

TOWARD AN EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL SCIENCE

Lecture 5: Some Final Twistings and Turnings

I

In this final lecture, I shall first return to the issue I discussed in the last half of Lecture 2 (Sections III-VI), that is, the issue of whether, and if so how, a social science could be emancipatory and still be scientific. That, it is perhaps natural to think, is impossible because incoherent. I argue that we can have an emancipatory social *theory* that is normative, though it may not be through and through scientific, but it need not, for all of that, be unscientific or anti-scientific. As well, I shall argue, we can have an emancipatory orientation and we can have with it, *as an adjunct* to that social theory an emancipatory *social science*. Moreover, it is also reasonable, but perhaps mistaken, to think this *social science* itself, or indeed any social science, cannot be normative. In *that* way, perhaps the Weberians were right; but, I also argue, they were wrong in thinking that history—taken as a social science—could be written in a purely normatively neutral vocabulary. But how, one still might ask, could it be *emancipatory* and still be a social science? Does not the very notion of ‘being emancipatory’ connote being normative? And how can something be normative and still be scientific? There are a lot of entanglements here and I shall try to untangle them.

In Lecture 1 I assessed Joseph McCarney’s complicated and striking argument that social science can be emancipatory without being normative. I argued that McCarney’s complicated and subtle argument that an *emancipatory* social science can be non-normative fails and I raised the issue in Lecture 2 of whether the very idea of something being a science connotes something that is non-normative. Is a science when formal non-normative (its rules of formation and transformation

apart)? And when non-formal, is it not simply empirical (its rules of procedure apart) and thus non-normative? Or is this 'thus' suspect? It is empirical, at least, in the wide way Quine stressed that a science must be, i.e., empirically at least weakly verifiable. Without that you would have mere speculation without scientificity. This would turn history into a provider of 'just so' stories. So how then can we—or can we?—have an emancipatory social science, something that has scientificity and is still emancipatory?

History is not, and could not become, a *natural* science. Isaiah Berlin well argued that (Berlin 1980, 103-42). (It is even very strange that it would be thought, particularly by someone as perceptive as Berlin, that that would need to be argued.) But it is now typically claimed to be, a *social* science, as much as is sociology, social and cultural anthropology, and social geography. History needs to make accurate descriptions of past matters, often—indeed almost always—interpretive descriptions. But in doing that, it often, and typically quite unavoidably, uses thick descriptions, descriptions utilizing thick concepts that have both a descriptive and normative component, but components that cannot be untangled (Putnam 2002). This would seem to make history unavoidably a 'normative science', or at least a normative discipline, after all. To say, for example, that 'blacks were oppressed under apartheid' need not be to say that *that* oppression was, everything considered, always wrong—though for morally speaking right thinking people (to make a moral remark myself), the oppression of blacks under apartheid is rightly taken to be so. But someone who thought that oppression was wrong need not think that *that* oppression, everything considered, was wrong while still believing that oppression itself (any oppression) was always *prima facie* wrong. She might also believe—though I think she shouldn't—that anyone who wished to be scientific over that matter should confine themselves to remarking that though most people in our societies think oppression is *prima facie* wrong—indeed in that way evil—that not all people think that the oppression of blacks under apartheid was wrong, everything considered. They might think—wrongly I, of course, believe—that though oppression of blacks is wrong *prima facie* it was a

necessary evil to keep South Africa well ordered, to make the society still less evil than that society already was. Without that, many believed there would have been chaos, mayhem and barbarism. Still, looking at the matter purely scientifically, in saying 'Under apartheid blacks were oppressed' a person might not necessarily be either condemning or condoning *that* oppression but merely reporting it, making a description—true or false—of what most white people as well as *some* non-white people, or at least many white people, in that particular society believe.

Description, even 'interpretative description', is one thing; *endorsement* or *condemnation* is another. But still sticking with a purely scientific view, we could recognize that the very word 'oppression' normally has a negative force. That is a fact about the use of English. To not recognize that would be to fail to recognize how the language-game is played. With a reasonable understanding of English, a person would understand that 'oppression' has such a negative force. But that itself cuts no moral or otherwise normative ice one way or another. 'Oppression' itself in most contexts has a negative normative force and oppression is *prima facie* wrong. But that does not tell us which oppression or even that any oppression is to be condemned or not condemned, full stop. Not much of normative import can be done with meta-ethics. *Perhaps* properly done it is normatively neutral.

That notwithstanding, we still should recognize that 'oppression' could be used *in some contexts* by some users, say scientific ones, without that negative force, though to properly understand 'oppression' we would have to know that it normally has that negative force. But where it is not so used, we would, to properly understand what is going on, still need to understand that normally 'oppression' has such a negative force. But where a scientist uses 'oppression' purely scientifically, such as to say, truly or falsely, 'In Bahrain there is more oppression than in Saudi Arabia', she as a historian is reporting, interpreting and perhaps potentially explaining the activities and practices, including the moral beliefs and practices, of a certain people at a certain time and place. She need not be speaking in a normative mode. In doing so, she is, that is, neither endorsing

nor not endorsing those beliefs or practices—or at least she need not be. And where she is, she is doing something that is going beyond science—perhaps, better said, just being non-scientific. (I didn't say she is being unscientific.) She must restrict herself, however, as a historian to being purely scientific. That is, or so it is natural to say, what being scientific requires of her. *Qua* social scientist she is not, as Eric Hobsbawm might remark, in the *judgment business* (Hobsbawm 1995). But *au contraire*, or so it can be contended and as Hobsbawm's practice bears out, as a historian she should not limit herself to a purely descriptive, interpretive and explanatory account (Hobsbawm 1999; 2008). An historian as well seeks to decipher some parts of the world and in doing so uses thick descriptions and this is an activity that is unavoidably both normative and factual in an inextricable mix. To describe the Afrikaner belief system and practices accurately during apartheid (think of the *Bruderbund*, for example) one would have to say blacks and other non-white populations, though in varying degrees, were oppressed. Speaking as an historian she need not condemn it nor condone it, but speaking scientifically—could she be condemning or condoning it? Or would she be going beyond her vocation as a scientist? Moreover, while most post-apartheid white South Africans think that black South Africans were oppressed under apartheid, they (where they understand English) recognize that 'oppression' normally has a negative force. (Things do not go differently in Afrikaans.) Some of them also thought that during the time of apartheid in South Africa. However, many whites nevertheless thought then that apartheid was, all things considered, justified. In some cases, Afrikaners (and some others as well) didn't even think much about oppression or perhaps even think that blacks were oppressed. They didn't think much about such matters, as most people do not think about such matters in their societies. How many reasonably well-heeled people, for example, in the United States lose sleep thinking about how many people in their society have no health care or typically go to bed hungry or have lost their homes? People usually go along with doing the thing done in their societies. Think of Nazi Germany. Think also of the United States, Canada, Israel and Iran now. (I am not suggesting by this that they are as bad as

were the Nazis.) But over issues, *if* seriously considered, well-heeled people in many societies where things go badly are in denial and suffer gross self-deception. In the South African case, blacks were plainly oppressed and by an Afrikaner regime (though many English-speaking South Africans thought, even when they didn't say, "Thank God for that regime!"). A historian will describe these things and explain those beliefs. Her central aim is in understanding. In all these cases they will have an understanding that 'oppression' has a negative normative use, but also that it has descriptive use and that here we have, as I have remarked, an unscrambled, and indeed an unscrambleable, entanglement of the descriptive and the normative. There is something here that often over time leads to a conflictual situation.

It is in some respects like someone who says that war is evil. She could go on consistently to say that war is still sometimes justified as the lesser evil. Evil is always wrong (indeed, that, in Wittgenstein's wide sense, is a grammatical remark). Still, she could also think and say that *sometimes* war is the lesser evil. Where this is so and where there is no avoidance of it without doing or allowing something still worse, then we should do the lesser evil. One, for example, should in those circumstances go to war knowing that it is evil but also knowing that in that situation it is the lesser evil. Most of us who fought on the Allied side during World War II thought that war was justified, though many did not then think that about World War I and not a few thought that some momentous things that were done during the Second World War (for example, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the bombing of Dresden) were plainly not justified. Indeed, some think, as I do, that they were criminal. Knowing that in war, however, one acts or does not act, one does some evil. The thing in that situation is to try to ascertain the lesser evil. This, of course, is not usually easy. And if by abstaining one would make the situation even worse than it otherwise would be, then, morally speaking, one must do the lesser evil. (I should add that one does not have to be a utilitarian to think that.)

Historians, as all social scientists, use terms that are normatively freighted—terms that often have an inextricably entangled normative and descriptive use. As Hilary Putnam puts it, there is in our discourses a pervasive entanglement of fact and value (Putnam 2002). Nonetheless, I am *tempted* to argue that we cannot while remaining scientific use these thick descriptions to *endorse or dismiss or condemn*, though historians can and do use them to describe, interpret and explain. Science, I am inclined to say, to be genuinely scientific, must be normatively neutral. It can't be in the *judgment* business. But in many contexts it cannot be an even nearly adequate social science if it restricts itself to a normatively neutral vocabulary. Still, as I have said, endorsing or commending is one thing; reporting, interpreting, describing or explaining is another, though *sometimes* to describe in a certain tone of voice is also to endorse or condemn. Perhaps sometimes the very use of thick concepts without scare quotes just is to some degree to endorse or condemn or to in some other way evaluate. But describing with such a vocabulary one need not have such a tone of voice. To understand *sometimes* is to forgive, but it is not, and should not, always be so (Nielsen 2006, 175-98). And, where we are acting in a purely scientific manner, it cannot be so. Such reporting cannot be an activity of forgiving anymore than it can be an act of endorsing or commending or condemning. Yet things here remain to some degree problematic.

II

There are more twisting and turnings. When we think about science, at least when the scientific engine is idling, what we have said above *seems* to be what we should say. But often historians, even very good ones, seem, at least, not to be so proceeding—not to be making such assumptions. They seem *not* to be giving themselves such strict rules of conduct (Hobsbawm 1995; 2008). My account here, and a lot of such philosophical accounts, may be accused, perhaps fairly, of being artificial and useless scholastic constructions. Historical practice, even the very best historical practice, seems, at least, not to conform to it.

Historians describe, give figures, talk about individuals, societies, trends, cite statistics, make interpretations, make generalizations, and try to decipher historical events. But they also make assessments of—judgments on—peoples’ and societies’ actions, for example, the reasonableness of government strategies, the plausibility or reasonableness of their war or economic strategies or even sometimes of the justifiability of their going to war and the like. They sometimes make damning assessments—including moral assessments—of whole worldviews, e.g., Eric Hobsbawm on Nazi worldviews. In fine, they make all kinds of moral and otherwise normative endorsements or critiques of historical events along with their describing them, interpreting them, explaining them, deciphering them well or otherwise (Hobsbawm 2008). Of course, they also ask more limited causal questions, too. For example, why didn’t the Nazis attempt to make peace after their defeat at Stalingrad? Their generals must have known the game was up. Why did the apartheid regime make the transitional arrangements they did with the ANC at just the time and in the way they did? What were the long term consequences of the decisions they and the ANC made together and how well did it serve black liberation? (Notice that we have here something both plainly morally normative and descriptive. Must we say there was no scientific component here?) Was slavery coming to a rapid end in the United States and would it have done so as rapidly (or even nearly so) without the Civil War? Why at a later time did six million Afro-Americans move from the South to the North? Wasn’t this very much like an immigration? Was the war economy in the United States in World War II essential to taking it out of its economic depression or even more generally ending the world’s depression? Was its role in the war and right after it crucial for its later global hegemony? Did the Nazi regime pull itself out of the Depression earlier than the democracies? If Trotsky rather than Stalin had replaced Lenin, would it have made any deep and lasting difference to the Soviet Union and to the fate of communism? (Or is this for history an illegitimate, purely ‘could have’ question?) If the Nazis had been less racist or even less irrationally

racist (more like the British in India) and less murderous to the populations of the Soviet Union, would there have been the determination to resist the Nazis on the part of the Russian peoples?

Of course, these kind of questions engender many *how* questions as well as *why* questions and many different smaller questions. How racist and murderous initially were the Nazi practices? Did this square with original *Italian* Fascist policy which was initially so admired by part of the American capitalist class? (Ford, for example.) Was Mussolini such an anti-Semite as Hitler? How much cooperation with the Nazis of some segments of the Soviet populations was there? The Ukrainians, for example? Did the Nazis, when they invaded Russia, expect such a long war against the Soviets? Did the Americans expect such a tenacious and long resistance by Iraqis after the defeat of Hussein's army or later in Afghanistan by the Taliban? How well, if at all, were the Americans prepared for these two things? Did they and do they even later have any reasonable emergency plans for coping with such situations? How reasonable was it to expect that the Nazis' Hungarian and Romanian allies flanking them at Stalingrad would be able to hold long enough for the Nazis to capture Stalingrad? Why did the Nazis choose to attack Russia first and only after that turn to Britain? Why did they open, seemingly irrationally, two fronts? Given Germany's national interests, or at least its war aims, was it a reasonable thing to do? Was their irrational genocide harmful to their own war effort? Not just from what is now known, but from what could reasonably have been known then?

Here we have a sampling of the kind of questions historians ask or, as time goes by, will ask. Sometimes they are questions that just require the best (most accurate) descriptive answer that can at the time be garnered; sometimes also a causal and/or interpretive answer is required for the question's adequate answer. That is, the historian sometimes needs accurate description, careful interpretation, good causal analysis and good (accurate) confirmation or disconfirmation procedures. Sometimes they need good statistics; sometimes to make judgments about what it was reasonable to believe or do (thereby bringing in an evaluation, perhaps even a moral one);

sometimes they need *judgments* requiring moral evaluations. All these are in the historian's domain and often in his toolbox and in his practices. This does not square—or so it seems at least—with my *idealized practice* of how history should go, how we are to have a really scientific history. (Isn't any other kind of history just so storytelling and thus *ersatz* history? Or is this too positivist of me?) Be that as it may, that is what they do. That is how they—or at least many of them—practice their art. Are we philosophers (or anyone else) to be more restrictive and say that history is only *a genuine science* where it sticks to strictly morally non-evaluative matters? Isn't this too essentialist? My approach seems rather high-handed and arbitrary on the part of a non-historian. Are we to say that in historians' practices, when they depart from my conception of a scientific way of doing something, reveal their non-scientificity, meaning either that they are ceasing to do history at all or that there is scientific (social scientific) history and a non-scientific (not anti-scientific) history? Perhaps we have here 'speculative history', the things Herodotus, Hegel, Spengler and Toynbee did while by contrast what Thucydides, Hume, Marx and Namir did was scientific history? The latter, when push comes to shove, rely on observation, plainly an empirical matter, while the former, or not so crucially, do not. There lies the mark of scientificity, even if sometimes such testability is very indirect as Quine illustrates. (Contrast him with Hempel and Carnap who had a much more limited conception of indirectness.) This is not—or so I assert—just positivism in a post-positivist age. And it need not be *scientistic*. But my conception still might be mistaken. It might be too restrictive. But are we to open the floodgates? Do we do it here? And can philosophers prescribe rules for how historians must proceed if they are to be genuinely historians or, if that is not a pleonasm, 'scientific historians'?

III

History *may* very well not have scientific laws (generalizations that sustain contrary fact-conditionals). It has generalizations, of course, but accidental generalizations, like all Janes's books

are in English, and generalizations—non-law-like ones—that are, at least, generally contextual and admit of exceptions (Berlin 1990, 103-42). And they cannot be metaphysical as Hegel's thought often is. But they also cannot be *merely* speculative and still be history. There must be some empirical constraints. We cannot go wild as Hegel and Fichte did.

Does this exclude moral evaluations? Not unless we exclude a lot of things that practicing historians did and do, including historians who do not take a speculative route (as Hegel, Toynbee or Spengler did), but are wide ranging and deeply interpretive, sometimes evaluative, including morally evaluative, but also are widely regarded by other historians, who might take different ideological stances, while still regarding these historians as first rate un-ideologically enfeebled historians—historians that are empirically responsible. I shall take a look at the work of two such contemporary historians, Eric Hobsbawm (University of London) and Perry Anderson (UCLA) and with a passing glance at Tony Judt (New York University) all of whom seem at least to violate what I have taken as the methodological lines for a scientific history. If they do, then my conception of 'scientific history', I shall concede, is mistaken and needs a rather central modification. I should not then just stick with my stipulations—made here and more extensively made about social science generally in Lecture 4—no matter how plausible they seem. Or am I conceding too much?

Hobsbawm's work abounds, as does Judt's and Anderson's, in thick descriptions (terms that are both, and inextricably, normative and descriptive, such as 'rude', 'indolent', 'deserving', or 'rapacious'). We could hardly do history without such thick descriptions. But, as Hobsbawm rightly stresses, the historians' world is what happened, not what could have happened (Hobsbawm 1995, 5).¹ But to gain an understanding of what happened, the historian requires accurate description and testable (if only weakly so) descriptions, explanations and interpretations. He wants, for example, to record accurately and to understand the Great Slump or understand why the Soviet Union collapsed so suddenly. For a proper understanding in both these cases, as well as others, he requires both accurate description normally rooted in investigation and explanation. What

happened, how it happened, and why it happened—what caused it to happen? And for these he requires the use of thick descriptions: the use of terms that are both (and unscrambably so) descriptive and evaluative. But does not the evaluative part inescapably, at least somewhere down the line, involve judgment? Hobsbawm wants an historical understanding that is without judgment, but doesn't his very use of that thick descriptive vocabulary often involve judgment? And indeed doesn't he make judgments—say, most obviously, of the Nazis and while he is writing history? Doesn't this make a 'value free' account impossible? And doesn't this, if we take history, as we should, as a social science, make my case for the scientificity of social science (or at least of history) impossible? Shouldn't this lead us to deny what I do not want to deny—that history is a social science and that to be such it must make, and exclusively so, claims that are in some way empirically testable?

Consider what Eric Hobsbawm says about the end of the Second World War—what the Russians call the Great War. Both of the most directly involved nations among the victors and those among the vanquished lay at the end of the war in ruins (to say something plainly both evaluative and descriptive). By contrast consider the economy, wealth, and power of the United States which profited extensively from the Second World War. Its lands were not destroyed or even harmed, and the small reduction of its population did not economically harm it. But Russia, the country that defeated the Nazis, was extensively destroyed. Its towns and much of its countryside lay in tatters. Its economy, developed by its five-year plans, was undermined, its agriculture shattered, and nearly a quarter of its population killed. Though absolutely essential, defeating the Nazis with their brutal thrust for empire took a devastating toll. Germany and Japan, two of the Axis powers, were also devastated. Their industries were destroyed and most of their towns were bombed, many nearly to the ground. Japan not only suffered that, but it also suffered atomic destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and its other cities—Tokyo, for a spectacular example—were gutted with great loss of life by conventional bombing. The United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand

apart, there was great devastation on both sides during the war. But, while France, Britain, and Italy were badly damaged, that damage was not nearly as extreme as with the Soviet Union, Germany, and Japan.

With the United States' power jacking it up—the Soviet Union aside—the recovery was rapid, particularly in Germany and Japan. This was to the advantage of the United States as well as to Germany and Japan. U.S. aid went to France, Italy and Britain as well, but to a lesser extent and thus their recovery was slower. But for all these countries, there was aid. I should add that the Soviet Union was on its own after the war. The Cold War began early. The Soviet Union was essential in defeating Nazi Germany and in that defeating got help from their wartime allies. But after that, such communists could be, and were, ignored, though the need of the Soviet peoples was great—perhaps greater than in any other country. This, it needs to be said, was not all the United States' fault. Stalin, fearing American control, refused aid (Judt 2005).

Hobsbawm's account of these matters, along with his account of the Golden Age (1957-73) of capitalist advancement, is insightful and thorough. It was an advancement that went along Keynesian lines. But during the Golden Age of capitalist advancement, as he points out, there was not only increased wellbeing for the working class, but also a depoliticalization of it. Many workers no longer had nothing to lose but their chains; they now had cars, pensions and sometimes even houses. However, since 1973 things have been going downhill for working people.

Hobsbawm's account of these matters was given (not exclusively, though unavoidably extensively) in a thick descriptive vocabulary, that was effectively descriptive, sometimes explanatory, often interpretive *and* often, as can be seen from above where I closely follow him, with a normative and indeed sometimes with a moral edge. Typically normative, sometimes normatively moral-edged, accounts are engendered by or locked into an empirically factual account. (I did not say entailed by them.) We frequently get descriptions, interpretations, understandings, as well as explanations that are not normatively neutral. Rather, they (*pace*

Hobsbawm's explicit denial) are not infrequently judgmental and yet are an integral part of his historical account. (I am inclined to say that of any even remotely adequate historical account.) We should also come to recognize these accounts can be reasonable and sometimes even compelling. They are historical accounts that make such claims (including making such judgments); we would never have an extensive account of what happened in the past that had any adequacy without the making of such claims. But being such thick descriptions, there still remains the existence of the empirical. Hobsbawm, for example, speaks of

... the leadership of the "Red Khmer" party, a particularly murderous combination of the Paris Café Maoism of their leader, Pol Pot (1925-), and the armed backwoods peasantry bent on destroying the degenerate civilization of the cities. The new regime killed its citizens in numbers enormous even by the standards of our own century. They eliminated around 20 percent of the population before it was driven from power by a Vietnamese invasion which restored a human government in 1978 [note the normative use of 'human' here]. After this—in one of the more depressing episodes of diplomacy—both China and the U.S. bloc continued to support the remains of the Pol Pot regime on Anti-Soviet and Anti-Vietnamese grounds (Hobsbawm 1995, 451). (For another, perhaps even clearer, example, see Hobsbawm 2008, 145.)

This remark quoted from Hobsbawm reveals two things: (1) that, as the last sentence shows, by the use of "more depressing episodes of diplomacy", a straightforward moral remark is being made in an historical account and (2) that "murderous Café Maoism" and "human government" function as thick descriptive terms or phrases that also give the whole sentence a distinctive morally normative force. Both reveal that a bit of history—a bit of social science—that can be both normative *and* descriptive at the same time. (His 2008 passage noted above does the same thing.) At least apparently, neither is compatible with my account of what social *science* to be a science should be.

I want finally, as far as my discussion of Hobsbawm is concerned, to note an extended passage from the last two pages of Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1995). Here we have, particularly in the light of the 583 pages that have gone before, a very powerful moral statement as well as an economic and political statement, all made in the course of writing history. A statement, however,

that is not *just* moral or otherwise normative but is also rooted in a stern and unflinchingly non-evasive factual conception of how things have been and a testable conception, and so factually significant conception, of how things may well go and what we must try to do in facing them. It moves us, steels us, gives us a sense of our humanity, and of a caring about that humanity and about human dignity. It shows something of our sapience. It surely belongs to historical writing and of the highest order. Yet, it clashes—or at least seems to—with my account of the *scientificity* of social science. *If* that is really so, then so much the worse for my account of scientificity. Hobsbawm writes:

We know that behind the opaque cloud of our ignorance and the uncertainty of detailed outcomes, the historical forces that shaped the century [20th century] are continuing to operate. We live in a world captured, uprooted and transformed by the titanic economic and techno-scientific process of the development of capitalism, which dominated the past two or three centuries. We know, or at least it is reasonable to suppose, that it cannot go on *ad infinitum*. The future cannot be a continuation of the past and there are signs, both externally and, as it were, internally, that we have reached a point of historic crisis. The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life. The structures of human societies themselves, including even some of the social foundations of capitalist economy, are on the point of being destroyed by the erosion of what we have inherited from the human past. Our world risks both explosion and implosion. It must change.

We do not know where we are going. We only know that history has brought us to this point and—if readers share the argument of this book—why. However, one thing is plain. If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on this basis, we shall fail. And the price of this failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness (Hobsbawm 1995, 584-85).

Here, as befits an ending of such a book, we have generalizations of a sort that are perfectly in place in a historical account (Berlin 1980, 103-42). But we also have a powerful moral statement, though hardly of a type that we would find in a book of moral theory. However, its force is not at all diminished for all of that. It comes in the form, as we have seen, of what some philosophers call *thick descriptions*—*the use of thick concepts*—*where fact and value are inextricably*

entangled (Putnam 2002). Factual claims are being made that are also evaluative or normative. If in *The Age of Extremes* we have read nothing of it that has come before, we will still in these last pages see that. Hobsbawm's dark closing remarks have that status, but the force of them and a sense of their veridicality will be very much enhanced from a reading of the text, particularly if we think much of it, as I as well as many others do, as generally compiling as a historical account of the world from 1914 until now. But even if, like Tony Judt (another historian of considerable merit) and Edward Said (a formidable literary scholar and public intellectual), we have reservations concerning some crucial parts of it, indeed even have rather fundamental criticisms of it, we will still feel, as they do, the moral force of those concluding remarks (Judt 1995; Said 1996). We will feel that to the extent that Hobsbawm has often gotten it approximately right, has accurately and perceptively interpreted and explained his subject and "often remembered what others forgot" (Hobsbawm 1995, 3). He has deciphered the times of which he is writing with reasonable accuracy, penetration and that with the moral evaluations he takes from his account we still have good reasons to take to be apt. Moreover, they should, if we take them to heart, be morally compelling. But even if we do not so react, we can still acknowledge their attraction and power. We should recognize this is how we should see the world if Hobsbawm's account is factually on the mark. And even if we do not think that it is, we should acknowledge that *if* his factual claims were on the mark—were factually justified or nearly so—then we should recognize that his account is, morally speaking, an appropriate way to respond. (After all, fact and value are entangled here.) Perhaps it is even *the* way—the responsible way—that a rational and reasonable person should respond, at least in a socially liberal (I did not say neo-liberal) society. (I take 'rational' and 'reasonable' as John Rawls does. See Rawls 1993, 48-60 and Nielsen 2008, 227-36). Is there anything here that departs from or negates a scientific orientation or that rubs against the scientificity of his account? I do not think so. And there is much here that is profoundly moral.

However, Hobsbawm also says that the historian's "major task is not to judge but to understand and even what we can least comprehend" (Hobsbawm 1995, 5). But that is not to say that *qua* historian he can never be *judgmental*. Some remarks, being thick descriptions (using thick concepts), are unavoidably both judgmental and can be—and may well be—a part of an accurate historical account. His description, quoted earlier, about the leadership of the Red Khmer party involving a murderous combination of Paris Café Maoism and an armed peasantry bent on destroying the degenerate civilization of the of the cities was certainly also normative and indeed morally so, but it was also a factual claim (*perhaps a disputable factual claim*) as well; the very language he uses being a thickly descriptive account, a description made in certain circumstances. And arguably a true one: a claim that is *justified* by being warrantably assertable. Suppose, to take another example, one was what is now called an embedded journalist with an Allied army in the Second World War just entering a concentration camp which had been recently and hurriedly abandoned by fleeing Nazis as the war was nearing its end. Suppose the journalist was to give an account of what he saw. If some such thick descriptive words such as 'beastly', 'sickening' or 'grossly inhuman' were not used by this journalist, the account would have been plainly *factually* (as well as morally) inaccurate, indeed enfeebled. It would have been obviously badly off the mark as a historical report. Thick descriptions can sometimes be factually accurate and be utterly appropriate *and* deeply moral; indeed they in some circumstances are what are required for accuracy.

Hobsbawm goes on to remark, reminiscent of Hegel and Joe McCarney, concerning the Nazis that it is an *understanding* that is difficult to achieve; the *judgmental* part is easy. Moreover, as Hobsbawm remarks, "To understand the Nazi era in German history and to fit it into its historical context is not to forgive genocide. In any case, no one who has lived through this extraordinary century is likely to abstain from judgment. It is understanding that comes hard" (Hobsbawm 1995, 5).

Secondly, though Hobsbawm holds forth against prophecies and predictions as not being in the historian's job description, he remarks that while historians "can speculate about the future in the light of their understanding of the past, their business is not that of the racing tipster. The only horse races they can claim to report and analyse are those already won or lost" (Hobsbawm 1995, 5). But this dark speculating about the future is exactly what he does at the end of his book and, it seems to me, quite appropriately. Is it scientific? Well, it is not independent of his factual—here empirical—claims. But that does make it scientific.

I also think there is, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, no genuine conflict here. The *main task of the historian is understanding*: to get an accurate account, if she can, and an insightful deciphering of the part of the past that she studies—its societies, peoples, institutions and practices. But she can also *make judgments*, particularly when they 'follow' from her understanding.² This is particularly appropriate at an ending of a book like Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*.³ Moreover, it is what is appropriate for what I am concerned to argue here for the scientificity of history. Hobsbawm's descriptions, deciphering and judgments (normative claims) are empirically confirmable and infirmable. And so here we have the scientificity that I have been claiming for history.

IV

As Aristotle reminded us, one swallow doesn't make a spring nor one fine day. Hobsbawm, eminent and influential on a later generation of historians that he has been, still *may* be atypical. *Perhaps* most historians, even very able ones, use fewer thick descriptions and eschew placing moral assessments in their historical texts? I shall also look briefly at two other eminent historians: Perry Anderson (UCLA) and the late Tony Judt (NYU). Anderson, like Hobsbawm, is a deeply scholarly *non-parti pris* Marxist historian while Judt is a late social democratic defender of capitalism and someone who might be called a *social liberal*. They both have given powerful

historical accounts, deciphering important segments of history (Anderson 2009; Judt 1995; 2005). They both frequently use thick descriptions and make moral judgments much in the manner—*methodological* manner—of Hobsbawm though, particularly for Judt, not always with the same or even a similar substance. I shall illustrate this briefly for each. (Anderson, not unsurprisingly, is closer to Hobsbawm than Judt.)

Judt, in a long, often forceful and at times perceptively critical examination of Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, writes:

The fact that the Soviet Union purported to stand for a good cause, indeed the only worthwhile cause, is what mitigated its crimes for many in Hobsbawm's generation. Others might say it just made them worse. In any case, the end of communism was a source of much happiness for many millions of people, even if that happiness has been diluted by the difficulties that followed, and it rather calls into question Eric Hobsbawm's conclusion that "the old century has not ended well." One is tempted, after all, to ask, "For whom?" The somber, almost apocalyptic tone of the final section of the book obscures the fact that the Eighties were also a decade of liberation for many, and not only in Eastern Europe. It is certainly true, as Hobsbawm says on more than one occasion, that no one any longer seems to have any solutions to offer to the world's problems, that we are tapping our way through a global fog, that we live in a world where "the past... has lost its role, in which the old maps and charts which guided human beings... no longer represent the landscape through which we move." But it is not self-evident that confident large-scale solutions of the sort we have lost were ever such a good thing—on balance they did a lot more harm than good (Judt 1995).

Here we see one historian criticizing another and making some moral judgments opposed to the one criticized. Do we just have problematic ideological responses here?⁴ Both nonetheless are using thick descriptions in their attempts to decipher history and both are making firm moral judgments that they take to 'follow' from or to be justified by their factual accounts. They utilize the same methodology though they in an important part make significantly different moral claims and have different moral visions. But in both cases they have moral visions—though different moral visions—rooted in their respective decipherings of history. Moreover, their deciphering of history is in part rooted in their moral visions. There we have in both cases a thorough entanglement of fact and value. We do not here have anything by either that smacks of value-neutrality or of some

crucial valuations which are fact insensitive (Putnam 2002; 2004). Neither tries to gain such a 'value-free' Archimedean point—or thinks that such a thing is possible. Writing history, nonetheless, is not and should not be just moralizing—even political moralizing. Still, large historical accounts at least do not stand free of moral outlooks or moral evaluations. However, this does not make moral principles, standing alone, king. Getting the facts as nearly right, seeing how they hang together, perceptively arranging them and relating them coherently is imperative. But do we escape, or entirely escape, ideological problematics here? Are we reasonably free from that here?

Be that as it may, let us turn now to Perry Anderson's magisterial, thoroughly researched, carefully descriptive and organized, interpreted and explanatory powerful book, *The New Old World* (Anderson 2009). He also has a similar *methodology* to that of Hobsbawm and Judt. Anderson's book abounds in relevant and perceptive thick descriptions and acute and otherwise normative evaluations rooted in his deciphering and providing an astute historical account that is not shy or evasive of moral and otherwise normative assessments. I shall conclude this section with only a few rather randomly chosen examples from the many that could with equal force have been chosen from his elaborate and closely worked account.

The New Old World gives an exhaustive and penetrating account of what Anderson takes to be the core of contemporary continental Europe (principally Western Europe), namely of France, Germany and Italy and with a careful account of the European Union where he starts off with its initial conceptualizations and ends with its subsequent discontents, including its current (2008) ones. He also strangely, but interestingly, focuses, though more briefly, on Cyprus and Turkey in coming to grips with what he calls 'the Eastern Question', oddly with no detailed consideration of Russia.

Now to turn to my randomly selected exemplifications of how with him, as for Hobsbawm and Judt, normativity is embedded in is factual historical narrative. In discussing the European Union, he remarks:

That said, the effect of its calque of American virtues for European users is simply to reproduce the constitutional blankness it criticizes—as if Evangelical faith and the US congressman were conceivable, let alone desirable, implants in the body politic of the Old World. No original proposals for Europe eventuate, in a case that dissolves into vagueness just where the sharpest clarity is required (Anderson 2009, 122).

And in his last section, entitled “Prognosis”, he writes:

Brussels is a lair of decisional processes of staggering complexity, confounding executive and legislative functions—no less than thirty-two different procedures that ‘only specialist lawyers and trained functionaries can follow’. Three-quarters of the Council’s decisions, approved without discussion, are pre-packages for it in the obscure recesses of Coreper; while at a lower level, hidden from public gaze, subterranean connexions between national bureaucracies and the machinery of the Community multiply. Ninety per cent of the lobbies infesting the extended committee system in Brussels are business organizations of one kind or another. Trade-union, environmental, consumer, feminist, or other ‘public interest groups’, by contrast, make up, all told, about 5 per cent. In real terms, the budget administered by the Commission amounted in the nineties to less than 1 per cent of Union GDP. Of this, by the end of the decade about a third was spent on Cohesion Funds, more redistributive territorially than socially. Overall, social expenditure by the EU is a miniscule one-hundredth of the total laid out by national governments. In such conditions, no ‘visible or significant relevant layer of European social citizenship’ exists. Monetary union, on the other hand, has created an extremely strong economic boundary for the Eurozone, patrolled by the ECB. But, so far, lacking any institutional goals other than price stability, it ‘looks more like a rigid system for disciplining member states’ behaviours rather than like an instrument functional to common EU interests and economic hegemony’ (Anderson 2009, 516).

And on the next page he adds:

In such a system, issues of legitimacy—over which European elites occasionally agonize, to comic effect—never arise. For legitimacy involves, by definition, principles, for which mere performance—capable at most of securing a passive assent, something very different—can never be a substitute. The resulting order is incoherent (Anderson 2009, 517).

Anderson concludes *The New Old World* with the remark:

Without clarity of means or ends, the Union seems to many adrift. Yet its apparent lack of any further coherent finality, deplored on all sides, might on one kind of reckoning be counted a saving grace, permitting the unintended consequences that have tracked integration from the start to yield further, possibly better, surprises. In principle, dynamic disequilibrium allows for that. In due course, a prolonged economic recession might reignite the engines of political conflict and ideological division that gave the continent its impetus in the past. So far, in today's Europe, there is little sign of either. But it remains unlikely that time and contradiction have come to a halt (Anderson 2009, 547).

In these passages and in many more that could have been cited there are thick descriptions galore with an unscrambled entanglement of fact and value and with a determinate moral orientation rooted in his factual account. (Again, I do not say 'entailed by'.) In deciphering the world, Anderson takes into consideration, accurately and perceptively, a certain comprehensive moral outlook—though no moral philosophy or moral theory goes with it. He is obviously judgmental here and is as well pervasively and descriptively accurate. There is, of course and rightly so, a stress on understanding, as there is in Hobsbawm, sometimes without moral judgment but very often with an understanding that is also judgmental and, *pace* Hegel and McCarney's reading of Hegel as well as McCarney's own account, something yielding both understanding and judgment. 'Judgmental understanding' is not an oxymoron. Indeed it would be rare for much deep understanding not to be judgmental.

A fact-value entanglement yields a judgmental understanding that is both empirical—and thus testable—and normative. (Shades of John Dewey here.) So such historical writing, even when it is normative, has the scientificity that I have adumbrated, often following Andrew Levine (see Lectures 1 and 2). I did not make this plain earlier, but it should be made plain. It is essential to see that judgmental understanding is not *only* normative. Indeed, we cannot get this where we employ thick concepts. Normativity and descriptivity are inextricably linked.

I do not mean to suggest that in making moral claims, even general ones, Anderson is doing or attempting to do moral philosophy, moral theory or normative political theory. He is not setting out claims such as a philosopher, say a utilitarian or Kantian deontologist or Rossian pluralistic deontologist or a meta-ethicist (cognitivist or non-cognitivist) would. Neither he nor Hobsbawm nor Judt are taking a stance on the logical status of moral utterances or on 'moral foundations' or on the nature of or the very possibility of moral knowledge. Rather, they worry about whether humanity will have anything like a decent future or indeed even have any future, whether we are headed for a crisis that will deepen into a catastrophe that will lead us into a new dark age or whether there is a reasonable prospect for there being a better life for us and, if so, what form it will take. They make no effort to define 'better life', quite reasonably taking it for granted that we have some understanding of what this is.⁵ Instead, they try to decipher our histories, digging out, where they are doing the history of the 20th Century, remembrances of things we have forgotten, chosen to forget, are in denial of, or have never known. They seek understanding of this world—its peoples, institutions, the life that went on there, its social dynamics, its economy. Unlike the Enlightenment historians (or part-time historians) Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon, they do not seek to collect over time historical generalizations—typically comparative historical generalizations—and to draw moral principles from them. Hobsbawm, Anderson and Judt make moral assessments alright, and often deep and perceptive ones, but that is not their main aim. Their main aim is understanding and decipherment but this also yields judgments. Berlin well reveals, by contrast, the 'unhistoricality' in theory and typically in practice of Enlightenment writers of history.

Voltaire's interest in history was to show how men were much the same in most ages, and how the same causes produce the same effects. The purpose of that was to show what we were like sociologically: what kind of ends men sought after, what kind of means did not bring them about, what kind of means did bring them about—and in this way to create some kind of science of how to live well. The same is true of Hume, who also spoke in much the same way. He said that most men in most circumstances, obeying the same causes, behave in roughly the same fashion. The purpose of history is not simply curiosity about what happened in the past, or desire to revive it, simply because we feel passionately interested in what our ancestors

were like, or because we wish in some way to connect the past with ourselves, to see what it was that we grew out of. That was not the principal spring of these men's interest. Their main aim was simply the accumulation of data upon which general propositions could be constructed, telling one what to do, how to live, what to be. That is the most unhistorical possible attitude that can be taken towards history, and it is the fairly characteristic attitude of the eighteenth century, including great historians who, despite themselves, wrote great history, such as Gibbon, whose ideals were a great deal inferior to his actual performance (Berlin 1999, 29).

V

History is neither democracy by example nor a tale of our emancipation or of reason. It is a discourse about the past that tries to be accurate: to do as best it can to tell it like it was. We should think of it, as we look at the 20th Century and of what we have seen of the 21st, principally as a tale of folly, brutality, inhumanity, destruction, repeated catastrophes, wars and the like. These for the most part have been appalling times and things do not seem to be getting any better. Socialism, the great hope of the 19th and 20th centuries, is on the ropes. Social Democracy has become acculturated to capitalism. Capitalism—by its greed, drive for profit, indifference to the downtrodden, and its misconceived conception of what rationality and reasonableness comes to—has destroyed or eviscerated the welfare state it once, under pressure from labor and what capitalists regarded as 'the Red Menace', had created and sustained (Barry 2005, 251-60). Hobsbawm is right: the world, unless it is to be a world of darkness, cannot go on as it is. It must, to be a human world, change and radically. Our present future prospects with the combination of global warming and population explosion (particularly in combination) are lethal. Such a future is utterly untenable. Hobsbawm is also on the mark in claiming that both the Soviet style command economy and capitalist market economies with their deregulation and privatization have shown themselves untenable. They both work very badly and have led to disasters. We need a social economy—not an economy propelled by individualism, greed and profit—that answers to human needs and human wellbeing. This should be its priority. And we have come to see that that will not

be served by following the profit motive as a central priority. But it should as well be an economy and not activity *simply* driven by moral goals.

This is the direction in which we must go if we would be reasonable and achieve our wellbeing in the contemporary world. Otherwise, we will get something even worse than what the 20th Century and, so far, the 21st Century have brought us. Even if we think—mistakenly, I believe—that we no longer need emancipation but just decency, our future, if we go on as we have been going, does not look at all encouraging. It does not afford decency for vast numbers of the world's peoples. The likelihood that we will get even decency is minimal. Hobsbawm is right that we do not know where we are going. And the prospects do not look bright.

So even if I have laid out a coherent and reasonable conception of an emancipatory social theory and an emancipatory social science, we are still a long way from emancipation or even decency and a humanly tolerable life—though we must remember again that the lower classes (strata, if you will) have tolerated the intolerable; they have lived for a long time in dreadful conditions. We do not have to talk of gulags, concentration camps, Guantanamo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mexico, Israel or Iran but of what is happening in the United States, a plutocracy masquerading as a democracy (Parenti 2010); a state with an economy that produces and accepts a lot of unnecessary misery. Yet it is a state of incredible wealth (Davis 2006).

Perhaps Hobsbawm and I (and indeed not a few others) have been too catastrophist (Panitch 2008, 221-23)? Have we not a somewhat skewed view of the history of the 20th and 21st centuries? Surely it has the features that Hobsbawm powerfully and carefully adumbrates. But it has other features as well which he (and I) have neglected, namely, the arising extent and power of fundamentalist ideological and religious practices and the conflict that goes with Jewish, Christian and Moslem fundamentalisms. There has also been the rise and growing influence of the number of intellectuals, the importance and extent of nationalist movements, the emergence of the cultural phenomena of modernism and so-called postmodernism, and most particularly, the global

importance of East Asia. The historical import of *some* of these phenomena can be put in question, but still they complicate Hobsbawm's gloomy picture. (*Pace* Edward Said, they *may* reinforce it.) However, Edward Said's careful and insightful discussion of Hobsbawm—principally of his *Age of Extremes*—raises these issues and critically probes them. Said ends by asking if there are not “greater resources of hope in history than the appalling record of our century seems to allow” (Said 1996, 222). He goes on to ask “whether the large number of lost causes strewn about does not in fact provide some occasion for a stiffening of will and a sharpening of the cold steel of energetic advocacy. The 20th Century, after all, is a great age of resistance, and that has not completely been silenced” (Said 1996, 222). Of course it hasn't and we on the Left should be grateful to Said for reminding us of this. There must be, as he well puts, “a sharpening of the cold steel of energetic advocacy.” (But note that is a moral ‘must’.) We must put our energies and determination firmly into doing this and doing this intelligently and without evasion or self-deception. We do not know what spaces of hope we have. *Perhaps* they are less now than in 1995 when Said wrote that. With the depth and persistence of the recession (perhaps better called a depression) and the seemingly endless ongoing wars and threat of new wars (Libya, Iran and Yemen), we do not know whether our current state of affairs will not go on and on. *Perhaps* the horrors will be even greater. We just don't know. But the spaces of hope are not closed down entirely. Said is right there. We are in no position to know what the future will bring, but we are, with a sense of what we have now and have had in our past, in a position to stiffen our will and to sharpen the cold steel of our advocacy and resistance. This resistance must continue and accelerate. It is glued to our very sense of humanity and is not to be up for debate.

Notes

¹ Yet historians (including Hobsbawm) who do contemporary history (write, that is, about the 20th Century and/or what they have seen so far of the 21st Century). When they think they have spotted a trend they sometimes conjecture about the future. That may well be chancy, but it does not seem to me to be illegitimate for historians to be doing this, indeed, if you will, historians *qua* historians doing it. After all, much of science is chancy. If you want to go on about what historians *qua* historians can be doing, then that seems to me to likely to be a bit of essentialist scholasticism. Moreover, such historians are among the best placed to make such conjectures, if they are made at all. And why shouldn't they be made? Does it run against the necessary testability of science?

² 'Not follow' in the strict—the extreme—sense, is what most philosophers use when doing philosophy; for example, when they argue about 'ought' not following from 'is' in moral discourse. But they, and everyone else recognizes, that 'Stop' follows in a commonsense matter from 'There is a car coming'. There is no room for the question whether you should stop unless the person wishes to commit suicide or doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Then for him 'Why should I stop?' is a real question. See Stephen Toulmin (2001) and also his *Uses of Argument* (1958)

³ Hobsbawm, in *Age of Extremes*, narrates a great sweep of history from 1914 until 1991. He tries to decipher that period. Notwithstanding his remarks about what historians can and cannot do, it is appropriate in the light of what he has discerned to make some conjectures about what the future, perhaps with some reasonable likelihood, will be. This is particularly true when they concern untoward things that may be if we do not act with dispatch. We need not, and should not, be on the quest for certainty here. That we cannot get.

⁴ Some think Judt is on the mark here. That is fair enough. However, we should take note that, free of ideology in a pejorative sense, as perceptive an observer of the social scene (including centrally the political and economic scene) as Tariq Ali is refers to Judt as "a Cold War academic". Neither Ali nor Judt are themselves demagogues or ill informed. They both are able public intellectuals and acute and knowledgeable observers of our social world while remaining people of deep and well-defined political convictions (Ali 2000, 358). But they have political convictions that sometimes (and deeply) conflict: can we ascertain which, if either, is more nearly on the mark? Here take note of how Stephen Toulmin speaks of such issues. See Toulmin 2001.

⁵ For a clear and forceful exemplification of what it isn't, see Lance Topley, "The Worst of the Worst," *Boston Review* Vol. 35, no. 8 (Nov/Dec 2010: 30-35). With an awareness of such institutions so functioning, we can know without any doubt that their ending would lead to a better life in our societies. And such exemplifications can easily and in abundance be brought forth if we look with a non-evasive eye at our societies. For this we do not need one ounce of philosophy or a definition of 'a better life'.

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