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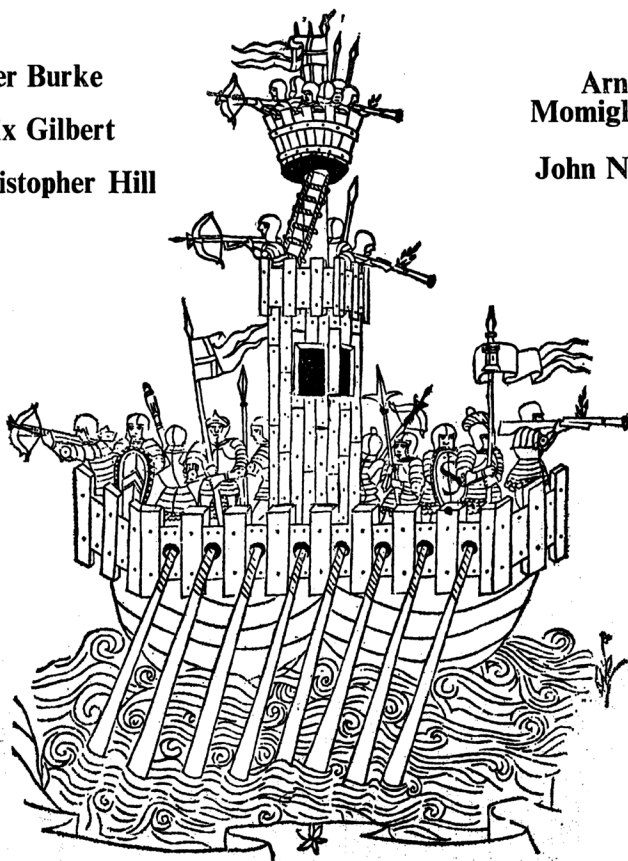
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**Arnaldo
Momigliano**

John North



THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography

ARNALDO MOMIGLIANO

With a New Foreword by Anthony Grafton

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A Piedmontese View of the History of Ideas*

WHEN I arrived in Oxford in 1939, it was enough to mention the word 'idea' to be given the address of the Warburg Institute. R. G. Collingwood, who still lectured on the history of the idea of history, was ill, isolated and discredited, and soon disappeared. Who had persuaded the English that the history of ideas was an unBritish activity? I suspect it was Lewis Namier. In the 1920s, when I was a student in the University of Turin, the history of ideas was the speciality for which English historians were most famous. This reputation went back to the days of Grote and Lecky, Freeman, Bryce and Flint. There were few books in other languages which could compete with Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the 18th Century* or with J. B. Bury's *A History of Freedom of Thought* and *The Idea of Progress*. Lord Acton managed to become famous for a book on liberty he did not write. For medieval political ideas one went of course to the work in progress by the brothers Carlyle, and we were told (perhaps not quite fairly) that no Italian study of a medieval jurist could compare with C. N. S. Woolf's *Bartolus of Sassoferrato* (1913). The most significant history of an idea published in Italy in the 1920s, G. de Ruggiero's *Storia del Liberalismo Europeo*, was in method and point of view a derivation from English models. De Ruggiero was a close friend of Collingwood who translated his book into English. In the specific field of history of philosophy there was little to match Bosanquet's *History of Aesthetic* (as Croce reluctantly admitted) or Burnet's much-admired *Early Greek Philosophy*.

The situation was clearly one of change. To remain in the provincial but very alert society of the University of Turin, a distinction was becoming apparent between the Law Faculty and the Faculty of Arts.

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There were historians, indeed eminent historians on both sides. Though the study of law in Italy had a strong Germanic imprint, students of political and social ideas in the Law Faculty were in sympathy with the English tradition and with whatever American research on the history of ideas happened to be known (not very much at that time). The English translation of the book on religious liberty by Francesco Ruffini had shown that this interest was reciprocated. The masters of the Law Faculty set their pupils and, literally, their sons to work on themes of English origin and sent them to English-speaking universities. The result constitutes a little-noticed chapter of Piedmontese-Anglo-Saxon cultural relations: Mario Einaudi, the son of the future President of the Italian Republic, studied Burke and is now a professor at Cornell (and Director of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation in Turin); Edoardo Ruffini, the son of Francesco, studied parliamentary ideas of the Middle Ages and became the first cultural attaché in England after the Second World War; Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves studied Hooker and medieval political thought under C. C. J. Webb and A. J. Carlyle in Oxford and later returned there as the Serena Professor of Italian Studies.

In the Faculty of Arts, by contrast, German *Ideengeschichte* was held in higher esteem than the English history of ideas. Federico Chabod, who had written his dissertation on Machiavelli in Turin (1924), went to Berlin to study under Meinecke; he returned to become the most influential Italian historian of his generation. Meinecke, who was recommended by Croce (the sympathy was rather one-sided), represented in many ways the most obvious alternative to the English approach to ideas. Though generalizations are precluded by the very list of names I have given above, the English approach tended to take the form of the history of the rise (and eventually of the fall) of a single specific idea, comprising its theoretical formulations and its embodiment in institutions. Even Bury's *Idea of Progress*, perhaps the most purely intellectual of all these books, deals specifically with the adoption of the idea of progress in historiography and sees connections with the social environment. Meinecke was a historian of conflicting principles: national state versus cosmopolitanism, *raison d'état* against natural rights. More and more he liked to leave these conflicts unresolved and to create an atmosphere of pathos round his books with which English prose could hardly compete.

Meinecke was only one of the facets of German *Ideengeschichte* as it emerged before Italian eyes in the 1920s. Histories of political myths, of words charged with ideological content, of class-conditioned social ideas,

multiplied both from the right and the left. Among those which made an impression on me at the time of their appearance I remember F. Schneider, *Rom und Romgedanke im Mittelalter* (1926); P. E. Schramm, *Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio* (1929); A. Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium* (1929); F. Gundolf, *Caesar, Geschichte seines Ruhms* (1925); B. Groethuysen, *Die Entstehung der bürgerlichen Welt- und Lebensanschauung* (1927).

It is no accident that books on the Middle Ages played such a large part even in the formation of an ancient historian like myself. These were the 'model' books about which one spoke. K. Burdach's *Vom Mittelalter zur Reformation* (1891 ff.) seemed to be one of the supreme achievements of modern historiography. Discussions imported from Germany on the essence and chronological limits of certain periods (Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment) bordered on casuistry. Chabod wasted too much time on them. But perhaps they contributed indirectly to the notion of intellectual climate and thus rejoined the Burckhardtian *Kulturgeschichte*.

The publications of the Warburg Institute of Hamburg were of course noticed for their approach to iconography and, generally speaking, as a rallying-point for the new German currents of thought. The variety of the contributions, which included big names such as R. Reitzenstein and E. Norden among the classicists, made it difficult to separate those works by Warburg himself, F. Saxl, Edgar Wind, Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer, which represented the really original nucleus of the Institute. The wide influence of the Warburg Institute in Italy as well as in England developed only after the Second World War.

In the study of Greece and Rome, Germany made fashionable the history of 'political' words. The model analysis of the word *fides* by E. Fraenkel (1916) is often given as the starting-point of the new vogue. But this type of research prospered among scholars who were far more interested in and committed to political ideology than Fraenkel ever was. R. Heinze in his postwar *Von den Ursachen der Grösse Roms* (1921) set the tone for the new inquiry which affected Rome more than Greece and progressed from one Roman virtue to the next until it ended in implicit or explicit Nazi-Fascist propaganda. Even the study of theological words – incorporated in the monumental *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (1933 ff.) – was marred by racial prejudice, not to mention the methodological inadequacies which J. Barr was later to expose so convincingly (1961). The total result was, however, a new archive of ancient ideas as expressed in the Greek and Roman vocabu-

lary which has since made much difference to research into the Classics and early Christianity.

It is difficult now to account for the poor circulation of French *histoire des idées* in Italy during the period between 1920 and 1939. Neither Croce, who disliked both French rationalism and French irrationalism, nor Mussolini, who feared French democracy, can really be made responsible for this. All the research into *représentations collectives* which characterized the Durkheim–Mauss–Halbwachs tradition was (so far as I know) practically ignored in Italy. Marc Bloch was noticed in the 1930s as a pioneer student of agricultural systems, but not as the author of *Les Rois thaumaturges*.

This ignorance of course had its limits. A masterpiece such as *Il Giansenismo in Italia* by A. C. Jemolo (1928) would hardly have been possible without the French analysis of Port-Royal. Some years later Paul Hazard's *La Crise de la conscience européenne* (1935) made an impression and Henri Bremond's *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (1916 ff.), though more slowly, also left its mark. More significantly, A. Omodeo, who helped Croce in editing the *Critica*, rediscovered the French liberal historians of civilization from Guizot to Tocqueville in his effort to escape from German historicism and Italian *attualismo*.

But Italian historians of ideas remained indebted to the German tradition of *Ideengeschichte* and had to settle their accounts with it. The little-known *Storia d'una mente* by E. Grasselli (1932) tells in autobiographical terms how deep this commitment went. *La lotta contro la ragione* by Carlo Antoni (1942) and some of the earliest essays by Delio Cantimori (now in *Studi di storia*) are the first signs of the disentanglement which meant the end of the Crocean era.

It seems to me that the price English historians paid in the 1930s for remaining independent of German *Ideengeschichte* was to jettison their own tradition of the history of ideas. The main exception was at Cambridge, where Herbert Butterfield manfully battled against Namier and where E. M. Butler produced that singular criticism of German humanism, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (1935). But the English mood of the late 1930s was expressed – at least for the ancient historians – by Ronald Syme when, in his *Roman Revolution*, he treated the Roman political vocabulary as 'political catchwords', 'a subject of partisan interpretation, of debate and of fraud'.

It is not for me to recount the story of the increasing impact of refugee German thought on English intellectual life and its convergence with old

and new native trends during the 1940s and 1950s. Today, after fifty years, English and Italian historians find themselves again at the same level – which is one of lively interest in the history of ideas in both countries. There is nothing very surprising in this. The popularity of the history of ideas is a universal phenomenon. If there is something more specifically common both to Italian and English historians, it is that they are increasingly dependent on France and on the United States for their inspiration and their methods.

Again there are exceptions. Historians of ideas like E. H. Gombrich and Isaiah Berlin have no peers elsewhere in their command of the theoretical presuppositions of their work. On the other hand there is in Italy at least one historian of ideas, Franco Venturi, who, perhaps because of his French formation, dominates his own chosen fields of work – the European Enlightenment and Russian nineteenth-century reform movements – without any concession to fashionable currents. But in neither country is there anything that can be compared with the *Annales* or with structuralism as major movements of historical research. Nor is there anything like the less sophisticated but massive and effective American exploration of ideas from sociological points of view. Young historians both in England and in Italy are more and more thinking in terms of the circulation of ideas, cultures of the lower classes, collective representations, utopias and modern myths, acculturation, position of intellectuals and of holy men, structure of scientific revolutions, and so on – all of which seem to have either a French father or an American mother (possibly with a German grandfather).

In this enthusiasm for ideas, the most difficult thing is to know what one still means by an idea; attitudes, propaganda, dreams, subconscious needs, symbolic figures are included. The traditional oppositions between ideas and institutions, between ideology and society or, quite simply, between beliefs and facts have become far too crude to define the new levels of exploration. Even the dualism between consciousness and society ably exploited by H. Stuart Hughes (1959) is inadequate. This is certainly the point which the astute Michel Foucault has grasped in trying to put across his new '*archéologie du savoir*' to replace '*l'histoire des idées*' ('*affranchir l'histoire de la pensée de sa sujétion transcendente*').

It explains too why pure history of ideas, in the form elaborated in America by A. O. Lovejoy's group with its organ, the *Journal of History of Ideas* (1940), seems to be unable to indicate a clear direction in the present situation. With Lovejoy – notwithstanding the extraordinary merits of the research he did or inspired – one always had the feeling of a

quasi-Platonic world where ideas could be counted. The Oxford professor D. S. Margoliouth had the reputation of believing in the existence of thirty Indo-European Ur-jokes from which all the others derived. Lovejoy did not believe that the number of Ur-ideas was much greater.

It was already very difficult to decide whether one could separate the ideological from the institutional element in the old notions of liberty, peace, federalism, chivalry, and so on. When we come to the collective representations of belief in witches, to the parson's wife or to the English nanny – not to mention the two classical examples of French origin: the idea of childhood and the idea of madness – the distinction becomes meaningless. It is indeed the impossibility of regulating *a priori* the traditional conflict of precedence between institutions and principles or between society and ideology that gives sense and zest to the new confusion. The period of experiment is bound to last for some time, and so is the confusion of languages. We hear less and less of orthodox Marxism; notice the transition from Marxism to structuralism of the most original and internationally influential French student of Greek thought, J.-P. Vernant. Russian Marxists do not help either, at least in the field of classical studies. The latest article on Freedom in Rome by E. M. Štaerman in the *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* 1972, No. 2, is a warning.

I hope it is not simply an ancient historian's prejudice to say that the new exploration in the field of ideas seems up to now more rewarding when remote cultures are its primary object. The mere task of finding linguistic and conceptual equivalents to our ways of thinking in other cultures – or alternatively the necessity of acknowledging that these equivalences do not exist – throws light on ourselves and on the others. I recollect the pleasure of recognizing that the ancient Egyptian attitudes to speech and silence could be a thread to guide me in my inexperience through the various stages of Egyptian civilization. And I have no doubt that the appearance of the notion of heresy in early Christianity and late Judaism means a caesura in patterns of thought and social organization.

But when we come to our own society we need to know what we can believe rather than what is believed. There is an inescapable question of truth, if the historian is to be a responsible actor in his own society and not a manipulator of opinions. This need, incidentally, seems to be taken too lightly by the various sociologies of knowledge, including the novel one of Foucault. The resulting paradox I may perhaps put in personal terms. When I became a professor at University College London more than twenty years ago, it did not take me long to realize that the best historians of ideas in the place were two practising scientists,

J. Z. Young and Peter Medawar. But the fact that they talked about sciences I did not know not only paralysed me in regard to them (which is easy to understand), but also paralysed them in regard to me or anybody else in my position. That is, they lacked the potential public necessary for developing their scientific ideas in an historical context.

To take another less personal example, it is perhaps characteristic of our time that we have so many discussions of the religious ideas of underdeveloped countries, but so little analysis of our own religious beliefs with the simple purpose of ascertaining their credibility. During recent years in Italy more scholarly books have appeared on heretical sects than on modern Catholicism. The men who would be able to illuminate the contemporary scene by talking about truth in its historical context have not yet found their public. Therefore we are left with the English nanny and the cargo cult for the expression of our nostalgias and dissatisfactions.