

The Role of History and Historians in a World With No Center

In his famous poem, “The Second Coming,” the poet W. B. Yeats wrote: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” It is a good metaphor for the course that historiography has taken since Carl G. Gustavson wrote *A Preface to History* in 1954. Many of the assumptions held dear by mainstream historians until the mid-twentieth century came under attack in the face of new perspectives, new methodologies and the swift and startling global changes that triggered questions and doubts about the validity of our interpretations of the past. In reading Norman J. Wilson’s *History in Crisis?* and John Tosh’s collection of essays by historians, *Historians on History*, in being introduced to Cliometrics, Social History, Gender and Race Studies, and Postcolonialism, I have been led to discard my own assumptions and to ask questions. What is the central subject matter of history? What is the methodology most conducive to uncovering the truth about the past? Are broad patterns in history uncovered by demographic or economic studies more revelatory than the “vie privée” glimpses into individuals’ thoughts? What about narrative? What about universals? What about the role of language? All of it is open to debate and revision. To encapsulate the last fifty years, I will summarize here Wilson and Tosh’s general conclusions, including a look at Gerda Lerner’s essay, “The Necessity of History.” From there I will move to a discussion of studies of race, ethnicity, and postcolonialism, and finish up with a new perspective on Gustavson.

Despite the often contradictory directions history has taken, Wilson, Tosh and Lerner anchor us by reminding us that while the conclusions historians reach may not be universal, the reasons that lead them to write about history have strong commonalities. Wilson gives six reasons for studying history: The human preoccupation with change as the one constant of human experience; the irreversibility of time and the differences that history highlights over periods of time; otherness as exemplified by the foreignness of the past; to gain perspective and show us how contingent our existence is; the need to create a collective memory that reveals our past without burdening us with it; and ambition, another “motor that drives” historians to create new ways of constructing our collective memory (Wilson 4-5).

For Lerner the reasons are more urgent. From defining the functions of historians as interpreters of the past and meaning-givers, she explains the significance of the study of history for the present and the future. Confronted by Western society’s current decline into the escapist pass-times afforded by presentism, and the threat to the discipline presented by a focus on science and technology, she sees the study of past decisions as a way to understand the process of becoming and place limits on the present (Tosh 337). In the face of the possibility of the very extinction of mankind, Lerner sees history both as providing an assurance of a collective continuity and as a vehicle for delineating goals and visions for a communal future.

John Tosh echoes other historians with his four aspirations of the writing of history: To discover what happened in the past, to uncover the shape of human destiny, to take a stand against historiography’s subordination to political objectives, and the insights and lessons that arise from the historical record itself (Tosh 2-7). Along the way he sheds light on historical movements throughout Western history such as nineteenth century historicism, the teleological approaches used by Christian and Enlightenment historians, the impact of Marxism and nationalism on history, history’s relationship to the social

sciences with their alluring quantitative method and theoretical models, and finally the impact of postmodernism on history, of which postcolonialism has become perhaps its major manifestation. It is this last period that I will now analyze more in depth.

Like feminism and its intellectual branching out into women's studies, postcolonialism was the natural evolution of postwar writing of history focusing on minority studies or studies having as their subject matter the history of commonwealth or third-world countries, many of which were moving towards independence movements. The earlier hyphenated term, "post-colonial", replaced "postwar" as a way to define historical periodization from a European perspective (Wilson 126). As with the term "postmodern," the unhyphenated "postcolonial" describes not only a period but an academic attitude that directs methodology. "Postcolonial" serves political, social and methodological ends; in that the term "colonial" suggests political inequalities, postcolonialism examines social "asymmetries." Methodologically, it questions the very norms that establish and characterize the colonial condition.

How is this condition to be framed? Postcolonialism can be seen as heir to Immanuel Wallerstein's Marxist-influenced theory of center/periphery, wherein the core influences the peripheral areas (Wilson 128). This binary model encompasses other oppositional tropes such as inside/outside, self/other, oppressed/oppressor, civilized/primitive and even moral/immoral. The problem with this model is that it examines everything in the light of a dominant core at the middle with ethnic groups on the margins, and thus maintains a Eurocentric focus. This representation of others becomes a European projection of fears and desires. Moreover, as Edward Said pointed out in Orientalism, such a view is built on European assumptions of superiority that allow the West to define the East as the exotic and morally inferior "other" (Wilson 130).

While Said looks to humanist scholarship to find a solution to the use of Eurocentric stereotypes and universals in the writing of history, other historians have emphasized the space between the poles. Hybridity, the diaspora, migration, creolization and transculturation are areas of study that have focused on the languages and identities that occur when people move between spaces. Rather than place the colonizer in the center, these models emphasize the mutual development of new traditions that combine the colonizer and the colonized and the new culture that is formed as a result.

Catherine Hall's discussion of the "post-colonial moment" in Great Britain is a good case in point. In a nation flooded with the inhabitants of former colonies, she sees new salience in the question of identity. Hall responds to Hobsbawm's reservations about what he calls the "passions of identity politics." Hobsbawm doubts the power of identity politics to transform societies in the way communist politics has done. Hall disagrees and, in the face of unprecedented global movements of people, the break-up of empires, decolonization and the emergence of new power blocs that have occurred over the last fifty years, she points out the inevitability of questions about cultural identity (Tosh 159). She sees one role of the historian as creator of new myths which will bind Europeans together in ways that are non-hierarchical and inclusive. She feels that a focus on identity drives us to ask new questions about our place in society, as well as about which narratives of the past and which historical memories will allow us to construct new myths. Indeed Hall insists on questioning the very "we" we are talking about. Having raised two young children in England in the 1990s, of northern European ancestry on my side and Anglo/Indian/Maltese ancestry on their father's side, I resonate with Hall's

perspective. What does it mean to be English when your skin is olive, your eyes are dark and your grandparents were born in parts of the old British Empire?

Questions of this type plague American society as well, and are particularly acute when posed by black Americans. While Negro studies were well-established from the time of W. E. B. Du Bois, Vincent Harding shows the journey, both political and intellectual, that studies focusing on blacks have taken, from Negro Studies to Black History to Black Studies. He explains how the rising surge of anticolonialism throughout the non-white world contributed to the political move towards blackness in America, and tied in with the larger movement towards self-definition, self-determination and liberation. Harding shows how the struggle for inclusion waged by the fathers, (i. e. up to the time of Martin Luther King Jr.,) became a demand for more autonomy and not necessarily assimilation.

In the same way Joan Kelly reveals how gender is a crucial category for understanding the past in "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" (Wilson 104), Harding insists on a reinterpretation of the American past from the vantage point of race, in particular of slavery and the suppression of Native American peoples. Informed as Black Studies are by postcolonialism in its analysis of the binaries of self and other, superior and inferior, as well as with Postmodern assumptions that readings of texts are determined by cultural context and ideological inclination, Harding demands an "exposure, disclosure and reinterpretation of the entire American past" (Tosh 155) and its sacred texts. He asks, "What did the Declaration of Independence mean to enslaved peoples?"

Harding makes a good point for his position that much of American history has been mythologized, (but this is true of all nations,) and his insistence on asking questions about the very meaning of America is valid and useful. I cannot help but feel, though, that he is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If one applies the postcolonialist methods of analysis of the mechanisms that allowed the male Eurocentric (i.e. oppressive) canon to be constructed, one would also have to analyze the mechanisms that allowed the ideas of democracy and equality to be constructed and implemented. Even if they were not applied to all people at the time they were created, the point is that they *were* created. Like many previously marginalized scholars, Harding seems to be caught in a Postmodern Catch-22; even as he attempts to debunk Eurocentric philosophies, he is himself a product of certain fundamental principles that arose out of the Eurocentric philosophical tradition. It is, in part, due to these principles that marginalized groups have been empowered to change and influence society.

It is an interesting exercise to read Harding and then return to a critical review of Gustavson. The twenty-first century reader may be tempted to dismiss Gustavson as a Eurocentric white male. It is easy to read into his language a sexist bias, and the historical periods and events he covers are those wherein the major actors are male individuals and social forces. While he adopts an analytical tone, he clearly denotes democracy with progress and communism with totalitarianism, and he speaks of mankind taking "another step- a long step- on its pilgrimage out of barbarism." He appears to be fulfilling the "function of history as elite ideology," as Gerda Lerner put it, and we sense the march of progress as he guides us through six-hundred years of European history.

But who can blame a scholar for being a product of his place and time or admonish him for being blind to social sensibilities yet to surface? Gustavson's

contribution in *A Preface to History* is to provide an analytical framework which compels the student of history to look at events and the actions of individuals from every possible perspective and to eschew simplistic conclusions.

Methodologically, Gustavson displays elements of a narrative approach such as Lawrence Stone describes in *Historians on History*. These include the way he organizes his material chronologically and the fact that while he seems to give as much importance to circumstance as to man, he deals more with the particular than with the statistical. Thematically he presents social forces and individual ambition as actors in history. He is also clearly concerned with the rhetorical aspects of presentation. Finally he would also seem to support Stone's criteria for narrative of a belief that the culture of the group and the will of the individual are as important as material output and demographic growth and he certainly recognizes the impact on society of brute force in the way of political and military power. But *A Preface to History* is, of course, also a primer for how to approach the study of the past and not a pure narrative such as Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, for example, with its vivid word portraits of the individuals central to the unfolding events. Gustavson appears to be on the threshold of the changes taking place in history and there are strong aspects of social/structural history in his work; that is, he attempts to give us a "total history" that is problem oriented and somewhat scientific in its analysis of economic and social structures and he shows a willingness to view society and culture within the context of politics.

After reading of the "advances" in historiography over the last half century, a visit back to Gustavson was refreshing. At least the reader gets the sense that Gustavson would agree with Norman J. Wilson when the latter wrote, "Regardless of the subjectivity of historians, the past is a once existent reality (Wilson 4). Gustavson presents that reality in all its multidimensional complexity.

Works Cited

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