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The discovery of the historical past: A comparison of ancient and modern approaches to history

We all know that history is the study of the past and that the tradition of writing history was established by the Greeks. When combined, however, these trivial assertions do not constitute a joint truth, since for the Greeks writing history was not in fact a study of the past.

A Greek historian published an account of notable events. Such an account was inevitably a description of past events, but the common practice of the early, as well as the best, Greek historians was to deal with the most recent past, even with contemporary events. Trustworthiness was a requirement for a historical account, and since it comprised many events, far beyond one's eyewitness knowledge, it had to be based on one's research; and "research", without any specific reference to subject matter, is the original meaning of the Greek word historie. Some Greek historians show a genuine interest not only in notable events but also in notable developments. They make acute observations on the logic of what happened. The thoughtfulness and intellectual brilliance of the best of them, like Thucydides and Polybius, may obscure the essential difference between the ancient and modern approaches to writing history.

However, students of mediaeval and modern history are more likely to underestimate the scope and sophistication of ancient historiography. It is appropriate, therefore, to recall first how advanced classical historiography was.

A sense of historical past is already present in the Iliad. The war at Troy is not just something that happened long ago, it belongs to another epoch. There are monuments testifying to the glory of that remote past. As the best of the Trojans envisages it, "some one shall someday say even of men that are yet to be, as he saileth in

his many-benched ship over the wine-dark sea: This is a barrow of a man that died in olden days, whom on a time in the midst of his prowess glorious Hector slew" (7. 87–90, A. T. Murray's transl.).

In the fifth century, educated Greeks were fully aware of cultural and technological progress as well as institutional change. Herodotus even knows that there was a time when the Greeks had no slaves. At the end of the century, Thucydides offers an outstanding reconstruction of the early stages of Greek history. While doing this, he cites the institutions of contemporary primitive tribes, the topography of Greek cities, the evidence of the epics and even the chance excavations at Delos.

Four or five centuries later, cultural change will be discussed by the ancients not only in terms of development from primitive conditions to high civilization but also in terms of decay, in terms of decline in both arts and sciences.

The principle of the chronological arrangement of past events was by no means alien to the ancients. Already Herodotus gives important chronological indications, and a strict chronological system is built into Thucydides' narrative. Greek scholars undertook significant efforts to locate in time the Trojan war, the conquest of the Peloponnesus by the Dorians, the foundation of numerous Greek colonies, the dates of famous poets, athletes, politicians, philosophers. All that was a matter of reconstruction, which sometimes involved even archival research.

Thus it is wrong to say that the ancients had no sense of historical change or that the study of the past was completely neglected in antiquity. And yet we have to contrast the ancient approach with the modern. Our modern idea of history includes as a standard research programme the systematic study of the past in its various aspects. Such a study aims to cover all important aspects of a given society, civilization or culture, to arrive at both detailed knowledge and comprehensive interpretation of a given epoch or phenomenon. This approach finds its expression in the leading role of the monographic essay, be it a book or a journal paper.

Now, classical antiquity produced no special work devoted to the study of the past. The brilliant pages of Thucydides appear in the introductory part of his history of the Peloponnesian war. Much was written about a remote past in the historical work of Ephorus. This work has been not preserved, but as far as we can tell, what Ephorus did for the early period of Greek history was to collect traditions about the foundation of various Greek city-states. He wrote a kind of national history, bringing it down to contemporary events. In such a context, a section on the remote past was a natural complement, made for the sake of completeness, not for its own sake. The same is true of various Roman or universal histories. The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus is but an apparent exception. First, it is a national history rather than a monograph, even though it does not cover the recent history of the Romans. More importantly, the purpose of Dionysius was not to understand the foundations of Roman power and the logic of its development but to give Greeks an idea of early Roman history. He did not write an original interpretative study but rather produced a more or less critical compilation from Roman historians. Various histories of Alexander and

his expedition, written in the first two centuries of the Christian era, were also compilations rather than studies, though a certain trend to a kind of historical monograph is worth noting. The Bellum Iugurthinum of Sallust presents the most interesting case. This is indeed a monograph, devoted to a compact episode separated by approximately seventy years from the time of the writer. It is remarkable that Sallust focuses on an episode which he regards as illuminating the initial stage of a political development that was decisive, in his view, for the fate of the Roman republic. However, the subject of his monograph is still the recent past. Besides, Sallust had no ancient followers in writing historical monographs, and his own Catilina, being too much a pamphlet, is only partial analogy to his Bellum Iugurthinum.

Why did the ancients fail to develop the study of the past as a special research programme? Why did they fail to establish the genre of monographic studies of history? To be sure, there was nothing in antiquity to compare with the modern institutional framework for performing research, without which the modern research programme can be implemented only on a modest scale. But the difference observed is not a matter of degree. It would be an unjustified simplification to maintain that adequate tools of research were beyond the reach of antiquity. As Sir Moses Finley has observed, "Schliemann and Sir Arthur Evans had little at their disposal which was not available to fifth-century Athenians. The ancient Greeks already possessed the skills and the manpower with which to discover the shaft-graves of Mycenae and the palace of Cnossus". One may also observe that the Greeks could have resorted to hundreds of important inscriptions and archival documents if they had wanted to; moreover, they did sporadically use them in the context of scholarly polemics. As to monographs devoted to the events and phenomena of the distant past, a sort of genre of this type was well-known among the ancients. I mean the writing of biographies. Plutarch is not only a brilliant writer but also a conscientious historian. For example, in his biographies of fifth-century politicians (separated from his own day by five or six hundred years), he uses not only the works of historians but also fifth-century pamphlets and comedies.

One might seek an explanation in terms of the essential cultural continuity throughout classical antiquity, resulting in the failure to recognize the past as something profoundly distinct from the present and, accordingly, the subject to a special study. But the characteristics of the Renaissance and early modern historiography can be cited against this argument. Classical antiquity certainly was a distinct and in general admirable culture in the eyes of historians of that period, and yet we observe no essential change in the approach to the past. In terms of genre, we see basically the same repertoire, that is, comprehensive national histories, from the origins of a given nation or community (like Florence) up to the historian's own day (roughly); general histories, like the remarkable Decades by Flavio Biondo, a work which covers a good thousand years, from the beginning of the fourth to the middle of the fifteenth century; accounts or studies of recent events, such as the Memoires of Philippe de Commyne or the History of Richard III by Thomas More. Francis Bacon's

History of Henry VII provides a good analogy for Sallustian Bellum Iugurthinum. I know of only one field where one finds monographs. This is the topography of ancient Rome, quite a special and, so to speak, isolated area.

The essential similarity between ancient and early modern historical writing is all the more remarkable in that the Europeans of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries lived in an epoch of radical innovation and experienced a variety of dramatic changes, which were recognized by many of them. In words of Tommaso Campanella written in 1602, there was more history in the last hundred years than in the previous four thousand ("...questo secolo nostro, c'hapiuistoria in cento anniche non ebbeilmondo in quattromila"). But despite the impact of these innovations and changes upon the intellectual atmosphere of early modern Europe, they did not alter the basic approach to the writing and study of history.

It is not easy to locate in time the emergence of modern historiography. La nuovascienza by Vico, however innovative, is not yet modern. But in the second quarter of the nineteenth century the modern approach to writing history is already manifest in works by Guizot and Tocqueville, Ranke and Boeck. Evidently, the change must have begun somewhat earlier. I would point to the appearance in 1774 of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. One recognizes the modernity of this work as soon as one reads the titles of the first three chapters: "The Extent of Military Force of the Empire in the Age of the Antonines", "Of the Unity and Internal Prosperity of the Roman Empire in the Age of the Antonines," "Of the Constitution of the Roman Empire in the Age of the Antonines". It is Gibbon's interest in the various dimensions of society, his effort to grasp the whole organization of the Roman Empire, that makes his work modern, even though not all its aspects are modern.

Gibbon's work of many volumes cannot be called, of course, a monograph. However, his selection of the period of time to be covered in the work is not self-evident or automatic, and it is not based on the "from alpha to omega" principle. In tracing a particular historical development, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon starts with the moment of its greatest prosperity and brings his story down to the fall of Constantinople.

As to monographs generally, they gradually appear over the course of the eighteenth century. One might treat this phenomenon in terms of the recognition of an adequate research strategy. But this is not the whole story. Such a strategy presupposes the notion of contributing to a common stock of knowledge, which reflects the specific intellectual atmosphere of Europe since the Renaissance and particularly since the last third of the seventeenth century.

Thus, and this is worth emphasizing, elements of the modern approach to writing history were already present before the French revolution. And if the modernity of Gibbon's approach is located in his readiness to consider institutional, organizational and economic aspects of the Roman society, we may recall that Gibbon was a contemporary of Adam Smith, to cite but one name as a label for a certain intellectual development.

The growing interest of historians in studying all important areas of a given society certainly has something to do with the growing complexity of contemporary European society and the related emergence of a more complex view on how societies function. One may also observe that the recognition of the importance of economic, administrative, legal and other aspects in determining the state of affairs in any given society invited techniques which were absent or underdeveloped in antiquity, such as archival research, archaeology, numismatics, etc.

And yet there was a more profound change, a change in the very perception of history.

Reinhardt Kosellekhas noted two interrelated phenomena, manifest in the second half of the eighteenth century. The German word for history, "Geschichte", was no longer used in the plural and, at the same time, the philosophy of history came into being. History is now seen as a comprehensive process. It has its unity and, so to speak, identity; therefore, the word "history" can now be used only in the singular. History displays its inner logic, and does not just comprise the totality of the past events or developments, which in turn makes a philosophy of history possible.

This development eventually brings about the modern perception of history in which it is understood not only as a comprehensive process, like that of biological evolution, but also as the most important power regulating human affairs. History is now something like Anaximander's Boundless, out of which everything emerges and into which everything returns. It is now accepted as a matter of course that every important aspect of a society, its social structure, economy, legal system, military forces, administration, etc. is historically determined. With such a perception of history, it is quite natural to admit a research programme which calls for both extensive and intensive study of past phenomena, in which everything is important, particularities as well as larger structures and units, like epochs, civilizations or cultures.

Discussing the reasons for the emergence of the new perception of history, I would also cite the growing sense of European unity, combined with European leadership in the world, on the one hand, and variety of national conditions within Europe itself, on the other hand. A German or Russian intellectual, in such a situation, might feel his identity split into European and national. The European self was experienced as something positive, while the national one was controversial. This controversy or tension presented a psychological problem, inviting the search for solution. Since an explanation in terms of national inferiority was traumatic and, therefore, inadmissible, it was natural to turn one's mind towards history, to blame circumstances and to justify one's hopes for better future. The sense of belonging to the leading part of mankind (the Europeans) gave grounds for such hopes. The philosophy of history was thus inaugurated.

Another explanation pertains to the dramatic change experienced by the Europeans since 1789. The previous such change, that of 15th–16th centuries, may be described in terms of discoveries (like that of the New World), inventions (gun powder, printing) and personal initiatives (Columbus, Luther). The events of the French

revolution and Napoleonic wars may be similarly treated in terms of human passions, mistakes or endeavours, in terms of enlightenment or superstition, etc. But the age of stabilization called attention to the strength of impersonal powers, such as gradual social transformation with its impact on political sphere (one thinks of the works by Tocqueville) or economic development underlying social change (one thinks of the seminal, even though inadequate, theories by Marx). Since these impersonal powers worked within history, history itself became the supreme manifestation of such powers.

Curiously, the recognition of history as the most important force regulating human affairs was accompanied by the gradual abolishing of the traditional view of history as magistra vitae. (Kosellek, again, was right to observe this synchronicity.) Why, then, did the new perception of history bring about an immense increase in activities devoted to the study of the past? As to abolishing the principle historia magistra vitae est, the answer is easy. History has shown, as Hegel put it, that nations and governments learn nothing from history. But why did such a lesson not result in undermining the interest in the past? Precisely because history was taken not as a store of instructive examples but as a force, and indeed the supreme force. For it is very natural to direct our curiosity towards that which causes the state of human affairs, on which our prosperity depends, with which we connect our hopes and fears. History was taking the role which theology used to play in the Middle Ages.

Speaking of "our modern idea of history", I do it not without reservations. We hear everywhere that the world we live in is no longer modern, but postmodern. And the claim is essentially true. The modern world went along its special road, it climbed a mountain. That thorny path was labeled "the progress of mankind". The famous words by Neil Armstrong upon stepping on the moon, 21 July 1969, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind", are perhaps the latest significant reference to the common achievement of mankind. The formerly ubiquitous principle and slogan, "the progress of mankind", somehow disappeared. The perception of the future has been changed. Until recently, though the details of mankind's future were beyond our grasp, its general outline seemed clear in crucial points: it will be better than today, not only in terms of available goods, but also in terms of social justice and human dignity. Nowadays the vision of the future is essentially vague, which affects in turn the perception of history. Moving without a clear goal and destination is hardly compatible with an idea of history as the omnipotent power directing human affairs. In the postmodern world, history no longer appears as a major social agent.

In his Apologie pour l'histoire Marc Bloch recalls the sad situation in which he and his comrades found themselves on the very day of the German entry into Paris: "We consumed our idle hours in ruminating over the causes of the disaster. "Are we to believe that history betrayed us?" ("Faut-ilcroir equel' histoire nous aittrompés?") one of us muttered". We understand well what Marc Bloch means, but the way he puts it now seems strange. Some of us might say that the politicians whom

we trusted have deceived us and the course of events took an unpredictable turn, the others might rather speak of our own blindness, our inability or unwillingness to comprehend things as they really are, our failure to work hard and advance in right direction. But no one, I imagine, will blame history. And this change as such is not something to regret. Metaphorical thinking is not best in terms of precision. Yet we have to allow that the modern research programme of history will gradually undergo a corresponding change. It will no longer invite that devotion to the study of the past which was characteristic over the past two centuries.

Abstract

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Although the tradition of writing history was established by the Greeks, and one should not underestimate the scope and sophistication of ancient historiography, the ancients did not develop the study of the past as a special research programme. The modern approach to history includes the systematic study of the past in its various aspects. Such a study aims to cover all important aspects of a given society, civilization or culture, to arrive at both detailed knowledge and comprehensive interpretation of a given epoch or phenomenon. This approach finds its expression in the leading role of the monographic essay, be it a book or a journal paper. Elements of the modern approach to writing history were already present before the French revolution, and it is manifest in works by Guizot and Tocqueville, Ranke and Boeck. Its appearance is related to the modern perception of history in which it is understood not only as a comprehensive process, like that of biological evolution, but also as the most important power regulating human affairs. In the postmodern world, history no longer appears as a major social agent, and the modern research programme of history will gradually undergo a corresponding change*.

Key words: study of history, Greek and Roman historiography, modern perception of history.

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