

## Intellectual History and Its Ways

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*AHR Forum*  
Intellectual History and Its Ways

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DOMINICK LaCAPRA

THERE IS MUCH IN RUSSELL JACOBY'S WORK that I respect and admire, especially his attempt to keep alive the tradition of critical theory and the role of the public intellectual. But there are aspects of "A New Intellectual History?" that I find questionable both in relation to my own work and to broader issues in the field.

It might be useful to begin with an adaptation of a question raised by Jacques Lacan in the wake of Sigmund Freud: What does Jacoby want? From "A New Intellectual History?" it is difficult to answer this question. The essay recognizes some virtues in the "new" intellectual history, but whatever is good in the new is really old. Whatever is more or less new tends to be bad, except of course for the begrudging qualification introduced by a conventional bow to the inevitability of change and the value of ferment. In the intriguing role of a populist increasingly conservative Theodor Adorno who has his doubts about newfangled ways, Jacoby elaborates a common-sense negative dialectics that merges with the good old genre of the jeremiad. (Lost in the process is Adorno's own sharp sense of the possibly necessary and desirable nature of difficulty and experimentalism.) For Jacoby, things are bad and they seem to be getting worse. Skittish colleagues are running after novelties and turning virtue into vapor. What Jacoby would himself propose as a constructive alternative is left to the reader's imagination. Thus he concludes on a note that mitigates resolute castigation with a token gesture in the direction of suspended judgment:

New history, new social history, new intellectual history: especially in history, "new" is suspect. But that does not mean nothing changes or should not change. By their energy and thoughtfulness, the new intellectual historians have brought a welcome ferment to a quiet field; and the story is far from over. An initial report suggests, however, that they succumb to bloodless scholasticism and cold formalism.<sup>1</sup>

This ending rings a little false. Jacoby's is hardly an "initial report." His own footnotes indicate that he is following a long line of historians who have pondered, pranced, pouted, and fumed over "newer" tendencies in the field. This is not to say that the report is all wrong, but it is neither initial nor very novel. One self-contradictory feature of Jacoby's essay is his inclination to disparage claims of

<sup>1</sup> Russell Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?" *AHR*, 97 (April 1992): 424.

the "new intellectual historians" that they are a beleaguered lot and then to join in beleaguering them in very familiar tones indeed. So what else is new?

I shall refrain from commenting directly on Jacoby's views of other so-called new intellectual historians. I hesitate to preempt others' responses or to propose myself as the representative voice of a prefabricated group or movement. Instead, I shall focus on Jacoby's understanding of what I have been trying to do, enter into what I trust will be a critical but constructive exchange with him, and conclude with an indication of my current views about the field. I hope my remarks will have a broader bearing on debates about how to do intellectual history.

With respect to those he includes under the rubric "new intellectual history," Jacoby notes some differences, but he is clearly most concerned with what is shared, particularly such things as bloodless scholasticism and cold formalism. With respect to my own work, I am surprised by the charge of formalism, since this is what I myself tend to criticize and to shy away from, perhaps to a fault. For I in fact think that a concern with form is important both in what we study and in how we study it, but form should not be separated out and reified in a methodology or constituted as an object of exclusive interest. If by scholasticism Jacoby means a concern with careful and at times intricate argument or with professional competence and specialized knowledge, I plead guilty, but his own comments would indicate that my scholasticism is often impassioned and even combative. For me, ideas are not cold and bloodless but insistent, important, and even erotic things.

What the preceding comments should serve to bring out is that Jacoby is himself largely a lumpener in his attempt to locate a school of thought and to provide the essential characteristics of its thinking. This lumping tendency is important for Jacoby's approach to problems. It is crucial for characterizing the work of others in simple, readily readable prose immediately accessible to a large public. His decided penchant for clear-cut characterizations and categories also helps to explain what he focuses on as essential in the work of others and why he resists certain approaches to reading that pose problems for lumpishly categorical conceptions of schools of thought. Needless to say, what tends to get lost or at least obscured in the lumping is the significance of the differences among, and the nuances within, those grouped together, as well as the importance of the specificity or distinctiveness (not to be confused with a dubious belief in the absolute uniqueness) of an object of study or critique.

Before pursuing the issue of Jacoby's (mis)understanding of my own work, I would note that his essay is to some extent illuminated if it is seen in the context of his recent book, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*.<sup>2</sup> "A New Intellectual History?" takes the theme of the book and applies it to the field or subdiscipline of intellectual history. The betrayal of the intellectuals for Jacoby has to do with their work in the academy—their scholasticism, professionalization, and specialization—and their putative abandonment of an independent, accessible role as commentators and critics in the public sphere. Bruce Robbins has

<sup>2</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York, 1987).

subjected Jacoby's book to a strong critique.<sup>3</sup> He points out that Jacoby relies on an ideologically suspect myth of a golden age that both conceals everything that was dubious in the older public, putatively independent intellectual and avoids much that is problematic as well as promising in the academy for the contemporary intellectual. We are after all in the academy, and the question is what we can do in the place we in all probability have chosen to be. In *The Last Intellectuals*, Jacoby provides an explicit ideal in the person of a semi-mythical independent intellectual who presumably existed in the good old days. Robbins observes:

"Independent" means selling yourself on a different market—perhaps a market that has dried up, shifted, no longer exists, as Jacoby himself more or less admits is the case for the educated reading public he then blames them [the intellectuals] for not addressing. His own book is a good case in point of the need to compromise with the market in order to sell on it. Precisely in its use of terms like "independent" it panders to the all-American ideology of self-reliance and rugged individualism . . . As a leftist, Jacoby presumably knows full well that the corporate America he thinks he's attacking has always thrived on the ideology of self-reliance and rugged individualism.<sup>4</sup>

In "The New Intellectual History?" Jacoby does not directly engage in golden-age mythologizing, and he even seems (projectively?) to detect it in those who have pointed to a decline or a crisis in intellectual history. He nonetheless retains the gist of his critique of the cold and bloodless academic. And the seeming implication is that some hotter, more red-blooded (independent? ruggedly individualistic? all-American?) type of intellectual (historian) is his desired hero. But the specific nature of this truly New Man (the gendered term is intentional, for the ideal type would clearly seem to be virile) and the precise kind of history he would teach or write remain a deep, dark mystery. For what carries over from the book to the article is the tendency to rely on an ideological stereotype for one's idea of an alternative, hence not explicitly to work out and argue for a normative position but instead to leave it implicit or even concealed in a claim about the way things are or were.

This last point returns me to Jacoby's (mis)understanding of what I have been trying to do. Jacoby refers repeatedly to my critique of reductive reading, and he apparently believes that this critique is the essence of my approach. I do indeed think that reductive reading represents an important problem. In fact, I think it plays a pronounced role in Jacoby's article, and this is one reason why he is sensitive to a critique. But I do not think that this critique is the essence of my work or that all forms of reduction or simplification are wrong.

THERE ARE OTHER IMPORTANT MOTIFS in my work that complement and supplement the critique of reductionism. One of them is the importance of a tense interaction between empirically based reconstruction of the past and dialogic exchange—or between the scholar and the intellectual in the intellectual historian. In fact, throughout my work, I insist on the conjunction and necessary tension

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Intellectuals in Decline?" *Social Text*, 8–9 (1990): 254–59.

<sup>4</sup> Robbins, "Intellectuals in Decline?" 255.

between scholarship and dialogic exchange involving critique, and I think Jacoby does not see its significance because it addresses in a different way an issue with which he is ostensibly concerned. But I think that he tends to misconstrue the issue because he conflates—or misleadingly folds into one another—empirical claims or general theories about the course of history and normative positions having socio-political dimensions or at least implications. I would not dissociate the normative from the empirical, but I would distinguish them and posit a problematic relation between them that requires elucidation and argument. In fact, if there is something essential about my work—essential in the sense not of reification or dogmatism but of sustained emphasis—it is the notion that one begins any attempt at understanding or action already situated within an interaction of forces with which one must attempt to come to terms. The great temptation is to resolve this tense interaction through analytic dissociation or speculative dialectical synthesis and to locate the solution to a problem—or one's own position—within an isolated sphere or a higher-order "reality."

Another way to make the point is to say that I am very concerned with the critique of ideology. A prominent form of ideology is the conflation of the empirical with the normative in some mode of speculative synthesis. A closely related form is the sheer analytic dissociation of the empirical from the normative and the constitution of each as a separate—and possibly essentialized or reified—realm of discourse and activity. The problem of distinguishing and cogently relating various forces or tendencies is thereby understood in a deceptively reductive and oversimplified manner. While not rejecting all modes of simplification, reduction, or readability, I do criticize misleading forms of oversimplification, ill-considered reduction, and facile readability that amount to ideological distortion. This critique goes along with the belief that acceptable simplification, reduction, and readability are among the most difficult and desirable goals of thought and practice. They are intimately bound up with the issues of translation, mediation, and supplementation. And they bear on the problem of how one should indeed relate specialized and at times necessarily difficult forms of inquiry to more accessible, altogether necessary, and desirable modes of public intercourse. Here, one must make the admittedly problematic effort to open the difficult to public scrutiny and accountability without resorting to ideologically tendentious and often implicitly elitist or disparaging modes of vulgarization. For vulgarization is not the alternative to hermeticism; it is its enemy-brother. As Robbins intimates, the task of the intellectual in the academy at the present time may well be to help create an audience for difficult ideas that one attempts to make as accessible as possible without resorting to tendentious ideological distortion. On this point, a passage from *Rethinking Intellectual History* (from which Jacoby quotes only a snippet) is apposite:

The intellectual historian should, I think, recognize his or her audience as a tensely divided one made up of both experts and a generally educated public. The intellectual historian is required to come as close as possible to an "expert" knowledge of the problems being investigated. But a goal of intellectual history should be the expansion of the "class" of the generally educated and the generation of a better interchange between them and the "experts." This means helping to put the generally educated in a position to raise more

informed and critical questions. It also means attempting to prevent expertise from becoming enclosed in its own dialect or jargon. In these senses, intellectual history faces complex problems of "translation," and its own concerns bring it into contact with larger social and cultural questions. One such question is how to resist the establishment of common culture on a relatively uncritical level and to further the creation of a more demanding common culture that, within limits, is genuinely open to contestation.<sup>5</sup>

I also criticize positivism as a misleading autonomization of dissociated dimensions of discourse and practice—the empirical (or "constative") and analytic dimensions. Positivism is not science but scientism that takes a restricted model of science and tries to generalize it as the only valid way to approach problems. The result is a conception of research in terms of extreme objectification of the other wherein the status of the researcher as subject is itself occluded or at least not posed as a problem. In more psychoanalytic terms, I would define positivism as the denial or disavowal of our transference relation to the object of study (including the past). In transference (as I adapt the concept from psychoanalysis), we tend to repeat aspects of the object of study in our own account of it. Thus, for example, in the study of the Holocaust, we tend to repeat processes (scapegoating, blaming the victim, disavowal, avoidance) or roles (perpetrator, victim, bystander, resister) prominent at the time, and we even face the problem of what terminology to use (Holocaust, Shoah, "final solution") in an area where no terminology is innocent or unaffected by the events themselves and by the history of their representation. We should attempt to be as aware as possible of this problem in order to elaborate more intellectually responsible and normatively controlled modes of inquiry and interaction. In research, this requires a certain combination of "objective" reconstruction and dialogic exchange in which we check our tendencies toward projection and narcissistic enclosure in order to understand the other as other and to enter into a non-invidious relation having both normative and cognitive dimensions. The critique of positivism does not, however, eliminate the need for empirical investigation to substantiate empirical claims or to test hypotheses, and I have never rejected the importance of empirical (including archival) research or the continued relevance of traditional norms of scholarship. On the contrary, the critique of positivism enables one to appreciate the virtues, necessity, and limitations of empirical investigation and to pose more cogently the problem of its relation to interpretation, understanding, and normative judgment.

I have touched on some difficult ideas as simply and concisely as I can, and I would refer the interested reader to some of my recent work.<sup>6</sup> Jacoby tends to ride roughshod over these ideas. His oversimplifying and essentializing tendencies lead him to misconstrue the thought of others in a manner that precludes both

<sup>5</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), 65 n.

<sup>6</sup> See especially "Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," in *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985); and "Psychoanalysis and History," in *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, 1989). See also my review of Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The "Final Solution" in History*, in *New German Critique*, 53 (1991): 175–92; and "Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate," in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

careful understanding and an argumentative defense of a normative alternative or standard of critique.

Here one may also better see why Jacoby misunderstands the nature of my criticisms of important historical works such as those of Allen Janik and Stephen Toulmin, Carl Schorske, and Carlo Ginzburg. Since I cannot repeat in full my discussions of them, I would suggest that it is a useful beginning (but not an end) point of analysis to see their work as tending to share with Jacoby's the conflation of empirical claims with normative positions. In Janik and Toulmin, ethics is seen as the essential point of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and this point is established not through a careful reading of the text but by an unmediated insertion of it into a fact-filled but often associatively patched-together context. English readers of Wittgenstein presumably misconstrued his basic or essential message because they were removed from his Viennese context. As I point out in my essay, a similar "misconstruction" was put forth by members of the so-called Vienna Circle, and living in Vienna was no guarantee of immunity against certain interpretations. In addition, aspects of the English context were themselves important in the writing of the *Tractatus*, including the work of Bertrand Russell and Lewis Carroll. I do not argue that the *Tractatus* is ultimately about nothing, although I do think that it runs the risk of silence as do many if not all truly ambitious ventures in modern thought. But this risk should not be fixated upon or converted into the pretext for an excessive and fetishized ideology of the sublime. Nor should silence be mystified or seen as the hidden telos of language; it is intimately bound up with the use of language, and how language breaks up or breaks down is crucial to the appreciation of the nature of the silence that ensues.

In addition, I emphatically do not dismiss interpretation. I try not only to understand how it works but to engage in it and relate it to more intricate issues in reading. My basic argument here as elsewhere is that contexts are indeed important for interpretation and reading but that they are multiple and at times conflicting or at least problematically related to one another as well as to interpretation and reading. Any assumption that one context or set of contexts is particularly significant (or "essential") must be made explicit and argumentatively defended, for it is contestable. Moreover, one crucial question is precisely how texts come to terms with the various contexts bearing on them. Even stereotypical, formulaic, vulgarizing texts (such as political propaganda, commercial advertising, and pulp literature) do not simply reflect or illustrate a context but reproduce it with typically legitimating ideological effects. Indeed, no text totally masters its contexts or transcends a more or less unconscious implication in contemporary ideologies, although some texts are obviously more critical than others in the way they engage contexts and ideologies. The general question one may pose to any text is how precisely it relates in symptomatic (or ideologically reinforcing), critical, and potentially transformative ways to its various pertinent contexts of production and reception. To raise this question is not to glorify a textual technique but to stress the importance of cognitive responsibility and the willingness to defend interpretations in explicit and argumentatively developed ways. Texts are both historical events in their own right and a crucial basis for our

inferential reconstruction of other events; the problem of how to read and interpret them should be considered vital for the historian.

In the case of the *Tractatus*, it is quite implausible to see ethics as the essential message of the text—except perhaps from a normative position. But then, at the very least, the normative position must not be left implicit or smuggled into the interpretation; it must be elaborated, elucidated, and defended in a manner that is not attempted in the book by Janik and Toulmin. Indeed, the understanding of ethics in the book is individualistic and bound up with an uncritical mystique of “silence.” It is by and large removed from politics and society as well as from the issue of how the individual and the socio-political interact in ethically relevant fashion.

In Schorske's case, the crisis of a liberal polity is presumably the essential core of the *fin-de-siècle* Viennese crisis, while in Ginzburg's, the essence of Menocchio's world-view is a reading code rooted in millennial peasant culture. I tried to argue that Schorske's argument was in part projective with respect to the United States of the 1950s and that it was misleading to center the Viennese crisis on liberalism. Schorske's approach obscured certain dynamics in Viennese culture, and it enabled him to privilege liberalism without engaging in a sustained, discriminating analysis or defense of its nature and its relations over time to other political and social options. It also induced oversimplified interpretations, such as that of Freud as basically a frustrated liberal who escaped from politics. In Ginzburg's case, a popular peasant reading code that is ideologically central for Ginzburg is perceived as central to Menocchio. I pointed out that Menocchio was both peasant and miller in addition to being a marginal figure in certain respects. Moreover, artifacts of high culture were manifestly important for him, and he wanted to impress the “higher-ups.” The more crucial point is that what appeared from Ginzburg's own evidence to be very significant in Menocchio's case was the interaction or even hybridization of levels or dimensions of culture both within the larger society and within the personality of Menocchio himself. Here (as elsewhere), I was trying to raise the issue of both the actual and the desirable role of hybridization in culture. I also tried to pose the problem of hegemony, which involves the internalization of dominant norms and values by subordinate groups, a problem with respect to which the idea of an autonomous peasant culture or reading code may well be wishful thinking. I found certain aspects of Ginzburg's peasant-populism to be both empirically dubious and normatively questionable. In any case, I thought that one had to distinguish between the empirical and the normative in order to understand their relations in the past and to argue for their desirable reconfiguration in the present and future. To avoid such issues is to be prone to the most unreflective and unself-critical mode of ideology. Indeed, the very point of my claim that “the reader deserves a transcription of [or, more realistically, significant quotation from] the inquisition register” on which Ginzburg bases his interpretation is to insist that social history be more publicly accountable by providing the reader with a basis for critically evaluating and possibly contesting interpretations and readings.<sup>7</sup> Public accountability becomes

<sup>7</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “*The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian*,” in LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 63.



impossible when the archive by and large remains the secret repository on which a narrative or an analysis is elaborated. It is astonishing that Jacoby, despite his plea for the public and accountable intellectual, would take exception to this point or simplistically reduce it to little more than a bromide about textual prudence and greater caution.

I SHALL SAY ONLY A BRIEF WORD about Jacoby's massive misconstruction of my essay "On Grubbing in My Personal Archives: An Historical Exposé of Sorts (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Transference)." The title alone would indicate that this venture is intended as parodic and (quite importantly) self-parodic. One may judge it to be in poor taste, and it certainly does raise the issue of taste by explicitly and intentionally testing the nature of professional norms of decorum and their relation to "personal" and biographical issues. But it is difficult to see how one could simply read it straight, as Jacoby does. It may seem "odd" to one who lacks a sense of humor and irony. In any case, it is hardly the simple expression (or "posturing") of a well-situated academic who takes "umbrage" at the audacity of an upstart assistant professor who refuses to "back down." In fact, I thought that the review was not audacious insofar as it chimed with what I claimed were conventional or even hegemonic voices in the historical profession. One may want to take issue with my claims or the style in which they are conveyed, but one must see them in the context of an essay that interrelates argument with more indirect modes of address such as irony, parody, and hyperbole. Furthermore, one may perhaps suspect a little posturing on Jacoby's part in his manifest inclination to identify with the putative underdog and to frame the issue in straightforward if not storybook terms.

One of the most important issues that emerges from a reading of Jacoby's "New Intellectual History?" is the relation between acceptable reduction or simplification and misleading oversimplification or ideological distortion. Distortion is always bound up with personal investments. It is also linked to the question of the role of the intellectual and the conditions created by work in the academy. One implication of Jacoby's analysis is that certain kinds of complexity may themselves be ideologically distortive, misleading, or diversionary, and I would agree with this point. But I would also insist that one examine carefully whether the level of difficulty in an account is warranted by the difficulty of the subject matter and whether there is an attempt made to effect—or at least to pose the problem of—cogent translations between different modes of discourse and areas of culture. As I noted at the outset of this response, Jacoby is known as someone who has tried to revive the spirit of critical theory and apply it to contemporary conditions in the academy and beyond. I thoroughly support and in fact actively try to further this project in my own work. But the question I would raise is whether aspects of Jacoby's critique of the "new intellectual history" accord too readily with recent neoconservative reactions that deride those difficult theory-people and clamor for a return to a supposed golden age when the canon was the canon and life was simpler and more straightforward. In its bearing on the issue

of the broader political resonance of academic debate, this question should at least make one pause and reflect.

Beyond more circumscribed political issues, Jacoby's approach converges with the unfortunate tendency in some recent commentators to become familiar with theoretical perspectives only to be better able to criticize and fend them off. This rather unconstructive and defensive strategy leads at best to containment by partial incorporation and to rather unreflective tensions in the reactions of the negative critic. In the recent past, this tendency has characterized the work not only of professional historians (for example, Donald R. Kelley, James T. Kloppenberg, and Anthony Pagden in the essays to which Jacoby refers) but also of literary critics who, at times under the banner of a "new historicism" or a "new pragmatism," have utilized theoretical sophistication to advocate a movement "against theory."<sup>8</sup> This bizarre form of anti-theoretical theory may lead to the intentionally unearth-shaking conclusion that theory makes no difference in practice, that it amounts to spinning one's wheels in the void—a conclusion that may indeed apply to some forms of contemporary theory, prominently including anti-theoretical theory.

Jacoby's essay is, unfortunately, of little value in offering insight into the problem of fruitfully conjoining history with theory. I would like to turn at this point to a more constructive engagement with problems I think Jacoby does little to elucidate.

HOW SHOULD ONE UNDERSTAND the conjunction of history and theory? First, the relation between history and theory should not be seen as a mere additive relation or associative link. The idea of "history and theory"—a title that in fact graces an important journal—may authorize a mere assemblage of reflections on history from a rather conventional perspective and on theory from relatively ahistorical or narrowly analytic points of view. The relation between history and theory should be dialogic and mutually provocative—a relation in which the terms are inter-involved and in part transformed by their mutual implication.

Second, the conjunction of history and theory implies a critique of history without theory or history in which the theoretical component remains implicit. The latter approach has often characterized conventional historiography, and it has engendered the idea of history as a craft. The historian's craft, in Marc Bloch's phrase, has indeed produced much admirable work, and I have already intimated that I would in no sense want to jettison the norms of meticulous research and careful testing of propositions that have become ingrained as common sense in the historical profession. In fact, I think that even the most theoretically sophisticated and experimental approach should have more than a nodding acquaintance with common sense and with disciplinary traditions that can test and

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago, 1985), 11–30. Interestingly, Kloppenberg also turns to pragmatism to support his critique of recent theoretical initiatives, and there is at least a partial convergence between some recent literary criticism and historiography in the tendency to combine contextualizing historicism with a pragmatic hermeneutic.

contest its more speculative ventures. But the procedures of established disciplines such as professional historiography should also be rendered more explicit and thus more open to questioning, revision, and supplementation. Otherwise, the misleading understanding of history as an alternative to theory may well induce one to hypostatize history, essentialize context, and confide in an unmediated idea of the manner in which "historical" information purports to explain various features of texts.

Third, conjoining history with theory does not lead to theory without history or, more precisely, to theory in which the historical dimension is extremely attenuated, abstract, and unspecified. For, just as there is in reality no history without theory, there is also no theory without history. But the relations between the two may be implicit or even repressed with the result that the problems and the potentials of a more explicit and critical relationship may be obviated or misconstrued. Although there is always the risk that theory will develop beyond—or fall short of—its object and become self-referential, the relationship between theory and history should not be seen solely in terms of a self-propelled theoretical movement that engenders its own internal resistances or that construes history in extremely theoreticist and easily misleading terms such as referential aberration, aporetic (skeptical) impasse, and radical discontinuity or fragmentation. The latter view (often associated with the name of Paul de Man, with whom Jacoby at one point seems to confuse me)<sup>9</sup> accords with the recent fixation on an (an)aesthetic of the sublime,<sup>10</sup> and I have already intimated that in my judgment it tends to fetishize or compulsively repeat what is indeed one important and unavoidable possibility in thought. The larger problem is, however, to explore the interaction between various dimensions of language use and its relation to practice, including the relationship between "constative" historical reconstruction and "performative" dialogic exchange with the past as well as between "sublime" excess and normative limits that are necessary as controls in social and political life.

In line with the effort to conceive of history with theory, one should make a sustained attempt to relate the reading of texts and artifacts to specific historical and socio-political questions. In fact, the problem of specificity is vitally at issue in the three implications I have drawn from the conjunction of history and theory. One should also try to indicate precisely how historiographical studies and debates might profit from closer, more critical attention to rhetorical and textual matters and to the kinds of theory that provide perspective on these matters. Here as elsewhere, one needs what I have referred to as a translation between disciplines and areas of culture. But any effective translation must be sensitive to the different traditions and protocols of interpretation within disciplines or areas of culture. A translation that is premised on the understanding of only one

<sup>9</sup> For a critique of certain tendencies in Paul de Man's work, see my "Temporality of Rhetoric," in LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory*. Jacoby's confusion of my approach with at least a vulgarized idea of de Man's occurs when he believes I argue that the *Tractatus* "is essentially about nothing (or is essentially nothing)." Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?" 417.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "The Jews,"* Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts, trans. (1988; Minneapolis, Minn., 1990).

tradition (such as professional historiography, on the one hand, or deconstruction, on the other) is necessarily an insufficiently complex, at times one-dimensional, appropriation that fails even to register as relevant in the terms of those within the other interpretive tradition. One should not, however, value complexity for its own sake or essentialize “high” culture as the sole sanctuary of resistance in an administered society.

Defensible complexity is related to dialogism in the basic sense of the interaction of mutually implicated yet often contestatory traditions or tendencies that have provocative relations to one another. These traditions or tendencies indicate why texts in which they are at issue cannot be reduced to mere symptomatic documents insofar as texts perform critical and transformative work or play on their contexts of production and reception. In this sense, these texts—texts such as those of Marx, Freud, or Wittgenstein—demand a response from the reader that should not dispense with, but cannot be confined to, contextualization. In addition, contexts themselves may well involve mutually contestatory tendencies that significantly complicate the problem of relating them to texts. But there is no need to postulate a dichotomy or simple choice between an interest in texts and in contexts, although the work of different historians will legitimately show different stresses and strains in addressing them. Nor need one accept a semiological theory in which language is conceived of as a self-contained system of signs—a theory that both Voloshinov and Derrida criticize as a formalistic idealization.<sup>11</sup> Highly dialogized texts and contexts may, however, be argued to require a dialogic and self-critical response from the reader that is intimately related to the subject-positions he or she occupies and is attempting to forge. The basic point here is that one should not hypostatize the text, the context, or the reader but attempt to understand the relations among them in tensely interactive terms. Even more basically, one should construe one’s own position as inserted within that interaction in relation to which text, context, reader, and subject are themselves more or less useful abstractions.

*Rethinking Intellectual History* (1983) engages various old historicisms whose importance in professional historiography is not entirely a thing of the past. The book attempts to give a significantly different twist to a traditional approach to a problem that was and is familiar within intellectual history, for it often relies on established canons but turns to critically noncanonical readings of canonical or, more precisely, canonized texts. In later work, I render more explicit and to some extent revise the strategy employed in *Rethinking Intellectual History*. It is, I think, important to distinguish between canonization—a basically conservative practice in the reception or appropriation of artifacts—and the potentials of those artifacts to be brought out through critical readings that, in Walter Benjamin’s words, brush history against the grain. It is only through an essentializing and misplaced ritual process that one apprehends canonization as totally and irredeemably

<sup>11</sup> See V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, trans. (1930; New York, 1973), especially the critique of Ferdinand de Saussure on 58–61; and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (1967; Baltimore, Md., 1976), especially the discussion of Saussure on 44 and following. There was a very close relationship between Mikhail Bakhtin’s views and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, although scholars debate whether or to what extent Bakhtin actually wrote the book under the name of Voloshinov.

contaminating texts or artifacts. By contrast, it is necessary to understand canonization critically as a historical process through which texts are made (however problematically) to serve hegemonic interests in ways they both invite and resist more or less compellingly. The process of canonization requires that the critical or even potentially transformative—noncanonical or anticanonical—dimensions of texts and other artifacts be repressed or radically downplayed.

JACOBY NOTES THAT, FOR MANY OBSERVERS, intellectual history seemed to be in the doldrums in the 1970s and early 1980s. Interest, momentum, and talent had apparently shifted to social history, and intellectual history as a field was often felt to be moribund. Yet I think it was, in at least limited fashion, an important locus for theoretical self-reflection in historiography and a noteworthy point of entry for more critical forms of reading and interpretation (prominently including noncanonical readings of canonical texts) often coming from Continental Europe. The enterprise of reinvigorating it seemed worthwhile to a number of professional historians. By now, the enterprise has largely succeeded: intellectual history is alive and kicking, and its theoretical concerns are being discussed in other areas of historiography and entering into mutually thought-provoking relations with other disciplines.

For intellectual history to achieve its present reinvigorated status, it was necessary to reconsider certain prevalent assumptions about its nature and to counter ill-considered attacks on it. But its renewed and more secure standing may now actually aid informed attempts to rethink the subdiscipline in even more basic terms and to relate it with greater insistency to a more encompassing mode of inquiry into culture and society. Critical, noncanonical readings of canonized artifacts remain, I think, pertinent for somewhat different reasons both in history and in other disciplines. But one's larger ambition should be the elaboration of more intellectually and politically significant modes of cross-disciplinary exchange having a bearing on institutional change in the academy and beyond it. One should also supplement and problematize noncanonical readings of canonized texts with a broader rethinking of the canon and the problem of canonicity in general.

Rethinking the disciplines in basic ways is a more difficult and risky venture than certain of its proponents at times seem to believe, and it is all too easy to call for basic intellectual and institutional revolutions that in reality amount to a relatively simplistic reformulation of older views whose genealogy and even whose existence one may ignore. Thus it is no great transformation or "instauration" to call for an evangelical "new" historicism in which salvation is sought through an empathetic understanding of the "other" purely and simply in his or her own time, terms, and place. It is nonetheless the case that any significant change in older modes of canonical interpretation involves an insistent attempt to raise the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and species as well as to explore historically and critically the emergence and function of "levels" or areas of culture in society. It also entails the possibility that intellectual history—along with

other “humanistic” disciplines such as literary criticism—ought to be more consistently related to a differently articulated program of cultural studies in which the study of popular culture is not detached from that of “elite” or “high” culture. Any acceptable program would not imply that one simply cashiers formerly canonical texts but that one reads them differently and relates them to the larger problem of critically inquiring into the formation and function of a canon in the production and reproduction of a stratified and conflict-ridden society and culture. For, unless one construes cultural studies solely in terms of a necessary but, in my view, far from sufficient program for a historical sociology of culture, the issue of what and how one reads remains crucial.<sup>12</sup> Here I would reformulate somewhat the argument I made in *Rethinking Intellectual History* in terms of a distinction between texts that are good to think with and texts that are good to think about.

All texts are good to think about, and no text is ideal. Indeed, all texts are hybrids or compromise-formations involving an interaction between ideologically reinforcing and more critical tendencies. But some texts are especially good to think with precisely because they counteract blindly symptomatic processes of ideological reinforcement in and through critical and self-critical movements. Texts that are especially good to think with should not be seen as “privileged” in an invidious sense; they should be viewed as educationally and politically valuable in part because they test theories while providing some perspective on their own workings and on larger socio-cultural processes. They may indicate that the difficult problem in both theory and social practice is how to articulate various differences in non-invidious but (to varying degrees) normatively regulated networks of relations. Still, the debatability of the very norms by which one evaluates desirable textual formations indicates that one must continually rethink the issue of which texts are especially good to think with and to employ in acquiring ways and means of coming to terms with more decidedly symptomatic texts and cultural processes. Moreover, the larger intellectual and practical goal is to elaborate an approach to society and culture in which the reading of texts is one crucial element but not the only or even the most important concern.

From what I have argued, it should be evident that it is indeed vital to attend to the way more symptomatic artifacts are able to reinforce ideological needs and desires or even to hold out a more or less distorted image of utopia. But it is equally vital to elaborate an approach in which it is possible to address this problem critically, and certain texts may be particularly valuable in cultivating this approach. There is no simple formula that will enable one to decide which texts these are, but the process of education—and of educating oneself as an educator—requires that this be a topic that is recurrently debated. One might call it the problem of reformulating expanded and revised critical “canons” that are open to questioning and self-questioning, particularly with respect to formerly excluded

<sup>12</sup> This issue is at times obscured in recent analyses of canonicity, including the important contribution of John Guillory, “Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate,” *ELH*, 54 (1987): 483–527. On canonicity and related issues, see the essays in Dominick LaCapra, ed., *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991). See also my “Canons and Their Discontents,” *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 13 (1991): 3–14; also included in Lloyd Kramer, Donald Reid, and William Barney, eds., *Learning History in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., forthcoming).

artifacts of women, minorities, and culturally subordinated groups in general. Dialogic relations both within and between disciplines, texts, groups, and selves have a continually renewed role to play in eliciting and elaborating different positions of vantage on textual and cultural processes.

It might still be plausible to suggest that, at least in the recent past, certain texts of "high" culture have had a particularly powerful critical charge in part because they have not entered fully into the commodity system and are instead objects of relatively small capital investment. (To account for that critical charge, Adorno's at times misleading ideas about "autonomous" art and the role of negative textual space in an administered society would have to be revised in important or even drastic ways, notably in the direction of a better understanding of the divided tendencies within any text or artifact and the interactions among various artifacts in different "levels" or areas of culture.) Mass culture, by contrast, is heavily capitalized and commodified, and popular culture in industrial societies has been largely absorbed into the commodity system. The fact that we often use "popular" and "mass" culture interchangeably is one index of the extent to which popular culture has been integrated into the commodity system. This indiscriminate usage is distortive and anachronistic with respect to other forms of popular culture that existed and functioned under significantly different conditions and might at times have critical, transformative, or legitimately affirmative tendencies. But, even with respect to more recently commodified popular and mass culture, we should avoid blanket categorizations or condemnations that always skirt essentialization, elitism, and self-defeating cultural pessimism. Instead, we should attempt to work out sustained and careful analyses of the way artifacts always affect social and cultural stereotypes and ideological processes, even when they forcefully reproduce and reinforce banality.<sup>13</sup> We should also be actively alert to how artifacts of mass culture may indeed have popular and even critical dimensions either through creative modes of consumption or through more thoroughgoing and even collective procedures in which commodified artifacts are reproduced or "refunctioned."<sup>14</sup>

In addition, it is difficult to deny that the counterpart to the relative resistance of aspects of culture to commodification is frequently their hermeticism, including their tendency to recycle older and more popular forms, such as the carnivalesque, in largely inaccessible ways. At times, this difficult or hermetic quality may be justifiable.<sup>15</sup> But it is also possible—particularly when certain

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of some of these issues, see Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1986); and "Paul de Man, *Le Soir*, and the Francophone Collaboration (1940–1942)," in Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln, Neb., 1989), 266–84. See also my essay, "The Personal, the Political, and the Textual: Paul de Man as Object of Transference," *History & Memory* (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London, 1989); and Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (London, 1992). I would like to note what should be obvious. A critical process need not be purely negative. It may suggest alternatives. It may also revise or even reinforce established principles and policies to the extent that they are able to stand up to criticism and prove worthy of affirmation. But then their reproduction is not simply ideological.

<sup>15</sup> One of the more interesting and valid reasons for the appeal of a difficult or hermetic style as a strategy of resistance is given by the Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb: "We will defend

strategies have become routinized—that texts employing them, even when they attempt to subvert the high/low opposition and explicitly attack both the stratification of levels of culture and their own “high” or “elite” status, may be elitist, for example, in their function as symbolic capital and social reinforcement for a restricted in-group or *cénacle*. Whether such a state of affairs is compatible with the type of democratic values and politics often advocated by relatively hermetic critics poses a significant problem.

This problem is not confined to any one theoretical tendency, and its sources are bound up with advanced forms of the division of labor both in the academy and in the larger society. But an awareness of the problem should at least indicate that the necessary difficulty required by rigorous and self-critical thought should not itself be fetishized or correlated with some essentialized ranking of types of thought such as that which presents accessibility as necessarily a feature of a degraded or pejoratively vulgar thinking. One aspect of traditional historiography that is indeed worth preserving in a transformed manner is the idea that all forms of writing—and certainly all forms of academic writing in the humanities—should ideally make contact with diverse social groups. This ideal requires a style of address and a type of social reconstruction that should be affirmed, however difficult they may be to elaborate in a sustained and cogent fashion. Another directive one may take up and reformulate from traditional historiography is that we should insistently relate the reading of texts and other artifacts to the interpretation of significant broader problems in history and social life. The obvious questions are how this reformulation should be undertaken and the import it has for the elaboration of theory that is not self-contained but open to a sustained interchange with historical research.

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ourselves with arabesque, subversion, labyrinthine constructions, the incessant decentering of the sentence and of language so that the other will lose the way just as in the narrow streets of the *casbah*”; quoted in Jean Déjeux, *Situation de la littérature maghrébine de langue française* (Alger, 1982), 103–04. Compare Theodor Adorno: “What everybody takes to be intelligible is in fact not intelligible at all. Conversely, what our manipulated contemporaries dismiss as unintelligible secretly makes very good sense to them indeed. This recalls Freud’s dictum that the uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is why it is repressed . . . The accessibility of past art spells its doom. To validate this, one only has to look at the fact that there are many dark and doubtlessly misunderstood works among those enshrined for ever in the pantheon of classics.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, C. Lenhardt, trans. (1970; London, 1984), 262.