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## *Reflections on Past and Present*

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**Thinking Past a Problem: Essays in the History of Ideas**, by Preston King.  
London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000. 339 pp. \$62.50.

Spanning a period of over thirty years, these essays constitute an extended reflection on the intellectual treatment and understanding of the past. King, currently a political philosophy professor at Lancaster University, approaches his subject through two methods. One method examines in general the “pastness” of the past, and the problems it poses for those studying the history of ideas. The other method employs individual studies of several major contributors to the history of ideas. Strongly influenced by the work of Michael Oakeshott (to whose memory the work is dedicated), King treats the past from an Oakeshott-centered perspective, mixed with what King describes as his own “socialist” orientation (7). Indeed, King studied under Oakeshott at the London School of Economics, as well as under Karl Popper. The collection, most of which has been previously pub-

lished, includes lengthy essays on Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, two selections on Hobbes, and a comprehensive essay on the practice of the history of ideas in the twentieth century.

The study of the past always confronts two difficulties. The first is particularism, which exaggerates the difference between past and present. The other is its opposite, anachronism, which exaggerates the similarity of past to present. Both, for King, are false. He contends that “[w]e should accept, finally, that past truth is violated not only by making the past falsely *identical* to what it is now, but also by making it falsely *different* from what is now” (5; original emphasis). King states flatly that there is no “History as such. There is history of this or that” (3). The modern search for objective history, or a history completely divorced from the present moment, is therefore a fruitless one. Rather, the study of

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history is always laced with the present understanding, because to “know about the past is to know about it in the present” (3). This sound insight is similar to John Lukacs’s notion of a “participant history,” the characteristic of historical study that gives it a moral dimension and burdens the historian with ethical duties rather than amoral scientific observation.

King offers an alternative approach that tries to accommodate both our desire to understand the past as it was and the knowledge that our understanding of the past is always a present understanding. Adapting the falsifiability thesis of Popper to historical study, King argues that the inevitable intrusion of the present into historical study can be tempered by analyzing whether the present perspective is contrary to available historical evidence. In this way, the historian can determine whether the unavoidable interpolation of our present understanding or intention violates the revealed truths of the past.

Ideology, on this view, is the truncation of the past because of its disregard of the falsifiability thesis. Instead of comparing the theory to the facts, proponents of ideology conform the facts to the theory. King acknowledges this weakness in ideology, and endorses what he calls a “negative” assessment of ideology from Oakeshott. However, King believes that some abstraction or abbreviation of historical concepts is a necessary element of a creative and imaginative approach to the past, as well as to other areas such as politi-

cal action. Using the apt analogy of a map, which is useful “precisely because it is an abbreviation” (20), King argues that the historian need not conclude that history is unknowable because every single fact is unknown or unknowable. This stance puts him somewhat at odds not only with Oakeshott, but also with American conservatives such as Russell Kirk, who called ideology an “armed doctrine” and who rejected it almost completely in favor of a reliance on traditional knowledge and custom.

From this conservative viewpoint, ideology, examined historically, is not a fruitful source of a creative understanding of the past, precisely because it flattens historical perspective in the search for an abstract ideal, usually with harmful results. The proponent of ideology, as Kirk wrote in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, “resorts to the anaesthetic of social utopianism, escaping the tragedy and grandeur of true human existence by giving his adherence to a perfect dream-world of the future. Reality [the ideologue] stretches or chops away to conform to [a] dream-pattern of human nature and society.” Against ideology Oakeshott and others placed traditional knowledge, which they thought was the opposite of ideology because its organic, illogical and slow-growing nature made it unsuitable for the kind of revolutionary fervor and devotion to rationalistic abstractions characteristic of the ideologue. Further, Oakeshott and Kirk

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concluded that because the fullness of historical fact is an Enlightenment dream, history at its core retains an element of mystery, which the ideologue eliminates.

To dissolve the dichotomy between ideology and tradition posited by Oakeshott and others, King contends, echoing Hobsbawm, that tradition is itself an ideology. Because the characteristics of a given tradition must be learned just as any other ideological “rubric” must be learned, it too is subject to the excesses of ideology. Elsewhere in the collection, however, King appears to reject this extreme view of ideology. In a perceptive essay included here, “An Ideological Fallacy,” King describes the “fallacy” as “a universal, non-contextual recommendation which claims to be true, but possibility of whose truth is eliminated by virtue of its claim being non-contextual, both in space and time” (302). To a conservative such as Kirk or Oakeshott, King’s definition is perfectly compatible with a defense of tradition as the negation of ideology. Tradition makes no claim to being “universal” in application; indeed, its very existence is contingent, built up over time within a particular social setting, and it makes no claims on others not within the community.

King opposes what he terms the “particularism” of thinkers, such as MacIntyre and Oakeshott, who have rejected the Enlightenment devotion to and belief in abstract universals in favor of a localist understanding of the past. In reacting against the modern conception of history as a

science, governed by scientific laws, a particularist approach threatens to remove any coherence at all to history. Oakeshott’s understanding of history as composed of “unique” events cannot mean that each historical moment is irreducibly individual. That, King argues, leads only to a “collapse into self-enclosure and the unintelligibility associated with a great profusion of private worlds” (86). This indeed has been the result of some “postmodern” attempts at history. King argues instead that “[w]here historical events are viewed as unique, then none, each being one of a kind, can be related or compared to any other (there is no understanding without comparing)” (116).

This argument against particularism is acceptable as far as it goes, but fails to address a critical component of a particularist approach, at least in its conservative variant. King does not address the problem of free will. The view that historical events are unique need not be based in the inability of a subsequent observer to compare different historical events. Rather, the inability of the assumptions of a scientific history to anticipate free human acts on the basis of even a prior pattern of similar acts supports the conclusion that each historical moment is individual. Because each moment cannot be fully anticipated “from the outside,” each individual is free to determine his own history.

*Thinking Past a Problem* is a learned collection of essays and a worthy contribution to the study of the history of ideas.