

THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY: AN INQUIRY VIA ALTHUSSER*

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For Geoffrey Waite and my students

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In April 1997 the Society of Architectural Historians, which can be seen as the sentinel of institutionalized knowledge in relation to architectural history in North America, held its fiftieth annual meeting in Baltimore. This time, in contradistinction to the other meetings of the society, to the historic Lord Baltimore Hotel of the 'Post-Modern' downtown Baltimore, where the meeting was held, there was an influx of young people with quite unorthodox approaches to history together with figures such as Mark Wigley, Beatriz Colomina, and Anthony Vidler who are 'notoriously' known as theory buffs rather than conventional historians. Moreover, one of the most attended sessions of the meeting turned out to be the one with the title 'Confronting the Canon: Teaching Architectural History', which broached questions about both the content and the methodologies of canonized teachings of architectural history. The issue was to propound critical ways of going beyond the institutionalized body of knowledge and methodologies that came to be taken as the essential substance of architectural history, which are now thought to be in need of at least some revisions, if not abolition. Actually the very surfacing of such a debate under the auspices of the Society of Architectural Historians is a symptom of something deeper and going on for the last couple of decades not only in architectural history, or history for that matter, but in the humanities in general.

Due to the recent explorations in Western intellectual circles (here I am particularly thinking of French Post-Structuralism, various feminisms, and the anti-Orientalist attack initiated by Edward Said among others), something which I would call an epistemological shift had taken place, which changed the attitude toward 'knowledge' and its production processes. One common point of the above-mentioned, admittedly diverse, positions is an insistence on the idea of 'knowledges', including the ones which were regarded as universally valid, being produced from the perspectives of certain subject positions, and very often from that of the white European male. This belief led into a distrust toward the ways of producing knowledge which were used to be regarded as neutral. And indeed there are striking accusations against certain established bodies of knowledge which are regarded almost as commonsensical by now. For instance, Martin Bernal, in his colossal book *Black Athena* of 1987, claimed that the Afroasiatic roots of the ancient Greek civilization had been systematically suppressed by North European scholars. According to Bernal, in the nineteenth century a version of Greek history, which he calls the Aryan model, that did not exist until then and still more or less shapes the general view about the genesis of the ancient Greek civilization, had been developed. This model explains the Greek civilization as 'the result of the mixture of the Indo-European-speaking Hellenes and their indigenous subjects' after an invasion from the North which is thought to have overwhelmed the local 'Aegean' or 'Pre-Hellenic' culture (Bernal, 1991). *Vis-à-vis* this position which essentially sees Greece as European, Bernal proposes to go back to the ancient model that he claims was also the conventional view among the Greeks themselves in the Classical and Hellenistic ages and which situated Greece basically in the Levant, on the periphery of the Egyptian and Semitic cultural area. This model would explain the emergence of the Greek culture as the result of colonization around second millennium B.C. by the Egyptians and the Phoenicians who had civilized the native inhabitants and would acknowledge the Greeks' considerable borrowings from Eastern Mediterranean cultures.

By the same token, Edward Said, in his ground breaking book *Orientalism* of 1978, suggests that in the West, in time, a certain imaginary representation of 'non-west' has been developed under the name 'Orient' which has been constructed radically as other than the 'Occident', *i.e.*, mysterious, unchanging and ultimately inferior to the West, in order to systematically undermine and dominate certain geographies, particularly the Islamic Near East. And furthermore, according to Said, this discourse has been disseminated not solely through fiction writers or 'dandy' travellers but formal academic disciplines and institutions, as well.

Even though it is perfectly probable not to agree with each and every detail of these revisionist attempts, it is not possible to deny the fact that they are raising important questions about the nature and information-gathering strategies of institutionalized bodies of knowledge as well as the neutrality of some of their procedures. This is exactly what Jacques Derrida is targeting in his 'Restitutions' where he masterfully problematizes the simple-minded positions in relation to neutrality and objectivity of the academic scholar, in this case the eminent art historian Meyer Schapiro (Derrida, 1987).

Schapiro claims to collapse Heidegger's argument in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' since Heidegger misattributes the boots in Vincent Van Gogh's 'Old Shoes with Laces' to a peasant woman, around which he weaves his mythos of 'the folk'. In the essay 'The Still Life as a Personal Object', Schapiro maintains that the boots actually do belong to a city dweller rather than a peasant and even to Van Gogh himself. Derrida, however, with a virtuoso performance not only disrupts

the whole debate by raising the possibility of the boots' not being a pair, but also suggests that Schapiro, who was seemingly 'restituting the boots to their owner', i.e., to the city dweller and to Van Gogh, actually was paying his homage to his deceased friend Kurt Goldstein to whom Schapiro's essay was dedicated and who as a Jew much suffered in the hands of the Nazis before he fled from Germany in the thirties. Derrida suggests that Schapiro's seemingly scholarly stand against Heidegger is very much shaped by his desire to undermine Heidegger's folkic mythos that he associates with the Nazi ideology.

I have mentioned these examples in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of skepticism in the humanities today: it is no longer possible to deny or dismiss it as a Post-Modern fad. It led to crises in many of the academically sanctioned disciplines due to the questioning of the basic assumptions and premises on which these disciplines are founded. And of course history, among others, took its share, as well. I think at this juncture it is crucial not to overlook a fine nuance: While it is not possible, as some would do, to cling to a position prior to all these developments and go on with the business-as-usual, it is also not productive and far too yielding for a sufficiently rigorous intellectual stand to deny the possibility of the production of any historical knowledge, as some extreme Post-Modern currents do. In order to be able to go beyond singular cases and 'micro history', which is the dominant practice now, and to be able to see the larger *tableaus* by avoiding the abyss of relativism, what is needed is to develop new ways of producing valid historical knowledge. I should also add that, as we will later see, the validity of such knowledge will come from its explanatory power rather than its being a total and exact portrayal of reality, a position not possible to hold on to anymore.

What is necessary now is to diagnose the problem and decipher some concepts that we take for granted, such as 'objectivity', 'reality', 'history', and 'historical knowledge'. First the diagnosis: The problem of subjectivity that I have brought up earlier as the basis for the rejection of any supra-subjective and general historical knowledge can be laid down in terms of some psychoanalytic concepts such as 'transference', 'working through', and 'acting out'.

Transference which in its general psychoanalytic sense means 'any displacement of an affect from one object to another, specifically the displacement of affect toward the parent, to the analyst' is innovatively applied to the realm of history-writing by the Intellectual Historian Dominick LaCapra (Chaplin, 1978). LaCapra (1985) maintains:

One problem is the transferential relation between practices in the past and historical accounts of them. I use 'transference' in the modified psychoanalytic sense of a repetition-displacement of past into the present as it necessarily bears on the future. 'Transference' is bound up with a notion of time not as simple continuity or discontinuity but as repetition with variation or change, at times traumatically disruptive change. Transference causes fear of possession by the past and loss of control over both it and oneself. It simultaneously brings the temptation to assert full control over the 'object' of study through ideologically suspect procedures that may be related to the phenomenon Freud discussed as narcissism.

According to LaCapra, narcissism, which involves the impossible, imaginary attempt of totally integrating the self and trying to elaborate a fully unified perspective, is an alluring response to the anxiety of transference. For the historian this means to assume that the past is totally transparent to her/his and s-he is in total control of her/his production. In psychoanalytic terms this is called 'acting out' that is carrying into action the repressed impulses, which are brought

to conscious level in the course of analysis. The historian may attempt to give the impression of mastery by totally identifying the past with her/his own 'self' or 'culture'. Yet, LaCapra warns us that transference is as much denied by an assertion of the total difference of the past from the present of the historian by its total identification. The important thing is to be aware of the transferential displacement: The considerations at issue in the object of study are always repeated with variations, or find the displaced analogues in one's account of it. That is, the historical account of something is not an exact replica of the past; it is an analogue and always a certain degree of displacement is at issue in the account of the historian. Accordingly, what is to be done is not to suppress this 'problem' but try to 'work through', that is, to be engaged in the ultimately impossible task of mastering the conflicts arising from the transferential displacement and to inscribe this struggle within the historical account itself, hence making it self-conscious.

A somewhat different but related position is that of Louis Althusser's. Against naive 'empiricism' which would hold that knowledge is the abstraction of the essence of the object to be known by the subject to know, Althusser talks about a distinction between the real object 'which survives in its independence, after as before, outside the head' and the object of knowledge, [which is] a product of the thought . . . [that is] a thought-object, absolutely distinct from the real-object, . . . [the] knowledge of which is obtained precisely by the thought-concrete' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970).

Althusser claims that this distinction involves not only those two objects, but also their respective production processes. According to Althusser,

While the production process of a given real object (*e.g.*, a given historical nation), takes place entirely in the real and is carried out according to the real order of real genesis . . . the production process of the object of knowledge **takes place entirely in knowledge** and is carried out according to a different order, in which the thought categories which 'reproduce' the real categories do not occupy the same place as they do in the order of real historical genesis, but quite different places assigned them by their function in the production process of the object of knowledge (author's emphasis).

What Althusser brings with this notion of two different objects, 'the real' and 'the thought one', which do not occupy the same place and are the products of two different processes, can be seen as complementary to the concept of transferential displacement between the real past processes and the historian's account of them. The 'real' historical flow is not the same with the historical account of it which is a product of thought that operates within a different order than the real historical process. In other words, the first step toward the production of valid historical knowledge is to refrain from equating the above mentioned objects and processes. We write history through abstraction. It depends on concepts; it is not simple observation. History is not an absolute out there, waiting to be captured by the historian through her/his data collecting activity. The facts, the data, do not speak, cannot speak by themselves. There is always a mediator, an agent, the historian. And as we have seen, the historian inevitably speaks from a certain subject position which may involve some biases that should be 'worked through'. One way of working through can be indexing those conflicts, inconsistencies, and discontinuities arising from the subject position of the historian together with the terms and conditions of the production of historical knowledge within the produced knowledge itself.

Now the question is how to achieve this, how to go from the acceptance of the transferential relation and the distinction between 'the thought object' and 'the real object' to the ways of producing valid historical knowledge. In order to be able to disclose the conditions of the knowledge production what is needed is to know the medium, the theoretical and epistemological frame within which that knowledge is produced.

At this point I have to agree with Althusser who claims that 'history [as a discipline] lives in the illusion that it can do without theory in the strong sense, without a theory of its object and therefore without a definition of its theoretical object'. According to Althusser,

What acts as its theory is its methodology, *i.e.*, the rules that govern its effective practices, practices centered around the scrutiny of documents and the establishment of facts. . . . History therefore [adds Althusser] takes its methodology for the theory it lacks, and it takes the 'concrete' of the concrete obviousnesses of ideological time for its theoretical object. This dual confusion is typical of an empiricist ideology. What history lacks is a conscious and courageous confrontation of one of the essential problems of any science whatsoever: the problem of the nature and constitution of its theory, by which I mean the theory within the science itself, the system of theoretical concepts on which is based every method and every practice, even the experimental method and practice and which simultaneously defines its theoretical object (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 109).

What Althusser means is the necessity for the discipline of history to generate its own concepts, to expose its immanent assumptions and to develop the mechanism through which historical knowledge will be produced. Here at this point, as Peter Schöttler has stated, an analogy can be drawn between Lucien Febvre's, the *Annales* historian, and Althusser's conceptualizations of history. Schöttler tells us that for Febvre only a history which formulates problems can account for historical reality, not compiling or narrating the 'facts' that seem to come to the historian on their own accord (1). Historian should consciously prepare a research object, he must first of all 'manufacture'. This is Febvre in his enigmatically titled *Combats for History*:

At that time historians lived in a puerile and pious respect for the 'facts.' They had the naive and touching conviction that the scientist was a man who, putting his eye to his microscope, at once perceived a pile of facts. Facts given to him, facts manufactured for him by an indulgent Providence, facts which he had only to record. It would have been enough for one of these doctors in method to put his eye to the lens of a microscope, however briefly, and to observe a histological preparation, for him to perceive at once that it was not a question of the histologist observing, but interpreting what must indeed be designated an abstraction. Five minutes, and he would have assessed, in the scientist's appropriation of what he had first of all prepared at length and with difficulty, in accordance with a preconceived idea, the personal contribution of the man, of the researcher who only acts because he has posed a problem and formulated a hypothesis. . . . Without preliminary theory, without preconceived theory, no possible scientific work (2).

So, what can be these theories, theoretical concepts leading to a valid and self-conscious history-writing? The starting point should most probably be the notorious issue of causality, that is, the problem of 'how to explain movement in history', 'how to envisage the mechanism of forces which constitute the impetus behind the historical process', in other words, 'where to locate causes as well as the effects'.

1. The French school of history which came to be known as the 'Annales' grew out of the periodical 'Annales d'Histoire économique et Sociale' launched by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929 and promulgated a symbiosis of history and the social sciences.

2. Lucien Febvre, 'Combats pour l'Histoire' (Paris, 1953) 22ff., cited by Schöttler, 1993, 86-87.

Traditionally there were two ways of constructing the mechanism of causality, or in Althusser's words 'effectivity'. The first type, which he names as transitive, is by far the most pervasive practice in conventional histories; that is, to construct a linear account of consecutive incidents in time, one leading to the other. Here I am thinking of history text books where history is 'made' through the deeds of great men and wars without any interference from other realms of social totality. This is not to say that these histories are consciously based on a certain type of causality, rather they are the products of a confusion that I have tried to point out earlier, the confusion of the thought object of historical knowledge with that of the real historical process. This, of course, is a simple-minded attitude which reduces the effectivity of the whole social totality, which is indeed a very complex structure, to the effectivity of one of its elements, that is, to the effectivity of one single social sphere. Given the fact that 'reality' is far too complex and different social spheres, or instances in Althusser's words, are quite interdependent, or overdetermined if you like, it is necessary to view social totality as a whole in order to grasp the historical process.

Here another danger shows itself, that is, to envisage simple, deterministic relations between different spheres of social totality, to assume that each sphere is a microcosm of the whole. This is what Althusser calls 'expressive causality' and which he traces particularly in Hegel's thought. For this type of causality he claims:

[I]t presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an inner essence, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: such and such an element (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = the inner essence of the whole. Here was a model which made it possible to think the effectivity of the whole on each of its elements, but if this category, inner essence/outer phenomenon, was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in question, it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a 'spiritual' whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a 'pars totalis' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 186-187; Althusser's emphasis).

While Althusser's target is mainly economic reflectionism which dominated Marxism for quite a while, examples of reflectionism, that is, instances of conflating different spheres of social totality can be seen in many contextualist and socially concerned art histories, as well. In contradistinction to these two types of causalities which cannot fulfill the difficult task of representing the complexity of 'reality', Althusser develops a third type -structural causality. This starts from the idea of social totality, or social formation in Althusser's words, as a complex, hierarchical and de-centered structure, and history is seen as the structural process of the evolution of these complex formations or societies. Social formations are complex structures different spheres of which are reflections of neither each other nor the total structure as a whole, as they are in the case of expressive causality. While different social spheres or instances are interdependent, determining the other instances and determined by them at the same time, they retain a certain degree of autonomy.

The concept of relative autonomy is a crucial one as it enables one to view different social instances and practices against the larger *tableau* of social totality, while avoiding to mislocate the dynamics behind those in other instances, as done in the case of explaining aesthetic phenomena solely on the basis of economy. We may say that in principle aesthetic practice is related to economic practice, but it is not determined solely by it, as vulgar economic explanations would have it.

One of the significant issues from the perspective of history-writing is the nature of the structure Althusser propounds. He claims:

[T]he effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to **imprint its mark**: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects . . . that **the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects**, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 188-189; Althusser's emphasis).

He locates the causes within the very structure where the effects are displaced, providing a new path for history-writing -the possibility of taking a cross-section of a certain 'social formation' at a given time and looking at any unfolding *vis-à-vis* other practices and contradictory relations within that 'social formation' rather than tracing a linear chain of causes back in time. Althusserian structure has no origin, no beginning or end as is the case in the Hegelian one: the structure which is **in** its effects is also ever-pre-given (*tojour-deja-donné*). That allows one to locate the causation mechanism within the structure itself at each determinate moment and enables Althusser to maintain that 'in the last instance economy determines' without falling into the trap of economism, as the last instance never comes if the structure is ever-pre-given.

There are two immediate implications of all these formulations: first, 'time' in historical accounts cannot be a linear flow which is thought to reflect the 'real' linear historical process as the causes are synchronous with the effects, they are not outside or prior to the effects. Accordingly, historical time, that is the time in historical accounts, is something that should be constructed. We should be aware of the fact that among historians there were attempts to develop different models of time. I am particularly referring to the *Annales* historians who had come up with the idea of different times, different cycles in history, long, medium, and short terms. Fernand Braudel, one of the most prominent members of this school of history which initiated a productive collaboration between history and the social sciences, in his now classical essay 'History and the Social Sciences' articulated the concept of *long durée* (long term) by which he means an almost unchanging structure whose evolution/transformation may take millenia and which he usually equates with geographical constraints. According to Braudel, however, there is no escape from the short-term:

Let us try to make ourselves clearer, and speak not of 'events' but of the short term, the tempo of individuals, of our illusions and rapid judgement, this is, above all, the chronicler's and journalist's time. Alongside great, so-called historical events, chronicles and newspapers present the ordinary accidents of life: a fire, a rail disaster, the price of wheat, a crime, a theater production, a flood. Anyone can see that there is a short time period for all forms of life, whether economic, social, literary, institutional, religious, geographical (even a gust of wind, a storm), or political (Braudel, 1972, 14).

Hence, for Braudel the almost unmoving structure of long term should be complemented with the short term, the tempo of the individual and the intermediate cycle that he calls the conjuncture, the tempo of the societies. If we go back to the Althusserian ever-pre-given structure, another implication of it is an undercutting of the teleological understandings of history. In such a structure historical process has no end, no determined objective where it is heading toward, since what is happening is the reciprocal interaction of causes and effects in a determinate moment.

By the same token, historical knowledge, if produced through above mentioned Althusserian, and psychoanalytic concepts, would not be a predictive knowledge, but an interpretive, explanatory one. Its validity would come from this explanatory power rather than a claim to absolute truth. As Lucien Febvre sensed years ago, even the natural sciences do not have that claim anymore. Today it is widely accepted that sciences are theory dependent, value laden and culturally affected. The impossible project of total objectivity of the scientist is not tenable anymore. So, in good scientific-realistic manner history should accept that it is based on assumptions, that it is theory dependent, and it should make these explicit together with all the complications/conflicts arising from transferential displacement. For a self-conscious, critical historiography which will produce valid historical knowledge we should start developing concepts and a theoretical frame that I have merely started here and we should try to inscribe the conditions of production of knowledge within the produced knowledge itself.

SOSYAL BİLİMLER VE TARİH YAZIMINDAKİ BUNALIMA ALTHUSSER ARACILIĞIYLA BİR BAKIŞ

ÖZET

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Son yıllarda Batı düşün dünyasındaki gelişmeler sosyal bilimlerin bilgi üretim mekanizmaları konusunda şüphelere yol açtı. Yakın zamana kadar evrensel ve yansız olduğu düşünülen bilgi(ler)in belli özne konumlarından üretildiğinin ortaya konulması üst anlatıların yanısıra tarihi bilginin de geçerliliğinin sorgulanmasını getirdi. Geldiğimiz noktada tarihçilerin bu gelişmelere kayıtsız kalmaları artık mümkün değil. Krizi atlatmak ancak tarih disiplininin kendi varsayımlarını, ön kabullerini irdelemesi, 'nesnellik', 'gerçeklik', 'tarihi bilgi' gibi geçmişte saydam olduğu düşünülen kavramlara gerçekten açıklık getirmesi ile olabilir. Öncelikle geçmişte olanlar ile onların tarihi anlatımları arasındaki 'transferential' ilişkinin farkında olunmalıdır. Tarihi anlatı bir yer değiştirmedir, bir analogdur, anlattığı şeyin kendisi değildir. Tarih bu anlamda Althusser'in dediği gibi gerçek (*real*) bir objedir ve bir bilgi objesi olan tarih anlatısından farklıdır. Tarihçi geçmişe bütünüyle hakim olamayacağını kabul etmeli ancak yazım sürecinde ortaya çıkan çelişiklere ve kaymalara karşı da çaba göstermelidir. Mutlak doğruyu yakalamak iddiasında olmayan ancak belli bir açıklayıcı gücü olabilecek bir tarih yazımı için tarih disiplini önce Althusser'in gösterdiği gibi kendi teorisini (metodolojisinden farklı olarak) geliştirmeli yani kendi kavramlarını ve tarih bilgisinin üretileceği mekanizmaları oluşturmalıdır. Teleolojik ve indirgemeci nedensellikler yerine Althusser'in önerdiği sosyal yapıyı merkezsiz, karmaşık bir oluşum olarak tanımlayan yapısal nedensellik üzerine kurulacak ve dolayısıyla tarihi bu karmaşık oluşumların yapısal evrimleşmesi olarak görececek bir tarihçilik, disiplinin öznel, indirgemecilik ve kurmaca olma iddiaları karşısında kaybettiği meşruiyetini kazanmasını sağlayacaktır.

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