

HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
FROM SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVITY TO THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE

Introduction

Georg Iggers, distinguished professor of history emeritus at the State University of New York, begins this work by reminding us of the increasing skepticism over the past twenty years regarding “the assumptions upon which historical research and writing have been based since the emergence of history as a professional discipline in the nineteenth century” (1). Central to this “emergence” was the notion that history was, in fact, a *science*. To be sure, *science* had to be defined differently with regard to history than it did with respect to the natural sciences. But “historians shared the optimism of the professionalized sciences generally that methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible” (2). In our day, of course, this optimistic perspective has struck many researchers as naïve and implausible (3).

A study of contemporary historiography thus confronts us with “two very different orientations in historical thought” (3). We might characterize the first as the “social science” approach to historical research and writing, whereas the second would be termed “postmodern”. The social science approach was modeled “closely after the natural sciences” (3). It became increasingly prominent among historians just after World War II (5). But in the 1960s a major shift in consciousness occurred. “The West increasingly appeared as merely one among a number of civilizations, none of which could claim primacy” (7). This led to a spate of histories which emphasized the claims of women, ethnic minorities, and other socially marginalized groups (7). As the claims and perspectives of these different groups became better represented in historical research and writing, many scholars began to wonder whether it was truly possible to conduct “objective historical inquiry” at all (8). Historians influenced by this thinking began to

view history as much more akin to fictional literature than to science (9). And this, notes Iggers, “has challenged the very assumptions on which modern historical scholarship has rested” (9).

Of course, theoretical discussions about the nature of historical knowledge are one thing, while the actual writing of history is quite another. Although the theoretical discussions have certainly been important, they have nonetheless had only a “limited impact on the writing of history” (11). Most historians continue to be committed to the crucial distinction “between truth and falsehood” (12). And while their belief in the “authority of science” may have been appropriately chastened, their commitment to “recapturing” the reality of the past by means of “a logic of inquiry” remains generally intact (15-16). In the remainder of this book Iggers will discuss the recent history of historiography, beginning with the establishment of history as a scholarly discipline in the nineteenth century, and continuing through its recent critique by postmodernist thought (19).

I. The Early Phase: The Emergence of History as a Professional Discipline

In the early nineteenth century, a major change in the practice of history occurred when it was “transformed into a professional discipline” (23). Beginning at German universities this “transformation” stressed the twin pillars of rigorous scholarship and literary quality—all in the service of various “public needs and political aims” (23). A tension thus arose between “the scientific ethos” of the historical profession and its “political function”—a tension that would continue to surface as this new view of history was exported to other countries (23, 28). The key figure in this transformation of historical thought and practice was Leopold Ranke, who eventually “became the model for professionalized historical scholarship in the nineteenth century” (26).

According to Iggers this new historical outlook, “often referred to by the term *historicism*,” was generally “hailed as an intellectual advance” (28-9). Historicism held that “history revealed meaning and that meaning revealed itself only in history” (29). But by the end of the century, Ernst Troeltsch was speaking of a “crisis of historicism”—based upon the belief

that “historical studies had demonstrated the relativity of all values and . . . the meaninglessness of existence” (30). In this state of crisis, a number of scholars began to argue that history should be more closely linked “to the empirical sciences” (31). French historians (influenced by the work of Emile Durkheim), as well as “Progressive Historians” in the United States, were particularly interested in moving in this direction (34). But there were also some German scholars, like Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, who wanted to see the human sciences (like history) take a more methodologically rigorous approach (38-9). Indeed, Weber was confident that the social sciences could achieve a kind of objectivity by following a “logic that has transcultural validity” (40).

Over time, methods of quantitative analysis became much more common in historical research (43). By the second half of the twentieth century, some scholars even argued that non-quantifiable history cannot possibly be considered a truly scientific discipline (44). For this reason, some historical researchers began relying on computer-based studies (43, 46). But other scholars were not terribly impressed by this, recognizing the profound difficulty of transforming “qualitative evidence into quantitative statements” (46).

II. The Middle Phase: The Challenge of the Social Sciences

Iggers begins this section by discussing the historical contributions of the French *Annales* school. Founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, the school occupies a “unique place” in twentieth century historiography (51-2). While initially entertaining a measure of confidence in “the possibility of scientific approaches to history,” *Annales* historians were also aware of the inherent limitations of such approaches (51). However, the school became increasingly enamored with the possibilities of quantification in the 1960s and began to speak of history “as a science” that “must work quantitatively if it is to be scientific” (59-60). One of the interesting features of this school concerns their view of time. Rather than embracing the commonly held Western notion of a single, linear development of historical time, historians of the *Annales* school posited “a plurality of coexisting times, not only among different civilizations

but also within each civilization” (56). The abandonment of linear time led naturally to a loss of confidence in progress, as well as to a denial of the notion of a “unified historical development on which a grand narrative of the history of man can be based” (57). Iggers concludes his discussion of the *Annales* school by observing that “perhaps no scholarly movement in the twentieth century has had such an impact internationally as a model for new paths of historical investigation of culture and society” (63).

Moving from France to Germany, Iggers notes that we cannot really understand historical thinking in 1960s Germany if we fail to appreciate “the catastrophic course of German politics in the first half of the twentieth century” (65-66). It was during the 1960s in West Germany that a new generation of scholars arose who wanted to critically confront the German past—especially the tragic consequences of National Socialism. These young scholars were democratically minded and deeply influenced by the thought of Max Weber (67). Important proponents of this movement were Hans Ulrich Wehler and the social historians of the “Bielefeld School.” They believed that history should assume the form of a “historical social science” which “approaches society with clearly formulated questions related to social change” (70). In Wehler’s view, the key question which German social historians needed to address was why modernization had occurred differently in Germany than in other Western nations, thus “leading to the disastrous consequences of the period from 1933 to 1945” (70).

Iggers next turns his attention to a discussion of developments within Marxist historiography. He begins by noting the decline in credibility which this theory of history has suffered since the “collapse of the Soviet Union” (78). In spite of this, however, Marxist thought was still highly influential in the second half of the twentieth century, for it sparked a great deal of thinking “which defined itself in opposition to Marx” (78-9). In addition, although a great deal of Marxist historiography in Communist countries was co-opted by the ruling elites in order to advance their political purposes, it was nonetheless still able to “raise questions that were productive for social history” (83). Finally, Marxist theories of history have also found a number of proponents outside of Communist countries. For example, since 1976 the journal *History*

Workshop has chronicled some of the fundamental changes that have taken place “in Marxist approaches to history in Great Britain and elsewhere” (89).

III. History and the Challenge of Postmodernism

In 1979 Lawrence Stone’s important essay, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” argued that a shift in historiography had occurred during the 1970s which led to social science views of history being largely rejected (97). In their place, narrative forms of history began to reappear with their “emphasis on the experiences of concrete human beings” (97). Although Stone rejected “the illusion of ‘coherent scientific explanation’ in history,” he did not suggest that carefully researched forms of narrative history necessarily fail in their attempts at a “realistic reconstruction” of the past (100). Indeed, most historians continued to believe that one could gain “truthful insights into the past” by carefully following rational methods of inquiry (100).

Social science history began to be questioned because some historians increasingly perceived it to be characterized by “the belief in modernization as a positive force” (101). Such a view was becoming anathema to many scholars, who argued that there was a profoundly negative “human cost” to modernization (102). In addition, some of these scholars (who came to be known as “microhistorians”) were not entirely satisfied with the macrohistorical perspective that was typically the object of social science histories. In their view, history also needed to examine “the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by common people” (102). They did not, in principle, object to social science approaches as undesirable. They did, however, argue that such approaches were often guilty of making generalizations that did not stand up to scrutiny—especially “when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life” they claimed to explain (108). Thus, in Iggers estimation, microhistory is not so much “a negation of a history of broader social contexts . . . as a supplement to it” (117). In this respect, the microhistorians have contributed a much-needed “sense of concreteness to the study of the past” (117).

If we now turn our attention to the influence of postmodernism on the writing of history we find something very radical indeed. According to Iggers, “The basic idea of postmodern theory of historiography is the denial that historical writing refers to an actual historical past” (118). Postmodern thinkers like Roland Barthes and Hayden White thus equated the writing of history with the writing of fiction, arguing that there is no substantial difference between the two. Barthes’ view was influenced by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure had argued (in effect) that human thought is “determined by language” (120). As the implications of Saussure’s theories were discussed by Barthes and others, they concluded that texts (including historiographical texts) had “no reference to an external reality,” thus obliterating the distinction between history and fiction (121).

Related to these ideas is the notion which has come to be called the “linguistic turn,” which Iggers describes as “the recognition of the importance of language or discourse in the constitution of societies” (123). While this idea has had a major influence on historiography, it has not generally led to the rejection of the view “that language refers to reality”—as it did in the case of Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard and others (126). Although Iggers believes that the development of linguistic theory by these three men has some important insights and applications for the research and writing of history, he nonetheless maintains that there is an important difference between a historical account, which claims “to portray or reconstruct an actual past,” and a purely fictional text, which makes no such claims (132-33).

In light of this distinction, it is hardly surprising (as Lawrence Stone observed) that one can scarcely think of a major historical work written by a thoroughgoing postmodernist (135). Apparently, if one seriously rejects the distinction between history and fiction, there isn’t much incentive to invest significant amounts of time poring over ancient texts, or documents in historical archives, in an attempt to determine what actually happened in the past.

Concluding Remarks

In his concluding remarks, Iggers acknowledges that historical objectivity is impossible. The best the historian can hope for in her attempts to reconstruct the past is “plausibility” (145). But to say that a particular historical explanation is “plausible” is a far cry from equating it with fiction. After all, there are “rational strategies” for determining what is (and is not) plausible. To say that a particular historical explanation is plausible “assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality” (145).

Iggers goes on to argue that while the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment has been helpful in some ways, it has nonetheless been guilty of unfairly distorting some of its aims and ideals in others. Bearing this in mind, he thinks, we should not abandon and repudiate our Enlightenment heritage wholesale, but should instead seek to critically reexamine it (147).

Epilogue: A Retrospect at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

In his epilogue, written in 2005, Iggers briefly reflects on the initial contributions to historiography during the opening years of the twenty-first century. He claims that the impact of postmodernism on historical studies during this period has been largely indirect, originating “not directly from postmodernism as such but from related developments in historical thought and practice” (150). For example, postmodern notions have indirectly influenced historical inquiries into the concept of human memory in both its individual and collective forms (153).

While historiography has generally continued to focus on microhistorical studies, it has not given up on large-scale investigations (e.g. Fukuyama’s *The End of History* and Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*). Although Iggers does not personally care much for either of these books, he does consider it important to deal with global history. In particular, he thinks that the notion of modernization needs to be revisited (155). Although this concept was initially rejected for its attempt to impose a “grand narrative” upon history, as well as for its negative aspects (e.g. two world wars, genocide, totalitarianism, etc.), Iggers believes it is

nonetheless “indisputable” that modernization is taking place and affecting societies globally. It must therefore “be taken seriously on a world scale” (156). This is so, he thinks, even if it is actually more appropriate to speak of many “modernities” instead of a single “modernity”. Although the “need for global history is obvious today,” it still entails many difficulties (158). In particular, such studies would require the expertise of numerous scholars, from a variety of disciplines and fields, all working together for a common purpose. Although Iggers appears hopeful that such work will be done, he nonetheless admits that “we are still very much at the beginning of such coordinated projects”—whether these be global histories or intercultural historiographies (158-60).