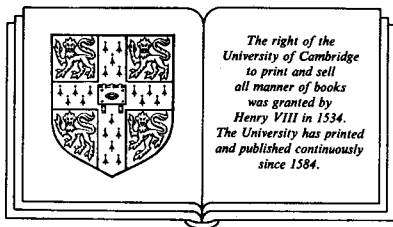


Return to Essentials

SOME REFLECTIONS
ON THE PRESENT STATE
OF HISTORICAL STUDY

G. R. Elton



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1

The Claims of Theory

The main theme of these lectures will revolve around the current debates on the nature of history, debates that are especially active in the United States, but I must say at once that I cannot claim to offer an exhaustive discussion. I propose to home in on a selection of the arguments that are at present running around, and I apologize from the start to all the disputants whom I shall not be able to mention. I should also like to make it plain from the start that I shall be defending what may appear to be very old-fashioned convictions and practices. My views and attitudes were formed by some forty-five years of trying to understand the historical past and write about it, and in some people's eyes I shall unquestionably appear ossified, even dead. However, I can only preach what I believe, and I do believe in those entrenched positions concerning the reality of historical studies. Perhaps there is virtue in now and again tackling the champions of innovation and new fashion from a position of mere experience.

Where today shall we find the Queen of Sciences? In the middle ages there was never any doubt. Theology, the study of God's ways in his creation and outside it, took that place by natural right. It subsumed all sorts of studies that have since claimed autonomy: philosophy provided the means for discovering God's will; history followed God's path through past, present and future; the natural sciences expounded the details of a universe operating by the law of God; and so forth. But since the sixteenth century dethroned theology we have witnessed a struggle for the succession. The sciences

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of nature and of man have developed in separate compartments within which there has been much rivalry for ascendancy. A hundred years ago, physics ruled the first and history came close to winning the title for the second. The experience of the past, properly and professionally studied, was recognized as the best guide to an understanding of the human condition. Other disciplines, it was agreed, could usefully contribute but only insofar as they helped to an understanding of the concrete reality of a past out of which the present had grown and from which the future might be cautiously prognosticated.

This claim on behalf of history never looked all that convincing, and before long it began to be undermined. On the one hand, the belief in a positivist history, capable of being discovered and agreed beyond all risks of partiality, retreated before various demonstrations that historians intruded the uncertainties of their own personalities into their apparently scientific work which thus came to be read as no more than a collection of individual constructs. History, some wisecracks explained, is only what this or that historian liked to put out – a superior kind of fiction. On the other hand, experience showed that historians did no better than anyone else when it came to forecasting the future: if this was so, what reliance could be placed in the idea that their work on the past equipped them with a sound understanding of human nature and the circumstances within which it operated? Once the overcharged claims of history lost credibility, attacks on it could be mounted from all sides. Some people held that there was a better sort of history to be found than that practised by historians; others went further and maintained that the less the present and future had to do with the past the better for all concerned. Both these lines of thought – if thought is the right word – have cast up influential absurdities. Thus, for instance, the perfectly valid recognition that much conventional history ignored parts of the tale it claimed to tell has deteriorated

into raucous claims for a history of women which leaves out men, or for a black history which deletes anything that does not fit with preconceived convictions of black separateness and indeed superiority. Past defects were to be remedied by new defective emphases, not the most promising of recipes to wave under the banner of truth. And the opinion that the present requires no past to explain it has increasingly produced attitudes hostile to historical studies on the grounds that they stand in the way of improvement. If only, so the line runs, we were free of tradition we could build a good life for everybody. Bile and innocence form a strange but powerful amalgam in this turning away from history. Not only is Clio not the queen of sciences but to many she appears as both a devil and a needless burden.

Now I think that these really extreme reactions against a knowledge of the comprehensive past, though they certainly exist, need not be treated so very seriously. This is an age of rapidly changing fashions; yesterday's buzz words are today's incomprehensible obscurities; who now remembers Marcuse and McLuhan? And though an absurd fashion is sometimes succeeded by a fashion even more absurd, generally speaking the ship does manage to right itself. Why, newly trendy historians are even heard to praise such things as diplomatic history or historical narrative which rendered their trendy predecessors apoplectic. Endeavours to escape from history altogether regularly turn out to be neither possible nor very sensible. The past is always with us and we are for ever part of it – and not only yesterday's past but also that of the retreating millennia; we cannot escape it, though we need not suppose that it shapes us in some inescapable fashion. If we try to ignore history or drive it from our minds we lose our communal memory; and why should an amnesiac society be any more satisfactory than a single person who cannot recall who or what or where he is? Trying to live in ignorance of the past does immense harm: every day's headlines tell us so as we watch people devoid of any understanding of

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the scenes and organizations they confront, conduct policies that are both childlike and childish. Like it or not, we live in and with history, for which reason we must give thought to the kind of history it is to be. The real threat to history as a humane, useful and respectable exercise does not come from the lunatic fringe; it operates right at the centre of the historical enterprise itself. It arises from a mixture of dissatisfactions with the limitations of any study of the past and of mistaken ideas about that study's proper function.

There are many and various attacks on what is called old-fashioned history, but I shall confine myself to three major issues, before in my third lecture turning to a positive restatement of inherited wisdom. Two of those issues reflect the overambitious dreams that afflict historians who do not see why they should not be gurus, like everybody else; the third springs from the mistaken demands of non-historians trying to read history. The first two include the call upon historians to formulate predictive laws based upon their understanding of the past, as well as the conviction that since history has to be written the only kind worth having operates within the framework of a general theory of language. The third I will call the fear of the demolished myth. Between them, and sometimes with the best will in the world, they undermine such claims to rational, independent and impartial investigation as historians can put forward for their work.

A good many people can see no virtue in history (except perhaps mere enjoyment) unless knowledge of it offers directly usable guidance to the present in its confrontation with the future. As the phrase goes, they wish to learn from history, a desire in which they have too often been encouraged by historians themselves. And they wish this learning to be precise and reliable – like the lessons of science. For them it is not enough to gain some understanding of how people may act and react in given circumstances; they call for behavioural laws to be extracted from an inspection of the

past. They like such laws as that the repression of a sector of society that is rising in wealth will lead to subversion and revolution; or that the accumulation of armaments will lead to war; or that only perfect democracy will ensure peaceful relations within society; or that ideological differences will always give way before economic interests (or the other way round). We can certainly find historical examples to illustrate all such generalizations, as well as others to cast doubt. The lawmakers insist that phrases of this sort, the product of particular investigations, must have a normative function – must precisely predict what will happen – and this is where they go wrong. I remember once encountering the statement that when people have exhausted the lands they live on they will move to new lands: in effect that there is a law compelling them to do so. But there is no such law, and they do not always obey its nonexistent force. Generalizations based upon a study of past events may be convincing or contrived; what they can never be is a law of human behaviour. The trouble is that historians cannot make predictions by virtue of their science, though like anybody else they can try to prophesy as human beings, with a barely better chance of success than other people. They cannot claim powers of prediction because the secret of their success as historians lies in hindsight and argument backwards. Historians do not even know what it is they wish to analyse and understand until after it has happened; of necessity, they always reason from the situation they study to its prehistory – from what is to how it came about, not from what is to what may come of it. Thus the hunt for predictive laws contradicts the very essence of our enterprise; we leave such things to the social scientists whose scientifically based ordinances find themselves regularly ignored by disobedient mankind.

Does this mean that the simple hope enshrined in the phrase 'learning from history' is totally misplaced? It does not, but the relationship between the teaching and the learning differs a great deal from the simplicity so often

imagined. A knowledge of history offers two uses to the present. It equips the living with a much wider and deeper acquaintance with the possibilities open to human thought and action than people can ever gather from their own limited experience, and it demonstrates the magnificent unpredictability of what human beings may think and do. History teaches a great deal about the existence of free will. Of course, it demonstrates the effects of circumstances, conditioning, inter-relationships, but it also demonstrates that even when this scene-setting looks remarkably alike the outcome can and will vary enormously because it arises not from environment alone but from environment used by human beings. If you incline to believe those who would reduce humanity to the mere product of discoverable nature and nurture, the study of history (provided it is free of preconceptions) will soon disabuse you. There are no human beings who do not feel the influence of the setting within which they move, but all of them also transcend their setting and in their turn affect it: what they do both within and to it remains explicable but unpredictable. The call for predictive laws thus deprives mankind of its humanity – of its power for good and evil, its ability to think and choose, its chance to triumph and to suffer. Whatever we may at times feel like, we are not the helpless playthings of a fate reducible to laws, and the variety of experiences inside the given settings – a variety revealed by an open study of the past – shows that this is so. Individuals do make history, a truth denied only by those who would rather not be saddled with the responsibility. For free will does imply a high degree of responsibility: if history teaches that we are not just the products of inescapable circumstance, it also denies us the comfort of blaming laws of behaviour for our misdeeds and false decisions.

However, if we are to absorb that very useful lesson – the lesson that frees mind and spirit from the bondages that the makers of laws are forever trying to impose upon us – we

need to escape from the most insidious temptation hiding within the very concept of learning from history. That temptation lies in seeing history as essentially relevant to the present; the technique which operates that temptation is known as present-centred (sometimes presentist) history. This is what Herbert Butterfield notoriously dubbed the 'whig interpretation': it selects from the past those details that seem to take the story along to today's concerns and so reconstructs the past by means of a sieve that discards what the present and time-limited interest determine is irrelevant. The method is totally predictive: it produces the result intended because it is designed to do so. The making of convenient laws receives assistance from such simplifications, but they assuredly ruin the real historical enterprise. Though as a fact of progress through time the present has emerged from the past, it was not the task of the past to create the present, any more than it is our function today to set up a predictable future. If knowledge of the past is to entitle the historian to speak to his own day, it must not be so organized as to satisfy that day's whim; if it is to teach usefully about mankind and the human condition, it must be understood for itself and in all its variety, undetermined by the predilections of the present and unrul'd by it at a time when the present did not yet exist.

True, this call for an understanding of the past on its own terms has some formidable implications for the working historian confronted by an endless agglomeration of events, of circumstances, of deeds and pronouncements and reflections. How is he to create some order out of such seeming chaos, especially if he is to be barred from just constructing a simple line terminating with today's outcome? The recognition of this difficulty has produced the first great threat to unprejudiced historical study that I shall here consider: the call for a general theory organizing the past. No sense, we are told, can be made of the usual morass of historical evidence unless it is fitted into a theoretical framework: it is

this framework, which exists independently of the historical detail, that will create meaning for what without it remains meaningless. Furthermore, so the argument runs, whether the historian thinks he is using such a framework or not he will inevitably be doing so as he selects his facts, makes his connections, sees significance; and it is better to be conscious of the theory employed rather than allow unrecognized predilections to direct the operation. There is weight in this argument: unconscious presuppositions have indeed done much to distort the hunt for truth about the past. What needs to be understood is the fact that recognizing one's preconceptions should enable one to eliminate them, not to surrender to them. However, the historian faces the formidable example of the social scientist who swears by theory. The social sciences tend to arrive at their results by setting up a theoretical model which they then profess to validate or disprove by an 'experimental' application of factual detail. The belief that it is only by such theories that the historian can make sense of history is not new, but it became dominant with the appearance of the French school based on the journal *Annales*. That school deliberately resorted to various theoretical models developed by such social sciences as economics, sociology and social anthropology. The result, we are assured, was to revolutionize the history of France, especially by replacing interest in the evanescent event by the extraction of the long-term structure – a neat concept because it left so much uncontrolled speculation in the hands of the historian. That influence spread after the last World War when progressive thinkers more and more took their inspiration from France, and in the United States today very few historians even question the rightness of the method. More especially they revere the name of Clifford Geertz.

And yet it is wrong, and yet it threatens the virtue of history. I am speaking, you will understand, of the great or general theories, whether or not they can be represented by

mathematical models – universal theories within which all historical exposition is to be accommodated. There are, in fact, two kinds of such theories with which historians have been confronted: some are strictly ideological (they impose an overarching interpretation on the past), while others are philosophical and question the whole concept of the study of the past. Today I shall try to deal with the former. Ideological theories have been around for a long time – general interpretative schemes embodying a faith of universal validity, imposed upon the reconstruction of the past rather than derived from it. And it does not matter whether the champions of the faith claim to base it on the study of the past, because in actual fact the faith always precedes that study. In my second lecture I shall turn to some current philosophical schemes, namely the endeavours to use literary theory to destroy the reality of the past as it had previously emerged from a study of that past's relics.

Let us look at interpretative and ideological theory. It does not matter which such theory we choose: they all arise from the same ambition and all do equal harm to the independent understanding of the past. At one time Arnold Toynbee's circular model of the fortunes of civilizations commanded much respect, except in Britain where the prophet characteristically found little favour in his own country. Much was claimed for this model. Allegedly it opened a way out of the traditional historiography, preoccupied with politics and personalities, given to an excessive emphasis on Europe and its offsprings across the world, and forgetful of the subterranean forces which, some believe, really direct the fate of mankind. Thirty years ago, even dynamite could not shift Toynbee-worship in some quarters; indeed, the effective disappearance of what for a while was so hot a fever in such a short time can reassure one about the hard core of human reason. For from the first it should have been obvious (as some of us said even then) that Toynbee's theories rested on inspirational faith rather than serious

study. He generalized partly from revelation and partly from the history of ancient Greece, the only so-called civilization that he had studied in the conventional way, and he consistently introduced religion into his artificial constructs because he was a mystic rather than a rationalist. His own applications of his scheme, not to mention those of his disciples, produced some remarkable absurdities which he unrelentingly defended. Thus, because his cycles demanded it, he called the seventeenth century an era of peace, even though wars of all sorts occurred in just about every one of its hundred years in just about every quarter of the globe. I should have felt certain that Toynbee has by now ceased to direct any historian's labours, if it were not for the recent biography by William McNeill which tries to restore some respectability to him as a thinker; in any case, his brief ascendancy (mainly in America and West Germany) should continue to act as a warning against theory-mongers.¹

Thus fashions come and go. We have had history written to the model of society as a depository of the universal myth (à la Lévi-Strauss) or of coded messages saying that all forms of knowledge are only forms of power (Foucault); Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood told us that all historical writing involved re-enactment in the historian's mind, a specific which pleased the history of ideas, suddenly promoted from the scullery to the drawing-room; a hundred years ago, biological theorizing derived from Charles Darwin saddled history with notions concerning evolution, the social survival of the fittest, and doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority. None of these theories wished to undermine the writing of history; they thought they were giving it shape and substance. Two things were common to them all: they made possible the rapid construction of imposing-looking edifices, and they told us much more

¹ For a sober but devastatingly comprehensive critique of Toynbee, the historian, see Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Groningen, 1955), 91-178, and *Encounters in History* (London, 1963), 276-305.

about the present within which their promoters worked than about the past. Though most theory-mongers like to make our flesh creep, none of them has ever quite matched the apocalyptic visions of earlier ages with their theories. Thus the sixteenth century extracted from the Bible and the annals of sacred history the model of a true church distinguished by a continuous history of persecution, a church whose final and triumphant emergence (shortly to be expected) would signal the second coming and the end of the world. The world has not yet ended, worse luck, but then the characteristic of such major frameworks has always been their remoteness from ascertainable facts about the past.

The important question must be whether these strictures apply to what at present is the dominant theory – that theory which the prophets of theory-based history really have in mind in their instruction and propaganda. None of the faiths I have just mentioned is totally dead, though you will not find many working historians employing even the teaching of Foucault, especially now that one of his early followers, Lawrence Stone, has declared that kind of history defunct.² Among theorists of history, none can at present rival the Marxists for influence, particularly in the United States, in a curious fashion the last bulwark of that faith, seeing that both Russian and French historians display increasing doubts about what not so long ago was never questioned. It is too early to say what the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe will do to the Marxist view of history; so far, its chief effect has been a stunned silence among usually rather talkative scholars. Marxism claims to be the one theory of history which rests upon the empirical study of historical problems, and it fulfils the first condition demanded of all general theories by embodying a forecast of future developments – a power to prophesy. Thus, wherever one looks one can find a sizable amount of history being

² Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative', *The Past and the Present* (London, 1981), ch. 3.

written on the model of a progressive struggle between classes moving onward by means of revolutions, a struggle conditioned by the decisive influence of the economic sub-structure to which all other human experiences form only paraphenomena. People entertain ideas and beliefs only as by-products of their place within the economy, and all actions are designed either to advance or to prevent the revolutionary movement upward of new classes. There are some very obvious weaknesses about the Marxist framework of history, not least the fact that its prophetic capacity has misfired so very regularly. The class structure paradigm populates this kind of history with some very crude and artificial categories: feudalism, capitalism, socialism – the original Marxist trinity – still dominate, here and there slightly refined by sub-categories identifying earlier, ascendant and declining states within them. None of this, of course, describes at all precisely what we actually find in history, but the practitioners of theory-based history are always allowed a measure of Procrustean adjustment of the facts of the past, so long as the stretching and clipping are done within the framework set up by the theory. As the history of the Christian churches has demonstrated over the millennia, true faith excuses all lies.

Let me make my meaning plain. I am not denying that this kind of history has made some gains. Thanks to Darwin, we have learned better to understand the possible changes produced by an exploitation of social advantages. Toynbee may have helped to modify excessive materialism in our reading of the past, and Collingwood has helped to keep past people's own view of events before us. Marxist historiography, especially during its era of creative impact, greatly expanded the area of historians' concerns and helped illuminate stresses within society. The *annalistes* have helped to break down some unnecessary barriers between the various disciplines of the mind that try to understand the human existence. You may think, as I do, that such gains (most

visible where actual historical evidence is thinnest) could quite well have come without surrender to overarching theories, but it is a historical fact that they made their impact as the result of such adoptions. The danger to true history lies less in an occasional resort to illuminating generalizations than in the belief that only within them can the historian find salvation. That which first makes them attractive in the end constitutes their threat: the very fact that they offer a helpful instrument for clearing up the muddle of the past quickly turns into a conviction that the past must be reconstructed to coincide with the theory. For theories clarify and enlighten by means of a murderously circular process. Allowing a great theory to guide your steps means putting together that history that will bear out the theory. You quickly cease to be in control and become its slave. The theory directs the selection of evidence and infuses predestined meaning into it. All questions are so framed as to produce support for the theory, and all answers are predetermined by it. Historians captured by theory may tell you that they test their constructs by empirical research, but they do nothing of the sort; they use empirical research to prove the truth of the framework, never to disprove it. The reason is psychological: adoption of such a theory involves an act of faith, and acts of faith cannot afford convincing contradiction. One might think that historians might employ theories selectively, using whatever seems most likely to open up the secrets of the past without developing addiction to any one of the ways proclaimed by the theorists, but experience does not support so comforting a notion. Election of any theory as the true structure of the human past invariably means surrender to it. Universal theories are hard task-masters and do not permit dissent among their followers; indeed, they cannot afford to do so because a free testing of their claims invariably reduces them to dust.

Over the years, I have met the consequences of the

theory-frozen mind in small ways and large. Thus at the International Congress of Historical Sciences of 1960, held at Stockholm, I read a brief paper drawing attention to the fact that general notions about social control in the hands of Tudor government could not be confirmed by means of the evidence alleged (mainly acts of Parliament) because the link could not be established between the statutes and the government as supposed makers of them. A Russian delegate promptly got up and said he was baffled: surely everybody knew that acts of Parliament in the sixteenth century originated with governments known to be concerned to promote capitalism. At another meeting of that Congress, at San Francisco in 1975, the Russian delegation would not allow the translation of a Russian contribution to be read out because it had not been vetted by the faithful; it was unfortunate that the translator turned out to be a historian from Russia visiting the United States. And so it has gone on for decades – theory-dominated barriers to free study and communication. Just the other day, I read in the journal called *History Workshop* (which announces itself as edited by a socialist-feminist commune) an attempt to criticize the eminent, though late, French Marxist historian Georges Lefebvre, with a reply that made it plain that the great man had been wrong but because of his standing in the movement was not to be questioned.³

I will illustrate the dangers more fully from an example which is particularly fair because it involves the very events which formed the supposed empirical proof first employed in Marxist claims to offer a comprehensive framework for the understanding of history. Thereafter, the theory became sacrosanct for the followers of the faith while the details could legitimately be manhandled and misinterpreted so long as the guide lines remained in place. I am talking of the alleged change (by revolution) from feudalism to capitalism

³ See *History Workshop* 28 (1989), 83–110.

which Marxism from the first identified in what it called the bourgeois revolution in seventeenth-century England. It was upon this paradigmatic example that the whole edifice of history as the progressive struggle of classes was first erected. This, of course, has made it imperative that its essence should be preserved: if what happened in seventeenth-century England did not demonstrate the triumph of a new bourgeois class resting upon its new capitalist mode of production and introducing a novel bourgeois ideology, the supposedly faultless empirical foundation of the faith is pitilessly exposed.

The interpretation in question originally read thus: capitalist developments in sixteenth-century England promoted the growth of an urban middle class (called the bourgeoisie) who in the civil wars of the seventeenth century overcame the earlier feudal economy based on land instead of money. The middle class fought and destroyed an aristocratic regime and thus secured the victory of capitalist principles in the mode of production, with the urban preference for trade and industry now dominating over what had been an agrarian society consisting of landowners exploiting the labours of a peasantry. In the process, the agrarian sector also went capitalist. Peasants were depressed into landless labourers, and landowners used their land solely as a source of wealth where previously it had provided a definition of status. Whereas in feudalism the classes had been interdependent throughout the hierarchic layers, with social benefits accruing to all participants, in capitalism the simple cash nexus replaced a nexus of established personal relationships. All this had been pioneered by the bourgeois classes of the towns who dominated the House of Commons, and the victory of a bourgeois Parliament over the feudal king signalled the triumph of the revolution. That revolution's ideology – epiphenomenal to the economic substructure – was the extreme form of protestantism called puritanism; it too triumphed in the revolution for which it had provided

the driving force. The link between puritanism and capitalism has endured in various forms: it could be presented as oppressive by the Marxists and beneficial by Max Weber, and both were talking historical nonsense. Thus this single example sufficed to prove the Marxist theory of history, which then came to be applied, pretty rigorously, to all the events of the past, from Periclean Athens to modern Vietnam – and indeed to the future of mankind too.

Thus this first pillar of the doctrine could not be allowed to shiver since like all religions Marxism could not tolerate an erosion of its articles of faith. Yet just about every detail of the exposition I have just put before you has been progressively and comprehensively disproved. Land had been treated as a simple source of wealth certainly since the thirteenth century and probably from the beginning of time; the feudal scene involved a manifest cash nexus. On the other hand, insofar as land also constituted a measure of social standing, it retained that position in England into the later nineteenth century. Early-modern England, whose social structure did not significantly alter in the course of the seventeenth century, knew no sizable urban middle class; ascendancy in wealth, political weight and social regard remained with the aristocracy and gentry, based on land-ownership; successful merchants and lawyers commonly sought to invest their wealth in land and join the leading sector of the community. Capitalist practices, so called, can be discovered in any age, even as the personal relationships of landowner and tenant farmer were still manifest in recent times. Indeed, after the supposed bourgeois revolution the country's aristocracy ruled more powerfully than before: the eighteenth-century aristocracy enjoyed an independence of the monarchy which its predecessors would have envied. The notion that what emerged from the bourgeois revolution was the rule of the House of Commons has become ever more absurd in the light of research. Most spectacularly, the whole structure of puritan religion, bearer of a revolutionary