Real History

Reflections on Historical Practice

Martin Bunzl

REAL HISTORY

In *Real History: Reflections on Historical Practice,* Martin Bunzl charts a new direction for the philosophy of history. He proposes a synthesis between debates about objectivity among historians and recent philosophical arguments about realism. In his clear and direct style, Bunzl argues for an approach to history based on what historians actually do in contrast to what they say they are doing. Drawing on a broad literature including the works of Foucault, Geertz, Novick, Danto and Scott, the result is a new and exciting model for philosophy of history that casts objectivity and realism in a new light.

Martin Bunzl merges two parallel debates in history and philosophy. In his wide-ranging argument, he draws on relevant discussions ranging from: post-structuralism; to the philosophy of science; to the hermeneutic turn in anthropology; to debates about the history of women.

Real History is fascinating and essential reading for all those interested in a reconciliation of the debates about the methodology and study of the philosophy of history.

Martin Bunzl is a Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University. He is also the author of *The Context of Explanation*.

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I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience....

Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*

For Deborah

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Finally, I should note that the title of this book takes its inspiration from *Real People* by Kathy Wilkes (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988)—readers of that fine book will readily see how my strategy here about history has been influenced by her work.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of history has to contend with philosophies of history that exist in two different worlds. One is inhabited by philosophers, the other by historians. Workers in these different worlds rarely attend to the work of each other, despite overlapping interests. Nowhere is this more true than in questions surrounding what philosophers call realism and what historians call objectivity. The sorry tale of philosophers' irrelevance is documented in Peter Novick's study of the history of debates about objectivism between historians in the United States over the last one hundred years.[1]

In this book I attempt to construct a synthesis between these traditions. Such a synthesis can be bruited with two different levels of ambition. At the narrow level we can try to integrate the philosophy of history as written by philosophers and by historians. But trying to do so in this way produces an artifact that hangs in isolation both from other areas of philosophy and, more importantly, from historical practice as well. Attempting a synthesis of the traditions within these broader contexts is much more interesting. And that is what I aim to do. But in doing so, I restrict myself to what historians call "The Objectivity Question."[2]

Novick nicely summarizes a consensus position among historians about how to think of objectivity, including its assumptions:

> The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are "found," not "made." Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different

> significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.[3]

The philosophical sentiments that underlie these views are not much in fashion in current historiographic writing, which is firmly anti-realist under the influence of post-structuralism.[4] Yet they form the core of this book. My aim is not a defense of these philosophical sentiments but a re-examination—a re-examination that proceeds against the background of historical practice. My thesis is rather modest. It is this: it is hard not to be an "objectivist" in practice. But the kind of objectivist you end up being does not embrace all of the aspects of objectivity in the quotation above. Separating the wheat from the chaff is the intellectual work of this project.

For the past twenty years the philosophy of history (as written by philosophers) has become largely disengaged from the central concerns of the philosophy of science and the philosophy of language. Yet in both the philosophy of science and the philosophy of language one finds striking parallels to some of the Parisian influence on recent work by historians writing in the philosophy of history. Non-philosophers often think of analytic philosophy and positivism as being synonymous. Yet within (mainline) analytic philosophy positivism was overthrown as the dominant philosophy more than forty years ago, and, long before Rorty, it was reasonable to characterize a (if not the) dominant view of Anglo-American philosophy as being composed of three tenets: holism as a theory of meaning, coherentism as a theory of truth and (more recently) anti-realism as a view of metaphysics.[5] Furthermore, as in the case of post-structuralists, these positions derive directly from considerations of language.

If one begins to construct a philosophy of history based on these views, the road runs nearly parallel to the French highway. In fact, in crucial respects, I think both roads run parallel. As such, criticisms of one program ought to apply to the other. Accordingly, recent *challenges* to the dominance of the post-war program in analytic philosophy may be of value in the debate about the philosophy of history. In particular, there is a movement in analytic philosophy of science which is anti-theoretical, to the extent that it urges against imposing on science any particular view with regard to ontology "from the outside."[6] The upshot of this view is not that history has no ontological commitments—they are legion. But we should examine them by working from the inside out. A consequence of this view is that such an analysis may yield quite heterogeneous results depending on the particular historiographical context. Hayden White would have it that all history has within it an implicit philosophy of history.[7] I think that we have to worry that the practice of history may underdetermine the philosophy of history. That is to say, we have to worry that practice may not be capable of providing the brute data to decide between competing philosophies.

Nonetheless, I think that the practice of history does allow us to decide some competing claims—if not between whole philosophies.

If we were to accept Novick's characterization of historical objectivity as a starting point, we could examine counterpositions by defining them by what it is about historical objectivity that they reject. But there are reasons not to accept Novick's view—even if it is descriptively accurate as an account of the concept of objectivity as historians have used the term.

One of the great virtues of *That Noble Dream* is Novick's account of the "Rankean" dictum that the aim of the historian should be to capture the past as it actually was.[8] I refer to the dictum as "Rankean" rather than Rankean deliberately. For, as Novick's account documents, the Americanization of Ranke's views transformed them by stripping away their Hegelian underpinnings.[9] In *That Noble Dream,* Novick provides us with a history of how "Ranke's epistemology was naturalized into an English empiricist idiom."[10] The result is a presentation of how American historians have conceived of the notion of objectivity. Novick's treatment of how this conception has been used within the American historical profession is exhaustive,[11] and against the backdrop of that exhaustiveness it becomes all the more obvious just how little *philosophical* aspects of the question of objectivity in history have played a role in the last one hundred years of the profession. Not only have philosophers been irrelevant but so has philosophy. For what Novick's history makes so clear is the way in which a conception of historical objectivity has provided a stalking horse for a variety of other issues, among which one was paramount.

The sweep of *That Noble Dream* provides an opportunity to see the use of the canon of objectivity against a variety of alleged counter-conceptions—including the conception of history as informed by moral judgments and the conception of history as informed by political interests. But the real driving force that gives unity to Novick's construal of this history is the relationship between objectivity and the aspiration to achieve univocality in the claims of scholarship, and, perhaps not surprisingly, as Novick's account makes clear, that aspiration derived from something less pure than a philosophical interest. The drive for historians to speak of the past with one voice was a powerful tool in the nineteenth-century movement of professionalization. It also became a central pillar of the rhetoric used in the attempt to resist the increasing heterogeneity of the profession in the middle of the twentieth century. But, notwithstanding this central interest, one of the philosophical opportunities provided by Novick's work is his treatment of the status of historical facts.[12]

Both Beard and Becker are often thought of as the pre-eminent *American* anti-realists of the first part of this century.[13] It is to Becker that Novick (correctly) attributes the position that "No historical synthesis could be 'true' except 'relative to the age which fashioned it'."[14] And, in general, Novick's thesis is that

it is correct to attribute relativism to both Becker and Beard. But it is important to notice just how circumscribed this relativism was intended to be. To do so we need to distinguish between relativism about facts and relativism about grander historical constructs. Novick writes that:

> there were no professional American historians, unguarded and casual remarks aside, who denied that at least singular factual statements about the past could be "true" for practical purposes. There was, however, considerable "skepticism" about the likelihood, or possibility, of creating a cumulative, convergent, "corresponding" picture of significant events and epochs of the past.[15]

For both Becker and Beard the facts in themselves were not in question on Novick's account[16]—nor the empirical method as the route to those facts. The "problems" arose only if one moved beyond the facts—to synthesis; and Becker and Beard counted themselves among those who argued that such history was the only history to be had.[17]

What gave "the facts" this privileged status and insulated them from the force of relativism? The most plausible contemporaneous philosophical reason to question the status of facts about the past would have been based on positivist considerations: such facts are not observable. But Becker and Beard were not driven primarily by philosophical considerations. Their concerns were much more attuned to purely internal debates about the function and role of history and its relationship to presentist interests, and to the extent that they *were* influenced by wider methodological issues of their time, it was pragmatism not positivism to which they were drawn.[18] (As Don Kelly has pointed out,[19] the philosophical underdevelopment of this American debate ought to be contrasted with what was a contemporaneous debate in Germany. If there is one thing that offers a key to the difference, it is the pervasive influence of neo-Kantianism, in all of its variants, that formed a background to the German debate.)

As long as you allow for the realist status of facts, then the case for anti-realism rests at minimum on making the argument that history cannot be composed of just such facts. And while Novick is perfectly aware that one can attack such a conception of facts, his reconstruction of debates about realism within the profession rests heavily on the idea that such debates left the status of facts themselves undisturbed. For all the confusion in the positions of both Becker and Beard that Novick points to, I think it is fair to say that Beard thought a history of just the facts was not just uninteresting but in fact impossible. Beard thought so because he embraced the idea that, even though history includes facts, it also involves an ineliminable *contemporary* component in the organization and selection of "the facts":

> It [history] is, as Croce says, contemporary thought about the past. History as past actuality includes, to be sure, all that has been done, said, felt, and thought by human beings on this planet since humanity began its long career. History as record embraces the monuments, documents, and symbols which provide such knowledge as we have or can find respecting past actuality. But it is history as thought, not as actuality, record, or specific knowledge, that is really meant when the term is used in its widest and most general significance.[20]

While for Becker:

> The facts of history are already set forth, implicitly, in the sources; and the historian who could restate without reshaping them would, by submerging and suffocating the mind in diffuse existence, accomplish the superfluous task of depriving human experience of all significance. Left to themselves, the facts do not speak; left to themselves they do not exist, not really, since for all *practical* purposes, there is no fact until some one affirms it.[21]

However we cash in the details behind the idea of "significance" in both of these passages, the core, familiar idea is of course that there is no history without interpretation, and it is with interpretation that anti-realism comes into the picture. The debate, as it were, does not get going until we reach interpretation. Now, in principle, the realist has two options: to argue for history without interpretation or to argue for a realist interpretation of interpretation. But, on Novick's account, it is only the first of these two options that gets seriously pursued. As such, the objectivity question becomes equivalent to the question of the eliminability of interpretation in history.

But we pay a high price for allowing this collapse of the question of objectivity into the question of interpretation. The philosophical difficulties with this way of forming up the debate are two-fold. On the one hand, *if* facts are accorded an unproblematic status, then it is not obvious, *prima facie,* that interpretation (or at least some kinds of interpretation) cannot be given the same status. That is to say, it is not obvious that the "standard" view of facts is not robust enough to support a very minimal account of interpretation—minimal enough to be compatible with a realist view of history. On the other hand, if facts are *not* accorded an unproblematic status, then of course the debate about realism will be engaged right away, and, as we will see, there are both philosophers and historians who have done just this. But beyond the philosophical, we pay an historical price as well; it is just not clear that cutting the world into the factual and the interpretative can do justice to the enterprise

of understanding the past—including past historiography. For to do so forces us to see historians with interpretative interests as anti-objectivists. To avoid this we first need to disentangle the question of objectivity from the question of interpretation. That task takes up the next chapter. Once we have done that, we can turn back to history.