

Drawing the Line: 'Scientific' History between Myth-making and Myth-breaking

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In December 1985 William McNeill presented a paper to the American Historical Association's annual meeting. At the time McNeill, who had earned his fame with widely acknowledged books such as *The Rise of the West* and *Plagues and People*, was president of the AHA and one of the pioneers of a kind of history which has since become known as 'global history' or 'world history'. The title of his paper was as original as it was enigmatic: 'Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians'. Published in the same year as a chapter in a volume entitled *Mythistory and Other Essays*, it was original inasmuch as 'mythistory' was a newly coined term, and enigmatic because history and myth had traditionally been considered by professional historians to be polar opposites. The dividing line between history and myth had only recently been questioned by hard-line postmodernists – and McNeill was not known for his postmodern predilections.¹ On the contrary, McNeill was a serious craftsman if there ever was one, possessing a fine sense for innovation and for what was going on within the profession. It is hardly surprising, then, that his prediction that the term 'mythistory' would not catch on with his colleagues turned out to be correct.

Here I will take his article as a point of departure in order to analyse the fundamental tensions between the two central epistemological and practical claims made by 'scientific' historians for their subject since its beginnings as an

academic discipline in Europe. The epistemological claim related to the status of history writing as a *Wissenschaft*, that is, a methodical truth-seeking discipline: academic history, above all else, claimed to do away with all myths about the past and to replace them with The Truth – or, at least, some truths. Accordingly, academic history had become characterised by its *Wissenschaftsanspruch*, its claim to scientificity, although this claim could be based on a wide variety of methodological positions, ranging from Comtean positivism to Rankean historicism.

Next to this epistemological claim, however, academic history always claimed to fulfil a practical function, namely, to provide a certain degree of guidance in practical life, and this constituted its *Orientierungsanspruch*, its claim to practical orientation.² For most professional historians over much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this practical orientation was about creating some kind of identification with the state, most often the nation-state. This was no accident since the professionalisation of academic history was very much a state affair; most professional historians were literally fed by the state. Not without justification, then, have historians been called ‘priests of the state’.

In the following article I shall analyse McNeill’s argument in order to show the fundamental and unresolved opposition between its epistemological and its practical claims. I shall argue that the practical claims undermine the epistemological claims in a manner that is characteristic of scientific history from the early nineteenth century onwards. The stronger its epistemological claims, the weaker its practical claims – and vice versa.

I shall start by arguing that McNeill tries to bridge the opposition between his epistemological and practical claims in two ways. On the one hand, he projects the practical aims onto the process of history itself and thus ‘objectifies’ them. This strategy of ‘hardening’ the practical goals by ‘objectifying’ has characterised scientific history since its foundation. The other strategy used by McNeill to bridge the opposition between history’s epistemological and practical aims, however, consists of ‘softening up’ the epistemological claims of scientific history by integrating its practical goals into the ‘soft’ and ‘subjective’ aspects of historical epistemology. In this respect scientific history has seen the notions of ‘narrative’, ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation’ turn into the loci within which practical ‘meaning’ is situated. Hayden White’s attempt in *Metahistory* to connect specific types of ideological content to specific narrative forms is the logical endpoint of this train of thought (although it should be noted that McNeill’s notion of ‘mythistory’ is not indebted to White). Nevertheless, the question of whether narrative history can claim to represent truth is as fundamental for McNeill’s ‘mythistory’ as it is for White’s *Metahistory*.³

After having reconstructed the birth of ‘mythistory’, I shall go on to analyse the notion of myth itself in order to establish its relationship to the concept of history. This will lead us to an examination of the anthropological

debate regarding myth and its functions, including myths of the nation. Thirdly, I shall raise the question of whether the nation itself can be seen as a myth. This question is fundamental for the historical credentials of ‘scientific’ history, because ‘scientific’ historians have been the prime academic constructors of nations. Finally, I shall go back to the writings of Ranke and Von Humboldt in order to locate the origins of ‘scientific’ history’s epistemological difficulties. Paradoxically, it will turn out that McNeill’s problem of drawing the line between ‘scientific’ history and myth was already embedded in the project of ‘scientific’ history itself.

From ‘Scientific’ History to ‘Mythistory’

Myth and history are close kin inasmuch as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story. But our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspires to be, true. Accordingly, a historian who rejects someone else’s conclusions calls them mythical, while claiming that his own views are true. However, what seems true to one historian will seem false to another, so one historian’s truth becomes another’s myth, even at the moment of utterance.⁴

With these intriguing sentences McNeill opens his article, and the rest of it he devotes to answering the delicate question of how scientific history got into its current predicament, with scientific historians regarding each others’ histories as ‘mythical’ and truth increasingly being ‘privatised’ rather than becoming universal.

This situation is all the more puzzling because the original rationale of scientific history was to replace myths about the past with true stories. Almost all of the treatises about ‘scientific’ history produced by nineteenth-century historians abound in statements about exchanging mythical, fraudulent, ‘amateur’ and/or ‘artistic’ efforts for true reconstructions.⁵ Almost all histories of historiography also argue that ‘myth’ is something scientific history left behind long ago, usually locating the break somewhere between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century (with Herodotus and Thucydides being habitually cited as its Greek precursors).⁶ Take Collingwood for instance, who characterises myth in contrast to history, which deals with human actions localised in time and space, as follows:

Myth [...] is not concerned with human actions at all. The human element has been completely purged away and the characters of the story are simply gods. And the divine actions that are recorded are not dated events in the past: they are conceived of as having occurred in the past, indeed, but in a dateless past which is so remote that nobody knows when it was. It is outside all our time reckoning and called ‘the beginning of things’. Hence, when a myth is couched in what seems a temporal shape, because it relates events one of which follows another in a temporal shape, the shape is not strictly speaking temporal, it is quasi-temporal.⁷

According to Collingwood, history is only concerned with temporally dated human actions and is thus the opposite of myth, which deals with gods acting in times beyond temporal markers.

What had happened to the project of ‘scientific’ history since it first took flight, full of self-confidence? McNeill, who initially shared the traditional historians’ aversion to methodology, formulates the following answer: although scientific history had made great progress since the beginning of the nineteenth century by transcending pre-existing divisions, such as those resulting from religious controversies, it had failed in generating a consensus comparable to that found in the natural sciences.⁸ He offers two explanations for this state of affairs. Firstly, although many individual facts in history can be established beyond reasonable doubt, history cannot be reduced to individual facts: ‘To become a history, facts have to be put together into a pattern that is understandable and credible [...]. In order to make facts “understandable”, the historian imputes “meaning” to them, and in order to make them credible the historian has to take account of the expectations of the audience he or she is addressing’.⁹ So McNeill explains the absence of an epistemological consensus among historians by the fact that historians connect historical facts in meaningful patterns – alias narratives – and that these meaningful patterns have no general epistemic validity, because their credibility is restricted to specific audiences (as was the case in the rhetorical tradition).

Secondly, McNeill presents the reflexivity of these (symbolically structured) meaning patterns as an explanation for the absence of consensus in history. His argument is as follows:

The great and obvious difference between natural scientists and historians is the greater complexity of the behavior historians seek to understand. The principal source of historical complexity lies in the fact that human beings react both to the natural world and to one another chiefly through the mediation of symbols. This means, among other things, that any theory about human life, if widely believed, will actually alter actual behavior, usually by inducing people to act as if the theory were true. Ideas and ideals thus become self-validating within remarkably elastic limits [...]. The price of this achievement is the elastic, inexact character of truth, and especially of truths about human conduct.¹⁰

Therefore, McNeill’s second explanation for the absence of consensus in history is the reflexivity of ‘theories about human life’, because this type of ‘theory’ alters human conduct itself. McNeill thus makes no fundamental distinction between the (‘first order’) ‘theories about human life’ of historical actors themselves and those (‘second order’) theories developed by historians *ex post facto*. His argument seems to be that both kinds of ‘theory’ may turn into self-fulfilling prophecies (he may have been thinking of theories like nationalism or racism, although he does not mention them).

According to McNeill, ‘shared truths’ are necessary in order for groups and cultures to survive, because they create in-group solidarity and function as

a group's 'social cement'. Sects, religions, tribes and states from the Sumer to modern times have all based their identity and cohesion on 'shared truths' in the form of shared beliefs, ideals and traditions. Here McNeill seems to lump together any collective belief system under the heading of 'shared truths', including all kinds of belief about the past. 'Yet to outsiders, truths of this kind are likely to seem myths [...] because different groups usually have different versions of the truth about themselves and in all likelihood this sort of social and ideological fragmentation will continue indefinitely'.¹¹

Is there any uncontested place for *historical* truth in this fragmented world? It is clear that McNeill, who refers to the 'truth' of 'meaning patterns' or narratives produced by historians and not the truth of historical factual statements, answers this question in the negative, because the idea that 'scientific method' would create a consensus among 'professional' historians has turned out to be just 'a recent example of such a belief system': 'Choice is everywhere; dissent turns into cacophonous confusion; my truth dissolves into your myth even before I can put words on paper'.¹²

However, he then, quite surprisingly given the logic of his argument, states that he is 'not ready to abandon' his liberal faith that in the free marketplace of ideas 'truth will eventually prevail', notwithstanding the present confusion.¹³ Still, the same logic forces him to qualify his own appeal to the 'liberal' idea of truth as just another 'faith', so in the end the regulative idea of truth for him is subject to a 'take it or leave it' approach, rather than forming a constitutive principle of 'scientific' history as such. In this respect McNeill's standpoint can be likened to that of a postmodernist *manqué*, who in the end recoils from the conclusion of his own argument.

At this point in his argument McNeill constructs a bridge in his analysis between the 'fragmented' epistemological universe in which it is hard, if not impossible, to draw a line between myth and truth, and a 'fragmented' normative universe. Large numbers of people, ranging from Iranian Moslems to American sectarians (religious and otherwise), 'exhibit symptoms of acute distress in the face of moral uncertainties, generated by exposure to competing myths'. The result of these worldwide moral uncertainties is 'an intensified personal attachment, first to national, and then to sub-national groups, each with its distinct ideals and practices'. This moral fragmentation also pertains to historians because 'the historical profession faithfully reflected and helped to forward these shifts of sentiment'. Women's, black and postcolonial history have been booming ever since.¹⁴

Like any postmodernist worth his salt, McNeill does not buy into the professional ideology according to which 'professionalisation equals objectivity', and neither does he have a fundamental problem with disciplinary fragmentation.¹⁵ Given the history of 'scientific' history, he regards the moral and practical allegiances of historians to specific groups as only natural: 'Such activity confronted our traditional professional role of helping to define

collective identities in ambiguous situations. Consciousness of a common past, after all, is a powerful supplement to other ways of defining who “we” are.¹⁶

Historians have in fact always been active in defining boundaries between an ‘Us’ and a ‘Them’.¹⁷ National historiography is the best known genre in point, Herodotus providing the model with his emphasis on the supreme value of political freedom within a territorially defined state. Because all human groups like to be flattered rather than criticised, historians are ‘under perpetual pressure to conform to expectations by portraying the people they write about in a positive light; and a mingling of truth and falsehood, blending history with ideology, results’.¹⁸ Most national and group history is of this nature, according to McNeill, although the precise mixture of detachment and emotional involvement varies with every historian; ‘truth, persuasiveness, intelligibility rest far more on this level of the historian’s art than on source criticism’.¹⁹

McNeill’s distinction between source criticism and the ‘art’ of putting the facts together in credible ‘meaning patterns’ or narratives goes back to Ranke, as we shall see, although the exact relationship between both activities has received very little attention either from historians or philosophers of history. Yet the identity-constructing and identity-enhancing aspects of history writing are essential to the whole enterprise, because ‘myths’ of this sort are self-validating and enhance the chances of the ‘survival’ of groups, especially during conflicts. Therefore, the historian has no choice but to choose: ‘Where to fix one’s loyalties is the supreme question of human life, and is especially acute in a cosmopolitan age like ours when choices abound.’²⁰

What McNeill presents here is what we could call an *observational theory* characteristic of a historian. He presents the theory as a description of ‘how it actually is’: according to him, the world just *is* both cosmopolitan and fundamentally fragmented – and so is the discipline of history.²¹ His next move is to connect his *cognitive* observational theory to a *normative* theory of the practical function of history. In true Kantian spirit McNeill concludes that in our cosmopolitan age the only realistic and morally acceptable option for the historian is to pledge his loyalty to humanity as a whole:

Instead of enhancing conflicts, as parochial historiography inevitably does, an intelligible world history might be expected to diminish the lethality of group encounters by cultivating a sense of individual identification with the triumphs and tribulations of humanity as a whole. This, indeed, strikes me as the moral duty of the historical profession in our time. We need to develop an ecumenical history, with plenty of room for human diversity in all its complexity.²²

This transition from the cognitive to the normative level is a typical methodological move for a historian, and dates back to the origins of ‘scientific’ history. The basic mechanism supporting the transition is the projection of the normatively preferred process onto the ‘factual’ process of history itself, which leads to the ‘objectification’ of these processes. In this

way, the historians of the nation-state simply identified history itself with the genesis and development of nation-states, just as the historians of class struggle simply identified history itself with the genesis and development of class struggles. Remarkably, even historians who advocate ‘the postmodern condition’ have actually identified history itself with the genesis and development of this ‘condition’.²³ Taking a normative position, such as furthering the cause of the nation, furthering the cause of one class in the class struggle, or furthering the ‘postmodern condition’, is then represented as being a more or less cognitive step, simply a matter of ‘reading the sign of the times’ or ‘riding the waves of history’.

McNeill is aware that world history is still a suspicious genre for most historians because they think that truth only resides in the documents. World history, with its reliance on literature rather than archival sources, is therefore often regarded as necessarily vague or even ‘unhistorical’. According to McNeill, this is mere prejudice, but fortunately the historian’s practice is often better than his epistemology. With a more reflective epistemology it is not hard to attain ‘a better historiographical balance between Truth, truths and myth’.²⁴

Since Eternal Truth is not the stuff of human affairs, Truth with a capital T can be discarded. However, McNeill argues that

Truths with a small t are what historians achieve when they bend their minds as critically and carefully as they can to the task of making their account of public affairs credible as well as intelligible to an audience that shares enough of their particular outlook and assumptions to accept what they say. The result may be called mythistory [...].²⁵

For McNeill, then, truths in history depend for their status on their plausibility for a particular audience, and are not universal. Therefore, truths in history are multiple, although this does not mean that one mythistory is as good as another: ‘Some clearly are more adequate to the facts than others’²⁶ in terms of temporal and spatial scope, range and accuracy. As we have seen, historiography has, by and large, made progress in this respect according to McNeill’s liberal conviction, so that ‘to be a truth-seeking mythographer is [...] a high and serious calling’.²⁷ So in the end, and quite remarkably, McNeill still appeals to (Popperian) epistemic criteria when it comes to evaluating different species of ‘mythistory’, probably because he knows that in any ‘scientific’ discourse overtly normative arguments tend to blow up in one’s face. So, at the very end of his argument, McNeill once again turns back at the sight of its logical consequences, preferring to sail his boat into a reassuringly safe ‘scientific’ harbour. How the epistemic criteria of scope and accuracy are supposed to function in a fundamentally ‘fragmented’ scientific universe remains unclear, alas. His decision to prevent his postmodern flirt with the notion of myth from

developing into a full-blown relationship at the *moment suprême* thus comes at a price – the price of his argument’s consistency.

All in all, with the notion of ‘mythistory’ the traditional rationale of ‘scientific’ history remains at stake, because the demarcation between scientific, methodical truth and myth constituted the very rationale of ‘scientific’ history in the first place. By blurring the line between scientific history and myth, it is no longer clear whether there is any distinction, and if so, what this distinction is. What is now called for, then, is a clarification of the notion of myth.

What is Myth? Myth from the Ancient Greeks to the Present

In her overview of the notion of myth the anthropologist Joanna Overing immediately identifies the problem McNeill has raised in his concept of ‘mythistory’:

The first relevant question in the study of myth is: how do we know that something falls within the genre of myth? How do we categorise this, but not that, as myth? Why, for instance, should we decide to use the term ‘myth’ and not ‘history’ in describing a particular piece of discourse? Whether in the context of Amazonia or Eastern Europe, the boundaries between myth and history are not clear, and one reason for this is that the category of myth is not easily defined. We might perhaps say that the use of the term ‘myth’ is more a judgmental than a definitional or propositional procedure: its attribution requires a judgment having to do with standards of knowledge and its organisation.²⁸

Myth, according to Overing, owes its bad reputation to Greek philosophy, in which it was identified with a category of fictional discourse at some point between the eighth and the fourth century BC ‘Myth or *mythos* became understood as a form of speech opposed to reasoned discourse or *logos*. As such myth became defined as opposed to both truth (myth is fiction) and to the rational (myth is absurd).’²⁹ Both the historian Thucydides and the philosopher Plato identified myth with ‘old wives’ tales, the fabulous and the marvellous – the opposite of truthful discourse.

Earlier on, myth had possessed a more positive ring, with a capacity both to express the fundamental truths of existence and a capacity to give pleasure and to involve the emotional participation of an audience. These qualities ensured myth’s power to captivate an audience and to be effective. McNeill attributed these same characteristics to ‘mythistory’. So, in short, all the major oppositions associated with the notion of myth today go back to the rationalist oppositions of Greek antiquity: the opposition between *mythos* and *logos*, between the contextual and the universal, between the absurd and the logical, the emotional and the rational.³⁰ These oppositions were all reproduced by nineteenth-century anthropology, which turned myths into its object of

inquiry: *mythos* was taken to be evidence of barbarian, primitive cultures, while *logos* was exclusively attributed to Western civilisation.

While anthropologists took primitive cultures as their object of enquiry, they studied other people's myths – people's fictive constructions of reality or 'phantom realities', to use the phrase of Overing. Thus, like the ancient Greeks, nineteenth-century anthropologists, and their successors well into the twentieth century, continued to view mythology as fictive, consisting of fabulous, untrue stories about unreal gods and heroes that erroneously explained a people's past to them.³¹ Anthropology acknowledged the rationality of the 'savage mind', but it did not acknowledge the truth claims embedded in the savage 'worldviews'. It could not, for instance, accommodate such 'primitive' ideas as the concept of rain being caused by urinating gods, within the rational Newtonian universe.

The classical demarcation between the mythical 'reality of the really made-up' of 'primitive' people and our 'real', scientifically known reality, however, has recently been questioned by anthropologists (just as McNeill did for history). Marshall Sahlins argued in his *Islands of History* (1985) that in Polynesian culture the distinction between (fictitious) myth and (real) history does not hold water: myths in Polynesian culture are the key to its cosmology and its conception of history. Overing makes the very same point with regard to the Piaroa-tribe in Amazonia: their mythical gods are part of their narratives about their history; and their mythical time does not belong to a closed past, but rather remains omnipresent. Furthermore, she argues that the Piaroa live within an evaluative universe, quite unlike the Western one, in which 'nature' is not a separate domain to be subjugated and controlled by humans: 'All postulates about reality in an evaluative universe, including those about physical reality, are tied explicitly to a moral universe.'³² Therefore, Overing refers to the 'truth of myths' in this cosmological sense – very much in the sense in which McNeill was referring to the 'shared truths' essential for every culture: 'Myths simply express and deal with a people's reality postulates about the world, and mythic truths pertain more to a moral universe of meaning than to a "natural" one (in the sense of the physical unitary world of the scientist). For those educated within a Western tradition, myth is a strange place indeed to discover "truth"'³³ – although not for McNeill, as we have observed.

Next to the nebulous dividing line between myth and history, there is a second issue raised by Overing that is pertinent to McNeill's argument about identity-construction by history. This is what one could call the performative function of myths in making the distinction between identity and difference, between an 'Us' and a 'Them'. Myths contain heroic stories about the origins and fate of specific communities and as such express images of selfhood by stating sets of identity criteria for a community. In this way myths help constitute communities' distinctness from others by creating boundaries.³⁴ Often these images of selfhood are simultaneously based on images of

threatening and despised others as their ‘alien’ *Doppelgänger*, as Schöpflin argues. So myths create communities by demonising others, although the degree of this demonisation can vary.³⁵ McNeill proposed an identical thesis with regard to history.

The third and final aspect of myth pertinent to McNeill’s argument is the solidarity function of myth connected to the performative function just mentioned. Next to boundary creation, the role of myth in *solidarity creation*, through rituals, liturgies and symbols, is essential: ‘The outcome of participation in ritual and, therefore, of accepting that one’s relationship to the community is structured by myth, is the strengthening of both the collectivity and the individual’s role in it [...] The common participation in ritual produces bonds of solidarity without demanding uniformity of belief. People can act together without consensus.’³⁶ Myth thus works on a *pre-rational* and *emotional* level that is crucial to its functioning. However, in order to fulfill this function myth must somehow resonate in ‘collective memories’, and therefore cannot be ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ at will. Remarkably, McNeill made the very same points for history: he argued that histories are necessary for the solidarity and ‘survival’ of communities, and are dependent on their acceptance by a particular audience, which is in turn dependent on the compatibility of their presuppositions with their organising concepts.³⁷

So, comparing Overing’s and Schöpflin’s analysis of myth with McNeill’s analysis of history – which resulted in the introduction of the paradoxical notion of ‘mythistory’ – we have to draw the conclusion that on first inspection the dividing line between myth and history does not seem to hold or is, at best, imperceptibly thin. This would imply that we have to face the possibility that ‘scientific’ history is not only engaged in ‘myth-breaking’, but also in ‘myth-making’ – a conclusion already drawn by postmodernists. And, of course, the image of ‘scientific’ history would only get worse with the deconstruction of the privileged object of ‘scientific’ history since the latter half of the nineteenth-century itself – the nation – as a myth. This is exactly the predicament historians have found themselves in over the last decade or so.³⁸

Is the Nation a Myth?

The importance of the question of whether the nation is also a myth – a ‘self-validating’ myth in McNeill’s terms – can hardly be overestimated because since the nineteenth century ‘scientific’ historians have been among the prime architects of nations and of nation-states. If the answer is yes, there are even more compelling grounds to categorise ‘scientific’ history as ‘mythistory’ than those McNeill adduced, because he did not specifically address national history. ‘Myth-making’ – *horribile dictu* – may even have formed a greater part of the activity of scientific historians than ‘myth breaking’.³⁹

In the literature on nationalism, the dominant constructivist positions *à la* Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm definitely seem to back up the thesis that national historians have been ‘mythmakers’ *par excellence*. The notion that nations are ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson) which again are dependent on ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm/Ranger), essentially identifies national historians as the main protagonists in the processes of ‘imagining’ and ‘inventing’. By the same token, all essentialist notions of the nation developed from the early nineteenth century onwards can be deconstructed as the cognitive strategies of ‘scientific’ historians to cover up their own ‘imagining’ and ‘inventing’ practices. Anti-constructivist positions like that of Anthony D. Smith nowadays appear to be no more than footnotes to their constructivist counterparts, in the sense that they only emphasise that nations cannot be ‘imagined’ and ‘invented’ *at will* (because ‘imagined’ nations are only effective if they ‘resonate’ with something ‘real’).⁴⁰

Also important in this context is the fact that constructivist authors have emphasised that the nation is not only an ‘imagined’, but also an ‘emotional’ community, that is ‘produced’ and ‘staged’ using the same cultural mechanisms, metaphors and practices as religion.⁴¹ Therefore, nationalism is directly linked to the Christian religion, and there are good reasons to interpret nationalism as the ‘nationalisation’ of Christianity (and this will take us to the very origins of ‘scientific’ history in Ranke and Von Humboldt, as we shall see in the next section). Like religion, the nation is produced through rituals, cults and myths.⁴² Religion’s central values, love, sacrifice and death, are also those of the nation. Moreover, love is easily transformed into hatred towards those outside the community, while fallen soldiers are often represented as the ‘incarnation of the nation’.⁴³ Both religious and national cults are centred on a sacred dogma and a sacred object – God and The Nation. Both have sacred symbols and both have a fixed calendar and fixed places for their cult-rituals – churches and national monuments. The international academic boom of *lieux de mémoire* projects derives its impetus from this analogy.

Both cults also worship special persons, who are regarded as ‘mediators’ between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane – in religious cults these special persons are saints and martyrs, and in national cults they are national heroes, especially those who founded The Nation and those who sacrificed their lives for it. In both cults, violent death in defence of the Sacred Cause is represented as worthy and meaningful – as a sacrifice – because it helps the community in question to continue its existence. In both cults, we therefore usually encounter a cult of the dead. Both cults essentially define *moral* communities that define the borders of human solidarity, using similar vocabularies (with central notions like ‘cult’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘eternity’, ‘incarnation’, ‘salvation’, ‘martyrdom’, ‘communion’ and ‘resurrection’).⁴⁴ It is no accident, therefore, that Schöpflin in his taxonomy of myths also emphasised the Christian semantic structure of the national myths of redemption and

suffering, the national myths of election and the civilising mission, the national myths of rebirth and renewal, and the national myth of a shared descent.⁴⁵

One could argue on the basis of these overwhelming similarities that the case for ‘mythistory’ in national history is very convincing. Etienne Francois and Hagen Schulze recently summarised the general verdict on nineteenth-century ‘scientific’ national history as follows:

Was the nineteenth century not a period in which everyone – historians, politicians and public opinion – was convinced that historical science had to be pursued with the aim of making it an objective science as opposed to the myths which it would destroy by bringing the whole truth about the past out into the daylight? [...] The result was that too often national myths have been dressed up as scientific truth.⁴⁶

The diagnosis only gets worse when one realises that much twentieth-century national history was no better than its nineteenth-century counterpart. So, all in all, ‘scientific’ history has never known where to draw the line between myth-making and myth-breaking, and ‘scientific’ national historians have themselves been very active in helping to construct the myth of the nation while simultaneously deriving their ‘scientific’ legitimacy from a discourse of ‘myth-breaking’. The very marginality of the history of historiography within the historical discipline – implying a very limited interest on the part of ‘scientific’ historians in their own history – may plausibly be interpreted as a professional mechanism in order to repress this threatening past. ‘Don’t look back’ still seems the safest strategy for *everybody* with an unsettling past – including ‘scientific’ historians.⁴⁷

The Source of the Troubles: Troubles at the Source

The foregoing discussion, then, has given ‘scientific’ history something of a pounding, as McNeill’s proposal to rename ‘history’ as ‘mythistory’ has gone pretty much unchallenged (even if it contains some internal inconsistencies that need to be resolved). Our short investigation into the history of the concept of myth seems to support McNeill’s diagnosis, as myth and history were found to be fulfilling essentially the same function, and anthropologists are no longer either able or willing to draw a fundamental line between history and myth.

Our inquiry into the debate about nations and nationalism pointed in precisely the same direction: national histories constructed by ‘scientific’ historians in the nineteenth-century have been deconstructed in recent decades as thoroughly mythical. The emotional function of national history, emphasised by the constructivists’ contribution to this debate, only added extra force to the thesis that it is impossible to draw a firm line between

national history and national mythology. The same could be said about the observation that striking similarities exist between discursive structures and practices relating to the nation and religion.⁴⁸ The recent debate about the Europe-wide phenomenon of *Volksgeschichte* in the twentieth century clearly suggests that the problem did not disappear in 1900, or after 1945.⁴⁹ The nation, in short, appears to be a prime example of the ‘self-validating’ type of myth revealed by McNeill’s analysis, and in this capacity it may still be with us today.

The question that now needs to be addressed in this last section, then, is where the crisis of ‘scientific’ history comes from and whether there is any reason to hope that it will go away. There are two answers to this question: one reassuring and one rather alarming. The reassuring answer is that all debate and insecurity about the ‘scientific’ status of history is due to the fashionable and temporarily unsettling influences of postmodernism, feminism and multiculturalism.⁵⁰ This answer has, for obvious reasons, been the most popular one among ‘scientific’ historians.⁵¹ Moreover, as historians know very well, there is always a ‘post-’ to every ‘post-’, and it is just a matter of time until ‘post-postmodernism’ will solve the crisis of ‘scientific’ history.

The more alarming answer, however, is that the crisis of ‘scientific’ history is *not* just a temporary phenomenon, but is built into the foundations of scientific history itself. Here I will argue for this second answer and I will do so by showing that the problem of ‘mythistory’ is already traceable in the writings of two of the ‘fathers’ of ‘scientific’ history, Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

For those who are used to identifying Ranke with the critical method and the critical method with empiricism in history, the idea of looking for the origins of the ‘myth problem’ in Ranke would probably seem a strange idea. In the US the ‘empiricist’ reading of Ranke is most common, but it is certainly not restricted to that country alone. In their introduction to an English edition of Ranke’s selected writings, Georg Iggers and Konrad von Moltke have flagged up this problem. Ranke’s famous dictum that historians should write ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’, based on the application of the critical method, has usually been misinterpreted as an advocacy of hardboiled ‘empiricism’, implying a restriction of scientific history to ‘the facts’. This interpretation, however, is completely wrongheaded because it misses what Ranke meant by ‘eigentlich’: ‘It is not factuality, but the emphasis on the essential that makes an account historical.’⁵² And what Ranke regarded as essential in history was not established by the critical method, but only by his *Ideenlehre* – his idealistic theory of history, which functioned as his interpretative framework or observational theory.

According to this (Neoplatonic) theory, history was a process in which specific immanent ideas were present, realising themselves in the form of forces. States, religions and languages were such ideas, and Ranke saw each

particular state, religion and language as a manifestation of such an idea, in the process of realising itself in a struggle against others – especially through the actions of ‘great men’, who were able to grasp the ideas of their time, the *Zeitgeist*.⁵³ The capacity to intuitively ‘grasp’ (‘Ahnen’, ‘Divination’) the ideas immanent in history was at least as essential for scientific history as the mastery of the critical method, because the factual establishment of events does not as yet constitute history for Ranke and von Humboldt. Only by connecting established facts to their immanent ideas, and thus by creating their meaningful unity – their *geistige Einheit* or their essential *Zusammenhang* – ‘scientific’ history was born.

Now both von Ranke and the other founders of the German Historical School of *Historismus* emphasised the ‘theoretical’, non-empirical aspect of scientific history as one of its *two* defining characteristics. Characteristically, the opening sentences of Ranke’s early treatise *On the Character of Historical Science* read: ‘History is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art. History is a science in collecting, finding, penetrating; it is an art because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognised. Other sciences are satisfied simply with recording what has been found; history requires the ability to recreate.’⁵⁴

Humboldt’s equally famous treatise *On the Historian’s Task* (1821) emphasises the ‘theoretical’, non-empirical aspect of scientific history even more clearly than Ranke: ‘The historian’s task is to present what actually happened. [...] An event, however, is only partially visible in the world of the senses; the rest has to be added by intuition, inference, and guesswork.’⁵⁵ The facts are just the ‘raw material, but not history itself. [...] The truth of any event is predicated on the addition – mentioned above – of that invisible part of every fact, and it is this part, therefore, which the historian has to add. Regarded in this way, he does become active, even creative [...].’⁵⁶

So both von Ranke and von Humboldt emphasised that interpretative activity, based on the *Ideenlehre*, was as essential for ‘scientific’ history as the critical method itself and that to ignore this aspect of the historian’s activity ‘is to miss the essence of truth itself’.⁵⁷ No wonder that Johan-Gustav Droysen, whose *Historik* is the first book-length treatise on historical method in the tradition of *Historismus*, also presented source criticism as merely a first step towards establishing the facts, the ‘interpretation of ideas’ being the real interpretative accomplishment of scientific history.⁵⁸

I have gone back to the very origins of ‘scientific’ history in Germany because here we find the origins of the problems McNeill is raising. This holds both for the problem of history’s scientific status and for history’s practical status. First, for Ranke and Von Humboldt ‘scientific’ history consisted both in the application of the critical method in order to establish ‘true’ facts *and* in the ‘creative’ or ‘artistic’ interpretation of the facts on the basis of their *Ideenlehre* in order to connect them and bring out their actual

‘meaning’. Ranke and von Humboldt actually regarded these ideas as active forces (*Kräfte*) immanent in history *itself*, and therefore by projecting their (Neoplatonic) theory onto reality, they treated it as if it were no different from historical reality.⁵⁹ What is remarkable, though, from our present point of view, is that their awareness of the ‘theoretical’ nature of history writing was *not* matched by an awareness of a plurality of possible theories. Therefore, all the epistemological problems of ‘scientific’ historians who realise that reality can be approached and interpreted through *different* theories *not* universally shared, are simply absent from the writings of Ranke and Von Humboldt. Of course, the explanation for their ‘blindness’ in this respect is that their *Ideenlehre* was not just a ‘theory’ for them, but their Christian worldview. Religious ‘myth’, therefore, was built into the foundations of ‘scientific’ history itself, and therefore it is small wonder that their ideas were ‘reduced’ by an empiricist reading later on.

So, although Ranke and Von Humboldt – contrary to most of their twentieth-century scions – were conscious of the fact that ‘scientific’ history was based not only on a (critical) *method*, but also on a *theory*, they simply failed to consider the possibility of other theories than the *Ideenlehre* and the epistemological problems resulting from the presence of *several* theories. What an epistemologically conscious ‘scientific’ history would have needed from its beginning, therefore, was a reflection on how to compare different theories and narratives with each other, and a reflection on how to evaluate their different epistemological and practical qualities.

This ‘omission’ at the very origin of ‘scientific’ history has had serious consequences for its later development, because those historians, who would later recognise the plurality of theories and narratives, lacked the theoretical tools and the theoretical justification to compare and evaluate them rationally. As a consequence of this theoretical *Leerstelle* the reflection on the preferences for and the evaluation of theories in history became ‘subjectivised’ and was conceived of in terms of the individual ‘historical imagination’ or of ‘an act of faith’.⁶⁰ Historical theory, if recognised at all, was thus positioned outside the domain of rational, epistemological discourse. Seen in this light we can conclude – perhaps a little maliciously – that the ‘scientific’ history of Ranke and Von Humboldt was ‘mythical’ from its inception. ‘Mythistory’ finally turns out to be not a specific *Geburtsfehler* (failure at birth), but the birth of ‘scientific’ history itself.⁶¹

Unlike Ranke and Von Humboldt, McNeill expressly identifies scientific history with establishing facts by the critical method, and he thus exemplifies the ‘empiricist’ reduction of Ranke which Iggers and Von Moltke have commented upon. Owing to this ‘empiricist’ interpretation, McNeill only encounters the problems which will lead him to formulate the notion of ‘mythistory’ when he observes that history requires *more* from historians than just establishing the facts: these problems typically arise when he introduces the notion of ‘meaning’

(or ‘interpretation’), which was still part and parcel of Ranke’s conception of *Geschichtswissenschaft*.⁶²

The scope of the notion of *Wissenschaft* had of course narrowed substantially between 1820 and 1985, resulting among other things in the ‘expulsion’ of the act of interpretation from the ground it had held during the reign of empiricism – only to make a triumphant return following the demise of empiricism as the dominant philosophy of science in the 1960s. Still under the spell of empiricism, however, McNeill equates science with consensus, and a science which is at the same time an art, as history was for Ranke, is no longer a life option for McNeill.⁶³ Therefore, his insight that ‘interpretation’ is just as essential for ‘scientific’ history as a critical method, constitutes a *problem* for McNeill, while it was still something of a *truism* for Ranke and Von Humboldt. Therefore, McNeill’s acknowledgement that ‘scientific’ history, as a consequence of subjective ‘interpretation’, is characterised by an obvious *absence* of consensus leads him to the conclusion that history must be something *less* than a ‘science’ – and for this ‘hybrid’ he coins the term ‘mythistory’. Small wonder, then, that Ranke’s well-known ideas about the ‘impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’ of the historian are not even mentioned by McNeill.⁶⁴ ‘Mythistory’, an apparent *contradictio in adjecto* within the framework of ‘scientific’ history, is the logical end station of this train of argument.

McNeill’s second reason for re-labelling history as ‘mythistory’ is related to its practical, reflexive function: all histories, being ‘theories of human behaviour’, influence human action and may even turn into self-fulfilling prophecies – the ‘myth of the nation’ included. This argument has no corollary in Ranke and Humboldt, because according to their theory the course of history ultimately is not so much determined by the intentions of human actors, but by God. Therefore, self-fulfilling prophecies do not fit into their framework and are not subjected to scrutiny. Yet Ranke and Humboldt nevertheless justify history’s practical function through their observational theory.

According to Humboldt,

the historian, in order to perform the task of his profession, has to compose the narrative of events in such a way that the reader’s emotions will be stirred by it as if by reality itself. It is in this way that history is related to active life. History does not primarily serve us by showing us through specific examples, often misleading and rarely enlightening, what to do and what to avoid. History’s true and immeasurable usefulness lies rather in its power to enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality, and this occurs more through the form attached to events than through the events themselves [...] [T]here is no successful intervention in the flow of events except by clearly recognising the truth of the predominating trend of ideas at a given time and by adhering to this truth with determination.⁶⁵

In short, history’s practical function is guaranteed for Ranke and Humboldt by the fact that historians, by showing the ‘actual’ reality of events – their ‘essence’, so to speak, stripped of what is merely ‘accidental’ – enable

readers to see the ‘trend’ and to act accordingly. In their view historians could only show their readers tidal movements and waves of history, and the only practical choice human beings had was either to ride the waves or be swept away by them. Given this view, they could not foresee that ‘scientific’ history itself might ever be among the victims.

Notes

1. I have analysed the postmodern arguments of Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Keith Jenkins for the ‘mythical’ character of history in “‘You Got Your History, I Got Mine’”: Some Reflections on the Possibility of Truth and Objectivity in History’, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 10, 4, 1999: 563–84.
2. See G. Scholz, *Zwischen Wissenschaftsanspruch und Orientierungsbedürfnis. Zu Grundlage und Wandel der Geisteswissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main, 1991: 38; ‘Die Geisteswissenschaften aber, so wurde oft gesagt, verlieren an Bedeutung, an Bedeutsamkeit das, was sie an strenger Wissenschaftlichkeit gewinnen und vice versa. Sie haben das Ziel, Wissenschaft zu sein; sie haben aber auch andere Ziele: Sie wollen z.B. Orientierungen für das private und öffentliche Leben geben. Und dies beides geht nicht immer leicht zusammen.’
3. For an analysis of White’s approach to the notion of truth, see my ‘Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism and the “Metaphorical Turn”’, *History and Theory* 37, 3, 1998: 309–29.
4. W. McNeill, ‘Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians’, in *Mythistory and Other Essays*, Chicago, 1985: 3.
5. See Moses Finley, ‘Myth, Memory, and History’, *History and Theory* 4, 3, 1965: 281–302; P. Heehs, ‘Myth, History and Theory’, *History and Theory* 33, 1, 1994: 1–19; G. Iggers, ‘Historiography between Scholarship and Poetry: Reflections on Hayden White’s Approach to Historiography’, *Rethinking History* 4, 3, 2000: 373–90; J. Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography*, Chicago, 2003; R. Collins, ‘Concealing the Poverty of Traditional Historiography: Myth as Mystification in Historical Discourse’, *Rethinking History* 7, 3, 2003: 341–65; Jerry Bentley, ‘Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History’, *Journal of World History* 16, 1, 2005: 51–82. For a historiographical overview, see F. Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: from Voltaire to the Present*, 2nd ed., New York, 1972.
6. See, for example, A. Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, Berkeley, 1990; and A. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Harvard, 1997.
7. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1976: 15.
8. McNeill, *Mythistory*, vii: ‘As a young man, I thought methodology was a waste of time’.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
11. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
12. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
13. *Ibid.*, 9.
14. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
15. See A. Megill, ‘Fragmentation and the Future of Historiography’, *American Historical Review* 96, 3, 1991: 693–98.
16. McNeill, *Mythistory*, 11. Cf. Scholz, *Orientierungsanspruch*, 26: ‘But history writing in the humanistic tradition serves not only individual education but also the education of the nation, its national and cultural identity’.

17. Cf. Lorenz, 'Towards a Theoretical Framework for Comparing Historiographies: Some Preliminary Considerations', in P. Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, Toronto, 2004: 25–49, esp. 29–32.
18. McNeill, *Mythistory*, 12.
19. *Ibid.*, 13.
20. *Ibid.*, 15–16, 19.
21. Elsewhere I have elaborated this position as 'internal realism': 'Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for "Internal Realism"', *History and Theory* 33, 3, 1994: 297–327.
22. McNeill, *Mythistory*, 16–17. See also 'The Care and Repair of Public Myth', *Mythistory*, 23–42.
23. For example, see K. Jenkins, 'Introduction' to his edited *The Postmodern History Reader*, London, 1997: 3; '[For] postmodernity is not an ideology or position we can choose to subscribe to or not, postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our historical fate to be living now.'
24. McNeil, *Mythistory*, 17–19.
25. *Ibid.*, 19.
26. *Ibid.*, 19.
27. *Ibid.*, 19–22.
28. J. Overing, 'The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective, or: "The Reality of the Really Made-up"', in G. Hosking and G. Schöpflin, eds, *Myths and Nationhood*, London, 1997: 1. See also M. Dehli, 'Mythos', in S. Jordan, ed., *Lexikon Geschichtswissenschaft. 100 Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart, 2002: 223: 'In jedem Fall muss dabei neu definiert werden, was konkret als Mythos verstanden wird, da es eine umfassende und verbindliche Definition der Begriffe Mythos und Mythologie nicht gibt. Allgemein läßt sich nur sagen, dass mit Mythos eine Sprachform bezeichnet wird, die nicht rational überzeugen, sondern symbolisch-emotional wirken will.' See also Daniel Woolf, 'Myth and history', in D. Woolf, ed., *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, vol. 2, New York and London, 1998: 642. He defines the relationship between myth and history as the relationship between the mythical or legendary past and the documentable past as studied by historians: 'Myth is in some ways the mother of history, but the child's relationship to the parent has been both nurturing and at times quarrelsome.'
29. Overing, 2
30. *Ibid.*, 3.
31. *Ibid.*, 4.
32. *Ibid.*, 13
33. *Ibid.*, 12. G. Schöpflin, 'The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths', in G. Hosking and G. Schöpflin, eds, *Myths and Nationhood*, London, 1997: 19, also equates myth with worldview: 'Myth is one of the ways in which collectivities – in this context especially nations – establish and determine the foundations of their own being, their own systems of morality and values [...] Centrally, myth is about perceptions rather than historically validated truths (insofar as these exist at all), about the ways in which communities regard certain propositions as normal and natural and others as perverse and alien'.
34. See also Schöpflin, 'Function of Myths', 22.
35. Overing, 17. It is remarkable that in the colonial encounter images of 'The Other' are often phrased in terms of sexual and culinary excess – next to the cannibalistic Wild Man there is the sexually profligate Wild Woman - while simultaneously a mechanism of inversion is at work: 'While for the indigenous discourse sexual excess speaks of a superfluity of power, in the logic of conquest sexual excess becomes the sign of degeneracy, and therefore of impotence'. On the role of 'aliens' in Russian histories, see J. Wertsch, 'Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates', in Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 49–63.
36. Schöpflin, 'Function of myths', 21.

37. Schöpflin, 'Function of Myths', 26; McNeill, *Mythistory*, 19.
38. Some historians have been questioning the scientific credentials of national history from the First World War onwards, because in many of the belligerent states the dividing line between national history and political propaganda got blurred beyond recognition. The founding myth of 'scientific' history that professionalisation equals 'objectivity' did not survive this war unscathed. The pleas after this war for making history more 'scientific' by ignoring or relativising state-related 'events' and 'politics', as for instance by historians Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch, owed much to the loss of credentials of 'scientific' national history during and after this war. See also L. Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme*, Munich, 2003.
39. For the German example, see S. Berger, *Inventing the Nation: Germany*, London, 2004: 111–65.
40. See A.D. Smith, 'The "Golden Age" and National Renewal', in Hosking and Schöpflin, *Myths and Nationhood*, 36–60; and A.D. Smith, 'The Origins of Nations', in G. Eley and R. Grigor Suny, eds, *Becoming National: A Reader*, Oxford, 1996: 106–32, esp. 124; '[...] the nation that emerges in the modern era must be regarded as both construct and a real process, and that in a dual sense'. This point of view, however, is not fundamentally different from Hobsbawm's, who also emphasises the importance of 'real' 'proto-nationalism' for the later formation of nationalism. See E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, 1990: 46–80.
41. See E. Francois, H. Siegrist and J. Vogel, 'Die Nation. Vorstellungen, Inszenierungen, Emotionen', in their edited, *Nation und Emotion: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, 1995: 24–25. See also E. Francois and H. Schulze, 'Das emotionale Fundament der Nationen', in M. Flacke, ed., *Mythen der Nationen: ein Europäisches Panorama*, Munich/Berlin, 1998: 17–33. Anderson himself also raises the question of the 'profound emotional legitimacy' of the nation in his introductory chapter, but does not really address it in the rest of the book. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed., London, 1991: 4.
42. Benedict Anderson is the exception to the rule, emphasising the census, the map and the museum as the institutions for nation-creation. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163–87. For his neglect of the role of religion Anthony D. Smith has criticised him as 'neo-Marxist'.
43. See also H.K. Bhabba, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in his edited, *Nation and Narration*, London, 1990: 300, who emphasises the direct connection between love and hate, quoting Freud on the 'Narcissism of Minor Differences': 'It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness'. Aggression will be projected onto the Other or the Outside, according to Bhabba.
44. See Francois, Siegrist and Vogel, 'Die Nation', 25–27. Bhabba rightly stresses the necessity of forgetting previous fissures and struggles in the process of nation constructing. See Bhabba, 'DissemiNation', 311: 'To be obliged to forget – in the construction of the national present – is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that *performs* the problematic totalisation of the national will [...] Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification.' On the relationship between history and forgetting see further: Paul Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, Chicago, 2004.
45. Schöpflin, 'Function of Myths', 28–34.
46. "'Ist das 19. Jahrhundert nicht die Epoche, in der jedermann, Historiker, Politiker und Öffentlichkeit davon überzeugt ist, dass die Geschichtswissenschaft insbesondere deswegen gefördert werden müsse, weil sie eine objektive Wissenschaft sei und weil sie, im Gegensatz zu den Mythen, die sie zerstöre, die ganze Wahrheit des Vergangenen ans

- Tagelicht fördere” [...] Das Ergebnis war nur allzu oft der nationale Mythos, als wissenschaftliche Wahrheit verkleidet.’ Francois and Schulze, ‘Das emotionale Fundament der Nationen’, 18 (author’s translation). See also P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton, NJ, 2002.
47. For the case of the German historians, see P. Schöttler, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918–1945*, Frankfurt am Main, 1997.
 48. See in particular M. Flacke, ed., *Mythen der Nationen*.
 49. See M. Hettling, ed., *Volksgeschichten im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Göttingen, 2003; and Schöttler, ed., *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft*.
 50. For diagnoses of the situation in the US, see P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge, 1988; and J. Scott, ‘History in Crisis? The Other Side of History’, *American Historical Review* 94, 1989: 680–92.
 51. See Lorenz, ‘You Got Your History, I Got Mine’.
 52. L. von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, eds G. Iggers and K. von Moltke, Indianapolis and New York, 1973: xx. See also R. Vierhaus, ‘Ranke’s Begriff der historischen Objektivität’, in R. Koselleck et al., eds, *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Munich, 1977: 63–77; and D. Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst. Die Entstehung der modernen deutschen Geschichtsschreibung 1760–1860*, Berlin and New York, 1996.
 53. Ranke dealt with European rather than with national history, which for him was basically a history of the European state-system. Nations tended to become states according to him, but they never coincided. See Ranke, *Theory and Practice*, 61–131.
 54. *Ibid.*, 33. It is beyond the scope and aim of this chapter to discuss Ranke’s view on other sciences.
 55. W. von Humboldt, ‘On the Historian’s Task’, in Ranke, *Theory and Practice*, 5.
 56. *Ibid.*, 6.
 57. *Ibid.*, 7. See also page 23: ‘The historian must, therefore, not exclude the power of the idea from his presentation by seeking everything exclusively in his material sources; he must at least leave room for the activities of the idea’.
 58. J.-G. Droysen, *Historik*, ed. P. Leyh, 1857, Stuttgart, 1977, 166; ‘Mit dieser Interpretation der Ideen ist das historische Verständnis vollendet’.
 59. Humboldt, ‘Historian’s Task’, 14: ‘It is, of course, self-evident that these ideas emerge from the mass of events themselves, or, to be more precise, originate in the mind through contemplation of these events undertaken in a truly historical spirit: the ideas are not borrowed by history like an alien addition, a mistake so easily made by so-called philosophical history.’ Ranke’s and Humboldt’s theory of ideas therefore has been aptly characterised as Protestant *Geschichtstheologie* and as ‘a highly speculative philosophy’ which in 2006 one might easily qualify as ‘mythical’. Few ‘scientific’ historians today would state that God is present throughout history and that states are ‘ideas of God’. See also Iggers and von Moltke, ‘Introduction’, xlvii–lv, especially lxix: ‘What Ranke considered to be the objective forces operating in history was to an extent the projection of his own value views into history.’
 60. See, for instance, Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 231–49, and C. Becker, ‘What Are Historical Facts’ and C. Beard, ‘Written History as an Act of Faith’ – both in H. Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, New York, 1959: 120–40, 140–53.
 61. See also Harold Mah, ‘German Historical Thought in the Age of Herder, Kant, and Hegel’, in L. Kramer and S. Maza, eds, *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Oxford, 2002, 148: ‘But what should be noticed is that historicist histories were guilty of their own ways of historical myth-making’.
 62. Here we can suspect the direct influence of both Carl Becker and Arnold Toynbee on McNeill. See his chapters on both historians in *Mythistory*, 147–74 and 174–99.

63. Whether science presupposes consensus is another question, of course. Paul Feyerabend and Nelson Goodman have convincingly argued against this view. See C. Lorenz, 'Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality'.
64. See also Iggers and von Moltke, 'Introduction', liv: 'There are no rational criteria by which the objectivity of such historical knowledge can be judged other than a subjective sense of certainty on the part of the historian'.
65. Humboldt, 'Historian's Task', 9–10.