Historicism

A Travelling Concept

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1

Historicism through the lens of anti-historicism: The case of modern Jewish history

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Abstract

Crises of historicism, as instigated by philosophers and theologians, expose the underside of a methodological practice not often given to introspection. They also signal and emerge out of a larger historical moment marked by disruption and upheaval. This chapter explores three such moments from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries, all of which are related to the enterprise of Jewish history. The first featured the renowned German-Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), who turned his attention to the approach of his one-time teacher, the historian Heinrich Graetz. The second involved Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), a former student of history who would become one of the most influential Jewish thinkers in Weimar Germany and who renounced his erstwhile scholarly practice. The third was inspired by an historian himself, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009), whose 1982 book *Zakhor* introduced a new degree of self-reflection into the field of Jewish studies.

Introduction

Over the past century and a half, historicism has played an important role, directly or indirectly, in some of the most interesting and consequential methodological debates in the human sciences. Indeed, it has travelled, even flitted promiscuously, across disciplines, entering the guarded precincts of, among other fields, history, philosophy, theology and economics.

A key to its ability to travel so widely has been its multivalence. Historicism, as many have noted, has had many different, even contradictory, meanings to different people – for example, to Ernst Troeltsch, Friedrich Meinecke and Karl Popper, three major theoreticians of the term in the twentieth century, each of whom operated with distinct understandings of what historicism offered or threatened.[1]

In this regard, we notice another prominent feature of historicism over the course of its career – that it has journeyed back and forth between its status as a conceptual platform for constructive or even essential scholarly labour and its status as an intellectual bogeyman used as a term of opprobrium to denounce or castigate those at whom it is flung. Historicism, in the eyes of its critics, can be methodological primitivism, scepticism, relativism or some combination of all three. Its appearance can unsettle commonplace assumptions or guiding principles, prompting wider intellectual malaise or disorientation.

It is this spectre that brings us to the heart of the matter in this chapter: the opportunity to explore crises of historicism that periodically surfaced in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They arose with the aim of combating the methodological or existential threat that historicism itself was perceived to represent.

At the outset, it is important to bear in mind two points. First, crises of historicism are not cries in the wilderness reflecting the panic or outrage of a few isolated critics; they emerge out of historical moments rife with change and disruption, marked by a high degree of intellectual upheaval. The critique of historicism, in this sense, is but one arrow in the quiver of those who fear that the existing order is being undermined in a deeply threatening way.

And a related second observation: the alarm over a 'crisis of historicism' is usually sounded not by historians, but by non-historians fearful of its consequences. For example, philosophers have seen fit to decry historicism's methodological imperiousness and flaccidity, often regarding the historical discipline as a second-order scholarly pursuit. So too have theologians. One scholar of the phenomenon, Thomas Howard, has aptly noted that the 'crisis of historicism stemmed from and found its centre of gravity in explicitly theological problems'.[2] Indeed, theologians were chief among historicism's critics, bemoaning its tendency to reduce inspired figures or texts to a narrow and decidedly mundane context – and thereby convert the sacred into the profane. But theologians such as D. F. Strauss and Albert Schweitzer were also among historicism's most avid promoters – in the sense that historicism mandated an understanding of the evolution of an historical individuum in context. Indeed, one of the great modern battles among theologians was the 'Historical Jesus' controversy, which revolved around the question of whether Jesus could be understood in the context of first-century Palestine or only as the transcendent Christ of faith. In some cases, for example, Ernst Troeltsch, the battle waged within the same theologian, at once drawn to the contextualizing impulses of historicism yet repelled by its seeming relativizing impulses.

In this chapter, I would like to elaborate on and, in one case, complicate these two propositions. In doing so, I will identify three moments of crisis of historicism, each of which reflects a larger state of intellectual and political perplexity. These moments are drawn from the history of one of the most instructive barometers of change in modern European history, the Jews. By virtue of their liminal status – as 'cognitive insiders' and 'social outsiders' in Paul Mendes-Flohr's well-known phrase – Jews both participated robustly in cultural and intellectual life in their host societies and encountered clear limits to their integration.[3] This liminal status, as Mendes-Flohr and others have observed, inclined Jews towards artistic and scientific innovation – and conversely, rendered them susceptible to forces of reaction. And it is that status, at the front line between forces of innovation and reaction, that made them important actors in the battles over historicism from the last quarter of the nineteenth century up to the present.

Heinrich Graetz

The first case at hand pitted two of the most important figures in German-Jewish intellectual history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the historian Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891) and the philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918). At its most basic level, this first crisis of historicism arose as a critique by a former student, Cohen, of a teacher, Graetz, as the student came to achieve intellectual maturity. At another level, it was a re-staging of the modern competition among the *Geisteswissenschaften*, pitting history against philosophy for the title of what the ancients called 'the queen of the sciences'.[4] Throughout the nineteenth century, there were intense efforts by advocates of the 'human sciences' to develop a proper scientific protocol independent of and on a par with that of the natural sciences. But there was also an intense debate *within* the various fields of the human sciences, with different disciplinary groups promoting the benefits of their respective discipline, and often insisting on their superiority over others. The result was not merely a popularity contest, but,

by the end of the century, a sharpening of the methodological, hermeneutical and epistemological premises of the fields.[5] Neo-Kantianism, particularly of the Southwest School in Germany, played a key role in pushing forward this conversation, proposing itself as an inclusive and holistic platform for defining the methodological protocol of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. And yet, as the famous debate between Wilhelm Windelband, a Southwest School representative, and Wilhelm Dilthey revealed, the project made for 'a fragile, combustible union'. The Neo-Kantians, as Frederick Beiser has observed, wanted to aid history in fortifying its precarious foundations, but they also regarded it as a threat because of its relativizing and hegemonic impulses.[6]

For all of their belief in the prospect of achieving methodological clarity in the name of *Wissenschaft*, the broader cultural ambience in which Dilthey and Windelband dwelt was rife with tension, despair and pessimism. Indeed, the last quarter of the century was known *tout court* as the age of *Kulturpessimissmus*.[7] The sequence of events in the early 1870s makes clear why. The victory in the Franco-Prussian war followed by German unification in 1871 produced a sense of intoxicating glory, only to be followed by precipitous economic collapse in Austria and Germany in 1873. The dizzying rise and fall of fortunes not only damaged German national honour, but lent a powerful sense that the forward march of history had been retarded.

Among those who captured the sense of 'pessimism' of the day was Wilhelm Marr (1819–1904), the German journalist who invented the term 'antisemitism'. In describing what he saw as 'the triumph of Jewishness over Germanness' in an age of 'cultural-historical bankruptcy', Marr spoke of the dark shadow of 'pessimism' hovering over Germany.[8] Of more direct relevance for this chapter is a far more notable cultural pessimist of the time, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose 'pessimism' was far more nuanced and purposive than Marr's. Indeed, Nietzsche's 'Dionysian pessimism' was not merely a reflection on the stagnant and decrepit state of the world, but a realistic sense of 'the constant processes of transformation and destruction that mark out the human condition'.[9]

The recurrent tension in Nietzsche between unsparing critique of the present – hence, pessimism – and the possibility of regeneration in the future (albeit through a dialectical process of destruction) animates his view of history. This is especially present in his well-known short essay, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* from 1874. With his inimitable acuity, Nietzsche criticized the over-abundance of historical data generated in his day, which led to an unfortunate condition: people knowing more and more about less and less. This was a disappointing abdication of history's responsibility and potential:

'What if, rather than remaining the life-promoting activity of a historical being, history is turned into the objective uncovering of mere facts by the disinterested scholar – facts to be left as they are found, to be contemplated without being assimilated into present being?'[10] That was the state of affairs about which Nietzsche vented his irritation and pessimism. History harvested the chaff, but did not extract the wheat of the past. And yet, all was not lost. Nietzsche, with his conditional pessimism, held out the prospect, slim as it may be, that history – or more specifically, historical education – could be deployed to 'serve life', as the words of his sub-title suggest.

It is in this milieu – a pessimistic era marked by intense debates about the utility of history – that a young neo-Kantian philosopher named Hermann Cohen launched a volley at the well-known Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz. Their exchange was an important and raw encapsulation of the disciplinary and temperamental differences between historians and philosophers in this period.

Graetz was a renowned scholar who, in 1854, had begun to publish what would become a monumental, eleven-volume history of the Jews, *Geschichte der Juden*. By the time that Cohen issued his first critique in 1880, Graetz had become the most famous and controversial Jewish historian of his day, a pioneer in terms of both the method and scale of his research, and a man whose passions and prejudices were rarely concealed. Graetz also happened to be Hermann Cohen's teacher at the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau, where Cohen went to study for the rabbinate in 1857 before leaving to embark on a career as a philosopher. During his time at Breslau, Cohen remembered, there 'was stirring in me in those young years a kind of historical consciousness'. Graetz was apparently a major influence. Cohen recalled his teacher's 'interesting and lively presentation of the great men of our literature'. Moreover, he recalled that Graetz 'elevated us to our spiritual heights'.[11]

The passage of time obviously led to a change of heart. After leaving behind the rabbinical seminary, Cohen commenced studies in philosophy at the University of Breslau in 1861 before moving to the University of Berlin and then submitting his dissertation at Halle. In 1873, he was appointed as a *Privatdozent* at the University of Marburg, where he would spend the entirety of his academic career.[12] By 1880, he had a chair at Marburg and a reputation as a prominent Neo-Kantian philosopher of his day. In that year, Graetz came under attack from two sharply disparate sources: his former student, Cohen, on one hand, and the leading Prussian nationalist historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, on the other.

It was the most unusual pairing. Treitschke's nationalism had taken a noxious turn in a tumultuous 1870s, expressing itself in increasingly xenophobic terms,

with a particular focus on Jews. Cohen, for his part, was a proud and engaged Jew who readily fought against the scourge that was now known by Marr's neologism, 'antisemitism'. One of the catalysts for Treitschke's descent into overt bigotry was his reading of the eleventh volume of Graetz's *Geschichte der Juden*. Graetz's passionate and sympathetic rendering of Jews (especially those whom he favoured) stood in contrast to what Treitschke saw as his anti-Christian bias and inadequate expression of German loyalty. Not only was Graetz guilty, but Jews at large, he lamented, held onto their insularity and exclusivity. In making this claim, Treitschke was hardly oblivious to the rising tide of anti-Jewish sentiment in German society. Rather than challenge it, he articulated great sympathy for those who stoked it. Jews were outliers who did not fit into the emergent German nation. Escalating the rhetorical temperature even further, he memorably declared, 'the Jews are our misfortune'.[13]

Treitschke's words in 1879–1880 triggered what came to be known as the Berlin *Antisemitismusstreit*, a wide-ranging public debate about the suitability of Jews in Germany. Hermann Cohen, as one of the most notable German-Jewish intellectuals of the day, jumped into the fray with an essay in 1880, 'Ein Bekenntniss in der Judenfrage'. Not surprisingly, he criticized those who sought to construct a barrier between Jews and Germans. Anticipating his later manifesto from 1915 *Deutschtum und Judentum*, Cohen acknowledged the deep affinity between Judaism and Protestantism, on one hand, and Judaism and Kantianism, on the other.

But then he turned his anger on a most unlikely target, his former teacher Graetz, already under attack. Graetz represented a form of particularism that Cohen found at odds with his harmonious vision of German Judaism. He called this perspective 'Palestinian', a somewhat bewildering choice of words for someone who was usually precise in using them. Graetz did in fact visit Palestine in 1872, but he would not make Jewish settlement there a major focus of his scholarly or public activity. Cohen clearly had something else in mind: 'Palestinian' connoted a narrow, parochial and material understanding of Jewishness, quite at odds with his own more ethereal conception of Judaism as an exalted spiritual force. Not only did he criticize Graetz for this narrowness of perspective; in a related gibe, he also accused his former teacher of 'a frightening perversity of emotional judgments'. Graetz's colourful and impassioned portrayals of historical actors clearly marked, for Cohen, a triumph of the sensory over the rational.[14] It also represented the second-order pursuit of historians, who were capable of grasping only that which was accessible to the physical senses rather than seeking out the a priori laws that constitute existence. Graetz's superficial historicism, on this

reading, stood in contrast to the 'transcendental method' that Cohen had begun to explore already in 1871 in *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*.

In analysing Cohen's oddly timed attack, it is hard to separate the personal from the methodological from the larger contextual consideration. He was clearly separating from his one-time teacher, as well as from his youthful infatuation with history as he sought to articulate his vision of the elegance and superiority of philosophy. For Cohen, philosophy held to the kind of precise norms of procedure that befitted a noble *Geisteswissenschaft*. It was sober and scientific as opposed to history's inescapable surrender to subjectivity and the sensory.

There was also an element of cultural judgement in Cohen's critique. Graetz's barely concealed tendentiousness in his historical writing fortified a kind of Jewish particularism that upset Cohen's vision of a universal spiritual Judaism consonant with loyalty to the German nation. In an era of constant tumult, and especially in 1880 in a moment of unsettling antisemitic agitation, Cohen felt compelled to take Graetz to task for his excess of 'emotional judgements'. The historian's withering assessments of both deviant Jews and unsympathetic non-Jews did not serve the cause of combating antisemitism.

Something of the heaviness of the cultural pessimism of the day lay over this critique. Unlike Nietzsche, who was the era's great prophet of pessimism, Cohen believed in and wrote about the prospect of a better day for humanity. But the *Zeitgesit* sowed the seeds of rebellion against the old verities and optimism of the Enlightenment. There was, as Carl Schorske described it in his classic study of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, an emerging 'politics in a new key'. Even Hermann Cohen, whose Kantian mooring affirmed many of those verities, was swept up into the sharp polemical culture of the day.

Towards the end of his life, Cohen returned to the subject of his teacher, and the nature of his historical thinking. In 1917, he published an analysis of Graetz's philosophy of Jewish history. The passage of nearly forty years had brought massive change to the Continent, accelerated by the epoch-changing Great War. Although different in nature from the earlier age of *Kulturpessimissmus*, the current era was beset by its own anxiety and pessimism. The enormity of destruction of the war induced a new scepticism about existing political and cultural conventions. Long-standing theological and epistemological premises were challenged or discarded, leading to a sharp 'crisis consciousness'.[15]

In this state of crisis, history once again came under scrutiny. The previous efforts of Wilhelm Dilthey – in debate with the Southwest School of Neo-Kantians – to shore up the methodological foundations of the discipline in the

late nineteenth century were revisited. Once again, Hermann Cohen weighed in, juxtaposing his own disciplinary practice to Heinrich Graetz' historical method and vision of Jewish history. Thus, the latter was drawn to 'the succulent fruit of national-political Judaism', while regarding the philosopher's 'sublimated idealized Judaism' as a 'dried-out husk'. Engaging in his own creative misprision, Cohen asserted that Graetz was intent on demonstrating that Judaism was at heart a 'political constitution' rather than a 'messianic religion'. This was especially galling to Cohen because it echoed the perspective of one of Cohen's great intellectual foils Baruch Spinoza.[16] As he had done earlier in 1880, the seventy-five-year-old Marburg philosopher grated against the subjective, sensory features of Jewish history, on which he believed Graetz's base historicism singularly focused. But Cohen was himself in an awkward spot, since the very winds of change that brought renewed criticism to the practice of history had begun to sweep away the ground on which his own neo-Kantian philosophy stood.

Franz Rosenzweig

If Hermann Cohen proffered a critique of a lower-order historicism from the heart of the philosophical establishment in nineteenth-century Germany, his student, Franz Rosenzweig, took aim at the prominence of history from his perspective as a theological renegade in the tumultuous Weimar era. The two men represented different generations of German Jews; one was beholden to the ideal of a seamless German-Jewish harmony and the other to a more dialectical relationship that one historian has called 'dissimilation'. That said, they joined forces at a crucial moment in their respective lives. After Cohen retired from Marburg, he devoted himself with greater urgency to Jewish thought and philosophy. He moved to Berlin, where he began to teach at the Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. There he met Franz Rosenzweig in one of his seminars in 1913, a fateful year in Rosenzweig's life when he was close to following the path of a number of colleagues and relatives by converting from Judaism to Protestantism. Cohen had a galvanizing effect on Rosenzweig, demonstrating to him the intellectual seriousness and vivacity of serious study of Judaism. The two actually joined forces a number of years later to conceive of a new institution of learning, to be called the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, in which the boundary between academic and Jewish communal interests would be consciously traversed. This plan never reached fruition, at

least as Cohen and Rosenzweig imagined it. That is, the Akademie did take rise, but as the antithesis of their vision – as a centre of purely academic research.

Notwithstanding their partnership, Rosenzweig had a totally different outlook in terms of method and cultural politics. Unlike the establishmentarian Cohen, he was a rebel fighting on multiple fronts. The story of his pushback against the aridity of historicism commences with his erstwhile historical studies in 1908 at the University of Freiburg with Friedrich Meinecke and Heinrich Rickert, two of the leading figures (and opponents) in scholarly debates about the nature of historicism. Four years later, Rosenzweig completed a dissertation on Hegel and the state that combined intellectual biography with an analysis of Hegel's political thought.[17] But in the middle, in 1910, Rosenzweig began to express reservations about the meaning and significance of history. In a letter to his mentor and cousin, Hans Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig wrote: 'God does not redeem man through History, but actually as the God of Religion.'[18]

Rosenzweig's decision to leave behind historical study was something different from Hermann Cohen's rationale; it was not the philosopher's dismay with the historian's subjective surrender to the senses or failure to grasp experience on the basis of objective a prioris. It was the theologian's unwillingness to tolerate the atomizing quality of historicism, which shattered sacred sources of faith into minute contextual shards. In travelling his own path away from Freiburg and historical studies with Meinecke, Rosenzweig was anticipating what would become by the 1920s an 'anti-historicist revolution' fronted by leading Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten.[19] Having witnessed the effects of the 'Historical Jesus' debate in the nineteenth century, these scholars were deeply sceptical of the redemptive, or even minimally salutary, power of history to illuminate what the past offered. They rejected that historicist ethos that reduced all historical phenomena to the same rank, in line with Ranke's famous aphorism that 'every epoch is immediate to God'.

As in the case of Cohen, Rosenzweig's path away from history and historicism was not disconnected from his own emerging Jewish world view. A particularly important experience for him, along with his encounter with Cohen in Berlin in 1913, was his deployment with the German army in the First World War, during which time he came face-to-face with Southern and Eastern European co-religionists. The effects were dramatic, affording Rosenzweig a startling new perspective on a holistic mode of Jewish existence that he had never experienced in his native Germany.

With that vital mode uppermost in his mind and while still serving as a soldier, Rosenzweig set about to imagine a new Jewish intellectual and educational

world of which he himself, who only recently embraced his Jewish identity, could be part. In 1917, he drafted a proposal and sent it as a letter to Hermann Cohen. It became the basis of their joint efforts to create an innovative academy of Jewish learning. As noted, the institution of their vision did not take rise, at least not in Berlin. Cohen died in 1918, and Rosenzweig decamped to Frankfurt where, in 1920, he opened the 'Lehrhaus', which embodied some of the key ideas in his and Cohen's plan. In particular, the new centre sought to erase the boundaries between teacher and student, centre and periphery, with the goal of enfranchising and invigorating the disaffected young generation of German Jews.

It is important to recall the moment in which Rosenzweig acted. There was a palpable sense of gloom and despondency in the waning years of the Great War and its aftermath, as Germany took stock of its staggering loses. At the same time, there was a glimmer of possibility, as if the War's massive destruction had cleared away old structures to allow space for new ones to surface. It was in the midst of this ambience that Rosenzweig wrote his proposal cum letter to Cohen, which was published in 1918 as 'Zeit ists' (It is Time). It was also in this ambience that Roseznweig drafted in epistolary form what is known as the 'Urzelle', a blueprint for his major work of Jewish thought that was published in 1919 as *Stern der Erlösung*.[20]

From the moment of his spiritual crisis in 1913 when he contemplated conversion until the publication of the *Stern*, Rosenzweig underwent a remarkably rapid transformation. In the course of those six years, he developed an impressive degree of Jewish knowledge, theological sophistication and faith. As he laid it out in the 'Urzelle', his personal belief and larger theological system were logically centred on Revelation, which he described as 'a fixed immovable centrepoint' that was itself the source of a 'pure factuality' (*reine Tatsächlichkeit*).[21]

This version of factuality was very different from the facticity upon which the work of the historian was based. It was not a matter of collecting small factual stones and assembling them into an edifice that was subject to the corrosive effects of time. Rosenzweig's notion of the *Tatsächlichkeit* of Revelation did not operate at the whim of historicism's normal rules of causality. It transcended the shackles of time and space, much as the Christ of faith did for opponents of the 'Historical Jesus' school.

On Rosenzweig's view, the Jewish people also had that capacity to soar through time and space. In a lecture that he gave in his hometown of Kassel in the fall of 1919, Rosenzweig juxtaposed the idea of *Geist* (spirit) to that of *Epochen* (epochs). He noted that '(h)istory exercises it powers over the nations via epochs, through which they pass from childhood to adulthood to old age and then death'. 'But', he continued, 'it is this power of history over the life of nations that is denied here'. Indeed, on his view, one nation resists that power, 'one that is free from the constraint of time, that same constraint to which all other nations are subject. A nation at once unique and eternal among the nations.' This was the Jewish nation, which was guided by a *Geist* that 'breaks through the shackles of time'. The Jewish *Geist* 'disregards the omnipotence of time. Indeed, it walks unperturbed through history.'[22]

In arriving at this view, Rosenzweig was taking his place among a generation of theological upstarts in Germany, neo-traditionalists who were seeking to claw back to a meaningful concept of religious faith after the perceived assault of irreligious (or to use a term not yet in vogue, secular) modernizers. In one of his earliest essays, 'Atheistic Theology' from 1914, Rosenzweig scored both Protestant and Jewish thinkers in the modern age for apotheosizing this decidedly this-worldly phenomenon. Both were smitten, he lamented, by 'the curse of historicity'.[23] Herein lay a key early moment in Rosenzweig's critique of the culture of historicism that sacralized the profane and profanated the sacred.

The Great War, with its unprecedented scale of destruction, seemed to render impossible belief in a benign god, reinforcing instead the sense of an all-powerful, uncontrollable and soulless modern technological monster. Facing this grave theological challenge, Rosenzweig and his fellow seekers attempted to reconstruct the foundations of faith, taking aim at the common target of historicism. Both symbolically and as a matter of scholarly practice, historicism was seen as a pernicious tool of fragmentation and relativization that dismantled the essential values on which religious faith was built. It was necessary to overcome the ubiquity of historicism in order to capture anew the holism of sacred texts, figures and events.

This current of theological rebellion was but one rivulet in a larger sea of opposition and innovation that characterized the culture of the Weimar Republic. The Republic took rise in November 1918 amid the simmering ashes of the War, buoyed by a new spirit of optimism and weighed down by the pain of massive loss (of life, property and territory, in the case of Germany). This clash of vectors, accentuated by the political upheaval and economic volatility of the early 1920s, invited convention-defying initiatives in art, music, and ideas.

Franz Rosenzweig was a product of that age and its guiding spirit. He revolted against the complacent secularism of his elders, whose very sense of the sacred was being eroded before their eyes, aided by the chiselling effects of historicism. His own illuminating life journey was a compressed passage

that brought him in short order from the centre of power of historicism to a position of sharp dissent. Tellingly, in 1920, his one-time mentor, Friedrich Meinecke, approached him about the possibility of taking up a lectureship at the University of Freiburg. Rosenzweig had already left behind the world of history. He confessed to Meinecke that he had had a stark turning point, a crisis, in 1913. In the wake of that moment, he came to realize that 'history to me was a purveyor of forms, no more' – lacking an essential and organic quality of its own. In light of this realization, it is no surprise that Rosenzweig's unmooring from history coincided with – indeed, enabled – an intense quest that would define and impart meaning to the rest of his life: the discovery of a living connection to what he called 'my Judaism'.[24] In this respect, Rosenzweig participated in a highly personal path of return to Jewish tradition. At the same time, he contributed to a cross-denominational, theologically driven critique of historicism that sought to restore a sense of holism to a broken age.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi

A guiding theme up to this point has been the basic proposition that powerful cultural (and political) crises shake the foundations of disciplinary and epistemological systems. Crisis can impel scholars to travel well beyond their methodological origins to seek new intellectual sources of authority. In the cases of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, the tumult of their respective days coincided with – and may well have induced in them – a certain disdain for history, from which they moved away in search of deeper philosophical or theological meaning.

Cohen and Rosenzweig serve as bookends of the modernist revolt against an Enlightenment-born modernity. Cohen's rise to philosophical prominence – and attack on Heinrich Graetz – occurred in the Nietzschean moment of cultural pessimism, one with which he himself was not fully comfortable, but which inspired other thinkers and artists to overturn prevailing norms and ideals. This revolt reached full strength in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, in the waning years of the First World War and at the outset of the Weimar era, Franz Rosenzweig rose to prominence along with a diverse band of cultural creators who, in a decidedly modernist, vein, deviated from the staid, bourgeois platitudes of their parents' generation.

Just as a modernist sensibility helped to instigate intellectual rebellion, including against the practices and methodological presumptions of history, the

postmodern era served as the contextual bed for a third critique at century's end. The intrigue in this third case is that the chief protagonist was none other than an historian himself, the towering scholar of Jewish history, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009), best known as the author of *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982).[25]

Yerushalmi was neither a declared postmodernist nor an admirer of that which went under its name.[26] But he lived in an age dominated by postmodernism's concerns. As Jean-François Lyotard noted in *The Postmodern Condition*, 'postmodern' meant 'incredulity toward metanarratives', which generated both scepticism and fear of the totalizing (and totalitarian) inclinations contained therein.[27] Postmodernism also trained new attention on the process of literary (and historical) representation, challenging the belief that one could achieve a degree of interpretive fixity or, in the terms of the historian, objectivity.

While many critics tended to regard postmodernism as an act of wilful nihilism advanced by ill-intentioned promoters, it, of course, had its own history. Lyotard famously situated the postmodern problem of representation as a conundrum born in the wake of Auschwitz: 'Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly.'[28] With shattered instruments, the task of accurate representation, especially of an event of the magnitude of the Shoah, becomes nearly impossible.

Indeed, the post-Holocaust era posed serious epistemological and hermeneutical challenges. Postmodernism, as it emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, was, at least in part, a belated response to these challenges. It triggered its own sense of intellectual and cultural crisis which, in my view, helps set the stage for Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*, arguably the most important book to be published in Jewish studies over the past half century.

In this brief, 100-page volume, the Columbia historian masterfully summarizes the *longue durée* of Jewish collective memory from antiquity, noting the diverse rituals and liturgy that conveyed it. Collective memory, he demonstrated, had indeed been a vital connective tissue of Jews throughout their journey through history. This story of continuity comes to an abrupt end in *Zakhor*'s fourth chapter when Yerushalmi arrived at the modern period and the birth of a new critical historical sensibility – the very sensibility that guided him throughout his career as an historian of the Jews.

At that point, Yerushalmi adopted a dolorous and longing tone, as he juxtaposed the richness of pre-modern collective memory and the cold

dissecting labours of the modern historian. Historicism offered neither a warm communal embrace nor deep consolation. Echoes of both Nietzsche and Rosenzweig reverberate throughout the chapter, as Yerushalmi observes that the Jewish historian was called upon to provide little more than 'faith to fallen Jews'.[29] The historian's guiding practice both marked and widened the rupture of modernity, dissolving the bonds of memory that linked Jews to one another previously.

Lyotard's comment about the instruments destroyed in the rubble of Auschwitz is relevant here. Although Yerushalmi did not explicitly describe himself in these terms, he stood in the long shadow of the Holocaust. He knew well that in late antique and medieval times, Jews had developed reliable methods of memorializing the past, especially the tragedies that had befallen them and their ancestors. But this capacity weakened in modern times, owing both to the lingering effects of genocidal destruction and to the 'acceleration of history', as Pierre Nora described it, that contributed to observers knowing more and more about less and less.[30] Stitching together the fabric of memory anew – and in the process, generating meaning out of history – was no longer the mandate of the historian. Modern historical research provided neither remembrance nor consolation.

Yerushalmi's *cri de coeur* echoed powerfully, in no small measure because the criticism he offered was directed inward. Within the field of Jewish studies, it inaugurated a vigorous debate about the relationship between history and memory that reverberates to this day, as scholars produced a more detailed map of the history of historiography, interrogated his conclusion about the rupture induced by modern historical research and pondered their own subject positions as historians.[31] At the same time, *Zakhor* inspired, coincided and was in conversation with important new work on memory formation after the Holocaust produced by a diverse array of researchers, including Saul Friedlander, Lawrence Langer, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, James Young and Annette Wieviorka. More generally, Yerushalmi's interest belonged to a broader moment of scholarly engagement with memory, among whose key foci in Europe were the *lieux de mémoire* approach of Pierre Nora and Mona Ozouf in France (1984) and the study of cultural memory by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann in Germany at the turn of the last century.

This late twentieth-century milieu was a postmodern moment. As in the case of Yerushalmi, not all caught up in it subscribed to deconstructionist or related literary methods or presuppositions; in fact, a good number actively fought what they perceived as the pernicious nihilism of postmodernism. And yet, for all its

sins, real or imagined, the postmodern moment induced a degree of reflexivity about scholarly method and the interpretive process that humanistic scholarship in general – and historicism in particular – sometimes neglected.

Yerushalmi's own meditations joined in that moment in at least two regards. First, he offered in *Zakhor* a healthy measure of scepticism about history and its utility for life, although his lament may well have drawn more from Nietzsche than Derrida. Second, he engaged in the sort of methodological self-reflection that the intellectual Zeitgeist encouraged and even demanded. And his example was a powerful one. Many others – students, admirers, and critics – followed him down this reflexive path.

The enduring impact of Yerushalmi's example was not to deliver the last word on historicism, but in fact to stimulate a robust, thirty-five-year debate among historians, philosophers, theologians and literary critics over the function of history. This is perhaps the final irony in our story about crises of historicism. They induce fear of change – of desiccation, distortion and desacralization. This fear often induces rigorous polemics. In some cases, the polemics end in a methodological dead-end. But in other cases, they can defy expectations and lead to both enhanced self-reflection and a reinvigoration of historical practice itself.

Notes

1 Calvin R. Rand, 'Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (1964): 503–18.

2 Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

3 Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, 'The Study of the Jewish Intellectual: A Methodological Prolegomenon', in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 37, 42.

4 Joanne B. Ciulla, 'Handmaiden and Queen: What Philosophers Find in the Question: "What Is a Leader?"', in *Leadership Studies: The Dialogue of Disciplines*, ed. Michael Harvey and Ronald E. Riggio (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), 54.

5 Lydia Patton, 'Methodology of the Sciences', in *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael Forster and Kristin Gjesdal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 594–606.

6 Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
7 Stephen Kalberg, 'The Origin and Expansion of Kulturpessimismus: The Relationship between Public and Private Spheres in Early Twentieth Century Germany', *Sociological Theory* 5, no. 2 (1987): 150.
8 Wilhelm Marr, *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (Bern: Rudolph Costenoble, 1879), 38.
9 Joshua Foa Dienstag, 'Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism', *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 4 (2001): 935.
10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage on Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 2.
11 Hermann Cohen, 'Ein Gruß der Pietät an das breslauer Seminar', in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Bruno Strauss (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), 420.
12 David N. Myers, 'Hermann Cohen and the Problem of History at the Fin de Siècle', chap 2, in *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
13 Michael A. Meyer, 'Great Debate on Antisemitism: Jewish Reaction to New Hostility in Germany 1879–1881', *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 11, no. 1 (1966): 145.
14 Myers, 'Hermann Cohen', 53.
15 Robert J. Rubanowice, *Crisis in Consciousness: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch* (Tallahasee: University Presses of Florida, 1982).
16 Quoted in Myers, 'Hermann Cohen', 56.
17 See Josiah B. Simon, 'Franz Rosenzweig's Hegel and the State: Biography, History and Tragedy' (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2014).
18 Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, vol. 1 of *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk; Gesammelte Schriften* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 112–13.
19 See Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 'Die "antihistorische Revolution" in der protestantischen Theologie der zwanziger Jahre', in *Vernunft Wissenschaftliche Theologie und kirchliche Lehre*, ed. Jan Rohls and Gunther Wenz (Göttingen: Vanndenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 377–405; as well as Kurt Nowak, 'Die "antishistorische Revolution": Symptome und Folgen der Krise historische Weltorientierung nach dem Ersten Weltgrieg', in *Umstrittene Moderne: die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs*, ed. H. Renz and F. W. Graf (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987), 133–71.
20 A. Udoff and B. E. Galli, ed., *Franz Rosenzweig's 'The New Thinking'* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 45.
21 Udoff and Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig's 'The New Thinking'*, 57, 62–3. Meanwhile, on the ambience for Jewish intellectuals in this period, see Ulrich Sieg, *Jüdische Intellektuelle im Ersten Weltkrieg: Kriegserfahrungen, weltanschauliche Debatten und kulturelle Neuentwürfe* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001).

22 Franz Rosenzweig, 'Geist und Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte', in *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, ed. A. Mayer and R. Mayer, vol. 3 of *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften* (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 1984), 533, 537–8.
23 Franz Rosenzweig, 'Atheistische Theologie', in *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, ed. A. Mayer and R. Mayer, vol. 3 of *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk; Gesammelte Schriften* (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 1984), 686.
24 Nahum G. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1953), 95–6.
25 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, with a new preface and postscript by the author (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1989).
26 Y. H. Yerushalmi, 'Jüdische Historiographie und Postmodernismus: Eine abweichende Meinung', in *Geschichtsschreibung heute: Themen, Positionen, Kontroversen*, ed. Michael Brenner and David N. Myers (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2002), 75–94.
27 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), xxiv.
28 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), 56.
29 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 98. It is interesting to contrast this portrait of the historian to Cohen's rendering of Graetz, who was cast in somewhat one-dimensional terms a pure subjective emotionalism.
30 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7.
31 Perhaps the most important of Yerushalmi's respondents was Amos Funkenstein, 'Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness', *History and Memory* 1, no. 1 (1989): 5–26.

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