

The great chain of ideas

*The past and future of the history of ideas,
or why we should not return to Lovejoy*

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In 1933, Arthur Lovejoy gave a series of lectures at Harvard University; they were later edited and published in 1936 as *The great chain of being*. Lovejoy was trained in and a professor of philosophy, and the lecture series was presented in honour of the late professor of philosophy William James. Yet in his lectures Lovejoy ventured out of the classical philosophical territory to bring together histories that had previously been told in separate contexts; his examples ranged from philosophy and theology to poetry and the natural sciences. “Many separate parts of the history have, indeed, been told before”, Lovejoy conceded; however, rather than novelty it was “their relation to a single pervasive complex of ideas – and thereby, often, to one another – that still seems to need to be set forth”.¹

Lovejoy’s ambition was something more than a new approach to the history of philosophy – he hoped to found an entirely new discipline. Beginning in 1919, he spoke of the new research programme as the “history of ideas”; in 1923 he formed the “History of ideas club” at Johns Hopkins University; and in 1940 he published the first issue of *The journal of the history of ideas*.² In consequence, Lovejoy is often described as the founding father of the history of ideas, at least in North America (Swedish *idéhistoria*, German *Ideengeschichte*, and other research traditions, several of which are at least as old as their North American counterpart, had their own founding fathers).

Yet as often happens with strong-minded school builders, Lovejoy eventually fell out of fashion, not least in the very discipline he had helped to establish. Methodological advancements such as social and cultural history, increased attention paid to context and language, and critical

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perspectives including those derived from psychoanalysis, Marxism, post-structuralism, and feminism, made Lovejoy and his contemporaries seem increasingly antiquarian, detached from reality, elitist and idealist. Many influential scholars in the discipline, including Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and Robert Darnton explicitly took a stance against Lovejoy, who increasingly became a symbol of the bad old days.

Since this is largely how I myself have encountered Lovejoy in the past, I was surprised when in *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, a recent anthology meant to stimulate discussion about methodological questions and “to clarify the alternatives for the future”,³ several of the contributing authors try to revive Lovejoy, characteristically described by the volume editors, Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, as “the discipline’s founding father [...] more often dismissed than read today”.⁴

In his own contribution, entitled “The return of the history of ideas?”, McMahon argues for the reappraisal of Lovejoy and the revival of a more Lovejoyous history of ideas. Making his departure from a perceptive statement by Lovejoy, that “every age tends to exaggerate the scope or finality of its own discoveries [...] and forgets aspects of truth against prior exaggerations of which it has revolted”,⁵ McMahon convincingly argues that the generation of scholars who most fiercely denounced Lovejoy fashioned a largely artificial divide between themselves and their predecessors, making of Lovejoy something he was not, while exaggerating the novelty of their own contributions. As McMahon registers, this created a somewhat confusing situation, in which an intellectual historian such as Pocock could claim (in his 2002 afterword to *The Machiavellian moment*) that “some would describe this [study] as doing the ‘history of ideas’, but I find neither this term nor its connotations satisfactory as an account of what I have been and am doing”;⁶ the very need to make the distinction indicates that the difference was not as apparent as Pocock wanted it to be. A similar, uncomfortable relation to the discipline’s past was evident also in Michel Foucault, who declared (in *The archaeology of knowledge*) that “I cannot be satisfied until I have cut myself off from ‘the history of ideas’”, but who also speculated that: “Perhaps I am a historian of ideas after all”.⁷

McMahon is clearly right that the difference between Lovejoy and the generation of the 1960s and 1970s has been exaggerated (McMahon does not do so, but one could even understand Skinner’s dismissal of Lovejoy using Skinner’s own methodological tools). Lovejoy’s method was analytical and reductionist, but the fact that Lovejoy studied continuities does not mean he studied constants. In practice if less so in theory, he remained significantly more attentive to shifts in meaning and to the importance of contexts, actors, and uses, than he is typically credited for today. In addition, the methodologies of later school builders were less radical and

less inventive than their proponents may have thought them to be. “Like other trends”, McMahon writes, “the history of ideas was rendered passé for reasons that were not confined exclusively to its own deficiencies or to the intellectual superiority of its rivals”.⁸

Yet even if McMahon is right to claim that Lovejoy was more subtle than his critics have granted, that he was not as different from later generations as they have pretended, that he at least to some degree acknowledged and cared for the importance of cultural and political context, and further that much of the criticism levelled against him can be levelled back at his critics – why would that lead to the conclusion that we ought to revive Lovejoy, and return to past ways of doing things? One possible answer is that McMahon seeks a suitable ally in his plea for big histories. He regrets the fragmented geography of cultural and social history, he wants more far-ranging, ambitious studies. His own big book reveals the ideal; it is a history of “happiness” that moves from the ancient Greeks (presumably in their capacity as ancestors of the Western world) to his own place in time and space: North America.⁹

This familiar time-span, of course, was present but not original in Lovejoy, and neither was the progressive tectonic drift from Greece over Rome to France, Germany, England, and finally America – more accurately described, I think, as Westbound rather than as Western. Again, this itinerary was nothing new – it was conventional at the time when Lovejoy composed his works (and it still is in some intellectual milieux). The more genuine invention in Lovejoy’s history of ideas, or at least as the subject was configured in North America in the 1920s to the 1950s, was rather its interdisciplinary thrust. Lovejoy studied Western thought by recourse to canonical thinkers and writers, he studied men, he studied men who wrote in European languages that he could read, and so on. Again, such were the conventions. But at least he departed from the conventions by not confining himself to any specific discipline. His choice of canonical texts constituted a motley of literary, scientific, theological, and philosophical works.

In his contribution in the same volume, John Tresch recognises and lauds “Lovejoy’s ecumenical, embracing approach”,¹⁰ in which he finds inspiration for an increased integration of his own field, the history of science, with intellectual history – an integration meant to overcome the unlucky “standoff” between the fields.¹¹ Tresch claims that the two were once happily interacting, not least in Lovejoy’s own writings, as well as under his editorship of *The journal of the history of ideas*. For Tresch, then, Lovejoy stands as a symbol not of big histories, but rather of a lost era during which the historical study of science, politics, and other intellectual pursuits, was gathered under one roof. This previous unity, Tresch argues,

was at least partly achieved because there existed a common research object. “Lovejoy’s true obsession”, Tresch claims, was “large-scale, synchronic ensembles of ideas – cosmologies or worldviews – and their modification over time”.¹² In Tresch’s understanding, it does not matter whether Lovejoy himself or his historical actors would classify those ideas as scientific, theological, or something else; whatever the categories, it was still the case that “Lovejoy and his fellow travelers were driven by a fascination for ideas about the composition, extent, and structure of the universe, and the place of humans within it”.¹³

Both Tresch and McMahon correctly point out how Lovejoy, although he theoretically presented his study of “unit-ideas” in a way that seems almost offensive to the modern historian, was in actual practice more attuned to changes and developments, shifts and reconfigurations in meaning, politics, uses, and not least ironies. To Tresch, this makes Lovejoy more attractive than the “neo-revolutionary” historians of science who superseded him, and who created a mythology of progress centred on the idea of a “scientific revolution” directed against faith and superstition. Theirs was an internalist history of the winners, a progressivist perspective that often transpired already in the titles of the works produced by its proponents (take for one example Herbert Butterfield’s *The origins of modern science*; ironically, it was also Butterfield who coined the term “Whig history”, describing the tendency to look to the past to justify the present). However, if historians of science have long worked hard to delineate their own discipline from the history of ideas, then the fields have also experienced parallel theoretical and methodological trajectories, with increased attention paid to situated and embodied knowledge, as well as to contexts, actors, media, and materiality. This, one would think, would provide good prospects for a future reintegration.

In his essay entitled “Intellectual history and the interdisciplinary ideal”, closing the anthology, Warren Breckman argues that the discipline of intellectual history is inherently interdisciplinary, in the literal sense that the interdisciplinary ambitions were inherited from scholars trained in other disciplines, and who created the discipline in the first place. Breckman, too, quotes Lovejoy, who in the first essay of the first volume of *The journal of the history of ideas* (currently edited by Breckman) wrote that: “A preconception, category, postulate, dialectical motive, pregnant metaphor or analogy, ‘sacred word’, mood of thought, or explicit doctrine, which makes its first appearance upon the scene in one of the conventionally distinguished provinces of history . . . may, and frequently does, cross over into a dozen others”.¹⁴ (Personally I was positively surprised as I first read Lovejoy more carefully, and noticed how easily he moved between disciplines, or rather, how he largely succeeded in not projecting his own

categories back in time onto a material and a period that did not organise the intellectual world in the same way as he did.)

I recognise and share with McMahon, Tresch and Breckman the sense that Lovejoy very productively brought disciplines together, a feat that has not always been acknowledged or emulated by later generations. The obvious example is the grim prospects of studying science in the seventeenth, eighteenth or even in the nineteenth century, without paying sufficient attention to religion, literary culture, and other intellectual contexts within which the scientists (in the case they could even be called scientists) were trained, lived and acted; it is simply a recipe for failure. Lovejoy for one convincingly demonstrated how the concept or idea of “the great chain of being” was continuously activated and called upon by writers in different times but also in different spheres of intellectual pursuit, including natural science, philosophy, theology, and poetry – spheres that in some times and contexts could be more easily discerned, whereas in others they virtually collapsed into one another. Accordingly, there is no way for a historian to appreciate the force and character of “the great chain of being”, or any comparable intellectual agglomerate, as long as he or she attends only to natural science, or for that matter only to theology or philosophy. But is this reason enough to call for “a return to the history of ideas”? The underlying message of McMahon and Moyn, which seems to be that intellectual historians ought to keep in line and should respect their forebears, seems akin to that of Donald Kelley, at the time editor of *The journal of the history of ideas*, who in 1990 warned about the “enticements of postmodern theories and the siren song of ‘cultural criticism’”, and who called fellow historians of ideas back to “their proper work and their own traditions – which are not as negligible nor as disposable as enthusiasts for recent theories assume”.¹⁵

All in all, *Rethinking modern European intellectual history* is timely in that it mirrors the surrounding society’s sense of urgency and crisis, as well as its search for historical anchorage, meaning and identity. It is the opinion of the volume editors that intellectual historians are too self-confident, but not sufficiently self-reflective. “Everyone cultivates his or her private garden as if writing history were a largely personal task”, complain McMahon and Moyn. In their view, this seemingly peaceful state of affairs is treacherous, since intellectual history really “stands at a critical juncture” with regards to purpose, theory and method. It has become imperative that intellectual historians come out from under the “cozy tent” of eclecticism and expose their methods to fresh air.¹⁶ In response to this challenge, the editors call attention to “a number of cohesive tendencies” in the contributions to the anthology, including: “An embrace of intellectual history’s role as a field that crosses disciplinary frontiers [...] and a desire

to overcome tired dichotomies (intellectual history versus social or cultural history, high versus low, science versus the arts) that no longer seem fruitful or sustainable".¹⁷ I am not convinced that everyone in the anthology stands behind this programme, but it is obvious how Lovejoy can be made to play a role as its mascot.

In any case, it is a programme that probably reflects better on a North American situation, rather than on a more general one. "With just a few exceptions in England and continental Europe", Breckman writes, "there are no departments of intellectual history, history of political thought, or history of ideas".¹⁸ Incidentally, I write these words from one such exceptional environment. In Sweden, invoked here not as a truer reality but as a counter-example, the break between the history of ideas, the history of political thought, and the history of science, as described by Tresch, has been less decisive. If Lovejoy thus appears attractive to North American historians, as a symbol of a lost world, then he may seem less attractive – because less useful – in other parts of the world.

We should also not forget that Lovejoy does not speak for himself in this debate. As with other founding fathers, his memory is dug up and invoked by the living. The purpose is straightforward enough in the cases of Tresch and Breckman: a plea for more interdisciplinarity. Yet in the case of McMahon, it seems to be something more than that. In the grand finale to his argument, McMahon in a section about style "confesses" his "nostalgia [...]" for a time when intellectual historians not only thought about language and its (de-)constructive relationship to thought, but when they used it with art to conjure works of enchantment and beauty".¹⁹ Having spent the entire chapter on invoking Lovejoy, McMahon suddenly summons another ghost: Isaiah Berlin. He quotes in the affirmative Noel Annan's assessment, that "nobody in our time has invested ideas with such personality, given them a corporeal shape and *breathed life into them* more than Isaiah Berlin", who was able to do this "because ideas for him are not mere abstractions. They live [...] in the minds of men and women, *inspiring them, shaping their lives, influencing their actions and changing the course of history*".²⁰ Such enchantment may make for spirited stories, and McMahon himself certainly is a moving writer – but should we really grant life and agency to ideas? Personally I think it is a bad idea, even as it apparently refuses to die (if I am allowed the pun). If we let ideas "live" to "change" the course of history, what will we believe in next? "Selfish" genes? I understand that the expressions are only meant metaphorically, but unreflected metaphors have a tendency to confuse more than they illuminate. Let us not return to that genre of enchanted writing.

In fact, let us not return at all. The fruitfulness of interdisciplinarity is granted – not everything was bad in the bad old days. But cannot these

North American professors see the very serious problems inherent to the Lovejoyous manner of writing the history of ideas? Is it really a peripheral issue that *The great chain of being* only contains important and influential men, that very few (and only European) languages are represented, and finally that Lovejoy's history begins in ancient Greece, whence it moves gradually westward until it ends in the twentieth century and in North America – a time and place incidentally known for “the end of ideology”, “the end of history”, and so on? The evidently very erudite Lovejoy drew on a wide array of sources, but they were all canonical texts; he did not attend to notebooks or letters, artefacts, political and social contexts, or personal biography. He did not need to justify his choices; he studied the thoughts of men who had already been canonised. Out of these thoughts he fashioned his great chain of ideas, connecting Athens to Harvard, anchoring the United States of America to its imagined intellectual origins in Greek antiquity. So while I am at it, let me remind you that chains are crafted, that their links are attached to one another to perform the job of chaining. However, and despite all the objections I have raised so far, it is my personal opinion that Lovejoy did well. The risk is evident that anyone who tries to walk in his steps today would do the same job less well; the reluctant heir is often more suited than the willing.

In the end, it may be wise to look elsewhere for inspiration. One place to look is in another recent anthology, *Global intellectual history*, edited by Samuel Moyn (again) and Andrew Sartori. The collection is offered as “a framework for debate”, “intended to showcase the available choices at a threshold moment in the possible formation of an intellectual history extending across geographical parameters far larger than usual”.²¹ The ambition driving this anthology – to raise and discuss methodological alternatives – is thus similar to the one driving the previously discussed volume.

There are good reasons to be suspicious about the trendy word “global”. Why is there suddenly an interest in a global history and a global past, precisely during an unprecedented peak in the globalised integration of the market? How is this development comparable to the previous rise of “universal history” under the aegis of Western imperialism, or the relatively recent interest in “European” history? Are there reasons to think, with Slavoj Žižek, that intellectual developments naturalise changes in the constellation of power and capital?²² A similar suspicion concerns the recurring network metaphors. Every epoch has its favoured metaphors, and when Moyn and Sartori propose – in this age of professional and social networking, network-managed supranational corporations, and not least the Internet – that precisely “the network model” seems a particularly promising one for intellectual historians,²³ we should not be surprised – we should be sceptical.

Regardless of such hesitations, however, the perspectives of global history do seem to have a lot to offer. Even “in a minimal conception”, meaning a more inclusive approach to intellectual history,²⁴ better attuned to diversity and multiplicity, it would challenge the great chain of ideas that still seems to bind Athens to Cambridge, Massachusetts. But there is more profit to be made still. When Cemil Aydin demonstrates how the ascent of the idea of the “Muslim World” was tightly bound up with political developments and power struggles – “the inseparable connection between intellectual and international history”²⁵ – and how the notion was first invented, then sustained and remodelled over time, because it proved useful to various historical actors, then we have a pragmatic model for how to place thinkers and thoughts into contexts that are not only cross-national, cross-cultural and political – but also possible to study. This is not ideas endowed with agency, it is ideas produced and used by people. It is a point made exceptionally well by Aydin, but it also comes out powerfully in Moyn’s own contribution, “On the nonglobalization of ideas”, in which he draws on available scholarship on the uprising of Haitian slaves in the wake of the French revolution, to describe the complex dynamic between “elites” and “subalterns” in the co-creation of ideas about universal values and human rights.²⁶ As Moyn writes, there is no inherent “logic” forcing ideas to go global if they are not useful to anyone. In his words, “concepts do not spread one by one. They are not only bound up with larger political and cultural processes but also selected out of larger actual and possible sets of alternative concepts. This means that for every concept that does globalize, others do not do so”.²⁷ Which brings us back to the question of agency. Ideas do not have trajectories independent of human actors, and if we are to establish a global intellectual history, we should be careful not to invest in any metaphysical explanations of their diffusion.

Intellectual historians attuned to global perspectives have generally been adept to take into account human processes of intermediation, translation, reception, and interpretation. Vanessa Smith’s contribution in the volume, “Joseph Banks’s intermediaries. Rethinking global cultural exchange”,²⁸ is a textbook example of this, but there are numerous other good examples both here and elsewhere. In any case, as we study how ideas are transported around the physical and metaphysical world we should remember that they never travel on their own. In *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, McMahon approvingly cites Lovejoy, who once stated that: “Ideas are the most migratory things in the world”.²⁹ It is beautifully phrased, and both Lovejoy and McMahon clearly have a good sense for style. At the same time, the statement is most obviously false: just as guns do not kill people and market forces do not exert power, ideas

do not travel. However generous McMahon might feel about distributing agency, ideas are thoroughly human and they can only move when humans move, or else when we utter them, record them, transport them by way of human-made infrastructure such as cables, transmitters or satellites, embed them in technologies, practices, or in other ways of doing things, or employ them in some other, human way.

Notes

1. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The great chain of being. A study of the history of an idea*, Harvard University Press, 1998 (1936), vii.
2. Warren Breckman, "Intellectual history and the interdisciplinary ideal", 275–293 in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 276–277.
3. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, "Introduction. Interim intellectual history", 3–12 in idem (eds.), *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, 11.
4. Ibid, 7.
5. Darrin M. McMahon, "The return of the history of ideas?", 13–31 in McMahon and Moyn (eds.), *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, 13.
6. Ibid, 21.
7. Ibid, 16.
8. Ibid, 21.
9. Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness. A history*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005.
10. John Tresch, "Cosmologies materialized. History of science and history of ideas", 153–172 in McMahon and Moyn (eds.), *Rethinking modern European intellectual history*, 154.
11. Ibid, 153.
12. Ibid, 155.
13. Ibid, 161.
14. Breckman, "Intellectual history and the interdisciplinary ideal", 277.
15. Ibid, 281.
16. McMahon and Moyn, "Introduction. Interim intellectual history", 4.
17. Ibid, 10.
18. Breckman, "Intellectual history and the interdisciplinary ideal", 285.
19. McMahon, "The return of the history of ideas?", 27.
20. Ibid, 27; emphases added.
21. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, "Approaches to global intellectual history", 3–30 in idem (eds.), *Global intellectual history*, Columbia University Press, 2013, 1, 4.
22. Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism", in *New left review*, vol. I: 225 (1997).
23. Moyn and Sartori, "Approaches to global intellectual history", 13–14.
24. Ibid, 7.
25. Cemil Aydin, "Globalizing the intellectual history of the idea of the 'Muslim world'", 159–186 in Moyn and Sartori (eds.), *Global intellectual history*, 161; cf. Annika Rabo, "När Mellanöstern blev 'Den muslimska världen'", 32–41 in *Babylon. Tidskrift om Midt-Östen og Nord-Afrika*, vol. 4: 2 (2006).

26. See especially Samuel Moyn, “On the nonglobalization of ideas”, 187–204 in Moyn and Sartori (eds.), *Global intellectual history*, 189.

27. Ibid, 201.

28. Vanessa Smith, “Joseph Banks’s intermediaries. Rethinking global cultural exchange”, 81–109 in Moyn and Sartori (eds.), *Global intellectual history*.

29. McMahon, “The return of the history of ideas?”, 25.