

The Illusions of Writing a Perfect History: Some “Archaeological” Contributions

A perfect history can be considered an exigency for a “better world”, and this metaphor is present in the spirit of writing and of criticizing texts from Renaissance to nowadays. How to write a perfect history was in the mind of generations of scholars. This cultural and political illusion developed disciplines such as Logic, Philology and Grammar as Universal Disciplines of Analysis. The development of written culture – writing and printing – made possible to observe and to eliminate the “contradictions” from texts and from social-political systems! In this way, Modern Logic, Grammar and Philology were founded by series of mathematical reasoning, which were introduced in *the spirit of perfecting humanist knowledge*.

Perfect History is the epistemological necessity of perfecting the existent historical knowledge. This perfect history made possible the development of critical and analytical spirit and it is linked to the idea of written history. I mean that perfect history is preoccupied by *how history is written*, and by *how history could be better written*. For depicting similarities and differences of written histories and humanities, many scholars of Renaissance analysed *their grammar; their structure of enounces* and the relationships between them. They conceptualized...

The conceptualization is the “product” of a modern scientific thinking instead of the fact that various scientific methods have existed in ancient civilizations. The conceptualization is in the same time practical and theoretical and it is an epistemological process which is governed by *the principle of representation*. To conceptualize means to invent some concepts for criticizing and analyzing living phenomena in order to reduce them to... *scientific or ordinary explanations*. And this ‘reduction’ is a loss of History, of experience and, maybe, of Humanity. But in the same time it is “an achievement” in making abstract, rational, logical, closed and secure systems of power-knowledge which govern our world, our modern society. The idea of security in the West is based on a closed and secured system of power-knowledge!

N. Machiavelli and Jean Bodin believed in this written history as “perfect knowledge”. For Machiavelli, written history can explain and represent everything from past and present. Italian humanist conceived history as a solution for daily social and political problems, using *the method of comparison*. For Bodin, written history must be founded by the deductive reasoning/deductive knowledge. A “perfect history”, as Bodin believed, can extract from social and political changes... general laws¹. French jurist and philosopher wished history to become a deductive science, guiding the Man to “a better” social-political system. This presence of “better” is the core of perfect history. I

do not think that this modern belief in “better” will produce *the better!*

The European Christian tradition imposed *story* or *narrative* as a *usual form of expressing historical research*. Medieval Christianity diffused the idea of story as *a universal form of writing history*. History is history only and only if it is *a story*, only if it has *a common or usual narrative structure* with *beginning, middle* and *end*. This narrative mentality is derived from Bible and combined with the Greek and Roman’s cultural traditions. Sande Cohen pointed out that in the Western historical culture “nonstory = nonhistory”² and from this Anglo-Saxon Academic Community’s perspective “what is distinctive about them is their utter reversibility (positive and negative), suggesting a rather fluid semantic network”³. This equivalence also imposed a “black-and-white” view upon society and history and gave birth to fluid relativistic interpretations on society, man and history. We have a circular construction of historical narrative which can be considered “a contradiction”, because people’s life and problems are never ending and a certain historical text must have *an end*, “must have” a limited sum of messages and findings! For this reason written histories are incomplete and revisable, because are writings which cannot please everyone and they do not have a *real end*, only a conventional one in a very figural meaning.

For La Popelinière (1541-1608), universal history is “the correct and perfect history” because was considered by the French historian as “the representation of all things”⁴ and *this representation* can be understood as an original and unclassified report between historian’s mind and the external social, political, historical facts. Every historian has its “own theory” and every collection of historical facts requires a theoretical approach. In this sense “history” and “theory” are together, interconnected and almost undistinguished at the level of composing a text; at the level of making a narrative.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in his well-known book *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) mentioned the concept of “perfect histories”⁵, when he classified the civil history in three types: *chronicles*, *perfect histories* and *antiquities*. Characterizing perfect histories, Bacon said that they divide in three other types: “a time, a person or an action”⁶. He commented in his well-known style these types of history.

David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) wrote about “perfect ideas”⁷ which are something deeply linked to memory and imagination, but closer to imagination than to memory. He considered that the so-called “indivisible parts” of ideas must be “filled with something real and existent”⁸. Otherwise, ‘perfect ideas’ can be viewed as enounces formulated at the crossing point of memory, of imagination and of reality.

Universal history became the model of perfect history having inside “historical data” and “meanings”. For more than two centuries, this form of history was the avant-garde of European humanist thinking. This universal history is characterized by the study of documents, the proliferation of metaphors, and the idea of “making sense” with all these *discontinuous and disparate evidences/or pieces of archives*. And “making sense” requires an *argumentative thinking in an evident or verifiable way*, following the Cartesian Ideal of Cogito and the Kantian Ideal of Rational Laws. It was the Illusion of *a pure and perfect reason*, physical and mechanical, which can govern people, things, realities, including *their linguistically and logical conditions*. Universal history (17th-19th centuries) is “perfect” and it is in the spirit of Descartes, of Newton, of Kant.

Social and political norms produce forms of behaviour, forms of (re)structuring thinking, and forms of systemized knowledge. But these *universal norms of knowing and being* cannot produce contents or substances, which are derived from original and creative thinking of individuals in connection with realities. These norms can only reduce specific contents of knowledge and of reality to *an empty form of global behaviour*. Scientific and political norms try to control and shape all these specific human conditions, activities, productions and services using *a sophisticated mechanism of power-knowledge* which is

represented by present institutions (universities, political structures).

Modern theories depict and criticize some concepts and ideas from histories and other humanities for perfecting them. And this ‘spirit of perfection’ creates a *new knowledge*, which is complementary or contradictory with *the old knowledge*. In this way, theoretical thinking endlessly increases *the forms of historical thinking* which are combined with *a selected number of historical contents* (historical data, books, activities, social and political deeds, personal experiences etc.). We have many different *forms of historical thinking* like a puzzle! I do not see many original *contents of historical thinking* at the global scale!

In this way, theoretical thinking develops and transforms the idea of humanist knowledge, having as a result *a plurality of forms of historical thinking*, which shape *the contents of written histories*, and all “un-theoretical” histories have theoretical insights in their *systems of production*. All these social and epistemological processes from the 16th and 17th century have contributed in the invention and crystallization of *two types of languages (scientific and literary)*, maintaining the utopia of a “perfect knowledge” and the Enlightenment, including Kant and Rousseau, are in this paradigm. For example, the idea of a Critique – as an autonomous discipline – which discovers the “key” of the creative function, which identifies the aesthetical

values of writing are exigencies of humanist thinking from France of 17th century⁹.

The Linguistic and Hermeneutic Type of Modern Critique was, always, obsessed by... a “perfect knowledge”. In this way, a “perfect knowledge” – a certain knowledge which cannot be revised and it is “an ultimate version”! – is achievable in *two types of perfection*: 1) the analysis of contents from X, Y object of study (e. g. books, activities, social phenomena, political struggles, arts); 2) the discursive or narrative construction of X, Y object of study (the forms of expression). The perfection of narratives and the perfection of the analysis of a text are obsessions of this literary modern critique¹⁰, which influenced the “know-how” of historians, of writers, of philosophers etc. If the novel is considered by Forster the narrative construction hardest to criticize¹¹, the same thing can be said about the book of history because these distinguished types of narratives (novel, book of history) combine a fictive way in which human experiences and certain understandable and common knowledge are presented to public, to audience.

Science and Ideology became parts of history due to this belief of a perfect humanist knowledge. That history was thirsty after *scientific* and inextricable involved in *ideological conditions*. A Science of Ideas and the Logic of Argumentations became parts of modern historical knowledge and the hyper-concrete fact that history as a modern discipline is linked to

ideas, arguments and ideological positions speak itself to a *politicization of humanist thinking*. History served as an efficient mean of governing people in this modern partnership power-knowledge.

Universal history, as was conceived by French classic school of 17th century and general historical research of the documents in the 18th century, especially in German cultural space, have conducted humanist knowledge towards two main philosophies of history: 1) Weltheorie (theory of the world); 2) Comte's positivism. Both philosophical important theories have the same purpose: to explain the world, to explain society using real data and observations. For example, Herder's and Hegel's philosophy, Comte's positivism, Evolutionism of the 19th century, or Einstein's relativism not refer to "a way of understanding the world" (some individual explanations), but these theories are *the ways in which we can understand the world* having the strong belief that could no one be better. At least this illusion of *the best theory* that can be conceived was the psychological mobile of their time...

I think that a turning point in the history of humanities was Schiller's inaugural lesson at the University of Jena (May 1789), suggestively entitled *What is Universal History and Why We Study It?* in which two important issues for humanist knowledge were formulated: *the content of a knowledge* and *the utility of a knowledge*. For Renaissance's humanists this problem was not

isolated from society and politics. None of an authentic reflection about knowledge could be isolated from society and politics which are inextricably parts of historical knowledge. If moderns separate “the content” and “the utility” of knowledge under the influence of Utilitarianism and for an *immediate scope* – maybe a commercial one! –, Renaissance’s humanists have an entire different view of these concepts-problems. They would never say: “What are the new arts and why we make them?”

Positivism “decomposed” the epistemological possibilities of writing a perfect universal history, which means a book of history that can satisfy everyone. And even if a book of history would please the public, this book could not be perfect at the level of narration or discourse, of succession of ideas or of arguments. There is no perfect history because the modern world instead of its technological progress is totally imperfect and profound contradictory at the level of action, of thought and of social and political dynamics.

Difficulties of universal histories in the foundation of a coherent and visible humanist knowledge are derived from two major situations: 1) historical knowledge has an incomplete epistemic structure and it is gradually formed from a generation to other of scholars; 2) more facts and events or more ideas and explanations in one single text destroy the coherence and *the common level of understanding*. We can only try a cultural illusion that we will write a perfect humanist text... and even if

this text is perfect from all points of view, this is not regarded in this way by contemporary people. They only see and evidence the “errors” or the “mistakes” of a certain knowledge and man! They are too mentally shaped by *nihilism*!

Even if we have this *incompleteness of historical research and writing*, history can be considered perfect from *two major reasons*: 1) written history and political thought cannot subscribe to *a unique and universal standard of knowing*, provided by the results from mathematics and physics instead of using these types of reasoning by analytical philosophy of history; 2) historical thinking and written history cannot be totally controlled by political establishments. These humanist domains really change the society even if we have an increasing pressure exercised upon historians and humanists by the political factors in order to follow *some “favourable” ideas and perspectives of writing about past*. From these two major motifs, history can be considered perfect with an evident figural meaning.

The structure of science is much more complex than the structure of history because science does not stop to “verifications” and “meanings” and it has to demonstrate series of hypotheses based on observations and experiments. Unlike history and humanities which have *a spiritual and imaginative advantage* in relation with sciences, mathematics and physics have *a practical advantage*, and the calculus represents *its*

structure. To write novels, to compose poetry, to do historical research represent spiritual activities and have little in common with *a practical scope of engineering projects, of social and political markets*. We do not compose a text (poetry, philosophy, history) for a special purpose, for a precise scope of an ad-hoc situation. Unlike the practicality of mathematics, of economics, the practicality of humanities can be regarded as a relationship of man with the past and present knowledge in order to understand the differences and the similarities between societies, civilizations, epochs, persons, actions and activities.

History will be “perfect” if the historian will understand the differences and similarities between cultures, societies and civilizations and he will try to make sense of them in his personal creative way. Educating human spirit is something different and greatest in contrast with modern and contemporary technological systems of power-knowledge. These systems are oriented in the education of psychological functions of brain and for profit. They do less for spirit and cultural non-intellectualized activities! For this reason, the modern mathematical and pragmatically education cannot improve the actual condition of humanity. We can only grow in numbers, but we cannot fulfil our souls and sensibilities using actual modern and contemporary technological and electronic systems, which invaded our life and humanities. There are too many enslaving and consuming ‘dispositifs’. I am using this term from Foucault

for designating media systems, social networks, Internet, gadgets, all the electronic objects which modify our behaviour etc. I think that these atomic devices represent an alteration of the authenticity for communication and for real life. But people are attracted by these factories of images, of impressions and of artificial dreams! We have the chance to become robots and to have a “perfect world” with a “perfect history” – an impersonal one! When impersonal dominates personal, humanity dies!

Histories cannot be written perfect because their fiction has a different epistemological condition from the fiction of literature or that of philosophy. Historical fiction is subdued to a past reality and this objective past reality is in one irreversible direction (*irreversible time*). Literary or philosophical fiction is much more flexible and open to various interpretations than historical fiction which is conditioned by an irreversible historical time. Every historical time has its own content of fiction which is the colour of a certain epoch.

Until Foucault – who succeeded a considerable breakthrough in the changing the Western epistemological conditions – modern and contemporary philosophy and literature used to address to *an unreal world*, to *a wishful world and thinking* for shaping and changing the present reality, the present human conditions (political, economic, cultural, social etc.). I see written history as a critical, narrative or discursive presentation of historical data and it addresses to a present reality, which is,

always, *a political reality from a historical past*. Historical thoughts cannot try to create an ideal world or a wishful thinking, but to offer to present thinking, to contemporary people a variety of social, of epistemological and of political aspects.

For this reason, historical thinking is utility and for politics is inevitability. Politics as practices are not “good” or “evil” and they do not have something in common with *this modern ethical separation* (“good” versus “evil”). To judge politics in this way is a *Masque from Understanding and Modern Discourse and its ethics* is a surface from a deeper understanding of *what is politics*. The subject *what is politics* is not at all a fluent and exactly question with one, two or three definitively answers provided by scholars and specialists! To believe that History is “good” or “evil” became a Symbol of Religious Mentality, in essence, a Symbol of Modern Political Thought which always judged and separated people, things and knowledge according to *its own standards and norms*.

Romanian cultural critic and writer Romul Munteanu (1926-2011) made an irony to this unilateral perception of *how is history*, said that “if history is painted by a mythology of evil, the imagination of people from all times was never innocent”¹². Dialectics is present in the imagination of scholars, rather than in reality! And dialectical imaginations are responsible and

directly involved in the atomization of modern reality by *its virtual devices* (media, Internet, electronics).

I see modern philosophy and literature closer to ideology and politics rather than written history, which is in the proximity of political general conditions. And this ideology is a mystification of social and political problems in order to take advantage from an *ad-hoc situation*, an *ad-hoc reality* or it is a subjectivist or partisan interpretation of facts and of events for controlling the general discourse and, implicitly, the political power. Mystification is for manipulation and for controlling *the social map of power*. Modern philosophy and literature are not at all linked to the proper meaning of ideology – a science of ideas. I think that written history is intimately based on *a science of ideas*. And history of ideas, epistemology of history, and philosophy of history can make sense in this chimera – a science of ideas as Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) wished. But not a mathematical science of ideas... I do not think that mathematical reasoning has a proper function in this intellectual project of tomorrow!

The Force of Ideology is maintained in societies by: 1) the people's ignorance; 2) the docile acceptation of ideas and knowledge in conditions of freedom on the basis of Modern Dogma of Authorities of Knowledge and of Behaviour; 3) the absence of civic and critically spirit among civilians and intellectuals; 4) the blindness of doctrines and of ideological

partisanship in civil societies; 5) the fragmentation of society in closed and exclusivist groups of power-knowledge, especially among leading intellectuals and politicians; 6) the myth of elite, called to save the society. These aspects of “the force of ideology” – my ironic emphasis – make impossible the idea of a perfect written history. Written histories are, always, placed in some “ideological positions” from Right to Left and beyond in, somehow, taxonomic labels (“radical”, “moderate”, “conservative”, “liberal”, “socialist”, “nationalist”, “cosmopolite”).

A perfect history was *a history with meaning*, but after Marx and due to him, a meaningful history was not good enough for... a complete or perfect history. Perfect histories have been decomposed into all possible ‘imperfect histories’. The meaningless histories are something deeper in Marx’s ideology and in modern lifestyle! Who made “a meaning” for us? I do not think that Reality and History have a meaning at all! After Marx, our world is a meaningless one... And this meaningless world can be understood as a permanent struggle in daily life for “a better” condition of man and mankind.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) do not have an epistemological function in relationship with, a somehow, understanding of history and of modern reality because of two arguments: 1) historical thinking and the formation of historical knowledge

were not founded on “sufficient reason” from the moment that historical thought and historical data cannot be finite and enough good and, somehow, are over passed by new ways of thinking and by new discoveries, are transformed in history by the what is called – *the general progress of knowledge*; 2) life and history are made by contradictions and only modern critique with its exigencies imagined the idea of written history as “a non-contradictory narrative”. We have something that can be easily read and assimilated by a large public: narrative histories and humanities. Narration became the skeleton of written history! Historical texts cannot be perfect because are not governed by “sufficient reason” and because *reality in itself is a contradiction*. If historical reality is a contradiction *how* could be *its* historical text a non-contradictory narrative? Logic cannot be sovereign upon historical knowledge.

If the modern analytical spirit and the deductive methods are good for technologies and mathematical calculus, they cannot be endowed with creative functions for arts and humanities. This modern analytical spirit, which served as epistemic basis for Hermeneutics and Semiotics, could no longer improve the epistemological condition of Humanities. This belief of *a better knowledge* and *a better world* is part of Enlightenment’s social and political projects. If we will make a circular and mathematical analysis of a painting or writing this does not mean that we will be able to create something similar

just because we understood “the composition” or “the elements” of that thing. This illusionistic reasoning of modern world is derived from *forma mentis* of Enlightenment, where Mathematics was the perfection of all knowledge and the Queen of all Sciences.

A perfect mechanism is something usual, something inhuman which has a social and fixed utility. For example, a bridge has the utility of crossing the river. A masterpiece of humanities is something unusual, something that cannot be reduced to a commonality, only in subsidiary (unessential observations and findings) or in abstract (numbers/statistics/econometrics). The major temptation and illusion of this modern world is that of breaking the humanist spirit, the poetic spirit, calculating and numbering all the subsidiary messages of a work of art from the purpose of sketching *a model*, of depicting *a recipe*. A book of history “is perfect”, because it does not have to subordinate to mathematical reasoning as a universal standard of knowing, and in the same time cannot be perfect because it is permanently analysed by this modern analytical mind with *its taxonomic authoritarian disciplines*. Every historical text is filled with a profound idea of imperfection. That’s why books of history and humanities have developed historiography and theory of history as analytical domains of historical studies. That’s why historical texts are source of reflection for humanists and philosophers of

history. That's why cultural relativism and alternative or unofficial knowledge have a stake in humanities and, also, in social and political practices. From different perspectives and points of view written history and its historical ideals from the West are perfect, but also imperfect...

¹ G. Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France*, Urbana, Chicago, London, The University of Illinois Press, 1970, p. 94.

² S. Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1986, p. 72.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁴ G. Huppert, *The Idea...*, p. 143.

⁵ F. Bacon, *The Two Books of Francis Bacon of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012, p. 196.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

⁷ D. Hume, *On Ideas*, Bucharest, All, 2012, p. 17. This volume includes the first two chapters from Hume's *Treatise...*

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁹ W. H. Coates, H. White, J. S. Schapiro, *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe*, vol. 1, New York/London, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966, p. 171.

¹⁰ J. M. Heath (ed.), *The Creator as Critic and Other Writings by E. M. Forster*, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2008, p. 151.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹² R. Munteanu, *Modern European Literature*, Timisoara, Amarcord, 2000, p. 87.