

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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HISTORICAL FACTS AND THEIR SELECTION

"Facts are not really like fish on a fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming in a huge and sometimes inaccessible ocean; what the historian catches will depend partly on chance, but principally on the part of the ocean which he has chosen to fish in, and also on the bait he is using.

These two factors are, of course, determined by the sort of fish he intends to fish for. In general, the historian will find the sort of facts he wishes to find."

E. H. Carr, *What is History?*

Our reflections on the objectivity of historical truth will quite naturally begin with the historical fact. It may perhaps be only because we are thinking in a general way—and with justification in a sense—that the divergences amongst historians appear only from the moment when they approach the interpretation of facts; for their structure—if one allows a certain level of knowl-

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edge and technique in research—is identical. This being established, it is not necessary to go as far as Ranke's school and ask that the task of the historian limit itself to the presentation of "pure" facts, without interpretation or commentary; it will be sufficient to state that when we use the term "fact" in a scientific or historical context, we are expressing ourselves in an unequivocal manner; and that consequently, when someone has established, in a competent way, a historical fact, he has established it for all who are concerned; historical facts as products as well as the work of research carried out to establish them are not, then, influenced by "subjective factor" in the process of acquiring knowledge, taken in the particular as well as in the social sense.

We shall anticipate our other arguments and say from the start that by opposing this point of view because we deem it primitive, we find ourselves in the position of the physicist who, starting from quantitative mechanics, must consider as scientifically primitive and incompetent the man who in our time uses as his only instrument of research the conceptual apparatus of the Newtonian system; or—this example is even more instructive—in the position of the physicist who, in full cognisance of present knowledge bearing on the structure of the atom, has to pass an opinion on the scientific competence of those who even now wish to apply to research the conceptual apparatus of the nineteenth century atomist for whom—as in antiquity—the atom was the smallest indivisible particle of matter, having the form of a small elastic ball. This conception would of course be primitive; it would be a proof of incompetence and ignorance of contemporary physics, but it would not be purely and simply wrong. In certain circumstances one may and one must use the Newtonian system; the atomic theory of Dalton includes elements which are to some extent true, and it is not very much more "ancient" in relation to modern science than other much more developed and adequate models, such as, for example, that of Rutherford. This comes from the well-known fact that the process of acquiring knowledge is endless, and that in this process any truth reached at a given moment is only partial; in this sense it is relative and thus condemned to "grow old" and to be surpassed by a more complete truth. But this does not mean, for all

that, that the partial truth—produced among others from the present level of world knowledge—cannot possibly be an objective truth, and is simply wrong.

It is impossible today, on pain of being classified as totally ignorant, to defend the thesis that the atom is totally indivisible and that it is a little elastic ball of matter; it is equally impossible to defend today the thesis that the historical fact is like a little cube retaining its shape always and for everyone, and that one can build with these cubes structures which will differ only in the way in which they have been arranged.¹ But this does not mean, as we have said above, that it is purely and simply wrong. Not at all. The task is so much more difficult and complicated if on the one hand we wish to oppose the primitive outlook which cannot incorporate the role, now obvious, of the subjective factor in the acquisition of knowledge and to bear it in mind, and on the other hand—without emptying the proverbial baby with the bath water—retain what there is of objective truth in the theory of the historical fact.

To achieve this we must begin with a fundamental operation from the point of view of semantic analysis, that is, we must clarify our terms. Let us begin, then, by trying to analyse the term “historical fact.”

Carl L. Becker, the well-known mouthpiece of *presentism* in the U.S.A., has written what I consider to be one of the most interesting essays related to historical fact.²

At the very beginning of his argument he introduces the subject very well; so we shall begin by quoting a passage from the essay:

When someone says “facts” we are all with him. The term gives us a feeling of stability. We know where we are, when we say that “we approach the facts” as for example, we know where we are when we approach the facts con-

¹ The comparison and argument are borrowed from Lucien Febvre, who criticised the Positivist conception of “*l’histoire historisante*” (see Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l’histoire*, Paris 1953, p. 114 f.).

² Carl L. Becker, “What are Historical Facts?” in *The Western Political Quarterly*, VIII, 3, Sept. 1955, p. 327-340. Quoted by Hans Meyerheff (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, New York 1959, p. 120-137.

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cerning the structure of the atom or the unexpected movement of the electron when it leaps from one orbit to the other. It is the same with history. Historians feel secure when they are dealing with facts. We talk a lot about “cold facts” and “hard facts” and we say too that “we cannot go beyond the facts” and that it is vital that we base our narrative on “the solid foundation of fact.” By this kind of talk, historical facts seem to us as solid and substantial as a physical substance [...], something possessing a determined shape and clearly defined contours—like bricks and measures; so that we can easily imagine the historian tripping over the past, and stumbling over the hard facts if he is not careful. That is his business, no doubt, a danger which he runs, because it is his business to establish the facts and to gather them together for someone to use. Perhaps he will use them himself; but in order to serve a useful end he must arrange them suitably, so that anyone—the sociologist perhaps, or the economist—can easily dip into them for use in some structural enterprise.³

Stating further on that things are not as simple and evident as they seem, and that the expression “historical fact” is equally as ambiguous as the categories “freedom,” “cause,” etc., Carl Becker proposes—for the sake of clarity—to envisage three questions: (1) What is the historical fact? (2) Where is it found? and (3) When does it appear?

Let us begin, then, as Becker suggests, with the question: “What is a historical fact?”

To introduce our argument concerning historical facts we had recourse to an analogy from the realm of natural science. We must also say that the question “What is a fact?” is by no means only related to history or to the social sciences in general. It posed itself much sooner in the realm of natural science, with all the paraphernalia of the role of the subjective factor. The first people to pose it were the Conventionalists of the French school. The line: Boutroux-Poincaré-Duhem-Le Roy is especially conspicuous. Starting from the problem of the role of language (the conceptual apparatus), definition and theory in the develop-

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 120-121.

ment of science, they finally (Le Roy in particular) doubt the "independent existence" and the "sovereignty" of the scientific fact, including equally in their construction the "crude fact," that is, the fact which is not integral to a theory. Whatever the shortcomings of conventionalism might be, especially in the direction of subjectivism, it has the indisputable merit of having posed the problem of the role of the conceptual apparatus in the construction of science and in particular in the perception and formulation of what are called scientific facts. The science of history, however strange it may appear considering the particular evidence and the importance of the problem in this context, is out of date in this respect; in particular, if it is a case of the active role of language in the study of historical facts, there would be much to learn from the metatheoretic reflection in the realm of natural science—as much in the positive sense as in that of an awareness of the dangers which threaten.

But to return to the question;—we must first of all specify what, in the historical sciences, we mean by *historical fact*. Granted that the question is ambiguous and separates out, in fact, into a number of concrete questions, the shape of the answer differs according to the sense we give to the question.

Let us firstly see which of the historical phenomena *may* be called historical facts. We say that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon is a historical fact. Thus, then, something which happened once only may constitute a historical fact (may, but does not necessarily do so; we shall not place in this category the overwhelming majority of daily events of which there are millions). But equally, certain processes which contain certain determined characteristics may be historical facts: we say that the weakening of the feudal system in the country because of the strengthening of capitalistic relationships in the towns, constitutes a historical fact in the history of Russia in the nineteenth century. Certain institutions and their role in social life may equally constitute historical facts (for example, the structure and functioning of the Diet in Poland in the eighteenth century); and also products which have arisen from certain events and processes—e.g. constitutions, laws, etc.; the material products of culture may be historical facts, e.g. archaeological findings, ornaments disco-

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vered in ancient tombs, tools, utensils, scientific inventions, works of art and even preserved grains of corn.⁴

Thus, different elements and aspects of *history*, history that is in the sense of *res gestae*, may constitute historical facts: events which happened only once, prolonged processes and also recurrent processes, as well as the different products—material or spiritual—of these events and processes. It appears then that the scale of what may be called “historical fact” is very rich and diverse. In theory, every manifestation of the social life of man *may be* a historical fact. May be, but is not necessarily so. So we have established a clear distinction between the event which took place in the past (we can give it the name “fact,” in the sense that it really took place), and the historical fact, that is, an event which, because of its importance in the historical process, concerns (or may concern) the *science* of history. The simple conclusion is that every historical fact is an event that took place in the past, (a fact) but that the converse is not true—i.e. every fact of the past is not automatically a historical fact.

This is a statement of extreme importance, for it means that the specific difference between what is and what is not historical fact should be sought not in the distinction between things or events, phenomena which occurred once only and those which recur, etc.; we must search simply in the frame of reference, in a specific context which makes of a thing, of a common event, something sufficiently special to merit the name “historical fact.” We shall subsequently be concerned with this criterion which allows us to separate historical facts from facts in general.

Let us now pass to the second version of the question: “What is a historical fact?”. This time we shall, as we proposed, distinguish from among the different manifestations of social life (facts) those which, in accordance with the definition, have a right to be called historical facts. We are not concerned, as before, to state whether certain peculiar manifestations of life, or certain of their

⁴ See: Celina Bobińska, *Historyk fakt, metoda* [The Historian, the Fact, the Method], Warsaw 1964, p. 24-25; Marc Bloch, *Pochwała historii* [In Praise of History], Warsaw 1960, p. 78-79; Igor Kon *Idealizm filozoficzny i kryzys burżuazyjnej myśli historycznej* [Philosophical Idealism and the Crisis of Bourgeois Historical Thought], Warsaw 1967, p. 316 f.

special categories, have a right to this name, but—since it appears that we may potentially be dealing with *all* manifestations of life—we must now establish what must characterise a manifestation of life to merit this name which is refused to others belonging to the same typological group.

The definition of a historical fact generally begins with the statement that it concerns facts of the past. This is true, but it is a truth so banal that it is not worthy of mention. Given that we are still dealing with something which has elapsed, even if only at the moment of speaking, it is clear that we are still speaking of facts of the past since, by definition, nothing else could come into play. This is clear and there is no point in lingering over it. Suffice it to say that any manifestation of life of the individual or of society can be a historical fact (bearing in mind the dialectical link between these two apparently extreme poles, since the individual is always social and society manifests itself in the form of the action of the individuals which compose it). Every manifestation of life may be a historical fact, but is not necessarily so; our job, to be precise, is to know the moment at which the possibility becomes reality.

So then, Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C. and this is indubitably a historical fact; but the Rubicon has been crossed, before and after him, by thousands of people and we by no means consider these crossings as historical facts. To the question *why?*, in this case the answer is simple; it depends on the context of the event, and its links with other events, as much from the point of view of cause as of effect. The crossing of the Rubicon by Caesar in 49 B.C. brought the end of a form of the system of ancient Rome and marked the beginning of a new form. Thousands of other crossings of that same river by other people, before and after, did not have these implications; we say they had no historical importance, by which we mean they had no such consequences.

One may argue similarly with respect to the most diverse realms of life and their diverse manifestations. There are events and processes as well as their diverse material and spiritual products (e.g. manners and customs) which we do not hesitate to treat as “historical facts,” whilst we do not attribute this name to others of the same category. For the former—so we

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say—take on great importance because of their consequences, while the latter have no such importance.

It is, then, always a case of a certain context, of links with a whole as well as with a *system of reference*. This last is extremely important if we are to understand the relative character of what we call “historical fact.” We must be aware of it if we are to see clearly why the same event, the same process, or their material and spiritual products, are lacking in historical significance from one point of view, while from another they are important historical facts. The researcher who wishes to establish the sources relative to e.g. the political history of a given country, would remain indifferent to the witness of its culture and art, if the latter were not directly linked with its political life; for him, their political significance would be zero, whereas they become important historical facts (not always, of course, but they may become so in certain circumstances), if they are placed in the context of the history of the culture of the country or the era under discussion. Such a comment may be banal, but it had to be made if we are to understand the analysis of the concept of “historical fact” which we are undertaking.

It appears, then, that historical facts are manifestations of the life of individuals or societies, selected from among many others belonging to the same category, because of their cause-and-effect links and the influence they exert within the framework of a much larger whole. The criterion of choice is here the weight, the influence of the particular event or process or their products. Thus we are here presupposing a system of reference in the framework of which and by virtue of which the evaluation and subsequently the selection are made; we are also presupposing the existence of a subject who brings about this evaluation and selection. With the subject, who is indispensable, the anthropological factor is introduced into the realm of historical facts, with all the complications caused by the active role of the subject, and with the influence of the subjective factor on the process of acquiring knowledge. We shall return to this problem when we analyse in greater detail the problem of the selection of historical facts. As regards what we are examining at present, viz. the answer to the question “What is a historical fact?”, the general statement we have just formulated is sufficient.

The third version of the question: "What is a historical fact?" concerns its structure. We must find out if it is a "simple" or "complex" fact, as some term it; a "particular" or a "general" one, as others say; or perhaps something else again.

Let us return to the essay of Carl Becker which we quoted earlier, and which begins its argument with this version of the question.

In the first place, then, what is a historical fact? Let us take a simple fact, as simple as the facts with which history is concerned can be, e.g.: "In 49 B.C. Caesar crossed the Rubicon." A familiar fact, known by all, and which is probably endowed with some importance since it is mentioned in all the histories of the Great Caesar. But is the fact as simple as it appears? Does it possess that clear-cut and persistent content which we generally attribute to a simple historical fact? When we say that Caesar crossed the Rubicon we are surely not thinking that he crossed it alone, but with his army. The Rubicon is a little river and I do not know how long it took Caesar's army to cross it; but the crossing was surely accompanied by many an action, many a word and many a thought of numerous men. That is to say that a thousand and one smaller "facts" have combined to form this one simple fact, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon; and if we had someone, let us say James Joyce, to find out and relate all these facts, he would most certainly need a book of 794 pages to present the simple fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. *Thus it appears that the simple fact is by no means a simple fact. It is the statement of the fact that is simple—the simple generalisation of a thousand and one facts.*⁵

Continuing his argument, the author stresses that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon is considered by us as a historical fact, unlike thousands of everyday crossings of that river, simply because we see and understand its links with other events and circumstances, such as Caesar's relations with Pompey, with the Senate, and with the Roman Republic; or the order the Senate gave him to resign command of the Gallic army; or Caesar's

⁵ Carl L. Becker, "What are Historical Facts?," *op. cit.*, p. 121-122 (my underlining).

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refusal to obey the Senate and the importance of the crossing of the Rubicon in his march towards Rome, etc., etc. Becker concludes thus:

It is of course true that the simple fact *comprises* links with the others [*the other events of this period*] and this alone is why it has been preserved throughout two thousand years. It is attached to numerous other facts, in such a way that it can only be of importance if it loses its precise contours. It can only have a meaning if it is absorbed into the complex tissue of the circumstances which brought it about [...].

Thus it appears that the simple historical fact is not something solid, cold, with clearly defined contours and exercising a measurable pressure, like a brick. As far as we can understand it is only a symbol, a simple statement which constitutes the generalisation of a thousand and one simpler facts to which we do not intend to refer at the present moment; and this generalisation cannot be used if we detach it from a vaster network of facts and generalisations which it symbolises. And speaking generally, the more simple a historical fact, the more clear, well determined and provable, the less we are able to use it for itself.⁶

The thesis is clear: there are no simple facts, their simplicity is only apparent and the illusion is provoked by the simplicity of the statement, which, to generalise, does not take account of the richness of the concrete reality. The latter, in all cases—those which are apparently the simplest, in the simplest statements of single events—are composed of innumerable links connecting this fact to other events, processes, and their products, in the context of which the fact appears and is comprehensible. The reality is always determined by a whole whose links are multiple and whose component parts are interdependent. The so-called simple fact is one element taken out of the context of the whole. The form of the fact concerned is indeed simple, thanks to its abstract character. But if we wanted to apply it to the fact itself, the latter would lose all meaning and would cease to be

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

a historical fact. So there are no simple facts, all historical facts are extremely complex. Lenin said once that the electron is as infinite in its possibilities for study and analysis as matter. *Mutatis mutandis*, one can say the same thing for what we call simple facts in the realm of history.

Becker's analysis and his conclusions (we shall return to those with which we are not in agreement) are correct and profoundly dialectical. A badly phrased question, we know, can upset the course of research. If one takes certain aspects out of their context and takes a statement which is abstract in character, to prove how "simple" is the reality referred to in the statement, the fault may be traced not to the "facts," but to the authors of these typologies and theories. Also, a typology which divides the facts into simple and complex, or particular and general, is in my view erroneous.

These delimitations are conventional and attached to the character of the statement and not to that of the reality in question. It is not the fact which is simple, but it is we who are concerned to simplify it (to facilitate narration, deliberately to make the situation more complex by abstracting insignificant details from the given context, etc.); it is not the fact that is partial (what is it when "whole"?), but we who are concerned to emphasise only one aspect of the problem, etc., etc.

This problem: is the partial or whole, simple or complex character to be attributed to the historical facts themselves (in the sense of historical events), or to the statements concerning them? —leads us straight to the fourth version of the question: "What is a historical fact?". This time, the question hides the following problem: does "historical fact" mean "an event of history," i.e. one link in the chain of *res gestae*, or does it mean "a statement concerning history," i.e. one element of *historiae rerum gestarum*, or is there yet another alternative?

Theoretically, the expression "historical fact" can equally well mean one or the other. Obviously, the partisans of idealism will be firmly convinced that they are dealing with a spiritual fact, and the partisans of materialism will stress the objective character of the historical fact (an element of *res gestae*). This difference bears important theoretical and methodological implications and even if only for that reason we would do well to stop here.

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Let us return once again to the essay of Becker, who in this case takes a definitely idealistic position with a view to reinforcing Presentism. He writes:

What then is the historical fact? Far be it from me to try to define such an illusory and impalpable thing! But for the time being I will say this: the historian can concern himself with all that is connected with the life of man in the past—by every act or event, every emotion expressed by men, every idea, true or false, which has been proclaimed. Of course, he may concern himself with an event of this sort. Yet he cannot have direct contact with this event, since the event itself has disappeared. What he can have direct contact with is *a declaration concerning this event*. In short, he is concerned not with the event but with a declaration affirming *the fact that the event took place*. When we really get down to the hard facts, the historian is always concerned with an affirmation, with the affirmation of the fact that something is true. So we must establish a distinction of capital importance: the distinction between the ephemeral event which disappears and the affirmation concerning this event, which endures. For all practical objects it is this affirmation concerning the event which constitutes for us the historical fact. If this is so, the historical fact is not a past event, but a symbol capable of recreating it in our imagination. One cannot certainly say of a symbol that it is hard and cold. Of an event itself, it is dangerous to say that it is true or false. The wisest thing to say of a symbol is that it is more or less appropriate.⁷

I have quoted this long passage because it sets out particularly clearly and precisely the idealist concept of historical fact and thus contributes concrete material for discussion and controversy.

Becker's argument may be summarised in the following way:

- (a) The historical fact is a declaration about an event;
- (b) it is thus because the historian has direct contact with a declaration concerning the event, since the event itself has already disappeared;

⁷ Carl L. Becker, "What are Historical Facts?," *op. cit.*, p. 124-125.

(c) therefore, the historical fact is not the event itself, but a symbol which can recreate in our imagination the image of the event;

(d) consequently, one cannot say of historical facts that they are “hard,” nor even that they are true or false, but since we are speaking of symbols, one can say that they are more or less appropriate.

The essential points of the argument are, of course, b) and c) and we shall begin with them.

Is it right to say that since we cannot perceive past events *directly* since they have already elapsed, that with which we have *direct* contact is simply declarations concerning these events, or opinions about them? Whatever the case we must notice that, contrary to appearances, this does not concern only historical facts; in fact we are dealing with all knowledge which does not come to birth at the present moment, and as the “moment” is an idealisation, and we are always concerned with processes occurring over a period of time—then this concerns literally *all* our knowledge. Thus we find ourselves faced with a purely idealist profession of faith, idealist in a distinctly *subjective* way in this case. However this was only a remark in passing and by no means an argument against Becker’s thesis. What, then, are our arguments?

Let us begin with the seemingly innocent word “directly,” which we find in Becker’s reasoning.

When we say “Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C.” is it true that we do not directly perceive Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but only imagine it? Indubitably, for Caesar is not crossing the Rubicon at the very moment that we are speaking. Nor does anybody claim this, and if there were someone who wished to live it “directly,” he would need to be put into an asylum. In fact this is not at all important if we are concerned with the objectivity of our knowledge, i.e. if we wish to know if what we are talking about corresponds to an event which really took place. For the problem with which we are dealing is that of the objectivity of knowledge, not conjuring thicks with the use of the word “directly.”

The better to circumscribe the subject, let us abandon for a

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moment the historical fact evoked in the phrase about Caesar crossing the Rubicon, and take a phrase at random from daily life. We say, for example: "Yesterday I met Henry in the street"; the veracity of this statement is confirmed not only by me and Henry, but also by several friends who were present at the meeting, and by a photograph which one of them took at the moment of the encounter. Whereupon Carl Becker arrives and says: "You are not directly concerned with the fact of this meeting since the event already belongs to the past; what you are directly concerned with is simply a phrase affirming that this meeting took place, consequently the fact is not your real encounter, but simply the affirmation—symbol of the encounter." In everyday life if we heard this we would simply say that the speaker was wandering from the point and we would give him a pitying look. But when one practises philosophy, or one approaches things by metatheoretic reflection, one can scarcely behave as in daily life. So we cannot simply tell ourselves that the speaker is wandering from the point, but we must present arguments and prove in what way our opponent's argument is faulty. And it is in this that we find, to a large extent the skill and difficulty of practising philosophy.

Experience teaches us that in the case of paradoxical statements (and the statement of our honoured opponent constitutes a characteristic paradox, once it is transposed from the historical sphere to that of everyday life), we need to look for the source of the error of logic in a verbal error, generally due to ambiguity of terms. If one thus considers the statements of Becker which interest us, our suspicions must be aimed in the first place to the word "directly."

Becker says: "We are not *directly* concerned with the fact of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, but we are on the contrary *directly* concerned with a statement concerning this fact." If we transpose this argument to everyday events we shall say by analogy: "We are not *directly* concerned with the fact of yesterday's meeting of X and Y, but we are on the contrary *directly* concerned with a statement about this fact." What is happening when Becker mentions twice, and with emphasis, this sacramental "directly," what is the accepted meaning of it, and what are the philosophical consequences?

The term “directly” is linked with a very old problem, well-known to philosophers, which has caused—in the history of philosophy—considerable upheaval. In a certain acceptance of the term, we cannot perceive or know anything *directly*: neither the events of the past (which is obvious), nor even the events, things or phenomena which we perceive and know *now*, in the instant of perceiving them. For this tree which I perceive at this precise moment, exists outside me, objectively (unless my excessive idealism should lead me to deny even this), and I only assemble perceptible sensations; thus, “directly” (using the term in a specific sense) this tree is not known to me. What, then, can one say about complicated cognitive acts which cannot involve perception, by the senses, of the object under study, but only of its effects (for example in the field of microphysics)? If one tackles the question from this angle, as do Becker and his school, one “directly” knows only what one has experienced; hence, the only acceptable and rational point of view is that of immanent idealism. This will not surprise those who know the history of empiricism and of the vagaries of immanentism, due precisely to this method of thinking. On the other hand, one can see yet again the confirmation of the thesis that anyone who takes up philosophical reflections (and all metatheoretic reflection is philosophical) must know the history of philosophy; otherwise he runs the risk mentioned by Engels of lapsing unconsciously into the worst philosophy of all, eclectic philosophy.

But let us return to our term “directly.” Since we are attributing to it such great importance in the process of reasoning, its meaning must be defined. Becker does not do this, and allows himself to be trapped by the ambiguity of the term. Thus, when he says: “We cannot *directly* know a historical event because this event is already past,” one cannot but agree with him, and this implies, conversely, that this event is known to us indirectly; however, we directly know certain sources and also the material product of certain given processes, which have been preserved to our day. At this point, Carl Becker (a specialist who knows his job as a historian) retorts that what we are *directly* dealing with is simply affirmations, judgments, that is to say elements deriving from the mind, though related to the events in question. This is false not only from the point of view of the facts (it is, indeed,

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difficult to think of the pyramid of Cheops or a copy of the *Magna Carta* whose authenticity has been proved, as being perceived exclusively through the mind), but also and above all from the formal point of view. The meaning of this second "directly" is different from that of the first, and one is clearly dealing with a logical slip caused by the ambiguity of the term. In the first case, when we say "directly," we are concerned with our *own* perception of the given object or event; that is to say, with whether we perceive it not through the intermediary of other observers (contemporaries or people of an earlier period who have left written accounts), or with material traces (sources, products, consequences of the action which can be observed apart from the action itself), but through personal observation. In the second case, "directly" implies the need to answer this philosophical problem: "What is involved in knowledge?" In short, it boils down to the disparity between immanent materialism (realism) and idealism. As we have already stressed, the sense that Becker gives in this case to the term "directly" is derived from immanent idealism. Philosophically speaking, this is not so far-fetched, since learned treatises have been written with the one aim of demonstrating that not only objects from the real world but also sensory perceptions are not given to us "directly." In reality, the trouble lies in the fact that Becker has confused these two problems which, related though they are to some extent, are nevertheless distinct; and from the banal observation that we cannot be the eye-witnesses of past events, he draws the conclusion that it is only the affirmations relating to these events that are given to us "directly." Why, pray? Logically, this is clearly a *non sequitur*; and it is evident that sources, material products of past events, etc., are *directly* given to us (in the first sense of the term). If the immanentist philosopher contests this, he must be thinking not of historical facts, but of a general world-picture. This poses another problem, and one must not confuse these two things; which makes it all the more important not to draw from one, conclusions relevant to the other, simply because in both cases we are using the same ambiguous term "*directly*."

However, the question cannot be restricted to mere verbal ambiguity and a logical slip. Direct perception, and hence knowl-

edge (in the first sense of the word "direct") also provide us with fetishes. What difference does it make to historical (or any other) knowledge, that it is the act of a single subject, and furthermore an act of visual participation in all the processes and events under study? No difference whatsoever. Such a postulate would be nonsensical, and, taken literally, it would threaten to abolish the whole of human knowledge. No-one, in any domain of science, is in a position to perceive and to know everything by himself—to be an eye-witness of it. And since, by definition, science is by nature intersubjective, this is as impossible as it is useless. Such an unlikely idea could only occur to a philosopher; nay, to a most extravagant-minded among philosophers, for he must be one who professes subjective idealism with a strong leaning towards solipsism.

What, then, is our answer to Becker's question: What is a historical fact? A historical fact is an element, a fragment of the *res gestae*, in other words an objective event of the past (if we introduce the word "past," this is purely for pedantry's sake, since as long as we are not speaking of the future all the events that we can speak of are already in the past). The direct or indirect character of historical knowledge, just like the degree of its exactitude, etc., are problems of another type and do not interfere with the definition of historical fact. A pronouncement relating to historical events can, on the other hand, itself become a historical fact if it has played any sort of historical role, if it has influenced the course of history. On the other hand it is wrong to identify the category of "historical fact" and the spiritual perception of an affirmation concerning a historical fact; in any case it is contrary to the accepted sense of this term and it arises from a philosophical viewpoint which is unjustly given general application as if it had been generally admitted. One of Becker's theses, on the other hand, is acceptable though for reasons completely different from the ones he adduces. One cannot say of a historical fact that it is true or false; this qualification applies to judgments about reality and not to reality itself. Becker also says that a historical fact cannot be described as "raw" (Becker says "cold," "hard"), and this is correct, but not for the reasons he gives (according to him "historical

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fact” is a symbol and all one can say of a symbol is that it is or is not appropriate).

This leads us on quite naturally to the fifth version of the question: “What is a historical fact?”. It is complementary to the question regarding the structure of a historical fact (viz. whether this is simple or complex), but it is peculiar in that it enters the domain of gnoseology: is a historical fact “raw” (with no subjective adjunct), or is it the result of the influence of the historian, and through him, of a predetermined theory?

We have already said that where natural sciences are concerned, conventionalism posed similar problems at a much earlier date, and replied to the question in the negative. Conventionalists, Le Roy in particular, who denied the existence of “raw” facts, resorted to the active role of language (the conceptual apparatus), of definition, and of theory to establish what one calls a scientific fact; in a certain sense, then, it represented to them an achievement, a result, and not a starting-point. The historical theorist proceeds in the same way, although the concrete starting-point of his reasoning is different.

Let us once more return to Becker, for despite the idealistic trend that this author represents, his remarks on the objectivity of historical knowledge and in particular of historical facts are pertinent and interesting. He starts from a criticism of the positivist ideal of history presented “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (as it actually happened), which admits of the possibility that the historian could introduce nothing into this knowledge “outside the sensitive plate of his mind, on which objective facts would register their own significance, since they cannot be called in question” (*op. cit.* p. 129). In opposition to authorities like Ranke, Fustel de Coulanges and others, Becker stresses the fact that not only can the historian not get to the bottom of all the facts he selects, but he cannot even explore a single one of them fully, that is to say he cannot present a single fragment of reality with all its ramifications. Even in the sphere of the historical fact, we are obliged to choose among all the documents which pile up.

[...] But in no case can the historian put forward assertions when describing all the facts, the thoughts, and the feelings of everybody who was involved in an event described in

its totality. This is why a historian must *choose* certain postulations about the event, and knit them together in some fashion, rejecting the other postulations, and other possible ways of relating them. Another historian would find himself obliged to make a different choice. Why? What it is which leads one historian to choose among all the possible true affirmations about the given situation—certain of them, and not others? This is determined by the object he has in mind. Thus the object he pursues will determine the exact meaning he will draw from the event. *The event itself, the facts themselves, say nothing, impose no significance. It is the historian who speaks, and it is he who imposes the meaning.*⁸

Here, the question of historic events, of facts, as well as of their reflection in the mind, in the form of related judgments, is posed in an adequate way. This is contrary to Becker's preceding assertions, according to which a fact is nothing but a symbol recreated in our imagination: the event, the fact, constituting an objective past, connected with reality by innumerable strands. In taking cognizance of this fragment of reality, objectivity, that is to say of the given historical fact, we must choose among the countless links, and take those which interest us in the context of the given frame of reference (from the historian's point of view, this is the purpose of the exercise). In this fashion we confer a determinate significance upon the historical fact, elevating it to the level of the *scientific fact*.

What is of importance to us in this argument, is that it brings the role of the historian into relief as a subject taking cognizance, within the historical consciousness. In short, it is trite, in the light of this analysis of the cognitive relationship and of the active role adopted by the subject taking cognizance. But when one applies this formula which is general, to a precise area of research, to a historical fact, its heuristic force becomes yet more evident.

We must distinguish carefully between a "fact," seen as objective historic event, and a "fact" seen as a reflection in the human mind, in knowledge. The objective historical fact has a deter-

⁸ Carl Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 130-131 (my underlining).

mined ontological status; this is very important for the concept in toto. But it also holds a gnoseological status. In this respect, the historical fact is of interest to us not as a Kantian "thing in itself," but as a "thing for us." It is exactly from this point of view that we speak of raw facts, and of theoretically interpreted facts; it is also from this point of view that we must definitely say that "raw facts" are just as devoid of meaning as the "thing in itself"; as devoid as any radical agnosticism. For the ontological assertion that some thing—in this case the historical fact—has objective existence, is equivalent to a rejection of the pretensions of subjectivism, according to which that thing is the product of the thinking subject. According to this assertion the thing is a question. The gnoseological assertion concerning the *image* of that "thing" in the human mind is another. This is what we speak of when we consider the possibility of presenting "raw facts." Given that we are concerned with the process of awareness, and the cognitive relationship, the thinking subject and his active role in knowledge comes into play, by definition. This puts weight on the postulated "raw fact," and incriminates them of *contradictionis in adiecto*.

Thus there are no "raw facts." By definition they cannot exist. The facts which we are concerned with in science, and even more generally in the sphere of knowledge, always carry within them the mark of the subject, and there is no subjectivity in this statement. To begin with what we know to be a fact, go through its establishment by way of a selection of its components, by its limitation in time, space, and substance, and end with its interpretation, there is always the interference of the subjective, of its various conditioning effects, and above all of the theory on the basis of which this operation is effected.

To all ends, let us repeat once more that this selection of material which establishes the historical fact is not arbitrary. The linkages of which we speak, the mutual influences etc., have objective existence—they are not produced or discovered by the historian. The conception which would contend as much would be an idealistic one, and anyway unsubstantiable, given the ontological status we have allowed to the historical fact—part of objective reality, part of history. What the historian brings to the establishment of a fact is the choice he makes among

objectively existent documents, among the links and mutual influences which appear objectively, etc. The criteria of selection, like the criterion determining the internal structure of each document, differ according to the theory behind them. And it must be that this action rests on a theory, if one presupposes that the choice is not fortuitous, in which case one would approach the absurd. Clearly, these diverse selections yield equally diverse results.

Thus, contrary to positivist prejudice, one does not assemble the facts within oneself first of all, "without presuppositions," and let them speak for themselves, refraining from those comments of the historian which would warp the reality. On the contrary (and this is understandable on the basis of the analysis of the processes of understanding, and historical theorists are ever more aware of this), the perception and the formulation of facts are the result of the influence of theory. The theory precedes the establishment of the facts, although on the other hand it is based on them.

So we have arrived at the end of our analysis of meanings hidden behind the question "What is a historical fact?" We have counted five, or at least we have envisaged five subjects susceptible of consideration relevant to these questions. Here they are:

1. When we ask "What is a historical fact?" we question ourselves on what can constitute such a fact; the answer is: it may be concerned with events, with procedures, and with their effects in social life;

2. secondly, we need to know which of these facts deserve to be termed "historic"; the answer is: the criterion of distinction can be the range of facts given for social development, which presupposes the establishment of a frame of reference;

3. thirdly, the question concerns the structure of historical facts, in particular the validity of the distinction between simple and complex facts;

4. fourthly, we inquire of ourselves what the ontological status of an historical fact might be; it is a question of finding out whether it is a fragment of *rerum gestarum*, or a pronouncement about them;

5. fifthly, we ask what the status of an historic fact is gno-

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seologically speaking; are historic facts “raw,” or are they the result of the intrusion of theory?

A review of these five versions of the question “What is an historic fact?” allows us to survey a wide range of problems. It remains to us now to envisage the problem which appeared in the analysis of the last, fifth, version of the question, to know the problem of the selection of documents by the historian. But if, while we are analysing the last version of the question, what particularly interests us is the selection of documents which establish the historic fact, still we are brought up short by the problem of the selection of historic facts from the multiplicity of events, of procedures just as much as their effects, which the historian does not take into account because he has not placed them in the category of historic facts. This problem has appeared in passing during our argument, but given its importance, we must return to it to make the analysis systematic.

We must make the distinction all the more because, seen in this way, the problem of the selection of historic facts is closely connected to the question, discussed earlier, of the establishment of historic facts by means of a selection of historical documents: indeed when we come to that selection, with a view to establishing the historic fact, and thus in a manner of speaking establishing it from the gnoseological point of view, we proceed *ipso facto* to the choice of events whose importance is historical (historic facts) among a multitude of events of no historical importance. But the opposite is equally true; when we proceed to the selection of historical facts from historical events (and we always do this and found our inquiry upon a theory or a hypothesis which constitutes the frame of reference here) we determine the meaning of the selection of the historical documents at the same time, establishing the given fact.

If, as historians, we found ourselves face to face with the past without having a conception, theory or hypothesis, whether it be deliberately formulated, in the case of intellectuals, or imposed spontaneously by practical necessity, as is the case in daily life, we are perplexed before the chaos created by the multiplicity of events, of the events as much as of their effects. For each one could claim the role of historical fact. In this case, when we employ the term “historical fact,” we are concerned not with the

objectivity of the event (in that sense, each one *is* a historical fact), but with an objective event qualified in a particular way; because notably, by virtue of its influence over other events, and hence over history, we recognise its importance by elevating it to the level of historical fact, or of that kind of fact with which the science of history treats. This again brings into relief the complicated character of the historical fact, which is a fragment of history, as far as its ontological status is concerned—a fragment of objective reality, and as far as its gnoseological status is concerned, the product of the mutual and particular influence of the subject and the object, as in all other cases of cognitive relationship. While remaining a solid element of objective reality, existing outside all minds that take cognisance of it, and independent of them, the historical fact is, at the same time a particular product whose genesis undergoes the historian's influence. Thus it is not true that historical facts draw themselves of their own accord out of the body of other events, or historical processes, because they are important and their effect is far-reaching (as the positivists suppose); or that the historian should limit himself to noting them and presenting them as if their importance were eloquent enough. This extremely simplistic attitude is not tenable, taking into account the progress made by contemporary theories of knowledge. No event can be capable of "extracting" itself of its own accord, from other events. It will simply remain one event among many. "The importance," "the relevance" of an event is a value judgment which necessitates the existence not only of the object under evaluation, but also of the subject who evaluates it. This is evident to anyone who understands what the cognitive relation is, and the role played in it by the subjective factor, which is relevant, a fortiori, to the relation of evaluation. Nor is it appropriate to be surprised, and it is in no way a contradiction of materialism in the theory of knowledge, nor with the theory of reflection (at least in one of its determined interpretations), if we say that the fact is the result, the product, of a theory. For it is on the basis of a theory that the historian will proceed to a selection, from the historical processes and events, of that which he will raise to the status of an historical fact. This is why historians differ so notably on this count (that is to say that their selection is far from being

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admitted by everybody) and also why though this has at certain times or among historians of a particular school been passed over in silence, being considered devoid of historical importance—a fact may be promoted to the rank of historical fact at another time, or by historians of a different school.

Why is this so? We quote, as a reply to this question, the opinion of the historian E. H. Carr, who has the honour of having said what needed to be said about this with true British humour.

When you read an historical work, always listen for its murmur. If you hear nothing, either you are deaf or else your historian is a perfect bore. Facts are not really like fish on a fish-monger's slab. They are like fish swimming in a huge and sometimes inaccessible ocean; what the historian catches will depend partly on chance, but principally on the part of the ocean which he has chosen to fish in, and also on the bait he is using. These two factors are, of course, determined by the sort of fish he intends to catch. In general the historian will find the sort of facts he wants to find. History means interpretation. Indeed, if, turning Sir George Clark on his head, I declared that history was "a hard kernel of interpretation, surrounded by a pulp of questionable facts," my assertion would indubitably be one-sided and wrong, but no more so, I dare say, than the original.⁹

And the eminent historian Lucien Febvre in some sort completes Carr's comment:

Have you heard enough of our elders repeating: "The historian has no right to choose the facts?" By what right? In the name of what principle? To choose, committing a crime against "reality," and thus against "truth." Always the same idea: facts—little cubes of a mosaic, nicely differentiated, nicely matching, well polished. An earthquake has dislodged the mosaic; the cubes have been buried in the earth; let's pull them out, and above all be careful not to forget a single one. Let's gather them all. Dont

⁹ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* London 1962, p. 18.

let's choose... Our teachers said this as though from the mere fact of chance, which has destroyed one vestige and protected another (let alone, for the moment, the deeds of man), history was not a choice. And if there were only those chances? True enough, history is a choice. Arbitrary, no. Preconceived, yes. [...]

Now without a basic theory, without a preconceived theory, no scientific work is possible. A construct of the spirit which satisfies our need to understand, a theory is the experiment of science itself... An historian who refuses to admit that the fact is human, who professes total submission to these facts, as if they were not of his making, as if they had not been chosen by him, in the first place, in all senses of the word "chosen" (and they cannot *not* be chosen by him)—he's a technician. Who may be excellent. But he's not an historian.¹⁰

These quotations are rather long, but they deserved mention nevertheless. For their authors are pureblooded historians, and moreover, they employ metatheoretical argument with knowledge of its implications. *Quae est mutatio rerum*, one would be tempted to say, in the name of the positivist historians, as we hear their words. But one cannot avoid agreeing with the innovators. At the most one would wish to add certain warnings on the dangers one would be exposed to if, following in their footsteps, one overstepped certain limits. But that does not in any way invalidate what they say.

Indeed the question created is the following dilemma—indubitably objective: in the course of human lives, there are a number of incalculable events, of processes and their products, which could be historical facts; what is more, there are links between them, mutual links and dependencies, and influences. Alone, a minimal number of them is termed an historical fact, the others, not. Why is this so?

The obvious answer is that they are the important facts which have played a particular part in the development of the society. Fair enough. But how do we know? For the facts in themselves carry no distinguishing signs. What is more, as we have already

¹⁰ Lucien Febvre, *Combats pur l'histoire*, Paris 1953, p. 116-117.

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said, historians' opinions on this count are sometimes notably conflicting, particularly if they write at different periods. The promotion of previously unaccentuated facts to the level of historical facts, and the disappearance of facts previously considered important, and later reduced to the level of everyday, devoid of historical meaning, can but serve to increase our scepticism.

Who then decides that some facts have the licence to be termed historical, and some not? Certainly, the man who studies the historical process, the historian. But it is not an individual and arbitrary act of pure individualism, subjectivism, because that is the pleasure of an individual. For our historian is himself a social "product"¹¹—he was himself created in the spirit of a theory, and he expounds it. The selection of facts depends on the historical creation of the historian of the theory he professes, since it is a social fact. Precisely in this way is the theory previous to the facts.

Thus it is the interpretation which raises the simple fact to the level of an historical one, or else the opposite, it makes them get down off that pedestal. Arbitrarily?—we ask, after Lucien Febvre. No of course not. In the first place, because the events themselves, their process, etc., have an objective character, they are not the product of the historian's mind. In the second place, because the historian has his own hands tied by the theory he holds to: he is more the person who realises its directives than his own master. In the third place, however, because he is socially conditioned by the interests of his period, by his social class, etc. But with this social corrective, he introduces a subjective factor into the historical consciousness. And since these opinions could appear daring, let us repeat once again that they are in no way a sin against materialism, nor against the theory of reflection. On the other hand one gains this, that one finds oneself conforming with the contemporary theory of knowledge and with the results gained by particular sciences, such as linguistics, psychology, sociology of knowledge, etc., which reach,

¹¹ In various reviews of my works on anthropology, I have been blamed for using this ugly term "product" in this context. Certainly this is a piece of Marxist jargon, but the word "fits" the thought it is meant to express perfectly, and I am unable to find another; anyone who knows Marxism will see that there is no question of my using the term in a vulgarized or oversimplified way, so that the problem is only an apparent one.

the horizons of our field of knowledge of men and of the process of consciousness, thanks to their concreteness of research.

It is thus the historian who proceeds to select, even if the selection is not arbitrary. He chooses documents which go together to make the tenor of the fact (in this sense he establishes it); he chooses the historical facts among the ordinary facts of living. That is why it is fair to assert that there is no such thing as a "raw" fact; "raw" facts are just as much the result of a theoretical elaboration, and what is more, their promotion to the category of historical fact is not a starting-point, but an arrival, a result. When we are dealing with an easy sentence like: "The battle of Grunwald took place in 1410," which is true or false according to whether the statement corresponds to the reality, nevertheless, the recognition of this as an historical fact is a result of the adoption of a system of reference (political history) and of a determined theory. If certain facts (e.g. the fact of the battle of Grunwald) are recognised historical facts from the standpoint of any theoretical system, that changes nothing; they are still not "raw" facts, historic in themselves, without the appropriate selection having been made, starting from a determinate theoretical reflection.

In the light of the above comments, we can conclude our thoughts with an eloquent quotation from E. H. Carr:

The historian and the historical fact are mutually necessary. The historian, without his facts, is deprived of roots and of value; facts, without their historian, are dead and without meaning. That is why my first answer to the question: What is history? is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an endless dialogue past and present.¹²

¹² E. H. Carr, *op. cit.* p. 24.