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## Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History by Darrin McMahon & Samuel Moyn, eds.

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**McMahon, Darrin M., and Samuel Moyn, eds. *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi + 305 pages. Paper, \$35.00.**

This collection of essays constitutes a long overdue reassessment of the field of intellectual history. Within its pages some of the most important questions concerning the state of the field, intellectual history's place in the wider discipline of history, and its possible futures are posited and explored. Historians Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn employ "rethinking" in the title of their newest edited volume not only to suggest corrective action to current trends but also to indicate the process each author takes in tracing historical developments in the field. Taking these two definitions as implied goals, the book succeeds much more in the latter than the former.

According to McMahon and Moyn, the imperative for reassessment comes from twin paradoxes: if everyone's methods are accepted as valid, then no one's methods are valid, and as more studies incorporate intellectual history, the sub-discipline may be diluted out of existence. The editors maintain that with the linguistic, cultural, and global turn the field took, it became turned around without consistent goals and common methods, effectually transforming intellectual historians into masons at the Tower of Babel. This sense of crisis is tempered by a certain amount of ambivalence that the editors allow in the collection of essays, which allows for the entirety of the work to be seen as a springboard for further discussion rather than a manifesto. What results are fourteen short essays that deftly articulate the history of intellectual history and its consequences for the sub-discipline today.

While the authors embark on separate paths, they have the common goals of distilling intellectual history as a separate and unique practice and expanding the ground intellectual history can cover geographically and through time. For some this means revitalizing elapsed methods and finding missing opportunities (McMahon, Marchand). For others this means disentangling intellectual history from neighboring fields (Moyn, Lilti). Still others demonstrate the proximity of other sub-disciplines, including cultural history (Surkis), the history of science (Tresch), and the history of sexuality (Matysik), in order to show how they are related. A final category of essays ties intellectual history recent developments in history, such as spatial history (Randolph) and global history (Kapila). Thus, these essays engage with McMahon and Moyn's project of reconsidering how a history of ideas might function in the twenty-first century.

The book attempts to create cohesion within the variety of methods found in intellectual history; however, the diversity of methods and topics presented in the book does more to highlight this trend toward difference rather than remedy it. For example, Peter Gordon disputes what he calls "contextual provincialism," which is the notion that meanings are contained by geographical and national boundaries, while the subsequent offering from Antoine Lilti is based largely on this form of contextualization as it holds intellectual history in France as a special case. Likewise, the various authors form different relationships to sub-disciplines, some pushing other methodologies towards intellectual history and others attempting to separate intellectual history from new methods. This informs one of the greatest strengths of the book: its ability to communicate and connect with a myriad of historians. However, as the editors acknowledge, this comes at the cost of internal consistency. A more problematic aspect of the rethinking process is that the majority of the essays focus on pre-Foucauldian developments that bypass the most recent literature and leave it under-examined. This creates two problems, the first being that it is hard to identify what is new in these methodologies and how their revitalizing these methodologies would increase our ability to understand and explain the past. Also, without clear

counterexamples the perceived problems in the field that necessitate a remedy remain nameless and abstract.

While the collection of essays makes a case for redeveloping the history of ideas alongside other existing methodologies, as a coherent whole the volume does not fulfill the mandate of the ambitious title, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*. As McMahon and Moyn point out, the field is currently enjoying a high point and, despite the diversity of practices, there is no immediate crisis to drive a push for field-wide methodological purity. McMahon and Moyn's main concern is that research has become too individualized, and that this eclecticism fosters complacency and contradiction for the sake of peace. As a guiding purpose this worry proves to be too weak to support a reorientation of the field, since the ultimate objective is not to increase the explanatory power of the historian but to offer a clarification of intellectual history as a distinct approach.

Nevertheless, the authors extend compelling invitations for its readers to use their historical training to reflect on the practices of being a historian. The book is successful in posing foundational questions of the historian's craft. In this way, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* lends itself well to courses on historiography and methodology in advanced history courses.

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