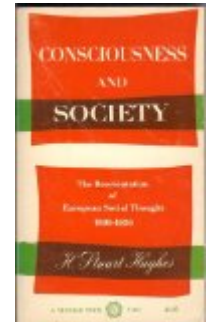


H. Stuart Hughes. *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930.* Revised edition Vintage Books, 1977. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958. xi + 433 pp. Out of Print, paper, ISBN 978-0-394-70201-8.



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THE NARROW PATH OF FAITH IN REASON

[Note : This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

Henry Stuart Hughes (1916-1999), a leading scholar in the field of intellectual history, has contributed an important essay about the forces at work in European social thought during the period 1890 to 1930, when intellectuals shifted their emphasis away from the elaboration of large systems and proposed new thought processes which have come to characterize the twentieth century. Most of the text is devoted to the period 1890-1914. Hughes began his book with substantial preliminary observations defining the territory of intellectual history while delimiting the main aspects he intended to discuss -- namely the "higher" level of thought using the works of individual thinkers because they refer to "intellectually clear and significant statements", rather than the "lower" level which he categorized as popular

effusions (p. 9). From its beginning, the history of ideas entailed interdisciplinary research and purpose, as Hughes' study did, encompassing sociology, philosophy, psychology, history, political theory, and literature. He defined sociology as "universal social theorizing in the tradition of Montesquieu and Marx", rather than the "highly specialized and fragmented discipline with which we are currently familiar in the United States" (p. 22). Some sociologists never forgave him.

The 1890s signaled the birth of a new era. One of the major ideas initially enunciated during the last decade of the nineteenth century was a new interest in the problem of consciousness and the role of the unconscious as earlier assurances of rationalistic ideologies - liberal, democratic, or socialist - became inadequate (p. 63-66). The object of Hughes' research was thus to develop an initial definition of "ideas that have still to win their way" (p. 10). In the intellectual turbulence of European fin de siècle, "consciousness seemed to offer the only link between man and the world of society and history" (p. 428).

The questions European intellectuals were attempting to respond to dealt with the object of social thought -- the character of individual and group dominance, the sources of social cohesion, the nature and function of religious sentiment (p. 24). Their first intellectual statement was to reject positivism because its absolute faith in scientific knowledge and strict materialistic determinism could no longer adequately explain human acts. How could irrational action be explained? The revolt against positivism and naturalism introduced other bases of motivation -- intuition and religious sentiment -- as elements and possibilities which had to be included if one was to comprehend human behaviour. More importantly, could irrational motivation be channelled for constructive human purposes? The greatest thinkers of the era were those "who while fighting every step of the way to salvage as much as possible of the rationalist heritage decisively shifted the axis of that tradition to make room for the new definition of man as something more (or less) than a logically calculating animal" (p. 17). Understanding the issue of consciousness in social thought would introduce subjectivity and limited freedom as defining characteristics of human behaviour instead of, or rather along with, rationality and free will. This small elite group included Sigmund Freud, Max Weber and Benedetto Croce. Theirs was a narrow path indeed, dictated by the "abiding legacy" of the rational and humane principles and accomplishments of the Enlightenment (p. 28), to which Hughes himself was profoundly attached.

To solidly ground his work in reality, Hughes introduced a large number of thinkers, to continually ensure the linkage between ideas and specific cases. He examined the works of diverse intellectuals ranging from Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Freud, Bergson, Nietzsche, Croce, Meinecke, Troeltsch, Mosca, Michels, Gide, Mann, Proust to Pirandello, and many more. To the wealth of their research and writing, Hughes added additional layers of understanding such as intellectual traditions (mainly French, German and Italian), fields

of knowledge (science or positivism), and fields of social behaviour (religion). He expanded the categories of analyses with additional prisms: the concept of generation, the values (socialism and catholicism), the social classes, and the collective experience of the First World War. These multiple layers add a formidable complexity, although some of the elements would have benefited from a more substantial analysis, socialism being one example. However, Hughes' essay introduced the reader to the intellectual torments as well as the possible choices which these generations faced. The interpretive frameworks of positivism and idealism could not encompass the whole of human experience; transcending both was the difficult task Max Weber pursued.

Obviously, such a large subject and corpus required a ruthless selection -- always arbitrary -- of individuals. Furthermore, Hughes chose not to include thinkers from peripheral regions of Europe, giving priority to seminal intellectual traditions which he believed were concentrated in the center of continental Europe. Thus, such great intellectuals as Ibsen or Ortega y Gasset are not a part of his essay. Nevertheless, what has endured is the breadth of this work; a major contribution to our understanding of European intellectual life, and, by extension, of the premises of twentieth century ideologies, especially fascism. Hughes, however, did not consider these consequences. Passionately attached to the legacy of enlightened reason, he focused on this aspect in his analysis of the great thinkers, sometimes distorting the overall appreciation of their work. Sigmund Freud being a case in point.

By his scientific and medical training, and through his objective of mapping the mind, Freud belonged to the sphere of positivism, the accepted intellectual conceptualization of his formative years. Despite his criticism of positivism Freud maintained a scientific vocabulary, even when he departed from his original goal of understanding the human unconscious and began to construct a

coherent explanation of human existence (p. 131). This intellectual leap was not well received. It would be helpful if Hughes had gone further in assessing the consequences of Freud's discovery of the unconscious. It completely disturbed the general assumptions about human nature and conduct, it contributed to the collapse of rational certainties about human behaviour and opened an intellectual space where irrationalism could develop. In *Consciousness and Society*, Hughes acknowledged the paradox that both intellectual creativity and destruction had emerged from a common source (p. 185) but, remaining faithful to his object, he focused on the former. The experience of the Second World War, during which Hughes served as intelligence officer, had clearly demonstrated the necessity of understanding what had happened, how European philosophy, social thought, and the basis of political discussion had been so profoundly shifted that they threatened to shatter its civilization. It is also this destructive potential which continues to draw us back to the 1890-1930 era searching for answers. Hughes still provides a solid introduction to these crucial questions.

Regarding epistemology, H. Stuart Hughes explained that by the mid-twentieth century the historian's research on human action and thought was confronted with the general assumption by social scientists, all of whom agreed about the narrow limits of conscious choice in human behaviour which follow patterns of repetition induced by material and psychological conditioning. Hughes justified the historian's traditional interest in both deed and thought by reaffirming that change was the essence of history (p. 5). Repetition alone could not explain human behaviour.[1] Not surprisingly, the most hostile review of his book came from the *American Sociological Review*. [2] But, overall, the book has been well received by historians [3], and Hughes' work has been recognized as filling a gap in historical knowledge. The author acknowledged that he followed Franklin L. Baumer who, in 1949, suggested

that intellectual historians should write "detailed studies of the interrelationship of thought in relatively brief periods of time" (p. 12).[4] Hughes achieved this goal. Research in the field of intellectual history began during the 1920s. The scholarly *Journal of the History of Ideas* was launched in January 1940, brain-child of the American historian Arthur O. Lovejoy. Baumer's admonition, as well as Hughes' observations delineating the territory of intellectual history must be understood in the context and perspective of a fairly new field of historical scholarship which is still open to original research and model studies. He believed that this conceptual effort, in terms of epistemology, was necessary in the face of the social sciences seeming triumph in the United States; he believed the work of the historian had to be vindicated.

It is now common for intellectual historians to place ideas in their social and political context, which Hughes did not attend to. As an example, though he did connect the reorientation of social thought with the decisive political question of the nineteenth century, namely the source of authority and legitimacy, he remained aloof from political events; similarly, he did not connect the economic and social upheavals brought about by the Industrial Revolution to the collapse of absolute faith in reason and human progress. *Consciousness and Society* was reprinted in 1961, and a revised edition was published in 1977.[5] It has become a classic of historical investigation into the styles of thought which flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century. From a methodological perspective, it demonstrated a comprehensive assessment of a complex central issue by multiplying the angles of investigation to ensure an understanding of vast interpretive frameworks. It still holds its ground in both history and historiography, despite the increased interest by intellectual historians for additional input from other fields such as science, the arts, or education.

Notes

[1]. For a detailed discussion of his ideas concerning the relationship between history and the social sciences, see H. Stuart Hughes, "The Historian and the social scientist", *The American Historical Review*, 66, 1 (Oct. 1960), 20-46.

[2]. *The American Sociological Review*, 26, 1961, 473-4.

[3]. See *The American Historical Review*, 65,2, 1960, 357; *The Canadian Historical Review*, 40, 1959, 145; *The Catholic Historical Review*, 45, 1960, 476; *Ethics*, 70, 1959-60, 177; *The Review of Politics*, 22, 1960, 426.

[4]. Quoting Franklin L. Baumer, "Intellectual History and its Problems", *Journal of Modern History*, XXI (Sept. 1949), 193-4.

[5]. This research was expanded into a trilogy with *The Obstructed Path. French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation, 1930-1960* (1968), and *The Sea Change. The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965* (1975); both books reprinted together in 1987 as *Between Commitment and Disillusion. The Obstructed Path and the Sea Change 1930-1965*.

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