Epistemological Status of Ideas About the Past: History Is Not a Science

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Abstract—The paper is concerned with the idea that history is not a science, but a synthetic worldview, combining scientific rationality with mythological, religious, everyday and artistic worldviews. The task of historiography is not the search for truth, but the creation of concepts for the collective identity of imaginary communities and the ideological substantiation of their claims in the present. The methods of science are not applicable to historiography, and its narratives do not meet the criteria of truth and are not explanatory theories. The author emphasized ideas that from an epistemological point of view, history relates to opinion, instead of knowledge.

Keywords—history; historiography; science; epistemology; truth; worldview; method; law; knowledge; opinion

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern epistemology has elaborated in some detail the question of why ideas about the past do not meet the criteria of scientific knowledge and concluded that “The real truth is that history is not science and it does not produce knowledge in the true sense of the word” [1].

Historical narrative cannot be attributed to science because:

• The sciences study the general, the stable, the imperishable in the phenomena, while the history describes the individual and the accidental, which will never happen again.

• Science studies events that are consistent with the criterion of regularity. In social processes there are phenomena, the repetition of which has the appearance of regularity, but this is only the outward semblance of the necessary regularities of nature, since their causes and consequences are always unique and unique.

• Scientific knowledge explains the causes of phenomena. Historiography cannot provide a clear, consistent and objective explanation of the events of the past. If scientific theory explains, and then there is no theory in historiography, there is only a description - a narrative.

• The concepts and concepts used in the narrative contain an insurmountable gap with the object of description, which is unacceptable for science.

• The criteria of truth are not applicable to the narrative and, therefore, there is no possibility to check its authenticity. The narrative can only match the sources or not advise them. At the same time, the source, in turn, is also a narrative [2].

• Representations of the past are attribute-oriented, subjectively and value-oriented, in contrast to intersubjective axiologically neutral scientific knowledge.

• History does not have its own language and method. Historiography uses everyday language and, therefore, is unable to reach the level of scientific generalization.

• Ideas about the past, unlike knowledge of objective reality, are a priori and therefore necessarily lead to antinomies. Scientific knowledge is a posteriori. These should be considered in detail.

II. FEATURES OF THE OBJECT, SUBJECT AND METHOD OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The object of scientific knowledge is the objective reality given in sensory perception. The past does not exist as an objective reality and represents non-existence. Therefore, the historian deals not with the past as such, but with its description in the source, which is a text. Thus, the object of science and the object of historiography are ontologically different: history deals not with physical, but with semantic reality. In contrast to the changeable and infinite world of objective reality, semantic reality is immutable and finite. If physical reality can be known through observation and experiment, then semantic reality is speculative, and it operates not with objects, but with concepts.

If the task of science is the open laws of nature and the search for truth, then the task of history, as Herodotus formulated it, is to keep in memory the most significant events of the past [3].

Historiography is subject to conventions that have no analogies in objective reality. It places events in an artificial
space-time continuum of imaginary eras and imaginary communities. For example, the History of ancient Greece is the history of an imaginary era and an imaginary community. Ancient Greece is a speculative construct that never existed in reality. It turns out that historians study artificial, divorced from reality constructs, to describe which used randomly selected evidence of the past are.

The competence of the historian is reduced only to the compilation of sources or their retelling. The only method they use is the “scissors and glue” method [4]. It is obvious that such a method cannot even be considered hypothetically as a scientific one.

The essential feature of scientific knowledge is that this knowledge explains [5]. In addition, the explanation is possible only because of understanding. Understanding means that knowledge can be tested, reproduced empirically, and put into practice. Only an explanation that meets such criteria can be called a scientific one. Explanations that are not empirically tested are speculative because inevitably lead to antinomies. That is why scientific knowledge is attributive a posteriori. A priori knowledge, i.e. knowledge that cannot be correlated with an object independent of consciousness cannot be scientific.

The explanation in science is reduced to the discovery of universal principles of being, which it formulates in the form of laws. Science can explain why an event happened this way and not otherwise predict them in the future, since uses to explain the phenomena of the general necessary causal relationships (laws) [6]. The events of the past that historiography describes cannot be explained “scientifically” because not described and explained by law. The facts of the past are not universal, but unique and inimitable. Their generalization is possible only because of the discovery in them of speculative similarity, but their reasons will always be different. The historian explains the events of the past, referring to other events that are in relation to the first in the future, but in relation to the historian are in the past, and in this sense acts as a prophet of the past. In this sense, a historical narrative is a collection of facts systematized by assignment to a specific space-time continuum and (or) based on the logical error “post hoc ergo propter hoc”. Because of this, historiography is not able to create an explanatory theory [7].

Thus, the maxim of scientific knowledge is the reconciliation of being and thinking through practice and discourse, fixing recurring phenomena that can be summarized in the form of a scientific law. Historiography can only create a narration.

Therefore, a scientist can determine the necessary conditions for a process to occur (for example, the transition of a substance to a new state of aggregation). The historian cannot establish what conditions will be necessary and sufficient for, say, a war to begin. He can only state the facts that make it possible to understand why this particular war began [8].

A tool that allows science to describe general principles that can be applied to explain a multitude of concrete facts is mathematics. Historiography cannot go beyond the limits of the continuum of the concrete and reach generalizations, while science transforms its empirical object into abstract concepts: “There is nothing abstract or abstract in history. Everything abstract is essentially the opposite of the historical.” [9]

This means that historiography does not have its own language or conceptual apparatus, which is necessary for any science. Using to describe the past everyday language creates insurmountable epistemological problems for historiography. The concepts of science must meet the criterion of unambiguity and logical consistency. They designate and generalize a set of homogeneous concrete phenomena, because of the selection of an essential attribute (attribute) in them and can be unambiguously and intersubjectively correlated with reality in the process of cognition. Concepts that do not meet these criteria cannot be regarded as scientific.

It should also be clarified what criteria the knowledge that we define as scientific should meet. Scientific knowledge is knowledge that, firstly, is logically and empirically proven. Secondly, this knowledge is consistent, value-neutral and intersubjective, that is, independent of the position of the knowing subject and, therefore, the objectively and rationally interpreting reality of the subjects of cognition is the same for everyone [10]. Thirdly, this knowledge explains. In addition, in order to explain something, you need to understand it. Understanding means that knowledge can be tested, reproduced empirically, and put into practice. Only an explanation that meets such criteria can be called a scientific one. Explanations that are not empirically tested are speculative, since they inevitably lead to antinomies. That is why scientific knowledge is attributive a posteriori, and a priori knowledge, which cannot be correlated with an object independent of consciousness, cannot be scientific.

Knowledge of the past does not correspond to any of these criteria: “If we agree with Kant’s definition and apply the term “science” only in relation to knowledge, the authenticity of which is apodictic, then it becomes clear that history cannot be considered science” [11].

What is the “historical science”? This is a story about events in the past, structured in a time sequence, based on a retelling of other stories about these events. For this story, it is fundamentally important to understand that events relate to each other in relation to before or after. How does history differ from other types of knowledge and representation of the past, for example, fiction or journalism? Does history make science what the historian justifies its arguments with references to sources?

The fact of the past can be explained only with the help of another fact of the past, considering them in relation to cause and effect. However, this relationship will be a single random character, fundamentally different from the causal relationships studied by science. For example, the cause of the Second World War was the German attack on Poland in September 1939, and its consequence was the defeat of Germany in May 1945. However, the interrelation of these
two facts, unconditionally interconnected, cannot be explained "scientifically", since there is no necessary causal connection between them, which can be formulated or described as a law.

The only possible verification of the reliability of the facts of the past is its correspondence to the source. Nevertheless, to verify the accuracy of the information contained in the source, its completeness and its correspondence to the events that took place in reality is possible only in the field of reason or intuition, which rules out the assignment of history to scientific knowledge. Different concepts of understanding the past — there is a discussion not about the facts or events that took place in reality, but about their interpretation [12]. The representation of the past is always a palliative: the text is a subjective orderliness of facts, depending on the will of its author.

Even in those cases where the past can be reconstructed, such a test of the narrative does not allow to establish its truth. Historical reconstructions prove only the possibility of one or another hypothetical event, but do not allow us to claim that it actually happened in reality. For example, Thor Heyerdahl successfully engaged in historical reconstructions. His experiments confirmed the hypothesis about the possibility of contacts between cultures of the ancient Mediterranean and Polynesia with Mexico and Peru, but did not prove that they took place in reality.

III. ATTRIBUTIVE SUBJECTIVISM OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Scientific knowledge is knowledge that is not only logically and empirically proven, but also value-neutral and intersubjective; independent of the ideological position of the knowing subject and, therefore, the same for all objectively and rationally interpreting the reality of the subjects of cognition.

The attribute of semantic reality is that in it is impossible to oppose the object and subject of research, which form an inseparable unity. Therefore, “the only subject of historical knowledge is the essence of the thoughts that the historian can reproduce in his mind ...” [13] At the same time, the historian introduces his own attitude and understanding to the interpretation of historical sources, thereby giving the source new meaning.

Guided by common sense, the historian, as a man of his time, can relate to the present either as better than the past, or proceed from the fact that the past was better than the present. There is a paradox: in both cases he is forced to embellish the past, because if good can become bad, then bad cannot become good, i.e. the great present must necessarily precede the great past [14].

To paraphrase Cicero it can be argued that the story is the daughter of its time. After all, the past does not exist. There are people who represent the past and reconstruct it as a discourse, and this discourse is conditioned both by the personality of its author and the need of society for a particular representation of the past. The historian cannot but be an interested person, reflecting a certain ideological position: “Not to have a certain position means not to be a man, but a historian is a person, therefore he cannot express completely objective statements about the past” [15].

Even if the historian seeks to be objective and is limited only by the presentation of facts, their description is subject to the logic of the narrative, and their selection is determined by the position of the researcher. Moreover, historiography cannot limit itself to a simple statement of facts — this does not allow one to understand the meaning of what is happening. Nevertheless, even the systematization of facts, and even more their interpretation, is determined by the personality of the researcher [16].

In order to become a science, historiography must operate not with the “stories” that historians construct in the interests of their customers, but with the facts “purified from any connection with identity and memory” [17]. Nevertheless, as J. Assman notes, such facts “are empty abstractions, they mean nothing to anyone, nobody remembers about them” and therefore they constitute “a useless artifact torn out of connections and relationships” [18].

The ineradicable subjectivity of historiography is expressed in the fact that every historian searches in the past for what is interesting for him from an arbitrary place and interprets it from an arbitrary point of view. Therefore, J. Burchhardt compares the historian with the marine painter. Both choose facts arbitrarily: “there is always room for arbitrariness in choosing only one sequence of ideas or one point of view on the waves of those events that make up the ocean of world history” [19].

Thus, in spite of the claims of historians to an objective interpretation of the past, “historiography belongs to its own time and is rooted in the interests of its authors or their customer” [20]. Therefore, as A. Megill notes, in all countries historiography, becoming “science” served as the “ideological support of the state” [21]. It is no coincidence that I. Droyzen called the statesman a “practical historian”; the historian is the basis of political education and education [22].

Ultimately, the perception of the past is nothing but an opinion about opinion. It is not only always subjective, but also built on false assumptions and generalizations (stereotypes). The stereotypes of historians are reflected in the way they interpret and explain the past. This makes cognition of the past attributively subjective in form and content and does not allow it to be attributed to scientific knowledge. Tendency is an attribute of historiography. The historian is not a direct witness of the past. By interpreting sources, he reflects his point of view, but not on the past as such, but on its representation in these sources.

IV. CONCLUSION

The less freedom there is in society, the more history serves as a political tool aimed at managing past perceptions: setting holidays, erecting memorials, approving curricula, ordering works of art, glorifying some historical figures and destroying the memory of others. In order to give legitimacy to such a policy, history is ranked by the state as a science,
and the ideas about the past that it has received are presented as truth. In this sense, historiography leads to dogmatism, while scientific knowledge is attributively characteristic of pluralism [23].

Nevertheless, the present becomes the past because of the actualization of various equally probable alternatives, which are subordinated more to the occasion than to the rational activity of individuals and social groups. Therefore, the only true no alternative interpretation of historical events is impossible. Therefore, there is no one story, but there are many narrative representations of the past, each of which reflects the need for imaginary communities to define identity. However, none of them has the exclusive right to the truth: “there is no one past, because there is no one present” [24].

History, as an activity aimed at systematization of ideas about the past, should be considered as a synthetic type of worldview. It combines the creation of images (mythology), postulates taken for granted (religion), conditioning by personal experience (everyday), literary form and content (artistic) with signs of a scientific worldview manifested in the use of a conceptual apparatus, proof of hypotheses put forward and a critical attitude to evidence sources.

Therefore, history in its form, content, and methods of representing the past does not refer to science, but is a “hermaphrodite of scientific rationality and literary form” [25]. Thus, what we call historical science is epistemologically a metaphysical speculation, which is not applicable to the understanding of reality and, therefore, is neither a science nor a scientific method.

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