

Rationality and History

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I

The past two decades have seen a lively theoretical discussion internationally on how history is to be written and at the same time a conscious reorientation in the writing of history itself. The term "postmodernism" has at times been applied to the new theoretical outlook and the new historiography.¹ The discussion has raised certain very fundamental questions regarding the nature of historical inquiry similar to those which have been asked regarding other forms of intellectual activity. These questions have revolved around the assumptions which have underlain historical writing - and philosophical thought - since the beginning of the Western tradition of secular history. There were two assumptions which were central to this tradition from Herodotus and Thucydides to the very recent past, namely, that there is a distinction, even if not necessarily an absolute dividing line, between fact and fiction, and similarly that there is a difference between rational thought and free imagination, even if the two may intersect

In dealing with the problems of reality and rationality raised in those segments of recent philosophic thought which have identified themselves as post-modern or deconstructionist,² this article proceeds from the assumption, rejected by this thought, that a historical text must be understood with reference to the context to which it refers and that this context contains an element of objectivity not fully identical with the subjectivity of the historian and an element of rationality which presumes elements of intersubjectivity in the methods of historical inquiry.

This crisis of modern historical thought is itself part of a broader crisis of the modern world, a world which was deeply affected by what has been described as the philosophy of the Enlightenment. One notion which was primary to the modern tradition of scientific thought, and which was integrated into the traditions of historical scholarship, was the notion of objectivity and of the possibility of rational inquiry and understanding of objective reality. But this notion underwent several important transformations in the course of the Enlightenment. Its classical Cartesian form saw the dualism of a rationally constructed passive nature counterposed to an

active, inquiring rational faculty which could comprehend and control it. Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* showed the fundamental transformation which already took place in the eighteenth century of the Cartesian *esprit de systeme*, which believed that the fundamental problems of existence and reality could be analyzed by abstract reason, into a much more humble *esprit systematique* which marked the empirical approach of the new science, for which science resided in method and hence in a process of questioning and thus not in the construction of systems and the positing of answers. With Hume and Kant, the problematic nature of reality was recognized. Science was thus never a reflection of reality but a construct; but not an abstract construct. The core of scientific reason was contained in scientific method. Notwithstanding the later attempts by philosophers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gaston Bachelard and Paul Feyerabend to see in science a variation of poetic imagination,¹ the basic ethos of scientific inquiry did not change with the very fundamental reorientations in world view which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense Einstein was as fundamentally convinced as Newton of the meaningfulness and rationality of the scientific enterprise. The mechanistic conception of an objectified universe, which served as the whipping boy of much of anti-scientific thought, represented even in physics merely a fleeting and by no means universal viewpoint. Very soon in the nineteenth century the close relation between science and culture was recognized. Even as avowed a materialist as Karl Marx in the *First Thesis on Feuerbach* recognized the active role of the mind in reconstructing a picture of reality.

The so-called German scientific school of historians from the very beginning operated with a very guarded sense of objectivity. The new historical science which Ranke propagated was based not on systematic empirical inquiry and analytical generalization but on philological and hermeneutical procedures. The source of historical studies was a text, whether a written text in the sense of a document or an artifact' in Droysen's sense. Not literal or lexicological analysis but comprehension - Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Einfühlung*, Ranke's *Verstehen* - was at the core of historical science. The whole new critical approach to historical study, not only in Germany but generally in the Western world since the Enlightenment⁴ - from the cultural studies of Heyne, Winckelmann, and Wolf, and from Gibbon and Voltaire on - rested on an approach to the past as a means of understanding the subject of historical inquiry not immediately but mediately. Behind this, there of course rested the belief that a source in fact reflected a subject matter of history, which could be studied and understood, even if never understood fully and finally.

The notion that historical understanding, even if always qualified and perspectivistic, was possible was closely interwoven with two other notions which have been radically challenged in recent philosophical thought, the notion that there were subjects of history both in the individual, personal sense and in an interpersonal setting. A historical source, again whether a written document or an archeological artifact, embodied and communicated meaning which was potentially capable of being understood. The text thus expressed the intentions of the author or the outlook of a social group. This again assumed that the author could express intentionality and meaning. Again the historiography of the nineteenth century did not work with the notion of a constant, unchanging personality. The biographies of the time, such as Dilthey's lives of Schleiermacher or of the young Hegel,⁵ parallel the *Bildungsroman* in which the person himself undergoes change. Nevertheless the confidence remains alive that the text reflects the meaning of the author and that the document means what it says.

On a broader collective level, history is seen as continuity, whether this continuity points to progress in the sense of Hegel, Comte, or Marx or to diversity as in Herder or Burckhardt. Even for Burckhardt, for whom discontinuity plays a major role in history, an epoch has a cohesion and a spirit which can be portrayed. Cohesion means that some form of explanation is possible; the causal factors in Ranke's *Great Powers*, in de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, or Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* may be very different, but they presume that there is sufficient coherence on the individual or collective level to make historical understanding possible. However, several important caveats appeared in the course of the nineteenth century in respect to the confidence regarding the coherence of the human personality and the historical process; we need only mention the names of Marx and Freud from two very different perspectives. For Marx the relationship between supposed knowledge and power relationships, for Freud that between knowledge and mental state were inseparable - although for both the possibility for rational communication remained, as it did later for Jürgen Habermas.⁶ The extent to which historical dialogue was distorted by social, political, and emotional interests below the consciousness of the author became increasingly apparent, yet the recognition of these distortions provided a basis for the restoration of rational discourse.

The revolt against the conception of historical truth and with it the belief in the applicability of rational criteria, say scientific or scholarly, to the investigation of the past cannot be viewed as a current in historical thought in a narrow sense but as part of a broad reorientation of modern consciousness under the changing conditions of modern existence. The world which took shape in the late eighteenth century - its origins were much earlier - not only generated the Enlightenment conceptions which were fundamental to the shaping of the new approaches to historical perception but also created a deep sense of uneasiness - which called its own presumptions into question.

It is perhaps a commonplace to say that cognition has never taken place in a vacuum. The whole discussion on the character of history, historical truth, and historical method has taken place in the context of political debate. The first incisive attack on the conception of truth and with it of historical truth comes from Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in his deconstruction of science in his later writings. This attack is part of a critique of "bourgeois" society which is much more radical, going to the roots, than the contemporary critique by Marx. Marx after all affirms the basic world-view of the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, its affirmation of rationality as an instrument of understanding and fashioning the world, its cult of progress not only in the general sense of improvement but in the Condorcian sense of the conquest of nature and the rational ordering of society. The criteria of truth remain, the belief in an objective reality, the possibility of mastering it scientifically, the confidence in the purpose of history in which human existence would find its fulfillment. There is, of course, another much more critical side to Marxist theory, that radically questions the technocratic ethos of bourgeois culture, which remains dormant until the emergence of cultural Marxism in the twentieth century.⁷

In applying the label "right" to Nietzsche's cultural critique, we must nevertheless qualify what is meant by "right" in this context because in many ways the Nietzschean conception of truth and history is radical rather than conservative, radical in the sense that it denies the entire Christian religious and communitarian conception of the traditional conservatives who turned against Enlightenment, liberalism, and capitalism. Nietzsche's refutation of Christianity itself contains an element of Enlightenment rationality. Yet at the core of *The Birth of Tragedy* lies the assertion, taken up again by Heidegger, that the entire philosophical tradition of the West, beginning with Socrates, has been false and rested on the myth that reality could be grasped by means of concepts. The place of logos must yield to the realm of poetry and imagination, reason to ecstasy, balance

to chaos. Yet this vision, which conceived itself as aesthetic, and hence as unpolitical, and reviled politics, in fact involved a deeply political passion, the reassertion in the form of Nietzsche's cult of genius of an aristocratic order in which the supposed complacency and vulgarity of bourgeois society with its pursuit of welfare, peace, and broader opportunity for the many would give way to the creative and aesthetic expressions of heroic violence.

The intellectual foundations of the critique of reason and with it of historical reason were well formulated before 1914. They were highly politicized in the aftermath of the war, primarily in Germany, for reasons which had to do with the conditions and traditions under which Germany faced the problems of modernization, but were not restricted to Germany. In different forms, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, and Carl Schmitt called for a revival of the mythical, the reassertion of violence, a new biologism which involved racial war, and an ambivalent attitude toward technology, which on the one hand sought a return to simpler, pre-industrial forms on life, and on the other hand admired the military potential of modern weaponry and saw in the First World War a heroic, revitalizing experience. *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by Alfred Rosenberg,⁸ which sought to give National Socialism a theoretical foundation, is only a vulgarized expression of what amounted to a broad consensus on the Right. Nor is there a break in Heidegger's well-known Inaugural Address as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933, between the basic yearning for a home in an ontic *Sein*, a way (which defies all rational comprehension) out of the homelessness of modern man, and Heidegger's invocation of solidarity with mythical and mystical origins, which German science is to serve.⁹

Yet it is the Left, and in fact a New Left, which in the years after 1945 has taken over many of the arguments of the cultural critics of the Right, including its critique of science, technology, and progress, and has paid its tributes to Nietzsche and Heidegger, although from emancipatory and egalitarian motives diametrically opposed to those of the Right. The seminal attempt to integrate the critique of science and rationality of the German intellectual Right into a Marxist conception of culture came in Gyorgy Lukács' 1923 collection of essays, *History and Class Consciousness*,¹⁰ criticizing the narrowly economic understanding of Marx by the Second Internationale. Most interesting for the purposes of this essay is not Lukács' brilliant attempt to show to what extent capitalism has molded not only material life but also consciousness and culture, but his critique of modern science. Drawing on Weberian analyses of capitalism, Lukács sought to show that modern science reflected the world view of capitalism, a reified picture of human reality, which, as

Lukács believed even before the 1844 Manuscripts were published, Marx had consistently diagnosed from his early writings on and given most poignant expression to in the famous section on "The Fetishism of Commodities" in the first volume of *Capital*. Max Horkheimer and even more clearly Theodor Adorno distanced themselves from Lukacs' messianic dialectics while developing further his ideas on the commodification of culture in a capitalistic society. Horkheimer's residual Marxism led him to a simplified explanation of liberalism as the political concomitant of capitalism. He thus placed much greater blame for the rise of fascism on the "culture industry" represented in its most developed form in the United States than on the heritage of authoritarian attitudes in German political culture. This hostility to the tradition of political liberalism was interwoven in Horkheimer's 1947 *Eclipse of Reason*, and in Horkheimer and Adorno's joint work, *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* (originally published 1944 in Amsterdam), with a critical reassessment of the Enlightenment outlook from which this political tradition originated. It was the Enlightenment now which in its attempt to create a society of free men and women on rational foundations was given a great share of responsibility for the Holocaust. In a strange way, the early Marx and Heidegger were now made to speak a similar language.

This merger of Marx and Heidegger, or Marx and Nietzsche, deeply characterized the philosophic outlook of the New Left which replaced the Old Marxist Left. The cult of progress with its scientific, technological, and cultural implications appeared hollow and destructive. What gave the New Left which emerged after 1945 its impetus was a continued, deep-felt sense of justice, in fact a sense of justice which went far beyond the more narrowly economic conceptions of traditional Marxists and traditional liberals. But the ideals of the past, whether Christian, Enlightened, or Marxist, had in its view proved disastrous for human freedom and dignity. It is this sense of the lack of any element of objective meaning, of any logical grounds for ethics, the Weberian sense of the ethical irrationality of human existence, which led Jean-Paul Sartre, the fighter in the French Resistance, to find important sources in Heidegger's *Being and Time* for his theoretical formulation of the existentialist viewpoint in his *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1956 but written under the German occupation.

Despite the radical critique of the Enlightenment conception of rationality, French thinkers from Sartre and Lévi-Strauss to Foucault and Derrida remained committed to basic ethical, and this includes political and social, values of the Enlightenment, even if they rejected the philosophic foundations upon which this ethics rested. May 1968 symbolizes the transition from the

conventional analysis of capitalism by the Left to newer forms which took into account the fundamental transition which had taken place in the world since World War II. Marxism in its traditional forms became irrelevant as a meaningful instrument for the analysis of the modern industrial world, often called now, in my view not quite correctly, post-industrial. It only survived, radically transformed, as a Western Marxism which invoked the concept of alienation of Marx's early writings without considering why Marx repudiated these writings. It was partly out of nostalgia for a revolutionary tradition of the past that broad segments of the left continued to use the language of Marxism while repudiating the political theory of the historical Marxist movements. In the setting of the late twentieth century, a fundamentally different perception emerged among the political Left of what constituted oppression. Notwithstanding their emphatic avowals that the world is ethically irrational, the line of thinkers from Sartre and Beauvoir to Foucault and Derrida is characterized by a deep commitment to social justice and humanity (even if in Sartre's case this may have included a blindness to the oppressive aspects of Stalinism and Maoism). It is this sense of justice which deeply distinguishes the confrontation of nothingness by Sartre and Foucault from that of Nietzsche and Heidegger .

Foucault's great contribution to this discussion has been his redefinition of oppression. The Nietzschean conception of the centrality of power was reinterpreted to give it a radical edge which challenged the social order in the broadest sense. The Marxist conception of power as emanating from a central core of political and economic power was now replaced by the recognition that forms of power and oppression permeate all forms of human relations. The history of the modern world was viewed with, as I shall argue later, an excessive yet well-founded pessimism, which saw Enlightenment as a means to exclude and control all those who did not conform readily to the norms of a society in which the prerequisites of performance dominated. The Left in the streets of Paris, Berlin, or Berkeley in 1968 had little to do with the traditional left, as the inability of students and workers to cooperate in Paris and elsewhere showed. The calls for racial equality, equality of the sexes, the end of the Viet Nam war, the recognition of alternative life styles rested on a radically pessimistic view not only of the capitalist but also of the industrialized world, including the socialist countries in which political repression and industrial and ecological irresponsibility were even less checked than in the capitalist countries. The fear of nuclear destruction which hung over Europe in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to an even more real fear of environmental catastrophe. While the developed countries achieved increasing affluence, accompanied to be sure by new forms of poverty and degradation in the American cities and

gradually also elsewhere, a great deal of the formerly colonized or semi-colonized world fought an increasingly hopeless struggle against deprivation, sickness, and violence.

Despite the utopianism of segments of the protest movements in the 1960s, there was little room left for any Utopian hope.

III

Yet from the perspective of this article with its focus on the role of historical thought in historical writing, we are less concerned with the destructive aspects of rationality in modern civilization, than with the critique of rational means of inquiry, although the two are very closely related. For if no coherence of any kind can be constructed in history or reality, then reason loses its claim to show a path to critical understanding. "Reason," of course, has very different meanings. The critics of modern civilization, from Weber to Horkheimer and Foucault, have been primarily concerned with what has been called instrumental reason. Yet Horkheimer in his essay on "Critical and Traditional Theory"¹¹ in the 1930s still recognized a normative side to reason. The core of the Hegelian notion of science, which Lukács and Horkheimer accepted, was that all items of knowledge have to be seen in a broad historical, cultural context. This, of course, involved a much more complex kind of reasoning which in the tradition of hermeneutics involved qualitative perceptions and the interrelationship of an abstract reasoning process and creative, empathetic imagination. Hermeneutics, even if it rejects clearly defined methodological procedure, is not in itself an expression of irrationality but rather an attempt to understand cultural meaning by means of adequate forms of reasoning.¹² For the Horkheimer of the 1930s, the world was still accessible to rational inquiry.

However, with the collapse of a sense of meaning, the possibility of rational inquiry is also eliminated. If history has no structure or reality, then any sort of approach which seeks to understand historical reality "rationally" is, of course, senseless.¹³ And with it is the distinction between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* (poetry and truth), history and myth, while never absolute, is now completely abolished.

Often, structuralism and post-structuralism were distinguished as two stages of recent thought in which the dissolution of a concept of reality, objectivity, and personality was completed. Moving away from the conception of hard, measurable artifacts of thought, a new generation of

cultural anthropologists increasingly likened a culture to a literary text, a web of meaning, which had to be decoded. A culture was seen as a language, with its grammar and syntax, which determined human behavior rather than being determined by it. Yet for Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, and Pierre Bourdieu, there was still very much of a whole world, or rather a set of whole worlds, of cultures which had to be understood and could be understood even if they required means which burst the imagination of traditional social science.¹⁴

For Foucault and Jacques Derrida this residue of coherence disintegrated. Derrida does not introduce a new note when he argues that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means. Marx and Freud had argued the same. But what Derrida suggests is that the text has no discernible meaning because there is no reality apart from language and language no longer has a structure. Saussure's relationship between signifiers and their signified is broken; words circulate freely. An archeology of knowledge in Foucault's sense is no longer possible, because there is no longer meaning to be uncovered, because there are no longer authors, integrated personalities which can convey intentions capable of rational understanding. The reader of Derrida is confronted by an apparent contradiction, the destruction of the claim of reason as a tool of knowledge through the cold and incisive application of logical arguments to destroy the claims of reason. Yet particularly historians, who have been close to the recent concern with language, have frequently stressed the extent to which women and men "make their own history" in response to oppressive conditions, political, economic, social, cultural, and sexual,¹⁵ an idea which is in contradiction with the determinism suggested by structuralism and the dissolution of meaning and personality assumed by deconstruction.

IV

How has this philosophic reorientation expressed itself in the theory of historical knowledge? It has become common to speak of a "linguistic turn."¹⁶ Insofar as this means that history cannot operate without language and that to an extent language shapes historical knowledge, there can be no argument. Nor can there be with the centrality of language not only in historical writing but also in historical consciousness. The pioneering work of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock in the history of modern political thought moves away from the reconstruction of the abstract ideas held by a select number of great individuals to the attempt to see these ideas as part of

the discourse of a broad group of educated persons.¹⁷ Civic humanism is less an ideology than a common vocabulary. Yet Skinner or Pocock have never argued that this discourse can be reduced to a linguistic game. As against the textualism of the post-structuralists, for whom the text has an existence apart from its authors, the intentions of the authors remain fundamental for Pocock and Skinner. There is a great distance between the recognition, which has in fact accompanied the emergence of critical historical research practices since the middle of the eighteenth century, that all history reflects the subjectivity and the perspective of the historian and the radical hermeneutical position that the historian is totally bound by his prejudices or pre-judgments (*Vorurteil*)¹⁸ In a fundamental way, the problem of history is not that different from that of science, even natural science. As Thomas Kuhn; has argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, an historical and cultural element enters into scientific work too. Yet what distinguishes science from imaginative fiction for Kuhn is the presence of a dialogue carried on by a community of scholars who speak a common language, but not an arbitrarily chosen language. And a similar dialogue, much less exact, much more evasive, but nevertheless governed by principles of rational discourse, also governs the work of the historians.

The new emphasis on history as a form of literature is related to the reduction of history to language. Within the tradition of professional historical scholarship in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century there arose an insistence on the strict separation of scholarly, scientific, and literary discourse. Hayden White is thus quite right in insisting that every historical text is also a literary text and that as such it is governed by literary criteria. But White goes beyond this to then conclude that a historical text is in essence nothing more than a literary text, a poetical creation as deeply involved in the imagination as the novel. The history the historian writes is determined ultimately not by any reference to his subject of study but by literary decisions, by the limited choices permitted by such literary determinants as "emplotment" and "choice of tropes," to follow White's highly formalized terminology which paradoxically, as that of other post-modernists, adopts the jargonized language of the professionalized sciences which it calls into question.

This attempt to explore the "linguistic grounds" of historical texts as a deep "verbal structure"¹⁹ which underlies the historical evidence has direct relevance for the role of evidence in historical investigation. From Thucydides on, the proper - i.e., critical - use of evidence formed the basis for a truthful historical narrative and the purpose of a historical narrative was broadly, even if

not universally, held to be truthful narrative. Now we are very well aware that history has often had a different purpose as a means of establishing a sense of ethnic, religious, or political identity and heritage in very different civilizations from ancient Babylonia or Hellas or traditional Black Africa to the national and ideological legends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet a distinction, perhaps too rigid, has been maintained, particularly since the Enlightenment, between history and what has come to be called mythistory. Donald Kelley in a recent provocative article sought to establish the history and the legitimacy of the latter.²⁰ Most historians, including cultural historians, nevertheless remain committed to an evidential base as a requisite of meaningful historical writing. The recent debate between Robert Finlay and Natalie Davis on Davis' use of evidence raises the question to what extent the historian may imaginatively go beyond the literal sources.²¹ Doubtless the layers of truth are deeper and the operations of reason more intricate than traditional historiography assumed. The symbolism inherent in fiction, mores, and folk beliefs may, and probably do, contain greater keys to the understanding of societies and cultures than do accounts of the Venetian ambassadors which Ranke took so seriously without a critical analysis of the distortions which entered into them.²² But cultural anthropology too involves method, in the sense of controlled strategies of research, and operates within a scholarly community of discourse. Yet one may wonder to what extent critical research in history will be possible if, as F. R. Ankersmit confidently observes, the "metaphorical dimension in historiography is more powerful than the literal or factual dimensions. . . . There is reason to assume that our relation to the past and our insight into it will in future be of a metaphorical nature rather than a literal one" (152).

V

There is a German saying that food is never eaten as hot as it is cooked, and I believe that this is also the case with the new cultural history which identifies itself with the conception of reality and the understanding of post-modern philosophy. Post-modern philosophy in itself has not been committed to any particular political and social outlook. In a sense it has belonged to a new right as well as a new left and the intellectual forebears it invokes, whether Heidegger or Paul de Man, hardly reflect the emancipatory concerns of many of the new historians who seek to write in the vein of the new philosophy. What they share is a deep distrust against what has appeared to them as the ideology of a technologized culture, identified in earlier language - e.g., in Horkheimer or Adorno -

with liberalism or capitalism. And intellectual schemes and strategies which even remotely suggest modes of social scientific thinking have encountered suspicion in so far as they seemed to be part of this technologized outlook.

Philosophers from Nietzsche to Foucault and Derrida have seen hidden or not so hidden instruments of power in technology, science, and logical thought. A fundamental shift took place between the older historiography, exemplified by traditions of historical writing and political thought from Thucydides and Aristotle to Ranke and Hegel - but also very definitely including Nietzsche and Heidegger, for whom power and hierarchy were beneficial and creative of culture - and the new philosophy and historiography for whom power was exploitative and destructive of human potentialities. For despite its deep sense of the ethical absurdity of the world and its insistence on the lack of coherence in history, society, and personality, the new cultural history proceeded from ethical and political values which were deeply rooted in the Enlightenment. In saying this, I am fully aware of the deep contradictions inherent in Enlightenment conceptions of the social and political order between the formal equality and liberty it piously proclaimed and the distinctions of status and power which it was willing to justify in practice. In a sense, we must deconstruct the hostility of the new cultural historians to the Enlightenment conceptions of a rational social order to unearth the deeper level of their thought hidden between their explicit formulations.

From the viewpoint of the new historiography, two traditions of historical writing became unacceptable, the kind of history practiced by the majority of professionally trained historians from the beginnings of Ranke's seminars until very recently, and the newer traditions of history oriented in social science. In both cases, the critical attitude of the new historians rests on political values. In the eyes of the new historians, traditional professional historiography involved political bias not only in the choice of subject matter but also in its restricted use of sources, the concentration on the centers of political power, the construction of narratives in which the powerful appear as the main agents of history, and the reliance on documents written by the powerful.

By the 1970s or 1980s, the main competitor of the new cultural history was, however, not the older professional history with its specific kind of political narrative, even if the latter experienced a limited revival, but rather history oriented in social science. The place devoted to cultural factors differed within the social-science traditions. We can establish a spectrum ranging from a position which emphasized such material factors as the economy, biology, climate, demography, and social strata defined by quantifiable variables, to one which stressed much more

strongly cultural factors. At the one end of the spectrum stood the logical, positivistic conception of a "covering law"-model proposed by Carl Hempel and Karl Popper which stressed the unity of logical inquiry in all areas of knowledge,²³ and at the other end Clifford Geertz' "Thick Description" (3-30). Yet in a very important way the new cultural history, with its stress on culture and its skepticism in regard to theory, profited a great deal from social-science approaches to history. The work of the *Annales* historians - which now spans almost a century since the early regional studies of Lucien Febvre before World War I on the Franche Comté during the Reformation²⁴ - shifted the focus from the central institutions of political and economic power to society and culture viewed (in part) apart from these.

Somewhere in the work of the new, structurally-oriented historians in the 1970s, transition takes place to a new cultural history which questions the social-scientific assumptions of this older history but benefits from it immensely. Lawrence Stone in his now-famous 1979 article on the revival of history noted that "the movement to narrative by the 'new historians' marks the the end of an era: the end of the attempt to produce a coherent scientific explanation of change in the past." In many ways, the new narrative history builds methodologically on the structural analysis of the social history in the *Annales* tradition. It expands the concern with the lives "of the poor and obscure" but now with a greater emphasis on life as it is experienced and felt by individual human beings, with personalities of their own, rather than with these people as collective groups. If historians have given up the search for "coherent scientific explanations," they have, however, not given up a related concern, namely, that of analyzing societies and cultures by other means, which nevertheless still aim at understanding a historical past, by "tell[ing] the story of a person, a trial, or a dramatic episode, not for its own sake, but in order to throw light upon the internal workings of a past culture and society."²⁵ Nor have they broken with traditional modes of scholarly inquiry in critically dealing with sources, which primarily remain written sources, although their interest now shifts from price data and hard demographic information, to documents such as court proceedings, diaries, letters, but also records of oral history, which reflect human opinion, behavior, and emotions.

The new work reflects both the "linguistic turn" and the skepticism regarding grand theory which this turn implies.²⁶ The primary focus is still on collective behavior. The quantifiable series in French studies of changing *mentalités* in the 1970s now yielded to narrative sources, particularly records of criminal and inquisitional proceedings which were often available. Again the French - and the Anglo-American historians dealing with France from the sixteenth to **the**

nineteenth century - were innovators in bringing the new cultural approach into the study of political history. They thus replaced with this approach Georges Lefebvre's Marxist analysis of the French Revolution in terms of conflicting class interests, analysis which had provided the basis for a Marxist approach which dominated French studies of the Revolution for a quarter of a century after 1945. Nevertheless, even these studies introduced a concern for culture and consciousness, as in Lefebvre's exploration of the collective psychology which shaped the "Great Fear" in the French countryside in 1789,²⁷ and Albert Soboul's examination of the political ideas and social values which gave coherence to a Sans-culottes movement recruited from very diverse social groups.²⁸ François Furet's reconsideration of the political and ideological factors which made the French Revolution possible constituted not only a frontal attack against the Marxist affirmation in the 1970s and 1980s of the French Revolution as an unqualifiedly progressive event of history but also an attack against an economic interpretation of history.²⁹ Yet in a sense, Furet still represented a transitional step to new approaches, deeply effected by the turn to culture seen through symbol and language. In the 1970s, Maurice Agulhon and Mona Ozouf were already dealing with the consolidation of a republican tradition in nineteenth-century France by studying the symbols of the Republic, as reflected for example in its festivals and its songs.³⁰ There is a marked break between Charles Tilly and Edward Shorter's statistical study in the early 1970s of strikes and violence in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, and Michelle Perrot's history of French strikes embedding the political and economic issue in a much broader setting of popular behavior.³¹ Robert Darnton's *Great Cat Massacre* represents an attempt to make sense of the symbolic actions through which the deep structure, the basic code of a culture expresses itself.³² The past thus becomes a text to be interpreted very much in the sense of a literary text which, in the conception of post-modern theory, contains an autonomy and inner structure of its own, even if filled with contradictory and alternative meanings. Saussure's linguistics, with its belief that language shapes reality rather than the reverse, lays the foundation for such inquiries into the history of *mentalités* as Lucien Febvre's 1942 study of unbelief in the age of Rabelais,³³ seen not in terms of ideas but of the "mental work-tool" (*outillage mental*) provided by language. Yet if these approaches to popular culture have at times tended to submerge individuals in deeply-buried structures of consciousness which control them rather than are controlled by them, other writings, such as those of E. P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman, and Carlo Ginzburg, have stressed the role of conscious, intentional behavior.³⁴

The historians as usual have been less explicit about the theoretical assumptions which guided them than have the philosophers. Works like those of E. P. Thompson and Carlo

Ginzburg show to what extent the stress on culture can be combined with an awareness of the forces of transition operating in modern societies. It is no accident that some of the historians who have retained the link between culture and society have viewed themselves as Marxists. One cannot speak of one Marxist tradition of historical writing because Marxist approaches to history have been so multifaceted and contradictory, even in the historical writing of Karl Marx himself. We have observed above the narrow scientism of much of official Marxist historiography, both in the Social Democratic tradition before 1914 and in that of Marxism-Leninism after 1917. On the other hand, Marxist theorists, beginning with György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, made important contributions to the critique of the scientific and economic approach - which Marxism had taken over from (the general intellectual climate of the nineteenth century - and to the new emphasis on culture.

The dividing line between Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to history, which seemed so important before the 1960s, became increasingly irrelevant in the New Left. Despite the continued use of Marxist rhetoric by segments of the New Left, the understanding of what constituted exploitation and oppression now extended to areas of everyday life and culture - which had been excluded in the more narrowly economic critique of modern society by the established Marxist movements - and included segments of humanity, women, ethnic and racial minorities, as well as the socially marginalized groups which had been neglected not only in the main stream of historical writing but in Marxist historiography as well. The non-Western societies, too, now were viewed from a very different perspective, no longer, as even Marx and particularly Engels had seen them, in terms of the imperial policies of the West - policies which were to enable them to enter the world of modern economic development and civilization - but as cultures with their own history and character. This broadening of historical interest had to bring about a fundamental reorientation in methodological approaches and strategies of knowledge which with the new emphasis on experience in turn had to lead beyond the narrow confines of the old conception of scientific inquiry and of rationality.

VI

This essay, in its plea for rationality and Enlightenment, is not intended as a rejection of the new kind of history but rather as a critical examination of the theoretical assumptions which this

history has frequently invoked in support of its practice. There is a fundamental contradiction between the radical rejection of rationality (admittedly with the use of rational arguments) by deconstructionists and the attempts by the new cultural historians to recapture the life and experience of real human beings in the past. The new cultural history which we have described above in very fundamental ways continues Enlightenment themes which were repudiated by the radical critics of modern civilization such as Nietzsche, Spengler, and Heidegger who demanded the restoration of hierarchical, authoritarian structures. It continues to operate, not necessarily explicitly but fundamentally, with the conception that individuals are to be taken seriously, that notwithstanding Foucault and especially Derrida's critique they are capable of expressing, either verbally or in terms of their behavior, intentions which endow them with a high degree of integrity and autonomy so that they deserve to be understood and ultimately can be understood. In the final analysis for Thompson, or Ginzburg, or Hans Medick,³⁵ the text is not a text consisting of signifiers which circulate freely but reflects a reality which goes beyond the words and symbols which constitute it, even if this reality can only be reconstructed through the mediation of subjectivity and culture. This reality to be sure is not an object in the sense either of classical materialism or of Michel Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* but represents a reality with a human face. The very stress on the central role of culture in history and the understanding of culture as a system of meanings and values contradicts the idea of a world in which there are no meanings.

In practice, the new cultural history involves not a rejection but an expansion of scientific rationality. The human, the social, and the natural world from the perspective of the late-twentieth century appear immeasurably more complex and opaque than they did to the authors of the *Encyclopédie*. Post-modernist philosophy and literary theory have created a new orthodoxy which has faced remarkably few challenges although it contradicts so profoundly the world of actual experience and value from which modern cultural historians proceed. In fact until now no post-modernist history has appeared which in any ways parallels post-modernist theoretical discussions. Rationality, the attempt to understand the world which confronts us by means of reason and understanding, can take on very different forms. The past century and a half, since the emergence of history as a professional discipline, has seen the extension of sources and of the means of interpreting these sources, which would have dumbfounded the imagination of a Ranke but which nevertheless constitute an expansion of rationality.

As practicing historians today recognize, the concepts and methods of the historians oriented to social science and to culture by no means exclude each other. The interesting work being done in such areas as working-class and women's history increasingly focuses on the examination of the experiences of men and women in settings of social structures and social change. Even Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, which is often cited as a prime work of the new cultural history, is profoundly aware of the new political and economic forces in which Ginzburg sees the sources of the destruction of the peasant culture. Almost all of the new cultural historians have been aware of these changes. Robert Darnton similarly in *The Great Cat Massacre* portrays the journeymen printers' reaction to their masters in terms of the interplay of artisanal culture with the powerful forces of emergent capitalism. Ginzburg and Darnton dispense entirely with the empirical instrumentarium of the social sciences and instead seek to recapture the deeper structures of a culture contained in the records embodied in the written testimony of the miller and the recollections of the journeyman. David Sabean attempted something similar in the utilization of court cases involving religious deviation in his *Power in the Blood*, but then showed in his in-depth study of the Suabian village of Neckerhausen over several generations how computer techniques applied to material conditions and to legal relations can contribute to an understanding of a popular culture, which yet requires anthropological interpretation as well.³⁶ The stress on the great impersonal forces in the shaping of human institutions and life which marked the historical perceptions of classical Marxism, analytical social science, and *Annales* structural history have increasingly given way in recent studies to a recognition of the role of cultural factors, including language and rhetoric, in influencing political and economic change rather than in being influenced by them.

We can agree that the idea of progress, as it was conceived by Condorcet is dead and with it a dominant version of the grand narrative. The tremendous arrogance which for a broad current of nineteenth-century opinion, from Ranke and Hegel to Marx and Spencer, identified the history of the world with that of the West, has been chastened. Yet it is hardly true that history is without any discernible directions. A theory of modernization may well be justified as a heuristic device if it refrains from blindly identifying modernization with capitalism, as prophets like Walt Rostow are prone to do,³⁷ or, in not entirely different ways, as those of a technocratic Marxism have done with social and civilizational progress. In this sense the questions raised by modern social historians on the transformation of modern societies both in the economically highly developed countries and those of the so-called Third World need to be combined with those raised by cultural historians on the impact of these changes on the experiences of human beings. To proclaim that

history has no structure, as Foucault or Derrida do, is to bury one's head in the sand. The absence of any over arching direction in history, as conceived by the great theologians and philosophers of history, does not mean that there are no forces at work in modern societies which require rational analysis and call for conceptions of historical and social change. Foucault's whole cultural critique implies, notwithstanding his assertion to the contrary, that history, or at least modern history, has a direction, one against which he struggles. In this sense interpretations of the history of the modern Western world, whether those of de Tocqueville or of Max Weber, or Alfred Weber, appear not as pure speculations or fictions but as conceptual constructs in the attempt to gain a rational understanding of the world in which we live. It is a characteristic feature of modern and post-modernist theories or visions, including those of Heidegger and Foucault, that they assume that there are forces involving scientification and technicalization which they reject but nevertheless see as the driving forces of modernity.

Certainly no interpretation even of limited historical subject matter, much less so of larger processes, can claim finality. But history, like every intellectual discipline, is an ongoing process guided by certain criteria of what constitutes reasonable communication. And this takes us to the core of Enlightenment values. The obvious limits of reason do not need to lead to the repudiation of the rational tradition of the West, suggested by the critique popular since Nietzsche and Heidegger, of a supposed logocentrism. The tradition of Western philosophy since Socrates needs to be critically reexamined from the viewpoint of the political and technical manipulation of nature and human beings which it implied. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were right in pointing at the elements of a myth of reason in the Enlightenment by which an emancipatory ideology led to its opposite. The products of an instrumental rationality in science, technology, and political and cultural control contributed to the horrors of the twentieth century. Yet there is no substitute in a civilized community for rational inquiry even if reason in today's world has burst the limits of conventional logic.

The contradictions of the modern world seen from the viewpoint of the dignity of human beings are apparent and these contradictions call into question the very conception of a civilized community. But the process of modernization, which in many ways has been the heir of the Enlightenment, has not been all evil. The future is by no means certain; nuclear and ecological destruction and genocides are all very real possibilities. The Enlightenment need not only mean the use of instrumental rationality in its scientific and technological forms to create more perfect forms

of control and domination; it also included a serious call for emancipation from the tyrannies of the past - from despotism, disease, poverty, and ignorance - to pave the way for a world in which man would be freed from the tutelage which had been accepted in all previous civilizations, Western and non-Western, as natural or God-given. The tradition of cultural criticism from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Horkheimer and Foucault, which itself has roots in the Enlightenment, has offered important correctives to an Enlightenment unaware of its inherent contradictions. A chastened idea of the Enlightenment, and with it, as its essential constituent part, a chastened rationalism, still have meaning today. The modernist and post-modernist critique of Enlightenment has often overlooked the extent to which the Enlightenment conception of man and society aimed at creating the conditions under which human beings would be able through their critical faculties to make reasonable decisions about their lives. The alienated reason they chastised, which sees the expansion of rational control as the aim of human activities, is foreign to the Enlightenment as understood not only by Lessing or Kant, Voltaire or Paine, but also by Condorcet for whom progress serves human beings rather than the reverse. Not as a philosophy of history but as an ethical task, the idea of progress conceived by the Enlightenment retains validity. Reason continues to have a task in creating a reasonable world in which human beings can finally live under conditions which they have been denied too long in societies in which gender, ethnicity, class, and caste determined status and expectations in life. The new cultural history has made important contributions in finally throwing light on those who in the Brechtian image have until now not been seen because they lived in the dark. In doing so, this history, often in despite itself, has shared in the Enlightenment conceptions of reason and human dignity.

Notes

1. See, for example, F. R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 137-53.
2. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, 1985).
3. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873) in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Hammondsworth, 1959), 42-47; Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit* (Boston, 1984); and Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, rev. edn (London, 1988).
4. See Hans-Erich Bodeker *et al.*, *Aufklärung und Geschichte: Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1986); Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975).
5. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Leben Schleiermachers* (Berlin, 1922-26); *Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels* (Berlin, 1905).
6. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* 2 vols (Boston, 1984-87).
7. Cf. Martin Jay, *Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Boston, 1973), and *Marxism and Totality: The Adventure of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984); Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge, 1982).
8. *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (München, 1933).
9. *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität / Das Rektorat 1933/34: Tatsachen und Gedanken* (Frankfurt, 1983), 9-19; rpt. "Self-Assertion of the German University," *Review of Metaphysics* 38(1985):470-80.
10. Gyorgy Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA,

1971).

11. In Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York, 1972).
12. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen, 1960); rpt. *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975).
13. See Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?* (Reinbek, 1989).
14. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretations of Cultures* (New York, 1973); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990).
15. This is true of a good deal of post-Marxist social history, of such diverse historians as E. P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman, Carlo Ginzburg, and Hans Medick, who have stressed the role of "agency."
16. See John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987):879-907.
17. Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1978); J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971), and *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).
18. See Gadamer on prejudice (*Vorurteil*) in *Wahrheit und Methode*, 255ff (*Truth and Method*, 238ff).
19. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), ix; see also his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978) and *The Context of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987).
20. Donald Kelley, "Mythistory in the Age of Ranke" in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, eds. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, 1990), 3-20.
21. Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," and Natalie Z. Davis, "'On the Lame,'" *American Historical Review* 93 (1989):553- 71, 572-603, respectively.

22. Gino Benzoni, "Ranke's Favorite Source: The Venetian *Relazioni*" in *Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, 45-57.
23. Carl Hempel, "Explanation in Science and History" in *Ideas of History*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (New York, 1969), 2:79-106; Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1959).
24. Lucien Febvre, *Philippe II et la Franche Comté: Etude d'histoire politique, religieuse et sociale* (1912; rpt. Paris, 1978).
25. Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* no. 85 (1979): 19.
26. Allan Megill, "Grand Narrative and the Discipline of History," unpublished manuscript.
27. Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (New York, 1973).
28. Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sansculottes and the French Revolution 1793-4* (Oxford, 1964).
29. Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981).
30. Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris, 1970); Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).
31. Charles Tilly and Edward Shorter, *Strikes in France 1830-1968* (New York, 1974); Michelle Perrot, *Workers on Strike: France 1871-1890* (New York, 1987).
32. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984).
33. Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the 16th Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).
34. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963); Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social*

History (New York, 1975); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a 16th-century Miller* (Baltimore, 1980).

35. Cf. Hans Medick, "Missionaries in the Row Boat: Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987):76-89.

36. David Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture in Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), and *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870* (Cambridge, 1990). See also Hans Medick's study of the village of Laichingen in Suabia in approximately the same period (forthcoming).

37. Walt Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960).