

»White Men Can't Jump...«

Objectivity and Fiction

Oto Luthar

»A different reality is possible«,
he defended himself,
 »if only you succeed in looking
left and right from your own nose«

Juan Octavio Paz, *Everyday pedagogics*

»A us Absicht und Stoff entsteht die Form«, claimed Ranke.¹ Ranke still believed in a mission. He also believed in a higher law. »Telling it like it was« was his ideal and this was an event in itself in human comprehensibility, yet also a relic. Objectivity, even though »farblos«, »abgebrechend« or »ermüdent erscheinen« had to be »ein Stück historischer Arbeiten«. He would sooner admit to a defeat »am Ende hat man's nicht erreicht« than the possibility of something creative, (with narrative) interfering with the world that was »ein andere«.

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»White men can't jump«, says Sidney Deane (Wesley Snipes) to his partner Billy Hoyle (Woody Harrelson) in the film² of the same title. Sidney does not believe anything (or very little) except that the truth is what is most advantageous at the moment, absurd as it may be, just like the statement that white men can't dunk. Sidney Deane does not only believe that nowadays one

¹ Leopold von Ranke, »Über die Verwandtschaft und Unterschied der Historie und Politik«, Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, dtv, Munich, 1990.

² The film 'White Men Can't Jump' by Ron Shelton is a well meant criticism of the rationality of the white race and its major characteristics: exaggerated obstinacy, determination and vanity. The story is about two team mates, sometime friends, who play basketball for money. An African American, played by Wesley Snipes, who looks at life very pragmatically, is still quite natural in his outlook and always has to explain to his white team colleague, played by Woody Harrelson, that one sometimes has to let loose...

manipulae the world but he also knows that it is necessary if one wishes to survive. To him and to Billy's girlfriend, who tries to reason with Billy in the best possible way that sometimes you win even if you lose or lose even if it looks as though you won, interpretation is everything...

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Of a similar nature is the premise that »blacks have the lowest IQs« as was statistically (read »objectively«) claimed by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray in their book called *The Bell Curve*³. Leaving aside the absurd of such »scientific« procedure and opting for methodology, soon leads again to the imaginary principle of objectivity. The »result« was – as is stressed repeatedly – acquired on the basis of measurements and was therefore supposed to be objective, legitimating the authors their claims and procedures...

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The statements expressed above are by way of an introduction to the following contemplation upon relations between objectivity and fiction, and are either chosen at random or are the result of work on different topics (the history of modern racism, discourses on nationalism) carried out by the author recently.

The final metaphorical starting-point – and a current example of the principle of objectivity – was chosen to stress the fact that this principle is taken to an absurd conclusion in certain quasi-scientific debates on the various cognitive capacities of different races. Above all, this is a clear example that often factual data are not in dispute⁴, but the interpretation of the data is.

³ In the book with the significant subtitle: »Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life«, the authors try to support three important claims: that Asians have a higher average IQ than white people; that most immigrants come from groups with lower IQs; and that the IQ score of black people in Africa is »substantially below« the black American average. Each of these seemingly formally objective claims has a key role in the formulation of *The Bell Curve*'s broader suggestions about the relationship between race, heredity, IQ and social structure. (See also the article by Charles Lane: »The Tainted Sources of 'The Bell Curve'« in the *New York Review of Books*, Volume XLI, No 20., p. 14 – 19.)

⁴ One of the greatest absurdities of such an approach was the assertion about inferior black African intelligence which has particularly far-reaching implications. Namely, »if it can be shown that low IQ can be taken as being predictive of social ills such as crime, poverty and unstable families, current views of Africa and of the sources of its tragic problems would have to be significantly revised ... And a lower African IQs could also be taken as refuting the claim that black Americans' lower IQ is a legacy of racism, assuming, as Murray and Herrnstein put it, that 'the African black population has not been subjected to the historical legacy of American black slavery and discrimination, and might therefore have higher scores' (p. 288)«. Referrals to the racist explanations of authors such as Richard Lynn are especially problematic. He claims »that genetic mental superiority of the Jews may be a happy Darwinian by-product of 'intermittent persecutions which the more intelligent may have been able to foresee and

This also shows the variable costs incurred by the principle of objective interpretation in general. The price can be high – consider that between Ranke's times and the present it has several times been proven that the criterion of objectivity is an illusion – nonetheless this issue is one of the main issues of the philosophy of history and the modern theory of historiography. This becomes obvious by careful reading of some of Ranke's theoretical papers. Similar facts can be proven by the analysis of letters to his closest contemporary Droysen, who established as early as in the middle of the 19th century that it is our imagination that determines particular phenomena in space and time and not some criterion of objectivity. (Droysen, 1856/57, 1882).

What (other) purpose can the establishment of some (selective) criterion, for which it was clear from the outset that it will not be easily accessible or not accessible at all, serve?

With such emphasis on the principle of objectivity, a certain (moral, political, or aesthetic...) concept can still be established and preserved. In Ranke's philosophy, it was political interest (politics/science, everyday political practice and politics as a long term process of strictly controlled change and leadership...) and a wish for a working definition of the relationship between politics and historiography or history. For the authors of the later period, especially the historians, the following statement, which Freud once said was true of biographers, is also true for historians: sooner or later they fall in love with the subject of their study. Some of them may truly feel some kind of inner mission and in their images of themselves and the world become part of the events, creators of politics, cultures, etc., while over everything, in their professional opinion, hovers the law of objectivity...

For historiography of the 19th century and for the final codification of history as a national science this entails the end of the belief that historiography is a literary art or a part of rhetoric, and historiography is no longer just a profession, a job or a mission, but becomes an (objective) science (with stress on both, the »objective« and »science«) and of course an act of patriotism...

This of course creates some crucial changes, in the manner of interpretation, with the entire set of categories replaced. Rather than fact and fantasy, the terms truth and error are introduced, and this is important for the present discussion on relations between the objective and subjective or fictional form of representation (interpretation), where the truth and the fact have become equal. Fiction in this case is represented as a sheer opposition to the first, as an

escape«». (See Richard Lynn, »Civilization and the Quality of Population«, *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, Vol. 16. No. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 123. Here quoted from Charles Lane, »The Tainted Sources...«, p. 16).

obstacle to the comprehension of reality. History was opposed to fiction (a term mostly associated with novels), a literary form, which, contrary to imagining what was real, dealt with imagining what was possible, in short something that can only be imagined but does not really exist. According to Hayden White (White, 1982) this brought about a fantasy of an historical discourse consisting only of statements that can be verified by facts... but mostly the goal of historians of the 19th century was to erase every trace of the fictional or merely imaginable from their discourse. It was a case of the thorough prevention and denial of poetic or rhetorical procedures and the avoidance of what might be characterised as an intuitive procedure by the author. All this of course did not happen suddenly, but the process of formalization of historiography, with several detours, lasted more than a century.

To make these issues clearer let us examine some of the basic characteristics of this transition:

From story to morality

At the end of the 17th century, the western European world was still enchanted by Roman and Greek history, rediscovered during the Renaissance. Historiography was similar in tone to novel writing, full of awe and respectfulness toward the idealized-virtuous citizens of Rome and Athens. Contemporaries were constantly compared to paragons of virtue from the ancient past, and the crude language of the chroniclers of mediaeval Europe was simultaneously criticised. If someone wished to learn something more about the contemporary history of his own environment, he/she had to, according to the French example, read genealogical narratives of noble families which were almost without exception derived from other sources. These were, like du Haillan, for example full of »such dirty and low words that can only reflect the thoughts of crooks and rude men... (and) ...by no means reflect the thoughts of kings and virtuous men« (Aries 1988). The writers of these »stories« were in his opinion so distant in tone from statesmanlike language that they were incapable of sane judgement.

Authors of a later period were mostly satisfied by using »sources« that were clarified versions of »vulgar« stories modified to the tastes of their time. Like Anquetil, who freely claimed that *Histoire de la France* is a compilation, they principally tried to establish which version of the subject was best presented in the works of their predecessors. The chosen »narrative« was then supplemented by whatever they believed to be missing and their actions were justified by the claim that the public was supposedly in need of activation by a suitable traditional version and that the possible literalization of such narra-

tives was recommendable only on the condition that it did not change the established order of things. According to Aries, for generations up to the end of the 16th century, people were comfortable with the monotony of a message that was always the same and the contents of which were, according to their beliefs, determined forever. Only changes in style, rhetoric or extension were allowed.

On the other hand, the same authors avoided quoting original sources and the original texts. Moreover, the accurate presentation of »manuscripts«, as originals were called, was considered to be a barbaric act, a tedious unravelling of fragmentary texts, the details of which were »impossible to include into general history anyway«. They saw their mission as modifying this original »substance« according to the tastes of their own period. A high style, free of blasphemies, tasteless jokes and proverbs was used.

At the end of the 17th century, however, the need to constitute modern national history arose, yet until the end of the 18th century it was still in its ancient (dis)guise. Its purpose was to rehabilitate previous national rulers and to fabricate new national heroes (a good example of this is provided by a comparison of important figures of the French revolution with ancient heroes or gods). All this led to a new comprehension of historiography. For instance, from this moment on, an historical figure such as Klodovik was no longer depicted as bloodthirsty and Dagobert as being fearful. Klodovik II and his successors, although still reprehensible rulers, were no longer deemed lazy thugs, rude men, but people worthy of respect as part of national history.

History became an act of patriotism and gradually changed into a collection of moral and political lessons. For Furetier, a French historian of the early 18th century, history is nothing more than »morality, reduced to acts and examples« (Aries, pp 135-136) that is offered to people as a reflection of their mistakes. This is a serious announcement of a constitutive phase of classic, nationally oriented historiography, which, in addition to introducing (educational) dialogue with its public, also explicitly recognises it for the first time. The climax of this process was the scientification of historiography. But before this actually took place, France (at the time still determining the orientation of western historiography) was still under the influence of the romantically colourful generation of Thierry, and above all Michelet, who, in his »authentic« report, dealt with the events of the past with the same »alien character«, or otherness that was characteristic of fiction. The strictly scientific approach to history was a reaction to the previous forms of extremely literally-oriented and mythologised historiography. The paths later taken by historical practice do not only include defictionalisation but also demythification of any domain of inquiry and representation.

History and science

History, the realistic science par excellence, was set up as superior to fiction as the study of the real in contrast to the study of the merely imaginable. One might also consider the words of White: »Although Ranke had in mind that form of the novel which we have since come to call Romantic, when he castigated it as mere fancy, he manifested a prejudice shared by many of his contemporaries, when he defined history as the study of the real and the novel as the representation of the imaginary. Only a few theoreticians, among whom J.G.Droysen was the most prominent, saw that it was impossible to write history without having recourse to the techniques of the orator and the poet. Most of the 'scientific' historians of the age did not see that for every identifiable kind of novel, historians produced an equivalent kind of historical discourse. Romantic historiography produced its genius in Michelet, Realistic historiography its paradigm in Ranke himself, Symbolist historiography produced Burchardt (who had more in common with Flaubert and Baudelaire than Ranke), and Modernist historiography its prototype in Spengler. It was no accident that the Realistic novel and Rankean historicism entered their respective crisis at roughly the same time«. (White 1982:124)

Nevertheless, we can say that there were several styles of historic presentation in the past, but only until the beginning of 19th century, but that a generation of »scientific« historiographers did not acknowledge these, being »captive of the illusion that one could write history without employing any fictional techniques whatsoever«, or as White says »they continued to honour the conception of the opposition of history to fiction throughout the entire period, even while producing forms of historical discourse different from one another, and that their grounding in aesthetic preconceptions of the nature of historical process alone could explain those differences. Historians continued to believe that different interpretations of the same set of events were functions of ideological distortions or of inadequate factual data«. They also believed that »if one only eschewed ideology and remained true to the facts, history would produce a knowledge as certain as anything offered by the physical sciences and as objective as a mathematical exercise«. (White 1982:125).

They did not realise, however, that facts do not speak for themselves but that historians speak for them, that they speak on their behalf and combine the fragments of the past into a whole »whose integrity is – in its representation – a purely discursive one. Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensive totality, capable of serving as the object of representation, is a poetic process«. Here the historian must utilise precisely the same strategies, the same modalities of representing

relationships in terms that the poet or novelist uses. These fragments have to be put together to make a whole of a particular, not general, nature. (White 1982:125)

We might almost agree with White yet at the same time ask ourselves on what basis it is possible to claim that historical discourse has more factors in common with, than, distinct from, not with the process of novel writing. The first basis – for White – is to be found in recent developments in literary theory – especially in the fact that modern structuralists and literary reviewers insist on the necessity of dissolving the distinction between prose and poetry in order to identify their shared attributes as a form of linguistic behaviour that on one side, are as much constitutive of their objects of representation as they are reflective of external reality, and projective of internal emotional states on the other. White even refers to Stalin and his claim that language belonged neither to the superstructure nor the base of cultural praxis, and especially stresses that language is the instrument of mediation between consciousness and the world it inhabits. If this is nothing new for literary theoreticians, it is new for historians who are »buried in the archives, hoping by what they call a 'sifting of the facts' or 'the manipulation of data' to find the form of the reality that will serve as the object of representation in the account that they will write when 'all the facts are known' and they have finally 'got the story straight'«. (White 1982:126)

Similar views were shared by White in the early seventies in his work »Metahistory«, where he claimed, referring to literary theory, that 'poetising' is not an activity that hovers over reality (White 1973:IX). Some fifteen years later he claims that we are therefore no longer compelled »to believe – as historians in the post-Romantic period had to believe – that fiction is the antithesis of fact ... or that we can relate facts to one another without the aid of some enabling and generally fictional matrix«. (White 1982:126). In his opinion, this would also prove to be a useful cognition for historians if they weren't »so fetishistically enamoured of the notion of 'facts'« and because of that »so congenitally hostile to 'theory' in any form that the presence in a historical work of a formal theory used to explicate the relationship between facts and concepts is enough to earn them the charge of having defected to the despised sociology or of having lapsed into the nefarious labelled philosophy of history«.

The height of White's insight was his reference to Nietzsche who claimed that every discipline is constituted of what it forbids its practitioners to do. In his opinion (which is put into one of the constitutive theses of contemporary theory of historiography), no other science has as many taboos as professional historiography. Those taboos are present »so much so that the so-called 'historical method' consists of little more than the injunction to 'get the story

straight' (without any notion of what the relation of 'story' to 'fact' might be) and to avoid both conceptual overdetermination and imaginative excess ...at any price.«

The price to pay for this is a considerable one. »It has resulted in the repression of the conceptual apparatus« (without which single facts cannot be aggregated into complex macrostructures and constituted as objects of discursive representation in a historical narrative) and the relegation of the poetic moment in historical writing to the interior of the discursive (where it functions as the unacknowledged – and therefore uncriticisable – content of historical narrative).

It is nowadays impossible to draw a firm line between history and philosophy of history because the difference is only that »the latter brings the conceptual apparatus by which the facts are ordered in the discourse to the surface of the text, while history proper (as it is called) buries it in the interior of the narrative, where it serves as a hidden or implicit shaping device...«. Such distinctions lead to the fact that »historians usually work with much less linguistic (and therefore less poetic) self-consciousness than writers of fiction do«, or even worse, it leads to the situation where »the persona of the author appears nowhere identifiable in the text« and where historians aim to be »clear what technical terms mean, when they dare to use any«.

Beyond sanctions?

The problem is that contemporary historians in refer to such authors as Thucydides, Tacitus, Michelet, Ranke, Droysen, Tocqueville and Burchardt support of their views, and forget that these historians at least had a rhetorical self-consciousness that permitted them to recognise that any set of factors was variously and equally legitimately, describable. »There is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything, on the basis of which an interpretation of that can consequently be brought to bear.« (White 1982:127).

»They recognised, in short, that all original descriptions of any field of phenomena are already interpretations of its structure and that linguistic mode in which the original description ... of the field is cast, will implicitly rule out certain modes of representation and modes of explanation regarding the field's structure, and tacitly sanction others.« In other words, it is true that every form of description is already limited by the range of »modes of emplotment« and »modes of argument« which serve to disclose the meaning of the field in a discursive prose representation. According to White, »the plot structure of a historical narrative (how things turned out as they did) and the formal argu-

ment or explanation of why things happened or turned out as they did are prefigured by the original description (of the 'fact' to be explained) in a given dominant modality of language use: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or irony«. The mode of metaphor will favour the archetype of Romance as a privileged mode of emplotment (»a mode of explanation that identifies knowledge with the appreciation and delineation of the particularity and individuality of things«). The mode of metonymy will favour a tragic plot structure (»as a privileged mode of emplotment and mechanistic casual connections as the favoured mode of explanation, to account for changes topographically outlined in the emplotment«). An ironic original description of the field will generate a tendency to favour emplotment in a satirical mode (and pragmatic or contextual explanation of the structures thus illuminated). And finally, themes originally described in the synecdochic mode will tend to generate comic emplotments (and organicist explanations of why these fields change as they do. (White 1982:128).

One might add that each of the linguistic modes of emplotment and modes of explanation has affinities with a specific ideological position. White divides them into four types: anarchist, radical, liberal and conservative. The suitability of these terms could be discussed but there is no argument with his claim that »the issue of ideology points to the fact that there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and suggests that the very use of language itself implies ... a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological or more generally political: not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated.« (White, 1982:129).

Deriving from this statement is the fact that the issue here is not »What are the facts? but rather, how are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another? Some people profess the view that history, for example, cannot become a science until it finds a technical terminology adequate to the correct characterisation of its object of study, in the way that physics did in calculus and chemistry did in the periodic table. Such is the recommendation of Praxists, Positivists, Cilometrians and so on. Others will continue to insist that the integrity of historiography depends on its use of ordinary language, its avoidance of jargon. The latter suppose that ordinary language is a safeguard against ideological deformation of the 'facts'. What they fail to recognise is that ordinary language itself has its own forms of terminological determinism, represented by the figures of speech without which discourse itself is impossible.« (White 1982:134).

Similar views to these are not infrequent, the strict scientific principle of objectivity was contemplated by some of Ranke's contemporaries (more openly

after his death – for example, his colleague Lorenz⁵ in 1891) and later this was repeatedly the subject of philosophical and historical discussion, especially in the times of the newly-discovered emancipation of philosophy of history (Hemple, 1942), and the period marked by Colingwood in the 60's. In the past quarter of the century – when the theory of historiography gained importance and authors such as H.M. Baumgartner⁶, Karl-Georg Faber⁷, Jörn Rüsen⁸, and White⁹ stressed just the opposite – here we have come across the belief that form makes history visible.¹⁰

»Geschichte existiert nicht solange sie nicht geschaffen wird« (Rosenstone 1991), Ranke was told over one century and a half later by historians that dared to look left and right from their nose and proved that »the 'real' past is devoid of meaning and order«, and that in historical narrative, the systems of meaning peculiar to a culture or society are tested against the capacity of any set of 'real' events to yield to such a system...

Finally, let us note that even some twenty years ago (around 1975) it was very hard to contemplate within the German historiographic debate (which is still the most authoritative in central Europe).¹¹ German historiographers were still striving for some mutual (general) reference point for each concrete historical interpretation, which should precisely define what can be discussed and acknowledged »as history«. They were (together with the historians in their

⁵ Ottokar Lorenz, *Leopold von Ranke*, Berlin 1891, p. 127, quoted here from Helmut Berding, »Leopold von Ranke«, in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Historiker I*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1971, p. 13.

⁶ H.M. Baumgartner in his article »Narrative struktur und Objektivität. Wahrheitskriterium im historischen Wissen« (in Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Objektivität. Aufsätze zur Geschichtstheorie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1975), attempts to explain the true sense of objectivity, as well as the relation between objectivity and truth on the basis of five argumentative steps or lines (»Argumentationsschritt«, »Argumentationsreihe«):

the first step stresses the use of the term »historical judgement«;

the second covers the relation between objectivity and the truth;

the third attempts to find an answer to the question of whether objectivity can be ascribed to history at all and if so, how;

the fourth explains expressions of narrative structure, a relation between the narrative and the event and the time-related dependency of narrative organisation of past events; and
the fifth analyses the connection between narrative structure and truth.

⁷ Karl-Georg Faber, *Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 1982.

⁸ Jörg Rüsen, *Zeit und Sinn. Die Strategien historischen Denkens*, Fischer, Frankfurt, 1990.

⁹ Together with White, the discussion on these issues was brought to Europe by Dominick la Capra, Steven Kaplan and Martin Jay, just to mention a few.

¹⁰ Reinhardt Koselleck, »Wozu noch Historie?« in Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, dtv, Munich, 1990, pp. 347-365.

¹¹ A fine example of such views is the introduction by Jörn Rüsen in his book *Historische Objektivität*, pp 5-8.

region of influence) aiming for clearly defined methods and a mutual sense of historic realisation »allgemeine Erkenntniszwecke«). They repeatedly asserted that all they wanted was to make historiography as historical as possible (»es geht darum, die Geschichtswissenschaft so historisch wie möglich zu machen«¹²).

The issue of the objectivity of historical realisation was thus at the centre of their discussions, proving the familiar and previously discussed tendency to make historiography scientific (»Wissenschaftlichkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft«) and demonstrating a need for those »moments of historic realisation« that provide history with a »specially high degree of validity« (»einen besonders hohen Grad an Geltung verschaffen«¹³). Such views are extremely problematic, because they put a historian in an unenviable position, particularly if he/she wishes to remain faithful to the tradition of German philosophy of history. As a scientist, a historian is suddenly overburdened (»überfordert«). He/she is also faced with a demand for the argumentation of past practices of living as well as with expectations of favourable instructions for (different) procedures (»Handlungsmaximen«¹⁴).

In spite of such relativisations of the »principles of objectivity«, these final short conclusions clearly prove (hopefully) to what extent European discussion – in spite of Veyne's¹⁵ thematisation of intrigue – really digressed from Ranke's »werwissenschaftlichung« of history or drew near to the new conceptualisation of metahistory.

One thing is already »clear«; a recent shift in historical thinking has brought – as Ginzburg would put it – »the peripheral, blurred area between history and fiction close to the center of contemporary historiographical debate«.¹⁶

Or as Strout¹⁷ would say: »the widespread recognition that historical evidence is not 'a transparent medium', or 'an open window that gives us direct access to reality', is a crucial contribution to historical understanding«. It is also true on the other side, that drastic minimization of differences between fiction and history could contribute to the reduction of historiography to »arbitrary aes-

¹² *Ibid.* p 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Karl-Georg Faber, »Objektivität in der Geschichtswissenschaft« and J. Rüsen, *Historische Objektivität*, p 10.

¹⁵ See Paul Veyne, *Foucault revolution de l'histoire*, Edition du Seuil, Paris, 1978, German translation published in 1992. See also Paul Veyne, *Der Eisberg der Geschichte*, Merve, Berlin, 1981 and Paul Veyne, *Aus der Geschichte*, Merve, Berlin, 1986.

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, »Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian«, *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1991, p. 87.

¹⁷ Cushing Strout, »Border crossings: History, fiction and Dead Certainties«, *History & Theory* XXXI, No 1, 1992

thetic or political preferences« but we can really agree with those who claim that by turning the idea of evidence into »a wall, which by definition precludes any access to reality«, we get »a sort of inverted positivism«¹⁸. And we certainly can not agree with the statement that »narrativists« boast of their liberation from positivistic realism and in this way might minimise the chance of the historian enlarging historical understanding.

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¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, »Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian«, *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1991, p. 83.