

## WHY HISTORY IS CONSTANTLY REWRITTEN

The slightest reflection shows that the conceptual material employed in writing history is that of the period in which a history is written. There is no material available for leading principles and hypotheses save that of the historic present. As culture changes, the conceptions that are dominant in a culture change. Of necessity new standpoints for viewing, appraising and ordering data arise. History is then rewritten.<sup>1</sup>

The problem referred to in this passage is well known both from the literature on the subject and the practice of historiography: historical works get old, the development of science—particularly of historical science—determines a new approach to old problems, and, consequently, history is rewritten in a different way. The fact is incontestable. But how should it be interpreted? Why is it so?

This is an important question in the field of historical method, for the historian who reflects upon his scientific activity must know whether a historical work can be of a final nature—in the sense of the

1. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York, 1949), p. 233.

fulness and invariability of knowledge about the object under investigation. But the question is also important for the philosopher, since it has wider philosophical implications: Does the knowledge about the past possess an objective character, or is it—as is sometimes asserted—in one way or another a subjective creation of the historian, which would account for the changing nature of approach? This controversy over the objective nature of historical knowledge is, incidentally, of essential importance not only for a philosopher. It is also on this problem that the historian, investigating methodological questions, bases his reflections on the variability of historiography. In any case, this describes the development of the conflict of views on the issue under discussion.

We are above all interested in two great trends which, in view of the diversity of opinions concealed in either case by the general term, we shall conventionally call *presentism* and *perspectivism*.

Nineteenth-century historiography (leaving aside Marxian methodology because of the still limited scope of its influence) was absolutely dominated by the ideas of Ranke, according to whom it should supply a pure description of events (“wie es eigentlich gevesen”) without any additional interpretation. The first opposition to this objective and uncommitted historiography (at least as far as the postulate itself was concerned) appeared at the end of the century, and in the course of the twentieth century it was transformed into a genuine rebellion. Its philosophical premises were developed in Italy (Benedetto Croce) and Germany (Georg Simmel, Theodor Lessing, Karl Mannheim, and others), and in actual historiography it found its sharpest expression in the works of American historians, J. H. Robinson, H. E. Barnes, Carl Becker, Charles Beard, Conyers Read, etc. To the postulate of an objective and uncommitted historiography the new trend opposes the conception of one which is committed and directed toward an end—a historiography which consciously denies the objectivity of the truths it proclaims, treating them in one way or another as a subjective creation of the historian.

The social background of this rebellion and the social sources for the radical change of opinion are extremely interesting. For the thesis which, as far as Marxian methodology was concerned, had most offended the so-called objective scholars and had been most sharply opposed by them—that the social sciences are of a socially determined and socially committed nature—now not only was accepted but also was developed by

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certain theoreticians. Some of these (Mannheim, for example) went so far as to reach the extreme of relativism, which undermined the very existence of social science, while others (the American presentists) subordinated historiography to the requirement of current policy, which was equally dangerous to its *scientific* role. But these problems, belonging as they do to the sociology of science, go beyond the scope of our present concern. I shall point only to attempts at this kind of analysis made, directly or indirectly, by American researchers. Two works above all deserve attention. The first is Charles Beard's essay, "That Noble Dream,"<sup>2</sup> in which, referring to the ideas put forth in his "Written History as an Act of Faith,"<sup>3</sup> he defends presentism and exposes the alleged objectivism of Ranke's historiography, revealing its partisan and committed character. The second is the essay of Chester McArthur Destler, "Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory,"<sup>4</sup> containing an analysis of the social background of the "eruptions" of presentism in American historiography between the wars.

We shall concentrate our attention not on the social but on the philosophical aspect of the problem; we shall try to discover the theoretical views of the opponents of the Ranke school and the philosophical implications of these views. We shall begin with presentism, if only because it is chronologically earlier than perspectivism as preached by the sociology of science.

The most important advocate of presentism, a man whose views played a tremendous part in the formation of presentist tendencies in the English-speaking countries, was undoubtedly Benedetto Croce. Historically, he may be recognized as the founder of the school. And, although it is true that the basic views of presentism had been put forward as early as 1874 by F. H. Bradley in *Presuppositions of Critical History* (as is expressly stated by Morton G. White in "The Attack on the Historical Method")<sup>5</sup> and that opinions on history as an art, similar to those of Croce, had been expressed by R. B. Haldane's *The Meaning of Truth in History*,<sup>6</sup> it was Croce who had a decisive influence on

2. *American Historical Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 1 (1935).

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2 (1934).

4. *American Historical Review*, Vol. LV, No. 3 (1950).

5. *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XLII, No. 2 (1955).

6. London, 1914.

the formation of modern presentism, particularly in America. Another trend of influence, representing a similar, but different approach, has its source in German irrationalism.

Croce's presentism solves the problems of objective historical truth and the variability of historiography in an extremely simple fashion, in full harmony with the spiritualistic metaphysics on which his whole system is based. For it is impossible to understand Croce's presentist theory unless one bears in mind that, according to his *Philosophy of the Spirit* (which, like its predecessor, the Absolute Idea of Hegel, is an absolutization of the individual consciousness transferred to the supraindividual sphere) everything is the creation of this Spirit, a creation which can be cognized through intuition. Consequently, everything, including history, is a "state of the spirit," an experience. From this there is only one step to the assertion that these states of the spirit vary in accordance with the situation—above all, with the interest prevailing at the moment. History is always a history of the present, discovered by the historian's intuition. Hence Croce's contempt for the "chronicle" type of history, which is concerned with collecting facts and confronting them with theoretical theses. In the light of the extreme subjectivism, which in Croce's conception is combined with spiritualism, this is a superfluous and hopeless occupation. For history is not just a product of the present; it is also a creation of the historian. The historian does not discover history; he does not examine it; he *creates* it. Naturally, there is no place here for objective truth, which would be *ex definitione* a self-contradictory product, and consequently the changes in historical approach are obvious and well understood. But, and let us make it clear, the price which must be paid for this obviousness is high: it is the *scientific character* of historiography which from a science turns into an art. This, for Croce, is natural, but it is not so for a historian whose concern is *scientific research*.

The present influences derived from German philosophy developed along another line. Despite the diversity of their individual manifestations, they had one thing in common: the protest against historical necessity and, thus, against the treatment of historical processes as objective processes. This protest, which is easily understood in the light of a sociological and psychological analysis of the period, gave rise to the conviction that man is only free when history becomes his *arbitrary*

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creation. This was tantamount to the introduction of the principle of arbitrariness in historical judgment, for to these subjectivist thinkers history was identical with history as it was *conceived*. This approach to history as a specifically conceived kind of freedom forms a bridge between this type of presentism and Croce's theory.

In the view of Georg Simmel, a prominent representative of the Baden school of neo-Kantianism, history is a product of the present, determined by an a priori historical perception. It was from Simmel that R. G. Collingwood, who, particularly in *The Idea of History*,<sup>7</sup> propagates Croce's doctrine in English literature, borrowing his conception of an a priori historical imagination.

The opponents of historicism, interpreted as a conception of the objective process of historical change, attack the problem from another side. In the tradition of Dilthey's "*Lebensphilosophie*," both Troeltsch and Karl Heussi set out to destroy historicism in the spirit of the conception of *creating* history, transformed into a subjective product. Another thinker, belonging to a quite different, positivist tradition, who was led to subjectivist antihistoricism by openly sociopolitical considerations, may also be considered as a representative of this trend—Karl Popper, whose views on this issue are stated in *The Poverty of Historicism*<sup>8</sup> and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.<sup>9</sup> A further variety of this position is represented by the irrationalism of Theodor Lessing, who, in *Die Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*,<sup>10</sup> gives his own continuation of Dilthey's *Philosophy of Life*.

All these theories not only interpret history in a subjectivist manner, as the creation of the historian (providing a philosophical justification for presentist tendencies to treat history as a projection of present-day needs and interests into the past) but also not infrequently preach such presentism in one variety or another. In any case, in the light of these conceptions the diversity of historical approach or the constant rewriting of history presents no problem at all. For, without certain

7. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946.

8. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.

9. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1952.

10. Leipzig: Reinicke, 1927.

well-defined metaphysical *premises*, there can be no presentism in one form or another.

Like Hegel, Croce accepts the existence of an Absolute Spirit, who is the creator of history. But, unlike Hegel, he at the same time assumes that historiography is the creation of individual intuition, of an individual spirit, dictated by its current interest. Of little importance for our present purpose is the inner coherence of this doctrine, eclectically combining as it does objective and subjective idealism. What is more important is that these are only *assumptions*, typically metaphysical and speculative, because unfit for intersubjective verification. They are the language of neo-positivism and, while having the grammatical shape of propositions, are completely meaningless.

The position is similar with the historical imagination a priori; with the identification of history with a *conceived* history, since any reference to an objective historical process is allegedly metaphysics; or with the treatment of history as an arbitrary creation of man in the irrationalist *Philosophy of Life* in its various brands. Here as well, all is metaphysical assumption of a clearly idealistic character—speculation which is anti-scientific, if only because its theses cannot be verified.

The repudiation of objective historical truth as a means to eliminate the objective character of historical processes and their necessity is typical of metaphysical, speculative philosophy. For there is nothing to support this position: it must be deduced from the premises of the system. Thus what is involved here is not the solution of a certain scientific problem by means of methods which are generally employed in science but rather the choice of a philosophical position in accordance with metaphysical premises. For what the adherents of presentism have to say about the nature of historical knowledge has a far wider philosophical scope, both because of the philosophical implications of presentism and because this position is derived from broader philosophical assumptions. Presentism assumes cognitive subjectivism and thus the negation of objective reality which is the object of knowledge. Are such views permissible? Certainly. But it is not permissible to assume them unless one adopts the status of metaphysician and renounces the scientific character of one's views. For an advocate of the *scientific* position this settles the controversy, as in the case of controversies with any kind of fideism. All one has to do in such cases is to point to the basis of the difference of opinion, and any further controversy becomes useless, since,

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where *faith* is involved, there is no common platform with science on which to solve the conflict.

The attitude to be adopted by the practical historian, whose activity in his specific field is to be based on the methodological advice given him by the theoreticians, is a different matter. And it is evident that, regardless of what his theoretical views may be, the assertion that the collection of data is immaterial, since history is only his individual creation, can be regarded by him as nothing more than a curiosity.

The justification of presentism by the Columbia school in American historiography supplies no new theoretical elements but deserves attention for a different reason. Its representatives point to the politico-social aims as determining the adoption of a certain theoretical position: presentism, they claim, is justified, *because* historiography is to be *functional*, because it must serve definite political aims. A study of the arguments of Charles Beard or Carl Becker is enough to achieve a completely clear view of this position; one should also look at Conyers Read's presidential address of 1949, "The Social Responsibilities of the Historian."<sup>11</sup> To serve the purposes of political struggle, historiography must not only be presentist; it must be clearly subordinated to politics, which is the conclusion following from Read's speech.

It is rather piquant to note that, almost simultaneously with the presentism of Beard and Becker, similar views were developed—in completely different conditions and on different theoretical foundations—by the well-known Russian historian M. N. Pokrovsky. Simplifying Marx's thesis on the class character of human knowledge, he claimed that objective knowledge in history is impossible, arguing that history is always a projection of the current politics into the past. That is why there is no objective historical truth, why the science of history is subordinated to politics, and why history must be rewritten as the social convergence of views, despite the apparent difference in their justification.

We shall deal with opinion of this sort when we discuss the thesis of perspectivism. As for the presentism of the Columbia school, we can only support Destler's warning (in his essay quoted above) against the conscious elimination of the scientific character of history through its being turned into a weapon of political propaganda. A historian is just

11. *American Historical Review*, Vol. LV, No. 2 (1950).

a human being; he can be neither isolated from political commitment nor protected against cases of a conscious renunciation of scientific honesty as a result of political opportunism. But here we have a difference between the violation of an accepted principle and the promotion of such violations to the rank of principle.

A much more important problem for our present discussion is involved in the sociology of science with its perspectivism. The classic representative of perspectivism is Karl Mannheim, not because he was the sole, or the first, exponent of this trend (he was preceded, if only by Max Scheler) but, above all, because he expressed the basic ideas of the sociology of science in the clearest and most consistent way, thus exerting a real influence on research methods in the humanities.

Mannheim, as he himself emphasized, drew the basic idea of his perspectivism from Marx. Marx's theory of the base and the superstructure, and his concept of the social, class determination of human opinions, which are linked with the interests and struggle of human beings, lay at the basis of Mannheim's assertion that, in social sciences, it is the social status of the people that determines their "viewpoint," or, to use the language of the sociology of science, their "noological platform." But Mannheim carries the Marxian idea of the social determination of human knowledge to a relativistic absurdity—to a point where any possibility of *science* disappears and subjectivist arbitrariness begins. Two theses lead to this, and their falsity is connected with the philosophical premise at their basis. One thesis is that the partial knowledge of reality is false; the other, that the consciousness which reflects reality from a certain viewpoint is a false consciousness. The philosophical assumption underlying this argument is that of absolutism in the theory of truth; it involves the view that all knowledge that is not absolute truth is false.

It is not our intention here to discuss in detail the controversy over the nature of the truth of human knowledge. One extreme of this controversy is represented by the absolutist concept of truth, cherished by logicians, according to which "relative truth" is a *contradictio in adiecto*; on the other side, we have the relativist conception, which, in its extreme form (e.g., in the writings of F. C. S. Schiller) denies the objectivity of truth, treating it as a subjective creation of man. I might only point here to the self-annihilating consequence of absolutism in the theory of truth: the complete destruction of its value for the theory of



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knowledge, dealing not with fictions but with the actually existing human knowledge. For if we were to accept as truth only knowledge which is complete in every respect, and, consequently, invariable, absolute, then the development of human knowledge would have to be regarded as the collection of falsities, resulting in the currently recognized falsity, since no sensible scientist regards his current theories as final and complete and thus as absolute truth.

Marxism, in accordance with the common-sense attitude of the scientist who is concerned with some branch of positive knowledge, regards truth not as something static but as a *process* of unending approximation to full—and thus absolute—knowledge. This process never ends, as in the case of a mathematical series approaching its limit. Each stage of the knowledge achieved is limited; it is not full and is therefore variable, but it still contains *objective* knowledge which we store, and thus we know more and more in the course of historical progress. We are collecting relative truths and approaching the limit of absolute truth, without, however, reaching it in full. The Marxian concept differs from the Neo-Kantian idea of truth as a process in that it is not restricted to the recognition of the *dynamics* knowledge: relative truths are a partial reflection but still a *reflection* of reality.

Mannheim *assumes* (and he does not seem to be aware of his philosophical assumptions) that only absolute truth is truth. Hence his conviction that partial knowledge is a falsehood, and, consequently, the consciousness which is limited by a point of view is a false *consciousness*. And this is where his *metaphysical* assumption is concealed. For this thesis must be *proved*, not assumed, if only because it contradicts the whole of our social experience. Knowledge is socially determined; there is no other knowledge. But is it false because of this? The critics of such an approach, like Charles Frankel,<sup>12</sup> are undoubtedly right. Partial truth is relative truth, but it is not falsehood. Mannheim's subjectivism and relativism stem from his wrong philosophical premises, not from an analysis of empirical facts.

But how shall we answer the question, "Why do people rewrite their history?" If the knowledge of history is socially determined, it naturally gets ever richer and changes with the change of its social determination. Historical works get old, and, even if at the time of their birth they

12. *The Case for Modern Man* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956).

reflected progressive or revolutionary tendencies, they will not be spared by time; the progress of history will reveal their limited character and all their shortcomings, caused by a biased approach or an inadequate understanding of the processes that take place. We see it clearly today when reading Roman history, not only in Tacitus but in Mommsen as well.

Does this confirm the thesis of presentism? Not at all. That limited version of perspectivism which can be accepted rejects relativism and merely states that historical truths are partial and socially determined. This social determination always has topical value—is always rooted in the present. But this does not make it equivalent to presentism, which involves a purely subjectivist and relativist denial of objective truth. In presentism, history is a subjective creation of the historian as a projection of present-day politics into the past—a projection which does not come to terms with objective facts. Historical truth, however, we call objective truth, even though partial, and social determination affects only the selection of facts, their interpretation, and their understanding. We thus do not deny the influence of the social determination of the present on our treatment of historical processes, but we sharply repudiate the assertion of presentism that history is a subjective creation of the present.

But that is not all. In both presentism and perspectivism the variability of historiography is reduced to the influence of the changing subjective factors. Both these schools are mistaken, not only because of their subjectivist and relativist treatment of the influence exercised by the present on the interpretation of the past, but also because of their total failure to appreciate the significance of the objective unveiling of the past in the course of historical development. This element was brought to light by Marxism, one of the most important theses of the methodology of historical research. Some have accepted this thesis consciously; others, as we shall see, unconsciously, as far as knowledge of its source is concerned. In any case, it is fundamental in solving the problem of the changing interpretation of history. Marx wrote, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

The bourgeois society is the most highly developed and most highly differentiated historical organization of production. Therefore the categories which express its conditions and the comprehension of its structure make it at the same time possible to understand the structure and the conditions of production which had prevailed

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under all the past forms of society, from the ruins and element of which it has grown and of which it still drags along some unsurmounted remnants, developing to complete significance what had formerly existed merely in embryo, etc.: the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape. Vice versa, the embryos of higher forms in lower species of animals can be understood only if these higher forms are already known. . . . The so-called historical development consists in general in the fact that the last form considers the previous ones as stages leading up to itself.

In studying history (social or otherwise), we must always deal with development processes, chains of events. Every event, every so-called historical fact, can be correctly understood only if it is treated as a link of such a chain or process. When treated in this manner, the event is not isolated, but viewed—in accordance with dialectics—in the light of its relationship and interdependence with other historical events. And only then can we understand that the significance of every historical fact comes to light in the process of development. Marx says that embryos of higher forms in lower species of animals can be understood only if these higher forms are known. This thesis has, of course, a much wider methodological scope and applies to any historical process. The march of history, transforming development potentialities into realities, shows what forces and tendencies were latent in the events of the past and reveals certain laws of development. Scientific prediction enables us to see some but not all of them and only to a certain extent. Particular difficulty is faced when we endeavor to disentangle the complicated network of mutual connections and dependences which are of decisive importance for the ultimate results of the process. That is why the full significance of historical events is as a rule evaluated *post factum*, often only from a distant perspective. The fact that the owl of Minerva takes his flight only at dark does not reduce the importance of historical prediction; but it does reveal the significance of historical analysis—historical as well in the sense that only further development permits a more profound and fuller evaluation of the significance of every stage of the process.

In describing the anatomy of man as the key to understanding the anatomy of the ape, Marx tried to emphasize the important methodological idea that the process of development should always be viewed from its highest point, for it is from the peak that the widest perspective opens before our eyes, enabling us to see the whole road and to better

understand its direction. The more advanced the process and the more numerous the effects of the given event, the better can we understand the forces and tendencies at work in the process. This vantage point enables us to see certain aspects of the events which were formerly inaccessible to us in their embryonic form; we can also not infrequently adjust our evaluations, reducing to their proper proportions things which once seemed to us great and important.

This means that, given proper information about the events, history can be better understood by later generations than by contemporary witnesses, not because they are more "objective" or not directly engaged in struggle, but because the march of time has provided them with more data for a fuller and more profound analysis.

As we have pointed out before, a proper understanding of the problem of analyzing historical processes from the point of view of "the anatomy of the ape" permits also a profound analysis of knowledge as a process. When pointing to the endlessness of the process of cognition, which cannot be exhausted by a single cognitive act, we usually refer to the infinite number of ties which connect the given phenomenon with reality. This view is, of course, correct but not sufficient. For it is restricted to the statement that every act of our cognition is finite in its nature and thus embraces only a fragment of infinite knowledge. But it must be stressed more emphatically that knowledge is of necessity a process; the dynamic nature of cognitive process must be brought to light. And this dynamic nature is, among other things, connected with the fact that the development of reality reveals to us new aspects and features of the past reality, which we did not and could not see before. The infinity of relations and dependences of every object and phenomenon is seen precisely in the *process* of their development, wherein it uncovers itself and becomes sharper. And this provides a comparatively simple and clear answer to the need for the constant rewriting, re-examination, and readjustment of history, not only because new facts and new sources are discovered, but, more significantly, because the development of history reveals new aspects and features of the facts already known, thus showing historical processes in new colors and shedding a new and more penetrating light on them. That is how the process of cognition takes place—the unending process of approaching the absolute truth. The relationship between finite knowledge and infinite reality thus acquires a new, deeper meaning.

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As has been said before, this position, which I hold to be of definitive importance for the problem under discussion, was first formulated by Marxism. It has of course been rediscovered later, and by independent sources, one being the study of J. H. Randall, Jr., and George Haines, "Controlling Assumptions in the Practice of American Historians":

The understanding of consequences, and hence of the "significance" of past events, changes with further history-that-happens—with what comes to pass in the world of events as a result of the possibilities inherent in what has happened. Thus World War I was understood in one way as leading to the adoption of the Covenant of the League of Nations. It was understood in another way as the Russian Revolution worked itself out, and began to appear as a much more significant consequence of the war than the abortive effort of an international organization. The war took on a still further significance with the rise of the Fascist and Nazi regimes, and with the resumption of German expansion. . . .

. . . New consequences flowing from past events change the significance of the past, of what has happened. Events which before had been overlooked, because they did not seem "basic" for anything that followed, now come to be selected as highly significant, other events that used to be "basic" recede into the limbo of mere details. In this sense, a history-that-happens is not and in the nature of the case cannot be fully understood by the actors in it. They cannot realize the "significance" or consequences of what they are doing, since they cannot foresee the future. We understand that history only when it has become a part of our own past; and if it continues to have consequences, our children will understand it still differently. In this sense, the historian, as Hegel proclaimed, is like the owl of Minerva, who takes his flight only when the shades of night are gathering, and returns are all in. The significance of any history-that-happens is not completely grasped until all its consequences have been discerned. The "meaning" of any historical fact is what it does, how it continues to behave and operate, what consequences follow from it.<sup>13</sup>

I have cited this long passage to conclude my remarks simply because I agree with it and think that it well explains the central point of the issue. And also because it has nothing in common with presentism, which, incidentally, J. H. Randall seems to support in his other studies.<sup>14</sup>

13. *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography* (Social Science Research Bull. 54 [New York, 1946]), pp. 19–20.

14. E.g., "On Understanding the History of Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXVI, No. 17 (1939), 462.