

A HUNDRED YEARS

AFTER RANKE

I

About a hundred years ago a student of the University of Berlin would have been able to hear Boeckh lecturing on *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* and Droysen lecturing on *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte (Historik)*. He could also hear Ranke, whose *Epochen der neueren Geschichte* were delivered, not however in Berlin, in 1854.

Boeckh's *Enzyklopädie*, Droysen's *Historik* and Ranke's *Epochen*, as we know, had two features in common:

1. They rejected the Hegelian *a priori* method of philosophy of history.
2. They took the main task of the historian to be the discovery of the leading ideas of history.

As for the first point, not much comment is needed here. Hegel's *a priori* method was discredited. Historical research was more than ever safely founded on the careful examination of old sources and the discovery of new ones. Niebuhr, whom Hegel had despised, was universally hailed as the great master of the new historical method. The new historical school

had re-established contact with the great *érudits* of the eighteenth century. After the over-production of philosophies of history, great attention was again devoted to the rules whereby we ascertain the authenticity of documents, date them, and edit them.

It is more difficult to say something both sound and brief on the second point. In 1821 Humboldt had proclaimed that the task of the historian is to discover the ideas behind the facts, and his words had inspired the younger generation. Boeckh, Droysen, and Ranke were Humboldt's ideal pupils. They agreed on the notion that history makes sense because men ultimately act according to leading ideas. By leading ideas they seem to have meant the general principles according to which religions are founded and states are built. Their interests were, generally speaking, confined to religion and politics with some excursion into the realm of literary and artistic activities: they concerned themselves with ideas relevant to these fields of research. State, Church, Papacy, freedom, individuality, humanity, marriage, honour, redemption, are some of the ideas which were supposed to determine and characterise historical events. There was a general inclination to admit that the leading ideas of successive periods would form some sort of continuity and could be described as phases of a progressive development, but there was no unanimity on this point. Ranke himself was notoriously uncertain: according to him each epoch is in direct contact with God, though he would not perhaps deny some progress from epoch to epoch.

Ranke, Droysen and Boeckh can be considered as typical representatives of that German historical method that spread throughout Europe about a hundred years ago. This method ruled the universities, but was also largely accepted outside the universities. Where the native traditions of historical research were particularly strong, German influence had to compromise with them. In England the emphasis remained on strictly political history, that is, the history of party struggles. In France there was a preference for the history of civilisation. But though no German was capable of writing a Greek History like Grote's or Guizot's *Histoire de la Civilisation en Europe*, the differences were not such as to imply a conflict of methods and purposes. These too were histories of leading ideas: it would not be unfair to call Grote a historian of Greek democracy or Guizot a historian of the influence of liberty on civilisation.

It is, however, important to remind ourselves that other points of view remained or became vital a hundred years ago. The philosophy of history now took the shape of Comtism and historical materialism. Vico continued

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to inspire some writers. Strictly partisan, dogmatic history was flourishing, both in the field of political and of religious historiography. But it is perhaps more important to register the fact that the very notion of leading ideas was already becoming ambiguous. Nationalities were allowed an increasingly important part in history. Nations were, of course, often supposed each to have their own ideas—the Germans were the *Träger der Freiheit*, and the Prussians the *Träger des Staats*, but this close identification of ideas and nations was no longer fashionable in every circle. Nationality as such was the good thing, without further justification; and one talked of natural borders, national spheres of interest, natural enemies, as if these things existed. It would indeed be interesting to make an exact study of the spreading of these notions. The national history as such was endangering the history of leading ideas embodied in states and religions.

Nor was all smooth in the field of source criticism. Many people suspected that what was called the German method of source criticism was arbitrary and fanciful. Some people, like Bachofen, objected to *Quellenforschung* because they believed in traditional data: others, like Cornwall Lewis, thought the Germans, and Niebuhr most of all, far too credulous. Lewis asked for stricter standards of judgment; he was suspicious of Niebuhr's intuitions. But the Bachofens and Lewises remained a small minority.

The German method of source criticism seemed to the majority to be founded on the solid rock of the direct examination of evidence. And the German history of leading ideas was corroded by internal ambiguities rather than by external enemies. The elevation of nationality to be the supreme factor in history was indeed momentous: it led away from the study of ideas to the study of material forces; it replaced the study of something dynamic, like ideas, by the study of something which was supposed to have been present from the beginning.

II

If we compare the situation of about 1850 with that of about 1950, I would say that two features emerge:

1. Academically speaking, not much has changed in the matter of source criticism. The principles obtaining in Boeckh and Droysen are still ruling now. There has been some change in the technique of critical editions: the evaluation of manuscripts has of course become much less mechanical after Traube than it used to be after Lachmann. There has also been a conspicuous refinement in the study of linguistic evidence. But on

the whole the approved technique of academic research is today not essentially different from that of the age of Droysen and Boeckh. Yet much of the present historical research is done with little respect for, if not actual contempt of, the approval rules. The Marxists have gone back to obsolete *a priori* interpretations of history. Racialism has been another notorious source of an *a priori* approach to history. Psychoanalysis and existentialism and theology have made their contribution to *a priori* constructions.

Apart from these more or less frank *a priori* interpretations, there are abundant examples of relaxations of rules. In my own field of ancient history the phenomenon has assumed alarming proportions. There are many distinguished scholars who do not deal with sources according to generally approved methods. An accurate analysis of their departures from what I may perhaps call valid methods would involve us in a discussion of individual historical problems. I shall simply refer to my recent experience in dealing with the problem of the date of composition of the *Historia Augusta*. This is a conventional problem, but the arguments recently put forward by many distinguished researchers to solve it are so unconventionally absurd that a re-statement of principles appeared necessary.

2. Even more important, perhaps, is another feature of the present situation of historical studies. As I have mentioned, a hundred years ago it was generally admitted that one could understand history if one could grasp the ideas behind the facts. As history was, generally speaking, either political or religious history, the ideas would be either political or religious, which was simple enough. Today this situation has changed in four ways:

(a) History is no longer chiefly political or religious. National histories somehow look old-fashioned. Under Marxist influence social-economic history is probably the most popular brand, and covers a bewildering variety of products from the history of tools to the history of amusements, from the history of town planning to the history of the parson's wife in the Anglican tradition. If you happen to admit or suspect that there are ideas behind all these developments, the problem of how to track down these ideas becomes increasingly complicated. Theological thought provided a key to religious history, and political doctrines were deemed to explain political facts, but the ideas, if any, lurking behind the development of card games or silk-production are not so easily found and formulated in plain words.

(b) The evident fact that ideas are no longer so easy to discover can only increase the doubts already suggested from many other quarters that ideas are no explanation of history. Psychoanalysis, racialism, Marxism, the

study of primitive and animal behaviour all suggest different competitive explanations. Do these explanations exclude ideas or simply supplement the interpretation of history by ideas? And do these anti-idealistic explanations exclude each other? Take the notion of aggressiveness as a historical factor. Is aggressiveness an explanation in itself or does it presuppose the existence of some idea or some ideals to be aggressive about? Furthermore, if you exclude the intervention of ideas or ideals, is aggressiveness the most elementary factor, or is it to be analysed in terms of economic competition? Even if aggressiveness is to be analysed in terms of economic competition there is the further question whether economic competition explains aggressiveness or aggressiveness is the condition of economic competition and class warfare. And this, of course, is not the end of the question: one can ask, for instance, whether human aggressiveness is different from animal aggressiveness; and whether religion is a sublimation of aggressiveness or a source of aggressiveness, or an antidote to aggressiveness, provided either by natural or by supernatural forces.

(c) Since the explanation of historical facts is now usually given in terms of social forces, the question of the relation between explanation of historical events and explanation of individual actions has become more acute. You can explain the French Revolution as you like, but there is always a moment in which you have to take account of the fact that a certain individual was either angry or in love or ill or drunk or stupid or cowardly. How are these individual features to be combined with the general explanation?

(d) The fourth and most obvious aspect of this state of affairs is that it has become extremely difficult to speak of progress or even of a meaningful development of events in a certain direction. Not even all those who hold an *a priori* view of history would find themselves able to believe in progress. Marxists and Catholics perhaps can, but psychoanalysts, I am told, do not believe in progress. The great majority of ordinary historians simply do not know what to think about progress, and ask the philosophers for guidance. The philosophers, of course, answer that it is not their business to tell you what to think, but only how to think.

III

This picture, however sketchy and incomplete, is one of exceptional complication. It makes the life of a historian a hard one. To begin with, the historian is now supposed to know more facts than are compatible with the short span of an ordinary human life. He must know about statistics, technical developments, the subconscious and unconscious, savages and

apes, mystical experience and Middletown facts of life: besides that he must make up his mind about progress, liberty, moral conscience, because the philosophers are chary in these matters.

I have no idea how one can simplify the present tasks of an historian, but I venture to throw out two remarks on marginal points:

1. It is more than ever essential to be strict in the examination of evidence. We must not allow people to get away with doubtful pieces of evidence. Any searching question about the value of the evidence presented by Marxists, psychoanalysts, racialists, Catholics, sociologists, contributes towards the clarification of the general question of the value of their doctrines.

2. We must get used to the fact that the purpose of our research has an influence on the methods of the research itself. If you study corn production in order to assess its influence on the growth of population, you still use different methods of research from those you would use if you were interested in collecting facts relevant to a proposed reform of land-tenure. In the latter case the mental habits of the peasants would presumably be of greater importance than in the former case. A candid admission of the purpose of one's own study, a clear analysis of the implications of one's own bias helps to define the limits of one's own historical research and explanation. To take the example of a great book, if Ronald Syme had clearly asked the question which was at the back of his mind when he wrote his *Roman Revolution*—was Augustus' revolution a fascist revolution?—his research would have been more clearly directed to a definite aim.

This point may perhaps help us to understand the role of ideas in contemporary writing of history. Dilthey has already dispelled the illusion that one can write the history of one or two isolated ideas or principles. But men still inevitably turn to history in order to clarify their own mind about ideas such as freedom, honour, justice, or even marriage, war, trade, for which contemporary experience might well seem to be enough. These ideas provide the starting point of important historical research. The question whether ideas are principles of historical development is one that cannot be answered *a priori*: only historical research can say whether and how, for example, the idea of honour operated in history. But if we cannot be sure that ideas will lead to historical developments, before having tried hard to find other explanations, we are sure that ideas lead to historical research. Ideas are themes of historical research—though not of all historical research. The clearer we are about the theme of our own research, the clearer we become about our own bias. And the clearer we are about our

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own bias, the more honest and efficient we are likely to be in our own research. Many of the rules laid down about the correct methods of historical research are in fact disguised declarations of the purposes of the research itself. For instance, if you assert that the only method of studying the history of Roman Law is to analyse the interests of the Roman property classes, you are already selecting one of the many tasks of historical research on Roman law. Self-examination is a necessary step not only to personal redemption, but also to objective historical research. Too much historical research is being done by people who do not know why they are doing it and without regard to the limits imposed by the evidence. An improvement in this respect is both possible and desirable.