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Aspects of the Evolution of Modern Historiography. From the 18th to the 20th Century*

Paul E. MICHELSON**

> "The knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes into the making of the future...Every part of it is weighty with inestimable lessons that we must learn by experience and at a great price, if we know not how to profit by the example and teaching of those who have gone before us...Its study fulfills its purpose even if it only makes us wiser, without producing books, and gives us the gift of historical thinking, which is better than historical learning."
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> Lord Acton on history[1]

I. Introduction

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Western development experienced a series of dramatic changes, beginning with the Industrial Revolution in England in the 1760s, followed by the political upheaval of the French Revolution in the 1790s; and ending with an intellectual and cultural revolution that began in the German lands in the early 19th century. This Triple Revolution was at the base of the modernization of Europe[2].

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** Paul E. Michelson is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus at Huntington University. pmichelson@huntington.edu.

[1] This is from Lord Acton's Inaugural Lecture for the Regius Professorship of History at Cambridge University. It was first published as *A Lecture on the Study of History, Delivered at Cambridge June 11, 1895*, London, Macmillan, 1895, reprinted as Lord Action, "The Study of History", in Lord Acton, *Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, Indianapolis IN, Liberty Classics, 1985, p. 504-505; 513-514.

[2] See Robert Anchor, "The Triple Revolution", in Robert Anchor, *The Modern Western Experience*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1978, p. 1; C. E. Black, "Prologue: The

Naturally, historiography (the history of history) was impacted by these changes. In fact, it was during this era that historiography properly speaking emerged, gradually replacing compilations, compendiums, and chronicle-histories with analytical "historical thinking"[3]. Since this emergence also took place during the rise of modern nationalism, it was colored by the histories, cultures, and traditions of the various nations and nation states that were also emerging and transitioning at the same time. This makes a unitary account of 19th and 20th century historiography difficult to describe and analyze since the characteristics of nationalism vary with each national group[4].

This essay discusses several sometimes-neglected aspects of the development of historiography in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is not meant to be a history of that development which is obviously too complex to be dealt with here[5].

II. What is History? Three Great Questions

We begin with a useful framing of the issues set forth by Karl R. Popper. Popper wrote that

"What may be called the philosophy of history persistently turns round three big questions.

(1) What is the plot of history?

(2) What is the use of history?

(3) How are we to write history, or what is the method of history?"[6]

Challenge of a Revolutionary Age", in C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization. A Study in Comparative History*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1967, p. 1-5; and, for the context, see Paul E. Michelson, "The Triple Revolution and the Birth of Modern Times", in Sorin Mitu, et al., (eds.), *Biserică, societate, identitate: In honorem Nicolae Bocşan*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007, p. 639-648.

[3] Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past. The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship*, with a new preface by the author, Boston MA, Beacon Press, 1960, p. 4-8.

[4] Robert C. Binkley, *Realism and Nationalism 1852-1871*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1963, p. 68 ff.; Ernst Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 2nd edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 303 ff.; and Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789*, fifth edition, Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice Hall, 1990, p. 177-181. For a prescient look at nationalism, see Lord Acton's *Nationality*, 1852, reprinted in Acton, *Writings on History*, 1985, p. 409-433. This essay deserves to be better known.

[5] For surveys, see Donald R. Kelly, *Fortunes of History. Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2003; Donald R. Kelly, *Frontiers of History. Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2006; and Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2013. For a French perspective, see Guy Bourdé and Hervé Martin, in collaboration with Pascal Balmand, *Les écoles historiques*, second edition, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1997.

[6] Karl R. Popper, "A Pluralist Approach to the Philosophy of History", in Erich

II.1. What is the Philosophy of History?

The first of these questions refers to the sense of history. This concerns the philosophy of history as such, that is the meaning of history. Answers have been given to this question, according to Popper,

> "implicitly and explicitly, from Homer and the Bible down to our own day. And the answers have changed astonishingly little. The oldest answer to the first question...is theistic. The plot is only dimly discernible, because it results from the will of God, or of the gods....there is a secret hidden beneath the surface of events....in our own time, the earlier, naturalistic revolution against God replaced the name 'God' by the name 'Nature'....Theological determinism was replaced by a naturalistic determinism....Hegel and Marx replaced the goddess Nature, in her turn, by the goddess History....the omniscience and omnipotence of historical determinism[7]. Sinners against God are replaced by 'criminals who vainly resist the march of History'; and we learn that not God but History will be our judge."[8]

This led "to the secularized religions of existentialism, positivism, and behaviourism," all varieties of what Popper calls "historicism," a perversion of history founded in the belief that, like science, historians can predict what will happen[9]. In the final analysis, this approach is a theology of history, but not history as historians practice it, or at least should practice it[10].

Compare Popper's analysis from an atheist point of view with that from a Christian point of view by C. S. Lewis. For Lewis,

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Streissler (ed.), *Roads to Freedom. Essays in Honour of Friedrich A. von Hayek*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 181 ff.

[7] One, of course, has to wonder why an argument has to be made for something that supposedly will inevitably happen.

[8] Karl R. Popper, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 182.

[9] See Idem, *The Poverty of Historicism*, second edition with corrections, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. v-vii; and Idem, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences", in Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books, 1962, p. 336. Popper's use of the word "historicism" should not be confused with the use of this term in German historiography. See Aviezer Tucker, "Historicism", in D. R. Woolf (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1998, Vol. I, p. 414-416. Nor should it be confused with the absurd "historicism" of Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England*, Vol. 1, London, John W. Parker and Son, 1857. For an acid critique of Buckle, see Lord Acton and Richard Simpson, *Mr. Buckle's Thesis and Method*, and *Mr. Buckle's Philosophy of History*, in Lord Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies*, edited by John Neville Figgis and R. V. Laurence, London, Macmillan, 1908, p. 305-343. Buckle truly was the leader of a school with no actual adherents.

[10] On this philosophy of history, see Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of history*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 50 ff. See also Guy Bourdé and Hervé Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 101 ff.

> "historicism" was "the belief that men can, by the use of their natural powers, discover an inner meaning in the historical process…. The mark of the Historicist... is that he tried to get from historical premises conclusions which are more than historical." However, "Historicism is an illusion and...H istoricists are, at the very best, wasting their time"[11].

Lewis also warned that "We must guard against the emotional overtones of a phrase like 'the judgement of history'. It might lure us into the vulgarest of all vulgar errors, that of idolizing as the goddess History what manlier ages belaboured as the strumpet Fortune. That would sink us below the Christian, or even the best Pagan, level"[12]. These are words worth heeding.

Of course, Lewis does not deny that for the Christian, "history is a story with a well-defined plot, pivoted on Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Judgement…" Nor does he "dispute that History is a story written by the finger of God. But have we the text"?[13]

In the final analysis, the only thing that appears to be inevitable in history is people pressing the claim that things are inevitable, usually to the detriment of human agency. On the other hand, though this paper rejects deterministic approaches to the past, the alternative is not to see things as the merely product of accidental and random events as does A. J. P. Taylor, for instance[14].

Generally, for the typical practitioner of history, philosophical questions are not at the forefront of his or her attention. But, as Henri-Iréneé Marrou among many others has argued, the theory of history is not a completely fruitless or pointless exercise. Everyone has philosophical assumptions set within a worldview. These should not be overlooked, denied, or concealed. In the words of Herbert Butterfield, "If in life a man has accepted the Christian view of things, he will run these values throughout the whole story of the past, and

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[11] C. S. Lewis, "Historicism", in C. S. Lewis, *Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy, and Short Stories*, edited by Leslie Walmsley, London, HarperCollins, 2000, p. 213-224. For a discussion, see K. Alan Snyder and Jamin Metcalf, *Many Times and Many Places. C. S. Lewis and the Value of History*, Hamden CT, Winged Lion Press, 2023.

[12] C. S. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 215-217. On the Christian philosophy of history, see Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, London, Collins Fontana, 1957; Henri-Iréneé Marrou, *The Meaning of History* translated by Robert J. Olsen, Montreal CA, Palm Publishers, 1969; and two surveys with abundant bibliographical resources: C. T. McIntyre (ed.), *God, History, and Historians. Modern Christian Views of History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977; and Jay D. Green, *Christian Historiography. Five Rival Versions*, Waco TX, Baylor University Press, 2017.

[14] See A. J. P. Taylor, "Accident Prone, or What Happened Next", 1977, in A. J. P. Taylor, *From Napoleon to the Second International. Essays on Nineteenth-Century Europe*, edited with an Introduction by Chris Wrigley, London, Penguin Books, 1995, p. 1-23, especially p. 21-22.

taking the very basis of narrative which historical scholarship has provided, he may see every event with an added dimension" but "He will not claim that historical science has demonstrated the truth of the interpretation which as a Christian he puts upon human events"[15].

However, as Marrou writes, the philosophy of history – which involves responding to the question "what is the proper role of the human intellect in the study of history" – has been denigrated in modern times by "the torpor in which positivism has too long held historians"[16]. Positivism was born of the Enlightenment folly that the humane studies could be transformed into the humane sciences.

This was what F. A. Hayek has correctly described as "scientism," the "slavish imitation of the method and language of Science... an attitude which is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed. The scientistic as distinguished from the scientific view is... a very prejudiced approach which, before it has considered its subject, claims to know what is the most appropriate way of investigating it"[17].

The healthy urge to separate actual historical work from wild philosophical speculations was a reaction against the inexplicably great influence that Hegel's pretentious monistic idealism and pernicious "historical" theories about *Volkgeist* and *Weltgeist* acquired in the 19th century. Many, but not enough, decent people were alarmed by Hegel's deifying of the "World-Historical Individual... whose own particular aims involve those issues which are the will of the World-Spirit…. devoted to the One Aim, regardless of all else... [even if he] must trample down many an innocent flower—crush to pieces many an object in its path"[18]. Thus, many positivist strictures on philosophers and philosophies disguised as historians and history had a salutary effect in rejecting the ideas and writings of Hegel and his followers as the ruin of history[19].

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[15] Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations*, New York, Macmillan, 1952, p. 147-148.

[16] Henri-Iréneé Marrou, *op. cit.*, p. 9 ff.

[17] F. A. Hayek, "Scientism and the Study of Society", in F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science. Studies on the Abuse of Reason*, New York, The Free Press, 1955. I have used here the revised edition of this work published as F. A. Hayek, The *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason. Text and Documents*, Volume XIII, edited by Bruce Caldwell, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 80.

[18] Capitals in the original. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* translated by J. Sibree, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, p. 300-32; 39.

[19] Hegel's intellectual charlatanism is demonstrated in devastating detail in Karl R. Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, fifth edition revised, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 30 ff. See also Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche. The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century*

On the other hand, as Marrou indicates, the positivists went too far in trying to make historical work a science, which is impossible because the "chess pieces of history" are living, volitional human actors[20]. Perhaps a resolution could have been found in agreeing that history is "scientific" in that it has a method[21] and a particular means of perceiving reality, while properly concurring that historical work is not a science in the sense that the natural and social sciences make pretensions to, but is also an art.

Regarding history as an art, Paul Veyne has asked: "Can it be that historical synthesis is no more than positivism?" and responds "It is easily forgotten what an extremely small place general ideas occupy in history books....". In the end, however, Veyne concludes:

> "The interest of a history book is not in the theories, the ideas, and the conceptions of history, packed up to be handed to philosophers; it is, rather, in what makes the literary value of that book. For history is an art, like engraving or photography.... history is a work or art by its efforts toward objectivity.... History is not one of those arts of knowledge in which, to quote Gilson, it is enough to have understood the method to be able to apply it; it is an art of production in which it is not enough to know the methods: talent is also needed.... Originality, cohesion, flexibility, richness, subtlety, and psychology are the qualities necessary to say with objectivity 'what really happened', to use Ranke's words"[22].

Thus, history is bounded by objectivity and historical method, and at the same time is an art, making the past come alive in the hands of the historian, depending on his or her literary skill. And, perhaps, we could also assent to the proposition that history is not primarily about philosophy[23].

Thought, translated by David E. Green, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991; and Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949, on *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschischte*.

[20] For the argument on the impossibility of a "social" science, see Alasdair McIntyre, "The Character of Generalizations in Social Science and their Lack of Predictive Power", in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition, Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p. 108.

[21] On the method, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies. Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, New York, Harper Colophon, 1979; and Section II.3 below.

[22] Paul Veyne, *How History Is a Work of Art*, in Paul Veyne, *Writing History. Essay on Epistemology*, translated by Mina Moore-Rinvolucri, Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1984, p. 229-230. It may be observed that Veyne often uses hyperbole to make his points.

[23] It is interesting that the textbook which most regard as the fountainhead of positivist historiography, Ch. V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, translated by G. G. Berry with a preface by F. York Powell, New York, Henry Holt, 1907, first published in 1897, is not nearly as doctrinaire as either its votaries or its critics convey. Another case of Calvinists who are more Calvinistic than Calvin. Cf.

II.2. What is the Value or Use of History?

We are not concerned in this essay with Popper's second question, "What is the use of history," which has to do with the philosophy of history as such. Responses to this question are certainly of interest philosophically or pragmatically, but not historically except as a source of hidden bias, and have ranged from the Exemplar Theory of History (history is of educational value, teaching lessons to statesmen, politicians, or civil society as a whole) to History as Entertainment to Historical Understanding as re-enactment or 'situational analysis', to History as Useful in and of itself. We all have philosophies or worldviews that affect our work, even if it is a philosophy that denies one has a philosophy.

On the other hand, one has to respect the apologia explicitly made for the "Use of History" by Marc Bloch's posthumous *The Historian's Craft*[24]. Bloch's book, mostly written during the French debacle of World War II, remains one of the touchstone books on historical inquiry and method[25] and his call for a usable past cannot be taken lightly. The problem of "use and abuse of history" continues to be a relevant concern for historians[26].

II.3. How are We to Write History? What is Its Method?

Popper's third question, "How do we write history?" deals with historiography and historical practice as such, that is historical method[27]. This is pretty much what most of historians think of when asked what history is. Here Popper comes down solidly and explicitly on the side of Lord Acton, who argued that we should "study problems in preference to periods"[28]. Indeed, Acton asserted that "the main thing to learn is not the art of accumulating material, but the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainty from doubt. It is by solidity of criticism more than by

Charles-Olivier Carbonell, « L'Historiographie positiviste : Une doctrine sans practiciens», in Charles-Olivier Carbonell, *Histoire et historiens. Une mutation idéologique des historiens français 1865-1885*, Toulouse FR, Edouard Privat, Editeur, 1976, p. 401 ff.

[24] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft,* translated by Peter Putnam with an introduction by Joseph R. Strayer, New York, Vintage Books, 1953, p. 3 ff.

[25] Including balanced, classic discussions of *History, Men, and Time*, *Historical Criticism*, *Historical Observation*, *Historical Analysis*, and *Historical Causation*, e.g., the five chapters of *The Historian's Craft.*

[26] Cf. Pieter Geyl, *The Use and Abuse of History,* New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1957.

[27] Compare Guy Bourdé and Hervé Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 16, who see historiography as "l'examen des différents *discours de la méthode historique* et des différents *modes d'écriture de histoire...*".

[28] Lord Acton, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 545.

the plenitude of erudition, that the study of history strengthens, and straightens, and extends the mind"[29].

Popper argued that "The questions the historian is asking are decisive.... It is only from problems that our work can possibly start; and this holds not only for what Professor Elton calls 'analysis,' but just as much for what he calls 'narrative'"[30]. By the 19th century, Europe was preoccupied with a myriad of major "problems" and "questions" such as the Italian Problem[31], the German Question[32], the Jewish Question (*Die Judenfrage*)[33], the Woman Question (*querelle des femmes*)[34], and the Eastern Question[35]. The proliferation of such questions and problems, as Holly Case has argued, was partly the result of the politicization of society and tended to exacerbate problems: "Instead of being understood as questions to be answered, these were treated as problems to be solved" and were framed in such a way that "implied... a question/problem could be solved once and for all" with "only one solution, like 2×2 =4"[36].

However, this does not obviate the usefulness of all questions and certainly not the fact that historical inquiry must begin with questions posed by historians. As David Hackett Fischer put it:

> "A moment's reflection should suffice to establish the simple proposition that every historian, willy-nilly, must begin his research with a question. Questions are the engines of intellect, the cerebral machines which convert energy to motion, and curiosity to controlled inquiry. There can be no thinking without questioning—no purposeful study of the past..."[37]

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[29] *Ibidem*, p. 528.

[30] Karl R. Popper, *op. cit.,* 1969, p. 195.

[31] Harry Hearder, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento 1790—1870,* London, Longman, 1984.

[32] W. E. Mosse, *The European Powers and the German Question, 1848-1871*, New York, Octagon Books, 1969.

[33] Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870,* Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1973; and Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (eds.), *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship,* Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995.

[34] Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "The Woman Question"*, London, Routledge, 1990; and Lucy Delap, "The 'Woman Question' and the Origins of Feminism", in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys, *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 319–348.

[35] M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question 1774-1923. A Study in International Relations,* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1966; and Veniamin Ciobanu, *Problema orientală (1856-1923)*, Iași, Editura Junimea, 2009.

[36] Holly Case, *The Age of Questions or, a First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond,* Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 2-7.

[37] David Hackett Fischer, *op. cit.,* p. 3.

Fischer cites R. G. Collingwood in summary:

"Scissors-and-paste historians study periods: they collect all the extant testimony about a certain limited group of events and hope in vain that something will come of it. Scientific historians study problems: they ask questions, and if they are good historians, they ask questions which they see their way to answering"[38].

And how does one go about responding to historical questions? What is the method of history? The answer to this question is to be found in the remarkable 19th century "Historical Movement" which saw the emergence of history as a modern discipline. This takes us back once more to Lord Acton because the revolutionary Historical Movement was precisely the focus of his seminal 1895 Cambridge University Inaugural Lecture[39]. In the words of Herbert Butterfield's masterful account:

> "In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a great historical movement produced a rage for the study of the past, as well as a notion of history different from anything one can find in classical antiquity or in any other of the world's civilisations. Here the history of historical scholarship presents the spectacle of something like an intellectual revolution"[40].

According to Herbert Butterfield, Lord Acton was the first to understand "the new place which history had come to hold in the realm of the intellect and the change it had produced in the structure of human thought". He showed that there were "now two ways in which every branch of science was to be studied: first by its own forms of technical procedure, and secondly, by an examination of its history"[41].

In Acton's own words, the Historical Movement was this:

> "Each science has to be learned by a method of its own. But also by one and the same method, applicable to all, which is the historical method.... History is not only a particular branch of knowledge, but a particular mode and method of knowledge in other branches. Determines their influence on society. It embraces other sciences, records their progress and the tests by which truths have been ascertained. Historic thinking is more than historical knowledge"[42].

History came to be seen for the first time not merely as a branch of literature or the *Belles Lettres*, but as a professional discipline with its own method, content, and perspectives. Nor was history any longer a simple

[38] *Ibidem.*

[39] Lord Acton, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 527 ff. See my "The Historical Movement of the 19th Century and Some Considerations on the Development of Romanian Historiography," in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, Vol. 45, 2007, p. 307-314.

[40] Herbert Butterfield, *op. cit.*, 1960. Butterfield's work is based, in part, on a thorough examination of the Acton Archives at Cambridge, which contain many important unpublished statements of Acton's position.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 1.

[42] Notes from the Acton Archives at Cambridge, cited in *Ibidem*, p. 1, 97.

chronicling or compilation of facts, but was transformed into a critical, analytical, and systematic study of the past.

Acton underlined three key developments in historical studies[43]. The first was a product of the unprecedented opening of archives and unpublished materials which led historians to insist that intensive study of original documents was a prerequisite for historical writings. However, Acton warned that, while original documentation was essential, "the main thing to learn is not the art of accumulating material, but the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainty from doubt"[44].

The second development was the emergence of historical criticism as an essential of historical work. "It is by solidity of criticism more than by plenitude of erudition that the study of history strengthens, and straightens, and extends the mind", Acton insisted. "For the critic is one who, when he lights on an interesting statement, begins by suspecting it.... he asks whether he has read the passage as the author wrote it.... Next is the question where the writer got his information.... For a historian has to be treated as a witness, and not believed unless his sincerity is established. The maxim that a man must be presumed to be innocent until his guilt is proved, was not made for him...."[45].

This "accession of the critic," Acton wrote, "in the place of the indefatigable compiler, of the artist in coloured narrative, the skilled limner of character, the persuasive advocate of good, or other, causes" amounted to "a transfer of government, to a change of dynasty, in the historic realm"[46]. This directed the historian's attention, Acton argued, from the lower to "the higher objects of history – the difference between knowledge of facts and the energetic understanding of their significance"[47].

The third development was the establishment of the "dogma of impartiality. To an ordinary man the word means no more than justice.... The men who, with the compass of criticism in their hands, sailed the uncharted sea of original research proposed a different view. History, to be above evasion or dispute, must stand on documents, not on opinions". In the end, "method is only the reduplication of common sense..."[48]. The result was that history became "infinitely more effectual as a factor of civilisation than ever before, and a movement began in the world of minds which was deeper and more serious than the revival of ancient learning"[49].

[43] For what follows, see Lord Acton, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 527 ff.
[44] *Ibidem*, p. 528.
[45] *Ibidem*, p. 529-530.
[46] *Ibidem*, p. 528-529.
[47] Notes in the Acton Archives at Cambridge, cited in Herbert Butterfield, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[48] Lord Acton, *op. cit.*, p. 530 ff.
[49] *Ibidem*, p. 526.

Acton proposed one other desideratum for the historian that proved too difficult for even most of his 19th century colleagues. That concerned the issue of moral judgements. He wrote: "I exhort you never to debase the moral currency or to lower the standard of rectitude, but to try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong"[50].

The idea of historian's making judgements is usually widely criticized, but the question that needs to be faced is: why all the care, caution, and scrupulousness of historical work if it has no further application? Imagine a legal system that applied very strict standards of evidence, testimony, cross-examination, rigorous protection of rights, and other judicial procedures to ensure fairness and impartiality. Then, after application, adhering to, and insisting on all of these safeguards and conventions, wouldn't one be astonished if the judge would rise and congratulate the prosecution and the defense for presenting interesting, artistic, and even gripping stories...and then adjourned the court? Wouldn't one wonder what the purpose of all the rigamarole and procedure was for if no conclusions were going to be drawn and no judgements were to be made?[51]

Unfortunately, the moral currency has been debased because of modern times acceptance of a footless relativism or what Alasdair MacIntyre has called emotivism[52]. Such an approach would be intolerable in a court room (or used to be). One might not entirely agree with Acton that "If, in our uncertainty, we must often err, it may be sometimes better to risk excess in rigour than in indulgence"[53], but the balance has certainly shifted too far to the side of devastating permissiveness. And it should not be ignored that as in a legal proceeding, safeguards and the right to appeal are built into the structure.

III. The 19th and 20th Century Schism in Historiography

The final aspect of the evolution of modern historiography to be examined in this essay deals with the historiographical schism caused by German historicism in the 19th and 20th centuries[54].

The 19th century historical debate sparked by the German historist school, Paul Ricoeur argued, "gave rise to a schism within the historical

[50] *Ibidem*, p. 546.

[51] But see Marc Bloch, "Judging or Understanding?" in Marc Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 138 ff.

[52] Alasdair MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, *passim.*

[53] Lord Acton, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 550.

[54] For a survey, see Friedrich Meinecke, "Historicism and Its Problems", in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, New York, Meridian Books, 1956, p. 267-288.

discipline itself, as between its theory which was idealistic and its practice which was positivistic"[55]. This resulted, Ricoeur argued, in

> "a fragile compromise between...conflicting requirements, assigning to them two distinct phases, in the one case the sifting of documents and in the other the interpretation of facts. An unstable equilibrium between comprehension and explanation seemed the best that historical knowledge could hope to achieve"[56].

Since then, both the aim of history ("the idea of historical truth progressively worked out through mutual rectification of errors")[57] as well as the mission of history (the Rankean "establishment of facts")[58] were undermined by doubt.

The contributions of the "German School" of history[59] – whose impact is best summarized by the work of Friedrich Meinecke[60] – led, ironically, to "the impossibility of... objective interpretation...[and] the impossibility of attaining to the true facts," i. e. relativism[61]. German-style historicism took the Historical Movement to an extreme, making the "application of what is taken to be historical understanding and method to all phenomena"[62]. As such,

[55] Paul Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy*, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1979, p. 269. For subsequent developments, see Geoffrey Barraclough, *Main Trends in History*, expanded and updated by Michael Burns, New York, Holmes and Meier, 1991, dealing with "the Crisis of Historicism," and Marxist historiography.

[56] Paul Ricoeur, *op.cit.*, p. 169.

[57] I. e., the progressivist "Whig" approach to history. Cf. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, G. Bell, 1931.

[58] Ranging from Ranke's *Wie es eigentlich gewesen* to Ch. V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos's "positivism."

[59] For German development, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, revised edition, Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

[60] See especially Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, translated by Robert B. Kimber, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1970, first published in 1908; *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of raison d'État and Its Place in Modern History*, translated by Douglas Scott, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1957, first published in 1924; and *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, translated by J. E. Anderson, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, originally published in 1936.

[61] Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 169. For a critique of historical relativism, see Karl R. Popper, "The Theory of Objective Truth: Correspondence to the Facts", in Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books, 1962, p. 223 ff.; and Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach* reprinted with revisions, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, *passim*, abook dedicated to Tarski and Tarski's theory of truth, especially p. 44 ff, and 319 ff.

[62] Aviezer Tucker, citing Maurice Mandelbaum, in Aviezer Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 414.

German-style historicism merged with social science historicism, and lapsed into relativism and scientism[63].

We need not deal further here with relativism other that to affirm the trenchant words of the philosopher Roger Scruton: "A writer who says that there are no truths, or that all truth is 'merely relative,' is asking you not to believe him. So don't"[64].

The resulting "subjectivism and relativism, idolatry of the past as such, fascination with the problem of great individuals and virtually exclusive emphasis on political events"[65], led to terrible consequences in the 20th century's "Era of Tyrannies"[66] and Benda's "Treason of the Intellectuals"[67].

The aftermath of World War I saw the advent of yet another historicist approach to history described by Ricoeur as a "'schematism' and 'dogmatism' imposed on historical research by over-simplified interpretations of Marxism-Leninism". This rose to power beginning in Soviet Russia and then extended its reach over most of Eastern Europe. Ironically, Ricoeur noted, this method came "at things from an opposite position of Western European historiography" but eventually "found itself equally embarrassed by the doubt raised by the lack of coherence between theory and practice"[68].

[63] Ernst Troeltsch confirmed that German historicism, in the end, led to "the crisis of modernity, to moral and intellectual relativity." *Ibidem*, p. 415. On what happened in the 20th century, see Georg G. Iggers, "The Crisis of the Conventional Conception of Scientific History", in Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, with a contribution by Norman Baker, Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1975, p. 3-42.

[64] Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey*, London, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 6, and *passim* on the question of truth and relativism. See additionally Fisher, *Fallacies*, 1970, p. 40 ff; C. S. Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism", 1943, in C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1967, p. 72-81; C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, San Francisco, HarperOne, 2000, on moral law; and Peter Kreeft, "Are There Any Moral Absolutes?: Finding Black and White in a World of Grays", in Brad Miner (ed.), *Good Order. Right Answers to Contemporary Questions*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1995, p. 78-88. On the other side, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, who I don't believe.

[65] Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

[66] The phrase is taken from Élie Halévy's classic *The Era of Tyrannies. Essays on Socialism and War*, translated by R. K. Webb. Notes by Fritz Stern, New York, Doubleday, 1967.

[67] See Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*, translated by Richard Aldington with an introduction by Herbert Read, Boston, Beacon Press, 1955, first published in 1928.

[68] Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 170-171.

IV. Conclusions

What might follow from the above? Certainly, one gets a flavor of the complexity and diversity of historiographical work from the 18th century onward. This essay has endeavored to illuminate some aspects of this.

Secondly, we have seen the contributions of Lord Acton to our understanding of the revolutionary but now almost forgotten Historical Movement in the 19th century, and concerning the emergence of historical method as regards the crucial nature of original documents, of historical criticism, and of objectivity. Though these have come under almost continuous fire in the 20th and 21st centuries, it can seriously be questioned whether or how this has affected the work of the average historian. Indeed, the so-called literary turn of the last forty years has been the province not of trained historians, but of literary historians and of philosophers wandering off of their own reservations to try and instruct professional historians on what they ought to be doing while asserting that history is merely another, possibly inferior branch of literature[69]. A principal error is to assume that because history is in part an art, it is, *ipso facto*, literature[70]. A little more attention to what Acton wrote and what Butterfield later described might have helped.

And what of the evolution of European historiography from the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century? Hans Meyerhoff summarizes:

> "a situation...developed which is quite paradoxical in human terms: The barriers of the past have been pushed back as never before; our knowledge of the history of man and the universe has been enlarged on a scale and to a degree not dreamed of by previous generations. At the same time, the sense of identity and continuity with the past, whether our own or history's, has gradually and steadily declined. Previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we do, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it..."[71]

Herbert Butterfield writes that Lord Acton stood "in 1900 on the crest of what might be called a great wave of historical thinking; and perhaps it is not going too far to say that the wave has been receding ever since"[72]. However, as James Fitzjames Stephen pointed out, there is no reason "why as we go with the

[69] Hayden White was the main inspiration here: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

[70] This might have been fostered by the success of such compellingly and beautifully written books such as Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) and Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), both of which are by Acton's standards bad history.

[71] Quoted in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, with a NewPreface and Postscript, New York, Schocken Books, 1989, p. 79.

[72] Herbert Butterfield, *op. cit.*, 1960, p. 97.

stream we need sing Hallelujah to the river god"[73]. Waves recede, but they also crest again.

At the same time, we need not fall into the trap of relativism. Lord Acton wrote:

> "History...does teach that right and wrong are real distinctions. Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity...." Justice has been just, mercy has been mercy, honour has been honour, good faith had been good faith, truthfulness has been truthfulness from the beginning.... morality is not ambulatory.... if we lower our standard in History, we cannot uphold it in Church or State"[74].

He affirmed that "The knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience" was "eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes into the making of the future," and that it could give "us the gift of historical thinking, which is better than historical learning"[75]. If this is going to be the case once more, it will require integrity and effort, especially of a new generation of historians with the courage to follow Acton's injunctions concerning the doing of history.

Aspects of the Evolution of Modern Historiography. From the 18th to the 20th Century
(Abstract)

Because the history of historiography is obviously too complex to be dealt with comprehensively, this paper is in the form of an essay. It discusses several aspects of the evolution of historiography in the 18th through the 20th centuries, organized around three principal questions concerning history/historiography posed by Karl R. Popper's 1967 article "A Pluralist Approach to the Philosophy of History." These questions are "What is the meaning of history?" "What is the use or value of history?" and "What is the method of history?" The work of Lord Acton plays a key role in responding to these questions which is elaborated here. The final part of the essay looks at the19th and 20th schism in historiography and its impact on the study of historical study.

Keywords: European historiography, Scientism, Positivism, Historicism, Historical method

[73] Quoted in B. Lippincott, "James Fitzjames Stephen—Critic of Democracy," in *Economica*, Vol. 33, 1931, p. 305.

[74] Lord Acton, *op. cit.*,1985, p. 550-552.

[75] *Ibidem*, p. 504-505; 513-514.