Writing History: Essay on Epistemology

Reviewed by Edward H. Kaplan

Readers of von Mises's Theory and History or Epistemological Problems of Economics will find little to affront their sensibilities in this extended essay by a French historian on what historians ought to and (equally important) ought not to do when they write history. Veyne even cites von Mises and Hayek for some key aspects of his argument. Other aspects, though both plausible and vividly expressed, may leave many historians and economists uneasy.

Veyne denies that history can be a social science. Any true science creates a set of abstractions as its object. History fixes on concrete particulars. The historian composes these into "true novels," and so resembles the novelist more than the scientist. Because the novelist creates fictions which strive for verisimilitude—the form or appearance of truth—he may have to perform the kind of research into documents one normally associates with the historian. The historian, of course, must not make up characters or incidents, but like the novelist he has to decide upon a "plot" which fits his narrative. Various plots will, however, fit a given set of documents, depending on what sort of story the historian wants to tell, and different plots will send the historian scurrying off after different sets of documents. "Facts" do not lie around in documents like so many irreducible atoms. The needs of his plot determine what facts the historian will construe out of which documents.

The historian explains what he is writing about by giving an account of it—by unfolding the plot he has selected for that narrative. Abstractions as such cannot be historical explanations. Socrates was not killed by demagogy, not even Athenian demagogy. Particular demagogues did the deed and they did it not with demagogy but with hemlock.

As it was for Aristotle and Aquinas, the historian's causation remains an uncertain mixture of physical or social law, chance, and human free will. History is, therefore, an open system, and neither the economist's equilibrium nor historical laws are possible for it.

Even such "intuitive abstractions" as "enlightened despotism" are not approximations of historical laws, but mere verbal shortcuts, "only the summary of a plot." (p. 118). Such historical types, unlike biological species, are wholly subjective. Any particular enlightened despotism, for example, surely has enough unenlightened aspects as to oblige the historian to create a new type should his plot require him to notice them. General labels for concepts such as "direct taxation" or "hereditary monarchy" are no more than building blocks for historical types. To make these types sufficiently general as to approximate scientific laws is to spill over into the ridiculous (for example, the Marshall Plan as an instance of potlatch).

Not even Max Weber's "ideal types" are instances of historical laws. Ideal types are actual historical individuals or events rendered in the historian's mind as perfect examples of themselves so as to lay bare their inner logic. Would-be social scientists have stripped away the rich vestments of historical context which Weber so carefully provided for such ideal types as the "Protestant ethic" or "capitalist spirit" and thereby reduced them to bland abstractions useful neither to history nor true social science.

The historian can at least use historical types to draw analogies to roughly similar events at other times or places for which more or better documentation exists, and can thereby help "retrodict" a past cause for some later event. As the historian broadens his "historical culture," more and more apt analogies may occur to him, and his historical types may gradually turn into Weberian ideal types. By easy stages the history of specific events in particular places and times will evolve into the comparative history of what Veyne calls "nonevents"—cities or direct taxes, for example—rather than "events"—Paris or direct taxation in modern France.

A science of man is possible and to some degree already exists, but history is not and cannot be that science. Such a science must, Veyne argues (citing von Mises, Hayek, and Schumpeter) be praxeological. If the objects of history are specific events (and nonevents), the objects of a true human science must be abstractions that can be manipulated in the mind independently of the world from which they were drawn. Veyne also believes they must be put into mathematical terms, a notion that he surely did not get from the Austrians, but otherwise his view is quite congruent with theirs: Just as Galileo did not infer the role of gravity from the unworkable and probably mythical experiment of simultaneously dropping a ball and a feather from the leaning tower of Pisa, but from a mental experiment conducted on the interaction of the abstractions "force" and "mass" on each other, so too economics does not base its law of declining marginal utility on data provided by psychological observations, but on the logic of a carefully delimited imaginary situation wherein people apply the first unit of a good to the use they most favor, and each successive unit to less favored uses.

Veyne believes economics to be the best-developed human science, at least in its truly scientific neoclassical form (within which he places the Austrians),
rather than in its historicist and institutionalist forms. But even economics is
of mainly negative use to the historian—to explain (under certain narrowly
deﬁned circumstances) why some people did not obtain some results they ex-
pected. Laborers, for example, may never move toward actually obtaining their
DMVPs for their wages because of any number of possible political interven-
tions and/or customary freezings of relative wages; it is the historian's main
business to focus on these particular events rather than on the never-achieved
tendency for wages to converge on DMVPs. Indeed Veyne quotes with approval
(p. 254) von Mises's dictum that the historian need only know as much of some
science relevant to his topic as does an average educated man. The historian,
Veyne keeps insisting, must always return to the speciﬁcities of his documents.
Dwelling too long in the realm of even a valid science's abstractions must either
turn him from historian into scientist or tempt him into the vain search for
valid historical types that are also scientiﬁc laws.

Truly praxeological sociology barely exists as yet, Veyne argues. "General
sociology" of the sort done by writers such as Talcott Parsons is merely solips-
istic. It uses nominally universal vocabulary merely to label entities without
turning them into abstractions that could be meaningfully manipulated as such
in people's minds. To the extent that Marx attempted a general sociology, his
work is no more valid than that of the Parsonians. Marx and Weber went beyond
this to write "noneventworthy" history, and so both are still worth reading.
Because noneventworthy history may appear to deal with abstract universals,
it may fool the sociologist into thinking he is doing social science.

Veyne treats Marx as something of an extinct volcano, but Weber still ex-
cites his interest and admiration. Like Marx, Weber thought he was doing
historical science. In the quarrel over methods between Carl Menger and the
German historical school, Weber sided with the latter, arguing that classical
economics was merely the ideal type of economic thought produced under
liberal capitalism. But if economics was both ideal type and science, Weber
implicitly reasoned, his own sociology of ideal types must also be a valid
historical science. Weber's work has survived, Veyne insists, because he was
actually pioneering noneventworthy history.

Aside from noneventworthy history, about all that is validly left to the
sociologist is contemporary history, usually also of the noneventworthy sort.
The history of the present and of the noneventworthy past are often left to
sociologists because historiography began as the community's memory and as
the handmaiden of kings and conquerors, the speciﬁc events of whose lives
it commemorated. Veyne is content with this division of labor, though by call-
ing comparative and noneventworthy history the logical completion of national
and eventworthy history, he would clearly not object to either historians or
sociologists poaching on each other's territories.

There is little to criticize in this English-language edition of an early 1970s
book. The translation occasionally falters, but even without the original French
in hand, there is no real difficulty in surmising what Veyne must have intended.
The translation nicely captures what must have been the epigrammatic touches of the original.

The most serious omission, which might serve Veyne as the topic for some subsequent essay, is that he introduces the notion of “plot” without discussing in any detail what that term implies. In a series of essays of the 1960s and 1970s collected in *Topics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978) and in detail in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), the American scholar Hayden White approached this problem of the “employment” of factual historical narratives as an exercise in pure literary genre analysis, with results as intriguing as they are disconcerting.

Following Levi-Strauss (who is also one of Veyne’s prime sources) but also literary critic Northrop Frye and linguistic theorist Roman Jacobson, White suggested that, at least for Western man and perhaps for humanity at large, there are really only four basic kinds of plot: romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire, and that each of these is associated with its own characteristic “trope” (in the sense of figure of speech): metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, respectively. White even linked these plots and tropes to specific ideological positions: anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal, respectively. Only mediocre and doctrinaire historians, White hastened to add, stay rigidly within this pattern. The great historians always attempt to mediate between pairs of these tropes and plots because they can see how they can all be true.

The historian has to fit his work into one or another of these sets of categories or flit back and forth between them—first, because he is using language and these categories may in fact constitute the rules for using language; and, second, because his readers, however unconsciously, attempt to recognize one of these categories in his work, and it is only when they discover the plot he is using that they grasp his explanation of the story. “Aha,” in effect the reader exclaims. “Now I see what the historian is getting at here. He is recounting a tragedy. Now I understand what is going on.”

If only four basic plots exist, there may be at least rough limits to the degree of complexity that the historian need embrace. White even suggests that when a revisionist historian changes plots, he is doing what a Freudian analyst does when he encourages his patient to recast his subconscious employment of the events that cause his neurosis into some other, more innocuous, plot. This, however, may be of more comfort to beleaguered Freudians than to historians embarrassed by such company.

White’s analysis of particular historical narratives reads disconcertingly like the “deconstruction” or “unpacking” of literary texts of literati of the deconstructionist school. Flashes of insight often come wrapped in opaque technical jargon as barbarous as anything committed by the disciples of Talcott Parsons. Worse, judgments about which of two tropes dominates a particular segment of narrative sometimes seem arbitrary.
Though historians, like novelists and poets, can continue to do their jobs without benefit of literary deconstruction even if they are, in fact, writing true novels, one may wonder (to commit some trope or other) whether Professor Veyne's intriguing book has snatched the historical profession from the palsied hands of the sociologists only to inadvertently drop it into the ravening jaws of the English professors.