THE CASE FOR HISTORICAL RELATIVISM

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Historians frequently remark in private conversation that while philosophers may demolish historical relativism regularly in theory, it remains a compelling and cogent account of the practice of historical writing. Historical relativism seems to be one of those cases where the problem involves the phenomenon of "Its all right in practice, but will it work in theory?"

Philosophers have a way of construing relativism to mean things which are trivial, absurd or contradictory. Then "relativism" is quickly refuted, the philosophers having demonstrated that a little quick analysis obviously dispels the fog created by naive historians untutored in the mysteries of logic, epistemology and metaethics. For example, they suggest that relativism means that everyone has his own truth and then proceed to demonstrate laboriously that "x is true to me" does not accurately report the standard usage of the term "true".

This paper sets out a preliminary statement of the meaning of historical relativism as understood by one student of history. While it draws upon my reading in writers like Charles Beard, Carl L. Becker, Harry Elmer Barnes, and E. H. Carr, it is not a summary of their writings. I have attempted to set out my own formulation of the meaning of historical relativism.

Different historians come to different conclusions about the "same" events. And history is constantly being re-written. These facts provide the setting or context for the problem of historical relativism. By and large, relativism is not a

recommendation of this state of affairs, but a description of it.

And a description which is more faithful to the complexity of reality than the usual objectivist reconstruction of the problem. Objectivism suggests that one view is correct; or that re-writing is simply occasioned by new evidence or more detachment; or that once confusion between categories such as ultimate and proximate is eliminated an accurate account of causation will emerge.

The relativist suggests that differences between accounts will not be settled on such bases, because they are rooted in assumptions or frames of reference controlling the organization and presentation of materials, i.e., historical synthesis. He further suggests that among the assumptions or components of the frames of reference are value judgments which are unlikely to be mediated by the kinds of processes so beloved of objectivists. The concept of cause as utilized by historians ordinarily involves attributions of "responsibility" which are never mediated by the simple accumulation of more "'facts".

Much of the difficulty in presenting historical relativism arises from the objectivist habit of identifying the relativist viewpoint with indifference to truth or standards in historical research. (1) If objectivity simply meant honest and open-minded handling of evidence, logical inference, willingness to change conclusions when evidence changes, and adherence to reasonable canons of research, no one could doubt either its existence or desirability. But objectivity is also taken to mean presentation of *the* truth and value--neutrality.

This leads up to the key argument of this paper: relativism cannot be stated *positively* in an epistemological formulation. By that I mean that it is not a comprehensive theory of knowledge. Rather it is a set of doubts about the objectivist theory of knowledge. Its affirmations are negations of the claims of objectivism. The categories or definitions of the problems of epistemology are set by objectivism. Anything which is not objectivity (in that paradigm) is subjectivity — a fate all wish to avoid. Within traditional objectivist categories, relativism cannot be stated as a posi-

(1) See Carlton Beck and Jim A. Barak, eds., The Study of Society (Scranton, Pa.: International Textbook Co., 1969), pp. 3-8.

tive theory of knowledge. Hence, it is here presented as a series of doubts.

Relativism is not a generalized solipsism, scepticism or nihilism in epistemology. It does not deny the possibility of any knowledge, nor does it view the categories of truth and falsity as meaningless or irrelevant. Rather does the historical relativist express doubt about particular aspects or types of knowledge involved in historical writing. Relativism is more than "revisionism" — which expresses doubt about some particular historical interpretation — but less than "nihilism" — which would deny the possibility of historical knowledge.

The point of departure of historical relativism is a distinction between *fact* and *interpretation*. Croce distinguished "history" and "chronicle" with the latter meaning simple narration of the facts. The distinction between fact and interpretation is similar, though perhaps the terms *data* and *meaning* are most exact. The relativist argues that the collection and verification of facts or data by the historian is simply the beginning of his task. The major problem faced by an historian is synthesis, interpretation and assessment of the meaning of the data he or she has selected. Objectivists assert that meaning is *prima facie* or obvious once the facts are arranged in their proper order. Relativists are sceptical about where the "order" comes from.

Relativists take exception to the objectivist assumption that the facts simply arrange themselves or are statable in simple hypotheses easily confirmed or denied by facts alone. I once listened to a philosopher of history argue that historians should print the value judgments is their books in colored ink — leaving the facts in black to constitute the history.

Relativism denies the correspondence theory of truth as applied to historical writing. It denies, that is, that the world has a simple natural order which it is the business of the historian to simply copy. It insists that historical interpretations are particular meanings or perspectives giving order to data on the basis of human purposes.

To the relativist, it is obvious that what "order" exists in the data is put there by the historian. The historian selects certain facts out of the multitude (but still selected as compared with all *possible* facts) available to him and organizes them in some fashion. He does this on the basis

of his own consciousness or frame of reference. In this sense, history is relative to the historian — because he will only discover the kind of order compatible with his presuppositions and mental limits.

Relativism is not a crude sociological determinism, insistent that the historian is the mere creature of his times or group memberships. Individuals can develop their own consciousness in ways out of tune with their surroundings. Social determinism is limited by the creative effect of the existence of what George Herbert Mead called the "self" — the self capacity to think and make choices.

But regardless of the complexities of genesis, the historian does have a frame of reference. According to Beard, it is made up of things deemed necessary, things deemed possible and things deemed desirable. This frame of reference (which can of course change or develop) creates cosmos out of chaos, and as the order of one's consciousness controls one's interpretations of events. The frame of reference of the historian determines the kind of history which he or she writes; i.e., the ways in which the facts are ordered.

At this point the philosopher's distinction between the logic of discovery and the logic of verification becomes relevant. So far, I have simply outlined the relativist contentions about the process of discovery of order in history (interpretation). The objectivist rejection of relativism asserts that the genesis of interpretations is irrelevant to their validity: the important thing is simply to determine by "research" *which* (or what components) are "true". The relativist, however, argues that the so-called logic of verification is plagued by relativity, and voices sceptical doubts about that part of historical inquiry as well.

So far as verification is concerned, there are many pratical difficulties arising out of attempts to establish particular factual assertions. But the relativist is willing to concede ability in principle to establish particular facts as data — his sceptical doubts are reserved for complications arising from the stage of synthesis.

Various aspects of synthesis are the causes of the relativist's scepticism about the objectivist reconstruction of the logic of historical inquiry. In general, these doubts have to do with the impossibility of demonstrating the comparative superiority of one viewpoint over another. The problen is that the humanities (including history) do not offer methods

of demonstrative proof. Hence, opinion or persuasion is the style of work in history argumentation, not demonstration. (2)

There are five classes of propositions or assumptions involved in the scepticism of the relativist working historian:

1. metaphysical or "domain assumptions"
2. causal propositions
3. motivational statements
4. judgments of responsibility
5. value judgments

In addition, there is the general problem of competitive criteria of proof or validation: authority, intuition, evidence, etc.

Metaphysical assumptions or what Alvin Gouldner in his *Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* calls "domain assumptions" enter into historical writing of necessity. In their interpretations of the past historians must assume various presuppositions about the nature of the world. These assumptions involve general beliefs about the nature of the universe, man and society.

Historians differ among themselves as do philosophers on issues such as the relative merits of pluralism and monism and materialism vs. idealism. When the nature of individuals is presupposed in statements about individual action — which occur in most historical works — the historian must take sides on issues such as free will vs. determinism. Likewise, the historian becomes a sociologist when generalizing about collective behavior. There are various social metaphysics rooted in diverse theories of the nature of social cohesion.

Philosophical disputes are not settled by laboratory experiments. They involve acts of faith on the part of Mr. Everyman, the philosopher and the historian.

Similarly, every written history is full of causal statements. The concept of "cause" is very ambiguous, and Dr. Beard argued that it ought to be abandoned. But if that is done, the idea reappears in lists of factors or "influences".

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(2) The place of "persuasion" in history and social thought makes such violations of the "genetic fallacy" as psychology and the sociology of knowledge relevant to the logic of historical and social inquiry.

But causal propositions are difficult to prove. There are final, ultimate, distant, proximate and immediate causes, and occasions. And historians cannot experiment. They cannot separate necessary, sufficient and "cluster" factors. It is not possible to "weigh" factors in any rigorous fashion. The historian selects various factors, puts them in some kind of sequence, assigns weights, and hopes for the best. Another historian can change the story drastically by emphasizing other factors. And there is no crucial experiment to iron out the divergence of opinion.

Which is also the case with motivational statements. All of the great figures of history are variously interpreted. Their personalities are described in very different terms by admirers and sceptics, friends and opponents. Motivations are assigned which are compatible with general estimates. And of course there are the problems of specific motivation: the purposes of particular actions. These involve situational aspects as well as purely individual motives.

And motivational statements are just as or more problematic than causal statements as a class. With most causal factors one is looking at external influences, but motivations include subjective aims, feelings, values and definitions which are not accessible to observation and must be postulated or inferred. Historians have incredible scope for disagreement about evidence concerning probable motivations.

Of course, historians are prone to rely on documents and testimony, and have developed sophisticated rules and procedures for verification. But there are unconscious motives. How could these be proved when the evidence is not in document form? When the actor himself is probably not aware of his own motivations?

Combining causal and motivational propositions, historians frequently offer judments of responsibility. They assign praise and blame for various events. This is not strictly a matter of value judment, but involves going beyond causal explanations. It is a mixture of empirical and normative judgment.

The historical controversies about the First World War offer an illuminating case for reflection. In reading a number of historical works, one is struck by how a slight shift in emphasis regarding various factors and events can result in a drastically different judgment of responsibility. Those his-

torians who argue for divided or mixed responsibility are on strong ground, but even that kind of judment offers much scope for shadings of emphasis.

And judgments of responsibility shade off right into value judgments. Most diplomatic and military history is blatantly nationalistic and involves acceptance of the morality of one's own national case combined with quick dismissal of the legitimacy of the case of opponent nations.

Value judgments in historical writing are of many sorts. Concepts, definitions and descriptions involve value judgments: what is "imperialism" or "exploitation"? And of course the historian must evaluate policies and actions in terms of value judgments about results. Disagreements arising from controversies over different value judgments are the most colorful of historical debates and the most incapable of resolution. They are never settled by the simple accumulation of facts.

Philosophers have debated the problem of the objectivity of values at great length. While many of them are convinced such things exist, so far they have offered historians and others no convincing methodology for settling questions of comparative warranted assertibility in regard to values. So for the present values may be understood as non-rational preferences, often rooted in individual and group interests. In the last analysis, most value judgments come down to a matter of what one prefers.

Historians are of different nationalities, classes, religions, regions and the like. Why should one expect them to agree on interpretation? Even if they were to agree on the chronology of events, there is no reason to expect identical interpretation. The best thing is to correlate value (and interest) and interpretation, with a view to understanding the perspective on the basis of which an interpretation is made. This is about what historians do — in evaluating the works of historians with whom they disagree.

Of course, data and empirical statements involving probable truth and falsity are testable within and between perspectives. That does not mean that historians with different perspectives will agree on "the facts" but that some kinds of issues are in principle matters of evidence involving high probability of rational judgments which can be discounted only by (in conventional terms) prejudiced persons. But

as far as competitive interpretations are concerned, there seems to be an ineradicable element of pure value preference involved.

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The nature of relativism is thus set more by what it rejects than by what it affirms. It rejects the objectivist assumptions of the correspondence or copy theory of truth, the possibility of value neutrality, and the additive model of research as the simple accumulation of facts. It is not a nihilism or solipsism or complete epistemological scepticism rejecting the possibility of knowledge. Relativists are perfectly willing to be shown precisely *how* one might solve the problem of objetictivity. How can one value position be demonstrated as superior? How can one causal explanation's superiority be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt? How does one weigh causal factors? The same questions can be asked in regard to motivational propositions and judgments of responsibility.

The more general problem of verification is that there is no consensus among philosophers and social scientists as to the nature of verification. While many profess a commitment to some form of empiricism, this coexists with substantive religious beliefs and nationalistic myths which have never been submitted to tests of empirical evidence. And experience and evidence are not unequivocal bases upon which to pronounce judgment, since they can be interpreted in many ways.

In large areas of history and social thought, authority, tradition and intuition rule without competition from any form of empiricism. Much of historical writing consists of refurbishing and embellishing national, racial, class and religious mythology with the trappings of scholarship. In other words, what it amounts to is pseudo-scholarly presentation of an apriori case — presented without fear and without critical and reflective research.

This is not to say that much fine work has not been done. There are volumes on most topics which are way above the common level in sophistication, attention to complexity, handling of sources and fairness to varying points of view. But in this age of world conflict that is not true of most historical writing, which might more accurately be

described as propaganda written by academic personnel. Professor Barnes may be wrong in looking back to a "golden age" of greater objectivity, but he is right that the present situation is not good.

Given the pluralistic diversity of interpretations in history, the important thing in teaching history is to keep that diversity before the student. By that I do not mean continual reiteration of various explanations for the same point, but constant reminders that all historical reconstructions are *interpretations* rooted in varying frames of reference. The student should be kept aware that it is the historian talking, and not History.

One of the more subtle dangers of historical work is the threat of the "conventional wisdom", as John Kenneth Galbraith calls it. To most people, a conventional interpretation does not seem like an interpretation: it is "common sense" or simply presenting "the facts".

The historian who reaffirms the truth of a conventional position ought to make clear that it is, nevertheless, *one interpretation*. Most people in the Allied and neutral countries during and after World war I thought Imperial Germany solely responsible for causing the war. Whatever disagreements scholars may have among themselves, critical scholarship has certainly demolished that myth. Certitude is no test of certainty.

All historians ought to make clear their frames of reference. They ought to understand that they are writing the truth as they see it. A sense of humor and some critical reflective thought about the humanity they share with their colleagues ought to convince them that they are less than capable of discovering THE TRUTH.

In summary, historical relativism argues that all written history involves interpretation. Every historian writes from a frame of reference containing his judgments on the necessary, the possible and the desirable. Given the shortcomings of human nature and social thought, it is not possible to demonstrate absolute truth in the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, an inevitable relativity of viewpoints exists and persists. Truth in history is pluralistic. In this situation, the reasonable course is to follow Mr. Justice Holmes, the distinguished American jurist, in his admission "I am not God."

SUGGESTED READING

Barnes, Harry Elmer. **A History of Historical Writing.** Revised Edition. New York: Dover, 1962.

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