

Which past? Whose transcendental presupposition?

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Most historians assume that there is an object called 'history', and that their task is to re-present it more-or-less objectively, to the degree that its surviving documents allow us to do so. To be sure, nowadays only innocents aspire to write history 'as it really was'. Most historians will concede that history-writing is influenced by the historical circumstances of its production, and will acknowledge that because history is written, it is shaped by the resources of a linguistic community and the narrative conventions characterizing it. Nonetheless, the modern historical enterprise presumes that an object called 'history' exists, and, because it does, that it can be objectively represented, even if this should be thought of as 'qualified objectivity';¹ and, on these grounds, assumes that 'real' history-writing is qualitatively different from, say, epic and myth.

I start this essay from the premise that the objectivist presumption that history simply 'is', and historiography is the best way of representing the past, will not do—even in its modulated, post-Rankean formulations. It is not that history simply happens, and historiography is the attempt to recreate that happening through a rigorous method, as objectivist historiography imagines. Rather, historiography is an intellectual and cultural construct, one particular way of construing and constructing the past; at once a tradition of reasoning, a way of being, and a certain practice of subjectivity. The desire to write history is specific to certain people (societies, classes) and not others. It is connected to some phenomena—the emergence of the modern state, 'progress', scientific rationality—and not others, which it usually defines itself against (magic, gods).

If history-writing constitutes its object, then how does it constitute that object? Constantin Fasolt provides an admirably lucid description of the 'basic principles' that the practice of history encodes:

That the past is gone; that it can nonetheless be turned into an object of scholarly examination by means of evidence; that the evidence was produced by some specific agent at some specific time and place for a specific purpose; that scholarly examination can take advantage of the agent's responsibility for the evidence to reconstruct its meaning; that evidence must therefore be interpreted in the context of its time and place; and above all, that things do have a time and place that may be called their own.²

To this one could add Lévi-Strauss's famous claim that the code of history is chronology.³ But more important still, and above all else, historiography encodes the humanism or anthropology that become a defining feature of Western thought from the early modern period. It does so, first of all, inasmuch as its subject is Man. This seems unremarkable—who else could the object of history be, if not Man? That this seems obvious only indicates how much we are heirs to the transformations which made anthropological assumptions the axioms of our intellectual practice and the bedrock of our culture. Tracing the semantic and epistemic changes underlying the emergence of the concept of history, Reinhart Koselleck however notes that prior to the Enlightenment 'there was no history for which humanity might have been the subject',⁴ but rather histories in the plural, of specific institutions and communities. The emergence of historiography thus corresponds to the emergence of a 'collective singular'—Man—as the object of history.

That historiography emerges as the study of the past of Man also means that nature no longer has a history. Voltaire's essay on 'Historie' in the Encyclopaedia, for example, declares that 'natural history' is in fact a part of physics, not history. More generally, 'historia naturalis' ceased to belong to the domain of history.⁵ Gods are also expelled from the domain of history. This is not a function of secularization, for historiography can coexist with religion, and indeed even, as in Ranke's case, with the conviction that a divine Providence animates history. But God or gods can no longer be historical actors, because the subject of history is Man, and only Man. It is this anthropological/humanist presumption that disqualifies many of the other forms by which peoples have conceived and narrated their past—these are now declared to not be history-writing at all, and indeed the emergent discipline defines itself against them. It also means that not only is God not a historical actor, he is himself to be explained, as a creature of men.

This last is one of the more dramatic implications of an epistemic and cultural shift which, amongst its other effects, saw the ways by which European men and women recounted and related to their past replaced by this new 'code'. 'The task of the modern era', wrote Ludwig Feuerbach, is 'the humanization of God—the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology.'⁶ The modern era has been steadily discharging that task. Once, to understand men you had to understand God; now, to understand the gods of men you have to understand the men, for their gods are the fantastical creation of their minds. Once the purposes and the acts of gods explained the world of men; now, gods are themselves signs of men, traces from which historians, anthropologists and sociologists can recreate the meanings and purposes with which these men endowed their world. It is not, then, only that the subject of history is Man, but that this subject is a Subject, that is, a meaning- and purpose-endowing being who objectifies himself in the world, and through whose objectifications we can recreate what sort of men these were, and what sort of world they had created and inhabited.

To be sure, there are important differences in how this is formulated. In some cases, the signs which give us information about their makers are understood as 'objective spirit'; in others, collectively they constitute a

