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## **After the Shipwreck: New Horizons for History Writing**

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**T**hank you for all those hot coals. I apologize for not letting you know in advance. You're going to be surprised.



I'm not talking about political responsibility in a direct sense today. I'm talking about historical responsibility, which has a political import. My title is *After the Shipwreck: New Horizons for History Writing*. Now, this all began with a chapter that I wrote in 1995 for the 26-volume series on Japanese history, published by Iwanami in Japan. Those of you who know Japanese publishing, know that this is the fourth such multi-volume set that Iwanami has published—one in the 30's, one in the 60's, one in the 70's, and then this one in the 90's. It was a sign of the times that foreigners were included this time. And it was a cunning trick, I thought, to ask a foreigner to write about postwar Japanese history-writing. I thought it was a little bit like outsider-art, you know, those people who take Coca Cola casts and make sculptures out of those. Sort of like outsider history—I was to come on and give my view of their national history. Well, the outcome, apart from the fact that it had a very pretentious title, called in English, *A Meta-History of Post-War Historiography* no less, surprised the editors, actually, and surprised me too. And I'll tell you why; for two reasons. First, commonality was what I noticed. Despite the insistently national character of every national history I looked at—France, the United States, Japan, or South Africa—I saw everywhere things in common.

There is a conceptual cosmopolitanism in modern history-writing because modern historians everywhere draw water at the same methodological wells. And since I'm dealing with modern history, the different national histories also had modernity in common—not the same one, not the same experience, but as the same problem, in any case.

And so I saw historians lowering the buckets of their particular modern experience into the common well of the conceptualizations of what the modern is. And what they came up with was both similar and distinctive at the same time. But viewed from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the similarities seemed to be far more striking than the differences. So I ended up writing about Japanese history from a comparative viewpoint, stressing the commonalities, and only after doing that, asking how and why distinctive histories emerged in places like Japan, Italy, Germany, India, and the rest. And part of the answer, of course, lies at the bottom of that conceptual well.

Now, it helped that I was an American historian, writing about Japanese history, in Paris. And this historiographical triangulation is what I think rendered the commonalities intelligible to me. It was like a Rosetta Stone of modern history-writing. I had everything in three or four languages, or three or four scripts, anyway, and it was the same story. And it also enabled me, this triangulation, to see something even more exhilarating, and that's what I now think of as a new conjunctural moment that began in the 1990's and has not ended yet. As you know, the 1990's brought another eruption of the past, the so-called return of history and seizure of memory, and together with that, historians, who "speak history," professionally and incessantly, burst forth themselves with a torrent of historiographical reflection. There was a lot of meta-history around.

Now, in Europe, North America and Japan, most of the talk was about crisis. History was at a turning point. History was in pieces... History was coming apart... Post-modern challenges made history in need of defense. It was said that history needed to be deconstructed, or that it rather had to be reconstructed because of all that multicultural chaos induced by the American Historical Association.

These books were lining up on my shelf *Deconstructing History*, *Reconstructing History*. And I really decided that they were fighting the battles that are basically anachronistic, that they were skirmishes on the trailing edge of historical scholarship, because what I was seeing is something very different. I was seeing a change in the regime of historicity, a transformation of our notions of the present and of the past. The 1990's brought a conjunctural

moment when several factors converged to open new horizons for history-writing—no crisis at all, the opportunity of a lifetime! And here are some of the factors, all of which you'll recognize, that came together to constitute the present conjuncture.

The first is that we are now living in the land of paradigms lost. The large dominant paradigms of history-writing, whether they're Marxist, liberal, or developmental, modernizationist, functionalist, or structuralist, are most of them theoretical discourses from a long century before, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their 20<sup>th</sup> century evolutes. They are the basis of modern social science, and they were no longer working. So for the moment, there were no more historical parachutists, to use the term of Emmanuel Leroy-Ladurie, who came parachuting in with their theories already formed, pre-prepared for any historical reality they might encounter. There were no paradigms to take.

Secondly, methodologies had multiplied in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. History and other arts and sciences have since survived and been strengthened by a 20<sup>th</sup> century ordeal-by-method. Epistemological savvy had been gained. For sure, there was no more naïve empiricism, no more truffle hunters—those are the opposite of the parachutists—sniffing around the trunks of the trees of the past for hidden facts. The constructedness of knowledge was now taken as a given. And the past, which used to be taken as a given, the so-called 'un-thought' for historians, who just chalked it up but never thought about it, had now been challenged. We are told that the past no longer speaks to us, there are no more telling pasts. The past is now described as an absolute elsewhere. And Paul Ricoeur, who is responsible for a great deal of this, has put it very well when he says it's what once was and is no more, which makes it hard.

Now, this parallels what happens in science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the beginning with relativity until the end of certainty. It's certainly made a tremendous difference for historians. In addition, there was a great deal of disciplinary enrichment. History first sidled up to the social sciences earlier in the century—sociology, and later anthropology, ethnography, later literary theory, and vice versa; we have the new historicism in literature and the so-called historic turn in the social sciences. There were theoretical surges throughout that time—structuralism, post-structuralism, the linguistic turn, the new social history, the new cultural history, feminism, post-colonial theory, post-modernism. All of them with tremendous impacts. And there were meta-historical challenges too, particularly to the nature of narrative. The tales that historians tell reflectively now began to be approached with

reflexivity, sometimes to a point of paralysis, although nowhere near as bad as with the anthropologists. The historians kept on doing it. But all these methodological and epistemological changes during the course of the century were presented very often in terms of aggressive advocacy because they were intended to make themselves felt against the resistance of the naturally viscous institutional flow of established history-writing. This is a very conservative profession.

So these were asserted as polemical absolutes. They were the *only* way to write history. But by the turn of our century, these multiple methodologies and these challenges had been absorbed into the historiographical woodwork of young historians, who deployed them multiply, at will, ethnographic one chapter, textual the next, cultural analysis of the media, followed by an excursus into great man history. Gender was no longer an add-on, but part of the very analysis of all social experience. Nor were historians, particularly young historians, any longer applying theory like an ointment to the empirical skin of their subject, or serving up a narrative sandwich of thick description between thin slices of theory at the beginning and the end of a dissertation. Now they had an array of arrows in their methodological quiver. They pulled them when appropriate, sometimes with extremely sophisticated results.

The third aspect that came together to form this conjuncture was really historical, but that had to do with, or you could sum it up as, endings all around. It was the end of the Cold War, which it was. It was the end of the modern, which it wasn't. Not to speak of the fact that it wasn't the end of history, either. Endings posed present challenges, sometimes expressed as a loss of the future, and since history, at least in modern times, has always been written toward the future, this created a time offerment, and a kind of unsettledness in history-writing. And Marshall Sahlins has called our age, 'the age of after-ology'—we're after everything and we don't know what we're before. It is this after-ology, this post-ness, and the lack of clarity of what things might be coming forward that made these times unsettling.

But the unsettling times were where the opportunity lay, because suddenly we had the opportunity to ask very big questions. This is one of the advantages of chaos, at least disciplinary chaos, because if you lost your paradigms and the glaciers of intellectual orthodoxy have broken up, it may be hard to keep your footing, like on ice flows, but there are a lot of new currents, and the directions are open.

So at the same time that this is happening, we have all the methodological capacities that I've mentioned to answer these big questions and answer them in *situ*, or on the ground, as they say. So we can ask questions like how capitalism happens in early modern Japan, what the U.S. Civil War or the Glorious Revolution was all about, how childbirth changed across decades in colonial or post-colonial Congo, how the post-Cold War transnational system emerged in relation to the Algerian War—those are all examples from real books. And the fruits of asking these very large questions and answering them in the precincts of past experience are real. Context-layered interpretations of situated specificity that speak to large historical questions suggest patterns and even generate theory.



Now, my conjunctural point about the 1990's means that we are, to use Fernand Braudel's phrase, 'after the shipwreck.' Braudel once said, 'Social science models was like making boats—you make them, you set them afloat, and then you see what happens. 'The shipwreck,' he added, 'is always the most significant moment.' And that's where I think we are.

Now, I've actually studied this in history-writing. I really have studied it, and I'm pretty sure of myself. But I think it is not only about history-writing. I happen to know through kith and kin that it's true in architecture, that there is no dominant style at the moment in architecture. And I'm told by others who know their fields better that this conjuncture is also true in other scholarly arts and sciences. So I'm speaking about history-writing, but I don't believe at all that this conjuncture affects only historians.

Now, there are three caveats that I want to add about this conjuncture, because I don't want to be too much of a Pollyanna here. First, the weight of the field will remain doing what it has been doing. And the built-in time lag caused by institutional factors like tenure—dare I mention it here—just prolongs the long half-life of academic anachronism, but I promise you the exciting work will look different. Second, this is not meant to be a progressive story, where the history written during this conjuncture is some kind of culmination to the march of historiographical progress. I'm not arguing that it's going to be better history, but it will be different. And, third, the conjunctural opportunity will not last long. History shows that this window will close, new paradigms will form, orthodoxies will congeal, so there's really no time to waste. This is a conjuncture that was not chosen, but it can be