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On the Objectivity of History

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I would like, with your consent, to present here some remarks on the lecture that you delivered at Sèvres, the text of which I have just read.

And first of all I would like, for my purposes and yours, to take note of and to specify *what it is that distinguishes you from Raymond Aron*. This comparison is not arbitrary: it is your text itself that imposes it, most often implicitly, sometimes openly.¹ And I do not believe that I am being unfaithful to your thinking in saying that *the critique of the 'subjectivist' themes in Raymond Aron is one of the grounds of your text*. This comparison, moreover, is not untimely. For Aron's themes have, I dare say, fallen into the public domain, are known to all, and to many minds it appears as if nothing could be more obvious.

What distinguishes you from Aron is your problematic itself. Whereas Aron poses the question, "Is a universally valid science of history possible?" – which is to say that he, as Kant puts it, "doubt[s] [...] its actuality"² – you depart from the existence of the science of history, from its rationality, from its objectivity, as from something factually given. Whereas Aron poses to history, not the question that Kant poses to the sciences (the question of their foundation), but on the contrary the very question that he poses . . . to metaphysics (the question of its possibility), you reverse the perspective of Aron and return to the tradition of critique in posing to history a question that implies the prior recognition of its reality as a science. I will leave to one side for the time being the principle and the content of your question. But this reversal of perspective is of the utmost importance: it presides over the entirety of your critique.

¹ "After the voluminous work of philosophical criticism which reached its climax with Raymond Aron's book, perhaps we should now ask the following question: what is *good* and what is *bad* subjectivity?" Paul Ricoeur, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 30.

² Cf. Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity*, trans. George J. Irwin (Beacon Press, 1961), p. 10. Aron, moreover, is aware of transforming the sense of the "critical" question. He writes: "But instead of the Kantian formula: 'Under what conditions is historical knowledge possible?' we shall ask: 'Is a universally valid science of history possible?'" It is not without interest to place, opposite this "rectified" Kantian problematic, some texts of Kant's. For example: "we can confidently say that some pure synthetic cognition *a priori* is actual and given, namely, *pure mathematics* and *pure natural science* [...]. We have therefore some at least *uncontested* synthetic cognition *a priori*, and we do not need to ask whether it is possible (for it is actual), but only: *how is it possible* [...]." Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 26. Or again: "To ask whether a science might in fact be possible assumes a doubt about its actuality" (*ibid.*, p. 6). It is true that the only feature common to both Aron and Kant is the "contested" character of metaphysics and of history.

Indeed, at the moment that Aron asks himself the question, “Is a science of history possible?” he excludes in advance one response to his question: the very one that would dispense with the necessity of posing it, that which furnishes precisely the existence, the reality of the science. No longer wanting to find the response in the science itself, he seeks it outside of the science, at a level which is not that of the science: on the one hand, at the level of ordinary experience, self-knowledge, the knowledge of others, at the level of the experience of the man in the street, as he himself says; on the other hand, at the level of a philosophy of the historical object. In other words, Aron seeks a response to his question in a historical object that he *constitutes outside of all scientific apprehension*, and that he presents, as if so much went without saying, as the “truth of history.” It is necessary to recognize that this “*truth of history*” is composed of a background of immediate experiences cast in relief by philosophical notions: the experience of the “spectator,” of the “judge,” of the man who recalls his past and, in evoking it, transforms it; indeed, of the traveler who gets his ticket punched, the experience of the incommunicability of others, the experience of the retrospective passions of politics, of ideology, etc. . . . , the whole thing coated in philosophical concepts that consecrate the “equivocal,” “inexhaustible,” “complex,” “plural” character of history, the phenomenon of “recovery,” the preeminence of the future, etc. . . . From time to time this constitution of the object outside of the very level of scientific apprehension benefits from the moral support provided by the aporiæ and the difficulties that the historian encounters in his work. No matter that the latter are problems that have a sense only within the field of the constitution of historical knowledge; Aron transfers them to the object of history so as to consecrate its mysterious ambiguity. So it is not altogether by chance that Aron should pose to history the question that Kant poses to metaphysics: for the history that is going to furnish the expected response is indeed a metaphysical history. But, contrary to Kant, who refutes metaphysics, the metaphysical object, in the name of the conditions of objective knowledge, and of the existing sciences that provide him with its model, Aron refutes the empty idea of a possible science of history in the name of a metaphysic of history that he has first given himself *a priori*! In other words, the center of reference is not for him, as it is for Kant, the effective rationality of existing science, but the “truth” of an object constituted outside of all science. An extraordinary reversal of the Kantian problematic, under the cover of a “critical” protest! All of Kant’s efforts consisted in showing, precisely, that there is no sense in speaking of the “*knowledge*” of any object whatsoever outside of the very conditions of objectivity. It matters little, for the moment, in what ideal form he conceives of those conditions. The fact is that he conceived of them, and on the basis of existing sciences. The very idea of comparing, in order to adjudicate the

possibility of a science, the idea of that possible science with its purported object, *unknown*, and thus constituted outside of all objective apprehension as a thing in itself, is the very prototype of that metaphysical procedure which leads us right back to the precritical period and to its naiveté.

That is why it is important to note henceforth that your problematic, at least as regards its principle, excludes (or should exclude) every type of metaphysical judgment of that order. You quite rightly show that the level of history is not that of immediate experience,³ that history as a science is not, nor can it be, a resurrection of the past,⁴ that historical science is a *knowledge* of history and not the resurrection (whether integral or partial) of the past.⁵

It is at this level that it is possible to recognize in history a rationality “of the same kind” as that of the natural sciences. You show very well that the moments of scientific elaboration in history – observation, abstraction, theory⁶ – correspond to the very procedures of the experimental sciences (which are at the same time theoretical, because experimental). The point at which your critique of Aron reaches its climax is your distinction between *the good and the bad subjectivity*. There you touch on the core of Aron’s sophisms. Aron’s entire undertaking effectively issues in what one could call *an ideological theory of the science of history*. For Aron, despite the reservations that he is indeed obliged to formulate in regard to certain domains (such as economics, even though his conception thereof is purely static and terribly summary), there is no objectivity and no rationalization of historical reality except in retrospect. If the facts (certain of them, at least, despite his celebrated formula concerning the “disintegration of the object”⁷) can sometimes be described, if certain structures can be educed and, as it were, read in the real itself, as soon as one rises to a certain level of generality there is no longer any recourse against retrospection. Put differently, as soon as one attains to a certain level of abstraction, *that, precisely, at which every scientific theory is situated and constituted*, one is hopelessly given over to the fatality of philosophical “choices” and of the “will” – in short, let us call it by its name, that name which he pronounces only

³ “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” p. 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

⁵ “The objectivity of history consists precisely in repudiating the attempt to relive and coincide with the past; it consists in the ambition to elaborate factual sequences on the level of an historical understanding” (*ibid.*, p. 24).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4. You quite rightly refuse to take up the opposition between comprehension and explication. Admirably, you write that history requires “‘theory,’ in the sense in which we speak of ‘physical theory’” (*ibid.*, p. 25).

⁷ You write: “Does the intrusion of the historian’s subjectivity signify, as some claim, the ‘disintegration of the object’? By no means [...]” (*ibid.*, p. 29).

in the final pages of his work, *to ideology*.⁸ All theory, in the sense in which that word is employed in physics, for example, in history is tainted with an irremediable relativism and arbitrariness. Why? *Because* (and these two reasons support one another, more or less as the box that Kohler's chimp puts all of its energy into carrying supports the chimp once it has climbed on top of it⁹) – *because* the complexity, the ambiguity of reality, which, besides, reflects back onto the historian, radically precludes any theoretical unification, and because, in this sad situation, the historian makes a choice (in which he finds his grandeur and his consolation): he chooses the meaning of his past, he gives himself *a priori* a theory which is that of his people, of his class, if not simply that of his temperament. One sees immediately, in the grandeur of the historian, the poverty of his theory (and conversely). For the latter is not universal: it is only the translation of interests, of passions, even if noble, of philosophical preferences; it is only ideology.

It is that thesis of Aron's which you condemn in speaking of "*bad subjectivity*."¹⁰ It is remarkable, moreover, to see here, once again, Aron constrained, by his problematic itself, to take recourse to the most vulgar themes of immediate consciousness, and to attribute them to the possible historian so as to condemn him as he pleases.¹¹ Is it useful to mention here that, in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Hegel had condemned, under the title of reflective history, the practice of that ideological retrospection, and appealed to a knowledge which surpassed that subjective relativism? It is certain, indeed, that ideology, far from constituting the very essence of every historical process, can be only one of the objects of the science of history, and that history, to be constituted scientifically, must surpass that level of immediate consciousness that ideology is, i.e., must show itself capable also of

⁸ Cf. Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 309: "We have come across the problem several times without using the term."

⁹ Aron himself acknowledges the "circle": "It is vain [...] to ask whether the historian's curiosity or the structure of history is to be considered in the first place, since they refer to each other" (*ibid.*, p. 44).

¹⁰ "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History," p. 30: "It is meaningless to say that history is relative to the historian. [...] [The relativity of the object to a transcendental subjectivity] has nothing to do with just any relativism, with a subjectivism of will to live, will to power, or what have you."

¹¹ You quite rightly say: "[History] always flows from the way in which traditional societies *rectify* the official and pragmatic arrangement of their past. This rectification is of the same nature as the rectification represented by physical science in relation to the first arrangement of appearances in perception and in the cosmologies dependent on perception" (*ibid.*, p. 22). That is to state that the science of history is constituted in surpassing the level of immediacy and ideology.

producing a theory of ideologies, so as to escape their grasp, which is to say, its degradation.

* * *

But it is here, perhaps, that, having followed you to this point, I would separate myself from you in reproaching you, precisely, for having ceded to certain of the temptations and easy ways out that you so justly condemn in Aron.

Let us take up once again, for a moment, the problem of *the good and the bad subjectivity*, which is equivalent to that of *scientific theory and ideology*. What is the criterion that permits one to distinguish these two forms from one another? Does it suffice to say, as you do, that “the scientific object is always relative to an ordered mind,” to oppose an “*investigative* ego [to] a *pathetic* ego,” and to suppose the general theory justified solely by the intellectual virtue of its author?¹² Presumably not, since to an interlocutor who asked you how to distinguish myth from history – let us say, historical ideology from historical science – you responded by giving other reasons: “though the employment of the critical method, through verification, and through the control exerted on one historian by others.”¹³

I do not know what you understand by the word “*verification*,” which seems to me to be of the utmost importance. But, taking it rigorously, it forces us to critique your analysis on certain important points, and even the principle and the content of the question that you pose to history.

What distinguishes you from Aron is that you take seriously the *practice of the historian*. But, if here I may broaden this confrontation, what would distinguish you from a Marxist epistemologist is the view that *the practice of the historian contains within itself, and itself alone, the grounds of the objectivity and the scientificity of history*. It is symptomatic to see you “listen to the historian as he reflects on his craft, for he is the measure of the objectivity proper to history, just as his craft is the measure of the good and bad subjectivity implied by this objectivity.”¹⁴ And it is not only, presumably, the self-consciousness of the historian that you interrogate about itself, for it is often suspect, but his practice. *But that practice remains purely internal*. It bears on the criticism of documents, the establishment of “series,” the bringing up to date of theory. Let us say, so as to envision it in its broadest extension, that theory, too, is susceptible of an internal verification: the historian counts himself satisfied in

¹² “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” pp. 30-1.

¹³ See Paul Ricoeur, “Objectivité et subjectivité en histoire,” *Revue de l'enseignement philosophique* 3.5-6 (1953): 42. (The sentence does not appear in the version of the essay published two years later in *Histoire et vérité*.)

¹⁴ “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” p. 23.

the measure that he will have taken account, with the maximum of coherence, of the greatest possible number of phenomena. But I do not see, then, how to escape, in all rigor, from arguments of the nominalist type: if it is a matter only of internal coherence, why should not several theories be possible? Which gives us over to the sophistries of Aron, who opposes, tirelessly, to the idea of a scientific history the “plurality of systems of interpretation.” How is it possible, moreover, to avoid that consequence when one recognizes, as you yourself recognize, in regard to the “choice” that the historian effects between different “factors,” that is to say, in the end, between different theories, that “the rationality of history depends upon this judgment of importance – a judgment which lacks, however, a sure criterion”?¹⁵ How can you at one and the same time accept the principle of Aron’s critique and refuse its effects? It seems to me that this contradiction results at once *from your concern to defend the objectivity of history and from your purely internal conception of that objectivity*. I would like to show that there exists a fundamental contradiction between your objective and your conception, or rather between the sense of your demonstration and its philosophical presuppositions.

What, indeed, is the ultimate truth of that “historian’s craft” which is the ground of the objectivity of history? I do not think that I am being unfaithful to you in saying that it is, first, that practice of rationalization which you describe following Marc Bloch. But that practice itself is only the putting to work (and into works) of an “endeavor for objectivity,” itself animated by an “intention of objectivity,” which is its ultimate foundation. What makes history is “the choice of the historian, the choice of a certain knowledge, of a will to understand rationally [...]”¹⁶

I well understand that you conceive of this choice, with Husserl, not as an empirical, but as a transcendental one. I do not want to undertake here a critique of Husserl’s conception of the genesis of sciences: besides, you yourself have shown up its ambiguities and its formalism.¹⁷ And it is clear to see, certainly, that the transcendental character of this choice confers upon history a dignity that has precisely to preserve it against the encroachments of vulgar subjectivism and psychologism. But it is also clear to see that it can confer that dignity upon all historical works, whatever may be their economy. One sees only too often how that transcendental “intention of objectivity” can degenerate into a declaration of objectivity: what historian, or even pseudo-

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 25-6.

¹⁷ In your article “Husserl et le sens de l’histoire,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 54.3-4 (1949): 280-316. See Paul Ricoeur, “Husserl and the Sense of History,” in *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 143-74.

historian, does not make a claim to objectivity? In truth, even were we to follow Husserl on this point, we would see that he did not define Galilean physics by a mere “intention of objectivity,” but that he gave to that objectivity *a structure corresponding precisely to a general theory of the object of physics*: “that which can be determined mathematically.” That this definition is still formal, let us leave to one side. What matters here is that this definition translates, and thus recognizes, *the necessity of invoking the general theory of the object in order to characterize the objectivity of a determinate science*. Put differently, to define a science it does not suffice to invoke, as you do, an “intention of objectivity” and to find that intention at all of the levels of the operations that it animates. For at this level of interiority and formalism, we have not advanced the least bit further than Aron, who will readily grant us all of the “intentions of objectivity” in the world, so as to oppose them each against the other. It is necessary that a science be defined *in relation to the general theory of its object*. And it is on just this point that you run into trouble. For you have indeed defended the necessity of a general theory of the object and shown its legitimacy from the point of view of objectivity in general, but you have not given any “sure criterion” that would allow one to characterize that theory, which, nevertheless, is indispensable. And it is not, in fact, in the simple circle of his “craft” that the historian can find that criterion.

You see in what direction I am pulling you, I hope without violence. For on this point I would like, following your example, to invoke the precedent furnished by the sciences of nature. There one sees in operation the cycle of observation, abstraction, theory. But there is added to it another moment: that of experimentation, which is not solely the experiment conducted in the laboratory, but the daily conducted experiment that consists in the countless effects drawn from theoretical acquisitions. Here I would like to advance a scandalous thesis, in saying that *history, equally, can be a science only if it is experimental*.¹⁸ To that one will object, presumably, that in history one cannot repeat an experiment as one can in a laboratory, which supposes the old Aristotelian schema according to which there can be a science only of that which is repeated. But why could not a theory find its verification in a reality subject to transformation, *if the theory is precisely a theory of the transformation of reality*? It seems to me, for example, that Marxism, a general theory of the development of societies, contains within itself the exigency as well as the

¹⁸ May I recall that Aron, in order to oppose history to the sciences of nature,” invokes, in the last instance, the fact that “science of its own accord discriminates between true and false,” “because it has available a criterion, experimental verification” (*Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, pp. 123, 126). Whereas history in essence does not have available such a criterion. Whence its polemical character and the “plurality of theories.”

moment of submission to the practice of real history.¹⁹ When you say: “History makes the historian as much as the historian makes history,” we might agree with you if by history you did not mean that which the historian composes, rather than the living one – that to the necessity of which the historian is subject even as he makes it.²⁰ And yet it is indeed *this real history that effects the fundamental “critique,”* as much of the subjective intentions of individuals as of the general theories that account for the development of social formations. It is of that “critique of history by itself” that Marxism is at once the product and the theory. But I return, to conclude, to our point of departure: it is for having sought solely in the practice of the historian the foundation of objectivity, and for having reduced that practice to an empty “intention of objectivity,” that you have been unable to adduce any “sure criterion” to distinguish between ideology and scientific theory. How, then, can you defend yourself against the arguments of Aron? It seems to me that you are attacking him from a position that you have surrendered to him in advance.

* * *

It remains for me to show the ultimate effects of these concessions of principle: I have in mind your conception of the “proper” characteristics of historical objectivity, that objectivity which, in comparison to the objectivity of physics, is at once “incomplete” and “richer.” You develop that conception in the section devoted to the “subjectivity” of the historian. Is that an accident? You conclude that section by saying, “we have elucidated the *constitution* of historical objectivity as being the correlate of the subjectivity proper to the historian,” after having several times given the impression that the legitimate procedure was the opposite: “the objectivity proper to it [...], rather than subjectivity, must be our point of departure.”²¹ It seems to me that this “reversion” follows, as regards its principle, from the “circle” of your internal conception of objectivity. But then, not having defined objectivity at its true level, that of the specific theory and of verification, you are going to give to that – up to this point, empty – objectivity a set of transcendental determinations, which either pertain to immediate consciousness or else belong to history as problems. That is going to expose you to the senseless undertaking that I described at the beginning of this text, in showing Aron

¹⁹ The first conscious affirmation of this principle is contained in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Lenin and Stalin have constantly returned to this theme. It was, to cite only one example, that “critique” exercised by reality which led Lenin to correct Engels’ thesis on the possibility, for the proletariat, of taking power within the framework of bourgeois democracy. It was the “practice” of the 1905 Revolution that inspired his theory of the power of the “soviets.” The examples could be multiplied.

²⁰ “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 30.

comparing the empty idea of a science of history to a metaphysical object both fabricated out of whole cloth and *supposed to be known*.

I will not insist on the theme of the *judgment of importance*, the primary feature, as you see it, of the specific character of historical objectivity. It is necessary to choose which events are important. Granted. But every science knows this passage from phenomena to the essence, and you yourself have rightly said of physics that it “rectif[ies] [...] the first arrangement of appearances in perception [...]”²² Let us add, furthermore, that it is not a matter of choosing among phenomena immediately given, but of “thoroughly exploring the phenomena” and of arriving at their essence. Therefore, when you attribute to the “subjectivity proper to the historian” the transcendental category of the “judgment of importance,” you do not succeed in establishing an opposition between the “subjectivity proper to the historian” and the subjectivity proper to the physicist, but, on the contrary, you make evident another opposition: that of the scientific narrative (“the narrative is connected”) and of a “nature” of history (“that which actually took place is disconnected”), which for you has the sense, not of the immediate, but of the transcendental.²³

What you say about causality merits more attention, because there you defend, against the “precritical naiveté” of the historian “dependent in varying degrees upon a *popular conception of causality*,” the very theses of Raymond Aron.²⁴ It seems to me that in your argument several themes are mixed up that do not appertain to the same level. First, a critique of positivism. A necessary critique, but one has nonetheless to give a precise account of its principle. Then, the idea that the historian has to “unravel and put [his] causalities into order” (antecedent, slowly evolving forces, permanent structure), and you cite as an example Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean and Philip II, a work that “marks an important date, from the point of view of methodology.”²⁵ I cannot discuss on its own account the very questionable example of Braudel. I would like only to remark that the *positivist conception of causality, as well as Braudel’s, are closely linked to general theories bearing on the content of history* (the role of the economy, of ideology, of politics, etc. . . .); the fundamental scheme is dependent, ultimately, *on the theory*. Whether he be “naive” or not, “critical” or “precritical,” the historian always avails himself, so as to account for the evolution of societies, of categories fundamentally linked to a general theory. The history of the sciences makes that dependence patent. Therefore, when

²² Ibid., p. 22.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴ Loc. cit.

²⁵ Loc. cit.

you say that it is a matter of “distinguish[ing] different tiers of causality,” having in mind, presumably, Braudel’s Mediterranean pyramid, one can oppose to you another type of “raveling-unraveling,” which would link, dialectically and not mechanically, different spheres of activity in their development.²⁶ Here we remain within a domain that belongs to the order of epistemology; in this domain it is not the qualification “critical” but the reality of historical practice that decides among the theories and the schemes of determination that depend on it.

But from there you do not keep to the order of epistemology. In saying: “But this ordering will always remain precarious, for to arrange in a composite whole various causalities which are scarcely homogeneous and which have themselves been established and properly constituted by analysis raises a practically insoluble problem”;²⁷ in saying, later (and supposing that the text indeed translates your thinking, for in question is an oral response): “I will never say that what this objectivity in itself comprises are laws. History as it takes place comprises neither laws nor even facts. Facts and laws derive from the very elaboration of historical knowledge”;²⁸ in holding Marx, for that reason, to be “precritical” and methodologically “naive”;²⁹ in writing, at the conclusion of your “philosophical” meditation, that “the historian’s quandaries, caught as he is between the event-filled aspect and the structural aspect of history, between the great personages who make their appearance and the slowly progressing forces, or even the stable forms of the geographical environment,” have their basis in an “antinomy of historical time”³⁰ – in all of these judgments you manifestly depart from the epistemological order, and you recommence the very undertaking of Aron; you fall back and short of the level of what you call the “intention of objectivity”; you fall back into the sphere of “everyday subjectivity” of which you proclaim the “epoché” to be necessary,

²⁶ Loc. cit. I cannot help remarking that, in fact, you show a marked preference for Braudel’s schema over other schemas, and in particular over the Marxist schema. (Cf. your response to Vilar: “One must renounce the privilege of the infrastructure and acknowledge the perfectly circular character of that causality.”) I do not see how that choice can claim for itself the privileges of “critical” and transcendental lucidity. It is a choice in favor, not only of a type of causality, but also of the role of “geography,” of the economy, of politics, of ideology, and of their relations – in short, it is a choice in favor of a certain general theory of history, at once “economist” and “idealist,” by which you are manifestly seduced. But it is not that theory itself which furnishes the standard by which it can be judged.

²⁷ Loc. cit.

²⁸ “Objectivité et subjectivité en histoire,” cit. supra, p. 41. (These sentences do not appear in *Histoire et vérité*.)

²⁹ Loc. cit. (Likewise, Ricoeur scratched these remarks from the 1955 version of his text.)

³⁰ “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” p. 39.

but in adorning it with all of the prestige of the transcendental!³¹ In short, you *constitute*, outside of the field of science, the *truth* of the object of which science, precisely, pursues the *true knowledge*.

The same can be said of the remarks that you develop on the subject of the other “specific features” of historical objectivity: that the historian stands “at a distance” from the past of which he speaks; that the object of history is “a different man.”³² For, finally, this notorious “distance,” which is “one of the sources of the inexact and non-rigorous characteristic of history,” this distance in which “[h]istorical time [...] sets its own dissimulating work, its disparity, against the assimilative quality of the understanding [...] wherein we have recognized, since the time of Plotinus, the irreducible phenomenon of self-alienation, of drawing out, of distension, in a word, of original ‘otherness’ ”³³ – this distance is a transcendental category only for those who hold that history is the resurrection, or the “emotional coinciding,” that you have done so well to put in its place!³⁴ For the historian it is nothing outside of the very problems that he poses, problems which are problems of language (such as you say are “necessarily *equivocal*” because necessarily historical!³⁵) only in the measure that they are problems of scientific terminology, problems that concern the determination of reality: it is a matter of knowing whether the same concept indeed comprehends the same reality. Can one speak of “imperialism” in regard to the Greek city-states, in the exact sense in which Lenin speaks of imperialism? Can one speak *unequivocally* of the bourgeoisie from the sixteenth on through the twentieth century? Of the same Christianity for the primitive Church and for the Church of the Middle Ages? But have you yourself not written: “the consciousness of an era, which the historian tries to reconstruct within his most far-reaching syntheses, is nourished by all the interactions and varied relations he has won through analysis”?³⁶ Where, then, is that “distance”? Is it an *a priori* of historical knowledge? Or, on the contrary, as you show, is it not to be found at the end of the historical work, not as what is immediately given in perception, nor as a transcendental category, but as the result of historical knowledge?

As to that “cross” – alas, religious indeed – that a millenarian tradition forces the philosopher to bear, that “decisive feature,” “that specific distance which stems from the fact that the other is a different man,” that specificity

³¹ Ibid., p. 31.

³² Ibid., p. 28.

³³ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

which makes history “an extension into another subjectivity”³⁷ – I can see that you are in an awkward position indeed, in having to demonstrate as much after you have condemned the resurrection of the dead and emotional coinciding. You say that, “since we are unable to relive what they lived,” the “only way of evoking man that is open to us” is to make “the values of past men surge forth.”³⁸ I very much fear that these values are for you a means of consolation. For how are they accessible to you? I do not think that they are given to you *directly*. It is the labor of history that gives an account of them, and access to them is not possible except by way of the scientific abstraction that casts light on the monuments to them that remain. Likewise, in what sense can that “decisive feature” (that human beings are the object of history) ever be a revelation for the historian? In what sense can that “distance” constitute a transcendental dimension of historical objectivity?³⁹ Either it is a matter merely of stating a truism: the historian knows perfectly well that it is human beings who make history, and he proposes precisely to show how they undergo the history that they make; or else, and this is of greater consequence, but by no means scientific, it is a matter of proposing that the “extension into another subjectivity” is the end of history, which, I believe, is meaningless for the historian, though it may have a sense for the philosopher of history, concerned as he is to revivify values or the thought of a master. Do you not show as much in the final section of your lecture, in regard to the history of philosophy? Or, finally, it is a matter of opposing to the objectivity to which history has actually attained an inexhaustible human nature, a freedom of which the effects cannot be foreseen, which refutes in advance any claim on the part of history to objectivity.

It is on the subject of this misunderstanding that I would like to conclude. I am leaving to one side the final section of your text, but it is also of its presuppositions that I am going to speak. For there is good reason to wonder whether the philosophical grounds of your disavowal of Aron are not themselves disavowed by your fundamental philosophical positions. What distinguished you at first from Aron was your defense of the objectivity and the rationality of history. But you have found the ground of that objectivity, beyond its methodological content, only in an “intention of objectivity” suspended in some sense from itself, from the “choice” that is proper to it.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 28-9.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁹ I do not see how you can escape, by means of that argument and the use that you make of it, the temptation of taking up, or the risk of committing your reader to taking up, the well-worn theme of the radical distinction between the sciences of nature, which can be sciences because they bear on nature, and the sciences of “man,” which cannot truly be sciences because their object is man, the very opposite of an object, etc. . . .

Granted, you have enumerated the operations of rationalization that the historian effects. But you have considered them internally, without showing their fundamental relation to the very content of the general theory and the “critical” reality of history. Having stripped the object of its actual content, you have attributed to it a content that you have elaborated outside of the domain in which the scientific truth of history is constituted. And it is ultimately this content (a mixture of “immediate truths” and philosophical concepts) that you have made into the judge of scientific objectivity, on the pretext of specifying its distinctive characteristics. It is clear to see that, in thus constituting the “subjectivity” and the objectivity of history, you were preparing a transition, naturally, toward that “high level of subjectivity” which is “properly philosophical,” and which dominates the final section of your text.⁴⁰ It is clear to see that you have taken history seriously (for you credit its reality, and you have shown as much at other encounters than that at Sèvres), but you have taken seriously only that in it which was necessary to guide it, the moment having arrived, toward its completion: a philosophy of history. I confess, therefore, that I was unable to read without irony (I am speaking of course of a historical irony) the reproach of “precritical naiveté” that you address to certain of your Marxist interlocutors. For, if I have understood Kant, or what is best in his teaching, is not the “naive,” the “precritical” philosopher the one who constitutes, outside of the very conditions of objective knowledge, a truth, a thing in itself, that he substitutes for actual knowledge?

I would like to justify these too critical remarks by elucidating them from another, more general point of view. It seems to me, indeed, that the best minds today, when they reflect on history, and, I would add, even when they reflect on the sciences of nature, do not escape a misunderstanding concerning the actual function of scientific knowledge.

I see the source of this misunderstanding in a contemplative attitude, which “awaits” from science a sort of reproduction, re-animation, re-presentation, or rather re-presentification, of the real itself in its immediacy. When it is shown to us that history, in varying degrees, is incapable of restituting to us the “authentic” past, the singular flavor of an event, like the madeleine on Proust’s tongue, or the future in the doubtful combat of an uncertain present; when it is shown to us that history is unfaithful, “distanced,” and by nature denaturing, that in its laws and its categories it betrays the immediate experience of the freedom, the contingency, and the will of the human being; when to the laws of history one opposes history as it is lived, it

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

seems to me that we are doubly abused, both as regards the aim that a science affords itself and as regards the actual function of that science.⁴¹

I am indeed speaking of science in general, and not only of the science of history or the human sciences. For, in listening to the commentary on these antinomies of history, one cannot help thinking of those Cartesians who did not for the life of them know what to do with the gift of a *second sun* that the astronomers had given them. How was one to bring into agreement the sun of the farmer and the sun of the astronomer? *One had one sun too many.* That of science. And one was incapable of chasing away the image of the other one, of “making it be seen” otherwise than at “a distance of two hundred feet.” What a quandary! All the God in the world could not have gotten them out of it. In truth, there was one sun too many only for those who were nostalgic for perception, who were afraid that, by believing in the other sun, they would lose their sun at a distance of two hundred feet, and who thus awaited from the astronomer a re-creation of the sun itself; who did not see, if I may put it thus, that this second sun neither replaced nor did away with the first, but, removed as it was, made it possible to have a knowledge of the immediately perceived sun and to act upon its effects. There was not one sun too many for the astronomers, the physicists, and the whole active breed of “masters and possessors of nature”! Today as then, what one *more or less consciously* opposes and proposes to history is the same absurd task of producing a second sun that would be the brother and the double of the first, of producing, by one knows not what miracle, a second history in which the immediacy of history would be resuscitated, alive, present. . . . And because, obviously, one does not rediscover that first history in the science of history, one holds that against it. One reproaches (*more or less consciously*) the science of history for not being history in its immediacy, for not being history as it is “lived,” the history of “man,” of “freedom.” *More than that*, one reproaches it for *preventing* one from seeing the sun at a distance of two hundred feet, I mean for preventing human beings from being free, for preventing life from being lived in its “contingency,” for preventing art from being savored as an aesthetic object – in short, one reproaches the science of history for threatening to deprive human beings of the charms or the dramas of immediate life, for the reason that it grasps its necessity and its laws.

How is one not to see, at the basis of that argument, a misrecognition of the *specific level* at which every science is established, and at the same time a nostalgia for a sort of absolute knowledge or resurrection of bodies? As little as

⁴¹ How else is one to interpret your intervention? “History as it takes place comprises neither laws nor even facts. Facts and laws derives from the very elaboration of historical knowledge.”

the knowledge of the laws of light has ever prevented human beings from seeing, and even from seeing the sun as though at a distance of two hundred feet, or replaced or threatened their simple gaze, just as little does the knowledge of the laws that preside over the development of societies prevent human beings from living; just as little does it take the place of work, of love, and of struggle. On the contrary: the knowledge of the laws of light has produced eyeglasses, which have transformed the gaze of men, just as the knowledge of the laws of society has produced undertakings that have transformed and broadened the horizons and the existence of the human being.

The antinomy of history-as-science and history-as-lived ceases when one ceases to “await” from science anything other than what it gives. It ceases when one has a conception of the *level* at which scientific truths are established; it ceases when one has a conception of the *practical purpose* of science, which departs from immediacy and rises to the level of generality, of laws, only so as to return to the concrete, not as the double of immediacy, but as the effective knowledge of it. It seems to me that that is what Marx meant when he reproached Feuerbach for having conceived of “reality [...] only in the form [...] of contemplation” (a form forever haunted by the nostalgia for an “*intuitus originarius*”), instead of conceiving of it as a “practice” of which science is only a moment: that of *truth*.⁴²

Translated by Charles Gelman

⁴² *Theses on Feuerbach*, I.