HISTORICISM REVISITED

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I

I really have revisited Historicism. On 10–12 June 1974 I was one of the participants in a conference on Historicism organized by the editors of History and Theory at the Warburg Institute in London. The papers were excellent, and the level of the discussion was very high. But when after the conference I tried to formulate for my own use what I had learnt from it, I found myself writing an introductory paper for a future conference in which the participants would be kind enough to discuss the rather old-fashioned points of view on which I want to be either reassured or refuted. As there is something to be said for not having conferences in accordance with one’s own wishes, I publish my paper as the lesser evil.¹

II

It is of course old-fashioned to say that the historian always starts from facts, but I do not know what else I could say. A historian may register the mere existence of a fact: for instance the date of an event. Or he may ask questions about that fact: questions which incidentally may very soon lead him to make a distinction between fact and evidence. It is very difficult to define what sorts of facts are the characteristic concern of the historian; and it is equally difficult to define what precisely is the concern of the

historian in his facts. But to judge from the historians we respect—from Herodotus and Thucydides to Eduard Meyer and Marc Bloch—four features would seem to characterize the historian’s work: 1) a general interest in past human deeds; 2) pleasure in discovering new facts about the human past; 3) awareness that the information we have about the human past raises problems which affect the credibility of the information itself and therefore the substance of the past; 4) an effort to make sense of selected facts of the human past, that is, to explain and evaluate them.

Every historian is a collector of facts of the human past. Collecting these facts is so important that it is pursued by specific institutions, such as museums, archives, and archaeological expeditions. But although they emphasize the fact-finding aspect of historical research, these institutions exist only in relation to the other aspects of historical research—namely, selection of the evidence and explanation and evaluation of the facts emerging from the selected evidence.

What we call “historicism” is a situation arising from this process of selection, explanation and evaluation. More precisely, historicism is the recognition that each of us sees past events from a point of view determined or at least conditioned by our own individual changing situation in history. Raymond Aron and others have given good reasons to explain why historicism should have become an acute question in the early twentieth century. But its roots lie in the extension of historical interpretation to all aspects of human life (indeed of the universe itself) in the nineteenth century.

Historicism is not a comfortable doctrine because it implies a danger of relativism. It tends to undermine the historian’s confidence in himself. True enough, Ranke who, among the nineteenth-century historians, is supposed to be the “Altvater” of Historicism, lived very comfortably. He seems to have felt no difficulty in relating the individual facts disclosed by the opening of the archives to the march of universal history. But we suspect Ranke of some confidence tricks. If God is in the individual facts, why should we care about universal history? If God is not in the individual facts, how can he be in universal history?

In our more prosaic terminology, there is a question about the categories according to which events must be classified, correlated, explained and judged; but the question is complicated by the changing experience of the classifying agent—the historian—who is himself in history. This is not to accept the thesis very acutely developed by Hayden White in his recent book *Metahistory* (1973) that Ranke, or any other historian, classifies the facts according to rhetorical questions. Rhetoric does not pose questions of truth,
which is what worried Ranke and his successors and still worries us. Above all, rhetoric does not entail techniques for the research of truth, which is what historians are anxious to invent. The question is, rather, how we stand nowadays in relation to this task of discovering facts and fitting them into a pattern in order to understand and evaluate them, if we ourselves are part of the historical process we are trying to understand.

If history-writing implies that we choose our facts according to certain criteria—or we try to discover new facts according to certain interests—these criteria and interests already imply a choice of universals or generalizations according to which we want to classify and understand the facts. We cannot understand and evaluate facts unless we relate them to general categories and values, but we would not be able to start to choose (or discover) facts unless we had in mind some value or general category to which we want to refer the facts.

To choose facts about the history of feudalism means having some idea of what feudalism is. Facts become meaningful only by becoming part of a situation or of a process, but the choice of the facts depends on the situation we envisage from the outset (call it a hypothesis or a model or an ideal type). Furthermore, to attach importance to certain facts in view of a certain situation or process is equivalent to attributing a value to these facts. History is always a choice of facts fitting into a static or dynamic situation which appears worth studying.

This characterization of historical research can be interpreted either pessimistically or optimistically. The pessimistic interpretation is that history-writing is selecting facts for a situation one envisages before having selected the facts. Consequently we shall find what we want to find because our initial hypothesis or model or idea will determine our choice of the facts to be studied. An extra dose of pessimism may be injected by the further consideration that between the moment we start our research and the moment we end it we ourselves shall be changed and therefore guided by different interests or presuppositions. But the pessimistic interpretation depends on the assumption that any initial hypothesis or model is arbitrary and unfalsifiable; and the extra-pessimistic dose depends in its turn on the further assumption that the human mind is incapable of consistency because of historical change. We have emphasised that the historian collects facts: his initial hypothesis or model is propounded in view of the facts he has before him and in order to test it against more facts. If I formulate a provisional hypothesis or model about feudalism it is because I know some facts which I connect with the feudal order.
I expect to modify my initial hypothesis or model as my research progresses; indeed, the very selection of the facts will continuously be modified by the requirements of the research itself. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the relation between facts and evidence, historical research is controlled by the facts indicated by the evidence. In so far as evidence presents facts, facts are facts—and it is characteristic of the historian’s profession to respect facts. The pessimist underrates the discipline to which the historian is submitted.

Even so there are two ways of going wrong. One is avoidable ignorance or error, the other is unavoidable ignorance. I may misinterpret a text because my knowledge of its language is faulty, but I may also misinterpret it because certain circumstances about it were not yet known when I studied it. In either case I am shown to be not only changeable, but fallible, and there seems to be a relation between my changeability and my fallibility, though the relation is neither clear nor perhaps necessary. It will be enough that we, being mortal and fallible, study change from changing points of view and can never boast of absolute certainty. If we were unchangeable and infallible, we might still be interested in change—as the ancient gods were supposed to be in relation to changing humanity (it saved them from boredom). But it would be a different interest, presumably with a different method.

We study change because we are changeable. This gives us a direct experience of change: what we call memory. Because of change our knowledge of change will never be final: the unexpected is infinite. But our knowledge of change is real enough. At least we know what we are talking about. Our knowledge of change is both made possible and circumscribed by our changing experience. All we can do is to produce facts which fit into our model or hypothesis and models or hypotheses which fit the facts. We shall soon hear from our colleagues (or from our changing selves) if the alleged facts are non-existent or if the facts, though existent, can be better interpreted by a different hypothesis or model.

There is no hope that structuralism will save us from the predicament of historicism. Structuralism has sharply reminded us that synchronic understanding is even more necessary than diachronic history-writing and has its own presuppositions and rules. On consideration, this was perhaps not such a revolutionary intimation. “Altvater” Mommsen should have been enough to warn us that the diachronic history of “Altvater” Ranke had no claim to exclusiveness. The Römisches Staatsrecht is essentially a masterpiece of synchronic history. Burckhardt wavered between synchronic and diachronic history. Looking more carefully, one might even discover
that most of the important books of cultural and social history of the last 120 years (from Fustel de Coulanges to J. Huizinga and M. Bloch) are more synchronic than diachronic: that is, they are based on stereotypes, or ideal types. Structuralism certainly reveals deeper and more permanent elements of our human nature. It has taught us to seek new relations between diachronic and synchronic sets of events. But the reality of change, which is the reality of death, cannot be wiped out. In the future we may as historians have to study long-term changes which are for the moment hardly conceivable. But I cannot foresee history ever becoming a science of the permanent.

III

As we cannot do better than studying change from a changing point of view, there is a point in doing it well. But the determination to do it well depends on an extra-cognitive factor: the conviction that it is worth doing well. If we are never absolutely certain about the facts, we want at least to be absolutely certain about the purpose of our efforts.

Now this may become a troublesome requirement. What is the point of writing the biography of a good man if we feel that goodness is a historically conditioned value? What is the point of studying the phenomenology of freedom if freedom is a transient value?

It is easy to object that our moral conscience has nothing to do with the facts in question. If we study parliamentary institutions (this objection implies) we must see how they work, not whether they are what we think they should be: if anything, the desirability of a certain type of parliament will be a separate question. But this objection leaves out the possibility that the model from which we start and to which we ultimately return with modifications will be a morally desirable model: the good man, the good institution or the good society. Are we to exclude a morally coloured model?

We would have much to exclude. Present-day researchers who worry about the status of women, children, slaves and coloured people will be affected. True enough, they may not be looking for the good society, but for a better society emerging out of a bad society which exploited women and humiliated slaves. But the moral conscience which requires the historian to do research with a view to a better society must be able to resist the claims that its values are as historically conditioned as the values of a ruthless adult white male slave-owner.

The true answer, I believe, lies in a dilemma. Either we possess a religious or moral belief independent of history, which allows us
to pronounce judgment on historical events, or we must give up moral judging. Just because history teaches us how many moral codes mankind has had, we cannot derive moral judgment from history. Even the notion of transforming history by studying history implies a meta-historical faith.

What history-writing without moral judgments would be is difficult for me to envisage, because I have not yet seen it. It would, however, be unwarranted to exclude a priori the possibility of a historiography inspired by mere intellectual curiosity or by interest in technical achievements while indifferent to any moral value.

IV

Having in any case made my choice in this dilemma—that is, having decided to use my moral judgment as a sign of my liberty in the face of history—I prefer to concern myself with the technicalities and actual trends of historical research in the age of historicism.

Here it will be enough to underline with H.-I. Marrou what was too easily forgotten in the golden age of the discussion on historicism (for instance by E. Troeltsch himself and by O. Hintze), namely that between us (as historians) and the facts lies the evidence. We can envisage borderline cases in which the historian looks straight at the facts. A contemporary reporter can write about what he has seen: an archaeologist can examine the features of a perfectly preserved buried city which he has discovered and excavated personally. In both cases there will be questions about the reliability of the writer’s memory or notes; but his evidence and his facts will in practice coincide. However, the great majority of historians work on relics of the past—in the form of written or oral accounts, documents, material remains discovered by others, etc. The historian has to interpret the evidence in order to establish the facts and normally has to consider previous interpretations. All this implies that he has to write history not only from his personal (and changing) point of view, but also taking into account the points of view of previous witnesses and interpreters. Furthermore, he has to assess the value of his evidence not in terms of simple reliability, but of relevance to the problems he wants to solve. He may discover that much of his evidence is irrelevant or superfluous; but more often (especially if he is a historian of Antiquity or of the Middle Ages) he will find the evidence inadequate. Though every piece of evidence is a fact in itself, it is not necessarily the fact we need. We all know that what is a useless forgery to one historian is excellent evidence of intellectual trends to another. A historian employs much of his time in establishing the
correct relation between the evidence before him and the hypothesis or model he has in his mind. Even in the case in which the relic is a fragment of the fact he wants to study (an incomplete text, the ruins of a city) there are basic questions about the relation between what is lost and what survives. Consequently the historian will worry less about his own inevitable situation in history than about the historical situation of his evidence, previous historians included.

Many of the difficulties in assessing the relation between evidence and events have become routine and therefore require less attention now than they did in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. But the difficulties re-emerge in strength when new types of evidence are offered. Psycho-analysis or psycho-history, for instance, is a newcomer to historical research and therefore raises acute questions. Few will doubt that psycho-analysis has justified its extension beyond the abnormal and beyond the living. Its right to be treated as a tool for historical research has been asserted (for instance by H. U. Wehler, Historische Zeitschrift 208, 1969, 529-554 and by B. Mazlish, Trans. Royal Hist. Society 5, 21, 1971, 79-100). But the nature of the evidence psycho-history can offer is not very clear to me. If we are talking about the age of Julius Caesar, we may conceivably psycho-analyse Caesar and Cicero, about whom we have documents (though that too will create difficulties), but would that be enough? We ought to know what was going on in the subconscious of their friends and enemies, even of the opposed armies. I cannot see any a priori objection to incorporating the subconscious in the problems of historicism. The changing points of view of the psycho-analysts will take their place among the changing points of view of other historical observers. But the psycho-historian will have to justify his use of evidence like anybody else in the historical profession.

One of the curiosities of historiography is that the removal of restrictions on research does not necessarily make research easier. We have seen the theologians become increasingly indifferent to the results of historical research on the Bible. They have found other ways of knowing God. The first reaction of the historians was one of elation. Bible criticism (and patristic studies) flourished in such a climate; and the religious creed of the historian became largely irrelevant to his performance. But now we begin to suspect that by becoming irrelevant to theology, Bible criticism risks becoming irrelevant to everything else—or at least trivial. To call the Bible a historical document is to forget that the Bible used to be the foundation of more than one living creed.

On a different (perhaps lower) level, the disappearance of national history as a meaningful notion is embarrassing to historians. We
Italians have been asking ourselves for a long time what Italian history is. But it was almost a shock to have to admit, on being faced with the first three volumes of the *History of Italy* recently published by Einaudi, that one did not understand why all these interesting, and often admirable, essays had to be collected under this title. Some chapters appeared to be fragments of a history of European culture, others were episodes of the history of the Catholic Church, others were descriptions of regional societies, etc. What is relevant here is that the virtual disappearance of the concept of nation as an elementary unit for historical research multiplies the points of view from which one can consider events that used to be taken as episodes of national history.

It is not surprising that in the circumstances biography should steadily progress towards the centre of historical research. While almost any type of political and social history is made more complex by the claims of historicism, biography remains something relatively simple. An individual has clear contours and a limited number of significant relationships: there are recognized techniques even for psycho-analysing him. Biography allows any kind of question within well defined limits: political history, economic history, religious history, and art history become easier if confined to one individual. Even the biological factors can be brought to bear in controllable terms. It will be interesting to watch this development which is at least partly a function of the tiredness of the historians in the age of historicism.

The inevitable corollary of historicism is history of historiography as the mode of expressing awareness that historical problems have themselves a history. This, however, has produced books the sole purpose of which is to prove that every historian and any historical problem is historically conditioned—with the additional platitude that even a verdict of this kind by the historian of historiography is historically conditioned.

Such an expression of pure relativism, in my opinion, is not defensible. History of historiography, like any other historical research, has the purpose of discriminating between truth and falsehood. As a kind of intellectual history which purports to examine the achievements of a historian, it has to distinguish between solutions of historical problems which fail to convince and solutions (= hypotheses; models; ideal types) which are worth being restated and developed. To write a critical history of historiography one must know both the authors one studies and the historical material they have studied.

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