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Antoon De Baets

Daniel Woolf, «Historiography», in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 6 vols., ed. Maryanne C. Horowitz, (Detroit: Scribner's, 2005), I, xxxv–lxxxviii. Herbert Butterfield, «Historiography», in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, 5 vols., ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973–74), II, 464–498 (Electronic version: <http://etext.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html>, 2003).

Social-scientific encyclopedias that achieve fame are sometimes re-edited¹. The (*International*) *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (IESS) is a prime example. Published in 1930, it was entirely revised and re-edited in 1968 for the first time and, under the name *International Encyclopedia for the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (IESBS), in 2001 for the second². The same is true for the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (DHI), an initiative of the board of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* from 1973–74 that was completely redesigned and published in 2005 as the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (NDHI)³. The DHI was popular for many years. It had Chinese and Japanese translations. When the NDHI project was eventually launched, the out-of-print DHI was still appreciated sufficiently to make it available digitally. The IESBS and the NDHI can also be consulted as e-books.

Re-editions of authoritative encyclopedias such as the IESBS and the NDHI enable us to ask how their different editions present the historical discipline. In the IESS and the IESBS the domain of history is covered by many authors, each of whom treats subfields of the discipline in dense essays. Unfortunately, this complicates a comparison between the IESS and the IESBS. The DHI and the

¹ This also applies to general encyclopedias. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s first edition, for example, goes back to 1768–71. It is regularly re-edited: the latest, fifteenth edition, from 1974, has itself been frequently updated and reprinted, most recently in 2007. See *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 32 vols., ed. R. McHenry (15th edition, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974; electronic version: <http://www.britannica.com>). In the 1994 reprint, the entry for «Historiography» is in vol. XX, pp. 559–623.

² *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 15 vols., eds. E. Seligman and A. Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1931–35) [«Historiography» in vol. VII, 357–91]; *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 19 vols., ed. D. Sills (New York: Macmillan-Free Press and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968) [«Historiography» in vol. VI, 368–480]; *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 26 vols., eds. N. Smelser and P. Baltes (Oxford, etc.: Elsevier–Pergamon, 2001) [«Historiography» mainly in vol. X, 6718–6876]. IESBS electronic version: <http://www.elsevier.com> (in Japanese via <http://www.maruzen.co.jp>).

³ See for another successful example *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols., ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), and its successor *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols., ed. D. Borchert (Detroit: Thomson-Gale, 2006; electronic version available).

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NDHI, in contrast, have substantial entries for «historiography» written by single authors. The DHI contains an entry of 32,500 words by English historian Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) and in the NDHI British-born Canadian historian Daniel Woolf (1958-) wrote a survey of 42,000 words. Surprisingly, the biographies of both authors reveal that, although recruited by different editors, they have a specialization in common, namely early modern Britain. Working at the University of Cambridge for sixty years, Butterfield further published on the relationship between Christianity and history, the theory of international relations, and, as in the essay under review, on the history of historiography and of science. A professor, first at Dalhousie University, Halifax, subsequently at McMaster University in Hamilton, and now at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Woolf previously wrote several monographs about the social circulation of historical knowledge in early modern times. He also edited the *Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*⁴. At this very moment, he is transforming his NDHI contribution into a book for Cambridge University Press. He is also the editor-in-chief of the five-volume *Oxford History of Historical Writing*, scheduled for 2010⁵.

Even if the DHI and NDHI essays are comparable, albeit written with a generation in-between, two factors complicate their joint assessment. First, within predefined logistic margins, most encyclopedia boards allow their experienced authors broad intellectual freedom. Second, even if they disposed of generous word lengths, given such panoramic topics, the authors under review were still forced to make tantalizing choices. Originally, Woolf was given 10,000 words, found that number impossible, was allotted 20,000 words and eventually delivered a 42,000-word entry. The NDHI editorial board then decided to put his piece – at 53 pages, longer than any of the others – into the prefatory material⁶. Even if the assignment was identical for both authors, even if they shared a common specialist background and even if both attempted to deliver a balanced survey, the result was very different. Moreover, the global community of historians is so large that the essays are not necessarily always a representative reflection of prevailing opinions in that community. It cannot be otherwise.

And so Herbert Butterfield, an *éminence grise* past seventy at the time of his writing, offers us a very personal view. Writing at the end of an era in which it was still more or less accepted to equate ‘historiography’ with ‘western’ rather than ‘global’ historiography, he depicts the classical history of historiography in Western Europe, alternated with paragraphs on the history of historical method in that region. The price for this approach was high – at least as seen in retrospect. Geographically, Butterfield scarcely pays any attention at all to historiography outside Western Europe (although he would do so in his *Origins of History*, posthumously published)⁷ He omits, for example, Byzantine history, barely treats

⁴ *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, 2 vols., ed. D. Woolf (New York and London: Garland, 1998).

⁵ [Http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~dwoolf/oxfordhistory.html](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~dwoolf/oxfordhistory.html).

⁶ Daniel Woolf, e-mail to author (26 October 2006).

⁷ H. Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

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the historiography of the United States, and remains silent about non-western history – two pages on China and one on Islam aside. Thematically, he mostly discusses political history; other genres are dealt with at a bare minimum (the *Annales* school, for example, is not mentioned at all).

And yet, Butterfield's approach produces many brilliant, if speculative, insights. Insights about how time conceptions determine historiography; about the connection between religion and world history; about the role of narrative and rhetoric in historical writing; about skepticism regarding the attainability of historical knowledge; or about the tension between the bird's eye view of philosophers of history and down-to-earth archival research. Some of these topics are also discussed by Woolf. Butterfield emphasizes two motifs in particular. The first of these is the question of how and why historical agents come under the spell of the past. This allows him to pay attention to several scattered themes from one angle: it presses him to treat historiography in preclassical times extensively in order to discuss numerous myths of origin and descent in which westerners once believed, and to keenly observe the instrumental functions of history⁸. In particular, he suggests a causal relationship between war and historical consciousness. In his view, war is the pre-eminent experience that generates historical consciousness; it is *the* point at which human beings of all classes are *compelled* to feel the impact of historical events. During the war, people ask how it came about; after it, who started it and what exactly happened. In short, they demand a satisfying narrative about the war, a story that also explains the behavior of their leaders, who, in their turn, acquire an interest in keeping 'relevant records' (pp. 467, 496, 498).

The second motif that captivates Butterfield's mind is historical criticism. He repeats insistently that historians were always acutely aware that people made mistakes or were capable of being dishonest, but that nevertheless this did not prevent historical criticism from evolving unusually slowly and with great fragility into the sophisticated method we know today. For centuries, human beings did not see clearly how they might be able to correct untrustworthy history or reconstruct forgotten history. The analytic achievements of a Dom Mabillon in the seventeenth century or the hesitant transition of history into a recognized form of scholarship in the nineteenth were the combined culmination of training, technical insight, and consciousness of one's own bias (pp. 464, 475–77, 484–85, 487). Arnaldo Momigliano had already demonstrated previously that the *systematic* use of evidence, especially nonliterary evidence – formerly mainly an activity of antiquarians and erudites – became accepted practice among historians only in the early eighteenth century⁹.

Daniel Woolf's approach and Herbert Butterfield's are virtual opposites. This is apparent simply from the comparison of their bibliographies. Following the NDHI philosophy, Woolf opts for a truly global approach to historiography. The

⁸ Butterfield famously studied presentism in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell, 1931).

⁹ A. Momigliano, «Ancient History and the Antiquarian» [originally 1950], in Idem, *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 1-39.

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breadth of this approach induces him to draw conclusions more patiently and less speculatively than Butterfield. Only Geoffrey Barraclough, who in the 1970s wrote a very accessible and still often-used thematic survey for UNESCO (mainly about the twentieth century, though), could be called a sort of precursor¹⁰.

In practice, Woolf's approach demonstrates that two obstinate claims by ethnocentric authors are untrue. The first is that it is impossible to draw a universal historiographical panorama; the second that, even if this were feasible, it would add nothing to our actual knowledge because all classical discussions are already present in western historiography. The first claim is untrue because Woolf shows the opposite. The second claim is a fallacy. If non-western historiography is not studied, there is no way of knowing whether all classical discussions are already being explored. On the contrary, neglect of non-western historiography guarantees the exclusion of two types of discussions: those that are classical within the realm of non-western historiography but not within western historical writing and those touching the relationship between western and non-western historiography. That is the *theoretical* refutation of these claims.

Their *practical* refutation is illustrated by five features of Woolf's approach. The first of these is the description of historical writing as a widespread practice. Woolf systematically treats genres, styles, currents, schools, methodological controversies, problems of periodization, and even individual historians from different regions – to the extent that present scholarship allows this. It should be remarked that this comprehensive strategy has a serious disadvantage: it touches on everything but then races forward to the next historian, era, or topic. Be that as it may, attention is paid, for instance, to the *Methodenstreit* in Germany around 1900, but also to the conceptual battle between 'feudalism' and 'Asiatic mode of production' in China in the 1930s; to theories of Polybius and Vico, but also to those of Sima Qian, Ibn Khaldun (like Butterfield) and other non-western icons (unlike Butterfield).

The second trait concerns the arena where historiography meets power. Woolf covers not only the *locus classicus* of court historiography, the Renaissance, but also official historiography at the courts of the Chinese emperors, the Indian Mughals and the Ottoman sultans. Given all these new examples, one wonders which one deserves the epithet *locus classicus* the most: the very idea of a *locus classicus* may itself have to be re-evaluated. Within the realm of power, Woolf also regularly points to the persecution of historians and the repression of the historical profession in many corners of the globe (pp. lxi, lxxviii, lxxiv). Censorship of history is far more frequent, universal, and important than was assumed until recently.

A third feature of Woolf's approach concerns historical truth and historical consciousness. Like Butterfield, Woolf devotes a great deal of attention to myths of

¹⁰ G. Barraclough, *Main Trends in History* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1979). Originally, this book formed a chapter in a volume of the UNESCO series *Main Trends of Research in the Social and Human Sciences* (Paris: UNESCO; The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

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origin and descent, but unlike Butterfield, he also gives Eastern European and non-western examples. Likewise, some burning questions of historical consciousness are discussed by both Butterfield and Woolf: why did the ancient Greeks not pay more attention to the past than they did? Why did the Jews, obsessed as they were by the past, not produce any remarkable historiography for one and a half millennia? Similar questions about other regions are asked by Woolf alone: how exactly was ancient India interested in the past before the arrival of the Muslims, or how was Africa interested in it before the arrival of the Europeans? However refreshing these new questions are, one important problem, I feel, is still neglected here. Woolf finds signs of low or 'uncommon' historical consciousness in some regions before they entered into contact with the Muslims (ancient India) or the West (Russia, Cambodia, the Philippines). In the Indian case, he asks whether this historical consciousness *was* really low or 'uncommon' or *appears* only so because of lack of research (or ignorance of research results), but he does not do the same for the other regions. Nor do we learn whether the debate about this problem is as heated there as it is in India.

Wholly lacking in Butterfield's essay are two pregnant questions discussed by Woolf. The first of these is whether all cultures make the same epistemological distinction between fact and fiction (pp. lxxii, lxxx). The other problem is whether history is a western invention (pp. xlix, lxxix) – a question intensely discussed in India (and among, I would add, African philosophers of history). This last question above all raises a curious puzzle. For centuries, eurocentric thinking maintained that non-western history did not exist or could not be known. Now that this kind of arrogant thinking has finally disappeared, some non-western thinkers defend the view that 'history' is a typically western way of dealing with the past, not *superior* but *different*¹¹.

The fourth trait is the mapping of historiographical influences. Woolf carefully traces the diffusion of western historiography around the globe in the wake of European colonization and North American cultural hegemony, and discusses the reactions of indigenous historians in Africa, Russia, scores of Asiatic countries, the Ottoman Empire, and the modern Middle East. In addition, he focuses on regional influences: not only the influence (or lack thereof) of the German rankean model on the rest of Europe and beyond, but also, for example, influences of Chinese historiography upon Japan, Vietnam, and Korea.

The last characteristic of Woolf's method is that he is able not only to make comparisons over time (something at which Butterfield excelled), but also across cultures (of which we find little in Butterfield). Such cross-cultural comparisons are geographical (finding similarities between the West and China or between China and Japan) and thematic. The example of quasi-omnipresent court historiography has already been given, but the Renaissance and the *querelle des*

¹¹ A. De Baets, «Eurocentrism in the Writing and Teaching of History», in *A Global Encyclopedia*, ed. D. Woolf, 298–300; and Idem, «Eurocentrism», in *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450*, ed. T. Benjamin (Detroit, etc.: Macmillan-Thomson Gale, 2007), 456–61.

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Anciens et des Modernes too appear to be comparable with Chinese Qing-era phenomena (pp. liv-lv), for instance. From time to time, Woolf even points to analogous trends in three or four cultures (pp. lxix, lxxv, lxxx). This is possible only with a worldwide approach that permits him to discover influences and analogies formerly unknown or underexposed. And for his purpose, Woolf uses recent studies unavailable to historians like Butterfield, but also much fine work from the postwar years that was neglected or only politely cited in western-dominated surveys of historiography. Until the 1980s, considerable quantities of scholarly knowledge about non-western regions, collected for decades, were sparsely, almost reluctantly, mined in general surveys and admitted only to the extent that they did not force the calibrated framework. Fortunately, the era in which the West was perceived as the fortress of history and the rest as the sand of myth has gone forever. In my view, the first two traits of Woolf's approach convincingly refute the first ethnocentric claim, while the remaining features refute the second claim.

It is not simple to comment on the essays of both authors because much fair comment quickly becomes unjustified when taking into account the complexity of such large assignments within a severely limited space allocation. Still, two gaps may be observed. Although both authors continuously pay attention to historical consciousness (defined by Butterfield as «a sense *for* the past» and by Woolf as «a sense *of* the past»), they do not attempt to rank its numerous determinants into a full-fledged theory: is there a system behind the factors generating historical consciousness? And once historical consciousness is identified, which additional factors are needed to generate historiography? Can these factors be captured in groups and do general phenomena underlie them? Or is the curiosity for the past and the materializing of this curiosity into historical writing a human capacity so varied that it can only be illumined by unsatisfying *ad hoc* explanations? John Pocock developed a stimulating theory when he identified experiences of discontinuity and plural but antagonistic views on the same past as general causes of historical consciousness. Butterfield's suggestion of a connection between historical consciousness and war can be seen as one variant of such a theory¹².

A second gap does not concern theory but perspective. Butterfield – and Woolf to a lesser degree – points more or less explicitly to the important fact that quantitatively, and until the early nineteenth century, most historical writing concerned the historian's own time rather than ancient times, especially in the West but also elsewhere. However, the importance of this fact is perhaps not given due emphasis. Only the professionalization of history in the nineteenth century did interrupt this long-term trend: the prevailing historicist attitude of that era rejected contemporary history with the argument that *distance* was a necessary condition

¹² J. Pocock, «The Origins of Study of the Past: A Comparative Approach», *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (1961–62): 209–46. See also Jörn Rüsen's work about historical consciousness as summarized in IESBS, vol. 10, 6860–61, or in his «Historical Consciousness? Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development», in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. P. Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 63–85.

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for history to be scientific and this condition was insufficiently met in the case of contemporary history. This rupture lasted no longer than 150 years: on a global scale, contemporary history again became the most widely studied period after World War II, and more especially from 1970-80. This thesis was convincingly defended by Fritz Ernst in Germany and more recently by Dutch historians such as Paul Luykx, c.s., and Jaap den Hollander¹³.

Identifying alleged deficiencies in essays written under extraordinarily strict conditions is one thing, but perhaps more legitimate for a reviewer is comparative criticism: supposing that we could forget the lapse of time between the two essays for a while, how do the authors compare with each other? I believe that we cannot erase that time factor: Butterfield and Woolf are representatives of different traditions. Although the former is certainly capable of making, and from time to time *does* make, enlightening observations on the world beyond Europe, in fact he personifies the end of a tradition that in essence equated world history and western history. The fact that most of his readers were extremely familiar with the *fil rouge* of that western story allowed him to pass smoothly to macrohistorical musings. In contrast, the latter fits into a new tradition of global historiography, of which a recent historiographical survey by Markus Völkel is another example¹⁴. For the moment, this new tradition is preoccupied less with attractive speculations than it is with indispensable infrastructure: mapping historiographical forms and schools formerly forgotten or underexposed and adjusting the global picture. The large-scale incorporation of these barely known historiographical developments is cognitively overwhelming, but definitively worth the effort because new and better global theories are waiting on the horizon. It is also probable that, standing on that horizon, a reviewer of the *Newest Dictionary of the History of Ideas* in 2035 will look back at its precursor of 2005 – and at this reviewer – with mixed feelings, seeing sharply what we do not yet feel and observe today. Progress is savored over time, but does not preclude appreciation of past merit. And so it is here. Same mountain, different paths, comparable grandeur.

University of Groningen

¹³ P. Luykx, H. Termeer and J. van Vugt, *De ware geschiedschrijver: Apparaat voor de nieuwste geschiedenis* [The True Historian: Guide to Contemporary History] (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1982), 22–36; J. den Hollander, «Historisch bewustzijn» [Historical Consciousness], *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 115 (2002): 195–97. Both contributions are inspired by F. Ernst, «Zeitgeschehen und Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Skizze», *Die Welt als Geschichte: Zeitschrift für universalgeschichtliche Forschung*, 19 (1957): 137–89.

¹⁴ M. Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006).