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John Potts. Ideas in Time: the longue durée in intellectual history

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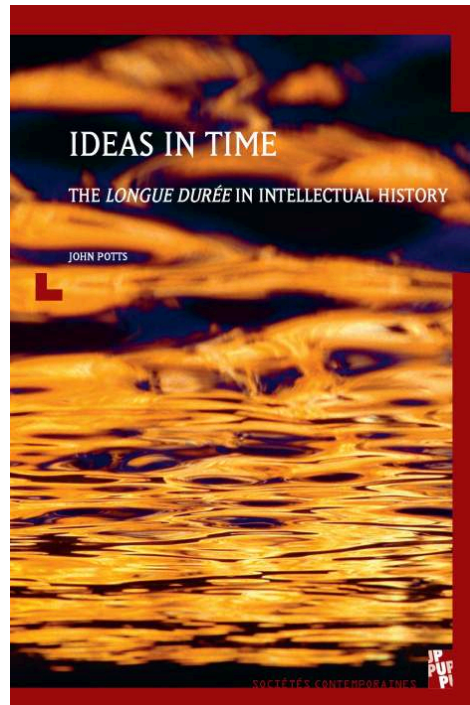
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- 1 In this short but dense and ambitious book, John Potts seeks to bring to the history of ideas “some of the ‘rigour and stability’” Michel Foucault famously declared it to be lacking (Potts 2019, 16). Indeed, spearheading the epistemological turn in intellectual history of the 1960s and 1970s, the Frenchman, along with scholars such as Quentin Skinner, Hayden White and Thomas Kuhn, took a sledgehammer to the methods and assumptions of a previous generation of pioneering historians of ideas, most notable among them Arthur O. Lovejoy (Potts 2019, ch. 2). Fairly or not (McMahon 20) his assertion that the task of the historian of ideas was to write the “biographies” of the fundamental “unit-ideas” which had been “expressly enunciated by the most influential of early European philosophers” (qtd in Wilson 200) came to stand for that generation’s epistemologically flawed and politically suspect manifesto. Flawed, the critics said, was the *unhistorical* notion of the “unit-idea” endowed with fixed meanings stubbornly resistant to the passage of time. Flawed also was the conception of the European philosophical tradition as a great unbroken chain of thinking initiated by Plato – this could only lead to deep misattributions of “influence” and “transmission” between thinkers, all (mis)read as responding to each other rather than to their own immediate contexts. Flawed again was the exclusive focus on the ruminations of a small coterie of elite white men, resulting in a cramped vision of past thought. And the root cause of these multiple errors of epistemic judgement? An axiomatic obsession with *tracing historical continuity*, itself the result of (or at the very least resulting in) an inherently politically conservative grand teleological narrative of “Western civilisation” as a fundamentally praiseworthy project culminating in the glorious present. This would not do (Potts 2019, chs. 3 & 4). Out went individual ideas; in came “ideologies”, “political languages”, and “systems of thought”. Out went the set canon of “Great Texts” by “Great Thinkers”; in came studies of vast corpora juxtaposing texts of different origins and natures, to the point of denying authorial agency. Out went the grand sweeping narratives covering multiple centuries; in came the micro, in-depth studies of particular debates, in particular places, over tightly-bookended periods of time. And out went the search for continuity, that massive river of slowly evolving traditions linking past, present and future; while in came a focus on “tectonic plates” (Potts 2019, 103) shifting, on breaks and turning points, both between and within periods of time. In short, a new paradigm had arrived in the history of ideas: discontinuity.
- 2 Surveying the state of the field half a century on, Potts issues a plague on both houses. He is particularly scathing about authors who have attempted to revive the old Lovejovian model, such as Daniel Dennett, whose “memetics” approach is deemed



“simplistic and ahistorical” (Potts 2019, 53), or Robert Nisbet, whose *History of the Idea of Progress* is described as evincing “all the flaws of the grand narrative form” (188). But neither does he pull his punches when discussing the work of discontinuist authors. Using their own tools, he points out that their work too could be read as politically suspect, which in turn might explain their own epistemological flaws. Indeed, a contextualist approach to the discontinuist turn could not but notice that the “cultural environment” of the 1960s was one in which “continuity of thought or custom [was] assigned a purely conservative identity. It [was] seen to serve the authority that [was] being challenged” (133). Hence the flawed conclusions of authors such as Kuhn, who were determined to show that historical change happened *against* the past, leading them to ignore or suppress evidence of continuity, on the one hand, and forcing them to develop unconvincing promethean explanations for this change, such as the woolly notion of “genius”, on the other (120-130). Invoking Bakhtin, Potts suggests a simple remedy: rather than a “dialectical either/or” model, historians of ideas should adopt a “dialogic both/and” model of history: continuist *and* discontinuist (160). By acknowledging, along with Bachelard, Canguilem (ch. 6), Serres (ch. 9), and, to some extent, the genealogical Foucault (ch. 5) that the past is *both* an obstacle *and* a contributing factor to change, *both* destroyed *and* preserved in the process of change – including the most radical – their histories would become all at once less epistemologically flawed, capable of offering nuanced and convincing accounts of how ideas evolve and are transmitted, and, he implies, would cease to be politically suspect, having no built-in biases towards either continuity or discontinuity.²

- 3 It is hard to disagree with Potts on the epistemological front: his case is at once reasonable on its face and convincingly defended throughout. I am a little more sceptical about the claim to political neutrality however. Indeed, Potts’s scholarly rehabilitation of continuity as an epistemic frame is accompanied in *Ideas in Time* by an arguably Burkean preference for the past over the present expressed in language that, in this otherwise measured tome, is uncharacteristically charged. For instance, he paints contemporary “commentators on science and technology” who argue for a continuist perspective as embattled prophets whose “**plea to respect the continuity** on which any contemporary development **must** build” (Potts 2019, 177, my emphases) is disastrously falling on deaf ears. He later approvingly describes “the continuist orientation” as “evinc[ing] a **respect for tradition**, or for aspects of thought or culture that **resist** across very long durations” (180, my emphases). These suggestions that the past is threatened by an inconsequential present in thrall to “a **delirium** of novelty” (177, my emphasis) culminate with Coleridge’s quip that those “who are not good enough to contemplate the Past (...) exist in fragments, annihilated to the Past (...) [and] dead to the future” (180). To call on historians to be alert to continuity is one thing. To invite them to “respect tradition” is quite another. Potts is fully aware of this, as his excellent summary of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas shows (154-5). Frustratingly, he concludes simply that “its merit lies in its questioning of the political significance of theories elevating the role of tradition” (155). It will be my argument that his own “elevation of tradition” is of some significance for the kind of history of ideas he invites us to write.
- 4 For Potts is not content to develop a theoretical framework. That is simply a stepping stone towards his ultimate objective: to rehabilitate the “seemingly outmoded practice of tracing ‘the empirical progress of ideas’, as Foucault pejoratively describe[d] it” (Potts 2019, 19). So.... *tout ça pour* a return to Lovejoy? Hardly. The resulting narratives,

he insists, must be “provisional”, not grand (ch. 7), never assuming continuity and attentive to both the peaks and troughs of an idea’s “career” (19), including those stretches of time where it may have fallen out of usage. They must also engage in “serial contextualism” (15), i.e. be alert to the social and cultural specificities of the successive contexts in which the idea is found. And they should of course not limit themselves to a study of “Great Thinkers”. But if Lovejoy is thus corrected, he is not entirely forgotten. Potts holds on to two fundamental features of the “old” history of ideas: its humanism and empiricism. He thus calls on historians of ideas to reject any talk of the death of the author (160-161) and instead heed Collingwood’s fundamental hermeneutic of question and answer, which “allows for the localisation of thought within its broader context, while accommodating the ‘human reflective ability’ likely to prompt intellectual change” (162). He also argues, with Gadamer, that if “all understanding is interpretation”, nevertheless “historical truth may ultimately be ‘disclosed’ in hermeneutic reflection” (69) or, more pragmatically, with Ashplant and Smyth, that the aim of the historian should be to seek not “truth” but “plausibility” in reconstructing the meanings accrued to an idea in the past (70). And one particularly fruitful way of achieving all of this, he ultimately suggests, is to draw on “the tradition of etymology as utilised by Raymond Williams in his book *Keywords*” (164).

- 5 To readers familiar with Quentin Skinner’s critique of that famous textbook (Skinner 1969), Potts’ project may suddenly look distinctly unenticing. Why return to an approach that has been convincingly shown to adopt a limiting view of language as “reflecting” rather than “constituting” social reality (Richardson 103), leading to studies which, at their best, descriptively catalogue the existence of an idea in a given time and place but are incapable of analytically exploring why it was used by those who used it and to what effect?³ I invite those readers to refrain from despair and turn instead, as I did, to Potts’ excellent *A History of Charisma*, published in 2009. A self-styled “word history” concerned with the “dynamics of semantic change” (Potts 2009, 7) from Ancient Greece to the contemporary United States, it is conducted along most of the *longue durée* post-Lovejovian lines he champions in *Ideas in Time*, to illuminating effect. But, happily, not all of them. For instance, his critique of the discontinuist focus on “discursive systems over human agency” (Potts 2019, 161) in *Ideas in Time* sits a little uncomfortably with chapters 7 to 9 of *Charisma*, where he looks at various types of literature – religious, scientific, pseudo-scientific and common – in which the term “charisma” is used, to gather a sense of what it is thought to mean and what functions it plays. If that is not studying “discursive systems”, I don’t know what is. Similarly, when the word “charisma” falls out of use, his “word history” should, by rights, have been blank. Instead he writes ten pages which trace “the idea of charisma – as spiritual gift, including supernatural aspects – even while the word charisma lay largely unused” (Potts 2009, 94). This decision, to shift from the meanings attached to a word-sign – “charisma” – to a focus on finding those meanings even in the absence of the word-sign is arguably a departure from the “tradition of etymology” and a vindication of Skinner’s helpful distinction, in his critique of *Keywords*, between identifying “the words [people] use” and the “concepts they possess”.⁴
- 6 Ultimately, what Potts offers us is not so much an etymology as a genealogy of the idea of charisma.⁵ Much more (and much better) than a straightforward linear history, it is a historically grounded reflection on the here and now, similar in that sense to ... Skinner’s work on the concept of the State, published that same year (Skinner 2009).⁶ Where their projects differ however is in their aims. The latter writes his genealogy

with a view to “reflecting critically on how [the concept] is currently understood” (Skinner 2009, 325, my emphasis). The former writes his in order to explore the “shifting cultural role” (Potts 2009, 1) of charisma and to map “the persistence of the past in contemporary culture” (Potts 2019, 17). The result is a playful puncturing of the secular self-image of our age, as he demonstrates that the ubiquity of the term charisma signals a cultural need, in our rationalist modernity, for mystic irrationality and enchantment (Potts 2009, ch.10). It is in this that Potts’s “elevation of tradition” is significant: it shapes his understanding of what the history of ideas is for – not for engaging with the concerns of the present but for puncturing its self-delusions, not for imagining the present’s potential futures but for celebrating its persisting pasts.

- 7 Rarely has one book led me to read, or re-read, so many other articles and books, as *Ideas in Time*. Bar his arguably mistaken view of Skinner’s work, Potts discusses a dizzying array of authors from a no-less dizzying array of disciplines, with a clarity and authority that are truly remarkable. His call, in *Ideas in Time*, and his ability, in *Charisma*, to show a “both/and” flexibility in methodology and epistemology when exploring an idea’s history are inspiring. Whether the history of ideas emerges either “stabilised” or less shaped by individual historians’ political inclinations as a result is doubtful. But reinvigorated? Certainly – and for a *longue durée*.

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NOTES

1. My thanks to Fanny Robles, book reviews editor for e-Rea, for the patience she has shown despite the embarrassing *longue durée* it has taken me to complete this review.
 2. Potts quotes approvingly the semioticians Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress's view that a historian's decision to adopt a narrative model of either "slide" (continuity) or "transformation" (discontinuity) is "itself ideologically significant" (Potts 2019, 165). The implication seems to be that a model which prioritizes neither would be free of any ideological bias.
 3. See Levine (1991) and Rothstein (1993), whose reviews of David Spadafora's *History of the Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-century Britain*, a book which Potts repeatedly sets up as an exemplar (Potts 2019, 41-44, 67-68), highlight these limits. As the rest of my review makes clear, those limits don't apply to *A History of Charisma*, which goes well beyond describing the instances in which the term appears but also analyses the intentions of authors involved in contests over its meaning, when they arise, such as in his chapter on the virulent debates in the early Church (Potts 2019, ch. 4).
 4. See Skinner (1979, 206) when he takes the example of John Milton, who clearly possessed the concept of "originality" yet could not use the word, as it only appeared in the English language long after his death.
 5. "when we trace the genealogy of a concept, we uncover the different ways in which it may have been used in earlier times" (Skinner 2009, 325).
 6. See Armitage (2012, 499) who points to that article by Skinner as a good example of a contextually sensitive history of ideas spanning a *longue durée*.
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