

Nietzsche's Use of History for Life

In “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life” Nietzsche argues against scientific-historical forms of knowledge in favor of unhistorical living. “I demand that man should above all learn to live and should employ history in *the service of the life he has learned to live.*”¹ Nietzsche believed that his contemporary period was suffering from the production of a particular form of knowledge that had an adverse effect on the human life. I argue that this form of knowledge that Nietzsche describes as “historical” still exists today in the forms of knowledge produced and distributed by the mass media. Nietzsche believed that historical knowledge was used to enslave the individual within society by overwhelming their consciousness with an incorrect way of understanding how events occur. Historical knowledge promotes a particular conception of the world that is philosophically premised, in Nietzsche’s eyes, on submission. For Nietzsche the struggle against historical knowledge was linked to a struggle against a Hegelian philosophy that saw the individual’s submission to the State as fulfillment of the “world-process”. In rejecting the “total surrender of the personality to the world-process”, Nietzsche proposed an increase in an unhistorical perspective where creation was understood as possible at any moment: “For then there would come the empire of youth”.²

Fundamental to Nietzsche’s argument is that there is only unhistorical living and historical dissection. An appreciation of the unhistorical is crucial for Nietzsche because the unhistorical is the source of creation. All that currently exists came about through an

¹ “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life” (UD) 116

² UD,116

act of forgetting which enabled the individual to act against, and outside, the past. “With the word ‘the unhistorical’ I designate the art and power of *forgetting* and of enclosing oneself within a bounded *horizon*...”³ This boundary allows an individual to exert control over its consciousness through rejecting the past and foreign momentarily in order to act without hesitation. The capacity to forget the past and to establish this “bounded horizon” is termed the “plastic power of a man, a people, a culture”. By “plastic power” Nietzsche means “the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds”.⁴

The unhistorical is something that all individuals have experienced as it is “essential to action of any kind”. For Nietzsche, events emerge from an “unhistorical, anti-historical” condition that is integral to art, religion, and political revolutions. This unhistorical condition is “the womb not only of the unjust but of every just deed too; and no painter will paint his picture, no general achieve his victory, no people attain its freedom without having first desired and striven for it in an unhistorical condition”.⁵ Without the ability to feel unhistorical an individual is unable to “extricate himself from the delicate net of his judiciousness and truth for a simple act of will and desire”.⁶ In reference to Nietzsche’s essay, Deleuze explains that “creations are like mutant abstract lines that have detached themselves from the task of representing a world, precisely because they assemble a new type of reality that history can only recontain or relocate in

³ UD, 120

⁴ UD, 62

⁵ UD, 64

⁶ UD, 63

punctual systems”.⁷ The past, then, is composed of unhistorical events that should not be understood historically because such an interpretation would lead one astray. To understand an event historically would mean to gain knowledge about the event that does not explain the event’s emergence:

A historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead: for he has recognized in it the delusion, the injustice, the blind passion, and in general the whole earthly and darkening horizon of this phenomenon, and has thereby also understood its power in history.⁸

The event dies through historical inspection if history’s sole objective is the production of knowledge. If the past is taken as an object of scientific inquiry then volumes upon volumes of knowledge can be produced but this knowledge has a harmful effect on the human psyche. Harmful because the production of historical information is premised on the superstition of objectivity: “it is a superstition, however, that the picture which these things evoke in a man possessing such a disposition [objectivity] is a true reproduction of the empirical nature of the things themselves”.⁹ But instead, this detachment deprives the event of its significance and attachment to desires. “The original note recalled actions, distress, terrors; this note lulls us and makes us tame spectators.”¹⁰ The effect is overwhelming.

Because of the “demand that history should be a science” that Nietzsche sees his culture embracing, “the demands of life alone no longer reign and exercise constraint on knowledge of the past: now all the frontiers have been torn down and all that has ever

⁷ “A Thousand Plateaus”, 296

⁸ UD, 67

⁹ UD, 91

¹⁰ UD, 90

been rushes upon mankind.”¹¹ In dissecting the past, historical-scientific knowledge is produced - overwhelming the individual with an immensity of contradictory, factual knowledge about the past. Taking as an example how war is understood historically, Nietzsche writes that “the war is not even over before it is transformed into a hundred thousand printed pages and set before the tired palates of the history-hungry as the latest delicacy”.¹² A key aspect of this form of knowledge is that it is voluminous. Heidegger too was aware of the effects of too much information: “talking extensively about something, covers it up and brings what is understood to a sham clarity – the unintelligibility of the trivial”.¹³ Trivial, historical knowledge is favorable to the State; when it is consumed it creates satiated, passive individuals whose lives are played out internally without external action. By convincing the individual to understand life through the consumption of information the State is able to develop within the individual a new form of consciousness that limits the individual’s ability to live.

A remarkable aspect of Nietzsche’s essay is that it develops a theory of how the consciousness of man is altered through the consumption of information. Nietzsche understood that the State was increasingly “educating” the public with a form of knowledge that developed obedient subjects. Nietzsche anticipated both the effect of this information overload and that it would be deployed in terms of “education”:

The uniform canon is that the young man has to start with a knowledge of culture, not even with a knowledge of life and even less with life and experience itself. And this knowledge of culture is instilled into youth in the form of historical knowledge; that is to say, his head is crammed with a tremendous number of ideas

¹¹ UD, 77

¹² UD, 83

¹³ “Being and Time”, 165

derived from a highly indirect knowledge of past ages and peoples, not from direct observation of life.¹⁴

Overwhelmed by information, the modern man is comprised of “indigestible stones of knowledge” that form an aberrant, incoherent mental consciousness: “Knowledge, consumed for the greater part without hunger for it and even counter to one’s needs, now no longer acts as an agent for transforming the outside world but remains concealed within a chaotic inner world which modern man describes with a curious pride as his uniquely characteristic ‘subjectivity’.”¹⁵ Nietzsche is arguing that historical-scientific knowledge develops in man a new form of subjectivity. In contrast, for Nietzsche, the consciousness of man developed from the repression of instincts by society. Compare modern man’s subjectivity with the origin of the unhistorical consciousness which Nietzsche describes as resulting from the man’s first capture by the “walls of society and of peace”:

All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward*—this is what I call the *internalization* of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his “soul.” The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited*.¹⁶

The “internalization of man” is a result of the formation of early societies that forced the individual to rely on mental cognition rather than instinct. Modern man’s “subjectivity” is the result of historical-scientific knowledge that fills man’s “inner world” with unending information. When the focus is placed on dissecting the event from a scientific perspective an unlimited amount of information can be produced and fed to the

¹⁴ UD, 118

¹⁵ UD, 78

¹⁶ “On the Genealogy of Morals” (GM), pg 84

individual. Nietzsche describes the effect on the modern man: “Fragmented and in pieces, dissociated almost mechanically into an inner and outer, sown with concepts as with dragon’s teeth, bringing forth, conceptual dragons, suffering from the malady of words and mistrusting any feeling of our own which has not yet been stamped with words”.¹⁷ Thus, the development of the inner world of man, which emerged from the original constraints placed upon the individual’s instincts by society, has become deformed in a new way. A new inner world, the “subjectivity” of the individual, has developed while the ability to live has atrophied. “I still have the right to say of myself *cogito, ergo sum*, but not *vivo, ergo cogito*. Empty ‘being’ is granted me, but not full and green ‘life’; the feeling that tells me I exist warrants to me only that I am a thinking creature, not that I am a living one, not that I am an *animal* but at most a *cogital*.”¹⁸

For Nietzsche the production of historical knowledge is not an innocent consequence of society, but is instead a deliberate tactic used to stifle a youth rebellion against the State. “We shall have to discover a particularly unpleasant fact: that the excesses of the historical sense from which the present day suffers are deliberately furthered, encouraged and – employed”.¹⁹ Overwhelmed by information, youth are trained to become obedient members of the State: “the mass of the influx is so great, the strange, barbaric and violent things that press upon the youthful soul do so with such overwhelming power that its only refuge is in an intentional stupidity”.²⁰ Historical knowledge “can even deprive youth of its fairest privilege, of its power to implant in

¹⁷ UD, 119

¹⁸ UD, 119

¹⁹ UD, 115

²⁰ UD, 98

itself the belief in a great idea and then let it grow to an even greater one”.²¹ The control of the eruption of youth protest is accomplished through a control of the event through its translation into historical knowledge. Foucault observes that “the power of a certain class (which determines this knowledge) must appear inaccessible to events; and the event, in its dangerous aspect, must be dominated and dissolved in the continuity of power maintained by this class, by a class power which is never defined”.²² Nietzsche describes this dissolution of the event with an example that brings to mind the production of the “9/11 Commission Report”:

The historical sense makes its servants passive and retrospective; and almost the only time the sufferer from the fever of history becomes active is when this sense is in abeyance through momentary forgetfulness – though even then, as soon as the act is finished he at once dissects it, prevents it from producing any further effects by analyzing it, and finally skins it for the purpose of ‘historical study’.²³

A critique of the historical is vital for Nietzsche if youth is to flourish. His primary concern in producing words about the historical is to strengthen the unhistorical. Nietzsche wanted a reoccurring youthful overthrow of all that exists and 11 years after he wrote “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, Nietzsche authored “On the Genealogy of Morals” for this purpose. Nietzsche’s genealogical method is meant to convey the event in a manner that incites events. Dismissing the value of historical knowledge, Nietzsche’s genealogy is concerned with how morality’s meaning has shifted overtime in correspondence with who had power. Nietzsche’s inquiry leads him to an awareness of the difficulty of determining meaning once one refrains from assuming that meaning was static or that it unfolded according to a teleology. Instead, it becomes clear

²¹ UD, 115

²² “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now’”, 221

²³ UD, 102

that meaning is created through the violence of an unhistorical act.. Whatever exists is the product of a creative force outside the restrictions of preexisting meaning or morality:

Whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.²⁴

In agreement with Nietzsche, Foucault writes that “humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination”. Foucault continues by observing:

If interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.²⁵

It is here, however, that I think early-Foucault strays from Nietzsche’s intention in producing knowledge about the historical.²⁶ Foucault takes Nietzsche’s observations and applies them to create a new method of writing history. For Foucault, “the role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process”.²⁷ However, Nietzsche’s primary focus in addressing history was to incite the unhistorical. Nietzsche seems less concerned with recording history

²⁴ GM, 77

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy, History* (NGH), 151

²⁶ Later Foucault is more open to laying aside theory in an embrace of action. Suggesting at one point, “Reject theory and all forms of general discourse. This need for theory is still part of the system we reject.” (“Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now’”, 231)

²⁷ NGH, 152

than creating it. On the one hand, this is accomplished by highlighting the fragility of every moment and by drawing attention to the movement of time as a sequence of missed opportunities to shift meanings in a way favorable to oneself. But of equal, if not greater, importance than the creation of information about ways meanings have shifted is to formulate a new history that furthers life. If historical knowledge acts to deform our consciousness through an overwhelming amount of information, then those who want change can fight back through replacing historical knowledge with myths. This is not to say that the myths which Nietzsche created are without philosophical validity. On the contrary, Nietzsche would argue that the mythical is the proper place for the emergence of creation and that the mythical is a superior way to express this emergence. To reclaim our consciousness means replacing a subjectivity composed of historical knowledge with the unhistorical.

This reading immediately illuminates why Nietzsche subtitled his genealogy “A Polemic”. Polemics is etymologically connected to war, arguments and consequently creation. Nietzsche deploys polemics to destroy and to rebuild. Through polemics Nietzsche destroys the idea that the evolution of the State is related to justice and historical development. He rebuilds by explaining the origin of the State in an aphorism for creation. For Nietzsche, the origin of the State was a “break, a leap, a compulsion, an ineluctable disaster which precluded all struggle and even all *ressentiment*”:

I employed the word “state”: it is obvious what is meant – some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad. That is after all how the “state” began on earth: I think that sentimentalism which would have it begin with a “contract” has been disposed of.²⁸

²⁸ GM, 86

By placing the origin of the State in this nebulous time when the nomad was colonized by these “involuntary, unconscious artists” Nietzsche is describing a mythical event that reoccurs at each moment with each act of creation. The origin of the state is not something that happened in the “past” but is instead something that is continuously occurring. As Foucault writes, “the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference”.²⁹ Every moment is an opportunity for the overthrow of the current state. This is why Nietzsche wrote his essay for the youth: youth are not entirely contained by society and are thus still capable of acting unhistorically: “here I recognize the mission of that *youth* I have spoken of, that first generation of fighters and dragon-slayers which will precede a happier and fairer culture and humanity without itself having more than a presentiment of this future happiness and beauty”.³⁰ Youth, and youthful thinking, present the possibility of this creation because youth are not yet at home in the culture they will overcome:

The sign that guarantees the superior robustness of its own health shall be that this youth can itself discover no concept or slogan in the contemporary currency of words and concepts to describe its own nature, but is only aware of the existence within it of an active power that fights, excludes and divides and of an ever more intense feeling of life.³¹

Given that Nietzsche’s intention is to incite creation, the advantages of his perspective can only be considered in terms of the effectiveness of that incitation on an individual level. For this reason, I agree with Deleuze when he wrote that what is important is finding what theory works for the individual: “treat my book as a pair of glasses directed

²⁹ NGH, 155

³⁰ UD, 121

³¹ UD, 121

to the outside; if they don't suit you, find another pair; I leave it to you to find your own instrument, which is necessarily an instrument for combat".³²

³² "Intellectuals and Power", 208