

Modern Historiography

HST 300
Fall 2009
Professor Lavender

Readings:

- Georgi Plekhanov, "The Role of the Individual in History"
- Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*
- Arnold Toynbee, "The Disintegration of Civilizations" and "My View of History"
- R. G. Collingwood, "History as Re-Enactment of Past Experience"

Approaching Modern Historians...

- Modern historians are engaged in two levels of debate
 - One with their predecessors
 - The other with their contemporary surrounding
 - So we will discuss them as "schools" that are not really necessarily schools
 - Today, an outline of what is "modern" in historiography; then, the "problems" of the modern and reactions.

Approaching Modern Historians...

- Debate over documentation
 - Storytelling replaced with research
 - Documentation valorized
 - the birth of the footnote

Approaching Modern Historians...

- Debate over "objectivity"
 - How to tell a story fairly (Ibn Khaldun)
 - How to be scientific in storytelling (Vico)
 - How to remove self from story (Ranke)

Approaching Modern Historians...

- Debate over to whom history belongs
 - Kings and Gods
 - Civilizations
 - Nation-States
 - Races

Approaching Modern Historians...

- Debate over causation
 - Gods's Will?
 - God's Will?
 - Biological/Physical Process (Bodin & Environments, Vico & Language, Kant & actions of the "hive")?
 - The Will of the Great Man or Great Nation or Zeitgeist (Hegel)?

Modern Historiography

- What is the "Modern"?:
 - Period from early-19th Century (the aftermath of the Napoleonic period)
 - Identified with the forces of modernity
 - Industrialization
 - The modern liberal state (limited monarchies, parliamentary and representative governments, professional civil services)
 - Imperialism (and the cultural ideas necessary for its maintenance)
 - In some sense, contains both the "Victorian" and the "Modernist" periods (modernity ≠ modernism)

Professionalization and Modernity...

- Ranke (in Romantic period) had called for history to become a profession
- In the modern period, this is even wider call
- Trend toward broader social and economic history
 - fueled by a revolution in the social sciences
 - emergence of "professions"
 - Economics (the "dismal science")
 - Political Economy
 - Anthropology
 - Sociology
 - Psychology
 - History

Social Science and Modern History

- Each of these social science approaches was then applied to history
 - with varying success
- Economics (the "dismal science")
 - helped by dialectic materialism and Marxist philosophy
- Political Economy
 - political systems and states as focus of history
- Anthropology
 - the concept of culture and origins of cultural complexes
- Sociology
 - social structures, power
- Psychology
 - the mind over time
 - Freud interested in History
 - Moses and Monotheism
 - History is the way we make sense out of the world that drives us mad.

Modern History as a Profession

- History
 - as a profession from late nineteenth century
 - and really takes off with WWI
 - what is the "civilization" that we are saving with global war?
- Ongoing struggle over what emerges from the Romantic historians
 - why do Moderns care so much what Romantics think?
 - Because they posit them as FIRST TRUE HISTORIANS
- SO
 - Modern historiography can be read as the **reaction** to Kant, Hegel, and Marx

Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918)

- Russian
- Critiques the "passivity" underneath Kant's "Universal History"
- and argues against the "inevitability" of Marx's revolution
 - although not its desirability
- Also takes on Hegel's categories of historical actors
 - to elevate the "individual"
 - to document the personal responsibility to change history

Five paragraphs from the end of II:

"[L]et us examine more closely the case in which a man's own actions -- past, present or future -- seem to him entirely colored by necessity. We already know that such a man, regarding himself as a messenger of God, like Mohammed, as one chosen by ineluctable destiny, like Napoleon, or as the expression of the irresistible force of historical progress, like some of the public men in the 19th century, displays almost elemental strength of will, and sweeps from his path like a house of cards all the obstacles set up by the small-town Hamlets and Hamletkins. But this case interests us now from another angle, namely: When the consciousness of my lack of free will presents itself to me only in the form of the complete subjective and objective impossibility of acting differently from the way I am acting, and when, at the same time, my actions are to me the most desirable of all other possible actions, then in my mind necessity becomes identified with freedom and freedom with necessity; and then, I am unfree only in the sense that I cannot disturb this identity between freedom and necessity, I cannot oppose one to the other, I cannot feel the restraint of necessity. But such a lack of freedom is at the same time its fullest manifestation."

IV-- a:

"[Lamprecht] quoted the following words, uttered by the Iron Chancellor in the North German Reichstag on April 16, 1869:

'Gentlemen, we can neither ignore the history of the past nor create the future. I would like to warn you against the mistake that causes people to advance the hands of their clocks, thinking that thereby they are hastening the passage of time. My influence on the events I took advantage of is usually exaggerated; but it would never occur to anyone to demand that I should make history. I could not do that even in conjunction with you, although together, we could resist the whole world. We cannot make history; we must wait while it is being made. We will not make fruit ripen more quickly by subjecting it to the heat of a lamp; and if we pluck the fruit before it is ripe we will only prevent its growth and spoil it.'

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IV-- b:

"According to Bismarck, events occur of themselves, and we can secure what they prepare for us. But every act of 'securing' is also an historical event. What is the difference between such events and those that occur of themselves? Actually, nearly every historical event is simultaneously an act of the "securing" by somebody of the already ripened fruit of preceding development and a link in the chain of events which are preparing the fruits of the future. How can acts of "securing" be opposed to the natural course of things? Evidently, Bismarck wanted to say that individuals and groups of individuals operating in history never were and never will be all-powerful. This, of course, is beyond all doubt. Nevertheless, we would like to know what their power -- far from omnipotent, of course -- depends on; under what circumstances it grows and under what circumstances it diminishes. Neither Bismarck nor the learned advocate of the 'universal' conception of history who quotes him answers these questions."

End of essay -- a:

"Bismarck said that we cannot make history and must wait while it is being made. But who makes history? It is made by the social man, who is its sole 'factor.' The social man creates his own, social, relationships. But if in a given period he creates given relationships and not others, there must be some cause for it, of course; it is determined by the state of his productive forces. No great man can foist on society relations which no longer conform to the state of these forces, or which do not yet conform to them. In this sense, Indeed, he cannot make history, and in this sense he would advance the hands of his clock in vain; he would not hasten the passage of time, nor turn it back...."

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End of essay -- b:

"Social relationships have their inherent logic; as long as people live in given mutual relationships they will feel, think and act in a given way, and no other. Attempts on the part of public men to combat this logic also would be fruitless; the natural course of things (this logic of social relationships) would reduce all his effort to nought. But if I know in what direction social relations are changing owing to given changes in the social-economic process of production, I also know in what direction social mentality is changing; consequently, I am able to influence it. Influencing social mentality means influencing historical events. Hence, in a certain sense, I can make history, and there is no need for me to wait while 'it is being made.'

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End of essay -- c:

"Monod believes that really important events and individuals in history are important only as signs and symbols of the development of institutions and economic conditions. This is a correct although very inexact expressed idea; but precisely because this idea is correct it is wrong to oppose the activities of great men to 'the slow progress' of the conditions and institutions mentioned. The more or less slow changes in 'economic conditions' periodically confront society with the necessity of more or less rapidly changing its institutions. This change never takes place 'by itself'; it always needs the intervention of men, who thus are confronted with great social problems. And it is those men who do more than others to facilitate the solution of these problems who are called great men. But solving a problem does not mean being only a 'symbol' and a 'sign' of the fact that it has been solved."

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End of essay -- d:

"We think Monod opposed the one to the other mainly because he was carried away by the pleasant catchword 'slow.' Many modern evolutionists are very fond of this catchword. Psychologically, this passion is comprehensible: inevitably it arises in the respectable milieu of moderation and punctiliousness.... But logically it does not bear examination, as Hegel proved.

And it is not only for 'beginners,' not only for 'great' men that a broad field of activity is open. It is open for all those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to love their neighbors. The concept great is a relative concept. In the ethical sense every man is great who, to use the Biblical phrase, 'lays down his life for his friend.'

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Marc Bloch (1886-1944)

- French (and Jewish)
- Historian of medieval France and a co-founder of the "Annales School"
- Placed emphasis on "everyday life" and telling a "total history" which accounted for all members of a society, not just its elites or leaders.

Annales Approach to History

- Combined geography, history, and the sociological approaches of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*
 - Founded and edited by Marc Bloch (medievalist) and Lucien Febvre (early modernist) in 1929 at University of Strasbourg, later moved to Paris
- Approach rejected the predominant emphasis on politics, diplomacy and war of Romantic historiography
- Pioneered an approach to a study of
 - long-term historical structures (*la longue durée*) over events
 - geography
 - material culture
 - mentalities (*mentalités*) or psychology of the epoch

Georges Duby on Annales history

- Annales approach "relegated the sensational to the sidelines and was reluctant to give a simple accounting of events, but strived on the contrary to pose and solve problems and, neglecting surface disturbances, to observe the long and medium-term evolution of economy, society and civilisation." -- Georges Duby, Annales school historian, in forward to his book "Le dimanche de Bouvines" (1973).

Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975)

- British historian
- Wrote a twelve-volume analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations: *A Study of History* (1934-1961)
 - synthesis of global history
 - "Metahistory" -- universal rhythms of rise, flowering and decline
 - An heir to Kant's idea of universal history; also to Khaldun's and Gibbon's idea of cycles

Toynbee as historian

- History as the rise and fall of civilizations
- Not because of natural environment
- And rather than the history of nation-states or of ethnic groups.
- Posited civilizations as focus of historian
 - "Western Civilization" = all the nations that have existed in Western Europe since the collapse of the Roman Empire
 - "Orthodox Civilization" = Russia and the Balkans
 - "Greco-Roman Civilization" = what preceded Western Civilization ("Classical Civilization")

“Challenge-and-Response”

- Civilizations arose in response to some set of challenges of extreme difficulty
 - That response came from “creative minorities” who devised solutions that reoriented their entire society.
 - Physical Challenges and Responses
 - How do we farm on the Nile flood plain/desert? Organize people into workers who can build large-scale irrigation projects
 - Social Challenges and Responses
 - How do we stay cohesive when Roman Empire is collapsing? Use the Church to consolidate the Barbarian tribes into a single religious community.
- Responding to challenge = growth
- Failing to respond to challenge = decline
- Thus, according to Toynbee: “Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.”

R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943)

- British historian and archaeologist of Roman Britain
- most famous for *The Idea of History* (1946, posthumously published by his student, E. H. Carr).
- “History as Re-Enactment of Past Experience” is his attempt to understand the psychological process of the mind in history.
- *The Idea of History* argued that history as a discipline = the reliving of the past in one’s own mind.
 - Only by immersing oneself in the mental actions behind events, by rethinking the past, can one understand it.

Collingwood & “History as Science”

- Argued that historical studies should be recognized as potentially producing results as much “knowledge” as the findings of the natural sciences.
 - Sought “to vindicate history as a form of knowledge distinct from natural science and yet valid in its own right.”
- “History is for human self-knowledge ... the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.”

Next Time:

- The “Problem” of Modernity
- The Point of Departure in Modern Historiography: Technology, The Individual, The Community
 - Gramsci
 - Benjamin
 - Lears
 - Schwartz