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History's (Un)Reason: Victorian Intellectualism from J. S. Mill to Leslie Stephen

MARCO DE WAARD

Intellectual history remains one of the least studied of the various forms of historiography practiced by the Victorians, certainly when compared to political, constitutional, or literary history, or to the historical novel when considered as a historiographical genre. Yet intellectual-historical inquiry formed a vital strand in the Victorian discourse on the past, particularly in liberal quarters, where a belief in ideas as the engines of change reinforced the prevailing doctrine of progress in history as shaped by human agency, volition, and “character.” Some of the more popular intellectual histories were epic in intention and scale: Henry Thomas Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* (1857–61), John William Draper’s *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe* (1863), and W. E. H. Lecky’s *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (1865) presented the march of mind in terms of a steady, incremental victory of reason over superstition and of heroic human effort over the unruly forces of nature. In a more scholarly (and more self-searching) key, historians like Mark Pattison, John Morley, and Leslie Stephen saw intellectual history as a cornerstone of the historiography of civilization or—in the fashionable parlance of mid-Victorian sociology—of the study of the laws of social change. For them, publishing their major works of intellectual

ABSTRACT: Conceptions of progress abounded in the Victorian period, and works of intellectual history were instrumental in illustrating and interrogating the laws of the progressive development of modern societies. Among the axioms that informed progressive historiography was the “intellectualist” assumption of the privileged and incremental historical agency of speculation, knowledge, and ideas. This paper considers the role of John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic* (1843) in shaping an intellectualist paradigm in Victorian liberal historiography. It focuses on Leslie Stephen’s methodological reflections in the *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), which it analyzes in terms of a revision of Mill’s concept of regulative ideas that suggests how intellectual history was fully caught up in the mid-Victorian “crisis of reason.”

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history in the 1870s, the progress of the intellect could not be treated in isolation from the moral life, as Buckle had once controversially contended. They rather believed that the laws that governed intellectual progress must somehow be connected to the laws directing morality, religion, and social organization in their respective temporal developments, to the extent that the task at hand was to reveal the intricate patterns of coordination between intellectual and other agents of change. This holistic vision ensured that at its most Millite, mid-Victorian intellectual history remained firmly attached to its place in the larger edifice of the social or moral sciences.

Mark Pattison's essay "Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688-1750" (1860) conveys the daring novelty and ambition of the enterprise. In his opening paragraphs, Pattison subsumed his formal subject matter—that is, the influence of rationalism on English theological discussions until 1750—under the larger rubric of "religious thought," as when he insisted on the need "to apply the laws of thought, and of the succession of opinion, to the course of English theology" (43-44). In using this larger category of "thought" as a collective designation—a conceptual novelty, as he could still remark in 1877 on reviewing Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (344)—Pattison effectively practiced what in France came to be called *histoire des mentalités*, for it enabled a definition of eighteenth-century English "rationalism" as all-inclusive and all-pervasive. He personally described it as "a habit of thought ruling all minds, under the conditions of which all alike tried to make good the peculiar opinions they might happen to cherish" (45). Likewise, Pattison maintained, "Rationalism, which is the common character of all the writers of this time, is a method rather than a doctrine; an unconscious assumption rather than a principle from which they reason" (55). It seemed appropriate to use a verb for it and speak quite simply of the "rationalizing method" (47). Pattison's method for writing intellectual history, just as Morley's and Stephen's in his wake, was both culturalist and organicist in thrust: culturalist in the caution it took not to isolate or exaggerate the individual agency of specific thinkers and ideas, and organicist in treating them within a conception of society as a natural growth in which all the parts are inextricably connected (compare Jones 231-44).

This vision of intellectual history put considerable pressure on its theory and practice. If the underlying aim was to grasp the correlation between intellectual change and larger shifts in the moral or

imaginative life, the focus shifted from ideas as such as the privileged unit of analysis to the agency that is exercised by ideas in context, and eventually also—as Stephen’s introduction to the *History of English Thought* rather uneasily underlines (8-9)—to the influences exercised on ideas “from the outside,” by social and political forces that can bend the course of ideas in what one supposes to be their natural development. In Morley’s studies of eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, published intermittently between 1868 and 1878, the problem of the fickle and changeable nature of ideas considered in terms of their social life and efficacy was met with a bold attempt to give intellectual history itself a genealogy, along with respectability and self-assurance. The result could be vertiginously self-referential: history of ideas centered on the emergence of the idea of history of ideas, narratives of progress historicizing the very notion of progress. But in Morley’s work, too, intellectual treatment blended into moral evaluations. Some of his essays—those on Condorcet and Turgot most notably—read like studies of the epistemic virtues as much as expositions of innovations in the world of speculative thought. Morley’s favorite form for intellectual history was the philosophical biography: a form well-suited to suggest how intellectual agency radiated from gifted, supremely able individuals by transforming them into models of morality and virtue and, following that, into progressive influences in the public domain and ultimately the historical imagination.

Here I consider mid-Victorian intellectual history in the light of the intellectual matrix constituted by John Stuart Mill’s model of the moral sciences. Mill’s scientific vision formed an important influence on the generation of liberals that went to university in the 1850s, when the *Logic* (1843) was widely read, and the two volumes of *Dissertations and Discussions* (1859) brought together, for the first time, Mill’s essays on Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, on French liberal historians François Guizot and Jules Michelet, and on the concept of “Civilization” and the enfranchisement of women. Drawing attention to the sense in which intellectual history intersected with and aspired to a pivotal position within the landscape of the mid-Victorian moral sciences may elucidate some of its idiosyncrasies, shifts, and fortunes. Indeed, we have already seen that insofar as the work of the historians under discussion here constitutes a unified corpus of texts, what holds them together is not simply a shared focus on the thought, ideas, and beliefs held by individuals or communities in the past, nor

the sense of discovery that those could be studied historically in the first place. It is also their adherence to what I shall now refer to as the intellectualist principle: that is, as Ben Knights puts it in an insightful discussion of Mill's social thought, "the belief that human progress is dictated by the progress of the speculative intellect, a belief which has as its corollary the fact that the history of mankind can be identified with the history of ideas" (151-52). As I want to suggest, intellectualism in this specific sense offered a forceful principle of narrative organization or emplotment, holding out the promise of insight into the dynamics of progress and the conditions for its successful guidance, direction, and acceleration.

The fullest statement of the intellectualist principle in England can be found in the first edition of Mill's *Logic* (1843), published at the height of Mill's infatuation with the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, and most clearly indebted to Comte in its outline in Book VI ("The Logic of the Moral Sciences") of a science of "social dynamics" or of the laws determining social change (113-16). At the point in Book VI that interests me here, Mill wraps up a discussion of a central problem in the study of social dynamics—in brief, the problem of how to establish empirical connections between the "progressive changes" that are manifest in each of "the separate elements of society" (114)—by saying that "it would evidently be a great assistance if it should happen to be the fact that some one element in the complex existence of social man is pre-eminent over all others as the prime agent of the social movement":

For we could then take the progress of that one element as the central chain, to each successive link of which the corresponding links of all the other progressions being appended, the succession of the facts would by this alone be presented in a kind of spontaneous order, far more nearly approaching to the real order of their filiation than could be obtained by any other merely empirical process.

Now, the evidence of history and that of human nature combine, by a striking instance of consilience, to show that there really is one social element which is thus predominant, and almost paramount, among the agents of the social progression. This is the state of the speculative faculties of mankind, including the nature of the beliefs which by any means they have arrived at concerning themselves and the world by which they are surrounded. (114-15)

Mill rounds off his discussion by saying, on the authority of the historical generalizations of Comte's three-stage law, that "we are justified in concluding that the order of human progression in all respects will

mainly depend on the order of progression in the intellectual convictions of mankind, that is, on the law of the successive transformations of human opinion" (116).

The intellectual matrix of Mill's *Logic* contains important implications for the writing of intellectual history in the Victorian period. First, if the passage quoted above exemplifies Victorian intellectualism as the view that human progress generally is directed by "speculation, intellectual activity, [and] the pursuit of truth" (Mill 115), it is important to stress that Mill turns the agency of the intellect as such into the harmonizing principle that coordinates between the heterogeneous forces at work in society and that irons out the contradictions and tensions between them. Not only, then, are the truths discovered by the intellect always, in the end, preponderant; they pervade the whole and work actively toward "consensus" between the parts. To borrow Pattison's term in his review of Stephen, the most important category of ideas is formed by those that are "regulative" (345). Second, it should be obvious that Mill's intellectualism was as much an article of faith to him as it was to eighteenth-century forerunners of his social science ideal such as, most notably, Condorcet in the *Esquisse* (1795). The cumbersome transition with which the passage I have quoted opens ("it would be a great assistance if it should happen to be the fact . . .") is not quite redeemed by Mill's subsequent proposal that intellectualism, while not (yet) established beyond doubt as a "natural law," should nonetheless be treated as *if* it was a scientific theorem. The point here is not, of course, to criticize Mill for blatant wishful thinking, but to recognize that the intellectualist principle placed a heavy burden of proof on the Millite intellectual historian, whose primary task, in the light of Mill's science of social dynamics, became to produce and amass evidence that would help to gauge in greater depth the ways in which the intellect could infuse and influence the social body. Mill's intellectualism was proposed as a principle of historical sociology, and it was accepted as such by some of his followers (most notably by Morley).

This brings me to my third and last point about Mill's intellectualism, which is that there is a sense in which it could be seen as generating the persistent conceptual slippage we have noted between terms such as "ideas," "opinion," "thought," and indeed "the human mind" and "intellect" itself in mid-Victorian intellectual-historical discourse. Between the wide array of terms that practitioners used to reference their practice we may locate their attempt to respond to and think

through their indebtedness to Millite (or positivist) sociology. Among those terms are not only “history of thought,” “history of speculation,” and “history of opinion” (the most current ones), but also “history of the human intellect,” “history of the human mind,” “history of intellectual development,” and indeed “intellectual history” itself, which we find incidentally in Buckle (238), and which in Morley and Stephen is set off explicitly against a notion of social history, of which it is presented as an integral component (Morley, *Voltaire* 336; Stephen, *History* 15). In addition, practitioners could frame their work as part of still more encompassing modes of inquiry such as “history of civilization,” “philosophical history,” “history of morals,” or “natural history of morals.” Notably, all of these terms have an Enlightenment pedigree, suggesting that a deeper continuity was being affirmed with eighteenth-century historiographical models, but perhaps also that a certain methodological unease was being deflected by invoking the authority of established—if, by the 1860s, already rather anachronistic—terms and phrases. Indeed, while intellectual history came into its own in England in the 1860s and 1870s, no stable self-definition crystallized. Instead, a gap opened up between Mill’s liberal individualism, with its privileged notion of the agency of the intellect, and social evolutionist conceptions of historical development in which such agency was problematized and qualified.

The introductory chapter to Stephen’s two-volume *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) is a case in point. In the *Mausoleum Book* that he wrote for his children, Stephen recalled how his reading of Mill’s *Logic* in combination with Comte led to his agnosticism and subsequent decision to give up his tutorship at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and eventually his fellowship (6). Stephen’s involvement in the “moral sciences” tripos established at Cambridge in 1861 further establishes a connection with the mid-Victorian vision of the social sciences, in which history held the status of an auxiliary science. Stephen opens his introduction to the *History of English Thought* by considering a problem in the study of David Hume as a starting point for a more general reflection on the theory of history of ideas. The conundrum posed by Hume when considered in context, Stephen points out, is that on the one hand his works were scathingly denounced or simply ignored by contemporaries, while on the other there is an undeniable synchrony between Hume’s scepticism and the larger currents of thought and feeling in his day. For Stephen, this synchrony suggests a “causal rela-

tion" that links the philosopher and his milieu; in his attempt to get a grip on this relation, however, his argument pulled in different directions. He states, in intellectualist fashion, that Hume "appealed to a few thinkers, who might be considered as the brain of the social organism; and [that] the effects were gradually propagated to the extremities of the system." The influence that Hume exercised in this reading was "chiefly negative," producing "in many minds a languid scepticism which cared little for utterance" (1). But Stephen also questions whether Hume's ideas can be credited with social agency at all; Hume may have been "but one . . . interpreter" of deeper impulses stirring the "soul of the nation." With this possibility, the issue of "the transformation of the whole body of speculation" is palpably thrown into question:

What is the real nature of this process? How is it that a tacit intellectual cooperation is established between minds placed far apart in the scale of culture and natural acuteness? How is it that the thought of the intellectual leaders is obscurely reflected by so many darkened mirrors, even when we are unable to point to any direct and overt means of transmission? How far may we believe in the apparent unity of that shifting chaos of speculations of more or less independent thinkers, which forms what we vaguely describe as public opinion, or the spirit of the age? (2)

In the paragraphs that follow, Stephen stakes out a claim for a sociological rather than a logical approach to the history of ideas, pointing out the limitations of "history of philosophy" or any other approach that represents the "progress of speculation" as "determined [solely] by logical considerations" (11). All the more surprising, then, that he should give up this ambition in the final paragraph of his introduction, where he curtly announces that he will mainly consider the "logical," and not the "social conditions" of the development of eighteenth-century thought. Noel Annan seems justified in his remark that Stephen "stood Mill on his head" (231).

The problem of how to square the introduction and Stephen's actual performance in the *History* has occupied scholars at least since John Bicknell's 1962 article on the problem, even though foundational claims also continue to be made for Stephen's *History* (Young 1, 108). Are we to read the introductory chapter as a programmatic manifesto, in which a historical theory and method are advanced for the relatively new mode of inquiry that Stephen and Pattison started to call "history of thought"? Or are we to take it as a retrospective reflection that seeks to self-diagnose which problems and contradictions inhabited Stephen's

work and vision, and prevented the *History* from taking shape as planned? Indeed, does it perhaps contain a concession of defeat?

As I read it, Stephen's text supports both readings to a degree. The first reading, in which the introductory chapter is a statement of intent or a declaration of his method, is supported by Stephen's vision of the historical process in terms of a dialectic between the "general tendency to persistence of ideas" (no matter how erroneous) and intellectual impulses such as the "love of abstract truth, the love of consistency, and . . . the love of intellectual curiosity" (8). At any one particular moment this dialectic manifests itself in the form of a "heterogeneous state," Stephen writes, in which different "stages of thought" messily coexist and interact in ways that recall the historical compartmentalizations and differentiations that Auguste Comte's stadial theory promised to map (4). This theory, however, is modified here with an understanding of intellectual impulses as *instincts* that war and rival for precedence. "Specimens of opinion derived from every age of mankind," ancient and new, inherited and newly acquired, seem to meet at a crossroads in historical time to fight out the "conflict" which, as Stephen says, "the progress of the intellect necessarily involves" (4). If Stephen's historical vision retains its optimistic investment in progress, it is because he believes that "there is a tendency towards a growing conformity between the world of thought and the world of facts. . . . [In] the ceaseless struggle, truth has at least the one point in its favor—that when once reached it is more likely to be permanently held" (5). This process of advancement can only be stopped by "tyranny" or "atrophied by some process of social decay."

The second reading—that Stephen's introduction registers a major revision of Millite intellectualism, which may have presented itself most directly to Stephen and his readers as a failure or inconsistency of method—is supported by roughly the second half of the introduction, which considers the non-intellectual influences involved in the transformation of opinion. Stephen particularly insists here on the primacy of the imagination, as in the idea that a "philosophic doctrine" will succeed, not because it "can convince the reason," but because it "can satisfy the imagination" and the emotions (15). Far from suggesting a simple binary organization of Stephen's introduction in which he shifts attention from one dialectic process to another, however—or, from logical to sociological forces—I want to argue that Stephen's notion of intellectual agency itself is complicated by his

adoption of social evolutionist metaphors: particularly the metaphors of sedimentation and accretion conjured up by terms like “strata” and “survivals” (see Burrow, “Images”). In Stephen, those metaphors seem to apply especially on the level of what he calls the “logical” processes involved in the transformation of thought. At an early point in the introduction, he considers that philosophers are often open to reproach for losing the “original nucleus” of a truthful idea out of sight “under a mass of accretions and adaptations.” Curiously, Stephen refers to this process as “rationalizing.” In Pattison’s 1860 essay, as we have seen, this term stood for the diffusion of standards of reason in eighteenth-century theological discussions, even though it could also stand more generally for a process of mental adjustment that was conservative in purpose. In Stephen, however, the term is completely detached from the discussion of eighteenth-century intellectual change, and instead constitutes a manifestation of what Stephen calls the “general tendency to persistence of ideas” (8): “though the initial stage of a theory may differ widely from the final, and even, in some important cases, be almost its logical contradictory, the change at any given moment may be imperceptible” (7). Rationalizing, then, is the “continuous and imperceptible process” by which ideas adapt to changes in their environment so as to survive—even beyond the lifespan of their social utility. As such it is the opposite of an intellectual breakthrough in which a new idea forces its way into the existing currents of thought, and disrupts their course in the process.

It would push the argument too far to say that Stephen, at this point, has effectively deconstructed the Millite idea of intellectual influences that are operative in an immensely permeable social body without being permeable—vulnerable to change and erosion—themselves. Yet Stephen did open them up—more drastically than Pattison did in the 1860 essay—to a principle of unconscious and possibly irrational motivation at work in history. Indeed, his notion of “rationalization” as a form of adaptation of ideas to their social environment threatened to take the reason out of intellectual history altogether, turning it into the mirror of different (and for Stephen darker) forces. His notion of “rationalization” could just as well work against the agency of reason as with it. There resides a special irony in the fact that in Stephen’s own terms, his notion of the persistence of ideas, of intellectual survivals and arrested growths, may apply to his own theorization of intellectual agency in the introduction to the *History of English Thought*. Indeed, his

failure to fully confront the disjuncture between intellectual production and social change in history makes the residual intellectualism of his own reflections an apt example of “rationalization” as a form of preserving ideas that are in fact on the wane. In later years Stephen wrote that “literature seems to me to be a kind of by-product” of some deeper movement of evolution (*English Literature* 22). Toward the end of his life his biographer heard him refer to ideas and literature as “the noise the wheels make as they go round” (qtd. in Maitland 283). Yet there is a sense in which the very idea of “intellectual history” had already obtained a somewhat simulacral quality for Stephen by 1876. His *History* may be considered not only as an originary moment or foundational beginning for intellectual history as it became institutionalized in the twentieth-century academy, but also as an endpoint of the Millite vision of intellectual history and of the Enlightenment scientism that Mill sought to carry on.

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