

## **A HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY: A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE MODES OF WRITING HISTORY FROM ANTIQUITY TO CONTEMPORARY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Historiography is the art and science of writing history. For a deep understanding of history and the past, it is imperative to discover many aspects such as process, method, ideology, and intention- of history-writing of a given period. Thus, a historical trajectory of various ways of history-writing enables us to understand the past and history as textual artefacts. By examining the various historiographies of different periods of history, we can delve deep to uncover the nexus between history as the reconstruction of the past and history as it really happened. Moreover, the knowledge of various historiographical traditions can reveal the works of historians of different ages in a new perspective by penetrating many buried meanings of history and the past as well. A survey, comparison and contrastive analysis of various historiographical traditions will enrich our critical understanding of history and the past.

**Keywords-** History, historiography, philosophy of history, narrative historiography, Herodotus, Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Hayden White

‘The word ‘history’ is itself ambiguous. It covers (1) the totality of past human actions, and (2) the narrative or account we construct of them now.’ –

W H Walsh

Modes of writing history are generally characterised by several changes with the progress of human civilisation and culture at various phases of human history. History writing or historiography of a particular period is often marked with certain salient features that are brought to it by various factors including ideology, human values, morality, ethics, etc. Apparently, the historiography of that particular historical period is ostensibly different from other periods of human history. This paper makes an attempt to provide a brief account of the main ideas that underlie important historiographies ranging from the ancient time to the contemporary. It intends

to present a survey and concise analysis of different conventions and traditions of historiography representing different periods of the significant historiographical scholarship. This paper tries to focus largely on the western historiographical traditions, especially European and American traditions.

Thus, the framework of the paper is designed to proceed with the chronological study of historiography by reviewing and critiquing it so as to acquaint with their varied facets. This diachronic study may enable to accentuate significance, impact, and place of a particular historiographical tradition among others which together can provide a comprehensive understanding in succinct manner. Although the paper draws on a set of select texts for insights, concepts, ideas and perceptions, the larger portion of discussion zeroes in on R G Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946). While discussing historiography, it is imperative to examine not only an isolated historiographer like Collingwood but a host of other historiographers (and their texts for that matter) from different historical periods such as Fernand Braudel, Karl Marx, G W F Hegel, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, etc. In short, the paper aims to focus attention on the writing, methodology, ideas, bias, ideology, and practices of prominent historiographical traditions since its beginning.

## **HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Before embarking on the discussion on historiography, it would be pertinent to understand these three concepts-history, philosophy of history and historiography. Etymologically, history<sup>1</sup> is a Greek word meaning an investigation and inquiry. Generally, history is considered both a set of written records of the past human actions and an academic discipline that not only uses a narrative to represent the past events and but also studies the chronological records of events affecting a nation or people. According to *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, history '...refers to two distinct, though related, things. One the one hand it refers to the temporal progression of large-scale human events primarily, but not exclusively in the past; and on the other hand, "history" refers to the discipline or inquiry in which knowledge of human past is acquired or sought.' (7:386) It is here evident that human beings and their action are the core concern of history. *The Encyclopedia Americana* defines history as '...the past experience of mankind. More exactly, history is the memory of that past experience, as it has been preserved, largely in written records. In the usual sense, history is the product of historians' work in reconstructing the flow of events from the original written traces or "sources" into a narrative account.' (Vol 14) The repertoire of history thus consists of sources like documents, evidences, written records, and 'reconstructed' narratives by historians.

On the other hand philosophy of history is, as *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* avers, conventionally associated with the '...philosophical reflection on the historical process itself, or it can mean philosophical reflection on the knowledge we have of the historical process.' (7:386) Unlike historiography that mainly deals with method, process and various modes of writing history, philosophy of history primarily aims at the goal, objective, orientation, nature and scope of history. *Britannica Encyclopedia* defines historiography as 'the writing of history, especially

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<sup>1</sup> Here two writers are to be quoted. First, Collingwood defines, 'History is a Greek word, meaning simply an investigation or inquiry. (18-19). Second, M I Finley, who says, 'History in its root sense means *inquiry*. (Introduction, 1) . But the English word "history" has its cognates in other European languages such as *histoire* in French and *Geschichte* in German.

the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods. The term historiography refers to the theory and history of historical writing.’ (Micropeadia, 948-49). Though historiography and philosophy of history seem to be interlinked with each other, they noticeably differ in meaning and motif vis-à-vis writing and purpose of history.

### **ANCIENT HISTORIOGRAPHY: ANTIQUITY**

Before the father of history Herodotus wrote *Histories*, history (based on understanding of the pre-historical documents) was considered an account of the events that were meticulously designed and exclusively delivered either by the gods or by their representative agents such as kings on the earth (they were identified with the incarnation of a god). In other words, those events recorded in ancient documents were not considered as human actions, but were deeds of the god directly or indirectly. Hence, this kind of history was not considered history proper, but a quasi-history by historiographers like R G Collingwood. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* strongly argues that such history appears to be mere assertions of the knowledge that the writer of history possesses, but not the answer of the questions, nor the result of any researches. For this kind of history, he proposes a term that is, ‘...theocratic history; in which phrase ‘history’ means not history proper, that is scientific history, but a statement of known facts for the information of the persons to whom they are not known, but who, as worshippers of the god in question, ought to know the deeds whereby he has made himself manifest.’ (14-15) Thus, it can be said that there was an obvious absence of the humanity as an agent in those recorded actions, but at the same time they appears to be partly an instrument and partly a recipient.

Another kind of quasi-history, as Collingwood appropriately explains, is found in the form of myth<sup>2</sup> which, unlike theocratic history, bears no any direct or indirect association with the human deeds. For Collingwood, the suitable ground for such claim lies in the fact which states that, ‘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.’ (15) At this juncture, it is desirable to understand that the temporal aspect of myth is always uncertain since it is absolutely undated and thus, unacceptable in terms of history proper. It can be argued that a mythical consciousness of the past is inescapably embedded in theogony and embodies a frame of narratives which incorporate gods and semi-gods as their characters. Genealogical records and commemorative archives of Egypt and Babylon are some more examples for further illustrations. In *Philosophy of History* (2003), M C Lemon defines the manner in which myth is understood in historical narrative of the past. He writes, ‘Calling to mind ancient myths we think of often detailed, lengthy narratives involving the dramatic actions and interactions of gods, and of men of semi-divine, heroic stature.’ (Introduction, 16) Intermixed with divine and moral elements, a myth eliminates all possibilities of any presence of the human being in the historical narrative of

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<sup>2</sup> More vibrant and suitable definition in this context can be found in *The Greek Historians* (1959, 80) by M I Finley who explains what a myth is and how it was associated with history in the ancient time. He asserts, ‘Myth serves admirably to provide the necessary continuity of life, not only with the past but with nature and the gods as well. It is rich and vivid, it is concrete and yet full of symbolic meanings and associations, it explains institutions and rites and feelings, it is instructive- above all, it is read and true and immediately comprehensible. It served the early Greeks perfectly.’ (Introduction, 3) Besides the Greek epics were also considered a contribution to quasi- history that became manifest in the epic tradition Greek poets like Homer.

the past. It is thus clear that a mythical consciousness of the past is potentially incapable of producing a history that can be acceptable as a scientific history. Against such backgrounds, it was the Greek historian Herodotus who is credited for creating a scientific history by systematically excluding major mythic and divine ingredients from it, and by bringing questions and answers, research, and human beings in the domain of history.

## **GRECO-ROMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY HERODOTUS**

In the fifth century BC the Greek historiography witnessed many historians who successfully jettisoned the divine, mythical and epic components from their writing and simultaneously made foray into a new world of historical writing. Apparently, the history writing of this period underwent radical changes since the focus of the historian's attention shifted from the divine, semi-divine and supernatural to the humanity to a great extent. As a result, the methodology of writing was deliberately fashioned after systematic and scientific inquiry based on researches and thus, history was presented in the form of narrative of human actions. It is widely acknowledged that Herodotus was pioneer historian who introduced a systematic, planned, and elaborate history in the form of narrative, though his book *Histories* (c. 430-424 BC) mainly dealt with wars and major political events of his time. Marine Hughes-Warrinton writes about Herodotus in *Fifty Great Thinkers on History* (2004) and presents critical views on him in a balancing manner:

Though Herodotus is credited with the production of the first narrative history, he has been accused of deliberate falsehood, inconsistency, errors of fact and judgement, undue credulity and easy acceptance of unreliable sources of information. It is only recently that scholars have begun to appreciate fully his remarkable fusion of chronology, ethnology, geography and poetry into a work that is both very readable and an important source of information on the ancient world. (156)

In other words, Herodotus and his book have been an area of great interest for scholars, academicians, historians and even literary critics since history became an established discipline—particularly from the Enlightenment period, partly because the Herodotean studies unfailingly provides a scope for both positive and negative criticism of it and partly because Herodotus' writing is characteristically marked with both positive and negative features. This can be confirmed from a similar view on Herodotus that is expressed by Carolyn Dewald and Johan Marincola in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (2006):

Throughout antiquity we can detect two schools of thought about him, one seeing him as the 'father of history', the first person to put together an accurate account of the past and to infuse it with meaning by giving causes, consequences, and the intentions of the participants. But there was also a persistent strain of criticism that took Herodotus to task for his stories of the fabulous and the improbable, for the accuracy of his reports of non-Greek lands, and for his portrayal of a quarrelsome and disunited Greek force. (Introduction, I)

In the light of these two obviously opposite views, it can be said that though criticism to Herodotus and his writing may be valid to some extent, he must be credited for his method of narration, his intellect for reconciling rational and divine belief in the Greek historiography and

above all his beauty of style. *Histories* contains a remarkable feature which is his manner of narration since it bears the mark of a storyteller's manner. Despite his flaws and errors, he is considered the first historian of the Western tradition, for he travelled widely and engaged himself in research before he offered his writing to the world. It is probably for this reason Herodotus is continued to be read till date.

## THUCYDIDES

If the invention of the science of history (the conversion from legend-writing) made Herodotus the father of history, it was Thucydides who meticulously emphasized not only the humanistic purpose and the self-revelatory function of history, but also stressed the importance of evidence<sup>3</sup> in history-writing. This is manifest in *History of the Peloponnesian War*<sup>4</sup> (c. 406 BC) in which Thucydides provides a detail account of the war between two powerful city-states of Greece- Athens and Sparta. His work copiously reflects the amount of details and information that he collected either from his own direct observation or from other witnesses till the war lasted (for twenty seven years). M I Finley points out, 'All through it he worked away at his book with a remarkable singleness of purpose, collecting evidence, sifting, checking and double-checking, writing and revising, and all the time thinking hard about the problems: about the war itself, its causes and issues, about Pericles, about the Athenian Empire, about politics and man's behaviour as a political animal.' (*The Greek Historians*, 7) His strong determination for ascertaining the evidence, unlike Herodotus who did not consider it *de rigueur*, apparently distinguished him from his predecessors and made him an accomplished historian. It appears to be a revealing intention about the aim of history writing when Thucydides proclaims in the 'Introduction' of his work that, 'My work is not piece of writing designed to meet the taste of the immediate public, but was done to last forever.' (*History of Peloponnesian War*, 48) Thus, this can be said that his work is the earliest example of serious historical research, because Thucydides displays the same vigour and respect for the truth and evidence as modern day historians do.

## POLYBIUS

After Thucydides a number of historians wrote the histories following his pattern-both in theme and writing style, but unfortunately those works did not survive more than a dozen in number. Though the histories of Thucydides' successors also covered various other topics, no writer, Finley observes, '...approached Thucydides in intellectual rigour or insight. At least five men in the middle or second of half of the fourth century wrote continuations of Thucydides' history.' (Introduction, 14) After the fifth century BC in the Hellenistic period, the Greek politics and the historian's outlook not only underwent a massive change and but also lacked the epic element which nourished Herodotus and Thucydides. But it was the Greek born Roman historian Polybius who is credited to continue the tradition of the Greek historiography inaugurated by the

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<sup>3</sup> The point where Thucydides distinctively differs from Herodotus is the evidence in history writing, according to Collingwood. Collingwood enumerates four characteristics of history viz. a) scientific, or begins by asking questions, b) humanistic, or asks questions about things done by men in determinate times in the past, c) rational, or bases the answers which it gives to its questions on grounds, namely appeal to evidence; and d) self-revelatory, or exists in order to tell man what man is by telling him what man has done. Herodotus misses the third characteristic. (18)

<sup>4</sup> This book covers the history of the war fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 to 404 BC, with a temporary but nominal truce for seven years in the middle. Thucydides, in his late twenties, decided to write history of this war when it broke out.

fathers (Herodotus and Thucydides) of history. With a great ambition, Finley writes, he ‘...undertook to write a “universal history” narrating and analyzing in minute detail Rome’s conquest of the world from 220 to 168...’ (441) Polybius wrote the history of the city of Rome which was at that time politically strong, adult and was brimming with a zeal of conquest. Thus it was quite obvious to notice that for Polybius history was an engagement with politics of the time. Collingwood aptly comments on Polybius’ motive of writing history, ‘History, for him, is worth studying not because it is scientifically true or demonstrative, but because it is a school and training-ground for political life.’ (35) In this way, he apparently differs from Herodotus who thought history as science and from Thucydides who did not raise the question of the value of history.

For Collingwood, the Greco-Roman historiography consists of two principal characteristics – humanism and substantialism. In the first case, it is evident that history ‘is a narrative of human history, the history of man’s deeds, man’s purposes, man’s successes and failures.’ (Collingwood, 41) Though the intervention of gods and the supernatural agency is occasionally noticeable in the history writing, their function was often restricted. Thus it may be correct to say that whatever happens in history, according to the Greek historiography, it is direct result of human will, because man is finally responsible for his action and the end he wants to achieve through it. On the other hand, substantialism is considered to be the main defect of the Greco-Roman historiography, because it prioritises mind as the ultimate substance which theoretically believed that only what is unchanging is knowable. Collingwood aptly argues, ‘But what is unchanging is not historical. What is historical is transitory event.’ (42) In other words, the historian has nothing to do with the substance to which the event happens, because thinking historically and thinking in terms of substance appear to be incompatible.

### **CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY**

As the Roman Empire consolidated its power in Europe, Asia and Africa in the fourth century AD, the Christianity became the dominant religion. Consequently, it gave a new impetus to the growth and development of Christian historiography which was influence by Christian theology and the development of the Biblical canon. It is remarkable to notice that the Christian historians preferred to written sources such as *the Bible* for their history writing whereas the Classical historians relied mainly on the oral sources It was based on the idea of world history as the result of divine intervention in the affairs of men and women. Collingwood provides an encapsulated view on this historiography that states, ‘All persons and all peoples are involved in the working out of God’s purpose, and therefore the historical process is everywhere and always of the same kind, and every part of it is a part of the same whole.’ (49) It was resulted in the creation of a unified chronology that reconciled all history around the birth of Christ.

It propagated a universal history. These writings were in the defence of their religion against pagan world or against rival Christian groups (heretical groups), though they also included politically unimportant persons. History was in the form of religious apologetics<sup>5</sup>. But the Christian historiography may be credited mainly for shaping history in periodized form through the inclusion of comprehensive chronologies. Eusebius, for example, wrote the church

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<sup>5</sup> Apologetics is the verbal defence of the Faith, for example by dispelling inaccurate stereotypes or by re-presenting doctrine in language that is more accessible to non-believers. The goal of apologetics is to persuasively answer honest objections that keep people from faith in Jesus Christ

history in *Ecclesiastical History* in the fourth century AD by giving a chronological account of the development of Christianity from the first century to the fourth century and of course, his full length historical narrative was written from the Christian point of view. Hence it can be argued that the Christian historiography embodies the following core ideology- there is a God, and God is in control of history, and history has a moral purpose.

### **MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY**

From the fifth century to the eleventh century, the monks served as annalists and chroniclers and produced a corpus of historical writings fused with ecclesiastical elements in it. Bede, for example, wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731) that consists of an extraordinary combination of chronology and hagiography. In other words, the history was not often written in objective and rational manner, because those chronicles detail the intervention of God in human events and lives of holy men and women. It can be noticed that annals<sup>6</sup> were the main product of medieval historiography and the annalist merely set down the most important events of the current year. But from the twelfth century to fourteenth century, Europe witnessed an intensified progress in culture and learning. As a result, many encyclopaedic compilations were brought out. The historiography of this period can be seen as the continuation of Greek learning and culture. There was a revival of the concept of critical theory and attention was paid to rational analysis, cause and effect. History was mainly written by statesmen, high officials, and prelates. There was a great historical corpus produced by the medieval chroniclers which was not fully exploited till recently. In his article 'Political Utility in Medieval Historiography: A Sketch' Gabrielle M Spiegel asserts, 'Medieval historiography offers an excellent subject for investigating the function of the past in medieval political life, for surely few complex societies have so clearly regulated their life in accordance with their vision of the past.' (315) Though there was no significant method of writing history, the medieval historiography contributed through the annals and chronicles in producing extensive historical records of the Medieval age and those writings in turn, continued to partially influence the succeeding Renaissance historiography.

### **THE RENAISSANCE HISTORIOGRAPHY**

In the wake of the Renaissance in Europe, the historical writing was apparently bound to change its approaches, methods and techniques, because '...a return was made to a humanistic view of history based on that of the ancients.' (Collingwood, 57) In other words, it was the man who was again in the centre of historical thought, not the predominance of God and its omnipotent machinery for that matter. But unlike the ancient time in which the history a priori determined the commands in writing history, the Renaissance values of historical thought recognized and merited the human effort and passions. While distinguishing the ancient and the Renaissance historiography, Collingwood aptly argues, 'Man, for the Renaissance historian, was not man as depicted by ancient philosophy, controlling his action and creating his destiny by the work of his intellect, but man as depicted by Christian thought, a creature of passion and

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<sup>6</sup> The annals are the concise form of historical representation that present the records of events year by year. But they fall short of history as they lack the social centre. As Hayden White puts it, 'The annals do not conclude; they simply terminate.' (*The Content of the Form*, 8) He further says, 'The chronicle is like the annals but unlike the history, does not so much conclude as simply terminate;...The Chronicle typically promises closure but does not provide it...' (16)

impulse. History thus became the history of human passions, regarded as necessary manifestations of human nature.’ (57) It can be asserted that it was a clear departure from the fanciful and ill-founded medieval historiography, although the role of divinity was not absolutely eliminated.

### THE ENLIGHTENMENT HISTORIOGRAPHY

The historiography of the Enlightenment was inclined to transfer the objective and impartial methods of natural science to the analysis and improvement of human social structures. It was inspired by natural science and based on formulating the general rules governing the development of human societies. In other words, it was a rationalistic historiography where reason dominated the historical thoughts of the major components of historiography such as Vico, Montesquieu, Gibbon etc. It is noticeable that the strength of the Enlightenment historiography is embodied in its ‘...capacity to study particular societies as coherent units and to formulate the theory that the various aspects of each society’s life were closely interrelated.’ (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 20, 15 ed. 559-574) Apparently, there was a strong insistence on the relation of man to his environment in historical writings and in turn, they influenced the political and religious institutions of that period. This is quite evident that the historical thoughts of the Enlightenment era held the modern scientific spirit responsible for the historical methodologies that tried to establish the universal laws of analysis and explanation of the entire body of human history. But Collingwood’s claim has a different voice as he proclaims that ‘...the historiography of the Enlightenment is apocalyptic to an extreme degree, as indeed the very word ‘enlightenment’ suggests.’ (80) Of course, his claims is partially based on the writing of historians like Montesquieu, Gibbon, etc., because they could not satisfactorily invent the theory of historical causation. Though the Enlightenment is commonly considered a monolithic project of the discovery of the modern scientific knowledge, the historiography of this period was primarily shaped to explain the human action in the light of the laws derived from the principles of natural science.

### GIAMBATTISTA VICO

Unlike his predecessor Rene Descartes<sup>7</sup> (1596-1650) who postulated the concept of historical scepticism, Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) is credited (Herder too by the same token) with the formulation of a ‘new science’ in the philosophy of history that challenged the then prevalent belief that only mathematics and science were the producers of certain knowledge. But it was the Jewish and Gentile approach to history (that was dominated by faith, not by reason) that gave way to the Vico’s ideas of history which was not only critical in nature and but also observed the general rules of historiography. In *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, Croce makes a strong point as he writes, ‘The conflict which for the general consciousness existed between science and faith reappears in Vico’s treatment of history as a distinction and opposition between Jewish and Gentile history, sacred history and profane. Jewish history was not subjected, he believed, to the laws of history in general.’ (145) It can be argued that Vico’s

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<sup>7</sup> Primarily a mathematician and philosopher, Descartes put the natural science on the front and history on the side. His historical skepticism, according to Collingwood, adumbrates four points –historical escapism, historical pyrrhonism, anit-utilitarian idea of history and history as fantasy-building. (60) As a result, history was based on the written authorities, but the historians were applying the critical methodology by questioning those authorities.

determination to defy the existing mode of writing history and to propagate a scientific historiography through his ‘new science’ made him a distinguished philosopher of history of the eighteenth century.

Vico’s historiographical propositions state that man can know what they have themselves created, not any other external things which are supposed to be left to the wisdom of God. Nature, for example, is intelligible to God only since this is His creation and the mathematics can be fully explained by man as this was invented by him. In other words, only the makers can know and explain what the thing is and why they are so, not by any other authority. Isaiah Berlin adds further point, ‘... [M]en’s knowledge of the external world which we can observe, describe, classify, reflect upon, and of which we can record the regularities in time and space, differs in principle from their knowledge of the world that they themselves imposed on their own creations.’ (Introduction, *Vico and Herder*, xvii) Thus, it is apparent that though Vico allows the distinction between the two worlds – of God and of man, his approach to history seems to have more emphasis on the human creation. In Collingwood’s words, ‘History, for Vico, is not concerned with the past as past. It is concerned, in the first instance, with the actual structure of the society in which we live; the manners and customs which we share with the people around us.’ (66) Hence, it can be argued that unlike Descartes, history for Vico, does not distinguish between questions about ideas and about facts. In other words, they are reconciled to bring out better understanding of the knowledge that history provides us. In fine, history is what the human mind constructs of the past, not the past itself.

## THE ROMANTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

It is widely agreed that the nineteenth century’s rejection of an allegedly ahistorical Enlightenment has often been taken as a founding moment of modern historical understanding. The Enlightenment historiography deliberately eschewed to investigate certain things that were ‘unenlightened’ or barbaric. The Romantic school of historiography, here marked a departure from the historiography of the previous age, because it rejected the conception of uniform and unchanging human nature. In ‘Romantic Historiography as a Political Force in France’ Jacques Barzun tries to bring out essence of the Romantic historiography. He writes:

The Romantic interest in the diversity of customs and manners, in local color, in the middle ages, in new and remote scenes, is an essential part of the historical spirit. It marks the breaking down of the abstract Reason of the previous age, and the return to concrete and living detail. To see life as conflict and contradiction, as a process of growth and evolution, is to see life historically, and it is thus that the Romanticists saw it. (318)

On this ground, it can be asserted that the Romantic historiography challenged the existing abstract human reason of the Enlightenment and favoured the human will instead in order to widened the scope of historical thought. In fact, it started treating ‘the entire history of man as a single process of development from a beginning in savagery to an end in a perfectly rational and civilized society.’ (Collingwood, 88) It was directed to the discovery of the mute past that was, according to the Enlightenment historians, mere ages of unintelligible barbarism and dark superstitions.

## LEOPOLD VON RANKE

It should not be incorrect to argue that the nineteenth century witnessed a paradigm shift in the course of historiography with the advent of an array of distinguished historiographers like Ranke, Hegel, Marx, Croce, Michelet, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, etc. Historiography of this century was bound to considerably influenced by the methodologies of science, since it was a science-dominating era. Thus it was quite predictable that in the first quarter of the century Ranke rose to introduce a new kind of historiography- scientific historiography. In ‘Historiography: What Ranke Meant’ Felix Gilbert writes, ‘Modern historical scholarship begins with Leopold von Ranke, and ever since his time historians have appealed to his name and writings to justify their approach to the study of the past.’ (393) J D Braw also reiterates a similar opinion, ‘A modern history of historiography that does not include the ideal that Ranke postulated in contrast to existing historiography to write “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” – is more or less inconceivable.’(46) It was Leopold von Ranke who can be credited to bring history and historiography much closer to science by advocating an objective historiography. Thus Ranke can be held as the originator of scientific history.

Before Ranke, history had been mainly assigned two major functions in general- to judge the past and to instruct men for the profit of future years. But his aspiration was not to achieve such lofty undertakings, rather he wanted to report “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.”<sup>8</sup> Ranke’s intension was to check the distortion of the aims of history such as moral or political. Gilbert sums it up, ‘Ranke implies that, whenever a historian uses the past to present his views about how people ought to behave and act, the picture of the past becomes distorted and false: the historian ought not to go beyond the limits of his task- to show how things were in fact.’ (394) It was apparent in Ranke’s writing that the representation of facts was made through a certain structure or pattern (unlike the manner of ‘positivists’<sup>9</sup>), and he was convinced that the historical books were works of literature. Gilbert tries to demonstrate it by revealing Ranke’s technique of composition of history:

As far as possible Ranke, in this work, avoids summary statements and lets the narrator disappear from the story so that the reader is directly confronted with facts and events. Ranke wants the reader to feel himself a participant of the story. Ranke’s use of literary techniques allowed him to diminish the distance that separates past from present, to give the story a pattern that changes between forward movement and description, and, above all, to make work conform to the primary requisite of a literary work: to tell a story that has a structure. (395)

This does not necessarily mean that the task of historians ends after setting forth the story of the past, but it requires him to delve deep beneath and to reach for what is behind it – its meaning. At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that history is like science, because it is primarily concerned with facts and their causal connection-how they acted upon each other. For Ranke,

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<sup>8</sup> This oft quoted German remark is roughly translated as ‘as it really/actually happened’. But Gilbert sees inadequacy in such translation, especially the word ‘*eigentlich*’. He believes that, ‘The term *eigentlich* is of such an opaque character that all of these translations seem possible. Thus the exact meaning of the statement seems uncertain, and this explains why the same statement could serve different, contradictory interpretation. (394)

<sup>9</sup> It’s philosophy of science that believes that knowledge is derived from the data of experience and that excludes a priori or metaphysical speculations. In short, it’s a system of knowledge.

‘The study of the past has a much greater aim than the teaching of morals or instruction in the conduct of politics. (Gilbert, 397)

Much of the Ranke’s emphasis was on his conception of history and historiography as visual perception or ocularity, since he was strongly committed to make it the end of historiography. Braw aptly pinpoints this intention, ‘The aim of history-writing [Historie] is to bring past life before one’s eyes.’ (48) In other words, history should skilfully weave narratives to present facts in a lifelike manner. Here the fact of this accentuation on ocularity and scientific aspects can be better justified by scrutinising Ranke’s motive in his new historiography. The objective of Ranke’s historiography becomes much clearer when Braw presents its brief comparison with the existing historiography of that era:

As opposed to the colorless and bloodless historiography that existed, the new historiography should reflect richness, development, and fullness; in short, human *life*. As opposed to the what Ranke perceived as fragmented and fragmenting historiography, the new historiography should show the coherence and unity of human history. As opposed to what Ranke perceived as the traditional character of existing historiography, that is, its building on the accumulated perception of events, the new historiography should concern itself with the original and authentic experience of the event itself. (56)

At this juncture, it can be argued that this kind of historiography was potentially capable of denying any strong matrix of multiple interpretations by restricting it to mere facts and their causal connections in an indirect manner. Here is a reason that may explain this phenomenon—the aim of such historiography was not realisable in complete sense which served a pivotal role in giving way to a different historiography.

## **GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL**

Hegel was one of the leading historiographers of the German school of historical thought (includes Kant, Herder, Fichte, Schelling, and others) and proposed a new kind of history drawing on the thoughts of his predecessors. Collingwood explains how Hegel’s new history differs from the existing ones, ‘...[t]he philosophy of history is for him not a philosophical reflection on history but history itself raised itself to a higher power and become philosophical as distinct from merely empirical, that is, history not merely *ascertained* as so much fact but *understood* by apprehending the reasons why the facts happened as they did.’ (113-14) This concept of history is explained in Hegel’s enormously ambitious *Philosophy of History* (1837) in which he distinguishes three different modes of historical writing: original history, reflective history and philosophical history.

Hegel further explains the original history that deals with writings of the ancient historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, etc.) ‘...who have witnessed, experienced, and lived through the deeds, events and situations they describe, who have themselves participated in these events and in the spirit which informed them.’ (12) Such mode of history writing allows the historical individuals and nations to express for themselves, and leaves no scope for the historian’s on reflection and perspective on the past events being written. Thus the scope and time covered in history are too limited and narrow as compared to other modes of history writing. The reflective history ‘...covers more than just those events which were actually present to the writer; it depicts not only what was present and alive in this or that age, but that which is present in spirit, so that

its object is in fact the past as whole.’ (Hegel, 16) In other words, the scope of history was vastly widened from the only present to the past. Third kind of history, Hegel proposes, is the philosophical history that consider history from a philosophical point of view.

The characteristic features of Hegel’s philosophy of history, according to Collingwood, distinguish it from other kinds of history and from his predecessors. Collingwood highlights those distinctive features in brief and writes that Hegel ‘insists that nature and history are different things.’ (114) Hegel strongly argues that ‘History...never repeat itself; its movements travel not in circles but in spirals, and apparent repetitions are always differentiated by having acquired something new.’ (114-15) For him, all history is the history of thought and the force that is mainspring of the historical process is reason. He further contends that the historical process is essentially a logical process. And finally, the history, according to Hegel, ends not in the future but in the present. Apart from those features, his dialectic should be considered in the light of historical progression. In brief, the dialectic progression of history means that history is the progression in which each successive movement emerges as a solution to the contradictions inherent in the preceding movement. This can be demonstrated in the endless circle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (that serves new thesis afterwards). Hegel’s theory of dialectic progression of history paved way to Karl’s Marx’s ‘historical materialism’ that is based on the economic conception of history.

### **KARL HEINRICH MARX**

Hegel’s belief that history is rational permeated the nineteenth century and later continued in concrete sense by his successors like Baur, Marx and Ranke. Unlike idealist Hegel, Marx was particularly specialized in the history of economic activity and provided a new dimension to historiography that was embodied in the concept of historical materialism (though Marx never used this term for that matter). According to Melvin Rader, ‘...Marx employed three models in the interpretation of history: dialectical development, base and superstructure, and organic unity.’ (Introduction, xvii) For Marx, dialectical development suggests that development advances through the strife of the opposites that are interdependent and yet conflict each other. The model of base and superstructure is perhaps most famous since it is directly applied in understanding the nature of history. According to this model, the base always supports the superstructure. In other words, Rader explains, ‘The base, in Marx’s model, is the mode of production, and the superstructure is the political state with its law, and the culture with its science, philosophy, art, religion, morality, and customs. Because a superstructure rests on its foundations and not vice versa, the implication is that the base determines the superstructure. (Introduction, xix) But the model of organic totality in effect embodies the features of other two models. It means that a kind of structure that is differentiated and dynamic and applies both to society in cross section and society in process. Collingwood brings out the importance of Marx’s historiography and writes, ‘If all modern treatment of the history of philosophy goes back to Hegel as the great modern master of the subject, all modern treatment of economic history goes back in the same sense to Marx.’ (126) Thus it may be said that by providing a concrete structure of economics, Marx has not only extensively influenced historiography for his period, but continues to attract contemporary historians and historiographers.

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FERDINAND BRAUDEL**

After the first quarter of the last century, the French historiography was almost dominated by the *Annales* school of history that emerged in the wake of the various subdivisions and specialisations of history: economic history, political history, social history, history of science and of arts. This school of historical thought was primarily concerned with history for history, and was shaped itself as a resistance to those multiple bifurcations of the core discipline of history. Compared to the dominant German school of history led by Leopold von Ranke who emphasised the narrative structure to history and the past event ('as it actually happened), the *Annales* refused it and developed almost contrary conviction- history, science of the past and science of the present<sup>10</sup>. Started in the form of a journal by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch and later advanced by Fernand Braudel, the historiography of the *Annales* aimed at breaking down the barriers among social sciences by not only incorporating elements from geography, environment, culture, politics, but also focusing on the different periods of time (hinting at long-term and short-term).

As a key proponent of the *Annales* Braudel gives an outline of his design of temporality in his *On History*<sup>11</sup> (1980) and distinguishes three broad groups of historical time - geographical time (denotes changelessness that embodies history of man in relation to his surroundings), social time (history of gentle rhythms, of groups and groupings), and an individual time (the traditional history-history of events, of short time). He tries to illustrate history and writes, 'Just like life itself, history seems to us to be a fleeting spectacle, always in movement, made up of a web of problems meshed inextricable together, and able to assume a hundred different and contradictory aspect in turn.' (10) In his opinion, history is not unilateral and has no centre at all. For Braudel, the meaning in history is relational, not substantial: the meaning of events, objects and individual actions does not lie in themselves, but in the relationship we construct between them. He explains the objectives of history in his article 'Personal Testimony', 'What the *Annales* proclaimed, much later, was history whose scope would extend to embrace all the sciences of man- to the 'globality' of all the human sciences, and which would seize upon them all in some fashion or other to construct its own proper methods and true domains.' (457) He believed that history is as much about the present as about the past and both past and present illumine each other reciprocally.

## PAUL RICOEUR

That the strong insistence on the possibilities of scientific approaches to history advocated by the *Annales* school of historiography paved the way for a new formulation on history-writing and it was, in effect, the role of narrative that brought out significant changes to existing historiography. One of the most prominent theorists who have championed the interrelationship between narrative and history is Paul Ricoeur whose three volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984-88) deals with the reconfiguration of human time through narrative. His idea on the nexus between history and narrative is shown through his conviction which asserts that, 'My thesis is that history the most removed from the narrative form continues to be bound to our narrative understanding by a line of derivation that we can reconstruct step by step and degree by degree with an appropriate method.' (Vol I, 91) Ricoeur's thesis on the entanglement

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<sup>10</sup> This is a loose translation of Lucien Febvre's aphorism, 'Histoire science du passé, science du présent'. It can be compared with the Ranke's dictum, 'wie es eigentlich gewesen'.

<sup>11</sup> This is an English translation of *Ecrits sur l'Histoire* (1969)

of temporality and narrativity delineates a systematic distinction between historical narrative and fictional narrative in the light of temporality that is the structure of human existence. His narrativist interpretation of history has gained much wider currency in poststructuralist discourses on historiography since many historiographers like Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, etc. have strongly upheld Ricoeur's formulation later. His theory of the construction of historical time is one of the major enterprises that impacted contemporary historiography.

### **MICHEL FOUCAULT**

Against the backdrop of 'history proper' as a discipline that strictly seeks the continuity from the past to the present and often tries to establish the stable relationship between them, a new methodology in history formulated by Michel Foucault appears to locate discontinuity instead. He argues that recent developments in postmodernist and poststructuralist historiography have substantially exhibited strong potentiality for proliferation of discontinuity in the history of ideas. Mark Poster in *Foucault, Marxism and History* (1984) presents Foucault's concept of discontinuity:

Foucault attempts to show how the past was different, strange, threatening. He labors to distance the past from the present, to disrupt the easy, cozy intimacy that historians have traditionally enjoyed in the relationship of the past to the present. He strives to alter the position of the historian from one who gives support to the present by collecting all the meanings of the past and tracing the line of inevitability through which they are resolved in the present, to one who breaks off the past from the present and by demonstrating the foreignness of the past relativizes and undercuts the legitimacy of the present. (74)

In other words, history seems to be abandoning the traditionally associated tasks of defining relations of simple causality, of circular determination, and of expression between facts. In defence of discontinuity, Foucault argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) that, 'It has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis.' (Introduction, 9) His conviction for new methodology in history displays a paradigm shift from a total history to general history. Foucault aptly points out that, 'a total description [history] draws all phenomena around a single centre- a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history, on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion.' (Introduction, 11)

This point of departure from a total history to a general history is marked with a remarkable change in the modus operandi of the use of documents (used by traditional historians to build a narrative of the past that is continuous and that merges with the present). As a result, it is bound to evaluate the metamorphosis in terms of the function that history is assigned with. With regard to changed function of history, Foucault mentions that, '...history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describe relations.' (Introduction, 7) Hence, his endeavour is directed to detach the image of history which has been constituted since the beginning of historiography.

### **HAYDEN WHITE**

It is widely agreed that the project of the narrativist interpretation of history that was started systematically by Paul Ricoeur, is further carried out and is elaborately theorised by

American historiographer Hayden White in his magnum opus *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). Here he sets forth the interpretative principles on which a historical work is interpreted. For him, the historical work is ‘...a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them.*’ (Introduction, 2) White argues that historians use three kinds of strategy to gain different kinds of ‘explanatory effects’- explanation by formal argument, explanation by emplotment and explanation by ideological implication. Within each of these strategies he identifies four possible modes of articulation. They are, in effect, proved to be instrumental in ascertaining a particular kind of explanatory effect in a work of history. In short, he believes that historiography does not differ from fiction but is a form of it.

Like in fiction, White argues, the role of language is crucial in order to provide a desired explanation to any historical writing, because the past is invented or imagined, not found by the historians. Thus, a historical work is designed after a combination of explanatory strategies and modes of articulation and that in turn, brings a historiographical style of a specific kind to historians who practise it in their own ways, though differently. White’s enterprise is demonstrated in his effort that tries to establish the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation. Later he tried to elaborate this theory of narrative and history in his two books, viz. *The Tropic of Discourse* (1978) and *The Content of the Form* (1987).

## CONCLUSION

In the last quarter of the last century, a grave concern was displayed on the perpetuation of historiography ( history as well for that matter) through an apprehension that tried to predict the end of it in the contemporary period, because history as a discipline is extensively affected by the emergence of interdisciplinary nature of various discourses of human sciences. But recent developments in the field of historiography betray that apprehension, for a host of postmodernist and poststructuralist historiographers has carried forward the project of historiography in tandem with the changing pattern of discoverable complexity in historical studies. It may be argued that of late, in the wake of the scientific advancement and the postmodern challenges, many historiographers who try to counter such challenging forces, have arisen to prominence either by expounding new approaches to history or by extending the horizons of existing theory of history-writing. Some names, for examples, would illustrate the point further- Alun Munslow (deconstructive historiography), Keith Jenkins, (history as literary narrative about the past), Dominick LaCapra (integrating critical theory with the rethinking of history), Frank Ankersmit (proposing ‘representation’ in history over explanation and interpretation), etc. Apart from European and American historiographies that are here dealt with, many other important historiographies are remained out of the domain of discussion- Chinese, Islamic and Indian historiography. Here, it is appropriate to mention that though there are many other historical approaches that are not discussed in this paper on account of delimitations of time and space, this brief survey of historiography attempts to cover major influential thoughts in history down the ages.

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