

# Comments on Gabrielle Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian”<sup>\*</sup>

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15 Apr 2009

There is a precedent for Presidential Addresses to the American Historical Association to draw tentative new insights together into a synthesis that points to a possible future for the profession. Spiegel’s Address apparently aims to fulfill that role. The time is appropriate, for Spiegel understands that the unsettling effect of the linguistic turn has run its course, and she justifiably raises the question of what can be salvaged from it to construct a new kind of historiography that is not just a return to the old. Unfortunately, little emerges from her effort beyond a description of some new historical topics worth exploring.

It is important to understand why she fails to achieve more, for only then is it possible to look beyond her limitations to speculate about what an alternative historiographic future might be. I will here measure her position in relation to modern western conceptual categories and suggest that she does not escape their prison and is therefore unable to offer any real alternative to a tradition in collapse. I will address four issues: the social location of the historian, the categorical distinction of real and actual, that of Self and Other, and finally, how we might define things in terms of their extrinsic properties. I will not develop my comments on an alternative notion of our future work as historians, for my primary purpose is only to suggest that we need to be more self-critical.

## 1 Social Location

The social location of the historian is typically that of a professional academic who privately possess the skills and knowledge that enable him to construct truthful, creative and persuasive accounts of the past. However, since the historian engaged in research is also a communicator, there is the question of his relation with everyone who is not a professional historian. The results of research seek the imprimatur of the professional community, but the historian’s ultimate target and justification is society at large that must support his efforts and is supposed to benefit from the results. This relation of history writing and the broader public is the obvious ground upon which to launch historiography in a new direction, but Spiegel raises the issue of the historian’s social location only narrowly and half-heartedly.

Regarding the natural sciences it is often said that its subject matter has become so arcane it is now unintelligible for the general public. However, we encounter many popularizations of natural

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<sup>\*</sup>Spiegel, Gabrielle M., “The Task of the Historian”, *American Historical Review*, 114, 1 (Feb 2009), pp. 1-15.

science that successfully bridge the gap between esoteric knowledge and what the non-expert might find interesting and digestible. That said, I find it difficult to imagine that a semiotic analysis of history can ever be broadly understood.

Although sometimes monkish devotees of the linguistic turn say that their aim is to make things obscure, most historians wouldn't agree. But despite their good intentions, obscurantism seems structurally implied by semiotic analysis. That is, the rules of discourse are represented as being emergent (outcomes not predictable based on a description of an initial state), and therefore they are by definition empirically irreducible to a base that consists of the thoughts of individuals. Since there can be no logical relation between emergent linguistic rules and the mental life at the base in empirical terms, historians of a linguistic inclination find themselves structured into darkness no less than the public at large, although they naturally won't admit it to themselves.

Another issue related to the historian's social location is that, as Spiegel herself insists, we are increasingly subject to global determinations and have acquired multiple overlapping social identities. Given the empirical complexity of our social location, we end without a coherent social location and therefore without a coherent framework in terms of which to represent the past. Clearly, any solution, if indeed there is one, to the crisis in historiography must reconsider the conventional notion of social location. It is not that we can escape it by some mysterious act of mental levitation (as positivism assumed), but we cannot expect to construct a coherent notion of the past unless we abandon the empiricist and therefore divisive definition of our social location.

Finally, a point that Spiegel does not address, is that the prevailing ethos in the world today is broadly democratic, a commitment to the belief that people are essentially equal. As a survey of the meanings given to democracy in the world today might suggest this does not simply reduce to equal rights or the protection of law, but more broadly is the notion that popular interests and needs are the ultimate determinant of political decisions and their satisfaction is the source of political legitimacy. What this implies is that one parameter for historiography is its general utility, its playing a positive role in ordinary people's lives. As a result, the central question for a new historiography, like the older historiography, is how historic consciousness might be socially liberating rather than how it leaps over philosophical buildings in a single bound.

Implied here is a social contradiction between professional historians (owners of their means of production) and the ultimate consumers of their product who generally do not rely on private ownership in order to develop as persons. I'm not suggesting that this means that inter-communication between the classes is impossible, but only that a self-conscious struggle for broad social accommodation must play a central role in the historian's task if his construction is to become meaningful for society at large. That the historian is skillful, works hard and means well is not enough.

These three aspects of the social location problem suggest that we have reached the end of the road in terms of the modern western cultural tradition, but also that a critical response to the challenge of the linguistic turn must break with its presuppositions much more radically than what Spiegel proposes.

## **2 The Real and the Actual**

The second problematic addresses the conceptual binary of real/actual. Unfortunately, Spiegel leaves this in a very uncertain state. The past, like the future, is (arguably) real, but it is clearly not actual. Alexander's Dictum that what is real is causal will no longer suffice in our age of scientific

realism. What distinguishes the actual is that it can be indexed from the present, can enter into a causal relation with other things in the present such as our observation of evidence. Although real, we can't see the past; we can't interact with it, observe it, interrogate it, or enter into any kind of dialectical relation with it as some carelessly assume. It is, to use the semiotic term, "absent", and what is absent cannot have a necessary relation with what is actual, such as causing things to happen.

However, this does not mean that we cannot construct from our knowledge of the evidence a truthful representation of the past. We do this all the time for non-actual realities. For example, we make justifiable probabilistic short-term predictions of the future, and that future is real because it will probabilistically actualize possibilities in the present. As for the past, an example is cosmologists who use existing evidence to arrive at truthful statements concerning the Big Bang. Ever since Peirce, we have known that truthful statements are mental constructs and therefore are not simple reflections of reality. However, saying that they are approximate analogs does not exhaust their truth value. For example, an image taken with an infrared camera responds to the heat differentials of an object and so represents a truth about it, although it is not the whole truth nor is the information contained in the image of the same nature as that associated with the object represented. It converts a range of heat values into a range of analogous color values.

Part of the linguistic turn is an emphasis on the mediation of signs or linguistic rules between the observer and an object observed. But all observation is mediated by a wide range of structures. A microscope mediates the relation of the eye and the object under inspection, and for that matter, the structure of the eye does that as well. Also, as structuralism has insisted, our relation with an object is mediated by cultural, social, economic, and material structures of various kinds that prevent our sensory apparatus or mind simply mirroring an object of interest. The mind represents the world its own fashion, in terms of its own biological and cultural capacities. This was understood long before the linguistic turn, and for us to reduce all these mediations to merely linguistic rules seems adventurous. In fact, if our possibilities in life, including mental life, ultimately arise from our relation with the material world, it also seems unrealistic.

What is observed is not the past, but merely traces of it and, as is well known, our observation of the traces is mediated in a variety of ways as we construct from them the historical evidence with which to build a mental representation of the past. The question here is the location of the ontological break. Does it arise from the determination of mediations or is it in our representation of the object of study, our representation of the past?

In the natural sciences, the antiquated positivist laboratory model defines an observer, the mediating structures, and the object observed as participating in a system that is broader than merely the object under study, but systematically excludes its relation with the environment. While the more inclusive frame encompassing all three supports a less one-sided representation of reality and therefor enlarges its potential truth value, if these constituents are understood in traditional terms as hypostatized entities entering into a causal relation, and causal power is seen as a property intrinsic to entities, the result is hopelessly contradictory or collapses into an infinite regress and fails to represent any ontological break.

Our mental conceptions of the world are emergent and therefore not reducible to an effect of the original state of the system under study, its mediating determinants and the capacities of the observer. To break with the contradictions of modern western ontology, the constituents of this system cannot be hypostatized as self-contained factors standing in a causal relation, but rather as constraints on the possibilities for change of the object of study that arise from its relation to the

wider world. Indeed, the natural sciences are coming to see closed systems as more a hypothetical limiting case than a useful characterization of reality.

### **3 Self and Other**

One problem in the modern western tradition is the conceptual contradiction represented by the terms Self and Other. It was ideologically useful at one time when the possibilities of the presumed typical individual could be actualized by placing his intrinsic capacities (his private property) into a constructive relation with resources that were available in his social or natural environment because they can be mobilized or detached from any social, legal or ideological entanglements to become self-contained, commodified.

There is no reason at all that we should universalize this outlook and represent the self-interested and self-contained Ego as autarchic. The historian confronts the evidence in terms of socially developed capacities, and so it is not a simple dialog between an individual and evidence. This was not a problem in terms of positivism, for the evidence (brute facts) was foundational, and so the construction of a conception of the past built on the evidence possessed truth value. The recent multiplication of determinants that are represented as irreducible dissolves any such foundation and delivers us into the jaws of an indeterminant interactionism. The solution, I believe, is not a return to a radical empiricist foundationalism, but to re-conceptualize the nature of things in terms of their possibilities rather than their causal powers.

If Self and Other are hypostatized self-contained entities, they can only affect each other accidentally, not essentially, and we end up with the indeterminant interactionism lacking any determinant framework, like a mathematical formula with too many variables. Rather than reduce evidence to brute facts, semiotic foundationalism reduces the facts to social or linguistic constructs. Any escape today from the crisis of historiography seems to require a challenge to this implicit and conventional dichotomy of Self and Other. One possibility is to not represent the historian as either a passive observer of facts or the active constructor of mental representations of the past. Both represent a relation of a hypostatized Mind and Body. The alternative is to transcend that contradiction by replacing mental action with physical action. Of course, for the historian to think of himself as engaged in physical rather than mental activity seems to run contrary to the ideal of academic isolation that in positivist terms was a condition for truth to emerge from the facts.

### **4 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Properties**

I have intentionally been a bit vague about alternative possibilities because my aim is critical, but the criticism only carries weight if some viable alternative is available. Spiegel's elaboration of new topics that appear to arise from more universal causal determinations seems only to limit the problem temporarily. While a universal social standpoint may exist, it can hardly survive her implicitly empiricist definition of communities. To escape the modern western conceptual categories would seem to require stepping away from defining things in terms of intrinsic qualities. However we may elaborate qualities or specify complex causal relations, their mutual effects leave intact their essential identity.

A different approach might be to include in the essential definition of things their extrinsic

properties as well, the relation to what lies in their surroundings. But how does one make an external relation essential? Causal explanation presumes closed systems defined in terms of their intrinsic qualities, and so the introduction of extrinsic properties (as in a pointless topology) implies a challenge to the adequacy of causal explanation. In the natural sciences, closed ("isolated" in thermodynamic terms) systems are coming to be seen as only hypothetical limiting cases.

Clearly, if systems are to be defined as essentially open, then there needs to be available an alternative to causal explanation. This too has been looked at in the natural sciences. Reality can be represented in terms of levels, where each represents a structure that constrains possibilities for its emergence that arise from its relation to a more general or universal level. Here intrinsic and extrinsic properties become merely aspects of a unitary process.

This approach is not unfamiliar in the natural sciences, and now-days is traced back to Darwin as being appropriate for any evolutionary system that is emergent. It is also not alien to our understanding of social development. A common example used is an apocryphal remark of Dillinger when asked to explain why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is." (Peter Martin, "Probability as a Physical Motive," *Entropy*, Vol. 9 [2007]).

Spiegel mentions the competing identities that arise from our participation in multiple social bodies, but this sees things in terms of causal factors that determine our self-identity. If instead we define these social bodies as sources of possibilities that we constrain in order to develop, then the problem disappears, for possibilities are additive rather than mutually exclusionary or competitive.