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From History to Theory

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One could perhaps argue that, so far as the popular academic imagination is concerned, America has never had much of a reputation so far as historical theory goes. True, nowadays one may point to the contribution of Hayden White, and if we go back a bit further, Becker and Beard; and of course one can?t forget Peter Novick?s *That Noble Dream*; but this is a fairly meagre haul for nearly 150 years of historical writing. English and Continental writers have dominated the field for much of the 20th century, although now they face competition from post-colonial writers ? ?the West and the rest?, so to speak. It is this impression that Kerwin Klein wishes to correct in *From History to Theory*. The essays contained within the book focus upon ?the history of various words and phrases key to scholarly historical discourse in the twentieth century?, especially upon ?English usage in North America? (p. 4). This approach is taken in order to try and move away the focus on continental events and ideas that has predominated for the past century or so. This does not mean that ?William James is more important than Frederich Nietzsche, or that we should write more books about Zora Neale Hurston than Martin Heidegger, but for students of history and theory the United States is the elephant in the corner? (p. 4). Yet Klein?s book is much more than this ? nothing less than an examination of the troubled relationship between history and theory in the 20th century.

The first term Klein looks at, ?historiography?, indeed has a long and curious history. It is an unloved word, ?reflected in its absence from a wide array of dictionaries and encyclopaedias?. But it has fared better than

the word ?historiology?, which is unlikely to take its place in the historian?s canon, despite efforts from the likes of Peter Novick and Hayden White. Most historians date the beginning of historiography to the Gottingen school; the first 60 years of the 20th century might be considered the golden age of historiography. By ?the end of the 1950s, many departments of history in the United States expected graduates and sometimes undergraduates to suffer through at least one course in general historiography? (p. 26). It was pyrrhic victory though. Historiography up to this point had emphasised generality; now ?its usage began to constrict? (p. 29). The courses grew more specialised, ?but the profession held on to a vague expectation that students would learn a simple creation tale that stretched from the origins of historical thinking (located anywhere from Herodotus to Herder) to the emergence of history as a discipline in nineteenth century Germany and culminated in one?s favourite (and usually American) predecessors? (p. 29). At worst, the ?historiography course was an empty formal exercise allowing its professor to rant at length upon a topic which he (seldom she) had little or no special competence? (p. 30).

Klein?s second chapter is a superbly written account of the fortunes of the philosophy of history prior to what has come to be known as ?the linguistic turn?. As he notes at the outset, the term ?philosophy of history? has by and large been replaced by ?history and theory? ? most notably the leading journal in the field of historical theory is entitled thus. As Klein notes, one can hardly blame George Nadel (the first editor of *History & Theory*) for not calling the journal *Historiography*, but ?the avoidance of another obvious title is curious ? to this day, there is no periodical in English that calls itself *Philosophy of History*? (p. 57). In my own writings I often note that, while I am a great critic of postmodernist philosophy of history, a return to the analytical philosophy of history that preceded it is not desirable either. As Klein correctly notes, after 1952 analytical philosophy of history primarily meant looking at ?covering laws?.(1) Prior to the birth of analytic philosophy of history, there was not much worthy of name, aside from Collingwood and maybe Oakeshott. Philosophy of history at this point generally meant metaphysics. As Patrick Gardiner put it in the introduction to his *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, the expression ?philosophy of history? was regarded by some (if not all) as ?signifying a submarine monster, dredged from the deep waters of nineteenth century metaphysics, its jaws occasionally opening to emit prophecies in a dead (or at any rate foreign) tongue ? the language of Hegelian dialectic?.(2) Some thought of it ?as a mysterious subject, not quite philosophy, not quite history, but a kind of vaguely disreputable amalgam of both?.(2)

At the outset then, the new analytical philosophy of history tried to separate itself from old slightly dubious metaphysical philosophy of history. The problem was however, that outside the academy speculative philosophies of history were in vogue publically in the post war period. D. C. Somervil?s abridgement of Toynbee?s *A Study of History* made the bestseller lists in 1947; while the likes of Isaiah Berlin and Daniel Bell found themselves catapulted into the public spotlight with their critiques of speculative historicizing. So far as ?professional philosophy was concerned, it was hard to say which was worse: the totalizing biases of speculative philosophy of history or its success on the book club circuit? (p. 44). Formerly relegated to the dustiest corner of the library, philosophy of history now found itself promoted the racks of the corner drugstore. Analytic philosophers of history therefore had to devote a large amount of time debunking metaphysical philosophies of history. This was a slightly absurd situation; ?no text on philosophy of science would devote half its chapters to a respectful debunking of Aristotelian physics and Linnaean biology. But the philosophy of history texts did precisely that? (p. 46).

What killed analytic philosophy of history? In a nutshell, Klein argues that it was the death of logical positivism. Analytical philosophy of history was dependent upon positivism following Hempel; but a small section of logical positivism at that. Only Hempel and Popper were generally quoted in textbooks; Carnap, Quine, Frege and Tarski may well not have existed. Concentrating upon a handful of figures ?kept the conversation moving in something like a straight line? (p. 50). Even Collingwood could be re-described as ?a premptive response to logical positivist accounts of science? (p. 50). But the works of Quine and Kuhn shot a stake through the heart of positivism, and philosophy of history ?left itself only one place to turn; the ancient notion of history as art? (p. 53). Debates about whether history was an art or a science had been going on since the professionalization of history, but ?the fights that materialized in the 1960s [would] take much nastier turns? (p. 54). Philosophy of history?s inability to ?constitute itself as a subject as a science

according to logical positivist models, and its continuing investments in old fangled humanisms, made history an obvious target for critics? (p. 55). Hayden White?s *The Burden of History* is now retrospectively considered to be the firing of the starting pistol. Historians were advised to aspire to the styles of the likes of Michelet and Burckhardt, as well as utilising the techniques of modernist art. No longer ?could historians credibly claim epistemic privilege? (p. 58). The great age of history as a science was over, for better or worse.

After a thrilling second chapter, Klein loses his way somewhat in the next two chapters in describing the various components of the linguistic and cultural turn. Indeed, these chapters are an implicit commentary on the lack of impact that these so-called revolutionary developments have had on the historical profession. While they work as a brief primer of intellectual history on how these ideas developed, by and large (the ideas) are not related back to the historical profession. Indeed, this is not the first book in which an author has faced this problem. The accepted narrative is that the linguistic turn has revolutionised historical thinking, but author?s are always hard pressed to find examples of this in actual historical practice. Whereas avenues of thought such as speculative philosophy of history struck a chord with the public, as we saw earlier, the same cannot be said of postmodernism ? Derrida could never have been found in the drugstore the way that Toynbee was.

Chapter five gets back on track with a look at the rise of memory studies. In many ways it might be argued that the rise of memory studies constitutes the real revolution in historical theory and practice, one that has had a far more wide-ranging impact than postmodernism. Memory ?is replacing old favourites ? *nature, culture, language* ? as the word most commonly placed with history, and that shift is remaking historical imagination? (p. 114). Heavily linked to the rise of Memory (with a capital M) is the Holocaust, an event which has rapidly become a touchstone for historians looking to defend the objectivity of their discipline against postmodernist attacks. Two events in particular ? Hayden White?s claims that events could plausibly be emplotted in a number of different ways, and revelations of Paul De Man?s anti-semitic writings during the Second World War ? made academia take a very dim view of deconstructionism. Memory, Klein argues, ?appeared to answer these problems, either by consuming history whole or by weaving it into it so as to provide a an authentic linkage with the past while still preventing the totalizing narrative closure that many historians believed marred the work of their predecessors? (p. 128). Closely linked to this is the idea that Holocaust is a ?limit event? ? that is to say an event that defies historical interpretation or representation.

However, the Holocaust argument is not the only one that can made to account for the rise of Memory. Pierre Nora has argued that ?we are obsessed with memory because we have destroyed it with historical consciousness? (p. 134). Another argument posits that memory ?is a new category of experience that grew out of the modernist crisis of the self in the nineteenth century and then gradually evolved into our current usage? (p. 134). A third states that ?memory is a mode of discourse natural to people without a history, and so its emergence is a salutary feature of decolonization? (p. 134). However, none of these explanations on their own can fully account for the memory boom. The roots of the rise in memory lead into Klein?s? final chapter, which ?takes off the academic gown? and examines how memory is used by the right-wing Christian movement in the US to reduce history to eschatology. The ?insistent association of memory with semireligious language not only undercuts the claims of memory to critique metaphysics, but it also opens troubling vistas? (p. 136). In the United States, the rise in academic enthusiasm for memory studies has coincided with a variety of conservative Christian commemorative discourses? (p. 141). Moreover, in ?the 1980s and 1990s, academics in retreat from scientism and nihilism blundered into a linguistic space shaped predominantly by religious thought and culture? (p. 159). When academics talk about memory, they tend to think of protests against oppressive regimes of modernity such as Nazism or imperialism. Unfortunately, Christian conservative have jumped on the memory bandwagon, and cast themselves as an unfairly persecuted minority who are on a crusade to recover America?s Christian heritage.

Although the author himself disclaims any notion of comprehensiveness, Klein?s book is nonetheless a fascinating look at the troubled relationship between history and theory in the 20th century. Ironically, the recurring motif of the past 100 years or so has been the desire to *escape* from history. As he states, for

?some, the escape from historical discourse promised an escape from the traumatic events it narrated ... For others, historical discourse appeared so compromised by complicity that with the crimes of various states that that only a full and complete emancipation seemed likely to bring about other sorts of revolutions? (p. 169). Similarly, trying to define just what motivated the linguistic turn in American academia is a tricky business. Klein rejects Richard Wolins? argument that ?besotted Americans foolishly imported viral strains of irrationality? from across the Atlantic (p. 164). Similarly, François Cusset?s narrative that the commodification of linguistic radicalism was the result of ?the isolation, provincialism, and entrepreneurial organisation of the American University system? (p. 166). One hopes that Klein will in the future will undertake a more comprehensive survey of historical theory; as it is, this brief effort deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the subject.

Notes

1. Carl Hempel, ?The function of general laws in history?, *Journal of Philosophy*, 39, (1942), 35?48. Back to (1)
2. Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, (Oxford, 1961) p. ix.Back to (2)
3. Ibid.Back to (3)

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