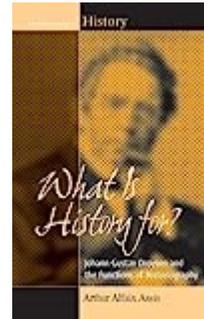




Arthur Alfaix Assis. *What Is History For?: Johann Gustav Droysen and the Functions of Historiography.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. VIII, 234 S. ISBN 978-1-78238-248-5.



Reviewed by Francesco Guerra

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2015)

A.A. Assis: What Is History For?

Arthur Alfaix Assis is a brilliant young Brazilian historian, professor of theory and methodology of history at the University of Brasilia, with a sound background as a researcher abroad, in Germany, where he got a PhD from the University of Witten/Herdecke in 2009, under the supervision of Jürgen Rasmussen, with a dissertation that investigated the meaning and role of history in Johann Gustav Droysen's theory of history (Historical thinking. Johann Gustav Droysen on the value and function of history). The years spent studying in Germany and Rasmussen's lessons crop up in many places of this essay by Assis, a work of deep erudition and a thorough historiographical investigation of the entire, although extremely vast, body of works by Droysen, as well as on the equally rich secondary literature.

What is history for? Johann Gustav Droysen and the functions of historiography is built on four sections, plus the conclusions, and a precious final addendum, Droysen and his theory of history. In dealing with Droysen's historiography, Assis takes inspiration from the role of historiography until the mid-19th century, looking at the first few critiques to the exemplary theory of history be-

tween the late 18th century and the early 19th century (Functions of historiography until the Mid-nineteenth century: a short history of the problem) (p. 7). In the second section (The theoretical design of a new justification), the Brazilian author reviews Droysen's ideas about the function of historiography, mainly the texts on the theory and methodology of history. Here, he presents the theory of historical thinking that revolves around the concepts of understanding and interpreting history, the feeling of reality, Bildung and identity (p. 7).

In the third section (Historical thinking and the genealogy of the present), historical thinking is set within a substantive philosophy of history and is associated with a genetic interpretation of the present. Likewise, Assis shows that there is still some tension between historical thinking and Droysen's political ideas about the German national question and the role played by Prussia in it (pp. 7â8). The application of historical thinking to politics is the subject matter of the fourth section of this paper (The politics of historical thinking and the limits of a new function). Here, Assis rightly states that such application results in the loss of a large part of the universalism

of historical thinking. In addition, Droysen thus seems to go back to that kind of historical practice (exemplary theory of history) he himself had condemned (pp. 8â9).

The final addendum (Droysen and his theory of history) is prompted by some biographical issues, emphasising the problem of re-enacting the events of Droysenâs private life, a problem, this one, that is mainly due to the fact that the correspondence he exchanged with the people closest to him is unknown and might have gone lost. Moreover, when he published Droysenâs Briefwechsel, Rudolf Höfner did not give pride of place to private matters when he selected the materials (pp. 190â191). The addendum is also noteworthy in other respects, for instance for mentioning some of Droysenâs commentators, such as Nippel and Momigliano, and Assisâs perfectly shareable assumption that the real hiatus in the Pomeranian professorâs life was when he moved to Kiel (pp. 192â195). Finally, one should not miss the precious final reflection on the Historik about the positions taken by several scholars over time, among whom Rothacker, Meinecke, Arendt, Gadamer, Nipperdey, Rösen and Hardtwig are definitely worth mentioning (pp. 195â203).

Between the late 18th century and the mid-19th century, historians started to reflect on the purpose of historiography as well as questioning their own academic discipline. One of the first key questions asked by Assis was why the majority of historians and thinkers of the late 18th century thought learning history from historical examples had become inadequate. He seems to assume that culture had changed, not that the methodological technology for the study of the past had flourished. It was a change in cultural patterns, which was deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, and which can be summed up with the word temporalization (Verzeitlichung) (pp. 36â39). According to Assis, temporalization was essential to overcome the exemplary theories of history, as they could never be harmonised with those conceptions that emphasise the qualitative difference between the past, the present and the future.

The author intends to take Droysenâs texts on historical theory as evidence of that intellectual process that led 19th-century historiography to deeply criticise historical exemplarity. The uniqueness of Droysenâs position can be better understood if we think that until then the purpose of studying history had been to look into the historical process for substantive maxims for action, which would have been applicable beyond the realms of space and time.

From Droysenâs perspective, the phrase âhistorical

thinkingâ embodies the purpose of historiography tout court, admitting that history could no longer be understood through contents and models to be followed but through a formal way of thinking. The historian was called to engrave the present into the perspective of the past and, from there, to see the present as the result of a developmental process. Establishing the historical truth would have led one to find the history-defining forces, to map their interactions, and to understand the birth of the present from such developments (pp. 63â66). So, Droysenâs outstanding attempt, as pointed out by Assis, consisted in wanting to think of a new, positive justification for historiography. The Archimedean point in such a process would have been the will not to understand history any more as a discipline that can produce universally-applicable examples, but to conceive of historiography as a means through which authors and readers would have learnt to gain mental skills (pp. 7â8). Historical thinking may give visibility to the generative process of a given world, a process that looks crucial to anyone who wants to take a decision, act and interact within that world (p. 2). Droysenâs perspective about history should have coincided with a stabilisation of a genetic, not exemplary, sense of history. A historical method that could grasp the genetic development of the present was needed to understand such a present.

Droysenâs neo-pragmatic project gave pride of place to the relationship of historiography with ethics and politics. What Droysen wanted to achieve was an understanding of the actual pragmatic bond between history and life, and that is why his texts were brimming with attempts at defining which impacts the genetic kind of historiography has, or should have, on contemporary culture, society and politics. In Droysenâs pages, the phrase âhistorical thinkingâ means an understanding that can hermeneutically relate not just to researchers, but to readers and historical agents too, all at the same time. For Droysen, the value of history went far beyond the academic world. Through the historianâs mediation, it turned into an awareness of the present and, when related with the concept of Bildung, which Assis sharply reflects upon, it turns into the self-awareness of mankind (pp. 77â85).

One of the key subjects in Assisâ noteworthy book is the disjunction that arguably existed in Droysen between the theory and the practice of historiography. In other words, Droysenâs commitment to the cause of German national unity led him to imbue many of his writings with the same exemplarity that his theoretical reflections used to condemn. Historical thinking seems to clash with

Droysen's intellectual commitment to the German national cause and the role that Prussia should have played in the process. However, when criticising Nippel, Assis admits that Droysen's theory of history should be viewed as a spurious rationalisation of his political beliefs, in other words, "Droysen attempted to integrate his ideas into a coherent world view" (pp. 8 and 14).

A point I am not too convinced about is Assis's view of historical truth. Assuming that, as he rightly writes, the historical truth, if taken beyond the criticism of the sources, can never be an absolute kind of truth, the Brazilian scholar claims that for Droysen such a truth is tantamount to a relative truth (p. 71). In his review of the *Historik*, Hayden White dealt with the problem of the scientific perspective actually presented by Droysen. Through a number of references to each stage of the historical method, White concluded that Droysen's re-enactment of the past seems to respond not so much to a principle of truthfulness as to one of plausibility. A plausibility that seems to touch on all of the social practices within which the historian lives. Hayden White, *Historik*. By Johann Gustav Droysen, in: *History and Theory*, XIX (1980), n.1, p. 84. The principle of plausibility seems to be particularly consistent with what Droysen intends to express through his historical method. Therefore, if we can speak of science in terms of Droysen's theory of history, it should be viewed not as the science of the truthful, even if it were a relative truth but as the science of the plausible. See Francesco Guerra, *Alle origini del comprendere indagando (forschend zu verstehen): il carattere empirico del materiale storico e la critica al concetto di "fatto oggettivo" nella Istorica di J.G. Droysen*, in: *Scrinia*, Year IV (March 2007), n.1, pp. 74-75.

The second part of Assis's book concerns the historical-political reflections made by Droysen in his works. The author finds the Archimedean point in the *Lectures on the Wars of Freedom* held by Droysen in Kiel in the Forties and published as a printed text for the first time in 1846. Assis takes this text as the starting point to contextualise Droysen's political ideas in this span of time, cleverly finding that the wars against Napoleon's troops were regarded by Droysen as a sort of a myth of the rebirth of a nation (pp. 117-118). Here, Assis engages in very interesting considerations about Droysen's use of the phrases "liberation wars" or "freedom wars", lingering on the juxtaposition made in Droysen's texts be-

tween revolution and reforms, the latter regarded as the only effective means for political and social progress, and between power and State (pp. 117-118). However, there is a point in this section where my reading differs from Assis's, and it is when Assis defines Droysen's considerations about history and freedom as a "sort of democratic postulate" (p. 121). In this respect, I would rather speak of Droysen's liberal monarchism as a consistent supporter of the Central Right side in Frankfurt (Casino Fraktion) and afterwards of the National Liberal era, close to the positions taken by the *Preussische Jahrbücher* and by the *Preussische Wochenblatt*, the journal of the future Minister of William II, Bethmann-Hollweg. A position, this one, that would always go hand in hand with Droysen's firm rejection of any democratic- or republic-inspired political idea. See Johann Gustav Droysen, *Briefwechsel*, 2 Bände, Rudolf Häbner (Hrsg.), Stuttgart / Berlin / Leipzig 1929, Band 1, p. 466. His liberalism can be considered inclusive insofar as it is antithetic to the concept of absolutism, and it is from this perspective that, as smartly pointed out by Assis, Droysen expresses his condemnation of the colonial system (p. 122). Droysen saw that his present involved the establishment of national identities, first and foremost the German one, which realistically could only take place under the aegis of Prussia.

The last point mentioned by Assis concerns the relation between Droysen's political theory and his substantive philosophy of history. Here, the author rightly points out that Droysen's theory of history encompasses different micro-theories, which, although complementary, remain basically separate (p. 203). These areas were extremely inconsistent, and there is no doubt that Droysen, partly under the pressure of a quick succession of facts and events, failed to bring the *disjecta membra* of his historical theory back into a consistent theoretical and historical-political picture.

Lastly, Assis's monograph is extremely valuable, since, through a painstaking review of Droysen's texts, it sheds light on the unsurpassable tension that can be found there between an epistemology of history, as an alternative model of any exemplary theory of history, and a historical-political thought that needed the examples of the past to find which actions had to be carried out in the present or the future.

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

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

Citation: Francesco Guerra. Review of Assis, Arthur Alfaix, *What Is History For?: Johann Gustav Droysen and the Functions of Historiography*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44452>

Copyright © 2015 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.