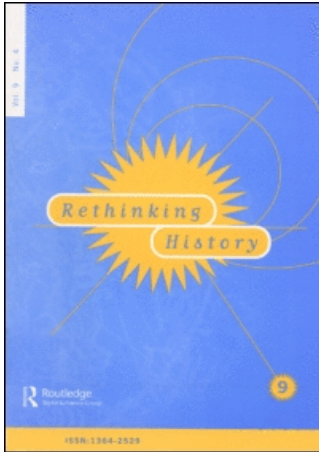


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A conversation with Hayden White

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This conversation deals with basic issues of historical knowledge, such as the nature of historical reality, the distinction between fact and event, the social function of historical knowledge, and the utility of 'methodology' in the study of history, as understood by Hayden White. It also addresses the problem of distinguishing between methods and conventions in historical research. White presents his idea of a 'progressive history' and advocates 'practical' history over a contemplative approach to the past. He also expresses his views on the ideological aspect of historical studies, the importance of treating the present as history, and the pedagogical as against the 'research' aspect of historiography.

Keywords: historical reality; event; fact; scientific history; progressive history; methodology

What is a historical event?

'What is a historical event?' is an essentializing question. It could be confidently answered only by someone who already knows or thinks he knows what an event is, while at the present moment no concept is more 'essentially contested' (Gallie) in both the physical and the social sciences. To be sure, in the human sciences in general and in historiography in particular, the 'event' is foundational. One could hardly even imagine thinking 'historically' without the notion of event. From the first, with Herodotus and Thucydides, founders of the western tradition of historical consciousness, certain great events loomed on the horizon of a specifically historiological way of thinking (the defeat of the Persians by the Hellenes, the defeat of Athens by Sparta).

The Greeks called these 'past actions' or 'happenings' (*τα γεγενημενα*, *ta gegemena*) and entertained no doubts about the possibility of

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distinguishing between ordinary or everyday occurrences and those extraordinary happenings that revealed in some special way the nature of things human and not only the working of fate and the doings of the gods. In other words, the historical event was distinguishable from other, human and this-worldly but nonetheless ordinary events of the kind peculiar to animals (and, needless to say, slaves, women, children, metics and other practitioners of the banausic life, none of whom was regarded as capable of 'action' [pragma] in the way heroes were). From the first, then, the historical event derived its specificity from the circumstance that certain extraordinary individuals, heroes or individuals capable of doing extraordinarily 'effective' things were involved in their production. Such personages bore many of the attributes of mythical figures of the kind met with in tragic drama, with the sole exception of their mortality, which gave to their exertions the poignancy of 'historicality'.

This mythical element remained alive throughout the whole development of western historiology and historiography. Which is one of the reasons that modern philosophy and social science have so much trouble defining the specifically 'historical' event. It retains the odor of myth, of the extraordinary or praeter-natural, of sheer contingency because it does not instantiate the operation of 'the laws of [physical] nature', but manifests the kind of 'individuality' (and not merely particularity) that makes it peculiarly amenable to literary, poetic, or narratological treatment.

In other words, the historical event has more in common with the occurrences met with in myth and religion, and specifically in the 'miracle', than with laws of material causality. And this is why modern efforts to transform history into a modern science have failed. Historical inquiry cannot become a science nor the historical past an object of science without giving up the very idea of the 'historical' event. Many aspects of history or the past are susceptible to scientific treatment (quantitative methods, statistical representation, material causality – especially with respect to the impact of 'natural' forces such as disease, variation in population, massive changes in the environment, and so on), but when all is said and done, anyone who wants to save the 'historicity' of certain events is forced to concede that no generalization can capture what is 'of its time' of a specifically historical event without adverting to statements about its 'uniqueness', the unrepeatability, 'originality', and so on.

So, for me, the historical event retains the mythic and religious element. It is more similar to the miracle than to the natural event. This is why history can be said to be scientific, because it consists of event (things that really happened) but require a kind of representation (ideographic) and mode of explanation (narratological) different from those found in the modern physical sciences. (I stress 'modern science' because I believe that, with respect to earlier, pre-Newtonian and Aristotelian versions of science, historical knowledge had little difficulty identifying itself as 'scientific'. But

here, of course, 'scientific' meant 'historiological' – as in the locution 'natural history'.)

What is the relationship between historical fact and historical event?

I believe that Arthur C. Danto is correct when he says that a fact is a discursive phenomenon. Facts are, in his estimation, 'events under a description'. In historical research, one is reading around in the archives and comes upon evidence of an occurrence which none of the knowledge of things happening in a given domain had led one to expect. Things were going along relatively quietly and as expected, but suddenly there is a rebellion, a revolution, the outbreak of a war, the enactment of a piece of legislation (like Solon's law or the law of the Twelve Tables), the sudden foundation of a city (Rome), a movement of peoples (the Exodus), the kind of event that 'demands' an explanation not only of its singularity but also of its continuity with the other events that made up its context. It is this combination of singularity and regularity – so different from anything found in 'real' nature – that threatens the stability of the doxological systems used to classify events and requires an act of classification by identification that we can call 'factualization'. An event is 'historical' precisely in the extent to which it is new, original, unique, singular, which is to say, initially unclassifiable by the doxological system of classification. The mere establishment by the historian of the specific attributes of this event, the time, place, and 'spread' of its effects, constitutes the event's 'identification'. The identification of an event in its singularity and regularity is its factualization.

The taking of the Bastille by the Parisian mob on 14 July 1789 was not only an act of mob violence but a revolutionary action. Its singularity consisted of its setting in motion a train of events which, taken together, can be said to constitute 'the French Revolution'. Hereafter it can be stated with considerable confidence that 'it is a fact that the French Revolution erupted as such with the taking of the Bastille on 14 Juillet 1789'. But note that the phrase 'it is a fact that' adds nothing to the truth-content of the phrase 'the French Revolution erupted, etc.' It is either true or it is not that 'the French Revolution erupted, etc.' The phrase 'it is a fact that' adds to the meaning of the whole phrase by indicating the speaker's belief or conviction that the French Revolution did erupt or break out or began with the taking of the Bastille in 1789. The phrase 'it is a fact that' is – to use the terminology of J.L. Austin – a 'speech-act', performative or illocutionary utterance belonging to the category of what Austin calls 'verdictives'. The phrase 'it is a fact that' does not establish the *truth* of the statement about the eruption of the French Revolution but affirms the 'truthfulness' – the intention to speak the truth – of the speaker of the utterance. Facts belong to speech, language and discourse, not to the real world. Things, persons,

relationships, and so on are not 'factual', only statements may or may not be. Which is why Barthes said, 'Fact is only a linguistic thing.' Statements of fact or professions of factuality can be tested as to their truth contents, accuracy, verisimilitude, and the like; things cannot be so tested. About things we want to know whether they are real or only illusionary. It is not that factual statements lack reality. Their utterance is an event in itself. But factual statements are linguistic events that also affirm or deny. So we are justified in asking if the linguistic event is true, false or indeterminable, in a way that is not appropriate for other kinds of events in the world.

So, facts are linguistic phenomena or concepts because the fact is an event under a description, as Danto said, but I will go even further: the description is either figurative, or conceptual. When you say: 'The French Revolution was a disaster' – this is a factualization, but the word 'disaster' is a metaphor rather than a concept. Disaster means 'bad luck' in Latin. We have to distinguish between facts and events, so you do not . . . But what we are interested in interpreting are always the events that do not conform to the factual records that we already have processed. They fall outside it and they are asking to be classified. This is what a historian does in his/her research about a given event.

How did you develop your view about the 'modernist event'?

I argue that certain events become definitive of certain epochs, not because they are experienced as such during the epochs in which they occur, but because of their 'historicization' – that is, the progressive retrospection of putatively past epochs whose own natures were products of the prior events. For example, Europe's so-called age of exploration, or 'the Reformation', featured certain events that could not have been expected prior to their occurrence and become apprehensible as representative events of their times only after a considerable period of time had elapsed. But the process of retrospective definition of an era is itself a product in part of emergent events which themselves had not been apprehensible as definitive of their times at the time of their occurrence. The history of warfare is especially instructive in this regard. Certainly, the utilization of gunpowder in the West in the sixteenth century changed the nature of warfare in important ways, but a firearm is essentially a spear or spear-like projectile being propelled by explosives. And the same is true of the tank and airplane; they require changes of tactics and strategy, to be sure, but do not undermine or render superannuated the institutions of warfare in the same way that atomic and biological weapons do. It is one thing for a new invention, such as the tank, to force a change in the practice of warfare, quite another to cause a mutation thereof. Modernist warfare differs from modern warfare in numerous and, in my view, epoch-changing ways. This difference is signaled

in the difference between conventional and atomic weaponry. And the same is true for such economic institutions as those put in place by modernist capitalism. Commercial capitalism defined an age, industrial capitalism another. Modern, transnational corporate capitalism, with its emphasis on the production of capital through trading in currencies, is another ballgame altogether.

I am not arguing anything all that new, since Marxism has always stressed the epochal significance of radical changes in the modes, means, and social relations of production. Modernist events are produced by the material conditions of late capitalism, which happens to be genuinely 'global' rather than simply 'worldwide.' In our times, we have genuinely 'global' events and it is these which, we can now see, give the distinctive character of our epoch.

What is the relationship between your (inherited from Barthes) idea of historical facts as linguistic phenomena and empirical base of facts as developed, for example, by Karl Popper? Could it be useful to rethink the relationship between facts and events?

I think that there are events that occur in particular periods that do not conform to the inherited categories used for the classification of events, and you make of them a kind of basic phenomenon that allows you to explain other phenomena. For example, late capitalist institutions allow you to understand certain kinds of politics in a way that you could not have done with earlier conceptions of capitalism. That is why I make a distinction between historical events that signify or endow other events with meaning and others that are signified or derive their importance from the signifier-events. For example, in the European Union old institutions have to be radically revised; even a concept like democracy does not work, as you can see by the reaction to efforts to establish a law code common to all areas of the Union. They go along with a common currency and certain cultural exchange programs such as Socrates, Erasmus, and so on. Thus, on the economic and cultural levels you have an agreement but on the political and legal levels you do not. People want to preserve the local. But to come back to your question: what constitutes an empirical base of facts is a convention. The difference between natural sciences and human or social sciences is that natural sciences agreed upon experimental procedures or protocols for determining what will count as an object for chemical or physical analysis. This is what allows them to establish a base that is called empirical but it is not empirical, since it has been developed by experiment, not by observation. The modern scientific experimental laboratory is not 'observing' in, as it were, 'plain air'. Experimental conditions are always 'artificial'. This is what makes them 'scientific'.

How about historical reality?

Well, the problem with 'historical reality' is that it consists of events and things which once existed but no longer exist. It is sometimes said that the historical past is simply 'absent' rather than no longer existing. And when it is a matter of something past, absent is as good as never having existed. You cannot observe it anymore. The past in this respect is unlike the present, some aspect of which may be 'absent' (from the field of observation) but which can at least be searched for and in principle brought back into the field of observation. So, I think that the present can be examined empirically, even if we have problems with the idea of observing something that exists but is absent to sight or sound. In fact, one might argue that what we mean by 'the present' is the congeries of phenomena which, although appearing and disappearing as time goes by, we can *still* observe in principle. But once a body of phenomena has disappeared or is regarded as past, these phenomena are not only no longer observable, but are not reproducible, even under experimental conditions.

What about the verification of basic statements in historical research?

'Basic statements' are – according to Popper – circumscribed existential statements reporting the existence of some material object at a specified time and place which can be affirmed or denied as true or false. This is the substance of the definition provided by Anthony Quinton in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967, vol. 6: 399). According to Quinton, Popper's 'basic statements' are neither 'descriptions' of phenomena nor 'explanations' of them, but rather reports of 'experiences'. They are testable, to be sure, but only in the mode of their possible disconfirmability. As reports of experiences, basic statements might be thought to conform to the structure of the report of a witness to an event now past and a fortiori 'historical'. But the problem with this is that, unlike an event presumed to be verifiable (or disconfirmable) because it is 'present' and therefore still in principle observable, the past event is no longer perceivable. One may search for other statements by past witnesses for testimony supportive of the occurrence of the event in question, but actually if the event is 'past', there is *no longer* any 'event' to be observed against which any given statement of its occurrence can be checked. Evidence can provide grounds for believing in the occurrence of a singular existential event in the past. But remember that a properly 'historical' account of anything is much more than a list of singular existential statements. An historical account provides some sense of the relationships obtaining among the events inhabiting a given time–space matrix. And relationships are not observable either in past or present time. They have to be constructed.

I think that there is a desire to speak about historical research more in terms of the categories of science than in those of discourse and I wonder how we can speak of 'scientific history' after the postmodernist critique of science.

You are probably right, but speaking 'about historical research in terms of the categories of science' is itself discourse; and it is one thing to speak about research and another thing to do research. My point in speaking about historical writing as discourse was that, since the aim of historical research is to produce an account more or less 'discursive' of some aspect of the past, certain discursive categories have to be built into the research from the beginning. However 'scientific' your research tactics may be, your findings have to be 'worked up' for presentation in a discourse because that is what historical writing is all about. Your discourse may make all of the moves that you associate with its counterparts in the various sciences – your article or monograph may very well look more like a scientific report than a fairy tale, but if your aim is to produce a properly 'historiographical' account of events, you have to move from the general to the singular, from the universal to the individual, in the way historians have always done; and that is not the way of modern science (although it was the way of Aristotelian and other kinds of pre-Newtonian 'science'). But presumably when you spoke of 'scientific history' you meant to indicate historiography that pretended to be scientific in some modern sense. Or do I misunderstand?

I guess it depends on how you define science.

Recall that Popper in his *The Poverty of Historicism* said that history can never be scientific. Indeed, he thought that even science was not fully 'scientific' because of the large number of purely conventionalist procedures that still prevailed in it.

So what kind of understanding of science would permit the idea of a science of history or historical sciences?

Well, I am not really any kind of expert on this problem because I believe that it is up to proponents of a scientific history to come up with an idea of what kind of science they have in mind when they speak of turning history into a science. I do not think that history can ever become a science in any modern sense of that term as long as historians continue to believe in the magical nature of the 'historical' event, that aspect of the event which makes it both 'real' and possessing many of the attributes of the mythical and the miraculous. But also, I believe that if historians do give up this old-fashioned idea of event, they can no longer do history. The belief in 'historical reality' or 'the historical past' hinges on belief in the magical nature of the historical event: the 'fact' that there are events which, although

material in nature and having no transcendental dimension, nonetheless are singular, individual, original, signifying, transformative of the societies in which they occur, have long-term effects and even can be said to 'act at a distance', and so on, all attributes of the 'miraculous' event.

It seems to me that a lot of the epistemological problems besetting historical research and writing in our time could be put by if professional historians gave up the search for the true and contented themselves with a search for the real. There is a movement in science which is represented by prominent physicists such as Steve Weinberg who say that physical science is less interested in truth than in reality, that the search for the real is not the same as the search for truth. They argue that science used to be thought of as the building of a set of true statements about the world in the same way that historians wanted to do – that is to say, produce a set of true statements about what happened in a given time and place in the past. But now physics is less interested in that than in drawing a line between the real and the illusionary. And this is quite a different matter. It is one thing to try to establish what really happened and quite another to try to articulate a set of true statements about what happened. The two operations require different modes of representation of events.

Thus, for example, physics is interested in many questions that cannot be studied empirically, such as the beginning of the universe, big bang, catastrophe, and so on, things they cannot observe and which, therefore, have to be dealt with 'historically'. It means that they are not trying to make up a set of true statements, but trying to build a model that would allow us to be able speculatively to say what might have happened, and not what actually happened. So physical scientists are developing historical views of the study of the cosmos, where the earlier events are not observable, just like in history; but they are not trying to make true statements about it, but to build models.

A model is not a statement about the world and is neither true nor false but useful or not for generating hypotheses about reality that can be tested experimentally. Of course, you can build models of historical structures and processes but never set up experiments that would allow you to test hypotheses about the historical past. The utility of such models lies in their power to generate hypotheses about the past and its possible relation to the present.

History is studied in a systematic way; it is not a common knowledge; it has its own methodology.

History *can be* studied in a systematic way, no doubt about it; but there is no such thing as *the* historical method. I agree with you that history is not a kind of 'common knowledge', but in spite of the exotic nature of much of its objects of study, it remains a commonsensical kind of knowledge. By this I

mean a product of a processing of information seemingly exotic or alien to human experience but which is, in the end, shown to be comprehensible by commonsensical criteria of verisimilitude.

And what about the auxiliary sciences of history?

I take it that you mean such *Hilfswissenschaften* as Carbon 14 dating, paleography, diplomatic, chronology, and numismatics, and the like? Or are you thinking of the way historians call in certain social scientific concepts for use in studying the past? If you mean the former, these are used to establish the authenticity of different kinds of evidence and to construct the *chronicle* of historical events, to detect forgeries, and analyze material remains of past ages. If you mean the latter – that is, the use of social scientific methods in historical investigations – this can generate interesting interpretations of historical phenomena but they do not in themselves constitute a historiological method. In a recent book, *The Logics of History*, William Sewall argued that the relationship between history and the social sciences was one of mutual implicativeness. But it was difficult to see what of a specifically scientific nature he thought history might contribute to the social sciences. History precedes the foundation of the social sciences which, historically, have claimed to supersede the field of historical studies considered to be the ‘science’ of the life of human groups in time. But the modern social sciences were founded by transcending a historical approach to the study of present phenomena – in much the same way that modern biology was founded by going beyond the interests, concerns, and methods of ‘natural history’.

What about New Historicism? It has a specific method of studying the past.

New Historicism is a movement in literary studies intended to return literary studies to attention to context, but the context fixed on by New Historicism is intertextual in nature. For New Historicists, the context is made up of texts located in discourses other than literary ones (such as medicine, politics, religions, economics, and so on). They like to identify and track motifs and themes across the different discourses circulating in a given temporal and spatial milieu. And they are interested in discovering the mechanisms and procedures used by different cultures for ‘negotiating’ difference. I am not sure that New Historicism has a ‘method’ of the kind one associates with, let us say, chemical analysis of a compound. What New Historicism has is a theory of how to ‘read’ discourses understood as instruments for making meaning, assimilating alien, foreign, or exotic phenomena to familiar ways of thinking, feeling, and acting and adapting new things to old ones. The New Historicists are literary scholars and critics and they bring to the study of non-literary discourses, such as medicine, law, and politics, the methods and procedures of literary criticism – modern

literary criticism. It is ironic that one of their gurus is the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who is famous for treating cultural phenomena as 'texts.' Ironic, because Geertz's training, like that of Victor Turner, another symbolological anthropologist, was in literary studies to begin with. I think that the techniques of modern literary studies do bring something new and valuable to historical studies. What they bring is a sophistication in the interpretation of cultural phenomena that makes the literalist approach of traditional historians to the study of their documents look quite juvenile.

I begin to get the impression that you think that history has no methodology.

Well, individual historians have their own ways of doing historical research. And schools of historians often agree on procedures, languages, and methods of construing historical phenomena. And there have been moments in the history of historical studies, such as the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, when historians conceived certain technical problems, such as the dating of documents and the problem of reading ancient scripts, when they were able to agree on how to do these in a professionally responsible way. But a methodology? For historical studies in general? I don't think so.

So what am I teaching at the university? My course is called 'Methodology of History' and I teach about various approaches to the past like gender studies, post-colonial studies, ethnic studies, oral history, visual history, etc.

Well, I do not know what it is exactly that *you* teach to your students in such a course, but I am morally certain that you are not teaching a methodology of 'history'. You tell students how to 'do' history? Or are you teaching them how to study the past? Do you concentrate on research techniques? Do you teach historiography, or how to *write* history? There are certain methodologies used in economic history that could be taught – I am thinking of statistical studies. But I cannot think of a 'method' that would be useful in studying cultural history or even political history. But what is the point of an education? To learn methods or to develop the capacity to think critically? Learning to think historically is like learning a language or an idiom; one learns how to do it by mimesis, by imitating other historians and especially those historians whom one admires. If I were to teach a course in historical methodology or methodology of history (two different things), I would simply give students examples of the best historical writing I know and have them study how historians think, and feel, and write. The students have to have a sense of the importance of historical consciousness and knowledge to the living of their lives. What is the point of our knowledge if we do not try to apply it to our lives? Undergraduate students are not interested in becoming professional historians and one should not teach undergraduates as if they were trying to learn the techniques of professional

historical inquiry. Undergraduates are interested in existential questions and history is a wonderful place for them to engage the great themes of human existence: heroism, love, death, violence, compassion, and so on. Methodology cannot help you address these topics in meaningful ways. But great writers of history, like great novelists and great poets, can do so. Save 'methodology' for the graduate students who are trying to become professional historians. It probably cannot hurt them, but it certainly won't help them become great historians in their own right.

I want to liberate my students, but first they have to know from what. That is why they have to have knowledge about conventional and unconventional approaches to the past. Besides, I do not think that methodology should be prescriptive. Why do you assume that one should write history in order to change the world? What about reflection on the past? What if one wants to study history just for getting knowledge of the past?

Those are fair questions to put to me, Ms Domanska, but I do not know whether they are rhetorical questions or are meant seriously. First of all, liberation is not necessarily 'from' something, it can also be liberation 'for' something. Second, I do not think that students need liberation so much as enlightenment, by which I mean demystification or learning to think critically about the clichés they have imbibed since infancy from a society that would prefer them to be passive or apathetic in the exercise of their human rights than militantly vigilant about society's interest in depriving them of those rights. Nor is it a matter of being either prescriptive or proscriptive; it is a matter, as far as I am concerned, of laying out some ways of handling what I called the great existential themes as they are met with in the study of the human past. Why else would you wish to study history? If some people like to study the past as 'an end in itself' and simply contemplate beautiful or sublime images of a world that used to be, that is all right with me. But do not pretend that such a personal interest or obsession has any value for anyone but the person undertaking it. To be sure, for those students of the past capable of turning their objects into works of art, it is another matter. But then you are not going to create a great art by teaching a student 'methods'.

I am against an instrumental application of methods or theory. If you project a method or a theory on the historical material like a grid, you would merely test a method or theory, whereas a choice of method or theory should come after a close analysis of your source material (whatever it is: a written text, photograph, film, or a thing).

Well, I have no objections to any of that, but these observations presume already an interest in history, while I believe that the teaching of theory and

even 'methodology' in historical studies should 'hook' the student into the study of history. Moreover, when it comes to theory and methodology, it is one thing to do it and debate it as a professional historian talking to or writing for other professional historians, it is quite another to presume that undergraduate students in a history course want or need to learn professional techniques of historical study. Students should read a lot of history written by great historians, not be taught to act as if they are 'doing' research. The only real value history has as a field of study is its role in the edification of young people – what our German colleagues call *Bildung*. The field of professional historical studies is not contributing to the 'science' of humanity, society, or culture, or anything else.

What about interdisciplinarity? Do you think that it would help to improve history's status as a discipline if it cultivated relations with other fields of study?

As far as I am concerned – and I think I know the history of western historical thinking as well as anyone – history has always been multi-disciplinary, rather in the manner of *bricolage*, to be sure, rather than rigorously multidisciplinary in the manner of biochemistry or physical chemistry, the so-called cognitive science, population genetics, and the like. Historians always borrow from whatever disciplines have investigated the objects of study that historians have been, willy-nilly, led to investigate just because they inhabit the same world as their principal objects of analysis. Thus, for example, historians are often led to investigate economic phenomena and artistic phenomena, along with the political and social structures that primarily interest them. So they pick up as much expertise as they feel they need in order to authorize whatever it is they wish to say about whatever it is they have come upon in their research. Such *bricolage* is much more congenial to the community of professional historians than any effort to import the methodology of, say, rational choice theory into the study of the politics of Italian communes of the twelfth century. Indeed, historians tend to be leery of theory of any kind, except such low-level generalizations as those used by Max Weber in his *Sociology of Religion* or Durkheim's *Suicide*. There seems to be some tolerance among modern historians for the procedures and conceits of cultural anthropology, but this is because cultural anthropology is anything but rigorously scientific in either its theory or its practices. Genuine interdisciplinarity entails a fusion of codes as well methods, which usually involves the creation of a new technical language for the characterization of objects of study as possible subjects of the methodologies deployed by the disciplines in question. Historians cannot use anything like the participant–observer techniques that pass for the 'methodology' of a certain kind of anthropology, while whatever 'human universals' modern anthropology purports to have discovered are so general

as to be useless as guides to research into the lives of past communities known only by records produced by their masters. In fact, the history of modern western historiography displays evidence that historical studies have become 'scientific' by becoming ever more specialized and micro-oriented. Once upon a time, historians thought that, as cultivated gentlemen, they were licensed to study the history of art along with the history of economic, social, political, and religious institutions. But nowadays the professional historian is advised to speak only about the knowledge about which he is an expert. So far, the 'exchange' between art studies and history has been anything but fruitful for historians. And so too for the relations between history and literary, religious, and science studies. Every historian knows a lot and about a lot of different things, but this does not make them more amenable to 'interdisciplinary' exchange, dialogue, or synthesis. Nor do historians take easily to research by teams of representatives from a variety of specialized fields. 'Interdisciplinarity' seems possible in the case of individuals with genuinely cosmopolitan interests who have pursued topics that lead them to break out of disciplinary boundaries and study problems rather than things. I am thinking of a social historian like Eric Hobsbawm, a cultural historian like Carlo Ginzburg, or an art historian like the late E.H. Gombrich. It is perhaps no accident that all three are Jews, victims in one way or another of the Nazi genocide, and displaced persons forced to eat the bitter bread of exile to survive. I will leave the discussion of interdisciplinarity with that.

Except to say that, instead of having genuine 'discipline', professional historians seem to be governed by a set of taboos which generate anxieties whenever they stray beyond their disciplinary habitats. Maybe we should speak of 'intertabooist' rather than interdisciplinary work. After all, what is a discipline but a learning of what *not* to do?

If history does not have its own method, what are historians trying to save by maintaining these 'border patrols'?

First, you have to ask what is the social or cultural function of historical knowledge in modernity? We know that modern historiography was connected with the nation-state, as medieval historiography was connected to the Church. Today the majority of historians in the West are studying the history of the nations to which they belong. In other words, historians – unlike practitioners of scientific disciplines – are allowed the luxury of being able to posit their object of study *before* they even begin their research. And because their objects of study are always already there, even before they come upon the scene of research, they find their methods of studying these objects already there as well. In historical research, the methods are dictated by the object of study, rather than, as in the sciences, having to devise methods of studying 'unknown' objects – unknown inasmuch as they resist

analysis by received conventions and rules of research. Now, in such a situation, if you introduce into historical research methods from other disciplines, you inevitably imply a change in the way you will construe your objects of study. When it comes to methodologies, historians are rather like old soldiers: they are always preparing for the last war. This is why historians have difficulty even contemplating writing the history of a genuinely new phenomenon. Globalization is a case in point. Most historians simply dismiss the idea of a global history or history of global phenomena because they have always taken it for granted that 'history' is about 'local' phenomena.

There is another consideration. When you say 'history' you may mean 'the past' but you also may mean the relationship between the past and the present, which is a different problematic all together. As long as history is understood as the study of the past it is going to remain locked into nineteenth-century modes of description, representation, and explanation. But progressive history is concerned with the present as much as with the past and with mediating between these two, so an interest in the way that a present is related to a past poses a historiological problem quite different from that stemming from an interest in 'what happened' in some local domain of the past.

So you present a kind of radical presentist position?

No, I historicize historical learning itself and this is what most historians do not do. They think that they can historicize by putting an event into its context. They do not realize that 'history' is not only *about* change but is itself – whether understood as a process or as accounts of a process – constantly changing; they do not historicize their own operations. For example, in the field of history of science, they historicize science, but when they take their own field as an object of historical study, they neglect to historicize history.

But this is what history of historiography is about.

No, most histories of historical writing are about changes in the way historians dealt with different phenomena in response to different contingencies. They treat historical writing as reports on what happened in some time and place in the past and as a transcription of historians' thoughts about their objects of study. Most of them have no idea about historiography as a discourse in which certain objects and processes in the past are 'worked up' by description in order to serve as a properly 'historical' kind of object – to which they can then bring their thought and reflection. It is this element of construction in the creation of historical objects that I tried to analyze in *Metahistory*. There are lots of things in the

past, all of which enjoy the same ontological status as 'past' objects, but not all of these objects are historical objects. So, what is the difference between being 'past' and being 'historical'?

But contemporary historiography shows how history is involved in current states of affairs. I refer to current debates about legislation governing what is permitted and what is not permitted in 'historical memory'. There is 'la ley de la memoria historica' in Spain, laws about what can be asserted and what cannot be asserted about racism, slavery in France not to mention laws that establish the factuality of certain events, such as the so-called Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915.

Sure, most professional historians, whether of the right or the left, do not want the state telling them what is fact and what is not, what can legitimately be called a genocide and what not, what terms can be used to characterize a group and what not. These are matters of professional autonomy and in fact have to do with historians' belief that they alone are competent to decide what is and what is not the truth about the past. The legislators, on the other hand, are concerned, not so much with the historical past as with what Oakshott called 'the practical past'. In these cases, the 'pasts' in question are politically 'hot' because certain groups have a political and legal, not to say economic interest (having to do with indemnities and compensation for sufferings) in how certain events of the past are named or characterized. Thus, for example, Armenians want to be able to say that they experienced a 'genocide' or a 'Holocaust' on the eve of World War I every bit as bad as that experienced by the Jews during World War II. What the events in question represent is political, psychological, propaganda and economic capital. Historians are right to resist the passing of laws that tell them what was true and what not in the past, what to call a given phenomenon in the past, and so on.

But in principle, communities have a right to determine the meaning or significance of their own pasts. The uses of a past for practical purposes has nothing to do with professional historiography, and historians have no authority to decide what communities (as against the guild of professional historians) should or should not call various events in their pasts. It is too bad, but the practical past has as little to do with truth as politics has.

Historians may tell them that communities lack sufficient evidence to justify calling a massacre a genocide or a genocide a Holocaust, or that they have got their facts wrong, etc. But they can no more legislate what communities should believe about their collective pasts than communities can legislate what historians should say or believe about the historical past. Politicians are interested in what works, communities in what makes them feel good, or offended, or proud, and so on. Most professional historians deny that knowledge of the historical past can be used for practical purposes and it would be bad science if it could be so used.

I am not sure, since historiography might be done in a traditional way but still could reveal an involvement of history – for example – in politics and show the difficulty of being objective.

But there is a difference between ‘the traditional way’ of doing history, a modern scientific way, and what Oakshott calls ‘a practical way’. Nobody owns the past, everybody has a right to study and use knowledge of it for different purposes and in different ways. Professional historians have claimed (during the modern period) to have found a way of studying the past that is properly ‘historical’ so that, when they run up against someone who is using ‘historical knowledge’ to make a point or sustain a political position, or what have you, they are inclined to ‘pull rank’ and assume a position of authority which allows them to correct the amateur or politician about ‘what really happened’ in the domain of the past that had been cited to support an ideological position. The authority in question is claimed to be ‘science’ or ‘scientificity’, but actually it is the authority of the institution of academic historiography that is brought to bear upon the amateur.

But the professional forgets that proper historiography is just that kind of historiography that happens to be favored by the professional guild of a given time and place. As mentioned earlier, it was only in the nineteenth century that historians began to identify scientific or professional historiography with the history of the nation-state. Objectivity was measured by the extent to which a historian could see that the nation was the ‘natural’ object of study for responsible historiography (even though most nations of the time were still in process of being fashioned), and an agreed-upon and purely conventionalist definition of the ‘essence’ of nationhood had to serve as a criterion for determining when a historian was ‘seeing’ history properly and when not. In any event, there are different kinds of objectivity. In some versions, objectivity has to do with the object, and in others it has to do with the subject. Turning the historian himself into an ‘object’ (rather than a subject) is one thing, turning the past into an object is another. In any event, historians give up any claim to *moral* authority over their communities when they decide to assume the guise of the scientist.

You use the expression ‘progressive history’. What do you mean by this term?

By progressive history, I mean a history that is born of a concern for the future, the future of one’s own family, of one’s own community, of the human species, of the earth and nature, a history that goes to the past in order to find intimations of resources, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, that might be useful for dealing with these concerns. Early psychoanalysis taught that many of our problems come from our pasts, from experiences of

mistreatment, abuse, or humiliation (given or received) that we can neither forget nor adequately remember. A later variety, represented by Jean Laplanche, for example, stresses the way that our efforts to 'come to terms with the past' destabilize the lived present, and thereby transform the future into an ominous threat rather than an opportunity for creative action that might possibly be. Since Laplanche recognizes that for us moderns, religion and metaphysics offer no prospects of enlightenment of our 'situation', we have only the past as a resource for coming to terms with a present that might have been otherwise. The present is a problem, not because it is becoming past before our eyes ('for time is fast a-fleeting'), but because it is being displaced by a future that presses down upon us like a tidal wave or suddenly shakes us like an earthquake.

And so it is with a progressive historiography. We study the past not in order to find out what really happened there or to provide a genealogy of and thereby a legitimacy for the present, but find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure. I think that something like that was what Benjamin had in mind when he spoke about 'messianic' history as fulfillment – what he called the 'explosion' of some bit of forgotten past in a present in such a way as to open out a future rather than sealing the present off from the past. Progressive historiography would be 'utopian', to be sure, but modernist rather than simply modern inasmuch as it uses the past to imagine a future rather than to distract us from facing it. I set progressive history over against antiquarian history. Progressive history corresponds to what Nietzsche called 'critical' history in *Thoughts out of Season*.

In post-communist countries, because of political issues like, for example, lustration (a Latin term used to describe a purification rite) in Poland, historians are crucially involved in the process of deciding whether, on the basis of the archival record kept by the secret police, a person being investigated for complicity with the communist regime was 'really' guilty or not.

Well, one might think that historians are the right people to be doing this kind of work because, first, unlike prosecuting lawyers or judges, they are supposed to be experts in assessing the documentary or archival record to determine 'what really happened' in the past. Second, however, historians typically do not have to reach a decision in the way that judges or juries do at the end of the process of presenting evidence about a particular crime or allegation. In fact, when it comes to assessing motives or intentions of specific individuals in the past – unless they were 'public' persons such as monarchs or Prime Ministers, etc. – historians are notoriously reluctant to feign certitude in most cases. And this is where one can begin to perceive the difference between the social function of a criminal investigator in the service of the courts, on the one side, and that of a professional historian in

pursuit of the truth about the past, on the other. The similarities between criminal detective work and historical inquiry are frequently noted, but although both may be expert at inquiring into ‘what really happened’ in some domain of occurrence in the past – which is to say that they may have the same or similar *objects* of inquiry – their *aims* are quite different. The criminal investigator’s aim is to establish agency, responsibility, motivation, intention, and *culpability* in the case under study, while the historian is or should be interested in any and all of these *except* culpability. It is especially difficult to establish culpability in a very old case or crime. This is one reason that most law codes have a statute of limitations, stating a time after which a person can no longer be prosecuted for a crime. It might seem that historians admit no statute of limitations because the record is, as it were, always open. In any event, although history used to be thought of as a propaedeutic to ethics (philosophy teaching by example), it can hardly do so and claim to be ‘scientific’ at the same time. A science is interested only in what is the case, without judging or assessing it in moral terms in any way. Of course, history is not really a science however systematically it may be practiced by a given historian. This means that historians have given up the authority they once had as moral preceptors of their communities without having gained the authority of a genuine science in the least. Historians who agree to work for all of the offices of historical memory or truth and reconciliation commissions set up after regime changes of any kind are betraying their professions. Criminal detection is one thing, historical inquiry quite another; and they should not be confused with one another.

I get very frustrated by this obvious manipulation of history by politics and this is probably why I have this desire for a ‘scientific’ (by which I mean research-oriented) approach.

Well, many scientists find no problem working for the state or for state agencies, in the development of arms and even of weapons of mass destruction, so even if history were to become a fully fledged science, historians could still work for governments just as they work for corporations, churches, and advertising agencies today. History was always ideological. It is not a bad thing. Better a right wing ideology than none at all. Ideology at least shows that you are interested in the present and future. But historians seem to think that they can go beyond ideology and that this will make them scientific . . .

I think that historians today are aware of location and situatedness and they are more willing to reveal their ideological biases.

No doubt, not only because of new-nationalism, post-colonialism, and gender studies, but also because globalization has turned the spotlight on

the well-known provincialism of most historians or, at their most cosmopolitan, fixation on the past of the civilization to which they think they belong. I know that 'situatedness' is supposed to be an antidote to ideological deformation, but I think that most people know where they are located and what their situation is. The important point is whether you feel that your location is congenial and whether your situation is uncomfortable or not. Revealing one's ideological biases does not necessarily allow one to transcend them. Actually, I think it is impossible to go beyond ideology in the human sciences and, moreover, that having a bad ideology, such as fascism, is better than having no ideology at all. Ideology can, as Gadamer said of 'prejudice', be a focalizing instrument, enlivening one to things that might otherwise remain imperceptible in a given field of inquiry.

Notes on contributor

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