

ARTICLE

RECONCEIVING THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY: FROM REPRESENTATION TO TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Arguing that history is not the application of a rigorous method to sources bequeathed to us from the past but rather a practice of coding that constructs “the past” in particular ways, this article seeks to delineate the key elements of this coding. Modern history treats past objects and texts as the objectified remains of humans who endowed their world with meaning and purpose while constrained by the social circumstances characterizing their times. This time of theirs is dead, and it can only be represented, not resurrected; the past is only ever the human past, and it does not include ghosts, gods, spirits, or nature. If, as argued here, “the past” does not exist independently of the means by which it is known and represented, then the many different modes of historicity that human beings developed and deployed before the modern form of history became dominant cannot be measured against “the” past in an effort to compare their accuracy or adequacy in representing it. The concluding section of this article asks what we are doing when we write the history of those who did not share the presumptions of the modern discipline but who had their own mode(s) of historicity. What, it asks, is the character and status of the knowledge produced when we write histories of premodern and non-Western pasts?

Keywords: historiography, humanism, philosophical anthropology, music history, art history, history of science, *Annales* school

From about the seventeenth century, a new knowledge began to emerge in Europe, a knowledge that differed from the medieval and Renaissance knowledges that it challenged and would eventually replace. By the nineteenth century, this new knowledge, which was further developed in the course of the European Enlightenment, had become dominant in much of the Western world, and the global dominance of the West rendered it globally dominant. This modern and Western “knowledge culture,” “tradition of reasoning,” or even “social imaginary” presupposed that “nature” was an object that was radically distinct from the human and the social. The former was the domain of impersonal processes and laws, and it required corresponding protocols, provided by the natural sciences, to produce knowledge of it. The latter was the preserve of the human sciences, which

1. I am grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rajyashree Pandey, Shahzad Bashir, and Valeria López Fadul for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

themselves often came to be internally divided between the humanities (attending to those objects and practices that were produced by humans and could be decoded as expressions or objectifications of an individual, civilization, or culture) and the social sciences (assigned responsibility for those forces and processes that included, but exceeded, the will and purposes of humans). It further presupposed that knowledge—whether of the natural or of the human—was a relation between a subject and an object and was gained when the object was accurately or truly represented in natural languages or in formalized ones. And an axiom of this modern knowledge was that, while the knowledge producer could believe in the presence and agency of gods and spirits, these were to have no role in explanation: knowledge was (for the most part) secular, even where the knowledge producer was not. Finally, a defining feature of modern knowledge was that it came to be divided into disciplines, each with its own object(s) of inquiry and corresponding protocols. The presuppositions underlying the social and natural sciences in general were here supplemented by presumptions that were thought to be specific to the object(s) of the discipline in question.²

The discipline of history, which was consolidated in its modern form in nineteenth-century Europe, had as its object “the past,” which was thought to be available for representation through the texts and artifacts that it had left behind. It was presumed that while this past was available, unchanging, and unchangeable, the modes by which it had been represented underwent change and, indeed, improvement. In the standard accounts of the history of the discipline, the ancient Greeks are usually credited with having begun history writing, the Romans with adding the genre of historical biography to it, and the Renaissance thinkers with rediscovering the model of the ancients and developing it into a more general “sense of the past,” including a sense of anachronism, an awareness of evidence, and an interest in causation.³ This standard genealogy assumes that the past is a constant (it is always already just “there”), while the forms of representing that past are variable and changing (and have improved); as Hayden White put it, this genealogy presumes that “historical consciousness, historical thought, and historical writing share some essential trait or attribute that appears at a certain time and place, undergoes certain vicissitudes but continues to develop, enters upon a phase of realization or comes into its own at a specific time, and finally achieves a kind of consummation in our own age and place.”⁴

This presumption has, however, come under sustained criticism for some decades now. As Louis Althusser pointed out in *Reading Capital*, to presume that history writing simply re-presents what it innocently finds is to “confuse the

2. For an elaboration of this claim (and the accompanying argument that the presuppositions of modern Western knowledge are under sustained challenge and should no longer be taken for granted), see Sanjay Seth, *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

3. The classical statement of this is Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969).

4. Hayden White, “The Westernization of World History,” in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 117.

object of knowledge with the real object by attributing to the object of knowledge the same ‘qualities’ as the real object of which it is the knowledge. The knowledge of history is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet.”⁵ Earlier, albeit in a very different idiom, Michael Oakeshott had made the point that history’s characteristic mode of engaging the past was not a natural but a cultivated one, which required translating events from a practical idiom into a historical one, and thus that “the historian’s business is not to discover, to recapture, or even to interpret; it is to create and to construct.”⁶ Paul Veyne alluded to something similar when he wrote, “if ‘historical’ presupposes ‘old,’ there is nonetheless, between ‘old’ and ‘historical,’ all the abyss of the intellect. To identify these two adjectives . . . is to confuse the condition of possibility of history with the essence of history.”⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss made a cognate point when he wrote that “history does not therefore escape the common obligation of all knowledge, to employ a code to analyse its object. . . . The distinctive features of historical knowledge are due not to the absence of a code, which is illusory, but to its particular nature.”⁸ More recently, Constantin Fasolt has argued that “history is the product of a technology. It does not simply lie around like stones or apples, ready to be picked up by anyone who pleases. It must first be produced.”⁹

What is of interest to me are not the details of the arguments made by Oakeshott, Lévi-Strauss, Veyne, Fasolt, and others but rather the implications of the general point that I take them to be making in their different ways. If Lévi-Strauss, Veyne, and others are right to argue that it is not the object, “the past,” that “generates” a knowledge adequate to it but rather the knowledge that constitutes its object, then we need to inquire into the presumptions informing and enabling the practice of history. I do so below, paying special attention to those forms of history writing (such as art, music, and science history) that are in some way at odds with, or at the margins of, the discipline; for it will be my wager that the presumptions and protocols of the discipline are most clearly visible in those parts of it that do not fully comply with, or transgress, these protocols. Furthermore, if the object (“the past”) does not exist independently of the means by which it is known and represented, then the many different modes of historicity that human beings developed and deployed before the modern European mode became dominant cannot be measured against “the” past in an effort to compare their accuracy or adequacy in representing it; there is no secure epistemological ground on the basis of which we can deem modern history writing to be superior to other forms of historicity, such as myth, epic, and legend. The question that then

5. Louis Althusser, “The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time,” in *Reading Capital*, by Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, transl. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), 117.

6. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 93. See also his “The Activity of Being an Historian,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 151–83, and “Three Essays on History,” in *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 1–128.

7. Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, transl. Mina Moore-Rivoluceri (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 72.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 258.

9. Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xiv.

arises (and that I address in this article's concluding section) concerns what we are doing when we write the history of those who did not share the presumptions of this mode of representing the past but who had their own mode(s) of historicity. What, I ask, is the character and status of the knowledge produced when we write histories of premodern and non-Western pasts?

IN THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY, THE PAST IS DEAD

The first element of the practice of history that I wish to draw attention to is that it treats the past as dead. It was not always so: as David Lowenthal has observed, "during most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events . . . as though they were then occurring."¹⁰ Moreover, and relatedly, knowledge of the past was thought to function "as propaedeutic to a life in the public sphere," offering "to teach lessons and provide models of comportment for living human beings."¹¹ However, modern history writing emerged in the nineteenth century as a discourse about that which was irretrievably *gone* and therefore could neither instruct, guide, please, nor delight but could only be known and represented. In a passage familiar to every student of history, Leopold von Ranke wrote, "to history has been attributed the office to judge the past and to instruct the present to make its future useful; . . . at such high functions this present attempt does not aim—it merely wants to show how things really were."¹² This has usually been quoted as an instance of modern history writing's aspiration to "objectivity," but what is surely just as striking about this passage is the explicit distinction it draws between judging and instructing, on the one hand, and knowing and truthfully representing, on the other. By the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos's widely used *Introduction to the Study of History* noted with satisfaction that this understanding of history had triumphed: "It is within the last fifty years that the scientific forms of historical exposition have been evolved and settled, in accordance with the general principle that the aim of history is not to please, nor to give practical maxims of conduct, nor to arouse the emotions, but knowledge pure and simple."¹³ If the past were irretrievably gone, knowledge of it could not serve as a propaedeutic on how to live in the present; its role was solely to provide a method and protocols that enabled the discovery and representation of the truth about the past.

Modern historiography, according to Michel de Certeau, "is an odd procedure that posits death . . . and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the

10. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvi. See also Zachary Sayre Schiffman's "Historicizing History/Contextualizing Context," *New Literary History* 42, no. 3 (2011), 477–98, and *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

11. Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 8, 10.

12. Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, ed. W. Andreas (Wiesbaden, 1957), 4, quoted in George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History before Historicism," *History and Theory* 3, no. 3 (1964), 315.

13. Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* [1898], transl. G. G. Berry (London: Cass, 1966), 303.

privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and a labor against death.”¹⁴ Gabrielle Spiegel has elaborated on the point by means of a contrast between history and what she has called “tradition,” or ways of relating to the past that, while immensely varied, all treat the past as something that is still alive and, thus, as a resource that may provide ethical and political guidance on how to live in the present and face the future:

Historians must draw a line between what is dead (past) and what is not, and therefore they posit death as a total social fact, in contrast to tradition, which figures a lived body of traditional knowledge, . . . borne by living societies. . . . The chief aim of modern historiography has become that of representing—rather than, as formerly, resurrecting—the past.¹⁵

Before modern historiography became the dominant way in which the past is remembered and represented, alternative ways of remembering the past were usually subject to denunciation for their anachronisms, for presuming that the past blended into the present, for confusing history with myth, and so on. It has been only in more recent times, when modern history has become hegemonic, that a space has opened for (some) historians to recognize that these other ways of relating to and representing the past were not failed versions of our mode of historicity but alternative modes of historicity. In *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote, “out of an acute awareness that there have been a number of alternative ways, each viable and with its own integrity, in which human beings have perceived and organized their collective pasts. Modern historiography is the most recent, but still only one of these.”¹⁶ The Jews, he wrote, are a people for whom memory of the past was a central aspect of their collective experience and identity; but the rabbinic literature that was one of the primary means of remembering and transmitting the past was far from being historiography. This is not only because the Talmud or Midrash do not record many significant events or are unreliable sources. More fundamentally, it is because they often ignore our modern conception of time, placing “all the ages . . . in an ever-fluid dialogue with one another”¹⁷ and because they are often unaware of, or freely practice, anachronism. This was, in short, a way of remembering and relating to the past that sought “not the historicity of the past, but its eternal contemporaneity.”¹⁸

This mode of recording and relating to the past was central to the transmission of tradition and the preservation of Jewish identity. When a modern historiography of the Jews emerged in the nineteenth century, it was not a deepening of or improvement on this mode of remembering and transmitting a collective past and a tradition. Rather, it was a caesura, a “chasm that separates modern Jewish historiography from all the ways in which Jews once concerned themselves with

14. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5.

15. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,” *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002), 161.

16. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Prologue to the Original Edition,” in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), xxxv.

17. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 96.

their past,”¹⁹ for modern historiography “repudiate[s] premises that were basic to all Jewish conceptions of history in the past,” including “the belief that divine providence is not only an ultimate but an active causal factor in Jewish history, and the related belief in the uniqueness of Jewish history itself.”²⁰ As a historian, Yerushalmi thus produced history with “the ironic awareness that the very mode in which I delve into the Jewish past represents a decisive break with that past.”²¹

Pierre Nora’s introduction to the massive *Les Lieux de Mémoire* project similarly counterposed a declining culture of “memory” to the rise of historiography, drawing a series of contrasts between the two:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains . . . open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, . . . vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation. . . . Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it. . . . History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. . . . Memory is blind to all but the group it binds. . . . History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority.²²

Collectively, these contrasts add up to a decisive difference—namely, that memory establishes continuities and origins and assumes that the past can be retrieved, while with the triumph of history, the past appears “as radically other, . . . a world apart.”²³

Both Yerushalmi and Nora drew inspiration from Maurice Halbwachs’s earlier and important work on “collective memory”; as a consequence, their works have sometimes been read as contributions to a burgeoning debate that counterposes memory to history. I suggest that, because Yerushalmi and Nora discussed written remembrances of the past, and not simply unrecorded generational experiences, they were in fact drawing attention to modes of historicity rather than to modes of memory—to ways of re-presenting and relating to the past that are different from modern historiography.²⁴ It is precisely this aspect of their works that makes them important, for these are works by historians who have recognized that, in the course of human history, there have been many ways of representing and relating to the past. When contrasted with modern historiography, these earlier modes have many common features: they are highly selective in what is preserved and transmitted; they need not be secular; and they are often untroubled by anachronism. These forms of historicity attend to a past that is not dead but is

19. *Ibid.*, 101.

20. *Ibid.*, 89.

21. *Ibid.*, 81.

22. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” transl. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 8–9.

23. *Ibid.*, 17.

24. For Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory designated a shared, usually generational experience that ceased to be memory if written or recorded; see Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, transl. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), especially 78. By contrast, Yerushalmi has discussed a tradition that stretches over more than two millennia and is embodied in, and transmitted through, liturgy and written texts; and Nora’s declining “memory-history” references the work of most French historians, including Augustin Thierry and Jules Michelet.

in a real sense a part of the present and future; these are modes of “resurrecting” the past, of seeking its “eternal contemporaneity.” By contrast, what is novel and distinctive about historiography, and a central and defining element in its practice, is that the past is treated as dead, as that which cannot be resurrected, only represented.

That the past is dead is not, however, a presumption governing *all* of modern history writing. There are practices of history that do not treat their objects as belonging solely to the past. We need to attend to these “exceptions” to my claim that modern historiography treats the past as dead.

EXCEPTIONS: HISTORIES OF BEAUTY AND TRUTH

Historiography takes the entire human past as its subject, but actual histories are always more specific, taking a period, country or region, or practice as their subject matter, with historians specializing in, say, seventeenth-century France or military history. Such divisions are usually a consequence of pragmatic factors, for no one can be a historian of everything. There are, however, subfields of history that are demarcated not for reasons of practicality but because practitioners in these subfields regard their objects as distinctive in that they are at once of the past (and hence historicizable) and yet not “dead.” The three subfields that I will consider here are the histories of art, music, and science. The view that art, music, and science partly resist historicization is not shared by all historians, but it has marked specialized historical treatments of these domains. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that discussions of historiography usually do not engage with these marginal or outlying cases, for modes of historicizing that insist that their objects cannot be treated in the same way as “general history” cast light on what it is that marks and defines this general history.

For art and music historians, the distinctiveness of their objects lies in the fact that art and music from the past are also part of the present. This does not just mean that they still exist in the present—so, after all, does the document that a historian of seventeenth-century France consults—but that, unlike this document, works of art or music can be *living* parts of the present. Whereas the historicity of, for example, a document of seventeenth-century French diplomatic history (that is, what it tells us about the past from which it issues) exhausts its being, the same is not true for art and music. For works of art and music are thought to be “autonomous”—that is, they cannot be “reduced” to simply being a “sign” or “trace” of the past in which they were made or composed.²⁵ As Eduard Hanslick, a leading nineteenth-century Austrian music critic, magisterially put it, “aesthetic enquiry knows nothing—and is content to know nothing—of . . . the historical circumstances of a composer.”²⁶ Hanslick did not deny that music had a history and

25. This is rendered in the legend that, when asked what the *Moonlight Sonata* meant or was about, Beethoven went to the piano and played it again; see Leonard B. Meyer, *The Spheres of Music: A Gathering of Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 21.

26. Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* [1854], transl. Martin Cooper, in *Music in European Thought, 1851–1912*, ed. Bojan Bujić (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

that musical works were influenced by the historical circumstances of their production; rather, he claimed that, as aesthetic objects, musical works transcended, or had a life beyond and wholly independent of, these historical circumstances. Carl Dahlhaus, a distinguished contemporary scholar of music history, has made much the same point:

Music of the past belongs to the present as music, not as documentary evidence. . . . Music historiography . . . differs from its political counterpart in that the essential relics that it investigates from the past—the musical works—are primarily aesthetic objects and as such also represent an element of the present; only secondarily do they cast light on events and circumstances of the past.²⁷

And the same distinction has been central to the history of the “fine arts.” According to Hans Belting, “in the practice of art historiography in general, . . . autonomy [has] been the very precondition for distinguishing art history from social history or cultural history of a general type.”²⁸

This has at once been a premise of art history and music history as well as a dilemma that has defined and plagued them. Since art and music are presumed to be historicizable and yet also in some sense beyond the pale of history, a history of objects and practices that belong to the aesthetic has been characterized by a struggle to steer between Scylla and Charybdis. As Lydia Goehr has described it, “one of the most basic problems of music history” is:

How does one reconcile the desire to treat musical works as purely musical entities with value and significance of their own, on the one hand, with the desire, on the other, to acknowledge that such works are tainted, influenced, shaped, and conditioned by their contexts—historical, cultural, social, political, economic, religious, and psychological? . . . This opposition has been formulated in many ways, most commonly as the aesthetic versus the historical or as the musical versus the extra-musical.²⁹

The same problem shadows any history of art. As Michael Podro has characterized it,

Either the context-bound quality or the irreducibility of art may be elevated at the expense of the other. If a writer diminishes the sense of context in his concern for the irreducibility or autonomy of art, he moves toward formalism. If he diminishes the sense of irreducibility in order to keep a firm hand on extra-artistic facts, he runs the risk of treating art as if it were the trace or symptom of those other facts.³⁰

The history of science is in important ways different from the histories of music and art (which in turn are different from each other in important ways, which are overlooked here), for the history of science is a history of Truth, and truth

27. Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, transl. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

28. Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, transl. Caroline Saltzweid and Mitch Cohen, with Kenneth Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 117.

29. Lydia Goehr, “Writing Music History,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 2 (1992), 185.

30. Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xx. Podro also argued that the great art historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “oscillated uneasily” between the two possibilities (216).

is assumed to always be there, awaiting discovery, whereas art and music are created.³¹ Indeed, why truthful beliefs about the natural world came to be embraced was usually thought to need no explanation; as David Bloor has observed, in the history of science, it is usually error that needs to be accounted for, whereas “logic, rationality and truth appear to be their own explanation.”³² Given this, the very idea of a history of science seems to be, according to Ken Alder, “an oxymoron, like ‘jumbo shrimp’ or ‘deafening silence.’”³³ But even if *why* truthful beliefs about the natural world came to be embraced needed no explanation, *when* and how these came to be embraced, and with what consequences, could and did form the subject matter of historical narratives: many histories of science were accounts of the historical circumstances in which ahistorical truths were discovered, of the heroes who discovered them, and of the ways in which the human place in the cosmos changed as we discovered more about it. As Lorraine Daston has described it, “the history of science was written as if. . . . [n]ature was eternal and universal; hence the sciences of nature were assumed to be as well. . . . The role of science’s past became to make science’s present inevitable.”³⁴

As in art history and music history, here, too, navigating the boundary between historicity and the extra-historical, while doing justice to both, proved difficult. Expressed as a tension between formalism and historicity in art history and music history, in the history of science, this appeared as a debate between “internalists” and “externalists”—between those who investigated change and progress in the natural sciences principally with reference to their internal intellectual development and those who accorded explanatory importance to factors that were “external” to science, such as social factors, the “spirit of the age,” and so on.

The histories of art, music, and science are thus exceptions to my claim that treating the past as dead is a defining element of the discipline of history. But they are exceptions that confirm the rule. That there are specialized domains of history that are thought to be special or different because their objects are historical and yet not so, that they are of the past and yet also of the present, serves only to underline the fact that the unmarked category of “general” history—history *tout court*, as it were—constitutes its object as belonging wholly to the past, as that which can be historicized without remainder because it is well and truly dead.

EXCEPTIONS NO MORE?

Once unleashed, however, the practice of historicizing has a corrosive effect on all claims to autonomy from history, including those of art, music, and science

31. Without endorsing the distinction, Isabelle Stengers summed it up pithily: if Beethoven had died at birth, his symphonies would not have been performed, while if Newton had died when young, someone else would have taken his place (*The Invention of Modern Science*, transl. Daniel W. Smith [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000], 39).

32. David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.

33. Ken Alder, “The History of Science as Oxymoron: From Scientific Exceptionalism to Episcience,” *Isis* 104, no. 1 (2013), 89.

34. Lorraine Daston, “The History of Science as European Self-Portraiture,” *European Review* 14, no. 4 (2006), 529.

history. This has been especially apparent in the history of science. The premises that inform it (that science is truth uncovered; that truth is, by definition, that which is timeless and contextless; and thus that any history of it can historicize only the discovery of truth and the consequences thereof, but not truth itself) have been subjected to sustained challenge and, indeed, have been progressively undermined. Bloor and his colleagues in the “strong programme” in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) rejected the assumption that “the rational aspects of science are . . . self-moving and self-explanatory”³⁵ and thus that historical and sociological explanations were required only for unreason and error. Instead, they enjoined sociologists to treat “both true and false beliefs alike for the purposes of explanation.”³⁶ The study of science was not to be undertaken on the assumption that science was special but rather from the position that “there is no essential difference between science and other forms of knowledge production; that there is nothing intrinsically special about ‘the scientific method.’”³⁷ A host of subsequent studies painted a picture of emergent scientific practices that were decisively interlinked with, and shaped by, prevailing cultural and intellectual settings. And the more science was historicized, “the more context historians unearthed, the less unitary, formal, valid, and in short, rational science looked.”³⁸

Historicizing science has had an unexpected effect, as scholars in the field have increasingly realized:

Although the name of the discipline embeds within it an assumption that a singular thing called science is the object of its attention, that object has become harder to pin down as historical and other studies have gone in search of it. . . . The historicization of the category of science has ended up . . . fragmenting the entity in question.³⁹

From being a history of a constant that undergoes development and unfolding, the history of science is increasingly becoming a history of the *emergence* of the category of science in the nineteenth century,⁴⁰ a category that cannot be applied to earlier times and to other places without anachronism. Surveying recent developments in the history of science, Daston has observed that “historians of premodern science grew increasingly skittish about calling what they studied science at all, and the word *scientist* when applied to Archimedes or Galileo set their teeth on edge.”⁴¹ Increasingly, science appears not as the premise but rather as the outcome

35. Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 10.

36. *Ibid.*, 37.

37. Steve Woolgar, *Science: The Very Idea* (London: Ellis Horwood, 1988), 12.

38. Lorraine Daston, “The Historicity of Science,” in *Historicization—Historisierung*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001), 215.

39. Jan Golinski, “Is It Time to Forget Science? Reflections on Singular Science and Its History,” *Osiris* 27, no. 1 (2012), 19.

40. See, for instance, Peter Dear’s “What Is History of Science the History Of? Early Modern Roots of the Ideology of Modern Science,” *Isis* 96, no. 3 (2005), 390–406; “Science Is Dead; Long Live Science,” *Osiris* 27, no. 1 (2012), 37–55; and *The Intelligibility of Nature: How Science Makes Sense of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

41. Lorraine Daston, “Science Studies and the History of Science,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009), 806.

of the history that is plumbed by historians of science; and as it does so, history of science ceases to differ in any fundamental way from history *tout court*.⁴²

Though less marked, something similar has happened in the fields of art history and music history; the claim that these are special domains of history, because their objects resist being completely historicized, has been challenged. In part, this has been due to developments in practice, for art history and music history are closely linked to the worlds of art and music production. As artists have questioned and challenged the ontological distinctiveness of art, and (though less so) musicians have done so with music (Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and John Cage's *4'33"* are well-known examples), this has inevitably had an effect on art and music historians. For once the ontological distinctiveness of art and music is challenged, the premise authorizing the treatment of art history and music history as specialized forms of history—namely, that their objects are distinctive because they are autonomous—is also thereby undermined.

However, and this is what most interests me here, this undermining has also been a consequence of the very process of historicizing art and music. Writing the history of music has led some historians to conclude that “the aesthetic premises that might sustain the writing of music history are themselves historical.”⁴³ For instance, it has been argued (most influentially by Goehr in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*) that the idea of music as a “work” that exists in and for itself, rather than being subordinate to religious, pedagogical, or other concerns, was a late eighteenth-century development that went hand in hand with the elevation of the composer and the score, the emergence of the professional orchestra and the concert hall, and music copyright.⁴⁴ This became a “regulative ideal” that then governed the production and performance of musical works. In the repertoire of classical music that solidified in the nineteenth century, this ideal was retrospectively and anachronistically projected backward onto music that had not been governed by the work-concept; and this same anachronism has underpinned music history, which has treated musical pieces from the eighteenth century and before as if these too were “works” that can and should be treated as autonomous aesthetic objects.

The example of Bach is often cited in this context. In his own time, Bach did not compose “works” and was not considered a great composer. Yet in the nineteenth century, he became central to the repertoire of great classical music and is treated as such in music histories. According to Dahlhaus,

Bach's works, in their original form, were relegated to an existence on the sidelines of history; it was not until they were reinterpreted as autonomous music in the nineteenth

42. For this argument, see Daston, “Science Studies and the History of Science.”

43. Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, 20.

44. Before this, Lydia Goehr has argued, the question “‘what is music?’ asked for specification of music's *extra-musical* function and significance. Music was predominantly understood as regulated by, and thus defined according to, what we would now think of as extra-musical ideals. . . . Those who sought to describe the nature of music looked mostly at music's ritualistic and pedagogical value. How could music successfully acquire an acceptable moral, political, or religious status that would render its production a valuable contribution to a good life?” (*The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 122).

century that they unfolded into works of an historical significance that was denied to them in the eighteenth century. . . . The fact that Bach's works could become the paradigm of a concept of art that they did not originally partake of is an historiologically baffling, almost monstrous occurrence.⁴⁵

This “baffling” move became possible when, around 1800, “musicians began to reconstruct musical history to make it look as if musicians had always thought about their activities in modern terms. Even if it was not believed that early musicians had thought explicitly in these terms, the assumption was that they would have, had circumstances allowed them to do so.”⁴⁶ The anachronism becomes more pronounced the further back in time we go. Leo Treitler has noted that medieval music “lacked all the conditions that have been for us the premises for the possibility of a history of music: a transmission founded on a written score, a work concept, the idea of musical structure, the idea that the musical work is autonomous.”⁴⁷ And if “the ‘work’ concept [itself] has a history,” then, according to Treitler, “it cannot sensibly be taken as a premise for that history.”⁴⁸

Something similar has happened in the history of art. Art historians have, of course, long been aware that, for much of Western history, art objects were regarded not as autonomous but as bearers of religious messages, as items of prestige, and so on and that their producers were not accorded the exalted status that (some) artists came to have beginning in the nineteenth century but were usually on a par with craftsmen and often organized in guilds. But because the artwork (unlike the musical “work”) had a material existence as an object—it could, for instance, be wrenched out of its context and displayed in a gallery or museum—it could be, and usually was, assumed that “art” was a universal, that there was some ontological essence to art that distinguished it from non-art, and thus that there was a constant-in-change that was the object of art history. However, such assumptions have been widely questioned in recent times. Belting, for instance, has distinguished between “image” and “art,” arguing that the “era of images” in the West gave way to the “era of art” following the Reformation, when reformed churches banished images from their walls and these discarded images ended up in picture cabinets in private houses and, eventually, in galleries: “Images, which had lost their function in the church, took on a new role in representing art.”⁴⁹ In this account, “art” is a product of history, not the object that underpins (art) history; and it is therefore anachronistic to retrospectively label earlier objects as “art” when, in Arthur C. Danto's words,

45. Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, 157.

46. Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, 245.

47. Leo Treitler, “History and Music,” in *History and . . . : Histories within the Human Sciences*, ed. Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 217.

48. Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 171.

49. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 458. In a similar vein, Jacques Rancière has suggested that “art is a historical configuration that has existed in the Western world since the end of the eighteenth century” (“Rethinking Modernity,” *Diacritics* 42, no. 3 [2014], 7).

their being art did not figure in their production, since the concept of art had not as yet really emerged in general consciousness, and such images—icons, really—played [a] quite different role in the lives of people than works of art came to play when the concept at last emerged and something like aesthetic considerations began to govern our relationships to them.⁵⁰

As this understanding has gained currency, some scholars have emphasized that the ways in which art is “seen” are themselves the products of historically specific and therefore changing forms of visualizing.⁵¹ Others have abandoned, or at least scaled down, claims to the distinctiveness of the art object by replacing art history with “visual culture,” which, according to James D. Herbert, does not presume the autonomy of the art object but rather treats this autonomy as an open question and thus “offers the possibility of maintaining an analytic balance between the primacy of social ‘man’ and that of material ‘art,’ examining the constant and productive tension . . . between these two underlying, governing conceits.”⁵² Still, others, such as Belting, have urged that we recognize that “art, as we understand it today, was a phenomenon not present at all times and at all places” and thus that, rather than writing art history on the assumption that art is a transhistorical object that changes over time, art historians could more profitably address themselves to inquiring into “how art entered certain periods and societies and in which sense it was possible to become accepted.”⁵³

Not many art historians have followed the path suggested by Belting. Doing so would require rethinking and even abandoning the premises that have informed the discipline. Moreover, art history and music history *are* different from science history in that, even after they have been historicized, art objects and music performances have a living presence in the present, constantly raising questions about the relation of their present to the past from which they issue.⁵⁴ My point is that the histories of art and music have been premised on the claim that the domain of beauty or aesthetics is, in some sense, autonomous. But as the historicization of art and music has raised the possibility that making this claim entails reading a feature of the present into the past, we are left, to put it schematically, with two possibilities. Either art and music are “in fact” autonomous and always have been, even if this was not discovered until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁵⁵ or the autonomy of art and music is itself a historical artifact. Either the line from

50. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3. According to Danto, with the decline of modernism and the advent of what he termed “post-historical” art, we are in a situation similar to that of the earlier era: “I would like to suggest that our situation at the end of art history resembles the situation before the beginning of art history” (114).

51. Two important such works are Svetlana Alpers’s *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Michael Baxandall’s *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

52. James D. Herbert, “Visual Culture/Visual Studies,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 455.

53. Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 165.

54. For a discussion with reference to “Early Music,” see Seth, *Beyond Reason*, 126–30.

55. In 1837, Heinrich Rotscher, a pupil of Hegel, observed that, whereas in the eighteenth century it was common to require that art have a moral or edifying effect or that it imitate nature, by his century it was “recognized” that art was autonomous and that artworks were to be judged by criteria

Baumgarten, through Kant and Hegel, to Habermas was a *discovery* of the aesthetic domain, which had hitherto “mingled” and been unfortunately subordinated to exiguous concerns, or the existence of an aesthetic domain, and the implications drawn from this, is a historical *creation* and does not have universal validity.⁵⁶

OTHER PRESUPPOSITIONS OF HISTORY: ANTHROPOLOGY/HUMANISM AND SOCIAL DETERMINATION

Proposing that history does not simply find the past lying around in the traces it has left behind but is rather a complex practice that constructs its object, I have suggested that one important presumption informing the practice of history writing is that the past is dead. I have argued that exceptions to this, including the histories of art, music, and science, serve only to confirm the centrality of this presumption: the condition for being exempt from it is to establish that the object being historicized is of a different and special kind because it is a living part of the present. I have further suggested that the exceptional status of these histories has been undermined as a result of historicization. I now explore the other elements informing the practice of history.

What is history the history of—that is, what is its subject? The answer seems so self-evident that the question seems redundant: history is the history of humans, of humanity. It is worth remembering, however, that the ways in which peoples have represented their pasts have not always been ones in which humans have been the sole subjects. As Reinhart Koselleck reminded us, this conception of history is, in fact, no older than the late eighteenth century; it was only with and after the Enlightenment that what Koselleck termed a “collective singular”—namely, humankind—became the subject whose changes history narrated.⁵⁷ This required the expulsion not only of God but also of nature, as in the same period *historia naturalis* came to be classified as part of physics rather than history.⁵⁸ To equate the past solely with the human past is thus itself a historical event, one that then becomes a presupposition or element in the practice of history. Following both its proponents and some of its critics, we could, in shorthand form, call this element of historical practice “anthropology,” or the study of Man.

immanent to them; see Stephen Bungay, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 188.

56. Terry Eagleton is among those scholars who have drawn precisely this conclusion: “The emergence of the aesthetic as a theoretical category is closely bound up with the material process by which cultural production, at an early stage of bourgeois society, becomes ‘autonomous’—autonomous, that is, of the various social functions which it has traditionally served. Once artefacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular, and can consequently be rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves. It is this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality which the new discourse of aesthetics is centrally concerned to elaborate” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 8–9).

57. Reinhart Koselleck, “On the Disposability of History,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 194.

58. As, for instance, in Voltaire’s article on “Historie” in the *Encyclopédie*. For more on this, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process,” in *Futures Past*, 37.

This anthropology is almost always also a humanism, meaning not only that the subject of history is humankind (and only humankind) but also that this subject is a Subject—that is, a meaning- and purpose-endowing being that objectifies itself in the world through texts, artworks, institutions, buildings, and activities. According to Max Weber, “the transcendental presupposition of every *cultural science*” is that “we are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it *significance*.”⁵⁹ The genealogy of this presupposition is usually traced back to Vico and Herder⁶⁰ and is often seen as the charter of the humanities, as the “discovery” that allowed the humanities to be differentiated from the natural sciences. Erich Auerbach, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Paul Ricoeur, Johann Gustav Droysen, Clifford Geertz, and numerous others have affirmed that, in the human sciences, Man studies his own products, that this “original, antecedent congruity between subject and object”⁶¹ means that the knowledge acquired is self-knowledge, and that this knowledge can be gained only through protocols that are very different from those of the natural sciences.

I refer to these luminaries, who have participated in different domains, including philosophy, literature, and history, to demonstrate that these “anthropological” and humanist presumptions underlie all of the humanist disciplines, and many of the social science disciplines too. In the case of history writing, they take the specific form of the presumption that remnants or traces of the past are the objectified meanings and purposes of humans like us, traces from which we can piece together the meanings and purposes with which these people endowed their world, what sort of people they were, and what sort of world they inhabited. As the great historian Marc Bloch put it, “behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, . . . there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp.”⁶²

59. Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), 81.

60. See, for instance, Erich Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Historism,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 183–98; Ernst Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, transl. William H. Woglom and Charles W. Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), especially 218; and Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976).

61. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the Historian’s Task” [1821], *History and Theory* 6, no. 1 (1967), 65. Similarly, according to Droysen, “the possibility of this [historical] understanding arises from the kinship of our nature with that of the utterances lying before us as historical material” (“History and the Historical Method,” in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer [New York: Continuum, 1997], 121). And according to Paul Ricoeur, the historian “is a part of history not only in the trite sense that the past is the past of his present, but also in the sense that the men of the past are part of the same humanity. . . . [I]t is a sector of the communication of minds which is divided by the methodological stage of traces and documents; therefore it is distinct from the dialogue wherein the other *answers*, but is not a sector wholly cut off from full intersubjectivity” (*History and Truth* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965], 29).

62. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, transl. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 26.

Alongside this, however, is another presupposition, one that delimits the humanist presumption. For if the humanist/anthropological presumption is a defining element of history writing—as both its champions and critics aver—then so too is the presumption that the actions and meanings of humans are shaped or determined (often in ways that are unbeknownst to them) “behind their backs,” as it were. And if there are forces or constraints that shape and frustrate human desires and meanings, then recreating the meanings that humans gave their world may be irrelevant to representing and understanding that world, or at least may be the first, rather than the last, word in historical explanation. We may take as an example the work of the *Annales* historians, not because they were unique in embracing this presumption (I am suggesting that this is embedded in almost all history writing) but rather because they theorized it and turned it into a program for writing history.

The *Annales* historians’ well-known critique of narrowly political (or “events”) history derived from their insistence that there were different “time spans” and that the history of events attended to only one of these, and not the most important one at that.⁶³ The *longue durée*—the “time of societies, . . . for whom, sometimes, a whole century lasts but a moment”—was a time span that “to a great extent escapes the awareness of the actors, whether victors or victims: they make history, but history bears them along.”⁶⁴ This “time of societies” included all those things that shaped human lives without being intended, willed, or “meant,” including price movements, long-term changes in diet, demographic changes, and so on. The innovation here was not merely “scalar” but lay above all in the insistence that history “to a great extent escapes the awareness of the actors.” For it was this that led to a different approach to historical sources, which were no longer valued for what they could reveal about what people thought, desired, willed, and did but rather needed to be “worked upon” in order to extract information that they were *not* designed to yield. As Veyne astutely observed, history writing, as practiced by the *Annales* historians, required “a struggle against the optics imposed by the sources.”⁶⁵ It aimed not simply at using traces that had been left behind to reconstruct the past as it had been experienced by those whose present

63. According to Fernand Braudel, “social time does not flow at one even rate, but goes at a thousand different paces, swift or slow, which bear almost no relation to the day-to-day rhythm of a chronicle or of traditional history” (“The Situation of History in 1950,” in *On History*, transl. Sarah Matthews [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 12).

64. Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” 12; Fernand Braudel, “History and Sociology,” in *On History*, 67.

65. Veyne, *Writing History*, 223. Michel Foucault’s appreciative comments about the *Annales* historians were also prompted by a recognition of this. Whereas the “old” history, Foucault wrote, had treated the document as “inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Pantheon Books, 1972], 7), the new history by contrast sought “the interplay of material determinations, rules of practice, unconscious systems, rigorous but unreflected relations, correlations that elude all lived experience” (14). In order to unearth these, “history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations”; “it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities” (7). History, Foucault concluded, was undergoing an “epistemological mutation” (11), one that began with Marx but had been and was still being resisted because its opponents recognized that what were at stake were “the twin figures of anthropology and humanism” (12). See also Foucault’s “On the Ways of Writing History,” in

it had been but at *constructing* a past that they could not have experienced or known. The importance of assembling quantitative series thus lay not simply in quantifying but in the fact that historians were arranging and producing sources to answer the questions they asked of them. By contrast, treating the sources as “testimony” was epistemologically naive: it succumbed to the danger of simply reproducing the bias of the archives, most of which had been institutionalized in the nineteenth century as “the memory of nations”⁶⁶ and which prioritized political events and processes. The *Annales* school instead sought to “rearrange” sources so they could provide that information and answer those questions that they were not formulated to answer and that those who had left behind these traces or sources often could not have even asked.

It is not that the *Annales* project was opposed to approaching sources as “expressions” of meanings and purposes. Even Fernand Braudel warned against “the danger of forgetting, in contemplation of the deep currents in the lives of men, each separate man grappling with his own life and his own destiny”; it was necessary, Braudel went on to add, “to remain sensitive to both [social history and individual or event history] at one and the same time and, fired with enthusiasm for one, not to lose sight of the other.”⁶⁷ The *Annales* school’s historiography produced not only Braudel’s monumental multi-volume study of the Mediterranean world from ancient times to the sixteenth century but also Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Carnival in Romans: A People’s Uprising at Romans, 1579–1580*, and his ethnographic study of the French town of Montailou. Many of the next “generation” of *Annales* historians, without renouncing the emphasis accorded to statistical series and to the *longue durée*, immersed themselves in recreations of the “mentalities” of social groups, the social imaginary underpinning feudal society, and other themes that were very much concerned with meanings and purposes.

My point is that both of these elements—humanism/anthropology and the premise that unseen and unknown forces shaped and constrained historical actors—are among the enabling presuppositions of history writing. To be sure, they do not mesh seamlessly; indeed, there is a tension between them. But most history writing includes elements of both, or at least acknowledges that both are necessary parts of what it means to write history. Hence why so many historians, Marxist or not, are fond of quoting Marx: “Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.”⁶⁸

In any given historical work, the emphasis may fall more on one than on the other, but both are implicitly or explicitly present, and the “ideal” work of history

Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, ed. James D. Faubion, transl. Robert Hurley and others (London: Penguin, 1998), 279–95, and “Return to History,” in Faubion, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 419–32.

66. François Furet, “Quantitative Methods in History,” transl. David Denby, in *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16.

67. Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” 20.

68. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), 146.

is often thought to be that which gives the impression of seamlessly combining both. In the discipline (taken as a whole), the emphasis has been placed more on one than on the other at different times. Very roughly, one could say that, from the 1960s through to the 1970s, in European and Anglo-American historical scholarship, the emphasis was on social history, on that which eluded or transcended meanings and purposes. Beginning around the 1980s, there was a general shift in a number of disciplines toward—in the words of Geertz, whose works have played a significant role in bringing about this shift—“connecting action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants.”⁶⁹ But this very alternation reveals that the practice of history writing presumes that history is *both* the recreation and representation of the meanings that humans in the past endowed their world with *and* an exploration of how these meanings were determined, shaped, or constrained (and a great deal of ink has been spilled in discussions of which of these is pertinent) by external factors that were unknown (and often unknowable) to historical actors—most commonly, those designated as “social.”

CONCLUSION: HISTORY AS TRANSLATION

This article has argued that the availability of the past is not what gives rise to the discipline of history; rather, history writing is a specific way of producing “the past” as an object. Historiography constructs the past in anthropological and humanist terms (nature and gods are not part of history), and it sets itself the task of recreating the meanings that humans once endowed their world with and the purposes that animated them. At the same time, and in more or less equal measure, it presumes that these purposes and meanings were determined or constrained by “society”—that is, by the web of social relations into which we are all born and which shape the ways we in turn shape our world. Finally, and in sharp contrast to many others forms of historicity, history treats the past as irretrievably dead.

These presumptions emerged only in the modern period in Europe, and they became part of the common sense of Western societies only in relatively recent times; they are still not fully part of common sense in many parts of the world. If, as I have argued, history is a specific way of constituting, re-presenting, and relating to the past, rather than simply the truthful and objective representation of it, a further question arises: What is the status of the knowledge produced when we write the histories of times and places—such as premodern Europe and non-Western peoples—that had their own, different modes of historicity? I conclude this article by suggesting that applying the modern discipline to lifeworlds that are not the same as that which produced modern history writing

69. Clifford Geertz, “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought” [1980], in *Local Knowledge* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 34. Geertz added that this entails not a rejection of social constraint or determination but rather an insistence that these can be apprehended only through interpretation of meanings. As William H. Sewall Jr. similarly wrote, “unless we can represent to ourselves and our readers the *form* of life in one historical moment or era, unless we can describe systematically the interlocking meanings and practices that give it a particular character, how are we to explain its transformation—or, for that matter, even to recognize when and how it has been transformed?” (“Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation,” in *The Fate of “Culture”*: Geertz and Beyond, ed. Sherry B. Ortner [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 42).

results in a form of translation and should be practiced in recognition of that fact.

The assumptions that govern the practice of history writing emerged in Europe in the modern period and were very different from those that had shaped the modes of re-presenting the past that they came to replace, but they nonetheless emerged out of conversation and contestation with the modes of historicity that they superseded. The same was not true in many parts of the non-Western world. In colonial India, for example, modern history writing did not engage with and thus displace the indigenous traditions of historicity in the Indian subcontinent, whether these be the “high” *itihasa-purana* tradition or regional practices of historicity, such as *bakhars*, *buranjis*, *puwada*, *lavani*, *bats*, *khyats*, *kulagranthas*, and so on.⁷⁰ Instead, it came with the colonizer, and its victory was cheaply won as a result of colonial administrative fiat. Although the presumptions that characterized this history writing were historically and culturally specific, it was presented by the colonizer not as a modern and British or European way of representing the past but as the right and true way of doing so; in stark contrast, indigenous modes of representation were denounced as fictional and “superstitious.” Thomas Babington Macaulay, in his *Minute on Education of 1835*, dismissed such indigenous histories as “abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long.”⁷¹

Nonetheless, like the English language, history writing has become native to India. From the moment the British became territorial rulers of Bengal to the moment they were forced to relinquish their Indian possessions, they wrote histories of India of the modern type.⁷² Indians also began to write history in the same

70. Since the rise of Indian nationalism, it has been claimed that India did in fact possess a tradition of history writing. That claim continues to be made today, including in serious scholarly works that have no difficulty in showing that there are texts from the subcontinent that pay some attention to chronology, are sometimes attentive to evidence, and, more generally, possess at least some of the attributes that we take to distinguish history from myth and epic; see, for example, Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) and Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). But the claim for the existence of historical writing in India prior to colonialism rests, I suggest, on a misunderstanding: it mistakes or conflates evidence of the existence of modes of *historicity* for evidence of *historiography*. A sense of historicity is indeed to be found among all peoples, but “history as a developmental story, as an explanation of how things came to be the way they were in the present, history as a story of human action devoid altogether of divine intervention, history as a process of change both illustrating and subject to sociological laws,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has rightly insisted, “came to Indians as a result of British rule” (“Globalisation, Democratisation and the Evacuation of History?” in *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars and the West*, ed. Jackie Assayag and Véronique Bénéï [New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003], 129).

71. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Minute* recorded in the General Department, 2 February 1835, in *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843*, ed. Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 166.

72. These included Alexander Dow’s *The History of Hindostan* in the late eighteenth century; Mark Wilks’s *Historical Sketches of the South of India*, John Malcolm’s *Sketch of the Political History of India*, James Mill’s *The History of British India*, James Grant Duff’s *History of the Mahrattas*, Mountstuart Elphinstone’s *The History of India*, and W. W. Hunter’s *A Brief History of the Indian Peoples* in the nineteenth century; and V. A. Smith’s *Oxford History of India* and the multi-author and multi-volume *Cambridge History of India* in the twentieth century.

vein: Indian nationalism was one of the main vehicles for this, and it succeeded in producing a nation and histories of that nation. The practice of writing history in the modern mode has thus been going on for almost two centuries now in the subcontinent. My argument that it is a modern and Western practice therefore leads me not to the polemical conclusion that historiography is a form of epistemic violence or foreign imposition but rather to a question: What sort of knowledge do we produce when we apply the code of history to South Asian—and, more generally, non-Western—pasts?

The earlier discussion of music, art, and science history can provide us with some guidance. As discussed above, these histories were premised on the claim that there were objects or practices (art, music, or science) that were constant across time, even as the forms they took were variable, and that these objects or practices were at once historicizable and yet not fully so because these practices were autonomous—at once part of the past and yet a living part of the present. In recent times, as argued above, historians of these practices have been less inclined to claim that their objects or practices have some sort of transhistorical, ontological solidity and have been more likely to regard the histories of these practices as histories of their *emergence* (usually in what historians periodize as the early modern or modern period). I submit that, analogously, in writing histories of non-Western pasts, we are tracing and narrating the emergence of a disenchanted, secular world and of subjects who have come to see themselves as the producers of meaning against a backdrop of a nature that is devoid of meaning and purpose. In short, to write the history of India in the modern mode is to narrate the conditions that have marked the emergence of that mode and made it possible and intelligible. When writing histories of pasts that precede these processes, historians of the non-Western world cannot presume that their mode of representing the past is superior to the ways in which the subjects of their studies represented their past to themselves. Historians of the non-Western world should instead, I suggest, write history in such a way as to recognize that their practice *translates* the lifeworld and the self-understandings of their historical subjects into our intellectual and conceptual language. This, I suggest, is not limited to the case of history writing but extends to wherever the object of representation cannot be presumed to inhabit the same knowledge culture as the producer of that knowledge.

Let me illustrate what I mean through some examples. Discussing the introduction of the cadastre to measure land in colonial Egypt, Timothy Mitchell has argued that this was not a leap in the precision with which land was mapped: “The twentieth century’s new regime of calculation did not produce, necessarily, a more accurate knowledge of the world, despite its claims, nor even any overall increase in the quantity of knowledge. Its achievement was to redistribute forms of knowledge, increasing it in some places and decreasing it in others.”⁷³ Cadastral surveys, and associated forms of mapping (and of statistics), did not represent the *same* object as the indigenous knowledges they displaced (except now more accurately) but rather produced “a reformatted knowledge, information that has

73. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 92.

been translated.”⁷⁴ Thongchai Winichakul has shown that, in Thailand, modern forms of mapping the nation did not do a better job of representing space than the indigenous conceptions of sacred and political space they supplanted had done: “The emergence of the geo-body of Siam was not a gradual evolution from the indigenous political space to a modern one” but instead “was a displacement of the former by the latter.”⁷⁵

Similarly, the censuses undertaken by colonial powers in their imperial possessions did not produce more accurate information than had previously been available. Rather, with an imaginary of “the social” and of “population” built into its optic, the colonial census translated (or reformatted) indigenous understandings of sociality into new terms. And just as the cadastre and the map often served to produce or make real what they were purportedly representing, so too did the colonial census, as a growing literature demonstrates, give “the social” a life and a significance that it did not previously have.⁷⁶ As Benedict Anderson has shown with reference to the colonial censuses undertaken in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century,

The new demographic topography [which was informed by the census] put down deep social and institutional roots as the colonial state multiplied its size and functions. Guided by its imagined map it organized the new educational, juridical, public-health, police, and immigration bureaucracies. . . . The flow of subject populations through the mesh of differential schools, courts, clinics, police stations and immigration offices created “traffic-habits” which in time gave real social life to the state’s earlier fantasies.⁷⁷

Mitchell, Anderson, Winichakul, and others have shown that modern knowledges and practices such as the cadastre, census, and map were not better representations of the same object that indigenous knowledges represented but rather were representations of an object conceived differently. They were not more truthful or more accurate representations of reality than the indigenous knowledge forms they sought to replace, though they were sometimes anticipations of the reality that they were helping to bring into being.

The same, I submit, is true of history writing. History (as a modern intellectual technology) became central to how, for example, India and its people were governed by their colonial masters. James Mill’s *History of British India* was required reading for generations of colonial officials, and the ways in which the history of India was narrated shaped policies for land settlements and revenue

74. *Ibid.*, 115.

75. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 131.

76. Such scholarship on India includes *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981); Bernard S. Cohn, “Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 136–71; Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, 224–54; Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), chapter 4.

77. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 169.

collection, the dispensation of justice, and a great deal more. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, history writing became a terrain of conflict, as nationalists began to write histories that set out “to claim for the nation a past that was not distorted by foreign interpreters,”⁷⁸ and these histories (written in the modern mode) helped to shape how this nation was imagined and what form it took after independence in 1947. History writing did not just represent the past of what is now India; it helped to constitute India. Just as it is impossible to imagine life in contemporary India without the census and the modern map, so too is it impossible to imagine it without history writing in the modern mode. We need such history because it is enmeshed in the functioning of modern institutions, has become one of the languages through which struggles for social justice are waged, and has become part of the self-understandings of many—though by no means all—of India’s citizens. The conclusion I draw from the arguments of this article is thus not that we should denounce history and cease to write it or that we should seek to retrieve indigenous traditions of historicity. It is rather that history is practiced best when accompanied by a self-conscious recognition that it is narrating and diagnosing the conditions of its emergence and intelligibility. When it is applied to pasts that precede these conditions, and thus precede the emergence of this practice as the authoritative way of representing the past, it should be written with the recognition that it is a form of translation.

The metaphor of translation, long used by anthropologists, has in recent decades been subjected to a critical reworking, at the heart of which is the claim that anthropological “translation” of the practices of a different society or culture should not be directed at revealing their “real meanings”—regardless of whether these would be acknowledged (or even understood) by those who are the subjects of study.⁷⁹ Where anthropology does so, on the presumption that it is an “etic” knowledge that understands the native people better than they can, it becomes nothing more, in David M. Schneider’s description, than “the ethnoepistemology of European culture.”⁸⁰ Anthropology is better practiced, according to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as that which seeks “to translate, and not to explain, justify, generalize, interpret.”⁸¹

There is no reason why this insight should be confined to anthropology. I suggest that, when history in the modern mode is written about subjects who did not, or do not, share the presumptions underpinning this mode, it is translating the lifeworlds and self-understandings of others into our intellectual and conceptual

78. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 76.

79. See Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 141–64.

80. David M. Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 175. According to Schneider, “so much of what passes for science in the social sciences, including anthropology, derives directly and recognizably from the commonsense notions, the everyday premises of the culture in which and by which the scientist lives. These postulates of European culture are simply taken over . . . and served up as something special, sometimes even in Latin” (175).

81. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 57.

language. Such translation is eminently justified—provided that it meets three conditions. The first, as indicated above, is that, as with any translation, we should not assume that the translation is superior to the original. History writing is not the “right” way to represent premodern and non-Western pasts; it is not a “correction” to or an “improvement” on how the subjects of our studies represented the past through their own modes of historicity. Rather, it is our way of translating and rendering those pasts in and for our time and for our world, one that is disenchanted, where the past is dead, where gods lack agency, and where texts and artifacts are material repositories of human meanings and purposes. Second, and related to the first, in translating thus, we must recognize that there will be much that escapes or gets lost in translation; hence, we should write history “in such a manner as to make visible all the problems of translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language of sociology.”⁸² And third—having recognized that, in writing the history of pasts that do not share the presumptions of our mode of historicity, we are engaged in translation and that the problems and infelicities of the translation should be highlighted rather than obscured—we should allow these problems to discomfort and deform our own historical practice. As the German poet and philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz observed,

Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. . . . He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.⁸³

Viveiros de Castro similarly urged that the task of anthropology should not be “to *explicate the worlds of others* but rather to *multiply our world*.”⁸⁴ So too, I submit, in the translations we make when writing histories of the pasts of those who rendered those pasts through their own, different modes of historicity, we should allow their alienness, their difference, to discomfort and disturb, and even deform, the concepts and presuppositions informing and enabling our historical practice.

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82. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 89.

83. Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*, quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 80–81.

84. Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native*, 85.