books & ideas

Writing Intellectual History

About: François Dosse, *La saga des intellectuels français 1944-1989*

By Iain Stewart

Should the history of intellectuals also be a history of ideas? François Dosse's book reorients scholarship in this field by integrating ideas and high culture into the history of French intellectuals, which used to be more sociologically oriented.

Intellectual History and the History of Intellectuals

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about François Dosse's *La saga des intellectuels français 1944-1989* is that it is the first book of its kind really to take ideas seriously. In the field defining books published on this subject during the 1980s and 1990s the history of ideas was explicitly rejected. Historians such as Christophe Charle, Pascal Ory, Jean-François Sirinelli and Michel Winock, approached the history of intellectuals as a history of social networks and political interventions for which the intellectual's artistic, literary or philosophical oeuvre was more or less irrelevant.[1] The general historiography of French intellectuals thus consciously

[1] On page 15 of their genre-defining *Les intellectuels en France de l'Affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*, 1986, Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli stressed that the book was "not about the history of ideas, but the history of societies" [s'agira … non d'histoire des idées, mais d'histoire des sociétés"]. When Michel Winock published his *Le siècle des intellectuels* in 1997, he followed Ory and Sirinelli in defining the history of intellectuals as "the description of the political confrontations that opposed writers, philosophers, artists, [and] scientists" ["la description des affrontements politiques qui ont opposé des écrivains, des philosophes, des artistes, des scientifiques"]. Winock was similarly explicit in his rejection of the history of ideas. As he put it, the book sought "to trace the history of intellectuals – in the sense that this word took during the Dreyfus Affair in 1898. As such it is not a history of ideas […]; less still a study of cultural production" ["retracer l'histoire des intellectuels – au sens que ce mot a pris lors de l'affaire Dreyfus en 1898. On n'y trouvera donc pas une histoire des idées … moins encore une étude de la

distanced itself from intellectual history as practiced elsewhere in Europe or in North America. This careful historiographical positioning partly revealed the influence of a longer tradition of French historians denigrating the history of ideas.[2] But it was also faithful to the specific meaning that the word "intellectual" took on when it first began to be widely used as a noun during the Dreyfus Affair. Instead of being synonymous with associated terms like "academic", "artist", "philosopher" or "writer", the noun "intellectual" described a distinct identity that such individuals assumed when they descended from the ivory tower in a bid to exercise political influence. In light of this etymology one could justifiably study Émile Zola as a political activist whose literary contribution was irrelevant except insofar as it provided the basis of his public renown.

This approach was justifiable on solid methodological grounds, but its implication that specialist knowledge was relevant to intellectual engagement only as cultural capital was always problematic. And this was especially true for the post-Second World War decades, when French intellectual politics was shaped by various kinds of high theory to an unprecedented extent. As more recent general histories of French intellectuals have begun to depart from the methodological presuppositions of previous scholarship in this field it has no longer seemed so clear that the exclusion of the history of ideas from the historiography of French intellectuals is a necessary prerequisite for the production of serious historical scholarship on the subject.[3] The publication of François Dosse's *La saga des intellectuels français* should dispel any lingering doubts about this. By integrating ideas and high culture into the history of French intellectuals while retaining what is most insightful in the more sociologically informed first wave of scholarship on this subject, Dosse's book completes an important reorientation of historical scholarship in its field.

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production culturelle". See Michel Winock, *Le siècle des intellectuels*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1999, 7. See also Christophe Charle, *Naissance des intellectuels, 1880-1900*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1990.

[2] Academic history in post-Second World War France was dominated by the *Annales* school, whose co-founder, Lucien Febvre, was so dismissive of the history of ideas that he did not consider its practitioners to be real historians. "Of all the workers who cling to the generic title of historian" he once remarked, these were the "one group that cannot in some way justify it in our eyes." ["De tous les travailleurs qui retiennent, précisé ou non par quelque épithète, le qualificative générique d'historiens, il n'en est point qui ne le justifient à nos yeux par quelque côté"]. Michel Foucault was equally disparaging towards the history of ideas in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where, explicitly aligning himself with the *Annalistes*, he referred to the history of ideas as "evad[ing] very largely the work and methods of the historian" ["échappent en grande partie au travail de l'historien et à ses méthodes"]. See Lucien Febvre, 'Leur histoire et la nôtre' [1938] in *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris : 1953), 276-283, 278; Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1969), 10. Such views, as propounded by some of the most respected and influential scholars in the human sciences, created a legitimacy deficit that the history of ideas has never fully overcome in France. This is not to suggest that the history of ideas has been absent from the historiographical landscape in France; but attempts to give it a secure institutional basis have been largely unsuccessful, as in the case of the short-lived journal *La Pensée politique* (1993-1995). Tellingly, self-identified historians of ideas at work in France today operate under the banner of a 'social history of ideas' that is primarily indebted to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. On this see Chloé Gaboriaux and Arnault Skornicki, *Vers une histoire sociale des idées politiques*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses universitaires de Septenrion, 2017.

[3] Christophe Charle and Laurent Jeanpierre (dir.), *La vie intellectuelle en France*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2016.

The Rise and Fall of the Prophetic Intellectual

La saga des intellectuels français is divided into two volumes. Volume I, subtitled "À l'épreuve de l'histoire", covers the period from the Liberation to the eve of May '68. It is divided into two parts, each consisting of thematic chapters arranged in more or less chronological order. The first part, "Le souffle de l'histoire", focuses on intellectual engagement and the history of ideas as shaped by the Liberation and the development of the Cold War up to the crucial year of 1956, when Khrushchev's secret speech and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution provoked a wave of disillusionment among French intellectuals previously sympathetic to the Soviet Union and French Communist Party. In the second part, "Le moment critique, âge d'or des sciences humaines", decolonisation provides the dominant context for an intellectual history whose ideational focus lies mainly with the development of structuralism, along with its wider cultural ramifications, and whose predominant political focus is on the impact of the Algerian War on the intellectual left and the subsequent rise of third worldism in a social context dominated by the baby boom's impact on higher education. Volume II, "L'avenir en miettes", is divided into an opening section on May '68 and its intellectual legacies; a second on the demise of leftist radicalism in the mid-to-late 1970s, and a concluding section covering a diverse array of topics from the history of ecological thought to the revival of the intellectual right, ethical thought, and debates over the death of the public intellectual in the 1980s.

La saga des intellectuels français covers a lot of ground over its two volumes, but its unifying narrative thread is that of the rise and fall of "the prophetic intellectual". According to Dosse, the original epistemic condition underlying the emergence of this intellectual type was the diffuse appeal of eschatological philosophies of history, of which Marxism was only the most developed form. This was compounded by widespread belief in the possibility of comprehending human societies on the basis of a single system of intelligibility, of which structuralism stands as the main example. By the end of the 1970s, however, the prophetic intellectual's epistemic conditions of possibility had completely broken down. The hegemony of various forms and combinations of Marxism and structuralism then gave way to new preoccupations such as political and economic liberalism, human rights and humanitarianism, environmentalism and ethics. What was lost amidst all of this was any sense of the intellectual's capacity to offer comprehensive interpretations of human history and societies. Yet since the Liberation this putative capacity had been essential to the identity and legitimacy of the French intellectual. It was therefore not a coincidence that commentators in the 1980s increasingly associated the deaths of great intellectuals like Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Foucault with the death of the French intellectual tout court. It was in precisely this moment that the first histories of French intellectuals began to appear.

The originality of *La saga des intellectuels français* in relation to this first wave of scholarship is clear. Surprisingly, however, François Dosse understates his books' importance

in this regard, choosing instead to position it as a critical response to the work of the British historian Tony Judt. In *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956*, Judt explained the broad appeal of communism among French writers by likening intellectual philocommunism to a secular religious faith and tracing that faith's origins to the allegedly endemic illiberalism of modern French political culture. Judt called this unapologetically judgemental book an "essay on intellectual irresponsibility" and it is true that *La saga des intellectuels français* departs completely from *Past Imperfect* in this respect.[4] Yet while the book is all the better for not treating the history of French intellectuals as a morality tale, this choice of overt historiographical positioning distracts from what is most innovative about *La saga des intellectuels français*. It also inadvertently draws attention to what is more derivative in its argument.

Dosse's main criticism of *Past Imperfect* is that the book is ahistorical because it "rejects any form of contextual explanation" (p.18) [récuse toute forme d'explication contextuelle"] and judges mid-century philocommunism by the standards of an anti-totalitarian understanding of Soviet communism unavailable to intellectuals in the 1940s and '50s. The first of these criticisms is exaggerated, the second unfounded.[5] In fact, there is little in Judt's analysis of intellectual philocommunism that cannot be found in Raymond Aron's contemporary writings on this subject.[6] And, remarkably, for all the tonal and methodological differences between *La saga des intellectuels* and *Past Imperfect*, Dosse's overall argument recalls Aron almost as much as Judt's does.

This resemblance is apparent in both Dosse's overarching narrative and in the terms in which that narrative is described. Like Dosse, Aron placed the question of historical consciousness at the centre of his explanation for French intellectual philocommunism. And like Aron, whose critique of intellectual prophetism described the appeal of communism as that of a secular religion, Dosse also sees the intellectual appeal of communism as having a religious quality. French intellectuals, he argues, turned to communism "in the hope of finding there a

4 Tony Judt, Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956, Oxford, University of California Press, 1992, 11.
5 Although it is true that Judt rejected contextual reductionism in this book, the whole first part of Past Imperfect is devoted to a contextual analysis of the moment of the Liberation which, to quote Judt, "is more than just an exercise in scene setting" and which "not only provides the context for postwar intellectual activity and concerns but helped shape the landscape and the assumptions within which that activity and those concerns were cast". Compare Dosse's discussion of Past Imperfect on pages 18-19 of La saga des intellectuels français' first volume with Judt, Past Imperfect, 6-7, 10, 13-98. It is true that Tony Judt approached his subject from the standpoint of a liberal anti-totalitarianism that had become increasingly influential since a French translation of Solzhenitsyn's The Gulag Archipelago was published in 1974. But while this perspective had certainly been marginal in the years immediately following the Liberation it was hardly inconceivable to oppose communism on this basis during the early Cold War. The first account of the Gulag to appear in French came not in 1974 with Solzhenitsyn but in 1947 with Victor Kravchenko's, J'ai choisi la liberté. According to Dosse, this book sold 400,000 copies.
6 For instance, by likening communism's attraction for French intellectuals to faith in a secular religion, Judt echoed an argument that had been central to Aron's analysis of intellectual philocommunism during the early Cold War. See e.g. Raymond Aron, Le grand schisme, Paris, Gallimard, 1948; L'Opium des intellectuels, Paris, Gallimard, 1955. Judt's argument that the deep cultural roots of this phenomenon were to be found in the illiberalism of modern French political culture was also made by Aron in the 1950s. See e.g. Raymond Aron, Introduction à la philosophie politique, Paris, Fallois, 1997.

Church and a faith" (41) ["dans l'espoir d'y retrouver une Église et une foi"], while their willingness to overlook the crimes of communist regimes resulted from their "transferal of religiosity onto history" ["transfert de religiosité sur l'histoire"] and "refusal to let go of eschatology in a modern, post-religious world" ["le refus de faire le deuil de l'eschatologie dans un monde moderne devenu postreligieux"] (19). If this was an argument that might be applied to any country with an influential communist movement, what particularly heightened communism's appeal in France, according to Aron, was the legacy of that country's revolutionary heritage. Dosse also highlights the exceptionality of France in this regard, but he does not draw the same political conclusion from this observation as Aron and Judt, whose critiques of the revolutionary legacy were coupled with an endorsement of political liberalism.

Methodological Innovation

La saga des intellectuels français nevertheless offers the most comprehensive account of intellectual communism and philocommunism to appear in any work of its kind. And as a history of ideas, the book offers lucid expositions of all the main strands of French Marxist thought as it developed from the 1940s to the 1970s. Moreover, Dosse pays as much attention to the conditions in which such thought was produced, distributed and policed as he does to its contents. Thus it is not only by taking ideas seriously that this book surpasses all previous general histories of French intellectuals. It is also contextually superior in that, as well as covering the familiar political controversies that elicited intellectual engagement between 1944 and 1989, it pays close attention to how intellectual life was structured from day to day. The book, for instance, is almost as informative on the history of French newspapers, magazines, journals and publishing houses as it is on the intellectuals that wrote for them. La saga des intellectuels français thus tells us as much about the social history of the French intelligentsia, and particularly the publishing landscape in which writers operated, as it does about the ideas and engagements of French intellectuals themselves.

What is equally impressive about this book is that it shows how intellectual innovations in specific academic disciplines filtered into the wider culture. This is particularly true of Dosse's treatment of structuralism, which not only elucidates the most important ideas of authors such as Claude Lévi-Strauss but also traces their wider political and cultural ramifications. The case of Lévi-Strauss is especially revealing of how Dosse's book differs from previous works of its kind. The famous anthropologist, who was once voted France's greatest living intellectual and whose influence on post-Second World War French intellectual life matched that of Jean-Paul Sartre, appears not once in the nine hundred pages of Michel Winock's *Le siècle des intellectuels*. Yet while Lévi-Strauss may not have been a politically

engaged intellectual in the sense that Wincock, Ory and Sirinelli understood the term, this hardly means that his work was politically insignificant. As François Dosse shows, Lévi-Strauss may not have engaged directly in the great political controversies of the post-Second World War era, but his work nevertheless helped to define the terms in which radical politics was articulated in the age of decolonisation.

Beyond its excellent coverage of structuralism and post-structuralism, Dosse's book is also to be recommended for the close attention it pays to feminist and ecological thought, subjects that have been ignored or underrepresented in previous general histories of French intellectuals. And although the book's primary focus is on the left intelligentsia, the history of conservative and liberal intellectuals is not ignored. Dosse's handling of organised intellectual anticommunism, for instance, shows some of the same qualities that make his coverage of intellectual communism and philocommunism stand out. A particular strength of the book in this regard is that it takes the contents of anti-communist culture seriously instead of focusing solely on familiar controversies like the Congress for Cultural Freedom's ties to the CIA. However, because the liberal and conservative right receive relatively little attention in the first three quarters of *La saga des intellectuels français*, Dosse's treatment of their revival in the 1970s and '80s sometimes feels more like an addendum than a fully integrated part of the book's overall argument. In one sense this is unsurprising and probably unavoidable: The new epoch in French intellectual history which began in the final quarter of the twentieth century did not close with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end point of Dosse's book. Future intellectual historians of this period will nevertheless be grateful for the example set by *La saga des intellectuels français*. It is the best general history of French intellectuals ever to be published and should set the standard in its field for many years to come.

François Dosse, *La saga des intellectuels français*, Paris, Gallimard, 2018
Vol. I: *À l'épreuve de l'histoire (1944-1968)*, 624 p., 29€.
Vol. II: *L'avenir en miettes (1968-1989)*, 704 p., 29€.

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