

## STEVEN G. SMITH, *Full History: On the Meaningfulness of Shared Action*,

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Thomas Carlyle opined that man “lives between two eternities, and warring against Oblivion, he would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole Future and the whole Past”.<sup>1</sup> A similar aspiration animates philosopher Steven G. Smith’s conception of what he calls “full history”, inasmuch as he hopes to incorporate every human action into a more comprehensive historical totality. An avowed admirer of Leopold von Ranke, who alleged “the meaningfulness of all past things”, comprehension (“fullness”) informs at every step this exercise in the amplification of historical meaningfulness (p. 15). Any temporal discontinuity that appears to exist between past and present is merely a matter of insufficient insight into the “principles of plenitude and continuity” which make “everything in some sort lead to everything else”.<sup>2</sup>

As a cognitive ideal, comprehension is described by John Henry Newman as the “enlargement” of the mind, involving the ability to view “many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence”.<sup>3</sup> As it was for Newman, so it is for Smith. For him, “full history”, presupposing the unquestioned, and for him unquestionable, necessity of historical thinking, aims to “construe our past as an *all-inclusive continuum* of occurrences in which each occurrence is derived from prior occurrence, placing *no unnecessary limit* on the *relevance* of earlier occurrence. To be mindful of full history, then, means to realize that all one’s actions *bear and extend* a fifteen billion-year *heritage*” (p. 20, my emphasis). A self-described ‘history maximalist’ rather than a strong historicist in the Hegelian or Marxian sense, Smith expresses from the outset the affinity of his approach with Actor Network Theory and David Christian’s “Big History” initiative, insofar as he believes that “everything in the unfolding of our universe belongs to a historically meaningful

1 THOMAS CARLYLE, *On History*, in: *Prose Masterpieces from Modern Essayists*, London 1896, p. 177.

2 ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, New York 1960, p. 332; JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *The Idea of a University*, London 1873, p. 137.

3 J. H. NEWMAN, *The Idea of a University*, pp. 136–37.

past” (p. IX). Christian, heralding the return of “Universal History”, declares that “in this expanded form, history (...) will aspire to create a map of the past as a whole. That map will allow individuals and communities throughout the world to see themselves as part of the evolving story of an entire universe”.<sup>4</sup>

Dubiously, however, *Full History* rests on what Davies calls “the foundational illusion” of historical thinking: namely, “that more history means more historical sense”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, central to Smith’s strategy is the assertion of superior historical, and therefore human, connection: that via the endless conjunction of more historical data – through “deriving some occurrences from others” and the “compounding of occurrences into larger occurrences” – “we can grasp their mutual relevance” (p. 19). “Full” history hence relies heavily on the idea of “derivation”: “current things deriving from prior things in the way that we think of a child deriving from its parents”. This misleading analogy is meant to suggest a sequence of events that follow a “causal continuum”; implying “that immensely many data are illimitably relevant to our interpretation of any worldly thing” (p. 20). How the relevance of this data can be established with any surety, given that its relevance lacks any limit, is unclear; nor does it seem possible to adequately interpret anything if most of the “immensely many” pieces of data are unavailable for analysis. In any case, the reliability of the inference from cause to effect on which the establishment of this “causal continuum” depends is hardly something to be taken for granted. Rather, following Hume, it’s legitimate to see causation as a mental projection on events rather than expressive of an underlying essence that guarantees the validity of the inference. The problem, moreover, is how to tell which occurrences in the alleged “continuum” made a real “causal difference to the sequel” (p. 20).

The means of making historical discourse more comprehensive depends upon the rhetorical strategy of *amplificatio*, described by Quintilian. Through amplification, he observes, “one thing is magnified in order to effect a corresponding augmentation elsewhere”.<sup>6</sup> The conjunction of vague terms of uncertain meaning seems to be the most effective strategy comprehensive discourse has at its disposal. Smith’s book is littered with redundant adjectives intended to allude to an indefinite plenitude of historical meaningfulness: e.g. “a fuller picture”; “fullest possible responsiveness”; “a quest for fully adequate awareness”; “a firmer grounding of interpretation”; “the ideal of full history (...) seeks to satisfy an intellectual

4 DAVID CHRISTIAN, *The Return of Universal History*, *History and Theory* 49/2010, p. 7.

5 MARTIN L. DAVIES, *How History Works: The Reconstitution of a Human Science*, London-New York 2016, p. 117.

6 QUINTILIAN, *Institutio Oratoria. Book XIII*, London 1922, p. 271.

demand for *unrestricted awareness*” (pp. 4, 5, 6, my emphasis). Readers interested in what that “fuller” picture or awareness actually consists of will remain disappointed, but that isn’t the point – what matters here is the impression of some untapped potential for meaning already inherent in history. To ensure there’s always “more” available, Smith must remove “all unnecessary limits to the content and relevance of history” and assert without question “the fullest appropriate amplification of the meaningfulness of history” (pp. ix–x).

Smith asserts that since “the past holds a limitless multitude of events”, and because “infinitely many more historical realizations might be had”, one ought to “recognize the pertinence of everything discoverable about the past in an illimitable universal network of actions” (pp. 18–19). What remains doubtful is whether there exists any means of determining the pertinence of any one “thing” in relation to “everything”. He insists, however, that “the healthy historical mind is stretched towards *more adequate* relations with other beings thanks to its fascination with backstories” (p. 90, my emphasis). That is quite clearly a matter of dispute: the endless fascination with backstories has frequently proved pernicious, even lethal to human life, as countless instances prove. In any case, it seems difficult to square the orthodox notion of historical thinking’s virtue, *à la* Cicero, as being “of service to ethical and political thinking not merely as an archive of examples but as a chief advisor on the shape of the collective good”, while at the same time “affirming the *widest possible pluralism* in the initiation of action, the *broadest sharing* in its execution, and the *deepest ambiguity* in its identity and effects” (pp. 189, 209, my emphasis). On these grounds, one could query whether one could educe from this heterogeneous mass (or mess) any coherent “advice” about anything at all.

The half-baked metaphysics comes out in the following example: “The *larger stream* of occurrence (...) is ultimately *unlimited*, which means the referent of importance is *essentially larger* than the judging subject can concretely perceive, imagine, or comprehend. An epistemology of importance therefore must appeal to *realizing* as distinct from knowing or feeling (...) a realizer grasps a being or state of affairs in relation to a *larger order of things* that cannot itself be directly perceived but that comes to bear on what is perceived and on the realizer in such a way that the realizer must redefine himself” (pp. 110–111, my emphasis). Yet if the “larger order of things” to which the state of affairs is “related” cannot be perceived, imagined, or comprehended, then how can it be “realized”? How and in what way is the “realizer” supposed to “redefine” themselves if, again, they lack the ability see how that “larger order of things” relates to the state of affairs in question? This obscure wordplay nevertheless fails to mask the inscrutability of the terms employed. In what way is the existence of that “larger order of things” *larger* than the “order of things”? If one can’t tell, then in what sense is

there an “order” there at all? Indeed, how can one discern the “order of things” if their “order” cannot be “directly perceived”? Somehow, we’re supposed to believe that “although realizing is not of itself history thinking, it always *connects* with history; a *larger* history that matters is implied by any full-fledged realization that *anything* matters” (p. 111, my emphasis). But *how* does it “connect”? What means of verification assures us that this “larger history” matters? How does one differentiate between a “realization” and a “full-fledged realization”?

Just how inadequate, how permanently frustrated in its intentions “full” historical thinking is, also comes out in the following acknowledgements: “we seek historical knowledge to gain practical insight, but the insights we seek can *never be clear*”; “historical knowledge provides *fuel for disagreement* but does not seem to provide much traction in *resolving it*”; so hence the daunting realization: “history... is afflicted with indeterminacy to a possibly *crippling degree*” (pp. 3–4, my emphasis). But confusingly, Smith had already asserted that “often agents can *act more successfully* when they are aware of structures of occurrence in the past”, and that “generally agents can act with integrity, or responsibility, *only* when they act *in appropriate consistency* with past occurrence” (p. 2, my emphasis). But the latter claim is itself a *non sequitur*: if morally responsible action depended on adhering to what was done in the past, injustice would flourish unchecked. Anyway, how can an agent act in “appropriate consistency” with past occurrence if the meaning of those occurrences remains impossible to determine? Such an approach would hardly vouchsafe the integrity of action, but endlessly frustrate it. So “the sense of history-based reasoning as a formation of our life orientation in fullest possible responsiveness to past occurrence” collapses, because history (i.e. human action) isn’t rationally constructed. Hence any purported sense in it is unreliable.

Nevertheless, with “ultimate seriousness” he declares history “sacred”, proposing that “it is *never permissible* to fail to *respect* this reality” (p. 206, my emphasis). This desperate move exposes the tyranny of historical thinking – its incarcerating, even authoritarian implications. Indeed, as Susan Sontag remarks: “Ours is a time when every intellectual or artistic or moral event gets absorbed by a predatory embrace of consciousness: historicizing. Any statement or act can be assessed as a necessarily transient ‘development’ or, on a lower level, belittled as mere ‘fashion’. [...] For over a century, this historicizing perspective has dominated our ability to *understand* anything at all. Perhaps once a marginal tic of consciousness, it’s now a gigantic, uncontrollable gesture.”<sup>7</sup>

7 SUSAN SONTAG, *Introduction*, in: E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, translated by R. Howard, London-New York 1987, p. 7.

Elucidating the mindset this perspective induces, Davies notes that subsequently, “the world becomes totally historicized once it cannot be told apart from the historical images that comprehend it”. This consequently produces the defining conviction of the historicized world: “the idea that the only common sense is a sense of history, the only common place for everyone is history”, as he puts it.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Smith, moreover, he realizes that the world has travelled beyond the reach of historical comprehension, that the efficacy of historical knowledge has been irredeemably compromised by the consequences of human action. The protective carapace of human history has been irreparably shattered: “in the actual redundancy of structures of historical knowledge that used to sustain comprehension and in the compulsive, coercive historicizations that pre-empt any redemptive action, historicized consciousness confronts its own destitute circumstances.”<sup>9</sup> Its unfortunate predicament is that the “guidance” of “2000 years of history” simply hasn’t worked, resulting in the “apprehension of cognitive inadequacy” previously assuaged by historical knowledge itself.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, in declaring history sacred Smith seems oblivious to the world in which history actually happens, and in which historical knowledge informs to their unsuspecting detriment what people actually do, maintaining patterns of behaviour unsuited to the existential novelties a constantly self-historicizing world throws up. No longer in the realm of logical consistency or empirically verifiable knowledge, therefore, he embarks in his final peroration upon a mystical ascent to the Archimedean point, from which the dogma of “history as reality”, of “drawing our existence and our practical trajectories from it unavoidably yet ambiguously” is preached without restraint (p. 208). But for the subject left stranded in history, occupying “infinitely complex webs of coexistence” which “do not have clear, uncontrollable consequences”, the proliferation of histories alternatively confuse, pre-empt, and foreclose, ironically, on the meaning of the very reality they are intended to reveal, even while absurdly arrogating to history the authority to tell you who you are (pp. 208–209). Yet the usual platitudes about history’s meaningfulness, even in the face of its “crippling” indeterminacy, fail to mask the intractable issue of how to intelligibly measure its meaning – and hence (if one is part of it, if history has really made us who we are) one’s

8 MARTIN L. DAVIES, *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of Historicized Life*, Abingdon-New York 2010, pp. 185–203.

9 M. L. DAVIES, *How History Works*, p. 25.

10 MARTIN L. DAVIES, *Cognitive inadequacy: history and the technocratic management of an artificial world*, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 20/2016, p. 338.

own. After all, precisely how comprehensive historical thinking can ever be, exactly how consequential or meaningful human action ever is, nobody knows. Existentially, this final appeal to history is symptomatic of a dangerous schism in consciousness, where “history is terrifying and does not promise to turn out well”, yet simultaneously, wishfully, “the sane answer to the terror is to affirm the sacredness of history (...) [where] everything that will have happened matters infinitely” (p. 206). This discrepancy speaks to the psychopathological element in historicized life.

Meant to expose the incoherence of Smith’s rhetorical strategy, the above examples from the text display a reality that in its penchant for change seems, particularly in historical terms, always insufficiently understood because it is constantly superseding what it used to historically mean. Perpetually inadequate, essentially contradictory, interminably divisive, it must in today’s climate of violence, hatred, and intolerance be the height of folly to consider history the antidote to the ills it itself perpetuates – not least in a situation where more historical knowledge is being produced on more topics, and from more perspectives, than ever before. This observation clashes with the belief, probably ineradicable, that contemporary demands for reassurance, for some discernible sense in human action, must be met by the production of even more of it. In this Smith is nothing if not consistent with the way in which history is considered central to any conception of human understanding. His advantage is that history is already the world’s prevailing idea; a category it finds as inescapable as it does indispensable. After all, who doesn’t turn to history to facilitate explanation, to connect one thing with another? Who doesn’t believe that in history resides the sort of intimate knowledge about humanity that was once the preserve of divine authority? History is indeed “a fictive substitute for authority and tradition, a maker of concords between past, present, and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity”.<sup>11</sup>

In this regard, *Full History* is yet more evidence of the suasion of “history thinking” in an already historicized culture, where to historicize – to treat, render or represent as historical whatever exists – is apparently the last defence against the depredations of human action. In any discussions about the self-delusions of this culture, with its misplaced hope in history, Smith’s book might figure as a prominent example, exhibiting as it does the “fullest” expression of an abiding yet unsubstantiated faith in history’s meaningfulness. Still, its readers

11 FRANK KERMODE, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford 2000, p. 56.

would do well to wonder about the contemporary dependence upon historical knowledge and, when faced with its dire consequences both political and ethical, question whether Smith's injunction to revere it is truly merited.

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