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First part of sixth lecture, Monday, August 9, 1971

Critical History

We hope, this morning, to do the second half of chapter 8 on 'History' and the whole of chapter 9 on 'History and Historians.' The second half of chapter 8 is on critical history.

We have seen in the first half an account of nature and history, the contrast between nature and the history that is written about and, then, secondly, the distinction between historical experience, which we all have and which is very fragmentary and not the whole of what's going forward at the present time, and, on the other hand, historical knowledge, which puts together the fragments of individual experience into an account of what has been going forward in the group. Now this putting things together can be done in different ways; and we begin from a distinction of precritical and critical history.

For precritical history the community is the conspicuous community, one's own. Its vehicle is narrative, an ordered recital of events. It recounts who did what, when, where, under what circumstances, from what motives, with what results. Its function is practical: a group can function as a group only by possessing an identity, knowing itself and devoting itself to the cause, at worst, of its survival, at best, of its betterment. The function of precritical history is to promote such knowledge and devotion. It is never just a narrative of bald facts. It is *artistic*: it selects, orders, describes; it

would awaken the reader's interest and sustain it; it would persuade and convince. It is *ethical*: it not only narrates but also apportions praise and blame. It is *explanatory*: it accounts for existing institutions by telling of their origins and development and by contrasting them with alternative institutions found in other lands. It is *apologetic*, correcting false or tendentious accounts of the people's past, and refuting the calumnies of neighboring peoples. It is *prophetic*: to hindsight about the past there is joined foresight on the future, and there are added the recommendations of a man of wide reading and modest wisdom.

Now such precritical history, that speaks very easily to people, is extremely important from the viewpoint of communications. To constitute the community and to advance its cohesion, its self-understanding and so on, it is that type of historical knowledge that is needed. But this is not in the functional specialty of history but in the functional specialty of communications.

Again, critical history is not this precritical concern with the community that you find in precritical history, though that is always needed. Critical history is simply determining what was going forward in a given community at a given time.

Secondly, that account is not what Collingwood calls 'scissors-and-paste history,' namely, history as collecting testimonies, checking their credibility, and stringing together the credible statements. That is a matter of finding out what people said about the past, collecting all you can in the way of information; secondly, discriminating between what is reliable and what is not reliable; and thirdly, putting together the reliable statements. That is the notion of history as belief; finding whom you can believe and believing them. And all that is being believed is not historical knowledge but historical

experience; the testimonies just convey historical experience; they don't go from the experience, through understanding, through interpretation, to historical knowledge.

But the process from the testimonies, from the historical experience of other people and their testimony about it, to historical knowledge is like the process from the data in a detective story to the baffled detective who uncovers one clue and then another and then another and gradually puts together a coherent account of what happened. Similarly, the historian works from testaments as clues to an intelligible account of what went forward.

Accordingly, we have to distinguish different meanings of the word 'evidence.' History is based on evidence but the evidence when the historian starts out is just potential. And potential evidence is any datum that is perceptible, any relic of the past, trace, statement about the past, is potential evidence. Evidence becomes formal when it is subsumed under a question for historical intelligence: what does this mean? what does it signify? what does it imply? You have the datum; and this particular datum becomes significant in some sort of way, you have some sort of an insight about it, and then we move from potential evidence to formal evidence. And we have a large number of data and a whole circle of insights with regard to them, and we are moving on to historical judgment. And then we have actual evidence; insofar as the understood data are the basis for a historical judgment, the evidence is moved to the third stage, of actual evidence.

Now what starts the process is the question, then, that moves from mere data to insight, and that is the question for historical intelligence. Any question for historical intelligence presupposes historical knowledge; history is born of history. Unless you know something about the past you have no questions about the past. So history grows out of history; critical history is a

leap forward from precritical history, and precritical history is a leap forward from stories and legends, from the existential history by which the group knows itself as a group. Inversely, the more history one knows, the more data lie in one's purview, the more questions one can ask, and the more intelligently one can ask them.

Now the question for historical intelligence is put in the light of historical knowledge, with respect to some particular datum. Collingwood asked, Why did the Romans build their walls in Britain? What was the function of the wall? Was it to stop the invaders from the North, a sort of fortress? And he decided that it couldn't be that. And he came to the conclusion that it had to be a sentry path so that they could see the invaders gathering miles away and be ready to meet them when they came along. And he confirmed that by the fact that where you could see for miles away there was no wall at all, and so on and so forth. The question for historical intelligence, you have to have historical knowledge, but you have further questions you put, and insofar as you get insights from those further questions you are moving from mere historical experience on to historical knowledge.

So one has some datum of the past, one asks a question about it, one gets an insight, one expresses it in a surmise: it might be this; one fills out one's surmise with an image, the *Sitz im Leben*, and the image gives rise to another question. And the next question may lead to a further insight and the insight to another surmise, and the surmise to an image. And if they are just surmises you are on a false trail. But insofar as the surmises lead not just to images but to a search for further data and you do find something approximating to what you surmised and that datum leads to a further question, and again you have a surmise and that fits on to another datum, not

just an image, then you are beginning to change potential evidence into formal evidence, the evidence that is available is being gradually understood, and the understanding is linking together. So if your question gives rise to no insight, you move on to something else. If it gives rise to an insight that is just a surmise, and that surmise gives an image and another surmise and you just have a series of surmises but no confirmation in the data, move on, you are on a false trail, move on to something else. But when you have got hold of something, then your surmises tack on to data, and that tacking on to data has a further implication. When your successful questions go on long enough, gradually you are being pulled out of your initial assumptions and interests and concerns and ideas, and you are beginning to move into the context of the past, into the assumptions and concerns and interests of the people whom you are studying. And your inquiry has a character that may be, your investigation is ecstatic, not the hot ecstasy of the devotee, but the cool ecstasy of growing insight; you are being pulled out of your own mentality, and you are moving into the mentality of the people you are studying. And that is the first characteristic of the growing insights of the person carrying on a historical investigation.

But those growing insights not only are ecstatic, pulling you out of your previous assumptions and views and ideas, they also are selective, constructive and critical.

The process is selective: not all data are promoted from the status of potential evidence to the status of formal evidence. It is constructive: for the selected data are related to one another through an interconnected set of questions and answers or, expressed alternatively, by a series of insights that complement one another, correct one another, and eventually coalesce into a single view of a whole. Finally, it is critical: for insights not only are direct

but also inverse. By direct insight one grasps how things fit together, and one murmurs one's 'Eureka.' By inverse insight one is prompted to exclaim, How could I have been so stupid as to take for granted that ...? One sees that things are not going to fit and, eventually, by a direct insight one grasps that some item fits not in this context but in some other. So a text is discovered to have been interpolated or mutilated. So the pseudo-Dionysius is extradited from the first century and relocated at the end of the fifth: he quoted Proclus. So an esteemed writer comes under suspicion: the source of his information has been discovered; in whole or in part, without independent confirmation, he is used not as evidence for what he narrates but in the roundabout fashion that rests on his narrating – his intentions, readers, methods, omissions, mistakes.

And note: critical history is critical precisely insofar as it relocates evidence; insofar as it moves the pseudo-Dionysius from the first century to the fifth; insofar as it discovers that texts have been interpolated or mutilated; insofar as it finds out the sources used by a source, a proximate source, and discovers that the fellow really isn't quite as trustworthy as people thought he was. Von Ranke's achievement was his critique of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors whom people previously had relied on implicitly.

Now there are two meanings to the word 'critical.' There is being critical in the sense the precritical historian is critical. He checks whether his authorities are reliable, and if he finds them all right he believes them. But he doesn't go on to this process of construction; he is just on the level of historical experience. And there is 'critical' in the senses in which this constructive process, this detective work on the past, goes on. And 'critical' there means simply taking a piece of evidence from a field in which it was

thought to be relevant and placing it in some other field. Becker narrates that he moved the Russian mier from Russian history, from the place in his cards where he had Russian history, and moved it into the part of his historical notes where it was relevant to the mentality of German historians in the nineteenth century. And this sort of thing is the fruit of critical history; evidence belongs not to this field but to another field. Numismatics may pertain to the history of the Roman Empire but it may also pertain to the history of Roman propaganda; and that is the sort of thing that the critical historian does; he doesn't throw out evidence. 'Scissors-and-paste' history decides that this series of people are credible and this series here is not, and the second series is thrown away into the waste basket. But critical history keeps all of them; but the second type, the people who are not credible, become useful for some other purpose; it is what purpose you use them for that the critical historian is concerned with.

So this growing body of insights into the data has five properties. It is *heuristic*: it moves data from potential to formal evidence, from something not understood to something understood. It is *ecstatic*: it pulls the historian out of his previous assumptions and ideas into a new view, a more intelligent and accurate and backed-up view of what had been happening. It is *selective*: it puts together elements, but not every possible element, it is fitting into a view and not everything fits into the view. It is *critical*: it moves stuff from one context into another. It is *constructive*: what it brings together becomes a unity.

Now the basic characteristic of critical history is that this fivefold process occurs twice, not once but twice. There is a double movement from data to facts. And the facts of the first movement supply the data for the second. The critical historian, first of all, is coming to understand his

sources; how good were these people; where did they get their information; how did they use it; what are their strong points; what are their weak points; it is not just a question of true or false; it is what kind of a man was he; how can I use him intelligently; where is he good and where is he weak; where can I trust him and where not; where do I use him as information on the past and where do I use him as information on what kind of man he was, use him as evidence on the period in which he lived? As Marrou said, if only we knew Tacitus's sources we would understand so much better what kind of a man Tacitus was. That is a different kind of understanding: what kind of a man Tacitus was is a different historical question from the things Tacitus is writing about. But the critical historian, primarily, is concerned to have a thorough understanding of his sources, where they are weak and where they are strong. It is not: is he telling the truth or is he telling a lie; or is he under a bias, and so on. It is something far more subtle; it is understanding this man in all his strengths and weaknesses; knowing where we are going to rely on him and where we needn't, and settling that initial question of understanding the sources. Then, when you understand the sources you go on and use the historical experience that those sources represent, insofar as they are reliable, to construct an account of what was happening, what was going forward. So that double process is what is constitutive of critical history, a double process of insights that are heuristic, ecstatic, selective, critical, constructive.

Note that the word 'constructive' has two meanings. There is construction insofar as data are unified by a nucleus of insights. But there is construction, again, insofar as those insights are expressed in a narrative. The expression of the insights in a narrative is another aspect of the constructive work that goes on, and in this narrative the construction is of

insights that come together to form a context, an interweaving of questions and answers on a certain topic. You will have a series of topics, and running through the series of topics you will have a common theme, and then you will have a series of common themes and then a higher theme; and the constructive process, as narrative, gradually builds up: sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books. There is the organization in terms of concepts, and it is extremely important that the expression of your topics and your themes, your lower and higher topics, your lower and higher themes, be as accurate as you can possibly make them, because those topics and themes are what determine what your questions are going to be; your questions are going to be put in terms, in some sort of categories, and they have to be categories that come out of your discoveries in the material. And the more accurate you are in framing your topics and themes, the more accurate you will be in putting your further questions. And the less accurate you are, the greater the danger either that you will say there are no further questions when there are a lot of further questions, or that you will find questions running on indefinitely when really they are quite irrelevant. So you have to be very accurate in this conceptual work.

Finally, the process is not only in two ways heuristic, ecstatic, selective, critical, constructive, but it is also reflective and judicial. The business of putting questions and making surmises and changing data into formal evidence goes on under a given topic up to a certain point. And then questions start drying up; relevant questions become fewer and fewer, and you are coming to the point where you can make a judgment. And this goes on for each topic, as your work gradually accumulates. And when you get to the point where there are no further relevant questions, it is possible to make a judgment, because if there are no further relevant questions there are no

further insights, and if there are no further insights, well, what we have understood already is what's right: the criterion for commonsense judgments.

It follows that the cumulative process of developing understanding not only is heuristic, ecstatic, selective, critical, and constructive but also is reflective and judicial. The understanding that has been achieved on a determinate point can be complemented, corrected, revised, only if further discoveries on that very point can be made. Such discoveries can be made only if further relevant questions arise. If, in fact, there are no further relevant questions then, in fact, a certain judgment would be true. If, in the light of the historian's knowledge, there are no further relevant questions, then the historian can say that, as far as he knows, the question is closed. So it is by the completeness of one's insights on any point that the possibility of judgment arises.

However, as the judgments of the natural scientist, so the judgments of the historian are the best available opinion at the present time; they are not totally definitive unless they are very closely hedged in. This is obvious when the work isn't complete; he has done part of his job, and there is a lot yet to be done. But even when his work is complete there is a possibility that new evidence will come to light. Old Testament scholars had to change their views when the archeologists got to work in ancient Babylon, and so on, and in Palestine. New Testament scholars had a big set of data supplied them, that they hadn't thought of, and they had to change surmises about Egypt and so on, and the Palestinian desert, when the Qumran stuff was found. And, at the present time, people who work a lot on Gnosticism are very, very hesitant to say anything because the documents discovered at Kenoboskion have not all been published yet; there is a lot of evidence they haven't seen.

So new evidence can come up that will change the whole picture. Secondly, just as new evidence can come up, history is an ongoing process. Events can occur that will change the whole judgment on the past; if new events occur that change the judgment on the past, there is going to be a revision of history.

However, neither source of revision totally invalidates earlier work competently done, because, if the historian has done his work competently, he has an interlocking set of questions and answers and evidence for every one of his answers, multitudinous evidence for every one of his answers; every sentence is annotated with a reference. As Karl Heussi in a book, *Die Krisis des Historismus*, Tübingen, 1932, said, Frederick William III of Prussia is easier to understand than Schleiermacher and, while Nero will always be Nero, we have not yet reached definitive views on Luther. Rather remarkable, since views on Luther, thirty years later, changed enormously, at least in Catholic circles.

So it depends upon the context within which a historical figure is placed. The Roman Empire is something that is over and done with, and there are no further events in the Roman Empire to change one's estimate of Nero; but Lutheranism is not something over and done with, there is a possibility of a revision of views on Luther. And it is the size of the context in which a historical figure stands that determines just how much further revision on his thought is possible.

Now we have to consider critical history at the second degree. We distinguished two elements in critical history: first, coming to understand one's sources, the people who are supplying us with our evidence; and, secondly, from the evidence they offer, from the historical experience they

tell us about, moving on to historical knowledge, which puts together the fragments of human experience into an account of what was going forward.

Now critical history at the second degree regards the community of historians. They are producing articles and books; and the articles and books are being reviewed. And professors are telling their students what they think of them, and what's good and what's weak, and how well he has done his job, and where you can rely on him, and where he will probably have to be revised, and so on and so forth. The historical community, the community of the professors of history and of historians, receives critically its own products. It just doesn't say it is true or false, but this man is good here; it understands its historians, where they are good and where they are weak. There may be controversy for a while, different opinions voiced from different angles, and so on, but the historian is critically appraised. 'No one is going to improve on this, but perhaps on that,' and so on. Gooch, in his *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, says that August Boeckh's 'Public Finance at Athens,' I think, in the age of Pericles, ('The Public Economy of Athens'-Ed.) was the one book written before von Ranke that had not been superseded in 1914, when Gooch wrote his *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*; anything else in history, previous to Ranke, had been superseded by someone else consequently. It is the type of thing; there is this appraisal of historical work that is done by the historical community. It is not just a matter of true and false, but it is a matter of understanding where the man is good, where he is weak, what you use him for, what you don't use him for, and so on, whether he is going to live on and remain an authority or not, like Stephen Neill's judgment that if he had anything to say about courses in theology every first-year student would read 500 pages of Lightfoot's *Apostolic Fathers*; well, that's a book of the last

century. Similarly, Paul Galtier, in a seminar I was in in Rome, started off by telling us that it is not the latest thing, there can be old works that can be very good, and they are quite independent of all the work done subsequently. Gaston Boissier's *Cicero et ses amis* is still required reading. Not because Gaston Boissier has read everything that was written in the last hundred years; it was because he knew his Cicero inside out. So there are things that endure; there are things that are considered good a century later. But there is this critical history of the second degree which provides the historical community with an appraisal of all the historical works that are written and to what extent you can trust them.

Now, what has been our purpose? I must recall the purpose of this analysis. I am concerned with history as a functional specialty, as concerned with an account of what was going forward, of the transition from historical experience to historical knowledge. There has been excluded the function of communications; the function of communications is of the highest importance, without it you haven't got a community, an ongoing community. But what are you going to communicate? Well, you have to have historians to keep us up to date on that.

Next, it is commonplace for theorists of history to struggle with the problem of relativism. I have said nothing about it. Why? Because it is not on the level of the functional specialty 'history' that you deal with it. We are going to attempt to deal with it when we get to Dialectic and Foundations, but at the present time we are simply concerned to set forth the set of operations by which a historian can arrive at sound history. That set of operations can be interfered with by mistaken assumptions, by mistaken views on possibility, by false value judgments, and so on and so forth. And those things are not going to be corrected within any accounts of the

functional specialty 'history.' We have the other functional specialties of dialectic and foundations to deal with that.

Finally, what I am saying there is the sort of thing that is generally recognized. Carl Becker, for instance, agreed that he was a relativist in the sense that *Weltanschauung* influences the historian's work, but at the same time maintained that a considerable and indeed increasing body of knowledge was objectively ascertainable. Erich Rothacker correlated *Wahrheit* with *Weltanschauung*, granted that they influenced historical thought, but at the same time affirmed the existence of a correctness (*Richtigkeit*) attached to critical procedures and proper inferences. In a similar vein Karl Heussi held that philosophic views would not affect critical procedures though they might well have an influence on the way the history was composed; and he advanced that while the relatively simple form, in which the historian organizes his materials, resides not in the enormously complex courses of events but only in the historian's mind, still different historians operating from the same standpoint arrive at the same organization. Rudolf Bultmann held that, granted a *Fragestellung*, critical method led to univocal results. These writers are speaking in various manners of the same reality. They mean, I believe, that there exist procedures that, *caeteris paribus*, lead to historical knowledge. Our aim and concern in this section has been to indicate the nature of those procedures.

And now, History and Historians.

History and Historians

In general, historians do not tell us what they are doing and how they go about it; they do very well to do it. To talk about it requires a theory of knowledge. And it is only, as it were, *per accidens*, that historians start

talking about history. In the nineteenth century there were composed handbooks on how to go about doing history. And insofar as a historian wrote a handbook, he was trying to state just what it is that the historian does, how he operates. Or they may be involved in controversies about what is good history, and then they will start saying what the historian does. But in general, since cognitional theory is not a field in which there is large agreement, they are very apt to be caught up in mistakes with regard to cognitional theory. And if one wants to profit from their remarks, one has to consider them as masters, as evidence for what one does when one is a good historian, but one must not expect them to be cognitional theorists.

Now, I propose in this chapter, 'History and Historians,' to make use of the various expressions of what history is by historians to confirm the analysis which is based largely on a theory of knowledge in terms of *Insight*. This discussion, 'History and Historians,' is, I think, in seven sections, of which the first is 'Three Handbooks.' And we are concerned with these three handbooks in the way in which they relate understanding and facts. An empiricist will think that facts are known first, the understanding puts them together. The person who knows about insight will know that you have data and then understanding, and only when you have an understanding of the data do you get on to facts.

Droysen, Johann Gustav Droysen composed a *Historik*, lectures on the encyclopedia and methodology of history. He published it in 1882; it had been in manuscript form before that; it has been through four printings this century. He divided the historian's task into four parts: *heuristic*, that uncovers the relevant testimonies; *criticism*, that decided how reliable they were; *interpretation*, that went on from historical experience to historical knowledge; and finally, *presentation*, that made his historical investigation a

force at the present time. He belonged to the Prussian school of historians; and it has been criticized because it was not content to tell *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, but also wanted to use that to influence contemporary history. Although his predecessors and his contemporaries identified the facts, the historical facts, with what you found in the credible testimonies, Droysen rejected that view; he said that it was mere inertia, their idea of criticism they got from the philologists. Now what the philologist discovers is a datum, a perceptible datum, what the text originally was. But the things the historian is concerned with are not like texts, they are like the meaning of a text. The historian is concerned with the battle, and that is not just one man's experience at one instant; it is a whole series of experiences, or it is something like a Council or a Parliament, and so on. Those are the sort of things that the historian is concerned with, and they are not just single percepts; they are the intelligible unities that can be made by putting together a host of percepts; and, consequently, the historical facts are only known in the interpretative process that proceeds from the fruits of criticism and puts together a narrative in which a series of events are understood, first, in their interconnections, secondly, in their dependence on the situation, thirdly, in their dependence on the character and the psychology of the agents in the situation, and fourthly, as a realization of purposes and ideas. So the historical narrative is fourfold understanding of a series of events, the interdependence of the events on one another, their dependence on the psychology and character of the agents, their dependence on the situation, and this process itself as a realization of purposes and ideas: What were they trying to do, and what ideas were governing them?

So here we have an account of history that accords very much with what I've been saying.

Secondly, Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode and der Geschichtsphilosophie*. It is an enormous book, almost eight-hundred pages, went through all sorts of editions from about 1880-1914. And it has been, more or less, the book on historical method, as long as these handbooks were highly esteemed. Handbooks on history no longer exist, so far as I know. But they were extremely influential in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first quarter of the twentieth.

Bernheim has a fourfold division of the historian's task, but he seems to put historical facts before the work of interpretation, inasmuch as he distinguishes outer criticism – Are *single* sources reliable? – and inner criticism – what is the factuality of the events witnessed by *several* sources? You have this idea that your sources become reliable when they confirm one another. So it isn't a question of understanding single authors and just how reliable each author is. This idea of understanding is not explicit enough to put it that way. You have your source, you have your statement. Is this statement true or false? Well, if you can find two independent witnesses that are not self-deceived you have a fact, but if you have only one it is unconfirmed. And the tendency of that, of course, is to pull the facts out of their context. And then the problem is how to put them together, if they are out of context.

Bernheim wanted to have the multiple confirmation for the facts, but he still insisted that the facts could be known only within their *Zusammenhang*, only in their interconnection, only by understanding them. So that even the selection of sources depended on your understanding of the whole situation. And the more you understood what was going forward, the more you would know about what sources would be relevant and so on. Everything depended upon this developing understanding. So he wasn't

really caring, while he wanted multiple evidence before asserting anything as a fact, still, he wouldn't admit that facts were known apart from the interpretative understanding of the whole process.

There is a third handbook, written by two gentlemen in French, Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, 1898. There is an English translation, I think, first published in England and in 1925 in the States. And in this there is a complete separation between analysis and synthesis. The book falls into three parts: an introduction, preliminary studies; secondly, analysis, what the author meant, whether he believed it, was his belief justifiable, and when you got that you had an object in the sense of an observation in the sense of the natural sciences. Then, one observation was not enough; you had to have a whole series of observations of the same fact. And once you got the facts entirely out of their context of this evidence, then you had to try and put it together. And Langlois, at the end of his life, had given up on that side of the business; he was just reproducing documents. And, of course, the question arose: why not let the facts speak for themselves?