



Writing History after Postmodernism: Historiography in International Comparison.
Stuttgart: Sandra Richter, Institut für Literaturwissenschaften, Universität Stuttgart;
Manuel Braun, Institut für Deutsche Philologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität
München, 18.06.2009-19.06.2009.

Reviewed by Deirdre Mahony

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2009)

Writing History after Postmodernism: Historiography in International Comparison

The concerns of postmodernism – its critique of ‘grand narratives’ and teleology in history – seem to have suffered a decline in recent years. Even the great historiographical projects of the 1970s to the 1990s, which were themselves conceived as an express response to postmodernism, are no longer at the forefront of the historical sciences. In light of this situation, an interdisciplinary conference took place in Stuttgart on the 18th and 19th of June 2009 entitled *Writing History after Postmodernism: Historiography in International Comparison* which aimed to review and consolidate current attitudes to postmodernism, as well as to suggest methods for overcoming the uncertainties of the post-postmodernist academic environment. Scholars from a wide-range of disciplines were invited in order to provide a holistic approach. This conference, supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, was organised by Sandra Richter (Institute for Literary Science, University of Stuttgart) and Manuel Braun (Institute for German Philology, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich).

One approach highlighted by the conference was that of alternatives to modernism and postmodernism: OLIVER HUCK (Hamburg), in his paper ‘Writing the History of Music after Postmodernism’, argued that a history of music must include not only a history of composition but also a history of interpretation (understood as musical rather than musicological interpretation i.e. as interpretative performance) – something not achieved by either modernism or postmodernism. This has, ac-

ording to Huck, been due to the lack of perception of a difference between written music and the variety of musical interpretations (or indeed theoretical conceptualisations) of that written music. Continuing this approach, BENJAMIN SCHELLER (Berlin), in his paper ‘Between Heterarchic Promise and Structural Analysis: Concepts of ‘Net’ and ‘Network’ in Cultural Science’, advocated an alternative idea which incorporates the postmodern notion of society as a decentralised network as opposed to the modernist idea of the state as a single organism or machine. Yet this idea is also novel in that it allows for the incorporation of institutions into the model, views networks as often hierarchical and considers networks not as methods of explanation in social analysis but as useful forms of representing society. SANDRA RICHTER also offered an alternative to postmodern approaches in her paper ‘After the Readings. Including an Outline of Holism and Particularism in Interpretation Theory’ in which she argued that postmodernism has led to a particularly liberal and wide concept of reading (‘Lektüre’). This involves theoretical and practical consequences for interpretation: the possibility of a true interpretation of a text is doubted, meaning that all readings become unassailable. Richter consequently argues for a more limited concept of reading, divested of the extreme holism and particularism of postmodernist interpretations. This ought to be a concept which does not overestimate the gain in knowledge provided by various readings (it ought not to include the more scientific aspects associated with

interpretation) and which involves an approach of particularistic holism, appreciating the interplay between details and the whole.

Other scholars advocated a third way which involved a certain degree of return to pre-postmodernist thinking whilst also incorporating the useful insights of postmodernism. MARK GREGORY PEGG (St. Louis) in his paper 'The Art of History' asserted that contrary to the oft-cited criticism that postmodernism represents relativism, postmodernism in fact contains essentialist elements - it sees the creation of narrative itself as an essential (and universal) human quality. According to Pegg, postmodernism also involves an intellectualist bias, concentrating on ideas in history rather than actions or behaviours. In this post-postmodernist academic environment, Pegg argued against the presumption of universal human qualities in writing history, and against a bias toward what stems only from language (namely ideas) - in this sense he advocated a limited return to pre-postmodernist attitudes. He argued that in order to understand past worlds fully, one must evoke them as fully as possible, including all their facets. In contrast to a postmodernist view, Pegg believes in an objective historical truth, yet with a concession toward the postmodernist era, he admits it will never be achieved. CORNELIS MENKE's (Bielefeld) paper 'Scientific Progress and Descriptive Categories of the History of Science' continued in a similar vein, examining the close relationship between science and progress and the descriptive categories this involves. With reference to Kuhn's postmodern critique (which views scientific progress not as a linear accumulation of knowledge but as periodic paradigm shifts), he discussed how describing science as progress (in an accumulative, epistemological or teleological sense) can be problematic particularly for the writing of the history of science. Yet Menke remains sceptical as to the possibility of finding descriptive categories better suited to explaining progress than those teleology-laden ones which stem from the history, rather than the philosophy, of science and so, to some extent, reverts to a pre-postmodern stance. LUTZ DANNEBERG's (Berlin) paper 'Source, Influence, Trace' in which he considered the concept of 'trace' and how this is to be distinguished from 'source' and 'influence' also returned to a pre-postmodern approach. He highlighted the fact that this problematic concept was well-examined long before the advent of postmodernism and that such analysis leads to the conclusion that the concept of 'trace' may only be used to a very limited extent in a historical-scientific context.

Further papers at the conference advocated an ap-

proach concerned with narrative and ways to interpret narrative: JONAS GRETHLEIN (Heidelberg) argued in his paper 'Experience and Narrative. From Postmodernism into Antiquity' that though postmodernism had rejected narrative in favour of experience (both that of historical actors and historians), narrative is in fact a useful means for representing experience: one finds the forcefulness of experience much better portrayed in historical novels than in historiography itself. ANDREAS KABLITZ (Köln) also considered narrative in his paper 'Is it really so? Marc Bressant's Novel "La dernière conférence" and Fiction after Postmodernism' examining the interplay between fact and fiction in the novel. Bressant's work represents for Kablitz a redefinition of factuality and fictionality where separating historical fact from narrative fiction remains problematic.

A final approach highlighted by the conference was that of answering the pragmatic question of how scholars are to write history in light of postmodern concerns. FRANK REXROTH (Göttingen), in his paper 'Modernism, Postmodernism and the Crisis of Writing History. A Contradiction', argued against the notion that the postmodernist era was the first to question the validity of narrative representations of history. Rather, Rexroth asserted, throughout modernity, ever since history and poetry became separated, there has existed a certain professional scepticism toward writing narrative history. For Rexroth, in order to write history after postmodernism, one must be aware of the difference between 'Geschichtsforschung' ('Historical Analysis/Research') which denotes written investigations based on limited empirical material in answer to a definite question, and 'Geschichtsschreibung' ('Historical Writing') which denotes the wide and diachronical organisation of historical knowledge (and can indeed be less scientific/academic in character.) A paper from JAN-DIRK MÄLLER (Munich) entitled 'Laboratories: Small Narratives' continued this theme by considering the writing of literary history. Mäller argued for a middle level between grand narratives (discredited by postmodernism) and limited, individual histories (with which postmodernism replaced the *grand récit*), which considers literary history as a network of partial histories. This approach sees literature as produced within certain regional, social and institutional constellations, though simultaneously possessing its own sense of being (literature is not merely a result of its context). For this purpose Mäller's research group has constructed the notion of literary production occurring in 'laboratories' - explained as spaces of consolidation in which

(cultural, regional) conditions converge to produce new works. Regarding the writing of the history of philosophy, ANDREAS URS SOMMER (Freiburg), in his paper on "Philosophy and Narrative" argued that despite philosophy's traditional hostility toward narrative communication (discursive argumentation being the preferred means of communication), it can (and indeed must) be found in the three areas history of philosophy, philosophy of history, and philosophical scepticism. According to Sommer, philosophical texts from Parmenides to Adorno involve narrative elements and ought not to be reduced merely to their propositional content in writing the history of philosophy. For Sommer, even philosophical scepticism cannot dispense with the narrative and illustrative aspects of its arguments. JOHANN ANSELM STEIGER (Hamburg) considered the writing of theological history in his paper "The Eschatological Teleology of the Comets of 1680 and the Revision of the Teleological Meaning of History. The Debate between Sigmund von Birken and Philipp Jakob Spener". According to Steiger, research in this subject concentrates too much on a teleological concept in historiography and future theological historiography ought to employ a non-teleological model, an introduction which would require subject-wide discussion. STEPHAN CONERMANN (Bonn) emphasised in his paper "Turnaround? Islamic Studies" Textual Readings after the Linguistic Turn" that whilst the problem of how to write history has been much considered in the Western tradition, it has not received similar attention in Islamic studies.

The conference fulfilled its objectives of reviewing the effects of postmodernism in a range of academic disciplines. Despite the variety of approaches discussed, a certain consensus seemed apparent, in that the contributors largely agreed that neither the insights of postmodernism, nor those of previous modern approaches ought to be rejected. Rather, the best elements are to be taken from both to establish a new approach which appreciates the contingency but also the necessity of constructing narratives in the humanities. Emerging new fields of study such as Digital Humanities which go beyond the scope of postmodernism will no doubt proceed with such post-postmodern reflections in mind.

Conference Overview:

Section 1: Beyond Postmodernism: Retrospect as

Prospect

Led by: Jörg Schäfer (Hamburg)

Oliver Huck: Writing the History of Music after Postmodernism

Mark Gregory Pegg: The Art of History

Jonas Grethlein: Experience and Narrative. From Postmodernism into Antiquity

Andreas Kablitz: Is it really so? Marc Bressant's Novel "La dernière conférence" and Fiction after Postmodernism

Section 2: On the Problem of Narrative

Led by: Philip Ajouri (Stuttgart)

Frank Rexroth: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Crisis of Writing History. A Contradiction

Jan-Dirk Müller: Laboratories: Small Narratives

Andreas Urs Sommer: Philosophy and Narrative. Problems in the History of Philosophy, the Philosophy of History and Philosophical Scepticism

Stephan Conermann: Turnaround? Islamic Studies" Textual Readings after the Linguistic Turn

Section 3: Historiographical Concepts after Postmodern Criticism

Led by: Marcel Lepper (Marbach)

Johann Anselm Steiger: The Eschatological Teleology of the Comets of 1680 and the Revision of the Teleological Meaning of History. The Debate between Sigmund von Birken and Philipp Jakob Spener

Cornelis Menke: Scientific Progress and Descriptive Categories of the History of Science

Lutz Danneberg: Source, Influence, Trace

Section 4: Impulses for New Historical Thinking

Led by: Horst Thom (Stuttgart)

Benjamin Scheller: Between Heterarchic Promise and Structural Analysis: Concepts of "Net" and "Network" in Cultural Science

Sandra Richter: After the Readings. Including an Outline of Holism and Particularism in Interpretation Theory

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Deirdre Mahony. Review of , *Writing History after Postmodernism: Historiography in International Comparison*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=28284>

Copyright © 2009 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.