



History and Historical Conceptualization

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Abstract: Dmitri Nikulin's erudite and stimulating book challenges the way as to how history is being thought of and provokes a number of questions. In this essay I want to address some of them. First of all, I discuss to what extent it is possible to abandon the concept of universal history without questioning the concept of historical time that underlies it. Secondly, I address Nikulin's discussion with regard to the pluralization of historical narratives and I explore whether when constructing hypothetical histories a limit for pluralization can be set to establish hierarchies among different points of view.

Keywords: Nikulin, Dmitri; Kant, Immanuel; Hegel, Georg W. F.; White, Hayden; historical temporalities; universal history; histories.

Johan Huizinga once wrote, "history must be granted to be the teleologically-oriented discipline par excellence."¹ This unilinear and teleologically oriented image of history accompanies modern thought at least since the notion of history, or rather of histories in the plural, became a collective singular. Reinhart Koselleck pointed out that, in the German language, it is only in the late eighteenth century that a critical semantic change took place: the term *Geschichte*, originally plural, histories, turned into the collective singular *Geschichte*, which is the prerequisite of the modern Western idea of universal history (*allgemeine Weltgeschichte*).² As Dmitri

Nikulin astutely noted, when the discourse is about "one single universal history, or the history of humankind," then "different people might have different roles to play in the unfolding play of providential universal history," but, since history has a purpose and an end, "various people share one and the same history."³ From this it is possible to develop at least two theoretical-political implications: on the one hand, as Nikulin said, "the very notion of one 'humankind'...derives from the idea of a universal history" (CH 15), and on the other hand, the prefix *Welt* in the term universal history does not simply mean world, but it has a strong unifying and ordering significance. Universal history works as a doubly organizing principle: diachronically seen, it has periodized and created historical stages; synchronically seen, different coexisting people have been ordered in terms of advanced and backward populations.

The unifying character of universal history

¹ Johan Huizinga, "Historical Conceptualization," in *The Varieties of Histories. From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz R. Stern, London, UK: Macmillan 1970, pp. 289-303, here p. 292.

² Reinhart Koselleck, "Geschichte, Historie" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, Bd. 2*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, Stuttgart, DE: Klett Cotta 1972-97, pp. 647-91.

³ Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2017, p. 15. [Henceforth cited as CH]

embodies a political-ideological meaning that goes beyond the timely and correct criticism of Eurocentrism. In so far as it is based on a unilinear conception of historical time, the concept of universal history subsumes qualitative differences in order to organize them into quantitative differences or delays in historical development. This procedure is not only the intentional result of a history that looks at the rest of the world from the perspective of the modern West. It is rather the corollary of a conceptualized understanding of history. As is well known, in G. W. F. Hegel's work history is conceptualized in terms of the "progress of the consciousness of freedom," a progress periodized through historical-geographical degrees of freedom, according to which there would be

the Orientals, who knew only that One is free, then that of the Greek and Roman world, which knew that Some are free, and finally, our own knowledge that All men as such are free, and that man is by nature free.⁴

The ultimate stage is that of the nation-state, represented by the principles that emerged during the French Revolution and the Protestant Reformation. In this way, universal history can be organized according to the concept of modern European freedom, creating degrees of historical development and corresponding geographical subdivisions. The concept of freedom functions here simultaneously as a unifying and differentiating operator. In other words, it functions as an ordering principle that depends, implicitly or explicitly, on political purposes.

It is the characteristic of modern concepts to subsume particularities into a totality or universality. Immanuel Kant would have said that subsumption operates through time, which is "contained in any empirical representation of the manifold."⁵ According to Kant, time, as a condition of possibility of any representation, "cannot be made representable to us except under the image of a line, insofar as we draw it" (CPR 259). However, Gottfried Herder rebelled against this unilinear conception of time. In contrast to Kant, he stated,

every changing thing has within itself the measure of its own time...There are no two things in the world that have the same measure of time. The beat of my pulse, the course or the sequence of my thoughts are not the measure of time for others; the course of a stream, the growth of a tree are not the measure of time for all streams, trees and plants...Therefore, (we can say with a daring but nevertheless exact expression) there exists an infinite multiplicity of temporalities in the universe at the same time; the time that we imagine to be the measure of everything is only a proportioning made up by our thoughts...an illusion.⁶

One could say that while Kant's *Kritik* laid the foundations of modern philosophy by delimiting the field of possible experience from that of metaphysics, a different possible trajectory was set by Herder's *Metakritik*. The alternative was thus between a conception of time that makes all events march to the same rhythm, in an orderly line, and a more or less chaotic plurality of times that overlap and intersect. Given that, it is needful to think about the implications of this pluralization of times for the concept of history and historiography.

If one assumes that universal time as a pure form is widely questioned today, things get complicated. For example, anthropology has shown that the Western conception of unilinear time is limited geographically and historically;⁷ psychology has shown that children perceive time differently⁸ and that the unconscious is fundamentally timeless;⁹ and, as Carlo Rovelli points out, the theory of relativity and quantum physics have shown that the world does not evolve over time, but rather things evolve in local times that influence

⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Verstand und Erfahrung. Eine Metakritik der Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, Leipzig, DE: J. F. Hartknoch 1799, pp. 120–1. [Translation by the author.]

⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁸ Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of Time*, New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1969.

⁹ "The unconscious is quite timeless." See Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology in Everyday Life: Forgetting, Slips of the Tongue, Bungled Actions, Superstitions and Errors (1901)*, transl. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 6*, London: Vintage, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, pp. 274–5.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, transl. Hugh B. Nisbet, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1984, pp. 54–5.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1998, B 178, p. 272. [Henceforth cited as CPR]

each other.¹⁰ When all of these dimensions are taken seriously, one must ask how it has been possible for the unilinear conception of time to become so dominant. However, this is not the place for suchlike a discussion and it would be ungenerous to put this question to Nikulin.

A discussion about the concept of history needs to include how history, or historical material, is conceptualized. It is here that the connection between particular representations of time and history has its axis. If all events are marked by the same universal historical clock, then it is easy to induce comparative schemes characterized by the colonial categories of modern and pre-modern, state and pre-state, capitalist and pre-capitalist. That "pre" denotes a delay and a destiny at the same time. It is as if historical times ran like trains along the same tracks, so that the travelers on the front train are enabled assessing delays or halts. In other words, according to a typically capitalistic rationality, given the existence of a single historical time, if there are, figuratively speaking, backward populations in terms of technological or social development, it is as if they had made inefficient use of their time. This is a typical colonial discourse that justified and continues to justify the intervention of Western countries in democratizing, guaranteeing safety and environmental protection for those who are allegedly not (yet!) able to govern themselves. This conception of history is in place in John Stuart Mill's colonial liberalism; Mill considers despotism the appropriate political form for backward states of society populated by what he calls "nonage" races.¹¹ Again, in defining some peoples as nonage, one must assume that, given the same amount of chronological time available to all, some of them did not use their time efficiently. But there is no such thing as having misused time. Rather, there are qualitatively different historical temporalities that cannot be subsumed under the abstract umbrella of universal history. The first question that I put to Nikulin concerns the possibility of abandoning the concept of universal history yet without questioning the concept of historical time that underlies it.

The colonial implication of Mill's discourse is made possible not so much because of the concept of universalism itself, but rather because of its

temporalization which operates a disjuncture between universalism and its actualization. The former gets represented by the modern West, the latter by populations which are presumably not yet civilized and therefore do not share the emerging universal values of democracy, private property, and free market. Not only is there an intentional colonialism, but there is also an unintended colonial attitude that operates at the level of categories and conceptions of historical time. For this reason, the colonial logic of universal history does not belong only to the dominator. Even the dominated ones make use of it when they try to close the gap that separates them from Western modernization, often characterized by productivity and technical progress. There are many ex-colonial countries that, in order to catch up with the West, have embarked on a race characterized by the initial accumulation of capital and political power. Entire traditional communities whose political and economic forms were being considered backward have paid the price for it; this alleged backwardness is the reason they were violently synchronized to the rhythm of the dominant modernity. Writing the history of these destructions adds to the archive of the victims of modernity, but in doing so it also confirms the dominant role of universal history. From this perspective, the excluded become dominated, passive subjects, victims to whom one can kindly give a voice or whose stories one can tell.

But telling the stories of the victims and the excluded does not yet mean being fair to them. The pluralization of the fabulae can make room for the many stories of those who had no voice, but it does not deactivate the colonial device that lurks in the conception of unilinear historical time. That is why, it seems to me, the project of a multiplication of stories should go hand in hand with that of a rethinking of historical time.

Nikulin's book, looking carefully at an ancient vision of history, calls into question the tyranny of modern universal history. Through the works of Herodotus, Hecataeus, and Hellanicus, he gets enabled to present an alternative to a unilinear conception of history organized according to universal concepts. It is a history articulated in a multiplicity of histories, which can be narrated or reconstructed "by telling a new or differing story about the names, things, and events that have been preserved and still work in a history in which we would like to live" (CH 174).

In reference to Greek historiography, Koselleck observed that the "Greeks, without having a concept of history, identified the temporal process within

¹⁰ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, transl. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell, New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2018.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 13.

events."¹² It seems to me that the events narrated by Greek historians met at least two organizational criteria: they were significant and repeatable instances within a limited range of experience. Both these dimensions, exemplariness of the instance and repeatability, have fallen into crisis in modernity. During the French Revolution, Chateaubriand observed: "I started to write *Essai* in 1794, and it appeared in 1797. I often had to erase, at night, the picture I had drawn by day: events ran faster than my pen."¹³ In the 1826 preface to the *Essai*, Chateaubriand had to note that the Ciceronian *topos* of *historia magistra* has become impossible, and with it every attempt to write a comparative history.¹⁴ The acceleration of historical events, the expansion of the political theater to the entire planet, and the consequent reduction of the ability to experience events that rapidly and repeatedly change the order of things—all these elements together required a new conceptualization of history powerful enough to organize historical material. It is in this context that, in nineteenth century, new philosophies of history take shape, which, as in August Cieszkowski,¹⁵ aspire to organize not only past historical material, but also to prefigure the future. The political implications of this historiosophy were developed by the Hegelian left and the young Marx on the progressive side, and by another Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, on the pessimistic and conservative side. It was the same conceptualization of history, differentiated only by the algebraic sign placed in front of the historical-temporal vector.

Today the limits of this conceptualization can be observed. Nikulin's book presents itself as an implicit erudite examination of these limits. For Nikulin, it is about setting the antiquarian, who collects historical facts, against the historiographer, "who is the writer of canonic history based on an established conception of history as universal" (CH 68). Between the seventeenth

and nineteenth century, as Nikulin writes, the antagonism between antiquarians and historiographers was decided in favor of the latter, giving rise to a "new attitude toward history, which includes its politicization" (CH 68).

Here arise several questions and some problems that are not always being clarified by Nikulin. If the modern concept of history and modern historiography respond to a precise political issue and request for politicization, what political question is implied in the pluralization of histories made possible by multiplying (perhaps innumerable) narratives? In other words, by abandoning universal history and national history, and instead pluralizing history into many individual histories and *fabulae*, would there be a limit to pluralization? Nikulin does not seem to set limits to it. While the concept of freedom served Hegel as an ordering criterion for a universal history, Nikulin maintains instead that "a new history is always possible, and if freedom is indeed realized in a history, then it is the freedom to create a new history" (CH 106). To wrest the concept of freedom from the hands of the nation-state and its colonial metanarratives, it seems that Nikulin heads toward the depoliticization of the freedom-history link departing from its individualization in terms of subjective narrative. However, one could remark, every perspective on history is always politically situated. In his sixth thesis on the concept of history, Walter Benjamin wrote: "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.'" The past, as a thing-in-itself, remains opaque, and history is a strategy to map it. But this mapping of the past always responds to political criteria and, for Benjamin, they should at least hold firm the distinction between oppressed and oppressors, for history written by the latter erases not only the history of the former, but also their tradition and memory: "not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."¹⁶ In Benjamin, the field of historiography appears as a battlefield: if the historical perspectives are not equivalent to each other, then an explicit criterion of differentiation is needed.

One could say, with Hayden White, that history does not have logic, but an emplotment that produces meaning through rhetorical figures, which organize events according to the specific attitude of the historian.

¹² Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2004, p. 97.

¹³ François-René de Chateaubriand, "Préface de 1826," in *Essai historique, politique et morale sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes, considérées dans leurs rapports avec la Révolution française, Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. 1*, Paris, FR: Gallimard 1978, p. 15. [Translation by the author.]

¹⁴ See François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, FR: Éditions du Seuil, 2003.

¹⁵ August von Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, Hamburg, DE: Felix Meiner, (1838) 1981.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, Cambridge and London, UK: Belknap Press 2006, Thesis VI.

This means, on the one hand, that historians are never neutral, but always politically located and, on the other hand, that historians themselves become the subjective organizing criteria of history. It is the narrative structure (romance, satire, comedy, tragedy), consciously chosen or unconsciously responsive to a specific attitude of the historian, which acts as an organizing criterion of historical material. But if that is the case, not only is there no privileged point of view on history, consequently, as a mere rhetoric of mapping of the past, history remains open to an indeterminate plurality of possible narratives. Again, what is missing is a criterion of differentiation. I put this question to Nikulin.

If the Greeks did not have a concept of history it is because they did not need one, since their spatially and temporally delimited range of experience acted as an organizing criterion. It seems to me that an endless pluralization of historical voices is more a symptom than a solution—a manifestation of the crisis of the ability to make historical experience, the outcome of which is a post-conceptual vision of history. There remains the narrator who, alternating between different points of view, becomes the authority that can go as far as to construct hypothetical histories, where the boundary between fiction and non-fiction becomes precarious. I know that Nikulin does not want to venture in this

direction. But I would like to urge my friend and colleague Nikulin to think about this outcome.

If there are as many histories as there are possible *fabulae*, then historiography risks becoming an infinite dance around a historical material destined to remain opaque. Indeed, "history is built up from multiple histories" (CH 13), writes Nikulin, but at the same time, he states that he does not "want to claim that historical relativism is the way to understand history and that any history is equal to any other one" (CH 6). I agree with Nikulin. However, if "history is constituted by a multitude of histories" (CH 20), and it is true that no one history is equal to any other, what then is the criterion and who is entitled to distinguish and differentiate among histories? In other words, if one does not want to equate, the perspective of the oppressed with that of the oppressors, politically and historiographically, then not only the positionality in the construction of a historical narrative needs to be considered, but, above all, one should opt for a precise historical-temporal framework. Paraphrasing Benjamin, in order to keep that differentiation, one should oppose the continuity of the homogeneous and empty time of the dominant historiography and instead favor the historical time of discontinuity and the ruptures of the oppressed classes.