, be they later baptised disciplines or not—coexist since the first seeds of early modernity were being planted in the fifteenth century. Consequently, we are interested in an interdisciplinarity that is more than ‘contextual’; from the studies of and in implicit or intrinsic interdisciplinarity, we nurture the move to a more programmatic interdisciplinarity of methods and objects.

Along with this approach, we can share two distinctive elements of intellectual history, as pointed out by one of the authors featured in this issue:

First, it assumes as its object of analysis human reflection through the study and explication of written texts. The second is the attention it pays to the textual and linguistic dimension and to the context in which the language is developed. The central premise of intellectual history is in fact that ideas do not develop in isolation from the individuals who work them out and use them, and it is therefore necessary to study the ideas not as abstract propositions, but in terms of the culture and historical contexts that produced them, and in which they circulated.³

We build, moreover, on the surprising fact that, despite its various shortcomings, in the Italian *accademia* there is a consolidated and growing practice of interdisciplinary openings in the history of thought. This is partly the result of various contingencies that have characterised the Italian intellectual tradition—for example, historically strong ties between the history of philosophy and the history of science, which have brought both limitations and peculiarity of approach; it is illuminating to mention the works by Paolo Rossi and his school. Italian history of mathematics, since the time of Federigo Enriques, was closely bound, as in the French tradition that influenced him, with the philosophy of science and the history of philosophical and scientific thought. And in its inception the philosophy of science was given a strong historical bias by Ludovico Geymonat, who coherently pursued a ‘history of philosophical and scientific thought’. The history of legal culture was coupled with contemporary philosophy of law in the works of Giovanni Tarello and his school.

The strict interdependence of philosophic and economic thought in the experience of the Italian Enlightenment, of philosophy and literature in Antonio Gramsci, of ethics and natural science in the Italian naturalism of the Renaissance, have at some length influenced historians of ideas. Literary history has seen, among others, the works of Maria Luisa Altieri Biagi and her school on the language of the Italian scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And also in recent times, we see an ongoing collaboration.

It is worth adding that intellectual history has a long tradition both in Pisa and in Turin, the two academic milieus where most of the young scholars here represented were trained. In twentieth-century Pisa, such scholars as Eugenio Garin, Delio Cantimori and Furio Diaz have been followed by Carlo Ginzburg, Adriano Prosperi, Mario Rosa and Michele Ciliberto. As far as the rich tradition of historical studies in Turin is concerned, we shall only mention here the heritage of Luigi Einaudi, an

³ Cecilia Carnino, ‘Luxury and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Italy: Intellectual History, Methodological Ideas and Interdisciplinary Research Practice’, this issue.

[Nota] As in the programmatic title of his *Storia del pensiero filosofico e scientifico*, 7 vols (Milano 1970-72).



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120 economist and an historian of economic thought who also was the second President
of the Italian Republic,⁴ and of Franco Venturi, whose works embody intellectual
history as a global history, and, as such, intrinsically interdisciplinary: a testimony of
the liveliness of his legacy appeared in this journal in 2006.⁵

3. Methodology

125 The necessity to transcend the bounds of specific disciplines and our accentuation of
interdisciplinarity *an sich* notwithstanding, we are determined to avoid the creation of
a sort of special subject, and also the building up of a specific methodology: we are
not interested in placing ‘a screen of current methodological concerns between us and
the past’.⁶ This is something that we especially feel to have in common with the
130 Sussex way of doing history that Stefan Collini described in a famous prefatory text:

Intellectual history in this vein has [...] eschewed adherence to any of the
methodological programmes or tight conceptual schemes which have from time
to time been elaborated and defended in general terms – the sociology of
knowledge, the history of unit ideas, the mapping of mentalités, the study of
135 political languages, the critique of ideologies, the recovery of authors’ intentions,
the archaeology of epistemes, the deconstruction of texts, and so on.⁷

The approaches that we favour stay open to an unlimited plurality of objects insofar
as they provide occasion for (interesting) historical exhibition. We are partial to a
loose historical ontology. With a somewhat anti-Ockhamist stance, we will accept a
proliferation of entities and proceedings, provided that a recognisable standard of
rigour—as Paul Valéry put it in his *Eupalinos*: ‘La plus grande liberté naît de la plus
140 grande rigueur’—be respected when threading this or that historiographic or
theoretic path.^[Note]

145 Thus we have no ‘methodology’ to suggest: no a-priori translation of general
ideas into precepts. We are interested instead in methodological reflections: a scholar
has to build awareness of her or his own method, that is, of the method(s) that she or
he has chosen or developed, be it consciously or not. But we see methodology as
reflection on past work done, not as precepts stated in advance—we are interested,
instead, in the very personal experience of individual methods in a particular
150 research. Reflection and communication do not necessarily make the particular
experience universal, but they are the basic conditions to have the authors share it;
the result should be less of a book of historiographic manners and more of a report of
precautions taken while treading on unfamiliar ground. This gives to all participants

⁴ Luigi Einaudi was also an ancient book collector. His library was at the origins of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi in Turin, which currently holds one of the most important collections worldwide of economic texts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. At the Fondazione different generations have learnt and still learn to practise interdisciplinary research in the history of economic and political thought.

⁵ In the issue, young historians investigated the links between economic and political ideas in eighteenth-century Italy; see *Commerce and Morality in Eighteenth-Century Italy*, edited by Koen Stapelbroek (*History of European Ideas*, 32 [2006]).


⁶ John Burrow, ‘Intellectual History: The Poverty of Methodology II’, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=intellectual-history—the-poverty-of-methodology-ii.pdf&site=68> (accessed 9 April 2013), 9.

⁷ Stefan Collini, ‘General Introduction’, in *History, Religion and Culture: Essays in British Intellectual History 1750–1950*, edited by Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (New York, NY, 2000), 14.

[Note] Paul Valéry, ‘Eupalinos ou l’architecte’ (1921), in *_Oeuvres_* (Gallimard 1960), 2, 132.

155 in the discussion, no matter what, the opportunity of making their case through an extended analysis of factual research practices and choices.

To this purpose we have started to organise the above-mentioned annual meetings (Incontri metodologici) on the theme of ‘History of ideas and interdisciplinarity’. From the participants we asked for particular reflection on the conditions for a certain type of historical research, such namely that has pretence, or intent, or obligations interdisciplinary. Precondition for participation was evidently the ability to gain a critical distance from one’s own disciplinary roots, and to recognise both positive constraints, which further comprehension, and negative constraints, which bring about obstacles. Everybody found it appropriate to invite young speakers as well as practised veterans. It must be remarked that, as we mentioned above, participating scholars were mostly based in the Universities and Schools of Turin and Pisa, by reason of the long-standing ties between these two sites of research in such disciplines as intellectual history, the history of philosophy, the history of mathematics, and the history of early modern ideas.

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The papers that follow originated in these meetings; the problems and qualities of their researches were presented and discussed (by appointed discussants and by the public), Italian texts were written, and further discussion and an eventual revision brought about the English texts, which we hope the readers will find as interesting as it has been for us to foster and collect them.

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175 Cecilia Carnino—the only one in the group to be a historian in the general sense—sets in a very clear way the problem of the mutual relationships of research work in the history of ideas and intellectual history. Her analysis is focused on the ideas of ‘luxury’ and ‘consumption’ in eighteenth-century Italy; an interdisciplinary approach which intertwines economics and politics shows how the reconstruction of economic thought constitutes a fertile course for the investigation of the political culture and social projects of eighteenth-century Italian authors.

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185 Simone Mammola, trained as a historian of philosophy, presents what we deem a convincing example of interdisciplinary history of ideas in reporting on his research concerning the interplay of medical and philosophical thought in the early modern time, the status of medical knowledge in concurrence with philosophical method, at a time when medicine and natural philosophy were considered, in their undeniable differences, to be integral parts of the same universe of knowledge.

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195 Marco Menin, connecting the histories of philosophy and of literature, as well as the history of physiology, shows how the study of ‘tears’ during the ‘weeping century’—that is, the eighteenth—can both offer by means of the history of ideas an in-depth consideration of questions crucial to the philosophy of emotions, and help in freeing the intellectual historian from the ‘rationalist bias’ of many followers of Lovejoy.

Sara Miglietti, by means of a philological interpretation of texts, discusses how Quentin Skinner’s views on meaning and context apply to cases of authorial revision, and she rigorously suggests that some key aspects of Skinner’s contextualism need to be reconsidered.

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Philosopher of science and historian of philosophy Paolo Tripodi’s contribution is focused on the eighteenth-century Italian anatomist Vincenzo Malacarne and the twentieth-century neurobiologist Mark Rosenzweig, in order to elucidate a type of interdisciplinarity that concerns not the object of research, but rather the research itself: how conceptual instruments of philosophy can be used to mediate between

research in the history of physiology, and theoretical and experimental undertakings in neuroscience.

205 Roberto Gronda, an historian of philosophy who case-studies here his own work on the history of American Pragmatism, analyses the very idea of interdisciplinarity in a punctual way, while adopting a mightily critical stance towards what he calls 'methodologism'. From this view arises a strong and original validation of interdisciplinarity historical work, as he suggests that while interdisciplinarity cannot
210 be a distinctive quality of any particular approach to historical records, it is rather a property of the subject-matter of history, thus concluding that a strong concept of interdisciplinarity proves itself to be a reliable historiographic category.

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