

“Butterfield’s Sociology of Whig History: A Contribution to the Study of Anachronism in Modern Historical Thought.” *Clio. A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History* 25: 4 (1996): 345-63.

## Butterfield’s Sociology of Whig History: A Contribution to the Study of Anachronism in Modern Historical Thought

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The whig interpretation of history is not merely the property of whigs and it is much more subtle than mental bias; it lies in a trick of organization, an unexamined habit of mind that any historian may fall into.

Herbert Butterfield<sup>1</sup>

Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History* has recently been the focus of much attention.<sup>2</sup> Among other attacks, Butterfield has been taken to task for arguing that anachronism results from insufficient immersion in the documentary record. Critics have point out that while ignorance of the sources may lead to anachronism, ever deeper study of historical artifacts will not eliminate it altogether because historians are necessarily trapped “within the perceptual and conceptual categories of the present.”<sup>3</sup> Though this critique has merit, it shifts attention away from the most valuable aspect of Butterfield’s essay. Butterfield realized that the historian “can never entirely abstract himself from his own age,” however he was not really concerned with the temporal logic that makes anachronism inevitable (16). In *The Whig Interpretation* Butterfield treats anachronism not as “a problem of the philosophy of history, but rather as an aspect of the psychology of historians” (vi). He was interested in the “unexamined habit of mind” that made anachronism attractive to modern historians (30).

The question at the heart of Butterfield’s essay is this: why, despite the admonitions of an entire discipline, do modern historians seem to be drawn to anachronism? Butterfield made three crucial observations in this regard. He noted, first, that anachronism was attractive because it offered historians apparently simple solutions to complex problems posed by historical investigation. Perplexed by the difficulties of constructing a coherent story on the basis of primary data, historians are wont to opt for anachronistic solutions that, as Butterfield put it, “cut through [historical] complexity” (11). Second, Butterfield remarked that whig history seemed to have an elective affinity for certain historical projects, for example, generalizing. In this connection he wrote, “all history must tend to become more whig in proportion as it becomes more abridged” (7). Finally, Butterfield suggested that the propensity to accept anachronism was not evenly distributed in the scholarly community. He explained that scholars working on narrow historical topics tended to reject whig techniques, whereas those constructing “general survey(s) of general history” were more inclined to accept them (6).

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<sup>1</sup>H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton, 1965), 30. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup>G. R. Elton, “Herbert Butterfield and the Study of History,” *The Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 729-43; A. R. Hall, “On Whiggism,” *History of Science* 21 (1983): 45-59; and G. Watson, “The War Against the Whigs. Butterfield’s Victory . . . and Defeat,” *Encounters* 66 (1986): 19-25; A. Wilson and T. Ashplant, “Whig History and Present-Centered History,” *The Historical Journal* 31 (1988): 1-16.

<sup>3</sup>Wilson and Ashplant, “Whig History and Present-Centered History,” 16. Also see Hall, “On Whiggism,” 51.

This essay will explore each of these observations in the hopes of offering a socio-psychological account of the gravity of anachronism. The following is not a reconstruction Butterfield's thought on the subject, but is rather an effort to pursue certain undeveloped insights in *The Whig Interpretation* in order to construct a Butterfieldian theory. Section one argues that the general pull of anachronism is the result of attempts to grapple with three paradoxes of modern historical research. The second section explores the link between anachronism and certain historical projects. Finally, section three demonstrates that the propensity to anachronism is unevenly distributed within the scholarly community and suggests that this phenomenon may be explained with reference to two scientific programs, each of which views whiggishness differently.

### **Anachronism and the Paradoxes of Modern Historical Research**

Butterfield's key insight into the attraction of anachronism was that ordinary historians were drawn to what he called "short cuts" by difficulties encountered in historical research (22). These difficulties take the form of paradoxes, moments at which the normative requirements of good history are to one extent or another contradicted by the practical requirements of historical research. Butterfield provides several scattered examples: historians must tell their story "without altering the meaning and peculiar message of history," yet as a practical matter they must abridge; historians should seek "to explain how the past came to be turned into the present," but they find that "the only explanation [they] can give is to unfold the whole story . . . in detail"; historians should look for patterns, but close examination of the primary record yields only "twists and turns" (22-23). In response to these paradoxes scholars reach for "a short cut through that maze of interactions by which the past was turned into our present" (25). The frustrated historian's "short cuts"--what we will call research compromises--are drawn from the present and imposed on the past. Examples of research compromises provided by Butterfield include patterns such as "the idea of progress" or "the doctrine of evolution" and political biases such as those evident in the historiography of Butterfield's day (23, 25). According to Butterfield anachronism inevitably resulted from the applications of such compromises, a point we will take issue with a bit later.

For all its merit, Butterfield's exposition of the theory of anachronism is incomplete: nowhere does he offer a catalogue of the paradoxes of modern historical research, the compromises made by historians to overcome them, or the anachronistic errors that result from their over-zealous application. Nevertheless Butterfield provides several suggestive hints that may be of some help in constructing a full theory of anachronism. The first such hint is found in Butterfield's implicit suggestion that the paradoxes which so frustrate historians are the consequence of the requirements of the historical discipline itself. Thus it would seem proper to begin constructing a list of historical paradoxes with a preliminary description of the general prescriptions of modern disciplinary history. Butterfield himself provided an account of these ideals as he explained what the non-whig historian must accomplish. Three requirements stand out: a respect for the difference between the past and the present ("The first condition of historical inquiry . . . is to recognize how much other ages differed from our own" (36)); a commitment to source-based analysis ("It is only by undertaking an actual piece of research . . . that we can really visualize . . . any historical change" (16)); and a sensible value neutrality ("Above all it is not the role of the historian to come to . . . judgments of value" (73)). It can easily be demonstrated that

these traits--what we will call discontinuity, empiricism, and neutrality--are indeed not specific to Butterfield's thought, but are in fact the most basic ontological, epistemic, and ethical standards of modern historical writing.

The idea of discontinuity between the past and present is an unspoken ontological axiom of modern academic history. Indeed this principle is so ingrained that it has rarely been the subject of significant debate among historians. Philosophers of history have argued about the status of historical events and the best method to study them, a debate which is related to the assumption of discontinuity. Its contours and antagonists will be familiar to most.<sup>4</sup> Dualists distinguish unique historical events from those studied by the natural sciences and propose that the methods used to study the former--imaginative reconstruction--are incompatible with those employed to investigate the later.<sup>5</sup> Positivists object that even spatio-temporally unique events are types of events and therefore subject to the same sort of detached empirical analysis familiar to hard scientists.<sup>6</sup> To exaggerate a bit, dualists tend to separate past and present, while positivists are inclined to unite the two under general concepts and regularities. Nonetheless, neither suggest that the past is identical to the historian's present. Working historians not concerned with the finer points of inter-subjectivity or the covering-law model take the difference between past and present for granted.

An equally defining characteristic of modern historical thought is its insistence on source-based explanation. One may argue as to what extent history is a scientific endeavor, but it is generally accepted that good history must offer reasoned, explanatory arguments based on the analysis of authentic evidence. Philosophers of history have traditionally argued about the nature of this evidence. Again the division falls roughly between dualists and positivists. The former argue that historical events are necessarily specific, lashed to a particular time and place, while the latter counter that no sense can be made of specific events unless they are placed under general categories. Neither claim that we can simply ignore historical evidence and make the story up as we please. Much attention has been focused recently on the mythic elements of even the most empirically rigorous narratives.<sup>7</sup> As president of the American Historical Association, William McNeill advocated the inclusion of civically-minded myths in history writing. Yet few modern historians confuse myth with history. As McNeill writes, "our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspires to be, true."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, modern historical scholarship is marked by a commitment to limited value neutrality.<sup>9</sup> In a philosophical sense value neutrality is limited because it is the only kind of neutrality that can be claimed by historians: despite the peculiar insistence of Hegelean and Marxist historians to have recourse to "objective" truth, it is widely accepted that histories are in principle subject to the particularizing forces of person, time, and place. For this reason, while there has been some technical philosophical debate about the senses in which historical narratives or facts might be called

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<sup>4</sup>See the brief characterization in R. H. Weingartner, "Historical Explanation," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols., ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967) 4: 7-12.

<sup>5</sup>See W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1958); H. Rickert, *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1924); and R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 249-52.

<sup>6</sup>See C. G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942): 35-48.

<sup>7</sup>See the many works of Hayden White, and especially his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>8</sup>W. H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," in *idem, Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>9</sup>Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 9.

“objective,” practicing historians treat the issue of neutrality as a problem of ethics.<sup>10</sup> And in this neutrality is limited in a second, practical sense. Weber, whose essay on objectivity may be taken as representative of the received view, explained this best.<sup>11</sup> He argued that researchers should attempt to be impartial while at the same time understanding that the choice of subject and the results of research have ethical implications.

The principles of discontinuity, empiricism, and neutrality give rise to paradoxes which, according to Butterfield, drive historians by small steps into anachronism. Butterfield does not identify the paradoxes, however it is a relatively simple operation to derive them from the three principles. The first paradox, following from the principle of discontinuity, is that of representation. Historians must strive to depict the past accurately, yet they are faced with a deep conceptual gulf between past and present that hinders accurate description. If the past is different from the present, and we can never go there to examine it in all its fullness, how can we hope to capture historical categories with ours? Adding more detail to a description may bring it closer to the truth, however only at the cost of brevity. And even the most detailed characterization is, according to the logic of discontinuity, imperfect. The second paradox, following from empiricism, is that of explanation. Historians should attempt to offer reasonably complete explanations based on primary sources, yet as has been frequently pointed out thorough explanation is really quite difficult to achieve.<sup>12</sup> A variety of issues are involved here (non-replicability of events, inability to control variables, lack of data), but to the working historian all pale before the fact that events are often contingent on too many factors for the mind to “unravel,” as Butterfield put it (19). How does one decide what is relevant, how much evidence is enough, or where the story begins and ends? The third paradox, following from the principle of neutrality, is that of justification. Historians are to remain impartial, yet it is a trope of modern historical discourse that impartiality parishes the moment a topic is selected, let alone pursued. Modern professional historians are asked to write something significant about the past, the reward for which is understanding and further employment. However the discipline itself offers no obvious criterion for significance--this must come from without and in at least partial contradiction with the principle of neutrality.

Having defined the paradoxes of modern historical scholarship, we are now in a position to specify a catalogue of research compromises (Butterfield’s “short cuts”). In response to the difficulties posed by the three paradoxes historians reach for corresponding solutions. We will call them translation, simplification, and engagement. Translation is the process by which concepts or data of the past are given modern equivalents and thereby made sensible within contemporary categories. Here the paradox of representation is addressed by offering a series of modern approximations for historical information. Simplification involves the exclusion of descriptively impertinent or causally irrelevant data and the arrangement of germane information into summary narratives. The effort here is precisely to limit the complex contingency which is at the heart of the paradox of explanation. Finally, engagement is the attempt to nest historical themes in modern values, to give them contemporary significance either in the context of some academic debate or wider political conflict. Nesting alleviates the paradox of justification.

To see how these compromises operate in historical narratives, let us take an example alluded to by Butterfield, Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber is an interesting case because he was keenly aware of the

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<sup>10</sup>See C. Blake, “Can History be Objective?” *Mind* 64 (1955): 61-78.

<sup>11</sup>M. Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *idem, The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 50-112.

problems scholars face when trying to write history according to the modern academic standards. Weber's general theme is "the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the ethos of an economic system."<sup>13</sup> Specifically, he analyzes "the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism" (27). As is well known, he believed he discovered just such a connection, and he argued it was in some sense a causal one:

One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only that but all modern culture, rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling, was born--that is what this discussion has sought to demonstrate--from the spirit of Christian asceticism (180).

In the argument of *The Protestant Ethic* we can see each of the research compromises at work, and each of the historical paradoxes behind them. Weber clearly attempts to develop a set of general terms that would capture the nexus between economic and religious life in the sixteenth as well as the twentieth century. The theologies of Calvin, the Pietists, Methodists, and Baptists all differ among themselves, and in many ways each is quite foreign to modern Protestantism. This plainly hindered Weber's project. So he terms them all "ascetic Protestantism" (95). His main argument in *The Protestant Ethic* is built on a simplified diachronic explanation: it traces a complex, contemporary phenomenon to a historically distant one. Weber freely and self-consciously eliminates irrelevant factors, reducing the complexity of historical contingency. In this way Weber is able to claim capitalism was to some limited degree born of the Protestant ethos. And though he is quick to point out that other historical currents were involved, the emphasis is clearly on theology. Finally, Weber's thesis is engaged in contemporary concerns--it speaks directly to the problems and interests of the present. Here they are particularly scholastic and political: in arguing that capitalism had intellectual origins, Weber critiques both the theory of historical materialism and Marxism.

Butterfield did not systematically distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of the research compromises: as the term "short cut" implies, he believed they were all violations of historical standards and therefore erroneous. In light of the fact that every historian (not simply the whiggish kind that Butterfield stereotyped) has recourse to the research compromises, this is not a helpful position. It requires that we say that all historians--good and bad--are guilty of anachronism. Thus if we are to give the term anachronism any sort of critical meaning we should try to separate the proper from the improper use of the research compromises. This is no easy task as the difference between the two is continuous, a fact that Butterfield systematically obscured. We will leave the specification of the exact boundary (if there be one) to others and simply note that the most basic species of anachronism--in almost any definition--are consequences of the abuse of the research compromises. In this sense Butterfield's "short cuts" may be seen as the anachronistic progeny of over-zealously employed compromises. Let us consider the following examples: the propensity to use thoughtlessly concepts from our time to describe another--conceptual anachronism; the tendency to claim to have discovered specific roots that lead inexorably to a present condition--determinism; and the habit of making moral judgments where none can be made--partisanship.

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<sup>12</sup>For a review of problem and the large literature, see R. H. Weingartner, "Historical Explanation," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 4: 7-12.

<sup>13</sup>M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 27.

Conceptual anachronism is a corruption of the use of modern concepts in historical narratives. As the historian struggles to bring a peculiarity of the past into present focus, an idea from the present is clumsily imposed on phenomena from the past in such a way as to confound them or distort their significance.<sup>14</sup> Butterfield spoke of conceptual anachronism in terms of “misleading analog(ies)” between past and present (12). A modern example is provided by the work of M. N. Pokrovskii. The renowned Soviet historian imported broad concepts from the canon of historical materialism into the distant context of early modern Russian history. Here he describes the confluence of “class” interests and its results in the mid-sixteenth century:

On the basis of this community of interests, apparently, was established that compromise between the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the petty *pomeschchiks* which lasted approximately until 1560 and is usually described as the “happy time” of the reign of Ivan the Terrible.<sup>15</sup>

While it is perhaps appropriate to speak of a Muscovite service elite and Old Russian townsmen, the concepts “aristocracy” and “bourgeoisie” are both over-broad and freighted with connotations that bring little clarity to the description. Determinism is a corruption of the simplified diachronic explanations contained in all well-formed narratives, though it has an affinity for ones that pretend to account for developments across vast stretches of time. A determinist narrative takes a universe of preceding facts and misleadingly reduces it to a few items which are then said to have caused a subsequent event.<sup>16</sup> Butterfield calls this “over-simplification of the historical process” (40). Take the following example from J. Lawrence.

The princes of Moscow were landholders whose estates had grown into an empire, but when they had suppressed their rivals, neither law nor custom could limit their authority. The tradition of personal autocracy founded by Ivan the Great set the pattern for many generations of tsars. In the persons of Lenin and Stalin, it survived the October Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

The origins of Soviet tyranny are suggested by a link to the putative unlimited authority of Muscovite rulers of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The intervening four-hundred years and the countless accidental and structural factors that may have produced Bolshevism are simply glossed over. Partisanship is a corruption of the engagement of contemporary interests. A history is partisan when one side is made to represent some contemporary value held by historians.<sup>18</sup> Butterfield described this fallacy in terms of “the transference into the past of an enthusiasm for something in the present, an enthusiasm for democracy or freedom of thought or the liberal tradition” (96). We find the following example in a canonical multi-volume history of the Soviet Union printed, significantly, in 1955. The authors, all reputable historians, are evaluating the rise of the Muscovite state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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<sup>14</sup>D. H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies. Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 132-35.

<sup>15</sup>M. N. Pokrovskii, *History of Russia from the Earliest Times to the Rise of Commercial Capitalism*, trans. J. D. Clarkson and M. R. M. Griffith (Bloomington, IN: University Press and Reprints, 1966), 132.

<sup>16</sup>Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 172-75.

<sup>17</sup>J. Lawrence, *A History of Russia* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960), 90.

The formation of the great feudal monarchies was a historically progressive development. “Only a country united under a single central government,” points out I. V. Stalin, “can possibly expect serious cultural-economic growth [or] the maintenance of its independence.”<sup>19</sup>

For reasons relating to Marxist theory and Soviet policy, the authors of this passage (and all Soviet historians) had no choice but to favor the forces of unity over those of “feudal fragmentation.” The best representation of this sort of editorial intervention is perhaps the first half of S. Eisenstein’s film epic *Ivan the Terrible*, where Ivan is depicted as Stalin uniting the country against the evil boyars and fending off the Germans.<sup>20</sup>

To sum up, three principles--discontinuity, empiricism, and neutrality--are characteristic of modern historical discourse. Further, a series of paradoxes--representation, explanation, and justification--confront working historians as they try to put the above-mentioned principles into practice. To overcome these paradoxes, historians adopt what Butterfield called “short cuts through complexity” which tend to be though are not necessarily anachronistic. Butterfield dismissed all the “short cuts” as fallacious, but it is more reasonable to say that they are sometimes sensible compromises and at others heavy-handed corruptions. In the latter case, the historian commits true errors of anachronism. The relation between the principles of historical discourse, the paradoxes of research, the compromises commonly used to ameliorate them, and the result of the abuse of the latter is summarized in the Table 1:

**Table 1: The Paradoxes of Historical Research and Anachronism**

<i>Principle</i>		<i>Paradox</i>		<i>Compromise</i>		<i>Result of “Short-Cuts”</i>
Discontinuity	>	Representation	>	Translation	[>?]	Conceptual Anachronism
Empiricism	>	Explanation	>	Simplification	[>?]	Determinism
Neutrality	>	Justification	>	Engagement	[>?]	Partisanship

### **Anachronism and Historical Projects**

The primary conclusion of the argument just presented is that the requirements of historical research themselves invite anachronism. Butterfield also noted that certain historical projects have an elective affinity for anachronism. He was particularly critical of three such projects--attempting to arrive at the general character of an era; tracking the origins of modern phenomena; and trying to determine whether historical actors or events were moral. According to Butterfield generalization makes complex histories easy to understand, but only at the cost of veracity. Similarly, origins-seeking provides modern readers with a quick and easy explanation of the roots of some aspect of the present, but again only by sacrificing true historical understanding. Finally, answering the question of the morality of historical actors or acts may be satisfying, but it is surely a step down the road to serious historical misunderstanding. Butterfield explained that all

<sup>18</sup>Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 78-82.

<sup>19</sup>*Ocherki istorii SSSR. Period feodalizma konets XV v. - nachalo XVII v.*, ed. A. N. Nasonov, L. V. Cherepnin, and A. A. Zimin (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1955), 27.

three endeavors were inherently anachronistic because they speak to the concerns of the present rather than beginning with a question about the past. This is in general true, but, as with so many of Butterfield's insights, the proposition is in need of further development. In this section we will see that these historical projects invite anachronism because in order to pursue them historians must make intensive use of Butterfield's "short cuts," the result being conceptual anachronism, determinism, and partisanship.

Generalization is a requirement of modern historiography. Though monographs may in some measure avoid general characterizations, other types of writing--textbooks, encyclopedia entries, and big-picture introductions--are almost entirely made up of them. In the process of historical generalization specific data are combined into progressively more general classes, for example when the myriad events in Russian history between 1598-1613 become the "Time of Troubles" and this in turn is nested into the "Muscovite period." As in the case of Linnaen biological classification, some information is obscured by movement up the scale of categories. This bothered Butterfield because he believed that veracity was proportional to the quantity of detail in a description. However the difficulty lies elsewhere. Unlike biological generalization which begins and ends with imposed categories, historical generalization usually begins with something close to the actors' classifications and ends with our terms. As historians move toward more general descriptions they tend to drift into the modern world and into anachronism. Thus in the historical sciences to pursue the essence of an era necessitates the use of concepts foreign to the era being described, the result being conceptual anachronism.

A benign example from Russian historiography is the use of "the gathering of the Russian lands." Textbook writers, whose project is generically bound up with generalization, typically deploy the phrase as an easy designation of the early Muscovite period. For example, N. V. Riasanovsky, whose excellent survey is the most widely used in anglophonic universities, writes:

It is generally believed that the policies of the Muscovite princes made a major and massive contributions to the rise of Moscow. From Ivan Kalita to Ivan III and Basil III these rulers stood out as "the gatherers of the Russian land," as skillful landlords, managers, and businessmen, as well as warriors and diplomats.<sup>21</sup>

One can sympathize with Riasanovsky's predicament. The identified rulers did preside over a tremendous expansion of lands under Moscow's control and, given the necessity of brevity imposed on any textbook author, the phrase is a convenient way to describe a complicated three-hundred year series of events. Brevity, however, comes at a high price. As a generalization, the phrase is obviously partial: a mass of information--and particularly that portion having nothing to do with gathering--is obscured from consideration. This is not in and of itself anachronistic. People make generalizations about themselves all the time and if the Muscovites described the era as "the gathering of the Russian lands" then Riasanovsky's citation of the phrase is simply a fact about the Old Russian mentality. But this is not the case. The phrase is an invention of eighteenth-century nationalist historiography, a back projection from the self-consciously imperial policy of post-Petrine regimes to the putative imperial policy of early Muscovite princes. Though the Muscovite

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<sup>20</sup>See B. Uhlenbruch, "The Annexation of History: Eisenstein and the Ivan Grozny Cult of the 1940s," in H. Günther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (New York: Macmillan, 1990): 266-87.

<sup>21</sup>N. V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 5th Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 110-11.

rulers spoke of vast stretches of Eastern Europe as their “patrimony” (*votchina*), they did not call their piecemeal conquest of northeastern Rus’ the “gathering of the Russian land.” Riasanovsky knows the phrase is a trope of Imperial historiography, as the quotation marks indicate.

The project of tracing origins is also extremely common in modern historiography. Aside from synchronic historical descriptions, almost all modern histories tell the story of transition from one state to another, i.e., a tale of historical origins. In the geographical sense tracing origins is relatively uncomplicated. A. N. Radishchev (to take a famous Russian literary example) began his journey in St. Petersburg and ended it in Moscow. The “point of origin” was obviously St. Petersburg and the “origin” (in a metaphorical sense) of his trip was an idea (not necessarily his) to go to Moscow. Tracing historical origins is much more complicated. The thesis that the origins of the Bolshevik revolution may be found in the disenchantments of late eighteenth-century intellectuals like Radishchev is hampered by the fact as we try to re-trace this “path,” the links between its various “stages” become progressively weaker until the trail is, perhaps, lost altogether in the maze of interactions that produced Bolshevism. Radishchev (who died in 1802) did not begin with *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* and end in league with Lenin, and in writing the book he certainly did not have Bolshevism in mind. Thus the link between his thought and Russian Communism is tenuous indeed. For reasons such as these, Butterfield suggests that the entire project of origins-seeking is bankrupt. This may be an exaggeration of the problem, but his basic point is a good one: historians who seek roots too narrow and deep do so at the risk of determinism.

R. Pipes’ *Russia under the Old Regime* provides an example. The book is avowedly an attempt to find the origins of modern Russian autocracy in medieval times.

The theme of this book is the political system of Russia. It traces the growth of the Russian state from its beginnings in the ninth century to the end of the nineteenth . . . The question it poses is why in Russia . . . society has proven unable to impose on political authority any kind of effective restraints.<sup>22</sup>

Pipes finds the beginnings of Russian (and by inference Soviet) authoritarianism in the institution of a “patrimonial regime” by Muscovite princes and the strenuous efforts at the maintenance of said regime by successive rulers (21-24). While it is true that over the course of most of its history Russia has been under the control of a single ruler, the attempt to trace the origins of the Communist partocracy to the primitive Muscovite monarchy is questionable. It telescopes an extremely complex series of events into a simple progression. This can be seen if we condense the logic of Pipes’ continuity argument (and many others like it): Soviet government is like late Imperial government; late Imperial government is like Petrine government; Petrine government is like Muscovite government; but Muscovite government is unlike Appanage government. This string of analogies allows Pipes to draw two conclusions: Bolshevik rule is somehow similar to Muscovite and “thus” Bolshevik rule has its ultimate origins in political forms established under Ivan III in the late fifteenth century. As one commentator put it, “Stalin is Ivan the Terrible plus electrification of the entire country.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>R. Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992), xxi.

<sup>23</sup>R. Lowenthal quoted in A. Yanov, *The Origins of Autocracy. Ivan the Terrible in Russian History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 213.

Unlike generalization and origins-seeking, passing moral judgment on historical actors is seen with considerable suspicion by the historical community. Yet in practice historians frequently take up the burden of judgment. Though the process by which such judgments are arrived at has been the subject of intense debate, its general outlines are clear. The prescriptions of a moral code are applied to a given set of actions, where they do correspond these actions are ethical, where they do not they are unethical. To have recourse to another Russian example, in *Let History Judge* the Soviet historian R. Medvedev offers an extensive moral condemnation of Stalinism.<sup>24</sup> He has the authority to do so by virtue of the fact that he personally experienced the brutality of Stalin's rule. He was part of the Russian moral universe and understood its prescriptions to be violated by the brutality of the Purges, camps and other excesses of the era. Though it is not the case that only participants may pass moral judgments, Butterfield pointed out that when historians make it their business to do so they often inject modern morality into a context that knew nothing of it. The very form of the question they ask--who was right and who wrong--would seem to require the transference of modern ethics into the past.

A collection of writings by female Russian anarchists of the 1870s and 1880s provides an example.<sup>25</sup> The editors describe the women in glowing terms as high-minded revolutionary feminists, determined to liberate Russia and particularly Russian women from the "patriarchal" tyranny of the tsar.

The names contemporaries applied to them--"saints," "Moscow Amazons," "Russian Valkyries"--are all somehow inadequate: the first women revolutionaries in Russian history, they created their own mythology. They possessed a passionate and lucid moral vision which neither exile, imprisonment, nor immanent death could destroy (xxxiv).

The strength of their conviction is not open to question, however their moral vision may well be. All were avowed terrorists. Vera Figner, for example, was at the center a campaign that resulted in the murder of Alexander II as well as many bystanders. The editors clearly had some difficulty squaring the anarchists' otherwise progressive politics with their violent behavior. The moral aspects of political murder are never touched on, except to say that proponents insisted terrorism "was a highly selective form of revolutionary violence" which claimed "only a handful of unintended victims other than the bodyguards of the tsar" (xxxix). In fact the editors turn the terrorists into the true victims of their campaign. They write that the effort to kill the tsar "exactd a far heavier toll than the party had anticipated" (xxxiii). A heavier toll, that is, not on the killed but on the killers: after seven attempts on the tsar's life the terrorists were drained of energy and unable to build any sort of effective political organization. The book is dedicated "To women fighting for freedom throughout the world" (v).

In sum, Butterfield suggested that certain historical projects created problems for historians that could only be solved by means of his anachronistic "short cuts." We have identified three such tasks--generalization, origins-seeking, and making moral judgments. Each of these projects in and of themselves necessitates the radical application of the research compromises described above--translation, simplification, and engagement. The consequence of radical application is in

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<sup>24</sup>R. Medvedev, *Let History Judge. The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

<sup>25</sup>*Five Sisters: Women against the Tsar*, intro. A. K. Shulman, ed. and trans. B. A. Engel and C. N. Rosenthal (New York: Knopf, 1975).

each case a specific species of error--conceptual anachronism, determinism, and partisanship. Table 2 summarizes the affinities between the projects, the compromises, and the resulting types of anachronism.

**Table 2: Historical Projects and Anachronism**

<i>Project</i>		<i>“Short Cut”</i>		<i>Result</i>
Generalization	>	Radical Translation	>	Conceptual Anachronism
Origins Seeking	>	Radical Simplification	>	Determinism
Moral Judgment	>	Radical Engagement	>	Partisanship

### **Anachronism and Modern Scientific Programs**

In addition to the force of the paradoxes of research and the historical projects, Butterfield noted a third magnet drawing scholars toward anachronism--the nature of modern scientific programs. Butterfield observed that the “short cuts” of historical research are differentially attractive to what he termed “specialists” and “generalists” (6, 14-18, 22). These personae are better understood as tendencies within each historian or within the social sciences generally. If we take specialists to designate scholars trying to construct detailed descriptions of events and generalists to mean scholars trying to map out large pictures and find patterns, then Butterfield’s distinction is easily recognizable as that between (roughly) historians and historical sociologists. Butterfield felt that each of these groups had a different “attitude to history”--what we will call a scientific program--that tangibly affected their propensity to accept anachronism (14).

The basic distinction hinted at by Butterfield may be traced to a nineteenth-century debate over the ideographic and nomothetic understandings of the social sciences, a debate in which Weber took part.<sup>26</sup> This is certainly no place to rehearse the intricacies of the differences between these programs: all that is required here is the briefest summary of the basic points of contrast. On the one hand, we have what might be called the descriptivist program, one that promotes thick-descriptive empirical research.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, there is the generalist program, one that encourages investigation aimed at the discovery of general patterns.<sup>28</sup> To stereotype for contrast’s sake, we may say that each has its own ontology: descriptivism stresses the uniqueness of human events to given times and places, while generalism underlines their uniformity. Each has its own epistemology: descriptivism denies that long-range continuities can be discovered, while generalism aims at their discovery. And each has its own logic of justification: descriptivism studies the past “for its own sake” while generalism often puts the past in service of the present. And most importantly for our purposes, each of them evaluates the research compromises in its own way.

For descriptivists, the research compromises are to be avoided. Butterfield is an extreme example, for he saw each of the three compromises described above as fatal flaws. According to Butterfield, translation diminished the veracity of historical statements. He warned that “to stress and magnify the similarities between one age and another” is necessarily

<sup>26</sup>For an brief overview, see E. Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 283.

<sup>27</sup>Recent statements include C. Geertz, “Thick Description,” in *idem, The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-32 and J. H. Hexter, “The Rhetoric of History,” in *idem, Doing History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971): 15-76.

<sup>28</sup>See A. Stichcombe, *Theoretical Methods in Social History* (New York: Academic Press, 1978) and P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

to risk historical “missapprehensions” (10). The point of historical research is to uncover the difference between the past and present, not to lump the two under contemporary categories. Butterfield also believed that simplified explanations were empirically unjustifiable: any attempt “sort or disentangle from the present one fact or feature” and to trace it “back into history” is doomed to failure because it rests on a confused understanding of historical causation (19). As concerns engagement, Butterfield is clear: “Real historical understanding is not achieved by subordination of the past to the present, but by making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own” (16). Evidence that Butterfield’s views find wide sympathy today is found in the very lexicon of modern historical criticism. The terminology we used above to describe anachronistic errors is part of the descriptivist catalogue of critical terms. According to descriptivists, long-range, diachronic theories are: “anachronistic,” i.e., they use modern concepts from some canonical social scientific text; “deterministic,” i.e., they suggest a simplified origins argument; and, finally, “partisan,” i.e., they have contemporary political implications that skew their representations of the past. Descriptivist criticism also has several commonly employed pejorative terms for generalist narratives: “whig,” “presentist,” and, paradoxically, “historicist.”

Generalists embrace the compromises as necessary and even laudable scholastic devices. Weber will serve as an example, even though he was much more sensitive to descriptivist objections than most. In “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science” Weber argues that translation (in the form of ideal-typification) is “indispensable to the cultural sciences” in so far as it reduces complex experience and enables researchers to make the cross-temporal and cross-cultural comparisons essential for the understanding of historical peculiarity (89-90). Further, though Weber certainly did not believe in laws of historical evolution, he affirmed that general “developmental sequences” could be “constructed into ideal types” of “considerable heuristic value” (75). As the argument of *The Protestant Ethic* makes clear, Weber believed that one could offer carefully qualified though perfectly valid historical explanations by means of such developmental patterns. Finally, Weber felt that engagement was both necessary and laudable. He held that any choice of a research topic implied a “value-orientation,” and the researcher should take advantage of the opportunity by making a relevant choice (76). The vocabulary of sociology and political science reflects the persuasiveness of Weber’s views. Generalists have more or less standard critical terms for the basic traits of thick-descriptive research: “not theoretically relevant,” i.e., it does not use general concepts from a standard social scientific source; “factological,” i.e., it does not present any causal conclusions; “esoteric,” i.e., without wider import.

A modern example of the tendency of generalists to accept anachronism is presented by an interesting treatment of Russian constitutional development by B. Downing. Downing’s intent is to offer a macro-historical explanation of the divergent constitutional evolutions of early modern European states. He argues that three factors “— rough balance between crown and nobility, decentralized military organization, and feudal lord-peasant relations—provided the sources of most of European constitutionalism in the late medieval period.”<sup>29</sup> These factors in turn spawned “local government . . . , parliamentary bodies, and the rule of law,” the essence of limited government (27). In five closely argued pages, Downing maintains that Old Russia enjoyed neither the precursors for nor the fruits of early modern Western constitutionalism. In his presentation we can see a willingness to offer “short cuts” in the name of the discovery of general patterns that few historians could comfortably accept. For example, Downing introduces the phrase “Ivan IV’s

reign of terror (*Oprichnina*)” (43). A review of the sources and literature supports the contention that something unsavory went on in the Muscovite court between 1565 and 1572, but to call this a “reign of terror” is to transplant Russian events into the French Revolution and beyond.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the Middle Russian word *oprichnina* did not mean “reign of terror” as Downing’s phrase suggests, but rather “widow’s allotment.”<sup>31</sup> Further, Downing pursues the origins of Russian autocracy to a narrow extreme. He cites Marx approvingly on the subject: “The bloody mire of Mongolian slavery, not the rude glory of the [Kievan] epoch, forms the cradle of Muscovy, and modern Russia is but a metamorphosis of Muscovy” (39). The impact of the Mongols is a traditional point of debate in Russian historiography, but it is hard to imagine any specialist agreeing with Marx’s statement.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Downing writes that his study began when he asked himself “why [Russia] did not develop in the direction of democracy, as did many Western countries?” i.e., with a question about the present, not about the past (xi). Interestingly, Downing takes his book’s epigraph from *The Whig Interpretation* (v).

The descriptivist and generalist programs are hardly exclusive. The two should not be imagined as camps, though it is convenient to speak this way. Rather they are tendencies ingrained in the programs and institutions of modern historical scholarship: historians, for example, will most likely be descriptivists and will be critical of whig history, while political scientists and sociologists will most likely be generalists and promote broad historical theories. Both will sometimes have the opportunity to switch perspectives. The difference between the generalist and descriptivist programs as regards the research compromises is summarized in Table 3.

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<sup>29</sup>B. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change. Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 27.

<sup>30</sup>For a balanced review, see R. Crummey, *The Formation of Muscovy, 1304-1613* (London and New York: Longman, 1987), 161-72.

<sup>31</sup>S. G. Barkhudarov, ed. et al., *Slovar’ russkogo iazyka XI-XVII vv.*, 16 vols. to date (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-), 13: 45.

<sup>32</sup>For an overview, see C. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

**Table 3: Scientific Programs and Anachronism**

<i>Paradox</i>		<i>Compromise</i>	<i>Generalist (to Descriptivists)</i>	<i>Descriptivist (to Generalists)</i>
Representation	>	Translation	“not theoretically relevant”	[or] “anachronistic”
Explanation	>	Simplification	“factological” [or]	“deterministic”
Justification	>	Engagement	“esoteric”	[or] “partisan”

**Conclusion**

With this the structure of Butterfield’s fragmentary sociology of anachronism becomes clear. Three factors inform the tendency to commit anachronistic error. The first is constituted by the demands of disciplinary history, specifically the defining principles of discontinuity, empiricism, and value neutrality. In the course of research each of these principles presents the historian with particular difficulties--the paradoxes of representation, explanation, and justification. In response to these paradoxes scholars will sometimes reach for one of several research compromises--techniques that facilitate research by lessening the impact of the paradoxes. We identified three of them: translation, simplification, and engagement. Butterfield believed that all the research compromises (“short cuts”) were irredeemably anachronistic, however they are often sensible solutions to intractable problems. If they are applied in a clumsy or heavy-handed manner, then they become serious anachronisms. A second factor affecting the proclivity to anachronism is the nature of the project facing the historian. Projects such as generalization, tracing origins, and judging the morality of historical actors often involve taking “short cuts” that end in anachronism. A final factor leading historians to anachronism is the scientific program they espouse. If they are descriptivists they are less likely to use the research compromises and correspondingly less prone to anachronism. If they are generalists they are more likely to opt for heavy use of the research compromises and consequently more likely to commit errors of anachronism.