

C W Smith, Carl Becker: On History and the Climate of Opinion
Ithaca N Y (Cornell U P) 1956

47 B quoting Turner: "History is the self-consciousness of humanity."

47 B: To me, nothing can be duller than historical facts, and nothing more interesting than the service they can be made to render in the effort to solve the everlasting riddle of human existence.

49 S: Even as a young man Becker was primarily interested in general ideas, not in the facts he had accumulated (though he had dug out a lot of new ones) but in the use of the facts to understand something about man, something that could never be proved but could only be imagined.

50: S: His specific target was the traditional set of rules by which scientific history was to be written, the rules which were to insure the historian against error and so assure the permanence of his contribution.

51 S: The modern historian had no doubt that he could at least establish facts which would stand forever, but he saw clearly the danger of attempting to interpret his facts, of making a synthesis. Accordingly the more scientific he was, the stronger was his inclination to concentrate on the "hard facts" and to leave the job of making a synthesis for some future time when all the facts were in. It was this distinction between the facts of history and the synthesis which linked them ~~magically~~ into significance that Becker proposed to examine.

According to the methodologists, the historian should endeavor to record the facts objectively, and he could do this only by "cultivating mental detachment," becoming as nearly as possible like Nietzsche's "objective man" -- a mirror to reflect whatever came before him -- in this case historical facts.

52 S: Becker based his conception of history upon the premises here given: first, that there are no discrete facts in history, no historical elements, every fact is a compound of smaller facts; second, historical facts are not solid substances which can be captured and examined; they are images present in someone's mind.

53 B: ... the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them, and into every fact that he creates some part of his individual experience must enter.

54 B: Experience not only furnishes the elements for the image which the sources guide us in forming; it is also the final court of appeal in evaluating the sources themselves.

54 S:.. if historical facts are images containing as a necessary ingredient part of the historian's own experience, then the "objective man, so detached and indifferent with no mental reservations referring to human affairs" would not, if he existed, be able to determine facts.

55 S Becker looks finally at the way historians actually operate when they are analysing and synthesizing their sources. First, they break down each source into all the statements it contains and put them down on separate slips. When this done and the historian has his case full of cards, then comes the problem of synthesis, which is "not to record exactly what happened, but by simplification to convey an intelligible meaning of what happened."

55 S Even historians who had perfect faith in their ability to record facts objectively were daunted by the problem of objectively choosing a few among them to use in their narratives.

55 S What historians needed was an objective standard for determining the relative value of facts. And now (here he comes to his specific target) there was such a standard, "and one residing in the facts themselves, and therefore purely objective." (Rickert via Fling)

52 B: .. the historical fact is a thing wonderfully elusive after all, very difficult to fix, ~~an~~ almost impossible to distinguish from ~~any~~ "theory", to which it is commonly supposed to be so completely antithetical.

56 Rickert via Fling: He (the historian) must seek facts that are unique, facts that have value on account of their uniqueness, facts that are causally connected, facts that reveal unique change or evolution.

idem: ... the question of value is not a question of partisanship, nor of approval or disapproval; it is a question of importance.

56 S Becker still asks, "Important for what?" The answer "important for the Reformation" takes us back to the very concept which the historian is trying to form scientifically. "All that we know therefore is that the concept is formed by selecting the facts that are important for the concept... After all, do the facts come first and determine the concept, or does the concept come first and determine the facts."

57 S: To clinch his argument Becker turns finally to an examination of the historian at work -- on the Protestant Reformation. Does he sit "thumbing his cards," deciding to use or omit each one on the basis of Rickert's four-point formula?

B: No such thing. As he goes over his cards, some aspects of the reality recorded there interest him more, others less; some are retained, others forgotten;... some facts strike the mind as suggestive... because they associate themselves with ideas already in the mind... The original concepts, which character to the entire synthesis, were contributed, not by the facts of the sixteenth century, but by the facts of the twentieth century.

B: Instead of sticking to the facts, the facts stick to him, if he has any ideas to attract them, and they will stick to him to some purpose only if his ideas are many, vivid and fruitful. Complete detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile; for the really detached mind is a dead mind, lying among the facts of history like unmagnetized steel among iron-filings, no synthesis ever resulting in one case or the other to the end of time.

61 B rejects history as weapon in the hands of the radical in his fight for progress. He asks for definition of progress.

62 B paper on "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems and Ideas upon the Study and Writing of History" in Publications, American Sociological Society, VII (June 1913) 73-107

63 Becker's paper is fundamentally a history of the rise and fall of the ideal of scientific history.

During the third quarter of the nineteenth century a change appeared in the methods as well as the subject matter of history. Because of the rising influence of natural science and because of the acceptance of Ranke's critical methods of research, history became "scientific." Scientific history came to imply also "a particular point of view in respect to interpretation." It came to mean the assumption of "the objective and detached attitude of mind with which the scientist regarded natural phenomena." To write scientific history it was necessary to renounce philosophy and eliminate all thought about the present. But, after all, this style of history in its determined disregard of all save "the facts" fitted its age too:

B: Materialism had its day in science, pessimism in philosophy, naturalism in literature; religion seemed a spent force. When all foundations were crumbling, historians held firmly to the belief that facts at least could not be denied, and in these days of acrid controversy, the past studied for itself, as a record of facts which undoubtedly happened, was a kind of neutral ground, an excellent refuge for those who wished to sit tight and let the event decide.

65 B: The importance of the fact can no longer be measured by the fact itself; it must on the contrary be judged by some standard of value derived from a conception of what it is that constitutes social progress -- some tentative hypothesis, or conception of moral quality, or present practical purpose.

68 B Becker and most present-day historians apply the term "scientific history" to history based on critical methods of research, and written with the sole object of telling what really happened without reference to modern man and his needs and interests.

Becker .. cheered the decline of the scientific ideal in history because it had prevented historians from asking any of the right questions.

70-77 What Is the Historical Fact? 1926

77-87 Everyman his own Historian 1931

88-90 Limitations of Testimony as a Method of Establishing Historical Facts at Cornell in 1937 and at Princeton in 1938

Mendelbaum's The Problem of Historical Knowledge 91-100