

International  
Handbook  
of Historical Studies  
CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH  
AND THEORY

Edited by  
Georg G. Iggers  
and Harold T. Parker

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GREENWOOD PRESS  
WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Main entry under title:

International handbook of historical studies.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Historiography—Addresses, essays, lectures.
  2. History—Methodology—Addresses, essays, lectures.
- I. Iggers, Georg G. II. Parker, Harold Talbot,

1907-

D13.I62        907'.2        79-7061

ISBN 0-313-21367-4

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-7061

ISBN: 0-313-21367-4

„First published in 1979 in the United States of America by

Greenwood Press, Inc.

51 Riverside Avenue, Westport, Connecticut 06880

First published in 1980 in Great Britain by

Methuen & Co Ltd

London EC4P 4EE

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Preface

The period since World War II, particularly the last two decades, has witnessed a remarkable reorientation in historical studies throughout the world. Whole new areas of human existence have become the subject of historical inquiry, and new methodological approaches have been tested. This volume seeks to assess the present state of the discipline, to examine innovations in historical method and perspective as well as continuities with older patterns of scholarship. The editors have asked themselves to what extent new approaches have succeeded or failed in bridging ideological differences and national traditions which divided scholarship in the past.

One important attempt at an assessment of contemporary historical studies has been made in the excellent volume edited by Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, *Historical Studies Today* (New York, 1971), the result of a conference of Western scholars in 1970. The present collection to some degree overlaps this preceding work, but it moves beyond in several respects. It seeks to analyze the rapid changes which have marked historical studies in the 1970s. A major section of the volume (Part I) deals systematically with new approaches and new areas of inquiry. The collection, moreover, is more comprehensive in scope than the volume by Gilbert and Graubard. Another major section (Part II) deals extensively with national and regional developments not only in Western Europe and the United States but in the socialist countries and in Japan, India, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America as well. The volume offers a truly international perspective.

At the same time the book is not intended to be an encyclopedic survey of present scholarship. Contributors were asked to present and to examine major tendencies in historical studies with an emphasis on methodological and conceptual approaches. Beyond this, each author was free to develop the subject as he or she thought best. The result is a rich diversity of approaches and interpretations, the latter at times reflecting very divergent ideological and methodological positions. This pluralism of viewpoints, the editors believe, enhances the value of the volume.

By necessity, the articles are selective, reflecting the areas of competence of the authors. The price to be paid for this is that at times important aspects of the topic under discussion are omitted. Thus Louis Mink, in the article on contemporary theories of history, restricts himself to analytical philosophy in the English-speaking world; the chapters dealing with regional or national developments in France, West Germany, Poland, and Latin America partially make up for this selectivity. Philip VanderMeer's article focuses on the new political history in the United States; again other chapters deal with new approaches to political history elsewhere. There is no separate essay on quantitative history—a topic on which much has been written in recent years—but various essays deal, even if marginally, with quantitative approaches in recent studies. After we were unable to obtain a contribution from a Soviet historian, Samuel Baron was kind enough to offer on short notice an essay which concentrates on the political and ideological aspects of Soviet scholarship. His article is complemented by that of Jerzy Topolski on the work done in the Soviet Union on social history.

Diversity among the essays has extended even to the choice of subject matter. Two or three authors stressed coverage of the literature with minimum attention to analysis, while in one instance the author singled out for analysis a cluster of works which he considered valuably paradigmatic for historical studies in the region. However, the editors believe that on the whole the essays reflect a balance between information and analysis.

The editors regret that they were unable to obtain an article on historiography in the contemporary Islamic world. Space did not permit inclusion of essays on Spain, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, or Hungary, all of which have made important contributions to contemporary historiography. Yet despite these omissions the editors are convinced that the volume offers a sense of the intellectual and scholarly climate of historical endeavor throughout the contemporary world.

*November 1978*

Georg G. Iggers and Harold T. Parker

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GEORG G. IGGERS

# INTRODUCTION: The Transformation of Historical Studies in Historical Perspective

In the past several decades, although the link with older traditions of historical writing has not been broken, patterns of inquiry which had directed historical writing since the days of classical antiquity have lost their predominance. There had been a high degree of continuity in the way historians had investigated and written history from the ancient Greeks until the most recent years. Although it is erroneous to perceive only one pattern in historical writing, nevertheless Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* presented a model which historians not only followed in the classical period but revived at the beginning of the Renaissance, a tradition by no means destroyed but to an extent even enhanced by the professionalization of historical studies in the nineteenth century. It is not without significance that Ranke wrote his doctoral dissertation on Thucydides.

This model sharply distinguished the main tradition of historiography in the West from that of other cultures, for example, China, and from both the chronicles and the sacred histories of the Middle Ages. The orientation of this historiography was secular. Its form of presentation was the narrative. History was conceived of as a form of literature, governed by standards of rhetoric and at the same time concerned about the truthful reconstruction of the past on the basis of the critical examination of evidence. A number of presuppositions underlay this history. Perhaps the most important was that men make their own history. Historical explanation rested upon an understanding of the conscious motivations of man. Linked with this essentially humanistic conception of history was the essentially aristocratic perspective which pervaded historical writing into the twentieth century. History dealt with the actions and aspirations of the eminent, particularly with the ruling elites. The key institution which gave unity to society and provided the thread of historical narrative was the state, a state whose conduct could be understood in terms of the deliberate actions of its statesmen guided by the requirements of power in a world marked by interstate conflict. The primary focus of historians from Thucydides to Ranke was thus on the narration of political and military events, with a concentration not on internal conflicts, inspired by social or economic interests, but on external affairs, governed by a logic of their own.

Such a history necessarily narrowed the perspective of the historian. It established a sharp line of distinction between areas which deserved historical interest and those which essentially were unhistorical in character. The history of Thucydides and its concentration on the politics of the Greek world stood in sharp contrast to the broadly social and cultural cosmopolitan history of Herodotus. This distinction between the barbaric and the civilized world, between the spheres of life worthy of historical attention and those not, permeated historical writing from the fifth century B.C. to the twentieth century A.D. and contributed to the parochialism of a history which concentrated on the Greek or Roman world or later the European state system.

The interest in universal history was never fully extinguished; it was kept alive, however, largely by a tradition of sacred and ecclesiastical history. The eighteenth century saw not only the reassertion of a tradition of secular history but also the conscious attempt to break the narrow confines of the classical paradigm. Voltaire provided a model for a new approach which aimed at a history of civilization in the broadest sense. Politics for Voltaire in his *Age of Louis XIV*, as for the famous Göttingen school of historians indebted to him, continued to occupy the central place in the historical account. But the attempt was made to combine the narration of political events with an analysis of institutions, customs, and opinions which would recreate the "spirit of an age." In some ways, the work of the Göttingen circle foreshadowed certain aspects of modern social history with its interest in statistics, demography, and economics and its concern not only with the European but also with the non-Western world. But both Voltaire and the Göttingen historians lacked any comprehensive theory of social organization or of social change which would have permitted them to integrate the great masses of data they accumulated. The result, particularly in the case of the Göttingen historians, was an additive history which lacked any clearly definable principles of organization.

The mainstream of historical scholarship went in other directions which were both more innovative and more traditional. The nineteenth century saw the acceleration on a worldwide scale of the process of professionalization which had begun in the eighteenth-century German universities. Very consciously now historians conceived of their discipline as a science—albeit a science in the broader, continental sense of the term, distinct from the natural sciences and never totally separable from literary considerations, but capable of reliable knowledge. Neither the professionalization of history nor the search for scientific rigor was going to be reversed in the twentieth century despite the philosophic skepticism regarding the possibilities of a historical science. History was now pursued less by people in public life, statesmen, military men, or men of letters, than by a group of technically trained scholars who increasingly wrote for a scholarly audience rather than an educated public.

The scientific character of the new historiography consisted in its heightened emphasis on the critical examination of evidence. But the "scientific" history of the Ranke school did not stop here. It was closely interwoven with basic

notions about human beings, society, and the historical process which were "metahistorical" in character and represented an implicit philosophy of history. It was this conception of history which enabled the scholarly historians of the nineteenth century to write the cohesive historical accounts which the historians of the Enlightenment had been incapable of sustaining. They overcame the gulf which had existed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries between a tradition of historical erudition, critical of sources but essentially antiquarian in outlook, and the classical heritage of narrative history. Their new conception of history has been labeled "historicism." In several aspects, it represented a profound rupture with the notions of man and history which had informed the classical tradition of historical writing. The new outlook stressed the radical "historicity" of all cultural phenomena. If the tradition from Thucydides to Gibbon had assumed the constancy of human nature and from this had deduced the possibility of seeing in the past exemplars for the present, the new historicist outlook stressed the incomparability of historical epochs. In the place of a unity of human history, the new outlook saw a diversity of societies and cultures, each possessing certain inherent principles of structure and development similar to those of a single organism. This organicist view of human society prevented the new historical school from lapsing into historical relativism or skepticism. While history could no longer be the *magister vitae* which provided lessons applicable to the present, history alone provided the key to the understanding of things human in their diversity. All sciences relating to man—linguistics, economics, jurisprudence, art, literature, and theology—were historical disciplines. Mankind was thus seen as being in continuous development. This stress on development contained an optimistic note, the belief, based on a residual religious faith, that the history of man itself constituted a progressive revelation of human values in concrete historical, cultural contexts.

One might have expected the historicist outlook to bring about an extension of the scope of the historian. In theory everything human was of historical interest—all ages, all cultures, all aspects of life. In practice, however, the new historical scholarship retreated from the broad cosmopolitan, social perspective of the Enlightenment historians. In part this was a result of the exigencies of specialization introduced by professionalization, which laid emphasis on a history that proceeded on the basis of certain evidence, particularly written documentary sources found in archives. Although Ranke still wrote comprehensive histories in which he sought to reveal the political and intellectual tendencies operating in modern history, a later generation, stressing the technical aspects of scholarship, turned increasingly to monographic studies. This was the case not only in Germany but generally in the Western world and elsewhere, as in Japan, wherever German patterns of professionalized historical research were imitated. The new nationalism provided an impetus for historical study, but its increasing emphasis on political integration restricted the areas of history of concern to the historian. In Germany at least, historical scholarship strove in the face of industrialization to legitimize a state in which broad segments of the

middle classes, whose status rested on property or education, sought support in a conservative political establishment against the fear of rising working-class influence.

The new "scientific" school of history proceeded with a theory of knowledge which was essentially idealistic in character. History, it assumed, could be understood only in terms of human behavior which was guided by conscious ideas. A society always constituted an integrated complex of values and purposes. In this sense, men made their own history, whether they made it collectively or individually. The historians of the new "scientific" orientation fought a running battle, first in Germany and later in France and Italy, with the positivism represented by Auguste Comte, Hippolyte Taine, and Thomas Buckle. Where positivists sought historical explanation in terms of generalizations and laws of development, historians with historicist views insisted that history dealt with human purposes and meanings which could never be reduced to abstract formulae but had to be "understood" in their unique historical setting. History was the scene of free, purposive human actions. A clear distinction was drawn between areas which were peculiarly historical and others which were not. "The repetitive, the irrational, the quasi-instinctual, [might] be the substratum of history—but it [could] not be the subject matter of history itself."<sup>1</sup> Whole areas of human existence thus fell outside the purview of the historian. The focus rested on the decision makers, on the elites who formulated and executed policies. An aristocratic bias guided historical studies. The history of the masses, of everyday life, and of popular culture were not of historical interest. Only the realm of consciousness was of legitimate concern to the historian. Connected with this was an explicit rejection of theory. History dealt with the concrete motivations and actions of individuals. These in the last instance were ineffable. They had to be empathetically understood or reexperienced. History, therefore, was the science of the unique and the narrative form of presentation was most suitable to it.

There were indeed alternative forms of historical writing in the nineteenth century—we need only think of Alexis de Tocqueville and Jakob Burckhardt—but these stood outside the main current of professionalized scholarship. By the turn of the century, however, a conscious challenge to the dominance of the German school of "scientific" history arose almost simultaneously in various countries in the world, in the United States with the New Historians (F. J. Turner, Charles Beard, J. H. Robinson), in France with Paul Lacombe, Emile Durkheim, and Henri Berr, and in Germany with Karl Lamprecht. Their criticism proceeded not from the basis of the contention made by Nietzsche and others that history could not be a science, but rather from the position that traditional historiography was insufficiently scientific. Berr, Lamprecht, and others challenged the objectivistic notion that historians could reconstruct the past purely by immersing themselves in the evidence free from presuppositions. They instead insisted that history, like any form of scientific or scholarly inquiry, must approach its subject matter with explicit questions and hypotheses: no history

is possible without theory. At the same time the critics accepted the traditional school's insistence on critical scholarship. They thus rejected macrohistorical speculations in the manner of Hegel or Spengler and sought to formulate theories of limited range which could be applied to and tested against concrete historical situations. From a different perspective, closer to the philosophic tradition of German historicism with its emphasis on human consciousness, Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber came to similar conclusions. They agreed that a closer relationship had to be established between the phenomena of consciousness and their sources in the subconscious. Events had to be understood in the structural context in which they occurred. Pure narration was therefore insufficient and had to be supplemented by analysis. Politics, moreover, was no longer viewed as the key-stone to history; not only was it necessary to approach politics in interaction with social and economic factors, but a history could legitimately be written which devoted itself to nonpolitical spheres of society.

These new patterns of historical writing were to be explored in the period after World War I by a small minority of historians, such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in France and Henri Pirenne in Belgium. By the late 1920s several important journals were founded which represented the new approaches: The *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1929) in France; a journal by the same name, *Dziejow Społecznych i Gospodarczych* (1926) in Poland; and the *Economic History Review* (1929) in England, which originally addressed itself broadly to problems of social as well as economic history. Max Weber's influence made itself felt in the conceptualized approaches to social history of Otto Hintze in Germany. But as a whole, as reflected in the journals that represented the major national organizations of historians, the *American Historical Review*, the *Historische Zeitschrift*, the *English Historical Review*, and the *Revue Historique*, the profession remained resistant to the new orientations.

Only after 1945, and then slowly, did the new approaches gain a dominant voice. The earliest and most remarkable breakthrough was in France: in 1946 the Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (since 1975 the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) was established as a research and teaching center for the integration of history and the social sciences; it also assumed the publication of the *Annales*. In England, *Past and Present* began to appear in 1952. In the United States a large number of interdisciplinary journals was founded reflecting the new historical interests, beginning with *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1958) and including the *Journal of Social History* (1967) and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1970). The *International Review of Social History*, founded but suspended in Amsterdam in the late 1930s, reappeared in 1956. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* began publication in West Germany in 1975, *Social History* and the *History Workshop* in England in 1976. The *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, founded in the early 1960s in the German Democratic Republic as an international forum, also deserves mention here. Nowhere else in the West, however, did the new interdisciplinary history possess the firm institutional basis and the influence over the profession



that it did in France. In the socialist countries, Marxist ideology and the coordinating role of the Academies of Science provided for the integration of historical research and social theory.

The rapidly changing historiographical situation in the 1950s, and more particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, reflected the delayed impact of fundamental changes in both the political, social, and economic structures and the intellectual attitudes in the twentieth century. Traditional historiography proved increasingly unable to understand the complex processes at work in a highly technological society and its social concomitants. The traditional political order had been replaced by democratization in the West and by the establishment of socialist governments in the East, both of which effected the destruction of the social and political monopoly of the traditional elites. European domination of the world had come to an end as areas of the world previously regarded by Western historians as ahistorical achieved national consciousness. At the same time the national state, while still firmly established, lost relative importance in Western Europe. Disillusionment regarding the course of history replaced the once deeply felt optimism regarding the quality of modern civilization. While the idea of progress had never been generally accepted by nineteenth-century historians and was explicitly rejected by Ranke, there had existed a broad consensus, questioned by relatively few cultural pessimists like Burckhardt, that the course of history, particularly that of the modern Western world, represented a qualitatively positive process. The idea of progress gave way among thinkers as different as Spengler and Max Horkheimer to pessimistic visions of the self-destructive forces inherent in modern technological societies. A broad group of thinkers, including theorists as diverse as Max Weber, Theodor Lessing, Karl Popper, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault but excluding the Marxists, now held that history had no meaning or structure. Much greater emphasis was now placed on a history which took into consideration the discontinuities and ruptures in history. The conception of the "historical process as a continuous development" was termed by Lévi-Strauss to be "fallacious" and "contradictory"<sup>2</sup> as was the nineteenth-century faith that "men make their own history." If, as we cited before, "the repetitive, the quasi-instinctual" had once been rejected as the subject matter of history, historians, including Marxists, now assigned a much greater significance to this "substratum of history." Forces outside human consciousness and control, whether economic and social processes possessing a high degree of autonomy, depth psychological determinants, or concealed anthropological or linguistic structures, were now assigned a decisive significance for historical understanding.

There is broad diversity in history writing. To be sure among all professional historians there are certain communalities. For all of them history is a reality-seeking enterprise. They seek to discover what happened in human affairs in the past and to understand why it occurred. Ideally, they proceed by canons of scientific research: through critical rational investigation, publication of results, and review by one's peers. Indeed, with respect to procedure, their work has become