

Methodological Introduction: the historian's craft

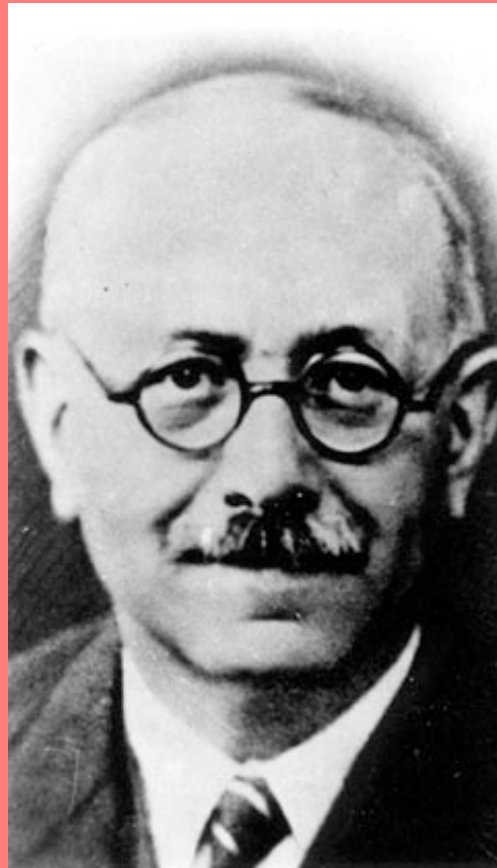
Announcement

- On Thursday my office hours (1-2pm) are **CANCELLED** -sorry for the inconvenience

From last time

- Professor Richard Hecht's methodological introduction: how to think about the study of religion in new and fascinating ways
- The study of religion is NOT simply the study of religious institutions or churches, but it is the study of cultural phenomena linked with the sacred
- Religion and the sacred in 17th century Europe: a step towards the de-theologization of science (Funkenstein's argument on 'secular theology')
- Religion and the sacred in 18th century Europe: Kant and the 'rationalizing' of ethics
- Religion and the sacred today: from secular theology to a form of 'scientified' religion or a 'religionized' science

Some background on your reading:
Marc Bloch (1886-1944)



What is history?

- Is it a 'science'?
- Is it 'exact'?
- What is its subject of study?
- Men and Women in time!
- What does this have to do with the issue of 'origins'?

History and Science?

- Look at what Thucydides said: ‘...with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible.... The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content...’

Important points:

- ‘Accuracy of the report tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible’
- ‘Absence of romance’
- ‘Exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future’

History and science: 'Positivism'



August Comte, 1798-1857

But...

- Positivism and '800-'900 culture: the triumph of 'exact science'
- After the First World War the theory starts to collapse...
- Why?

Problems with the concept of 'exact'



The issue of 'Exactness' and interpretations

- What is the account of person n.1?
- How about person n.2?
- And n.3?
- So what is the 'exact' account of the historian?
- The TRUTH is in the INTERPRETATION of the facts, not IN the facts

Important assumptions regarding the study of history:

- The HUMAN element: complexity (the historian is like an ogre who smells human flesh)
- The issue of 'exact' and the realm of interpretation
- NO RELATIVISM: Marc Bloch and Heisenberg

The Past

- What is the past? How should the past be to be considered 'historical'?
- The issue of ORIGINS: two meanings
 - 'Beginning'
 - 'Cause'

Faults with the concept of 'beginning'



When does Santa Claus 'begin'?

- 1931: Coca-Cola Ads (red and beard)?
- 4th century AD: St. Nicholas (gifts)?
- Pre-Christian German folklore: Odin (reindeer)?
- Jesus Christ (Christmas)?
- History cannot talk about origins as 'beginnings': 1) it is hermeneutically impossible, and 2) it implies 'making judgments'

What is the 'origin' or 'cause' of Santa Claus, or how do we EXPLAIN the Santa-Claus phenomenon?

- Historical focus: when?
- Historical focus: what are we interested in this problem for?
- Historical focus: complexity
- Historical focus: examination of the evidence and construction of an interpretation

Origins of the universe: what are we doing?

- Understanding how the issue of ‘origins of the universe’ became problematized BY MEN, IN TIME
- Historians do not deal with the ‘Origins of the universe’ as : where does the universe begin? This is a question for your conscience and/or your telescopes and computers
- Historians deal with the ‘Origins of the universe’ by dealing with its ‘cause’: cause of the question of the conceptualization of the origins of the universe, historical focus, complexity

The End