



Postmodern Theory of History: A Critique

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1. Among the more striking spinoffs of postmodernism in the past fifteen years or so has been an arresting theory of history. On the assumption that “the historical text is an object in itself, made entirely from language, and thus subject to the interrogations devised by the sciences of language use from ancient rhetoric to modern semiotics”¹, postmodernists have set out to enlighten historians about their discipline. From that perspective, they have emphasized the intrinsic fictionality of historical writing, derided the factualist empiricism that purportedly governs the work of professional historians, dismissed the ideal of objectivity as a myth, and rejected the truth claims of traditional historiography. Historians have been invited to accept the postmodern approach as a means to critical self reflection and to the improvement of practice.

Some postmodern theorists have taken a more overtly anti-historical line that bears directly on important questions of theory and practice. Rejecting the putative “autonomy” claims of professional historiography, they dismiss the notion of a distinctively “historical” mode of understanding the past. On this view, the study of origins and development is of limited analytical value; and the historicist principle of historical specificity or individuality is the remnant of a venerable tradition that has been displaced. It follows that historians ought to give up their claim to special authority in the study of the past. This article will concentrate on the postmodern rejection of the notion that the past has to be understood “historically.”

¹ Hans KELLNER, “Introduction: Describing Re-Descriptions” in Frank ANKERSMIT and Hans KELLNER (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 9.



On the whole, historians have been cool to the postmodern project, albeit without adopting the narrowly polemical posture assumed by Geoffrey Elton and Gertrude Himmelfarb². More recently, Richard Evans has written the sort of even-handed but critical survey of the voluminous literature that probably represents the views of most historians³. At this juncture then, as Dominick LaCapra has suggested, we may be in a position “where a more informed dialogue or debate between approaches... to history is possible,” avoiding “either automatic defenses or dismissals of recent theoretical tendencies”⁴. This article is intended to contribute to that sort of dialogue by setting forth as precisely as possible what appear to be the flaws in the postmodern dicta that historians have been asked to accept as accurate descriptions of their discipline. It deals with particular judgments advanced by postmodernists and touches only marginally on the elaborate theoretical structures that are said to sustain their conclusions.

We can take as a point of departure LaCapra’s apt comment that “history requires both as solid an empirical basis as the evidence allows and theoretically informed conceptualization that provides interpretive insight into facts and deepens the questions the historian poses to the past”⁵. This is especially true at the moment, after decades of historiographical and methodological proliferation. The question at issue, however, is the value of postmodern theory for historians.

In considering that question we run into a practical problem that should be noted at the outset. There is no single, authoritative version of the theory. Rather, we find recurring themes, assumptions,

² See, for example, G. R. ELTON, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991; Gertrude HIMMELFARB, *On Looking into the Abyss*, New York, Knopf, 1994.

³ Richard J. EVANS, *In Defence of History*, London, Granta Books, 1997. See also Joyce APPLEBY, Lynn HUNT, and Margaret JACOB (eds.), *Telling the Truth About History*, New York, Norton, 1994.

⁴ Dominick LACAPRA, review of Keith WINDSCHUTTLE, *The Killing of History*, *American Historical Review*, 103, 1998, p. 149.

⁵ *Ibidem*.



attitudes and dicta, expressed in multiple variants. Hence “postmodern theory of history” is an ideal type construct that embraces even more variation than usual. In this article I draw most of the illustrative material from the work of three disparate historians who have expounded postmodern themes with notable rhetorical and intellectual force: Dominick LaCapra, Robert Berkhofer and Allan Megill⁶. Other recent formulations, some of them intended for undergraduates, are less nuanced⁷. The fullest exposition of the conceptual foundations of postmodern theorizing about history is to be found in the writings of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit⁸,

⁶ Dominick LACAPRA, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Text” in D. LACAPRA and Steven L. KAPLAN, (eds.), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982; *Idem*, *History and Criticism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987; *Idem*, “History, Language and Reading: Waiting for Crillon” in *American Historical Review*, 100, 1995, pp. 799-828. Robert BERKHOFER, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995. Allan MEGILL, “‘Grand Narrative’ and the Discipline of History” in F. ANKERSMIT and H. KELLNER (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 151-73.

⁷ See, for example, Alun MUNSLOW, *Deconstructing History*, London, Routledge, 1997; Keith JENKINS, *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1991; *On ‘What Is History?’: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, London, Routledge, 1995; *Idem* (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1997. These works draw extensively on Hayden White. See also Patrick JOYCE, “The Return of History: Postmodernism and the Politics of Academic History in Britain” in *Past and Present*, 158, 1998, pp. 207-235. Joyce emphasizes the value of the application of postmodern theory to historical practice.

⁸ Although questions have been raised about whether White should be characterized as a postmodernist (notably by Wulf KANSTEINER, “Hayden White’s Critique of the Writing of History” in *History and Theory*, 32, 1993, p. 274), it is clear that he has exercised an enormous influence on the movement. He has been aptly described as “the progenitor of ‘the new philosophy of history’” by Frank ANKERSMIT, “Bibliographical Essay” in F. ANKERSMIT and H. KELLNER (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 280. The books that have earned White that title are familiar: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University



whose work has recently been subjected to a rigorous philosophical critique⁹.

If we take a bird's-eye view of postmodern theorizing about history, we find a number of interconnected flaws that severely limit its analytic value. First and foremost, its negative orientation —the preoccupation with exposing the “mythology of the discipline,” defined in terms of an archaic scientific empiricism— narrows the scope of the analysis. Having demolished the truth claims of history to their satisfaction, postmodern theorists stop right there, leaving a host of critical questions untouched. Thus, the rich resources of the “linguistic turn” have been brought to bear only within narrow limits imposed by extraneous assumptions. Second, the demythologizing impulse also contributes to the casual dismissal of the problem of understanding the past “historically” and obviates the need for argument in support of the anti-autonomy thesis. That is, attempts to describe a distinctive historical mode of understanding can be disposed of as self-serving disciplinary ideology. Third, although there is no logical connection between the fictionality thesis and the anti-autonomy thesis, the former performs a significant rhetorical function. Having constructed a “research paradigm” that caricatures the theory and practice of professional historiography, postmodern theorists can plausibly suggest that such a methodology is of no special value in the study of the past. Thus, postmodernism provides a redescription of history that not only removes its cognitive character

Press, 1987. For Ankersmit's contribution to postmodern theory of history, see his *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994; *Idem*, “Statements, Texts and Pictures” in F. ANKERSMIT and H. KELLNER, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-40.

⁹ Chris LORENZ, “Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the ‘Metaphorical Turn,’” in *History and Theory*, 37, 1998, pp. 309-329, is a brilliant analysis of the “deep presuppositions” underlying the theories of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. John H. ZAMMITO, “Ankersmit's Postmodernist Historiography: The Hyperbole of ‘Opacity’” *Ibidem*, pp. 330-46 carefully develops the theme stated in the subtitle; Perez ZAGORIN, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now”, in *Ibidem.*, 38, 1999, pp.1-24, is a critical discussion of a wide range of postmodern theorizing about history, with particular reference to its anti-realism and narrativism.



but also its specifically historical traits. Finally, the narrow focus of postmodern theorizing means that it falls far short of what we have come to expect of theory and philosophy of history. As Chris Lorenz has said, “historical narratives constitute truth-claims that must be elucidated and not annihilated by philosophy of history¹⁰. Postmodernism has swept the critical questions off the table.

Postmodern theory is unable to deal adequately with questions concerning the methodological implications of the historicity of human life, because it embodies a constricting formalism. The assumption that the fundamental characteristics of historical writing are determined by the literary forms intrinsic to it blocks out empirical examination of historiographical practice and the paradigms that actually guide it. In particular, postmodernists assume that since historians make extensive use of narrative, their work is governed by imperatives inherent in that genre. Hence history may be redescribed by showing the presence of characteristics dictated by the narrative form. When narrative is identified with fiction, this sort of formalist redescription supports the familiar postmodern emphasis on the fictionality of history. Lorenz has noted the claim, made by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, among others, that “historical narratives have a metaphorical structure and therefore no truth-value”¹¹. In addition, the description of historical writing primarily in terms of such generic literary forms necessarily excludes the distinctively “historical” element in historians’ approach to the past. That is, narrative as such is not specifically adapted to the study of the past. What matters is the use to which historians put narrative, within complex paradigms whose development began with the Enlightenment, as historians devised ways of dealing with phenomena of the historical world. But the conceptual structure of postmodern theory of history inhibits a recognition of these historiographical characteristics. There is point to Peter Ghosh’s vehement rejection of the notion that “the kernel of historical writing must be found in its exemplification of

¹⁰ Chris LORENZ, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 309.



deep, ahistorical literary forms —which is a kind of annihilation for the historian”¹².

Postmodernists suggest that their view of history flows directly and necessarily from the “linguistic turn” in the human studies. They chide historians for their anti-theoretical stance in refusing to recognize that literary theory has “impugned the very basis of traditional historical practice”¹³. In actuality, however, postmodern theory represents only one version —nihilistic, anti-historical, and neo-Nietzschean— of the linguistic turn. In work done in traditional philosophy of history —by Paul Ricoeur, Louis Mink, and Jörn Rüsen, for example— the new linguistic-rhetorical theory has been applied more constructively to elucidate problems in the field¹⁴.

In what follows I turn first (section 2) to the fictionality theme and the attack on the truth claims of professional historiography, which are said to rest on the sort of factualist empiricism that flourished early in this century. That theme is linked rhetorically to the rejection of the supposed “autonomy” claims made by professional historians (discussed in section 3), in the sense that the “research paradigm” attributed to them cannot sustain a claim to special authority in the study of the past.

2. Historians of a postmodern persuasion assume that their conclusions rest on the solid foundation of an omniscient literary-linguistic-rhetorical theory. From that vantage point they confidently expose the “mythology” of professional historiography, impugn the “research paradigm” that supposedly governs its work, and demonstrate the intrinsic fictionality of historical writing. Hans Kellner, a literary theorist, illustrates how postmodernism disposes of the truth claims of history. In his introduction to *A New Philosophy of History*, he “re-describes” history in such a way as to empty it of any

¹² Peter GHOSH, “Laid Down by Ranke” in *London Review of Books*, 20, October 15, 1998.

¹³ Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Louis MINK, *Historical Understanding*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987; Paul RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, I, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984; Jörn RÜSEN, *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986.



cognitive content. Kellner contends “that history can be redescribed as a discourse that is fundamentally rhetorical and that representing the past takes place through the creation of powerful, persuasive images which can be best understood as created objects, models, metaphors or proposals about reality.” In this vein, he reminds his readers that “philosophers have shown less interest in the truth-value of the historical statement and have turned to the narrative as a whole, which will have a truth more akin to the truth of a novel or a painting than to that of a syllogism”¹⁵. While postmodern historians may not subscribe to every detail of Kellner’s theory of representation, they accept the formalist assumption that since history takes the form of narrative, its output must be characterized as fictional or metaphorical. Within that theoretical framework, these historians have set out to demonstrate the inadequacy of the positivist empiricism and the “research paradigm” that they ascribe to professional historiography.

Robert Berkhofer’s full scale exposition of “history as text and discourse” is especially valuable because it is so explicit and detailed. His book develops a major postmodern theme that he had stated unequivocally some years before: “Contemporary literary theory defies the very intellectual foundations of current professional historical practice by denying the factuality that grounds the authority of history itself”¹⁶. In his book Berkhofer elaborates on this thesis, contrasting the views of “literary and rhetorical theorists” with the naïve conception of truth espoused by historians who believe that “the bare facts... constitute the truth of a history...” He derides what he characterizes as “the explicit factual message historians claim as the core of historical understanding.” Over against this caricature of current historiographical theory and practice, Berkhofer suggests that in some instances “aesthetic, stylistic, or other criteria might constitute the proper bases for determining the truthfulness of a history.” Thus, allegorical and analogical truths, for example, “must be judged by the moral, political or other criteria appropriate to the higher her-

¹⁵ Hans KELLNER, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ Robert BERKHOFER, “The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice” in *Poetics Today*, 9, 1988, reprinted in Keith JENKINS (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 139.



meneutics that establish the greater or ultimate meanings of histories and history for readers”¹⁷. On this view, professional historians, resistant to the “higher hermeneutics,” are bogged down in a fruitless examination of the documents.

Like other historians of a postmodern persuasion, Berkhofer contends that the factualist empiricism which he deplors constitutes the foundation of the research paradigm that dominates professional historiography. At its core is “professionally accepted methods for obtaining facts about the past from surviving evidence or sources.” It rests on the postulate of transparency, which holds that the documents provide the historian with a direct view of past reality. Historians are constrained by the simplistic epistemology that underlies their methodology: “The presupposition grounding normal historical practice is, therefore, that historians’ works are accurate representations of an actual past, ideally as photographs are popularly thought to be of their subjects or at least as maps are of their terrain, in a more frequently use analogy.” In order to drive home his point that the established historiographical paradigm has outlived its usefulness and is in the process of being superseded, presumably with the help of postmodern theory, Berkhofer refers to “the paradigm of normal history.” The analogy to Thomas Kuhn’s concept of “normal science” suggests that professional historians are wedded to the sort of routinized methodology that invites a paradigm shift. On this view, the paradigm of “normal history,” concerned primarily with extracting facts from sources, does not deal with “how those facts are combined into a larger expository synthesis”¹⁸. So described, professional historiography cannot claim special authority in the study of the past.

Writing from a deconstructionist perspective, Dominick LaCapra has developed a number of postmodern themes in a series of essays dating from as early as 1982. At the very outset he mounted a critique of “documentary history,” based on a simplistic factualist empiricism. He did not mince words: “Indeed a belief that historiography is a purely documentary or descriptive reconstitution of the past may be prone to blind fictionalizing because it does not explicitly and

¹⁷ Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.* pp. 71-73.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29, 34-38, 64.



critically raise the problem of the role of fictions (for example, in the form of models, analytic types, and heuristic fictions) in the attempt to represent reality." Such "documentary historiography... tries to exclude interpretation or to see it only in the guise of bias or subjectivity." Just which historians subscribe to this odd view of "interpretation" we are not told.

A few years ago LaCapra again deplored the defects of "documentary history" and reminded historians that language is not "a purely transparent medium that may simply be looked through (or bracketed) in the interest of (re)presenting the object or findings of research." Language so described "poses problems for the historian (or other analyst) and signals the manner in which the observer is constitutively implicated in the object of research." At this point LaCapra adds a Freudian twist to the postmodern line: "Freud framed this problem in terms of transference, and transference involves... the tendency of the analyst-analysand relation to repeat typically inappropriate parent-child relations..." LaCapra commends to the historian Freud's mode of handling these problems by attempting "to recall them in memory and critically work through them." Toward the end of his essay, he characterizes such working-through as "the goal of a controlled dialogic exchange with the past"¹⁹. Whatever the utility of such a Freudian approach, it reinforces the postmodern tendency to concentrate on matters of fictionality and subjectivity to the neglect of concrete problems of historical conceptualization.

In an elegant essay Allan Megill presents a number of postmodern themes without an elaborate theoretical apparatus, which is simply presupposed. Since the contours of "a new philosophy of history" have been well established, he sets forth a few salient principles in an ingenious framework and asks historians to recognize their validity. In the postmodern mode, Megill urges historians to "*confront, in an explicit way, the fictionality implicit in all works of history.*" But he seeks a more subtle and flexible treatment of the "history/fiction dualism." That dualism has been of limited analytical value —subject

¹⁹ Dominick LACAPRA, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts" in D. LACAPRA and S. L. KAPLAN (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 79; "History, Language and Reading...", pp. 803-804, 828.



to polemical misuse by contending forces— and needs to be “complexified.” To that end, he distinguishes between two kinds of fictionality: the “literary” and the “fictive.” The former denotes works of fiction. The latter is intended as a softer and presumably more acceptable notion: “By the ‘fictive’ I mean all those dimensions wherein works of history diverge from truth in its sense as correspondence to empirical reality.” This formulation locates Megill firmly in the postmodern camp, despite his disclaimer that he is simply discussing an issue that cannot be resolved. In this sentence, for example, he in effect dismisses Max Weber’s handling of the difficult problem of constructing concepts capable of yielding a good description of historical phenomena²⁰. Since history cannot escape such “fictive fictionality,” its truth claims are necessarily rather limited.

The primary component of postmodern theory of history, then, is a misdescription of professional historiography, which is characterized as committed to a crude factualist empiricism that is embodied in a research paradigm whose scope is limited to extracting “facts” from documents. That direct assault on the truth claims of history, in turn, is reinforced by a formalist approach that assumes that historical writing is governed by the literary forms, notably narrative, that it necessarily employs. That assumption, central to the assertion of the intrinsic fictionality of history, requires the imposition of generic, trans-historical concepts in the description of historiographical theory and practice. Such concepts, however, have no place for the specifically “historical” aspects of historiographical paradigms.

Such ahistorical formalism is spelled out at some length by Berkhofer. On this view, historians construct the real world “through the forms they use to give their texts the appearance of history.” It follows that “to the extent that history is a story, ultimately it obeys the conventions of story-telling.” Historians’ understanding of interpretation is inadequate because it “neglects the conventions governing its own construction.” From this perspective, the task of the theorist is not to inquire into historical practice and its operative assumptions, but rather to uncover the dominant literary forms and

²⁰ Allan MEGILL, “‘Grand Narrative’...” pp. 171-72. Emphasis in the original.



the “representations” that they require. Hence Berkhofer aims to describe “what historians must presuppose about the past in order to conceive it as history.” Narrativization is the primary instrument of history so conceived: “normal historical practice uses narrative structuring... to transform the past into history.” It follows that the salient features of historical practice are dictated by “narrative logic in some form”²¹.

As re-described by postmodernism, the “research paradigm” of professional historiography is a very crude instrument indeed. It clearly is of no special value for the study of the past.

3. Along with the denial of the truth claims of professional historiography, postmodernism also rejects the notion that there is a distinctively historical mode of understanding or that the past needs to be understood “historically.” Whereas the fictionality thesis has been asserted with considerable theoretical elaboration, however, the anti-autonomy dictum has been issued more casually, as if its validity had long been self evident. Some such assumption has been present in the postmodern canon from the beginning. On the first page of *Metahistory* Hayden White anticipated, in manner and in substance, what was soon to become orthodox doctrine: “Continental European thinkers have cast doubt on the value of specifically historical ‘consciousness’”²². More recently, Allan Megill has launched an aggressive attack on the belief in an “autonomously historical” mode of understanding. He expressed his doubts about the claim made by “‘professional’ or ‘disciplinary’ historiography... to a peculiarly authoritative role in the understanding of the past...”²³

Defining the problem in terms of “autonomy,” however, skews the debate at the very outset. In brief, since history is intrinsically interdisciplinary, it cannot be “autonomous” in any strict sense of the term and professional historians do not make such an extreme claim. Historiography as such does not possess self-sufficient analytical instruments of its own. From Thucydides to Ranke and beyond

²¹ Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-73, 36-38.

²² Hayden WHITE, *Metahistory*, p. 1.

²³ Allan MEGILL, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-53, 165.



historians have drawn on the intellectual resources available in their culture. What has been argued, however, especially in the historicist tradition, is that the historicity of the human world requires that the past be approached with methodological concepts and principles that are adapted to "historical" phenomena. Moreover, it has also been argued, notably by Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, among others, that historians necessarily draw on the social sciences in their study of the past. Central to any "critique of historical reason" is a full description of the relationship between history and the social sciences.

Megill, however, takes a hard line that yields a crude picture of professional historiography. On the assumption that historians are making a transparently false claim to "autonomy," he urges the "partial dedisciplinization" of history and "multidisciplinary interaction of a transformative sort." The second of the "prescriptive postulates" that he commends to historians reads: "*The Hybridization Postulate: Always establish residences outside the discipline*"²⁴. Thus, Megill advocates a totalizing interdisciplinarity that eliminates the specifically "historical" aspect of the paradigms of professional historiography. By a somewhat convoluted route, Berkhofer arrives at a similarly anti-historical position. On the (questionable) assumption that contextualism is "the primary mode of historical understanding," he points out (correctly) that historians share this notion with other disciplines. From these premises, he draws the odd conclusion that historians "cannot even claim that they alone seek to place things in the context of their times, although this claim is the supposed differentia of the discipline"²⁵. While historians make no such a monopolistic claim, they will argue that the relation between time and historical inquiry is a problem that needs to be explored.

While recognizing considerable variation in formulation, it can fairly be said that there is general agreement on two distinctive aspects of the "historical" approach to the study of the past, both of them connected with the dimension of time in the human world: a

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 169. Emphasis in the original.

²⁵ Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-34.



sensitivity to time-bound, *zeitspezifisch* phenomena and an interest in processes of continuity and change over time. The historicist tradition refers to the interconnected principles of individuality and development. So defined, history stands in a relationship of tension and complementarity with the generic and synchronic orientation of the social sciences.

In various ways, postmodernism dismisses the distinctively historical concern with particularities of time and place. Megill does so by assigning a primary role to the generalizing disciplines in the study of the past. That is, his proposal for the “partial dedisciplinization” of history presumes the lack of any special competence in the analysis of the time-bound specificity created by processes of continuity and change over time. Dominick LaCapra also makes short shrift of the claim that historians have a special interest in this area: “The purely documentary view of history often coincides with a historicist definition of the historical that identifies the object of study as changing ‘particulars’ in contrast with extratemporal or synchronic types or universals.” LaCapra disposes of this “venerable view” simply by remarking that it “ignores the historical process of repetition with variation or change,” and then moves on to different topics in the rest of the paragraph²⁶. In the postmodern mode, a sweeping judgment is presented as an aside, whose validity is self-evident. Berkhofer takes a formalist approach, treating “uniqueness” as the “wishful postulation” of a flawed methodology: “Contextualism presumes and therefore produces uniqueness as its chief explanatory or interpretive mode...”²⁷

The postmodern dismissal of the developmental dimension of historical thought is expressed succinctly in Frank Ankersmit’s comment that phenomena of the past ought to be studied “independently of their origins”²⁸. On this theme a line from Jean-Francois Lyotard has become a mantra for a good deal of postmodern discourse about his-

²⁶ Dominick LACAPRA, “Rethinking...”, p. 79.

²⁷ Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁸ Frank ANKERSMIT, “Historiography and Postmodernism” in *History and Topology*, p. 177.



tory: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives"²⁹. It is reflected in the titles of Megill's essay and Berkhofer's book. Such grand narratives or great stories, the foundation of professional historiography, we are told, have been discredited. With varying degrees of explicitness, it is suggested that developmental analysis of any sort is tainted by its association with metanarratives now seen to be flawed.

Megill makes extensive use of the concept of "grand narrative," a term that he has borrowed from Lyotard "with reservations and modifications." He takes a dim view of "the grand narratives that have prevailed in Western historiography" and which claim to offer "the authoritative account of history generally." In elaborating on this interpretation, Megill attributes to historians the "ontological assumption... of ultimate world unity." Professional historians, he suggests, "have generally held that every particular work of history ought to orient itself to history generally—that is, to a single history, which I shall here designate as History." He maintains that a belief in a single History remains fundamental to professional historiography. Megill also argues that the widespread belief in a "single History," embodies some of the characteristics of Rankean "universal history," whose limitations he explores. Megill concludes, in one of four "prescriptive postulates," that historians should renounce the "aspiration towards 'total history'"³⁰.

The first thing to be said about the "universal history" thesis is that contemporary historians do not in fact subscribe to the assumption of "ultimate world unity" in any of its variations. Historians have drifted away from that position during the last half of this century. In that connection it should be noted that in illustration of a secular version of Ranke's universal history Megill quotes J. B. Bury's splendid 1902 lecture, "The Science of History." Like other postmodernists, Megill tends to cite historians remote from the present. He also makes the postmodernist point that the current belief in universal history "has an important epistemological consequence," in that it "allows historians

²⁹ Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. xxiv.

³⁰ Allan MEGILL, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-153, 157-60, 168, 264 n.3.



to maintain that the historical account is an objective representation, connected to the standpoint of History itself"³¹. As every undergraduate student of history knows, Bury's lecture is an eloquent statement of the late Victorian faith in the objectivity of scientific history. The contention that historians today continue to subscribe to Bury's views on universal history and objectivity is part of the mythology of postmodernism. Finally, it can be said that the Lyotardian line functions to discredit the commonsensical developmental views embodied in historical practice. That is, anyone who wants to understand the French Revolution or the Holocaust or the Victorian family has to examine the historical process that produced the phenomenon and the context in which it occurred. That proposition does not rest on metaphysical assumptions about the totality of History.

Berkhofer also puts a Lyotardian spin on his account of the deficiencies of professional historiography. In normal history, he writes, "the Great Past is the Great Story and nothing but the Great Story." His main point is the element of "wishful postulation" that underlies the Great Story. Thus, "the paradigm of normal history presumes that there existed a 'whole' or 'total' past that can be understood and constituted as history, even if only in the mind of a God or his secularized successor, an Omniscient Historian, according to narrative logic in some form." In addition, "the Great Story is no less a predication or presupposition of the normal history paradigm than the Great Past"³². Here the anti-developmental thesis is expressed in rigidly formalist terms. The historian is obliged to follow a "narrative logic" that dictates certain postulations about the past and manner in which it must be approached.

LaCapra's comments on Ernst Cassirer's study of the Enlightenment illustrate the postmodern impatience with even the most basic forms of specifically historical conceptualization. Thus, he notes traits that have rightly been considered Cassirer's strengths, "his emphasis on structure and his ability to find order in seeming chaos," but

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

³² Robert BERKHOFER, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 64. For a discussion of the Great Story theme see the critical review by Thomas L. HASKELL, in *History and Theory*, 37, 1998, pp. 347-369.



questions “the extent to which the order thus found is limited or even specious.” In the next sentence LaCapra makes it clear that he is not merely noting flaws in an interpretation of the Enlightenment, but is dismissing a central component of historical analysis: “The point of this remark is to suggest that the imposition of ‘order and perspicuity’—in one of Gibbon’s favorite phrases— upon the historical record is misleading and that the objective of the historian should rather be to explore critically the ways in which the interaction between order and its contestatory ‘others’ takes place”³³. If LaCapra’s remarks are taken at face value, they deny the historian a whole battery of concepts, such as the Enlightenment, that are essential to handling the dimension of time in the human world. The historian simply cannot do without the sort of ideal-type construct used by Cassirer. LaCapra has put the historian in a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose situation. On the one hand, the historian is chided for writing a narrowly factualist “documentary history.” On the other hand, he is directed not to impose an illusory “order and perspicuity” on the past.

Allan Megill has provided a glimpse of his own “theory of historiography,” appended as a concluding afterthought to a useful bibliographical article on the work of Jörn Rüsen³⁴. He takes as “the point of entry to the revision of Rüsen’s disciplinary matrix” the notion of “topic,” as expounded in classical rhetoric. While Megill’s rather dense exposition—in contrast to his usual prose style— does not lend itself to brief summary, it illustrates the direction in which postmodern attitudes can carry an able historian. In contrast to Rüsen’s concrete engagement with historical practice and theory, Megill’s reliance on a single concept drawn from rhetoric leads to an extremely abstract treatment, remote from the world of history and historiography. Even the familiar topics of fictionality and objectivity

³³ Dominick LACAPRA, “Rethinking Intellectual History...”, p. 56. Ernst CASSIRER, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951. For a perceptive commentary on LaCapra’s views, see John H. ZAMMITO, “Are We Being Theoretical Yet? The New Historicism, the New Philosophy of History and Practicing Historians” in *Journal of Modern History*, 65, 1993, 783-814.

³⁴ Allan MEGILL, “Jörn Rüsen’s Theory of Historiography between Modernism and Rhetoric of Inquiry” in *History and Theory*, 33, 1998, pp. 39-60.



are untouched. Megill has sketched a theory of historiography in which concrete historical practice has disappeared in a rhetorical morass. In this instance, as in others, postmodernism fosters a discourse that obscures the questions that need to be explored.

4. In sum, there is good reason for historians to have been wary of the historical theorizing of postmodernism. They have been asked to accept a pervasively anti-historical theory on the grounds that it will not only dispel disciplinary myths and misconceptions but also improve their practice. Unlike traditional theory and philosophy of history, however, it does not attempt to clarify methodological and conceptual problems, but rather seeks to expose self-serving myths that supposedly mask the inherent fictionality of historical writing. Postmodern theorizing proceeds on the tenuous formalist assumption that the application of linguistic-rhetorical theory to the literary forms that historians necessarily employ will automatically produce an illuminating re-description of historical writing. In actuality, however, the end product of postmodern discourse has been a tendentious misdescription of professional historiography.

Because postmodern theory has been applied primarily to historians of the nineteenth century, it has remained curiously out of touch with contemporary historiography. Thus, its conception of the belief in "objectivity" and factuality imputed to "professional historiography" is a construct extrapolated from the ideal of scientific history that took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the "great narratives" of which we hear so much also flourished. In fact, one might easily get the impression that the ideas of J. B. Bury —stripped of their eloquence— represent the methodological and epistemological principles of professional historians today.

Some years ago Jörn Rüsen urged historians to engage in reflection on "the basic principles of their branch of science" and to formulate for themselves a conception of "the nature and task of historical studies... by means of which they can venture into dialogue with the human sciences on their relationship to one another." The aim of such reflection is a statement of "the principles of historical knowledge which are normative for history as an academic disci-

pline”³⁵. No one has done more to explore these perennial questions than Rüsen himself, drawing on the “linguistic turn” as well as German historicism and analytical philosophy. As suggested above, however, historians who wish to reflect on these matters will not get much help from postmodernism, because its anti-historical posture entails the dismissal of the very questions that Rüsen has posed about the distinctive characteristics of the discipline.

But postmodern theorists have difficulty even acknowledging such questions, since substantive issues fall outside the boundaries set by formalist presuppositions. Thus, the historicist thesis that the historicity/*Geschichtlichkeit*/*Zeitlichkeit* of the human world requires the construction of specifically historical concepts lies beyond the reach of postmodern theory. The old saw that epistemology presupposes ontology cuts no ice with postmodernists. Yet it is precisely in the course of their inquiry into concrete phenomena of the past that historians have developed analytical concepts and principles adapted to their subject matter. Without much theorizing about the dimension of time in human life, historians have developed and refined techniques for handling specifically historical aspects of the past. Hence critics of postmodernism have remarked that it would have benefited from closer contact with historiographical practice and with the theoretical discourse based on it.

Another presupposition that limits the effectiveness of postmodern theorizing about history is a simplistic conception of the relation between theory and practice. Postmodernists envisage their task as the application of an all-powerful theory to historiography while preaching the gospel to benighted historians. With his usual concision, Allan Megill expresses this view of theory in one of the prescriptive postulates that he commends to his fellow historians: “*The Theory Postulate: Always theorize.*” In the postmodern mode, theory is assigned total hegemony. Historians are told that they “can awaken universal interest only insofar as their work addresses theoretical issues.” Thus, an account of the Gunpowder Plot “can have interest only insofar as it raises issues of a theoretical sort, detached

³⁵ Jörn RÜSEN, *Studies in Metahistory*, Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1993, pp. 161-162.



from the specific events of 1605”³⁶. Megill does not fudge his argument. In a few sentences, he annuls the practice and theory of professional historiography.

Postmodernism obscures the intricate and symbiotic relationship that has prevailed between history and theory. On the one hand, theory has been enriched by a close examination of historical practice and its presuppositions. On the other hand, historiography has benefited from the conceptual and analytical refinement provided by theory. Henk de Jong has expressed the hope that “historical theory... will turn out to be a valuable help and guide to the practical historian”³⁷. We might even hope for a synergistic relationship, as in the case of Max Weber. The immediate danger, however, as de Jong puts it, is that the theory propounded by “postmodern relativists” may be “obstructive” to historical practice.

Postmodernism is obstructive to theory as well as practice, not only because of its anti-historical orientation, but also because of its neo-Nietzschean view of reason and rationality. In his superb essay review, de Jong examines Rösen’s critique of “the Nietzschean, postmodern view of historical writing.” While noting that Rösen is well aware of the merits of postmodernist and aestheticist narrativism, he welcomes Rösen’s defense of historical rationality against the *Vernunftfeindschaft* of postmodernism. Rösen takes his stand on methodological rationality, that is, on the rules, methods, and procedures established by the discipline of history³⁸. Since this

³⁶ Allan MEGILL, “‘Grand Narrative’...”, p. 172.

³⁷ Henk DE JONG, “Historical Orientation: Jörn Rösen’s Answer to Nietzsche and his Followers” review of Jörn RÜSEN, *Historische Orientierung*, Cologne, Bohlau, 1994, in *History and Theory*, 36, 1997, pp. 270-288.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 276-285. See “Die Rationalität der Geschichtswissenschaft” in Jörn RÜSEN, *Historische Orientierung*, pp. 69-203. Writing in 1990, Rösen was dismayed by the “post-modernen Irrationalisierung” of the historical consciousness. While noting that theorizing is an essential component of historical studies, he suggested that when it is misused -for example to determine the particular historical character of facts before they are fully researched- then theorizing becomes a *Hure des Verstandes*. *Ibidem*, p.100; *idem*, *Studies*, p.43.



article has emphasized the postmodern hostility to “historical thinking,” Rüsen’s defense of a sophisticated version of what used to be called “the historical method” is very much to the point, with the obvious proviso that his work provides the best available account of the “historical consciousness” in all its complexity³⁹.

One of the controlling myths of postmodernism is the notion that historians are philosophically and theoretically innocent, wedded to a primitive empiricist epistemology. Yet if we examine the comments of historians in the 1980’s and 1990’s —chiefly in articles and reviews— we find a much higher level of theoretical sophistication than in any previous generation. Once the distraction of postmodernism has dissipated, historians will achieve further advances in practice and theory.

³⁹ See, for example, *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit*.