

# History, Theory, Text

*Historians and the Linguistic Turn*

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Christian texts. For textually oriented studies of premodernity, the lament for “the end of history” is groundless. Indeed, critical theory has provoked lively discussions elsewhere in the humanities and provides intellectual historians, including students of early Christianity, with new conversation partners.<sup>7</sup>

I offer this book as one step toward remedying for premodern, textually oriented studies the “disciplinary blindness” for which Allan Megill has castigated the historians’ profession.<sup>8</sup> Because the historical discipline did not catapult directly from Ranke’s “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” to its recent confrontations with French-inspired theory, probing the long intervening debates over the status of history clarifies how the discipline arrived at its present contested position. Even the “dead ends,” I posit, reveal something about why certain approaches have been (or should be) abandoned. It is this passage with which the following chapters are principally concerned: the route by which we got from “there” to “here.”

This book begins with an exploration of the debates between and among historians and theorists in recent decades, moves back to consider some important moments in the prehistory of these debates, and returns to the present to consider the placement of premodern studies within the recently invigorated subfield of intellectual history. While Novick in *That Noble Dream* surveyed the professional development of the historians’ guild in twentieth-century America, this book, by contrast, centers on the conceptual field of history and focuses on intellectual debates between and among (largely) French and Anglophone historians, philosophers, and theorists. The world of German historiographical scholarship, earlier so crucial, remained a latecomer to this particular discussion; the theoretical issues that recently rose to prominence in German academia center mainly on hermeneutics, modernization theory, the Holocaust, and the writings of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 1, “Defending and Lamenting History,” sets the terms of the argument. I claim that the current debates have, in different guises, troubled the intellectual world of historians for much of the twentieth century. Here, I elaborate both the epistemological problems surrounding a discipline that investigates a vanished past and the moral questions pertaining to historians’ interests and values; since this past is not “there” for comparison with historians’ claims concerning it, appeals to a correspondence theory of verification are precluded.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 2 moves back to earlier twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophers’ exploration of truth claims regarding history. Some what counterintuitively, attempts to construe history as a scientific discipline in the English-speaking world emanated less insistently from historians themselves than from analytical philosophers of history, a small but lively subgroup in mid-twentieth-century Anglophone philosophical circles. These philosophers, believing that relativist historians such as Charles Beard and Carl Becker had too readily conceded history’s claims to objectivity,<sup>11</sup> offered their own expertise in exploring history’s ability to yield certain knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Yet technical discussions of historical causation and explanation by twentieth-century philosophers were of little interest to historians, more puzzled than illuminated by philosophical subtleties. Abandoning the debate, they left to analytical philosophers an open and largely uncontested field for the theoretical investigation of history-writing.

This tale, however, has no comedic plot: the philosophers do not triumph. When their attempt to construe history as a quasi-science failed, philosophers who retained an interest in historiography turned to other disciplines—chiefly, to literature—to seek history’s proper affiliations. Did not historians, like the creators of literature, employ narrative and tell stories? Was not narrative the distinctive characteristic of history, even lending it explanatory and persuasive force? Although some may judge that this second attempt to style the discipline of history as narrative came closer to the mark than did the interpretation of history as a quasi-science, it too faltered. Why?

One explanation holds that historians who had labored to escape from an older belletristic history with its rhetorical adornments had no wish belatedly to reembrace it. As Hans Kellner claims, from the early nineteenth century onward, successive generations of historians—from the romantics to the positivists, social and economic New Historians, and quantitative historians—eagerly abandoned rhetoric and charged their disciplinary forefathers (in a repetition of a “primal scene”) with hopeless implication “in the toils of linguistic forms and illusions.”<sup>13</sup> Such historians, wary of narrative’s links to an outdated rhetorical style of historiography, deemed theorists’ comparison of history and literature vacuous.<sup>14</sup> Yet, I shall argue, the assessment of history as “like literature” (if not as narrative, then as rhetorical argumentation) characterizes the fields of classical and early Christian studies better than does the categorization favored by both social-scientific and structuralist historians. The turn to narrative, how-

linguistic system of differences, how could historians assume (as they customarily had) the adequacy of words to refer to things? Could they continue to operate with what linguists call “nomenclaturist” assumptions? If language does not refer in a one-to-one fashion to things in the “real world,” how could historians argue that their language about the past corresponded to “what had actually happened”?

Even the most prominent historians and historical schools of the twentieth century have paid scant attention to these issues. Chapter 4 examines the work of several *Annales*, microhistorians, and British Marxist historians, and argues that although they probed new sources and fashioned novel interdisciplinary techniques (developments I explore in detail), they did not much attend to the philosophical and theoretical questions here to be considered; that task was left to relative “outsiders” to the historical profession, such as classicist Paul Veyne. The discipline of history, however, has recently returned to good favor in France after a period of occlusion by structuralism, and some theoretically informed historians, such as Roger Chartier and Michel de Certeau, offer models of a sophisticated history that could be contemplated with profit by historians of premodernity.

In Chapter 6, I explore the present reconstruction of intellectual history from its earlier incarnation in the writings of Arthur O. Lovejoy and his followers. The older history of ideas, in which disembodied ideas appeared to waft through time, has been replaced by a more contextually and materially grounded intellectual history, often aligned with cultural history. Long despised in favor of social history, a reenvisioned intellectual history now differentiates itself from its earlier instantiations by its emphasis on discontinuity, ideology, and power. I here register the immense influence of Michel Foucault on historical studies, along with the work of Roger Chartier, Michel de Certeau, Dominick LaCapra, and others who have importantly contributed to a revisionary intellectual history.

Chapter 7 addresses a central point of debate within current intellectual history—the relation of texts and contexts. What constitutes a “text” is now a fraught question, as is the once-simple query, what constitutes “reading”? Anthropologists and cultural critics (among whom Clifford Geertz is preeminent) undertook a semiotic “reading” of nonlinguistic entities; simultaneously, French literary theorists and philosophers (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, among others) were expanding traditional definitions of text. In the Anglo-

phone world, Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock proposed a contextualist model of historical interpretation based on spoken (not literary) language that sought (at least for Skinner) to uncover authorial intent—a model that in turn was attacked as insufficiently attentive to the differentiation of speech from writing. Also central were debates over whether nonlinguistic realities, such as the rituals that anthropologists study, should be understood as “texts.” Although textual scholars found it exciting to fancy themselves anthropologists encountering “native informants” in the works they studied, recent theoreticians of history argue that this expansion of the textual elides *both* the status of practices *and* the particular work performed by high literary and philosophical writings. Moreover, as debates between and among Dominick LaCapra, Roger Chartier, Carlo Ginzburg, and Robert Darnton suggest, different reading strategies are required for high and for low texts. Texts, indeed, have acquired a new caché among historians—a point of interest to my specific area, the high literary and philosophical texts of late ancient Christianity.

Chapter 8 offers examples of various premodern historical studies that engage recent debates concerning theory and suggests ways in which repositioning late ancient Christian historical studies as a subdiscipline of the newly refurbished intellectual history well suits the type of texts on which practitioners of this subdiscipline work. First, summing up points of discussion from earlier chapters, I claim that such histories should acknowledge that, as intellectual constructions, they differ from “the past,” vanished and now available only through “traces,” and that no historical construction is “politically innocent” but is driven by the problems and questions set by the historian in the present: recent discussions of relativism and objectivism are here pertinent. Learning from both structuralism and post-structuralism, such studies look less to historical continuity (and hence to the nostalgia for the past that such histories often encourage) than to discontinuity, noting both breaks in the larger historical order and the gaps, absences, aporias, and contradictions in texts. They eschew “grand narratives” that often mask ideological presuppositions, as well as categories such as “experience,” if understood as a foundational court of appeal. They implicitly or explicitly acknowledge that a correspondence theory of verification is untenable, and that their own *representations* are not to be confused with *reference*. They recognize that contexts are often multiple or unknown, and are variously con-