

History AND Theory

STUDIES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY / WESLEYAN STATION, MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT 06457, U.S.A.

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26th October, 1971.

Dear Professor Aron,

I am writing to you about tentative plans for assembling a small symposium to discuss HISTORICISM. We are at the moment concerned mainly with subject matter. No decisions have yet been made about date, site, numbers, or foundation support. Fall 1972 or spring 1973 are probable dates. I should greatly appreciate your help, answers, and comments -- including negative comments.

The overall objectives of the symposium would be any (or all) of the following: (1) To discuss the history of the impact of historicism on some of the established disciplines. (2) To learn where historicism stands today. (3) To attempt to reduce the variety of usages of the term "historicism" to some workable characterization and, as a service to scholarship, publicize our findings in History and Theory.

It would help in planning to determine to what kind or kinds of "historicism" the symposium should usefully confine itself. This need not be in contradiction to objective (3); it could be the first step towards it. For example, Professor Mandelbaum --at length in his recent History, Man & Reason and more briefly in his enclosed Encyclopedia article-- defines the term as the understanding of phenomena through their place in a process of development. As a methodological principle, rather than a Weltanschauung, he sees it to be relevant to such current topics of discussion as Piaget's developmentalism, structuralism, and a reevaluation of Marxism (regarding orthodox Marxism as historicist and Marxian humanism as anti-historicist). Quite different issues might be raised by other kinds of characterizations, e.g., by Popper's linking of historicism to "holism" (involving i.a. the concept of "laws") or by the identification of historicism with a concept of "historicity" (of relevance to theology)

Do you agree that our undertaking requires some prior narrowing down of the term, and if so, have you any wider-ranging associations of "historicism" in mind that might usefully be played down or excluded?

Participating speakers and auditors would mostly represent specific disciplines. These might include "history" (perhaps a survey of the classic development of historicism), "historicism and art history", "historicism and philosophy", "historical theology", "historicism and economics", as well as, perhaps, "historicism and science" and the more recent "historicism and black history".

Would you be willing, in principle, to attend? Could you also let me know on what topic you may wish to read a paper (or shorter comment on some problem, book, or thinker)?

SHF
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Sincerely, George H. Nadel
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England