Prior to the first World War, James Harvey Robinson offered a course at Columbia University entitled "The history of the intellectual class in Europe." Among Professor Robinson's students in this course were Lynn Thorndike, Carlton Hayes, and J. Salwyn Schapiro, who afterward made the study of medieval science, nationalism, and liberalism, respectively, their lifework. In 1940 was founded in New York the quarterly entitled the Journal of the history of ideas. These two events marked the recognition, in the United States, of a field of history for which the term "intellectual history" is as good as any other.

In this paper I propose to discuss in general terms what I consider to be the major problems of intellectual history.

History, of course, like nature, is a whole, the various parts of which—the economic, political, social, intellectual, etc.—are organically related to and inextricably bound up with each other. And yet, as with physics, chemistry, biology, etc., among the natural sciences, each field of history has problems which are more or less peculiar to itself. Each field, that is, isolates certain phenomena for special study.

Now intellectual history claims as its special province the history of thought. "Thought" is, admittedly, a very comprehensive term. There is nonverbal as well as verbal and "unmethodical" as well as "methodical" thought. Ideally, at least, the history of thought embraces not only theology, philosophy, the natural and social sciences, but also belles-lettres, the fine arts, and popular literature of all sorts. The intellectual historian's approach to these subjects, however, is different from that of the philosopher, the scientist, and the critic. What primarily interests him is not the value of ideas in the ultimate scheme of things, their accuracy and logical consistency, or the aesthetic satisfaction they give, but their development and relation to each other in time, how and why they appear and spread at a particular time, and their

1 In 1919 Robinson published a syllabus of this course under the title An outline of the history of the western European mind. The outline was designed "to be used in connection with the course of lectures offered in this field to students in the New School for Social Research."

2 For the distinction between "methodical" and "unmethodical" thought see J. T. Merz, A history of European thought in the nineteenth century (Edinburgh and London, 1896), pp. 66-67. Philosophy and science comprise "methodical" thought. "Unmethodical" thought is the largely undefined thought that is to be found in general literature, in poetry, fiction, and art.
effects on concrete historical situations. Intellectual history may, indeed, throw light on the problem of values, but it is as a philosopher and not as an intellectual historian that a man deals with values as such.

To put the matter more concretely, intellectual history concerns itself primarily with four great problems, for which, thus far, adequate solutions have not been forthcoming. First of all is the problem of discovering the climate of opinion or the Zeitgeist of particular periods of history. Presumably, each period operates within a specific intellectual climate, possesses, that is to say, a world view more or less peculiar to itself, which is based upon certain presuppositions and mental habits. But to discover the intellectual climate of, say, Elizabethan England is not at all an easy thing to do. If it were merely a question of pegging the thought of a few great thinkers, the task would be fairly simple. But intellectual history is the history of the whole intellectual class and not only of a microscopic part of it. Hence, it must take cognizance not only of the "great books" but of the "tracts for the times" (pamphlets, manifestoes, speeches, and sermons), novels (both good and bad), essays, letters, private reflections, etc. It must deal not only with the Hookers and Shakespeares and Hakluyts and Bacons but also with lesser minds like Peter Wentworth, Puritan firebrand of Elizabethan parliaments; Raphael Holinshed, pedestrian chronicler; Richard Rogers, humble divine and diarist; and John Davies of Hereford, whose Microcosmos is a confused jumble of most of the stock ideas of his time. To my knowledge, the exact relationship between the great books and the second-rate or minor books has never been satisfactorily analyzed. A study of this relationship might yield unexpected results. It might be discovered, for example, that the so-called "mind" of an age is not so very homogeneous after all; that while the intellectuals (of whatever quality) of an age share certain presuppositions, they do not share others. There may be (I believe that there is) an all-inclusive intellectual framework, but this framework is sufficiently elastic to permit extremely important variations. In Elizabethan England the context of both Anglican and Puritan thought was supernatural religion, but what a world of difference there was between their respective interpretations of the religious principle! And among the Puritans, what the theologian declared to be the Word of God was not always found to be so in the experience of the popular preacher or the layman.

Still other dangers beset the intellectual historian in his search for the Zeitgeist. To discover the climate of opinion of a particular age, he must cut a cross-section through history, and this is a highly artificial procedure; for as the philosopher-historians of the early nineteenth century made clear (and, I hope, once for all), history is an evolutionary process which never stands still. What we call an "age" or "period" contains both the fruit of the past and the seeds of the future. As A. F. Pollard puts it: "The history of the world presents itself as a series of dissolving views, rather than as a succession of separate lantern slides; new
light dawns on the screen before the old fades away." Now if the intellectual historian is not careful, he is likely to make the mistake that Jacob Burckhardt made in his Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, that is, to present the thought of an age in too static a light and in too great contrast with the thought of preceding generations.

And then there is the anthropologist's friend, the so-called "cultural lag," to contend with. In the eighteenth century the social sciences lagged behind and were slow to adopt the experimental method of the natural sciences. Except for Montesquieu, social scientists employed the by then old-fashioned Cartesian method of deductive reasoning. In late-seventeenth-century England the champions of "modern" progress had to contend with people who, intellectually, still lived in the Renaissance and believed that all wisdom was locked up in ancient Greece and Rome; and the advocates of sweet reason in everything lived side by side with the survivors of the Cromwellian age of religious enthusiasm. Who, then, best reflects the Zeitgeist of Restoration England, the "ancients" or the "moderns," John Locke or John Bunyan?

And, finally, for the intellectual historian who deals in continents rather than in nations, there is the problem of what we may call the "space differential." Doubtless, as A. O. Lovejoy points out, educated Englishmen and Frenchmen and Italians of the late sixteenth century had a great deal in common "in fundamental ideas and tastes and moral temper." The more I read in English intellectual history, the more I am convinced that Arnold J. Toynbee is right in choosing the "civilization" rather than the "nation" as the unit of historical study, for the English do not think, and they never have thought, in splendid isolation from the European continent. All the same, there are profound spatial (territorial or national) differences which vastly complicate the business of tracking down the Zeitgeist. The Italian Renaissance underwent important modifications after it crossed the Alps, and, as Albert Hyma has made clear, differences existed even among the "transalpine" humanists. Everybody knows that the Protestant Reformation assumed different forms in Germany, Switzerland, and England. And what of the climate of opinion of the European Enlightenment? Surely, to mention only one point, English and German intellectuals of the eighteenth century did not feel the same concern for religious and political reform as did the French philosophes.

Admittedly complex, the problem of the climate of opinion is fortunately not insoluble. The solution depends, however, on a proper method of procedure, and the method best calculated to succeed, in my opinion, is the study of the different branches of thought in relation to each other. Comparative studies of this kind are few and far between. We have a plethora of general histories and monographs on special aspects of theology, philosophy, science, historiography, literature, economic and political thought. But where is the history that cuts across these disciplines and relates the one to the other? Surveys like the Cambridge history of English literature and Preserved Smith's History of modern culture scarcely fill the bill, for not only is their sweep too great but their emphasis is on exposition rather than on integration. What we need are detailed studies of the interrelationship of thought

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5 The great chain of being (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), p. 18.
in relatively brief periods of time. I say "brief periods of time" because to lengthen the time span to more than a century, or perhaps even a few generations, would not permit the sort of detailed analysis I believe to be necessary. When the natural scientist wishes to make an experiment, he perforce isolates certain phenomena for special study. Similarly, the intellectual historian who would grasp the elements that go into the making of the climate of opinion must isolate a particular age and observe the different branches of thought of that age in relation to each other. Is there a prestige "science" (theology, physics, evolutionary biology, or what have you) to which all the other sciences of the age are consciously or unconsciously related? Or does the age exhibit a high degree of segregation or compartmentalization of thought? Do ideas readily cross over (although perhaps in disguised form) from one field of thought to another, or are the different fields more or less isolated or developing at different levels? What, if any, are the basic assumptions and presuppositions upon which all or most of the intellectuals ultimately agree? How much tension exists with respect to these assumptions? What are the most significant variations within the common intellectual framework? By answering these and similar questions for a single age, the historian can perhaps form a hypothesis about the nature of climates of opinion in general. Naturally, the answers to these questions would vary considerably for different ages. For example, the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries were intellectually more organic than the sixteenth or the nineteenth. Where theology was the nucleus of thought in the age of Thomas Aquinas, Newtonian physics became so in the age of Voltaire. And so on. But significant as these differences are, they are differences of detail only from the standpoint of the general problem of the climate of opinion. The broad patterns which the study of a single age suggests must be pretty much the same for all ages.

The second great problem of intellectual history is even more complex than the first. This is the problem of causation—the causes of intellectual change. One of the obvious facts of intellectual history is that the climate of opinion is ceaselessly undergoing change. And if one stops to compare the mental attitudes of two periods such as the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries or even of two periods much closer together, such as the Elizabethan Age and the Restoration in England, one finds that the change is nothing short of spectacular. The educated people of the two periods have dissimilar interests. They ask different questions and employ different keywords, metaphors, and analogies. Their methods of knowledge are different, likewise their conceptions of the nature of the universe, of the nature and destiny of man, and of social organization. How can we account for this transformation of ideas, and what is the process by which it comes about?

Such answers as we have to this question either are not answers at all or are too simple answers. Transcendental explanations of intellectual change are, of course, ruled out for the modern historian. Cosmic forces thinking through historical individuals there may be, but the historian, like the natural scientist, must stick to quantities that he can observe and measure. It is, however, precisely in this business of describing what Francis Bacon called the "efficient" (as opposed to "ultimate") causes that we are at sea. The genius theory satisfies nobody. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Des-
cartes, Newton, and the other great thinkers of what A. N. Whitehead called the "age of genius" undoubtedly helped to modify the medieval climate of opinion, but no historian believes that they thought in a vacuum or that their ideas carried persuasion by the sheer brilliance of their arguments. At the other end of the pole from the genius theory is the deterministic theory, which attributes intellectual change not to individual genius but to some vast impersonal force in politics or economics which determines individual thinking. While conceding the suggestiveness of this theory, the historian feels that it, too, sacrifices much to simplicity. Equally difficult to fit in with the facts of history is Hegel's dialectical theory. To say, for example, that the Ptolemaic theory of the universe of the second century A.D. contained its own contradiction scarcely explains the "Copernican revolution" of the sixteenth century. Nor are we much farther forward when we say (as Preserved Smith repeatedly says) that new thought patterns have both intellectual and material origins; for while this thesis recognizes, as the Marxist thesis does not recognize, the complexity of intellectual change, it tends to separate into individual elements what is essentially an organic whole. We feel, with Hegel, that the intellectual and the material are integrally related.

My feeling is that we have gone about studying this problem in the wrong way. What we need are not more intuitive generalizations by philosophers or propagandists but a tough analysis, by historians, of both the process and the dynamics of intellectual change within a relatively short period of history. Much of our trouble traces to the fact that we study causation over too long a time span, with the consequence that we cannot possibly take cognizance of "the subtle changes that each generation brings about." By selecting for study two ages fairly close to each other, but yet not too close, we can see intellectual change at work and observe, as it were under a microscope, the complex of factors that promote it. From such a detailed experiment we can perhaps deduce general laws of intellectual change and its causation. Or if this should prove impossible—for, admittedly, certain factors are more operative in some ages than in others—the experiment will at least have provided a method of general application.

To illustrate, let us take the age of Elizabeth and the Restoration—two periods of English history about one hundred years apart. Recent research has shown that Elizabethan intellectuals still lived, to a very large degree, in the medieval thought world. The view of the universe described in the first book of Richard Hooker's *Laws of ecclesiastical polity* is substantially like that of Thomas Aquinas. Original sin and the decline of the world from a golden age were general assumptions. The method of knowledge was authoritarian. Theology was the queen of the sciences, and it was unthinkable to all but a daring few that historiography and political and economic thought should be unrelated to it. Only three or four generations later, in the age of Newton and Locke and the Royal Society, progressive thought borrowed its method and its picture of the universe from natural science and par-

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6 Louis Wright, "Renaissance conference at the Huntington Library," *Huntington Library quarterly*, IV (1940-41), 174. Wright further remarks that while fundamental attitudes may be the same for different generations, other attitudes are vastly different. For example, the dominant mood of 1620 was not the same as the mood of the decade from 1580 to 1590.
ticularly from the new science of mathematical physics. Theology, although still respectable, was merely one of many sciences, each of which tended to formulate laws of its own being. For many people the "moderns" were superior to the "ancients"; and because man was thought to be the product of environment rather than of the Fall, there seemed to be an excellent chance of ameliorating his condition. How and why did this astonishing change in the English climate of opinion come about?

The external history—the process, as distinguished from the dynamics—of change from the one period to the other ought to be relatively easy to describe. In Darwinian terms the problem would be to discover just when the original mutations occurred, the stages by which they subsequently developed, and the time at which the environment definitely selected them for survival. From my own study of these hundred years of English thought I have come to the following tentative conclusions about process. First of all, intellectual evolution is not cataclysmic but gradual. It is, so to speak, given to the world in easy, very easy, instalments. Societies take a considerable time to wheel around from long-established positions. So-called "new" ideas usually shoot up inside the traditional intellectual framework, in combination with old ideas. To separate the new from the old and to win wide acceptance for the new is the work of generations. Copernicus' theory, for example, proceeded from the age-old assumption of the perfect simplicity of the universe and retained many features of the medieval cosmic scheme. It remained for the followers of Copernicus to draw the really revolutionary implications of the theory, and it was not until well into the seventeenth century that it became generally accepted. Equally slow in developing was the notion of a secular historiography. The Tudor historians and dramatists—Edward Hall, the authors of the *Mirror for magistrates*, Shakespeare, and others—broke with the middle ages in their patriotic concentration on recent English history, but they subjected national history to the Augustinian idea of providence. And from the preface and first books of Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the world* to the fifteenth chapter of Gibbon's *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* is a long road indeed. Nor was the break with medieval political thinking at all sudden. Hooker and his Anglican contemporaries broke with the past when they made the king the spiritual as well as the temporal head of a self-sufficient nation. But, in reality, all they did was to nationalize the medieval *Corpus Christianum*. John Locke's liberal machine-state materialized only after years more of chipping away at the old religious block.

The history of religious toleration from 1559 to 1689 admirably illustrates a second point about the process of intellectual change, namely, that the progress of an idea is not necessarily continuous. Queen Elizabeth and her privy councilors were in some respects more tolerant than Archbishop Laud. The Cavalier Parliament was less tolerant of Dissenters than was Cromwell of Anglicans. The profile of toleration for the period from the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity to the great Act of Toleration of 1689 would surely reveal not a straight, but a jagged, line with many dips and rises. The third and last point I should like to make about process is that the change-over from one cluster of ideas to another is not always so complete as appears on the surface. This fact was borne in upon me forcibly not so long ago when I re-read
Newton and the fourth book of Locke’s *Essay concerning human understanding*. Newton had not completely discarded the idea of providence, much less the creation of the world by God at a fixed time. Newton’s universe is static like that of Thomas Aquinas and Hooker, and unlike that of Laplace and Sir James Jeans. For Newton, as for Robert Boyle and surely for the majority of the members of the Royal Society, the created universe revealed the works of God and was the object of religious worship. And as for Locke, the main points he makes about the boundary between reason and faith might have been lifted out of the *Summa theologica*. To be sure, this comparison is somewhat misleading, for it takes into account only a part, and not the whole, of Newton’s and Locke’s thought. But it will serve to illustrate my point, which is that there is continuity in the midst of the very greatest intellectual change. The main value of Carl Becker’s *Heavenly city of the eighteenth century philosophers* consists in making this same point.

Turning now to the much more complicated problem of dynamics, how shall we proceed? What factors shall we single out for investigation? Usually, intellectual innovation is the result both of external and of internal influences and of a congeries of events working simultaneously. We might begin therefore by investigating possible foreign influences. Obviously, foreign influences are greater in some periods than in others, but in the century of the scientific awakening, the grand tour, and English discovery, colonization, and trade with the Levant and the Far East they cannot have been small. But what types of persons felt their impact, and precisely what new trains of thought did they set going?

*Inside* the society in question we should have to weigh the relative effects of intellectual, psychological, economic, technological, political, and social events. Of these, intellectual events are by all odds the most difficult to deal with. It is comparatively easy to see how other kinds of events helped to alter the climate of opinion. No one doubts, for instance, that the secularization of thought in the seventeenth century and the breakdown of the organic and hierarchic conception of society were closely connected with the expanding economy and increasing social mobility. Politics likewise figured in the first stages of the history of religious toleration. Not liking to push Roman Catholics and Dissenters to desperation in view of England’s parlous international position between 1570 and 1606, the English government hit on the formula of persecuting for political and not for religious reasons. This formula probably saved the radical sects from extinction, and the fact that they succeeded in firmly rooting themselves in English soil further stimulated toleration, for it demonstrated, as perhaps nothing else could, that a society lacking religious uniformity could exist without serious disorder. And the universal abhorrence of religious dogmatism of the Restoration, the search for a simplified and largely ethical religion—surely that was due, in no small part, to a century of interminable religious controversy and, as John Locke calls it, “enthusiasm or extravagancy in religion.” Sidney Webb suggests still another way in which non-intellectual events might foster a new ideology. In the *Fabian essays* he points out how “practical men” of nineteenth-century England, legislators and town councilors ignorant of scientific sociology, effected an “unconscious” revolution in social attitudes merely by performing necessary public tasks. By extending the
services provided by the state or the local community (for example, in public utilities), these practical men unwittingly undermined "philosophic radicalism" and prepared the ground for the recrudescence of the conception of society as an organism. Applying Webb's suggestion to the seventeenth century, one wonders how much of the contemporary zest for science and its utilitarian possibilities was due to "practical men," inventors and craftsmen wrestling with the practical problems of their trade, physicians seeking remedies for specific diseases, etc. Robert Boyle, the great chemist, says that he learned more about "natural philosophy" from craftsmen in their workshops than from all the theorists.7

With intellectual events as causes of change we are on more slippery ground. The chief issue to decide here is whether new ideas ever arise and effect changes in the climate of opinion independently of the kinds of events listed above. In other words, do ideas have a life of their own, independent of the social environment? I believe that they do in only a very qualified sense. That new ideas sometimes arise by deductive reasoning from traditional premises I am perfectly prepared to admit. In the late sixteenth century Giordano Bruno, for example, deduced "the doctrine of the decentralized, infinite, and infinitely populous universe" from the Platonistic principles of plenitude and sufficient reason. And, as Lovelace points out, Bruno's doctrine undoubtedly did more to shatter the medieval universe and confound the Christian epic than did the heliocentric theory of Copernicus. But it strikes the historian as more than just coincidence that Bruno should have made his bold deductions in the same century that saw the breakup of the old guild system, the Protestant assault on the medieval church, and the attack on traditional political thinking and man's key position in the "chain of being" by Machiavelli and Montaigne. The environment did not, of course, determine Bruno's specific doctrine. But the fact remains that the premises from which Bruno argued were well known in the middle ages, and yet few people drew (or at any rate accepted) their revolutionary implications. The historian concludes that something in Bruno's environment (the contemporary attack on traditional authorities and institutions, the spirit of criticism, or what have you) encouraged Bruno to make and popularize his novel deductions.8 The historian also wonders (or ought to wonder) whether Bruno's intellectual radicalism was in any way related to his social position or, rather, lack of it. The fact that Bruno was a renegade monk and a social misfit—can this have had anything to do with his yearning for philosophical infinity and his willingness, nay eagerness, to break the cake of intellectual custom? In accounting for the appearance of new ideas, historians would do well to consider sociological and psychological, as well as purely intellectual, data.9


8 In their article, "Thomas Digges, the Copernican system, and the idea of the infinity of the universe in 1576," Huntington Library bulletin, V (1934), 60-117, Francis R. Johnson and Sanford V. Larkey point out that the infinity of the universe was a subject of metaphysical discussion throughout the Renaissance, that Bruno was influenced by the speculations of Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century, and that Thomas Digges, the Elizabethan astronomer, anticipated Bruno by a few years in joining this idea to the Copernican system.

9 It seems to me that we historians are entirely too innocent of the data and methodology of sociology and psychology. The anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists are beginning to trade ideas and even to work on common projects. Psychologists like Franz Alexander and Erich Fromm now avail themselves of historical data for their work. But the
If the theory that ideas have a life of their own cannot completely account for the initial appearance of a new idea like Bruno’s doctrine of infinite worlds, still less can it explain its wide diffusion. Every age boasts a fair number of intellectual “sports,” men who think ahead of their times, but the ideas of perhaps the majority of these advanced thinkers die stillborn. Or else, like Castellio’s premature idea of religious toleration or Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s premature historian, for the most part, remains aloof from his brethren in the social sciences.

Just how important psychology, for example, can be to the intellectual historian is suggested by Erich Fromm’s important book, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, 1941). In this book Fromm studies the interaction of psychological, economic, and ideological factors in the social process. How can one explain the “escape from freedom” to authoritarianism in the present century? Not merely, says Fromm, by reference to contemporary political and economic events. One has to take into account the whole trend of European history since the late middle ages and the European’s psychological reaction to this trend. The history of Europe since the Renaissance and Reformation has been largely the history of the individual’s successful attempt to free himself from political, economic, and spiritual shackles. But the individual, because of his basic need to avoid moral aloneness and to “belong” to the world outside himself, can stand only so much freedom. Hence, in the twentieth century the individual’s “escape from freedom,” his panicky flight to authoritarian creeds which offer him emotional security and the sense of belonging to the group. Now, whether Fromm’s thesis is valid or not, it suggests to the intellectual historian the necessity of considering the basic structure of man’s character in relation to historical events.

The importance to the intellectual historian of social structure and social psychology is at once apparent when one considers a problem like that of intellectual radicalism. The degree and origin of radical dissent in any age doubtless depends very largely on social structure. In the nineteenth century, for example, the majority of socialist leaders were of bourgeois extraction. A sociologist recently suggested to me that this might be explained by the fact that the bourgeois intellectual was caught in a squeeze between his parents, who worshiped success and had social ambitions for their son, and the upper classes, to whom he was socially unacceptable. The bourgeois intellectual took his revenge on the society which frustrated him by attacking the whole social system.
themselves. The causes of these movements is a whole story in itself. Once they gather momentum, however, they themselves act as factors of intellectual change, and sometimes in totally unexpected ways. Puritanism, for example, was neither secular nor liberal at its inception. Yet Puritanism, by its "worldly asceticism," its separation of church and state, and its presbyterian form of church government, helped to produce the "capitalistic spirit" and the political liberalism of the English middle classes of the seventeenth century. As A. S. P. Woodhouse has taught us, Puritan religious ideas (Christian liberty, the priesthood of all believers, etc.) "transferred" to the political sphere and effected fundamental changes in political attitudes. Likewise, as R. F. Jones has written, the first principles of the scientific movement of the seventeenth century clashed with traditional ideas and generated secondary principles of enormous importance. For example, the scientist's habit of going direct to nature clashed with the authority of the ancients and led to anti-authoritarianism and insistence on freedom of thought and discussion. It also laid the basis for the idea of progress which eventually spread from science to the literary world. Seventeenth-century science was not consciously in opposition to religious orthodoxy, but it acted nonetheless as a powerful solvent of ancestral religious beliefs. In other words, intellectual movements often have indirect results which go far beyond the intentions of their original leaders.

Also worth investigating is the possible role that traditional patterns of thought may play in promoting intellectual change. A. N. Whitehead raises this point when he suggests, in *Science and the modern world*, that the scientific movement itself would have been inconceivable without the antecedent mental training provided by medieval scholasticism and the antecedent belief that Western intellectuals had in a rational and ordered universe, and hence in the scrutability of nature. Our conclusion must be that the dynamics of intellectual change is an extraordinarily complicated problem for which there is no simple solution. Events of all kinds, new ideas and old ideas, combine in subtle ways to produce new climates of opinion. The intellectual historian's job is to see how all these events bear upon specific mutations of thought and how and why they select some of these mutations, but not others, for survival.

From the causes of new ideas and new ideologies we move on now to their effects on the world of action. This is the third great problem of intellectual history: to what extent and precisely how do ideas affect the majority of nonintellectual people? Does intellectual activity modify institutions or move peoples? Do ideas have social consequences? Unquestionably, a great deal of nonsense has been written on this subject. The philosophers tell us, in effect, that "ideas make history." According to this argument, the *philosophes*, and especially the social contract, caused the French Revolution. To Benthamism was due the "administrative nihilism" of the English parliaments of the mid-nineteenth century; Schopenhauer and Nietzsche paved the way for national socialism in Germany; American conservatism stems from Locke's *Treatise on civil government*; and so on. Now it is undoubtedly most exhilarating to college professors and intellectuals in general to


think that their lucubrations win friends and influence people. But, as Tolstoi remarked in the epilogue to *War and peace*, it is a little hard to see what religious, philosophic, or political doctrines had to do with Napoleon’s momentous decision to invade Russia in 1812 or how the murders of the French Revolution could have resulted from the doctrine of the equality of man. Tolstoi’s remark calls to mind the English Usury Act of 1571. At a time when English intellectuals were still fulminating against usury, the “plain man” succeeded in piloting through parliament a bill which expressly sanctioned loans at 10 per cent interest.

The whole question of the causal nexus between ideas and political and social events obviously needs reopening. That ideas, along with other factors, “make history” we can safely assume. Ideas serve both to confirm a society in customary ways of acting and to push it into new ways. But how an entire society, as distinguished from a few individuals within that society, comes by the ideas it holds collectively—that is the question. The views (whether implicit or explicit) that men have of the universe, human nature, and society doubtless help to explain their actions in concrete situations. But where does the majority, the 90 per cent or more who are neither reflective nor articulate, get these views? In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoi tells us how one such man got his views. Prince Obloonsky, he says, did not choose his views any more than he chose the shapes of his hat and coat. He “simply took those that were being worn,” i.e., those views on science, art, and politics “which were held by the majority and by his paper, and he only changed them when the majority changed them—or, more strictly speaking, he did not change them, but they imperceptibly changed of them-}

And now we come to the fourth and final problem, which concerns the uses of intellectual history (employing the term "uses" in a general and not in a narrowly utilitarian sense). Why study intellectual history? A more stable and self-confident civilization than our own would not even trouble to raise this question. It would assume, like Hurvitz, the Polish schoolteacher in Sholem Asch’s novel *Three cities*, that every bit of fresh information pushed back the frontiers of knowledge and made for progress. But our age is uncertain of itself and introspective, and students of the "humanities" especially feel obliged to take stock of themselves and evaluate what they are doing in the light of contemporary events.

Only the other day an acquaintance of mine, a political scientist of the anti-historical school, told me that, so far as he could see, intellectual history (and, for that matter, history in general) had no relevance whatever to modern problems. By that he meant that intellectual history cannot predict the future. Historians are wise after the event, but could they have predicted (did they, in fact, predict) the future spread of the Nazi ideology back in the early 1920’s? I would agree that the historian cannot predict future events with the mathematical precision that the astronomer can forecast the eclipse of the sun or the appearance of a new constellation. History, which is ultimately the reflection of man’s nature, is too complex for crystal-gazing. Historical hindsight is therefore much easier than foresight. But, since I do not completely share my friend’s basic assumptions (he appears to hold the genius theory of ideas and certainly believes in free will as opposed to any kind of necessity or determinism; to that extent he is an existentialist), I cannot altogether accept his conclusions. I believe that the historian who knows the main outlines of the history of Western thought and who has studied it along the lines suggested in this paper should be able, at the very least, to describe the outer limits, the general framework, within which Westerners will think in the near future. A more detailed knowledge of the thought patterns of the last two centuries should enable him to do even better, to delineate the half-dozen or so major world views which have already crystallized or which are beginning to crystallize, and from which the Oblonskys will probably have to choose. If one is familiar with these world views, one can predict with reasonable accuracy how their respective adherents will act in given situations. In other words, I believe with Leslie A. White that “what one strives for and how his effort is expressed is [to a considerable extent, at least] determined by his culture.”

At the same time intellectual history suggests possibilities of control as well as of prediction. At the present time we Westerners are at sea intellectually. We live in what Saint-Simon would call a “critical” as opposed to an “organic” period of history. So many of the beliefs and values of the great bourgeois age just passed have been subjected to severe criticism, but as yet we have nothing satisfactory to put in their place. In this spiritual vacuum we either despair like Franz Kafka or frantically grasp at straws like the neo-orthodox. Now if intellectual history does nothing else, it enables us to see ourselves and our predicament in perspective. The study of hun-

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14 Leslie A. White, “Man’s control over civilization: an anthropocentric illusion,” *Scientific monthly*, LXVI (1948), 244.
dreds of years of thought throws into re-
lief, as perhaps nothing else can, the real
intellectual problems of our time. It
teaches us to distinguish between fash-
ions and fads and enduring values. It
shows us how dogmas come and go, and it
illuminates the disastrous effects of dog-
matism thinking in general. We perceive
that ours is by no means the first critical
period of history. This knowledge (I call
it “knowledge” advisedly) should enable
us to live more courageously and, at the
same time, put us on our guard against
the hucksters of intellectual certainties
and closed systems of thought (either
new or old). In this way we may be able,
after all, to preserve the scientific spirit
in a century marked by so many sense-
less “escapes from freedom.”

Intellectual history also and finally
has its uses for formulating a philosophy
of history. Ever since Ranke’s day his-
torians have, by and large, shied away
from the philosophy of history. In their
hunt for new manuscripts and new facts
they have abandoned this important
field to the philosophers, psychologists,
and amateurs. Far from disparaging fact-
finding, I would merely point out that too
few historians take the trouble to see the
wood for the trees. Yet, surely, it is the
historian’s obligation to search out the
meaning of facts, as well as the facts
themselves. Does the history of the West
from, let us say, the middle ages to the
present reveal a definite trend? And, if so,
is the trend downward or upward (obvi-
ously the answer to this question will de-
pend on one’s own values and “over-
beliefs”)? Where does the contemporary
age stand with respect to this trend? In
the history of the West, do “organic” and
“critical” periods of thought alternate as
Saint-Simon supposed? Which ideas have
persisted through all the changes in the
climate of opinion, and which ideas have,
for all we can see, died? What generaliza-
tions can one make about the process and
dynamics of intellectual change? Are all
ages equally creative, and, if not, what
are the historical conditions that make
for the maximum of creation? Does in-
tellectual concentration in certain direc-
tions mean atrophying in other direc-
tions? To these and other questions the
intellectual historian ought to be able to
come up with some interesting answers.
Of course, his philosophy of history,
whatever it may be, can be but tenta-
tive, for he is dealing not only with high-
ly complex materials but with a limited
time span. But his answers, however ten-
tative, cannot help giving him (and, he
hopes, others) insights into the historical
process as a whole. And to see the whole,
if only dimly, is, after all, the aim of edu-
cation.

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