
*On the Limits of "Presentism" and
"Historicism" in the Historiography
of the Behavioral Sciences*

This essay appeared originally as an editorial in the third number of the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*. Although the *Journal* was founded in 1965 primarily by a group of psychologists and psychiatrists, and its contents still reflect its origin, it may be regarded as a manifestation of a more widespread interest in recent years in the historical background of the modern behavioral and social sciences.¹ This interest has been evident both among historians and, to a greater degree, among scholars in the various disciplines involved. Such a dualism of personnel, along with the nature of the subject matter, creates special historiographical problems for the history of the behavioral sciences, which are widely manifest in its literature. In part because my own training and experience have been such as to give me an abnormal sensitivity to certain issues of historical method, I have devoted a fair amount of my scholarly energies to their discussion—perhaps more than was tactful for someone who still feels a bit of an "outsider" in relation to the anthropological "tribe."² Although several of the essays reprinted here reflect this methodological interest, they have been chosen primarily for their rela-

tion to a substantive historical theme. I have nevertheless decided to include the present essay, since it states an underlying historiographical point of view which I hope will be generally evident in the essays which follow. In the present less polemical context, I am inclined to qualify further my suggestion that the historian approaches history simply because "it is there." Much historical practice suggests otherwise. Furthermore, I am at this point inclined to be just a bit doubtful of the utilitarian benefits of historical study for ongoing anthropological research. Neither of these second thoughts, however, affects the basic message, which is a plea for an ideal of historical understanding which may never be easily obtainable in practice, and for the legitimacy of an historical enterprise whose utility is rarely easily definable in immediate terms. I have therefore reprinted the essay as it originally appeared, with only minor modifications of language.

ALTHOUGH the April editorial on "Policy and its Implementation" outlined the basic objectives of the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, its frankly limited scope and purpose did not allow extended consideration of certain broader questions of motive and method in the historiography of the behavioral sciences. Perhaps this was as it should have been. The "grass roots" impulses which produced the *Journal* were numerous, and express themselves in a variety of historiographical approaches. Furthermore, history itself is in many respects the most undisciplined of disciplines. There have been many attempts to codify historical method and to define the philosophical presuppositions of historical inquiry. But Clio, putative mother of many of the behavioral sciences, still drapes herself in skirts as varied as the progeny who once abandoned and now return to them.³ For all this, however, history remains a discipline of sorts, and one to which all the makers of this journal are at least avocationally committed. While we cannot assume and do not seek a consensus of motive and method, it is still appropriate to discuss these problems

systematically. If we can neither prescribe nor proscribe historiographical points of view, we can at least define them and argue their relative merits.

With due regard for the oversimplification which ideal-typical analysis involves, let us proceed by setting up a series of dichotomies which may be subsumed under two alternative orientations toward historiography. If subtler analysis should destroy the neat dualism of the model, well and good. It may nevertheless serve as a polemical starting point. Consider then the following alternatives: "context" and "analogue"; "process" and "sequence"; "emergence" and "agency"; "thinking" and "thought"; "reasonableness" and "rationality"; "understanding" and "judgment"; "affective" and "utilitarian"; "historicism" and "presentism." Their explication will, I hope, flow from the ensuing argument. At this point, however, let us leap directly to the alternative orientations under which I will subsume them: in each case, the first term seems to me to characterize the attempt "to understand the past for the sake of the past"; the second, to characterize the study of "the past for the sake of the present."

The last two phrases are of course Herbert Butterfield's. He used them a generation ago in a critique entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*, which he defined as "the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present." According to Butterfield, the whig interpretation introduces itself into historical writing as a principle of abridgment. Faced with the massive complexity of historical particularity, the general historian falls victim to the "historian's 'pathetic fallacy,'" "abstracting things from their historical context and judging them apart from their context—estimating them and organizing the historical study by a system of direct reference to the present."⁴ The whig historian reduces the mediating processes by which the totality of an historical past produces the totality of its consequent future to a search for the origins of certain present phenomena. He seeks out in the past phenomena which seem to resemble those of concern in the present, and then moves forward in time by tracing lineages up to the present in simple sequential

movement. When this abridging procedure is charged with a normative commitment to the phenomena whose origins are sought, the linear movement is "progress" and those who seem to abet it are "progressive." The result is whiggish history. Because it is informed by a normative commitment, its characteristic interpretive mode is judgment rather than understanding, and history becomes the field for a dramatic struggle between children of light and children of darkness. Because it wrenches the individual historical phenomenon from the complex network of its contemporary context in order to see it in abstracted relationship to analogues in the present, it is prone to anachronistic misinterpretation. Because it assumes in advance the progressive character of historical change, it is less interested in the complex processes by which change emerges than in agencies which direct it, whether they be great men, specific deterministic forces, or the "logic" of historical development itself.

Whiggish history is a variety of what I would call generally "presentism" in historical study. To characterize its alternative, I would suggest the term "historicism," although this word has been used with a variety of meanings, which often have an underlying or explicit epistemological charge.⁵ By deliberately using it rather loosely, without epistemological commitment, I am of course to some extent sacrificing analytic subtlety to polemical convenience. Nevertheless, some term is necessary, and "historicism" conveys rather well the essential quality of the commitment to the understanding of the past for its own sake. This essence should already be generally evident, but we can make it more explicit—and at the same time relate this whole discussion more directly to the problems of the historiography of the behavioral sciences—by briefly explicating several of the dichotomies mentioned above: "thinking" and "thought"; "reasonableness" and "rationality"; "understanding" and "judgment."

What I have to suggest in regard to the first two pairs of alternatives has been admirably stated in Joseph Levenson's *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, an extended essay on the *historicization* of a world view: the process by which a traditional and absolutistic *weltanschauung* becomes historical and relativistic under the impact of Western culture. In discussing this process, Levenson treats with a subtle and delicate hand the ways in which

iconoclasts "relegate traditional ideas to the past" and traditionalists "transform traditional ideas in the present"—an "apparently paradoxical transformation-with-preservation" which depends on "a change in the thinker's alternatives." For, as Professor Levenson suggests, "a thought includes what its thinker eliminates; an idea has its particular quality from the fact that other ideas, expressed in other quarters, are demonstrably alternatives." Levenson goes on to quote the British philosopher of history, R. G. Collingwood, to suggest a logical principle by which such change may be understood: "a body of knowledge consists not of 'propositions,' 'statements' or 'judgments' . . . but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer." Levenson concludes that an "idea, then, is a denial of alternatives and an answer to a question," and that intellectual history is the history of men *thinking* rather than the history of *thought*.⁶

In a general consideration of the problem of history and value, Levenson later comments on the alternatives of "reasonableness" and "rationality": "Absolutism is parochialism of the present, the confusion of one's own time with the timeless, a confusion of the categories of reasonable and rational." The historian, however, asks "not whether something is true or good, but why and where and to what end it came to be enacted or expressed." He goes beyond "assessment of his subject's thought as rationally (timelessly and abstractly) perhaps erratic. He proceeds to analyze why, nevertheless, that thought was not ridiculous . . . but reasonable—in spite of or because of imperfect rationality." For "reasonableness relates to the questions put by the subject's time . . . [to which] his ideas are answers."⁷ It is in some context such as this, rather than in any explicitly epistemological framework, that I would like to pose the dichotomy between judgment and understanding: understanding is the attempt, by whatever means, to get at the "reasonableness" of what might otherwise be *judged* as falling short of some present or absolute standards of "rationality."⁸

At this point, the reader may well ask "what has all this to do with the work of our journal?" In the first place I would suggest—in a frankly provocative, but open-minded spirit—that each of these orientations will tend to find its natural adherents among the historiographers of the behavioral sciences, and that each orientation carries with it a characteristic motivational posture. The

orientation of the historian approaching the history of the behavioral sciences will tend to be "historicist" and his motivational posture "affective." Presentism is by no means a dead issue in the historical fraternity, and historians are undeniably conditioned in a thousand subtle ways by the present in which they write. But in general, the historian approaches the past rather in the spirit of the mountain climber attacking Everest—"because it is there." He demands no more of it than the emotional satisfaction which flows from understanding a manifestation of the changing human self in time. The approach of the professional behavioral scientist, on the other hand, is more likely to be whiggish or, more broadly, "presentist," and his motivational posture "utilitarian." He may share the historian's emotional satisfaction, but he tends to demand of the past something more: that it be related to and even useful for furthering his professional activities in the ongoing present. Thus the April editorial emphasizes the utility of historical study as "a way to implement interdisciplinary cooperation."

Leaving aside for now the relative merits of the postures of these frankly ideal-typical practitioners, it is important to note that there is a sort of implicit whiggish presentism virtually built into the history of science, and by extension into the history of the behavioral sciences. However disillusioned we may have become with the idea of progress in other areas, however sophisticated in the newer philosophy of science, most of us take it for granted that the development of science is a cumulative ever-upward progress in rationality. Indeed, George Sarton, long-time doyen of historians of science, described his study as "the only history which can illustrate the progress of mankind" because "the acquisition and systematization of positive knowledge are the only human activities which are truly cumulative and progressive." For Sarton, the history of mathematics was a whiggish progress unmarred by tory backslidings, "an endless series of victories of the human mind, victories without counterbalancing failures, that is, without dishonorable and humiliating ones, and without atrocities."⁹ In view of the occasionally strident scientism and also of the residual reformism of the behavioral sciences, it is hardly surprising that their historiography should manifest various signs of whiggish presentism. The careful reader will find a number in the first issues of our journal. In a general and impersonal way, one

may note that antiquarianism can flow from a presentist orientation just as well as from a know-nothing historicism. Starting from whiggish assumptions about progress, the historian can become rather pedantically involved in the search for "firsts" and "founders"—for the agents of cumulative forward progression. Or one may note how the search for analogues, for precursors of modernity, can produce its all too revealing shocks of recognition disappointed—as, for instance, when scientist X, who otherwise anticipated so much of our current thinking, is found to have an "insufficient appreciation" of some point which is today obvious.

Fortunately, however, the history of science provides us with other models than the "chroniclers of an incremental process." In recent years there has been, in the words of Thomas Kuhn, a "historiographic revolution in the study of science." Rather than searching out "the permanent contributions of an older science to our present vantage," historians have begun to attempt "to display the historical integrity of that science in its own time." Although this revolution is still "in its early stages," Kuhn's own brilliantly controversial *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a clear indication that historicism, though it may have come late to the history of science, is by no means irrelevant to it. True, Kuhn's book is imperfectly historicist in its focus on the inner development of science to the deliberate neglect of the role of "technological advance or of external social, economic and intellectual conditions," and, one might add, the variety of national cultural traditions within which scientific development takes place. But however much certain traditional historians may have balked at its nomothetic language and its attempt to generalize the course of scientific development, Kuhn's approach to the internal development of science is informed by a spirit which is clearly historicist, in the sense in which I have used the term.¹⁰

Kuhn's central concept is that of the "paradigm"—an articulated set of assumptions about "the fundamental entities of which the universe is composed," the nature of their interaction "with each other and with the senses," the types of questions "which may legitimately be asked about such entities," and the techniques to be employed in seeking answers to these questions. In short, the paradigm functions as a disciplinary *world view*—which, as Kuhn

points out, is culturally transmitted and sustained by a set of social institutions. Prior to the establishment of its first consensual paradigm, a science tends to be a chaos of competing schools, each of which feels "forced to build [its] field anew from its foundations." Once accepted, the paradigm is the basis for the puzzle-solving mop-up work of "normal science," which serves primarily to complete the articulation of the paradigm. Scientific revolutions occur when anomalies "produced inadvertently by a game played under one set of rules" require for their assimilation the "elaboration of another set"—the creation of a new paradigm based on different assumptions, asking different questions, and suggesting different answers. Without further elaborating, or necessarily accepting, the specifics of Kuhn's analysis, I would suggest that this approach does encourage us to see a body of knowledge as a set of propositions "together with the questions they are meant to answer," to understand the "reasonableness" of points of view now superseded, to see historical change as a complex process of emergence rather than a simple linear sequence—in short, to understand the science of a given period in its own terms.¹¹

Quite aside from the question of its general utility, Kuhn's schematization suggests further reason for the presentism of many historiographers of the behavioral sciences. Perhaps because the behavioral sciences are for the most part in Kuhn's terms "pre-paradigmatic," their historiography is more open to certain vices of presentism than that of science generally. When there is no single framework which unites all the workers in a field, but rather competing points of view or competing schools, historiography simply extends the arena of their competition. At its most neutral, the result is the sterile tracing of theoretical lineages which is served up in "history of theory" courses in many behavioral science departments. As the degree of partisan involvement and historiographical effort increases, the author may attempt to legitimize a present point of view by claiming for it a putative "founder" of the discipline. Or he may sweep broadly across the history of a discipline, brushing out whigs and tories in the nooks and crannies of every century.¹² Inevitably the sins of history written "for the sake of the present" insinuate themselves: anachronism, distortion, misinterpretation, misleading analogy, neglect of context, oversimplification of process.

But does this mean that the history of the behavioral sciences should be written purely and simply "to understand the past for the sake of the past?" I think not. It may well be that such understanding exists only as a kind of historical Holy Grail—never to be found by sinful man, but enlightening the scholar who dedicates himself to the search. Or one may argue, as indeed Professor Levenson does, that the historian *must* "articulate his own [present] standards in order to find the rationale of his subjects', in order—by raising the question he could never recognize if he lacked his own convictions—to find what made it reasonable for the earlier generation to violate the later historian's criteria of rationality."¹³ But beyond such limitations which historicism would impose upon itself, there are compelling reasons for a more active presentism in the historiography of the behavioral sciences. Precisely because most of us are practicing behavioral scientists, we are, and indeed must be, interested in *thought* as well as *thinking*, in *rationality* as well as *reasonableness*—not in absolutistic terms, but in the context of ongoing attempts to develop generalized explanations of human behavior at the highest level that present knowledge permits. The case for an enlightened presentism in a particular area of the behavioral sciences has been so well put by Dell Hymes that I would like to quote from him at some length:

There exists, indeed, not only a subject matter for a history of linguistic anthropology, but also a definite need. To my mind, there is a general need in the current study of language for codification, articulation as well as exploration. From a humanistic viewpoint, such work might be seen as the reconstitution of a general philology. In strictly anthropological terms, such work might be seen as the framing of a provisional general theory of language and culture. In either case, the work of criticism and interpretation would have to draw for perspective equally as much on the history, or development, of the study of language as on a survey of current knowledge and research. History and systematics would be interdependent.

Reasons for this are familiar to students of intellectual history, and the combination seems often to have occurred. . . . I mention the matter here out of a strong sense of its timeliness and importance for anthropology. To the degree that we have lacked an active knowledge of the history of our field, we have been limited by lack of some of the perspectives that have not been transmitted to us, and by the partialness of some of those that have. A critical history can help us

regain the one and transcend the other. In my own work I have sometimes felt that progress in understanding was but the recapture of perspective that had been lost.

Certainly a case can be made for an intellectual discontinuity in American linguistic anthropology during this century, such that some important work of preceding generations has become unintelligible, its meaning having to be recaptured by special study. I say this not out of overestimation of the worth of earlier work. Much of its content has been permanently superseded, and its neglect thus to some extent justified. But historical interpretation and critique of earlier periods has the two-edged value of regaining and transcending (mentioned above), and I say this, not as an historian, but as a practitioner, of the field in question. I would identify the situation in this way. Our most recent, still continuing, period has been dominated by reaction against an earlier perspective considered too sweeping, too ambitious in scope, too weak in data and method. In outline caricature, the devolution from generalizations of bold scope has been first to drop the generalizations, and then the scope. Very narrow definitions of linguistics, affecting anthropology, have come to the fore. By enabling us to put in full perspective many of our problems and assumptions, historical study will help change the situation in two respects. In some ways the consequence will be to depart in a much more thoroughgoing way from earlier work, since the departure will be not simply a contraction, but a fresh start. In other ways the consequence will be to renew earlier periods by renewing attention to problems posed in them. Ideally, the fresh start will harness the technical and empirical advances of the latest period to the broad sense of scope and relevance of its predecessors.¹⁴

Perhaps one might generalize this argument in terms of the "pre-paradigmatic" state, the a-historical orientation, and the historically conditioned disciplinary fragmentation of the behavioral sciences. Because they are pre-paradigmatic, the various competing schools of the present and of the past exist in a sense contemporaneously. But because they have on the whole such notoriously short historical memories, the behavioral sciences of the present have very little awareness that their predecessors were in many instances asking questions and offering answers about problems which have by no means been closed. And because of the disciplinary fragmentation of approaches which were in the past often much more integrated, there may be fruits of interdisciplinary cooperation which are as easily picked in the past as in the present. In short, in a pre-paradigmatic situation there are tremendous problems of defining what the positive increments in our

knowledge of human behavior actually have been. There is also a tremendous field in which the seeker of serendipity may indulge himself.

But precisely because in the history of the behavioral sciences there are legitimate and compelling reasons for studying "the past for the sake of the present," it is all the more important to keep in mind the pitfalls of a presentist approach. And beyond this I would argue that the utilities we are seeking in the present are in fact best realized by an approach which is in practice if not in impulse "affective" and "historicist." E. B. Tylor may speak to present anthropologists, but they will be better able to understand him if they are able to distinguish between the questions he asked which have long since been answered, the questions which are still open, and the questions which we would no longer even recognize as such. As I have suggested below, Tylor's central anthropological problem, in its simplest terms, was to "fill the gap between Brixham Cave and European Civilization without introducing the hand of God"—that is, to show that human culture was, or might have been, the result of a natural evolutionary development. No anthropologist today would question the fact that culture was, in a broad sense, the product of such an evolutionary development. That question has been answered. On the other hand, the question of filling in gaps is still very much open, and although our methods of approaching this problem are perhaps quite different, Tylor may still have something to say to us. However, the question of the hand of God, which greatly exercised a number of Tylor's contemporaries, and therefore Tylor, we would not even regard as a question. As Professor Levenson suggests, to approach Tylor in these terms requires a standpoint in the present. But it also requires that we know what the questions were to which Tylor's ideas were answers, and the alternatives which his answers were designed to exclude.

What is involved here, if I may turn to my own uses a distinction which Professor Levenson made in a somewhat different context, is the difference in intonation between the "historically (really) significant" and the "(merely) historically significant"—"between an empirical judgment of fruitfulness in time and a normative judgment of aridity in the here and now." "By abjuring judgment," by approaching the past "with an even-handed alloca-

tion of historical significance," the historian may be able to create out of "the nothing of the *historically* significant" something of value and utility in the present, something "historically *significant*." ¹⁵ But to do this requires an approach in terms of context, process, emergence, thinking, and reasonableness. Indeed, it is the burden of this essay that this goal requires an affective, historicist orientation which attempts "to understand the past for the sake of the past." By suspending judgment as to present utility, we make that judgment ultimately possible.

2

French Anthropology in 1800

This essay reflects the limitations of its genesis and its method. It grew out of a chance encounter with a late nineteenth-century reprinting of a French document dating from 1800, and subsequently of related documents reprinted over the next several decades. Although my primary interests lay in other areas and I had little background in French history, the incidents surrounding the documents were of sufficient intrinsic interest to impel their explication. Essentially, my approach was an attempt to explicate the changes going on in a microcosm in the context of an implicit comparison to patterns of thought which I had uncovered by previous researches into late nineteenth-century racial thinking, not in France but in the United States. Based on comparison of historical phenomena separated both in time and space, written without access to certain French manuscript and printed sources, and treating problems that in principle involve a tremendous range of source materials that in practice have been the subject of spotty and often inadequate historical investigation, the essay is inevitably somewhat speculative and sketchy in its discussion of historical contexts and of the filiations and processes of change through time. There were a lot of gaps to fill, and my attempt to fill them raised many more questions than were answered. Quite aside from such broad and perhaps inherently speculative issues as the causes of nineteenth-century racism, there are any number of relatively specific problems in the early nineteenth-century history of the behavioral sciences that need to be investigated.