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ANALYSIS 30

WHAT ARE HISTORIANS TRYING TO DO?[1]

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I

The subject of historians' study is the development of human societies in space and time. This development is the result of billions of individual actions. But in so far as they are purely individual, these actions do not belong to the domain of history, which has to take account of them only as they are related to collective movements, or in the measure to which they have influenced the collectivity. History is thus allied to sociology and psychology and at the same time it differs from them.

Like sociology, it is interested in the phenomena of the masses which arise from physiological necessities or from moral tendencies which force themselves upon men, such, for example, as nourishment and family solidarity. Like psychology, it is concerned with discovering the internal forces which explain and determine the conduct of an individual. But the comparison stops there. While the sociologist seeks to formulate the laws inherent in its very nature which regulate social existence—or, if one wishes, *in abstracto*—the historian devotes himself to acquiring concrete knowledge of this existence during its span. What he desires is to understand it thoroughly: trace in it all vicissitudes, describe its particular characteristics, bring out all that has happened in the course of

[1] [This paper is not an analysis of individual inquiry. During an early discussion with Professors Dana C. Munro, H. I. Shipman, and R. G. Albion, of Princeton University, concerning the place of history and historians in the *Case Book* project, Professor Munro suggested that there be a statement introductory to the historical analyses which would set forth the historian's objectives in general terms. The proposal was later indorsed by the Advisory Committee of the American Historical Association, and further counsel and aid concerning it were given in particular by Professors James Westfall Thompson, James T. Shotwell, Charles H. Haskins, and J. F. Jameson. The present paper was the result. Professor Pirenne's manuscript was translated by Miss Martha Anderson, of the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., New York, the translation being reviewed by Professor Sidney B. Fay and Dr. Howard P. Becker. Inasmuch as the structure of the *Case Book* has been altered since the analysis was prepared (the manuscript is dated October 18, 1928) Professor Pirenne's paper is placed at the end of the section in which the larger number of historical analyses appear. In this position it serves to sum up rather than to introduce these other papers, none of which was available to him at the time of his writing. A logical alternative would have been to place it in Section I.—EDITOR.]

the ages to make of it what it has in reality been. For him, chance and the deeds of prominent personalities, of which the sociologist cannot take account, constitute the essential data of his subject. In other words, the sociologist seeks to separate the typical and the general, while for the historian the typical and the general are only the canvas upon which life has painted perpetually changing scenes. The former uses facts only with a view to the elaboration of a theory; the latter considers them as the episodes of a great adventure about which he must tell.

The sociologist is not concerned with the perturbing rôles of those who have taken prominent parts in affairs and must therefore be considered by the historian. For the latter, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Cromwell, Washington, or Napoleon I are subjects for study of the same value as a system of institutions or an economic organism. Here his task is allied to that of the psychologist, for in order to explain the feats of these "heroes" a knowledge of their minds is imperative. But here also the same difference is perceived between the psychologist and the historian as between the historian and the sociologist. For the psychologist the study of a great man's soul is merely a contribution to the general knowledge of the human soul, while this study is necessary for the historian only by virtue of the influence exerted by this man upon his contemporaries. Great as the genius of an individual may be, the historian concerns himself with him only if he has influenced other men.

Although sociology and psychology are sciences allied to history, it is no less true that they are clearly distinguished from it as much by their fields as by their methods.

In the same way that sociology takes for its subject *all* social phenomena, and psychology *all* psychological phenomena, history has for its subject *all* historical phenomena. In its chosen sphere, it presents the same character of universality as do the other sciences, whether they be human or natural sciences. It is universal in the same way as is chemistry or physics—in the sense that, like physics and chemistry, it lays claim to a knowledge of the ensemble of phenomena which constitute its subject. The historical concept necessarily implies the universal historical concept. It does not matter that in the present state of our knowledge enormous portions of history are still totally unknown, just as innumerable natural phenomena take place of which we are ignorant. It matters still less that no historian consecrates himself to the study of universal history, just as no chemist or physicist devotes himself to the study of the entire field of chemistry or physics. What is important is to have for an ideal the unity of science; similarly, to bear clearly in mind that all historical work is

only a contribution to the history of human societies conceived as a whole, and that the value of historical work consists in the degree to which it promotes the advancement of history as a whole. Specialization is here only a necessity resulting from the inferiority of man's capacities. Although no man can know everything, everyone ought nevertheless to work with a view to enriching the common treasury of knowledge, and in the degree to which he is conscious of this collaboration, the result of his effort will endure and be useful.

In pursuance of the goal he has chosen, the historian finds himself confronted with a double task. He must first of all establish the facts which constitute the materials of his study, then make use of them. His method consists essentially in these two processes; in following them out he answers the question which serves as title for this article. Both result from the nature of history. Since history has been written, both have been applied consciously or unconsciously. Fundamentally, history presents itself to us as it did to our predecessors. Our present progress is only the effect which general scientific progress has had upon the work of historians. We possess processes and methods of research of which Herodotus or chroniclers of the Middle Ages were ignorant, and in the explanation of events we use a quantity of ideas and a skill in criticism of which they had no idea. We find in history an amplitude and a depth which they did not suspect. But our method of working is only an improvement on theirs.

II

Historical facts are perceptible only by the vestiges which they have left. In this respect, the position of the historian vis-à-vis his subject is quite comparable to that of the geologist. The revolutions of men, like those of the earth, would be unknown if vestiges of their existence did not remain. But it is much easier to restore the picture of the latter than that of the former. The texture of the earth's surface is directly visible to the geologist; he can measure and analyze the material in it, and he knows that the elements of which it is composed act in conformity with the laws of mechanics, physics, and chemistry. The historian, on the contrary, only rarely finds himself face to face with an authentic fragment of the past. Almost always the monuments which have survived have been seriously altered either by the effect of time or by the hand of man which sought to demolish or restore. Nor can restoration reproduce an original state; too many factors due to individual genius, to need, to the circumstances of the moment—in short, to that imponderable which is human personality—have contributed to their construction for their gene-

sis to be describable with the same accuracy as if they were the result of forces of nature. And how many difficulties are not raised in another way by the date, the origin, the nationality of an artifact which archaeologists' excavations or chance have revealed.

Thus even in the most favorable case the historian cannot deceive himself into thinking that he is observing the past directly. But the difficulties of his task are much greater when he works with written documents. Of all the sources of history, they are at once the most valuable and the most fallacious. The very way in which they have come down to us has almost always changed them more or less seriously. When we have the rare good fortune to possess the original text, its state of preservation generally makes its deciphering more or less difficult—torn, or disfigured as it usually is by words left out, smudges, or words written over others. But in most cases the original has disappeared. To reconstitute the text we have at our disposal mere copies, and often only copies of copies, all in some measure spoiled by negligence, ignorance, or the untrustworthiness of the copyist. But let us assume that this task is accomplished; other problems present themselves. It is important to know the origin of the document, to establish the exact date, to determine its degree of authenticity. Mistakes abound in all epochs, and individuals or governments have invented or modified texts to suit their interests.

Thus the materials to which the historian is reduced require singularly difficult and delicate treatment before they are ready for use. They are merely the vestiges of events and not even authentic vestiges. One might compare them with footprints in the sand which wind and rain have half-effaced. To reproduce even an approximation of the picture, arduous and minute work is indispensable.

This work involves different processes according to the special nature of the sources to which it is applied. These are the processes which, constantly being improved by use, have given rise to what are called the "auxiliary sciences of history." From the criticism of inscriptions is born epigraphy; from that of writings, paleography; from that of charters and deeds, diplomatics, or the art of deciphering documents; from that of monuments, archaeology; from that of money, numismatics; from that of seals, sigillography; from that of armorial bearings, heraldry. Each of these constitutes a particular application of historical criticism. And to each of these also are devoted, to the common advantage of science, specialized scholars. Of all historians, these specialists are the most favorably situated from the point of view of the results of their work. Thanks to the homogeneous character of the objects which they study, it is pos-

sible for them to establish methods of observation of such precision that conclusions often result in a probability so great as to border on certainty. But after all, perfected as the methods may be, it would be quite erroneous to believe that they do not leave a very large rôle to the tact, finesse, and intuition of the user. The most exact among them—epigraphy and diplomatics—are based in fact only upon empirical observations, and the regularity of the facts which they establish has nothing in common with the rigor of the laws which result from the natural sciences.

The complicated processes of source criticism which have been briefly indicated constitute only the prelude to the work of historians. After they furnish the evidence it must be evaluated. In other words, the criticism of authenticity must be followed by that of credibility. One sees at a glance that the second is infinitely more delicate and subjective than the first. In fact, it depends no longer upon the external character of the proofs but upon the personalities of their authors. It is no longer a question of identifying the document but of judging its value. And this judgment depends necessarily upon the training, the intelligence, and the honor of the witness, as well as upon the circumstances which surrounded the gathering of his evidence. Not only is it indispensable to understand thoroughly what he wanted to say but to extract from his words whatever of truth lies in them.

Let us admit at once that it is impossible to be entirely successful. Most often one cannot flatter himself that he has even understood perfectly what the author of the document wanted to say. For even when very familiar with the language used, one can never determine with sufficient exactitude the particular nuance which it has taken on under the author's pen. To discover the real meaning which lies behind his words, one would have to identify one's self completely with him and to relive his life. That is, his personality intervenes between us and the facts. And this interposition transforms them. They suffer a distortion analogous to that of the reflection of an object plunged in water. But easy as it is to reconstitute the real appearance of the submerged object, thanks to the laws of refraction of light, one can only guess very roughly at the changes which historical narratives have inflicted upon reality. One has to be content with examining the incomplete information at his disposal as to the author's biography, his individual or national prejudices, his environment, and the conditions under which he wrote. It goes without saying that all this can be obtained only very approximately and insufficiently.

For the majority of events we fortunately possess more than one proof. Although our evaluation of each proof is necessarily defective,

from the comparison of these judgments it is possible to deduce some true semblance of the reality which otherwise disappears as each gives his own account of it. Historical criticism can thus arrive at an approximate representation of past facts. It perceives them in the wavering outline of objects which appear to us in mist.

Even of these inexact pictures of historical realities, we possess relatively few. Whatever in the way of monuments and writings has come down to us from preceding ages is almost nothing in comparison with what has disappeared. Historians are only too happy today to glean in the sands of the Fayum some miserable débris from the libraries and archives of the hellenized cities of Egypt. Of millions of documents drawn up by the bureaucracies of the Roman and the Byzantine empires only a few remain. What will be left to our successors from our books made of wood-pulp and our stenographic copies? Moreover, even if we had conserved all that had been written about an event, we could not pretend to complete information. No account, detailed as it may be, ever exhausts its subject. The fulness of reality can never be expressed either by speech or by pen.

In spite of all his efforts, therefore, the historian cannot gain an adequate knowledge of what has been. Realizing this limitation, he resigns himself to it. He accepts the limits which the very conditions of the knowledge of real history impose upon written history. To perceive the facts in the measure in which this is possible must suffice. Although in relation to the absolute this is not much, it is still a great deal from the viewpoint of man.

The account of perceivable historical facts is still infinitely far from being complete. Enormous gaps appear in it at first glance. Of many peoples and nations—China, for example—we are almost entirely ignorant. We are certain also that innumerable products of human art and industry remain buried in the ground and that in spite of archaeological expeditions actively and successfully conducted today it is impossible to exhume all. As for written documents, besides a large part of these which are contained in the archives and public libraries—not yet studied—how many are concealed by unknown possessors of which we do not even suspect the existence? It is also necessary to take into account all the evidence surrounding us that we cannot perceive. The vocabulary of dead or living languages, names of places, customs, popular traditions, costumes, superstitions, and religious beliefs contain treasures which philology, topical nomenclature, and folk lore are far from having exhausted. Let us note finally that the development of historical work has

resulted in the establishment of facts, knowledge of which came only from reasoning. To take a very simple example—the historian can determine the unknown date of the birth of a person if he knows that it was contemporary with an event of whose chronology he is certain. Thus by hypothesis he adds a new fact to those already known and enriches by one simple intellectual process our knowledge of the past. This procedure is so frequent that its application can be noted on almost every page of historical works. One would not be mistaken in saying that a considerable portion of historical data has no other foundation than conjecture and is certified by no source; thus the mass of the materials of science increases in proportion to the progress of criticism.

It would be an error to conclude that it is necessary to postpone writing history until all the materials are assembled. They will never all be assembled insomuch as they will never all be known. Naturalists do not insist upon knowing *all* the phenomena of nature before formulating conclusions. No more can the historian abstain from making a synthesis on the pretext that he does not possess all the elements of his synthesis. We require nothing more or less of him than that he utilize all the data at his disposal at the moment.

III

Historical construction, the utilization of facts, is the inevitable result of all the processes of criticism that we have rapidly reviewed. They have meaning and value only through it; they are only the means to the end.

To construct history is to narrate it. From its first existence it has consisted in narratives, that is, the telling of a succession of related episodes. Indeed, the essential work of the historian is to bring these episodes to light, to show the relations existing between events, and in relating to explain them. Thus it appears that history is the expository narration of the course of human societies in the past.

All historical narrative is at once a synthesis and a hypothesis. It is a synthesis insomuch as it combines the mass of known facts in an account of the whole; it is a hypothesis insomuch as the relations that it establishes between these facts are neither evident nor verifiable by themselves. To unite the facts into an ensemble and relate them is in practice one and the same process. For it goes without saying that the grouping of facts will differ according to the idea one wants to give of their relation. Everything then depends upon this—as we are about to see—and upon the degree of creative imagination of the historian and upon his general conception of human affairs. This amounts to saying that in its highest and

most essential expression history is a conjectural science, or, in other words, a subjective science.

This does not mean that it is at the mercy of fantasy and arbitrary procedures. It proceeds according to a method, but according to a method which its very subject obliges it to renew constantly. The historian is no less critical in making use of facts than in the study of sources, but the complexity of his task forces him here to have recourse in a much larger measure to conjecture.

All historical construction—which amounts to saying all historical narrative—rests upon a postulate: that of the eternal identity of human nature. One cannot comprehend men's actions at all unless one assumes in the beginning that their physical and moral beings have been at all periods what they are today. Past societies would remain unintelligible to us if the natural needs which they experienced and the psychical forces which stimulated them were qualitatively different from ours. How are the innumerable differences that humanity presents in time and space to be explained if one does not consider them as changing nuances of a reality which is in its essence always and everywhere the same?

The historian assumes, therefore, that he can treat the actions of the dead as he does those of the living who surround him. And this comparison suffices to make comprehensible the subjective element in his accounts. For to reason about men's actions is to trace them back to their motives and to attribute consequences to them. But where are these motives and consequences to be found if not in the mind of him who does the reasoning? Observers differ not only according to variations in intelligence but also in the depth and the variety of their knowledge. It is by intelligence that Thucydides is a greater historian than Xenophon, and Machiavelli than Froissart. But it is by the extent of knowledge that modern historians have the advantage over those of antiquity and the Middle Ages. They doubtless do not surpass their predecessors in point of vigor and penetration of mind; but by the variety of their knowledge they discover relationships between men's acts which have escaped the former.

For long centuries the destinies of societies were explained only by the intervention of some deity and the influence of great men. History appeared essentially as drama. Farsighted minds, Polybius, for example, perceived the importance of institutions in the activity of the state. But taken all in all, history, even in the case of the most eminent authors, was only the narration and the explanation of political events. The advance of the moral and social sciences has made the narrowness and insufficiency of this conception apparent. What these sciences teach us about all sorts

of factors—religious, ethnic, geographic, economic—which have determined the development of societies at various epochs, has necessarily contributed to the understanding of a mass of phenomena which formerly passed unnoticed. The knowledge of social relations being inordinately augmented, historians are in a position to discover between the facts of the past a multitude of relations which were never before taken into account. They consider the history of much more remote periods than were formerly included, and from their vantage point they discover infinitely more variation, fulness, and life. One can say with strict accuracy that with much less material at our disposal than Roman and Greek historians had, we know Greek and Roman history better than they did. We know it better and yet we are not in agreement about it at all, any more than we are about any other part of history.

To achieve certainty about a subject as flowing, diverse, and complex as social behavior is impossible. Each kind of activity reacts upon all others. How, then, distinguish in the ensemble the part taken by each? How evaluate exactly the rôle which, for example, the economic or the religious factor has played in a given evolution? The conditions indispensable to all really scientific knowledge—calculation and measurement—are completely lacking in this field. And the interference of chance and individuals increases still more the difficulty of the historian's task by constantly confronting him with the unforeseen, by changing at every moment the direction which events seemed to take.

Not to historical method but to the subjects with which history is concerned must be imputed the historians' want of precision and the fact that their results seem uncertain and contradictory. The human actions which they study cannot appear the same to different historians. It needs only a moment of reflection to understand that two historians using the same material will not treat it in an identical fashion, primarily because the creative imagination which permits them to single the factors of movements out of chaos varies, but also because they do not have the same ideas as to the relative importance of the motives which determine men's conduct. They will inevitably write accounts which will contrast as do their personalities, depending upon the relative value they place on individual action or on the influence of collective phenomena; and, among these, on the emphasis they place on the economic, the religious, the ethnic, or the political factor. To this first cause of divergence we must add others. Historians are not conditioned in various ways solely by inherited qualities; their milieu is also important. Their religion, nationality, and social class influence them more or less profoundly.

And the same is true of the period in which they work. Each epoch has its needs and tendencies which demand the attention of students and lead them to concentrate on this or that problem.

Thus, historical syntheses depend to a very large degree not only upon the personality of their authors but upon all the social, religious, or national environments which surround them. It follows, therefore, that each historian will establish between the facts relationships determined by the convictions, the movements, and the prejudices that have molded his point of view. All historical narrative is, as we have said, a hypothesis. It is an attempt at explanation, a conjectural reconstitution of the past. Each author throws light on some part, brings certain features into relief, considers certain aspects. The more these accounts multiply, the more the infinite reality is freed from its veils. All these accounts are incomplete, all imperfect, but all contribute to the advancement of knowledge. Those whose results have passed out of date have served to elaborate others which are in their turn replaced. For, in order that history may progress, the parallel development of synthesis and source criticism is indispensable. Without criticism synthesis would be only a sterile play of the imagination, and criticism would be merely dead erudition if it did not continually enlarge the field of its investigation and open new roads by the problems which it raises and the conjectures to which it gives birth.

We must believe, moreover, that in the measure in which the field is enlarged the work of historians will be accomplished under more satisfactory conditions. Up to the present time it has touched only a very restricted part of the immense subject which concerns it. In the field of ancient history, Greece and Rome; and in more modern times, the various national histories have attracted the efforts of investigators almost exclusively. Only today have we begun to discover the Orient, and we know what a transformation has consequently taken place in our comprehension of ancient history. Hellenic and Roman genius, in the dim light of records coming from Crete, Syria, Babylon, and Egypt, appear today as results of contact and interpenetration among different civilizations.

The comparative method alone can diminish racial, political, and national prejudices among historians. These prejudices inevitably ensnare him who, confined within the narrow limits of national history, is condemned to understand it badly because he is incapable of comprehending the bonds attaching it to the histories of other nations. It is not due to *parti pris* but because of insufficient information that so many histori-

ans lack impartiality. One who is lost in admiration of his own people will inevitably exaggerate their originality and give them the honor for discoveries which are in reality only borrowed. He is unjust to others because he fails to understand them, and the exclusiveness of his knowledge lays him open to the deceptions of the idols set up by sentiment. The comparative method permits history to appear in its true perspective. What was believed to be a mountain is razed to the size of a molehill, and the thing for which national genius was honored is often revealed as a simple manifestation of the imitative spirit. But the point of view of comparative history is none other than that of universal history. Therefore to the degree in which history is viewed in the totality of its development, and in which one accustoms himself to study particular or national histories in the functioning of general evolution, will the weaknesses inherent in historical method be diminished. It will attain the maximum precision which its subject permits when the final goal is clearly perceived by its adepts to be the scientific elaboration of universal history.

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