

Reinventing Ranke: Butterfield, Becker, Beard

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I

In 1824, a schoolteacher in the small German town of Frankfurt on the Oder published a volume entitled *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations*. In it, the author, a certain Leopold Ranke, basically reiterated what other authors before him had already written about the turn of the fifteenth century. But, although the actual book was not based on original sources, the author had added an appendix on source criticism. Even more important, however, were three seemingly negligible sentences, seemingly just a usual statement of modesty that historians tend to write in their prefaces: “To history has been given the function of judging the past, of instructing men for the profit of future years. The present attempt does not aspire to such a lofty undertaking. It merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened.”¹

These three sentences have probably turned out to be the most influential sequence of words ever written for the development of modern historiography. Ranke soon set out to develop an entire theoretical framework for historiography. Among the turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s, Ranke, now professor of history in Berlin, established a rigorous methodological and epistemological enterprise which was to no small extent reflecting his own longing for political stability.

One hundred years later, the Great Depression and the final breakthrough of mass democracy had again caught historians in turmoil. In Germany, Ranke’s own country, historians were more or less silently burying the remains of his

¹ L. von Ranke, “Preface to the First Edition of *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations*,” [1824], trans. W.A. Iggers, in G.G. Iggers and K. von Moltke, eds, *The Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke* (Indianapolis and New York, 1973), 135-138, at 137. On the German historiographical tradition, see G.G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Ct., 1983).

epistemology and historiographical principles. Already in 1922, Ernst Troeltsch spoke of a “crisis of historicism,” and ten years later, Karl Heussi declared in a book with the same title that “historicism was over.”²

But Ranke’s epistemology had also been “exported” to other countries, notably to Great Britain and the United States. In the process, it had also been somewhat vulgarized and appropriated according to the respective needs and national historiographical traditions. It was in these countries that the “crisis of historicism” resulted in a reinvention of Ranke as the historians’ response to a crisis that was probably, in their eyes, just as profound as the crisis of restoration period had been for Ranke, the Prussian conservative.

This paper deals primarily with three texts that are exemplary responses to the crisis of historical representation in the interwar years in the United States and Great Britain. Of course, the two countries had different national historiographical traditions in which the texts will have to be situated. But at the same time, they point to problems of historical thinking that are the same in Western historical thinking in general. The texts to be dealt with are Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), Carl L. Becker’s “Everyman His Own Historian” (1931), and Charles A. Beard’s “Written History as an Act of Faith” (1933).

Before addressing the texts themselves, however, some preliminary remarks have to be made with regard to the particular kinds of historical thinking which the authors thought to be in crisis. Since there are already several impressive studies on the development of historical thought and the institutionalization and professionalization in both countries, what follows will and can only be a rough sketch of the most important developments.

The theoretical and methodological input for the professionalization of the historical discipline in the United States came from Germany, where many young and aspiring, soon-to-be “founding fathers” of the American historical profession went for graduate education. However, upon return to the United States, these American historians vulgarized the Rankean concepts of writing history. While they copied the institutional framework of German universities, they, perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently, ignored most of the epistemological foundations of modern German historiography. “All German historians saw Ranke as the antithesis of a non-philosophical empiricism, while

² E. Troeltsch, “Die Krisis des Historismus,” *Neue Rundschau* 33 (1922): 572-590; K. Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen, 1932), introduction.

American historians venerated him for being precisely what he was not. To Americans, their mythic hero was empirical science incarnate.”³

The vulgar Rankeanism of orthodox American historiography had been criticized by some, not even necessarily marginal, figures within the profession since the turn of the century, notably by the advocates of the so-called “new history” or “progressive history.” But it was only after World War I had shown just how different events could be interpreted by historians who insisted on being “objective” in their source criticism that the critics’ voices could be heard more clearly. As Peter Novick points out, “[t]he New Historians’ ideological heterodoxy was, before the war, sufficiently moderate, and limited by social optimism, to pose a major threat to the support for objectivity which consensus offered; when optimism cracked, so did the consensus.”⁴

In Britain, on the other hand, German historicism had been embraced much less eagerly, probably because, unlike in the United States, there was already a rather firm tradition of historical writing in place. It had developed into its dominant form during the nineteenth century, as in Germany, but it had developed differently, as the political circumstances were quite different from those on the continent. Positivism, if at all influenced from abroad, by the thought of Auguste Comte, played a much greater role here than theoretical reflection or philosophy. Comparing the German and the British historiographical traditions as they had developed by the end of the nineteenth century, John Burrow has written of

a double contrast, predicated on the idea of Individuality or its absence; first between a mode of understanding consisting in grasping the unique historical configuration and its inner meaning, its animating principle or idea, and on the other hand would-be ‘scientific’ comparison, classification, and the postulation of general laws; second between historical narrative, predominantly political, with the state as its most characteristic protagonist, and on the other hand the construction of a hypothetical sequence of social forms considered as social evolution. We have, therefore, something like a potential spectrum of generality, from the individual to the universal and from the State to Civil Society.⁵

Thus, when Rankean thought was finally introduced in British scholarship, this was done in an even more eclectic and abridging way than in the United States. On the other hand, since a different, but nevertheless comparable path of

³ P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵ J. Burrow, “Historicism and Social Evolution,” in B. Stuchtey and P. Wende, eds, *British and German Historiography 1750-1950: Traditions, Preceptions, and Transfers* (Oxford, 2000), 251-264, at 252-253.

professionalization had been well under way when this was happening, i.e. by the end of the nineteenth century, this turned out to be less problematic than on the other side of the Atlantic. British historians, such as Stubbs in Oxford, or Seeley and Acton in Cambridge, appropriated rather than embraced the German paradigm for their own purposes, which were, at any rate, not strictly epistemological. Emulating Germany was less a means of improving historical methodology than of university politics, in order to firmly establish modern history as an equal field of study in the curriculum.⁶

Like everywhere else, the Great War had shattered many certainties dear to British historians and British society at large. But the intense crisis that others were experiencing was felt much less intensely here. Indeed, as John Kenyon, the historian of British historiography, writes, “it was in these interwar years that tension began to rise between the professional historians and their lay or ‘amateur’ colleagues. At the end of the nineteenth century the gap between the two was easily bridgeable, but now it was steadily widening.”⁷ But precisely because of this comparatively late development, the crisis of historical representation took a different form in Britain than on the continent, as other issues were at stake here than elsewhere.

II

This, then, was the context in which Herbert Butterfield, then aged thirty-one, wrote his essay *The Whig Interpretation of History*. It is, so to speak, the pamphlet of an angry young man. His main target is “the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”⁸ By this is not meant, as one could at first think, a critique of teleological history writing as such, but a very peculiarly British way of doing so. For what Butterfield defines as Whig history is, in fact, a much more limited enterprise than, say, the teleological philosophies of history by such writers as Kant or Hegel. While these thinkers had sought to find hints to the progress of

⁶ See D.S. Goldstein, “History at Oxford and Cambridge: Professionalization and the Influence of Ranke,” in G.G. Iggers and J.M. Powell, eds, *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (Syracuse, NY, 1990), 141-153.

⁷ J. Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (London, 1993), 287.

⁸ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* [1931] (New York, 1963), v.

reason in history, Whig history is designed “to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present [...]”⁹ Instead, Butterfield argues, “[h]istory is not the study of origins; rather it is the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present.”¹⁰ Although he is certainly not advocating a different form of philosophy of history, this idea is still very close to Kant’s concept of finding in history some “natural intent” (Naturabsicht) and of interpreting “signs of history” (Geschichtszeichen)—which is, for that matter, somewhat similar to Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”—or even Hegel’s idea of a “ruse of reason” (List der Vernunft). This underlying philosophical attitude becomes even clearer in the following passage:

But if we see in each generation a clash of wills out of which there emerges something that probably no man ever willed, our minds become concentrated upon the process that produced such an unpredictable issue, and we are more open for an intensive study of the motions and interactions that underlie historical change.¹¹

This is no inconsistency. As mentioned earlier, Butterfield was writing against an historical establishment that had not been thoroughly “rankefied,” not even in the vulgar way that the German historian’s thought had been appropriated in the United States. Butterfield could thus position himself as a true Rankean without having to abandon Ranke’s sophisticated philosophical stance on scientific history. Butterfield could, at the same time, condemn an overly present-minded, teleological history without having to revert, as the American historians did by the end of the nineteenth century, to a crude notion of “objectivity.”¹²

Lord Acton seems to be Butterfield’s prime target, although some studies point out that he may have been arguing against Trevelyan rather than against

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² It should be noted in this context that, contrary to the vulgar notion of Rankean thought, Ranke’s famous repudiation of the idea that historians should judge the past and his insistence that they should merely narrate “how it really was” (wie es eigentlich gewesen), as well as his emphasis on the history of states as the principle object of inquiry were essentially a conservative project that was directed not so much against the philosophical stance toward history displayed by classical German philosophers of history—Kant, and, even more so, Hegel, Ranke’s contemporary and competitor at the university in Berlin—as against their idealism and potential political liberalism. (It should further be noted that Droysen, who would become the leading historicist historian of the second generation and who was politically much more liberal than Ranke, was a disciple of Hegel as much as he was one of the “father” of German historiography.) On this, see Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, chs. 4 and 5.

the “ghost” of the long-deceased former Regius Professor.¹³ Either way, both represented the very British appropriation of the German’s thought, which Butterfield could now set out to resurrect in its essence. Both Acton and, in his wake, Trevelyan, had misunderstood Ranke in about the same way as the early professional historians in America, but they had drawn different conclusions from this misunderstanding. Instead of building their endeavors on impartiality and objectivity, which they understood Ranke to be advocating, they kept insisting on the possibility and duty of the historian to judge the past—and thus ended up to become the epitome of Butterfield’s notion of Whig history.¹⁴

What, then, was Ranke’s epistemology that Butterfield tried to resurrect? In his insistence on the point that the historian should not be a judge of the past, he reiterates the familiar phrase from the preface to Ranke’s *History of the Latin and Germanic Nations*. What is important here, however, is that the usual English translation of “wie es eigentlich gewesen” as “how it actually happened” or “how it really was” does not adequately represent Ranke’s point. For Ranke, “eigentlich” does not mean “really” or “actually”, but rather, “essentially.”¹⁵ In doing thorough empirical research based on sources, Ranke was convinced of being able to discern the truth, or the “essence” of an historical event or epoch. In the end, Ranke was searching for a “totality,” a meaning in history. And in order to grasp this essence, historians have to immerse themselves fully in the past.¹⁶

From this point of view, Butterfield’s idea of “imaginative sympathy”¹⁷ and his call to make “the past our own present and [attempt] to see life with the eyes of another century than our own”¹⁸ take on a very different meaning; different, that is, from the interpretation of Butterfield’s text that seems to have been prevalent in the United States, where it was used by the “vulgar” Rankeans as a counterargument to the ideas of the “new history.”¹⁹

¹³ Kenyon, *The History Men*, 241-242, who also reports that Trevelyan actually understood Butterfield’s book as being mainly directed against him, not Acton. See also G.R. Elton, “Herbert Butterfield and the Study of History,” *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 729-743, at 732.

¹⁴ Goldstein, “History at Oxford and Cambridge,” 152. On Acton’s attitude to Ranke, see H. Tulloch, “Lord Acton and German Historiography,” in Stuchtey and Wende, eds, *British and German Historiography*, 159-172.

¹⁵ Iggers and Moltke, “Introduction,” in *Theory and Practice of History*, xv-lxxi, at xix.

¹⁶ See Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 76-80.

¹⁷ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ See Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 274.

III

Butterfield's reception in the United States was ambiguous. Apparently, nobody completely dismissed the essay, probably because it was, in the end, a very British book. Carl Becker, for example, president of the American Historical Association at that time, was curiously noncommittal about it and ended in pointing out what Becker considered to be a sign of Butterfield's sophistry rather than his conservatism:

His little book is full of admirable passages which historians may well read and ponder; but I have a feeling that the impulse to which we owe it was not so much intellectual curiosity about the nature of history and the function of historical writing as it was an emotional revulsion against the deification of Martin Luther and the glorification of 'modern progress.' Wishing, naturally enough, to exalt a difference of opinion to the level of a philosophical principle, he persuades himself that history, apprehended by a kind of objective 'creative act of the historical imagination,' can be made to teach eternal truths. I suspect that his 'creative act of the historical imagination,' although different in emphasis, is not different in kind, from that employed by the Whig historians.²⁰

Of course, Becker was right in this last remark. Throughout Butterfield's text, one can find about a dozen formulations that would seem fairly whiggish, but, as was pointed out earlier, they actually reflect the underlying philosophical assumptions of Rankeanism. And in his very own way, these were to some extent shared by Becker, albeit rather by allusion than by affirmation.

In his 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association, Becker also conceives of history as a totality when he states that "there are two histories: the actual series of events that once occurred; and the ideal series that we affirm and hold in memory."²¹ And, similar to Butterfield and Ranke, he maintains that there is a theoretical possibility that at least a glimpse of this totality, i.e. his first history, can be gained by historical research, i.e. his second history. Charles Beard, in his AHA presidential address, which he saw as following and extending Becker's earlier arguments, also follows in this vein by distinguishing between "history as actuality" (Becker's first history) and "history as record and knowledge" (Becker's second history) but also explicitly linking the

²⁰ C.L. Becker, "Review of Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*," *Journal of Modern History* 4 (1932): 278-279, at 279.

²¹ C.L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221-236, at 222.

two together immediately.²² Becker, in contrast to both Butterfield and Beard, is however much more pessimistic about the practical possibilities of such an endeavor.

This pessimism is directly related to what is generally referred to as Becker's "relativism," a stance toward historical writing that is actually derivative of the notion of historical totality, and not, as often inferred, in contradiction to it. This is how Becker's argument works: While the past exists, although it does not exist any more in its actuality, the present does, in fact, not exist (it has already become a part of the past the moment we become aware of its being there), and must instead be created "by robbing the past, by holding on to the most recent events and pretending that they all belong to our immediate perceptions," as well as by "anticipat[ing] (note I do not say predict) the future." In doing this, human beings create for themselves what Becker calls "a specious present."²³ History (in the second mode) thus becomes more than just knowledge of the past, it also becomes a way of situating oneself in the present by being able to anticipate the future. This being said, Becker urges his colleagues to acknowledge that, depending on the respective ways human communities construct their "specious presents,"

every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience, must inevitably play on the dead the tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind. The appropriate trick for any age is not a malicious invention designed to take anyone in, but an unconscious and necessary effort on the part of 'society' to understand what it is doing in the light of what it has done and what it hopes to do.²⁴

Compared to Butterfield, this sounds extremely present-minded, exactly what the young British historian was condemning in his essay. However, Becker's argument points to an aspect of historical writing that Butterfield himself had mentioned, namely, that

[b]y imaginative sympathy [the historian] makes the past intelligible to the present. He translates its conditioning circumstances into terms which we to-day can understand. It is in this sense that history must always be written from the point of view of the present. It is in this sense that every age will have to write its history over again.²⁵

²² C.A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *American Historical Review* 39 (1934): 219-229, at 219.

²³ Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 226-227.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁵ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 92.

The difference between the two is more a difference in emphasis than a difference in kind. While Becker is putting more emphasis on the actual act of writing, of casting the past in a certain tone to derive meaning from it for the “specious present” of any given human community, Butterfield is insisting more on the fact that every historical epoch was, in its own terms, once such a “specious present,” and that historians should therefore attempt to make sense of how people made sense of this present. He is thus, much more explicitly than Becker, historicizing the present-centeredness of any given historical thought, and by rejecting the notion of making the present an absolute,²⁶ invoking Ranke’s old idea that “every epoch is equally close to God.” Becker, eschewing such metaphysical language, also seems to be aware of this phenomenon, but he is inferring to it rather than making it explicit, for example when he acknowledges that his own ideas are but a fashion of his times.²⁷

Both Butterfield and Becker grapple here with the problem of contingency in history. This is, of course, also the problem which the eighteenth and early nineteenth century philosophy of history was trying to come to terms with. But for Butterfield and Becker, as historians, there is yet another problem on top of the first: not only are historical situations contingent, but so is the historian’s situation, too: “we can never assert that history has proved any man right in the long run.”²⁸

Departing from here, Butterfield seems to fall back into Ranke’s optimism to be able to uncover the essence in an historical event if it is only investigated closely enough. It is interesting here to consider the metaphors he uses in this context:

The historian is essentially [!] the *observer*, watching the *moving scene*. Like the *traveler* he *describes an unknown country to us who cannot visit it*; and like the traveler he deals with the *tangible*, the *concrete*, the *particular* [...]. In a special sense he goes out to *meet the past* and his work is not merely the function of mind, it is a *venture of the personality*. [...] The historian presents us with the *picture* of the world as it is in history. He describes to us the *whole process* that underlies the changes of things which change.²⁹

Some of these metaphors point, again, clearly toward the notion of the total past that is still somewhere “out there” and can be “met” or “visited” by the historian. But all of them are also clear indicators of Butterfield’s mindset. These are all metaphors generally associated with Romanticism: the search for the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁷ Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” 236.

²⁸ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66, 92, 129 (emphases added).

whole, the essential; adventure and discovery; seeing and tasting; and, finally, a certain exceptionalism as well (“he describes [...] to us who cannot visit”). For Butterfield, history may be doubly contingent, but in the face of the turmoil of mass society and economic breakdown, the hope to find the (higher) truth of history is still alive and well, and maybe even a remedy against the disorder of the present.³⁰

Although not a conservative, and although certainly not an admirer of Ranke as a person,³¹ Beard’s conception of how to deal with the contingency problem are nonetheless equally optimistic (although it may well be said that of the three, he was probably also the least aware of the problem in the first place):

The historian who writes history, therefore, consciously or unconsciously performs an act of faith, as to order and movement, for certainty as to order and movement is denied to him by knowledge of the actuality with which he is concerned. [...] His faith is at bottom a conviction that something true can be known about the movement of history and his conviction is a subjective decision, not a purely objective discovery.³²

All this is more or less in keeping with the program that Butterfield had developed as a modified Rankeanism. Butterfield’s acceptance that the historian’s “personal bias” cannot always be avoided—he merely insists that the “sin in historical composition is the organisation of the story in such a way that bias cannot be recognized”³³—is, in a more conservative mold, to be sure, and, as mentioned before, with a different model against which to argue, relatively similar to Beard’s notion of a “frame of reference,” by which an historian decides which facts and events to include or omit.³⁴ But within any given frame of

³⁰ On Butterfield’s conservatism, see R.N. Soffer, “British Conservative Historiography and the Second World War,” in Stuchtey and Wende, eds, *British and German Historiography*, 373-399, especially at 388-390, where Butterfield’s attitude toward Ranke and his conservatism are quite well linked. It seems odd in this context that G.R. Elton, “Herbert Butterfield and the Study of History,” accuses Butterfield of fighting against the wrong enemy, i.e. against the Whig historians instead of against socialist historiography, while at the same time praising Butterfield for his “scientific,” “objective” approach. Elton, thoroughly socialized in the climate of Cold War “objectivity,” evidently has it all wrong on several accounts: Neither was Butterfield an excessive objectivist, nor was socialist history as another enemy image in any way relative to his main argument.

³¹ He was also quite aware of the political implications of Ranke’s theoretical outlook: “The formula itself [wie es eigentlich gewesen] was a passing phase of thought about the past. Its author, Ranke, a German conservative, writing after the storm and stress of the French Revolution, was weary of history written for, or permeated by, the purposes of revolutionary propaganda. He wanted peace. The ruling classes in Germany, with which he was affiliated, having secured a breathing spell in the settlement of 1815, wanted peace to consolidate their position. Written history that was cold, factual, and apparently undisturbed by the passions of the time served best the cause of those who did not want to be disturbed.” Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” 221.

³² *Ibid.*, 226.

³³ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 105.

³⁴ Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” 227.

reference, he insists, empirical and scientifically controllable research is possible, even desirable,³⁵ a notion to which Butterfield would almost certainly have been very sympathetic.

By omission, Beard also closes ranks with Butterfield's conservatism on another aspect of historical writing, i.e. on the question of historical facts. Both seem to believe that, having dealt with such issues as a "frame of reference" or a "personal bias," the problem of interpretation of facts is solved. Beard acknowledges that history as "thought about past actuality" is "instructed and delimited by history as record and knowledge [...] authenticated by criticism and ordered with the help of the scientific method."³⁶ But he never questions the very concept of historical facts itself.

Butterfield is even more ambiguous in this respect. At the end of his essay, he describes history as a liar:

History is all things to men. She is at the service of good causes and bad. In other words, she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most. Therefore, we must beware even of saying, 'History says...' or 'History proves...', as though she herself were the oracle; as though indeed history, once she had spoken, had put the matter beyond the range of mere human enquiry. Rather we must say to ourselves: 'She will lie to us till the very end of the last cross-examination.'³⁷

History is a liar, and the historian must be very careful to not be trapped by Clio's lies. But, implicitly, the truth can be found from the facts and events in the past if only the historian stays true to his own principles of inquiry, i.e. seeing the past through its own eyes, describing it, not judging it, and not letting any grand theory interfere with thorough investigation of the sources.

The odd man out on this aspect is Carl Becker. He seems to be the only one to notice that, to stay in Butterfield's world of metaphors, history is as much a whore as the historian is her pimp, rather than her lover. Like Beard, he points out that value-neutrality in historiography is a chimera. But he goes much further than his colleague in questioning the very existence of historical facts independent of the historian. Not only is the past too complex to be represented in full scale, as Butterfield and Beard would have it, but it is, in fact, not existing (anymore):

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. The least the historian can do with any historical fact is to select and affirm it. To

³⁵ Ibid., 226.

³⁶ Ibid., 219.

³⁷ Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 131-132.

select and affirm even the simplest complex of facts is to give them a certain place in a certain pattern of ideas, and this alone is sufficient to give them a special meaning. However 'hard' or 'cold' they may be, historical facts are after all not material substances which, like bricks or scantlings, possess definite shape and clear, persistent outline. [...] [T]he form and substance of historical facts, having a negotiable existence only in literary discourse, vary with the words employed to convey them. Since history is not part of the external material world, but an imaginative reconstruction of vanished events, its form and substance are inseparable: in the realm of literary discourse substance, being an idea, is form; and form, conveying the idea, is substance. It is thus not the undiscriminated fact, but the perceiving mind of the historian that speaks: the special meaning which the facts are made to convey emerges from the substance-form which the historian employs to recreate imaginatively a series of events not present to perception.³⁸

Thus Becker's answer to the contingency problem is much more radical than either Butterfield's or Beard's. In fact, it is no real answer; Becker avoids the problem of contingency by negating the past as reality and invoking the past as pure representation. It is here that Becker departs from the path toward a reinvention of Ranke and begins formulating his own epistemology. It is here, too, that his peculiar response to the crisis of the 1930s comes through: In contrast to Beard, who was becoming politically more active, on the left, and to Butterfield, who was, especially after World War II, turning in to a fervent conservative of the right, Becker's response was a pessimistic political abstention combined with an ironic stance on the possibilities of making use of the past (the very idea he had himself just advocated in his presidential address).³⁹

IV

Almost everywhere in the Western world, the crisis of the 1930s had also initiated a (perhaps long overdue) change of direction in historiography. While Beard was writing his presidential address, for example, the historical profession in Germany, on which he largely depended intellectually, was shifting focus. A younger generation of historians were abandoning the last remains of the Rankean legacy in Germany, the only remaining one being the almost metaphysical entity at the heart of the historical enterprise; only, where Ranke had placed the state, they placed the people, the *Volk*. Ironically, although this approach became deeply implicated by National Socialism, it somehow survived

³⁸ Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 233-234.

³⁹ See R. Nelson, "Carl Becker Revisited: Irony and Progress in History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 307-323. Very insightful on the inconsistencies within Becker's text is J.H.

into the Federal Republic and explains, at least to a certain degree, why it should today be German historians that are applying the most vulgar Rankeanism.⁴⁰ At the same time, as German historians were turning toward the *Volk*, a similar, albeit politically much less cynical, process was under way in France: The Annales School was working away from state and institutions toward economics, popular culture, and mentalities.⁴¹

Becker's and Beard's redirection of American historiography was, however, only initially successful. Their eventual failure to build something solid may be related to their own reluctance to press the argument further—as Peter Novick argues, although this seems to be fairly unconvincing at least in Beard's case.⁴² It may also be related to the fact that they were actually engaged in two different enterprises—Beard was reinventing Ranke while Becker was trying to develop a post-Rankean epistemology—both of which would have needed much more support from the profession than it was willing or capable of giving. As most times, the vulgar version of a once sophisticated concept is mostly stronger as it is simpler. And simpler than Beardian Rankeanism or Beckerian post-Rankeanism it was, indeed. When the Cold War broke out, vulgar Rankeanism and anti-communist government propaganda combined to sweep both concepts away, although it may be argued that at least some of Becker's ideas may have been resurrected by postmodernism.⁴³

In Great Britain, finally, Butterfield's refutation of "Whig History" proved to be enormously influential in establishing an image of an enemy that would give the discipline a last boost toward complete professionalization and "scientificity." It also helped to establish a conservative mainstream that is still well and alive,

Hexter, "Carl Becker and Historical Relativism," in idem, *On Historians: Reappraisals of Some of the Makers of Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 13-41.

⁴⁰ Among the abundant literature on this topic that has appeared during the last ten years, see especially W. Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovationen und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918-1945* (Göttingen, 1993). For non-German speakers, G.G. Iggers's review of Oberkrome's book, *History and Theory*, 33 (1994): 395-400, can serve as a preliminary substitute. The problematic continuities from *Volksgeschichte* to *Sozialgeschichte* are the subject of the essays in H. Lehmann and J. Van Horn Melton, eds, *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁴¹ See P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-1989* (Stanford, 1990).

⁴² Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 278.

⁴³ If this was indeed the case, it would be fairly devastating for postmodernism, since it would prove that it is possible to be reflective and write about complex problems of epistemology in stylistically sophisticated, well-readable prose...

at least from a methodological point of view.⁴⁴ British historiography is probably still the most thoroughly rankefied national historiography in the Western world.

National historiographical and political traditions were decisive in shaping the responses to the crisis of historical representation, and these responses, in turn, shaped the way historians set out to work after the crisis was over. This was not so much a result of the responses themselves, but of the political developments culminating in World War II. But the texts that have been analyzed in this paper did have an impact on the shaping of the post-war historical professions in the United States and Great Britain. The only difference is that Herbert Butterfield succeeded in reinventing Ranke, whereas Charles Beard and Carl Becker failed to reinvent, or go beyond, the schoolteacher from the small town on the river Oder.

⁴⁴ I am thinking not only of old-style conservatives such as Geoffrey Elton, but also of new conservatives à la Richard J. Evans, whose *In Defense of History* (New York, 1999) sometimes reads like Butterfield, only written in worse prose.