

EIGHTH EUROPEAN PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM FESTIVAL

Turning Points in History

Daniel Pick
October 2015

'Turning points' are of course a perennial concern of historians. They are in the business of looking at change, as well as stagnation in the past: thus revolutions as well as possible 'false dawns' and failed developments: was the Arab Spring, for instance, a real break with the past or not, and if there was a decisive rupture in that heady time of possibility, of what kind? How does one moment of historical possibility, or of human disaster, compare with another? Was 9/11 best seen as the unprecedented epoch changing moment in global history that it was often considered to be at the time? As a tragedy for thousands and as an atrocious set of acts, leading to mass murder, there can be no doubt, but as 'turning point, there might be several kinds of argument. If it did usher in a new world this was as much to do with the policy decisions taken in its aftermath as the event itself; some argue that events were 'hijacked' by neo-Con ideologues who were already committed to certain far-reaching geo-political policy changes well in advance.

Historians look for how events turn worlds, and how particular interests, and discourses, may fashion or seize upon such contingent occurrences. Thus turning points, real and imagined, require scrutiny, just as communities 'on the ground' and as

envisioned in language and image, require close analysis. The real and the virtual often bleed into one another; 'communities' are indeed always at some level imagined. And intellectual, political, cultural, social or economic transitions and transformations in nations or continents are indeed often hard to disentangle. And of course it is not only guns and tanks on the streets that may produce material effects in the 'real world', but also words and images.

Some historians now also search for the turning point when human beings actually had the capacity materially to affect the very conditions of viability for human life on the planet – the term 'anthropocene', coined in the 1960s, is now used to describe the stage in human history in which human activity has affected the climate and geology of the world we live in. The *Annales school* in France, in and after the 1930s, perhaps set the scene for such a notion – as they sought the deeper and slower moving material transformations in our environments over centuries or millennia, and the consequences of those settings for social organisation itself. This was an attempt to eschew the 'kings and queens' style of history. A characteristic move was to show how particular regions of the world – for instance, the Mediterranean – shape the contours of life, far more than the dynastic question of who governs which bit of the territory. Turning points might be for instance a matter of the erosion of the soil, rather than the decapitation of a monarch.

Other schools of history have focussed quite differently, for instance writing in miniature, using 'micro-history', particular lives or moments, or themes (the history of cod, the history of a single criminal case, or the role of 'cheese and the worms' in the life of a particular baker from Friuli) to see how a world of experience and belief might be turning. Here miniature stories are an optic on a larger world.

What I want to get at here is also how the word 'turn', or the phrase 'turning point' can characterise both history, and historiographical understanding, the nature of worlds in the past, and the nature of the way history has been thought about and written, how the past is construed; and I would like to open up

for discussion, the question as to whether the same could be said of film and of psychoanalysis.

Historians use the word 'turn' to convey movement in the 'writing' and conceptualisation of history, as well as to characterise redirections of human effort, feeling, or material practice in the past. That suggests two meanings, but in fact, here I want briefly to elaborate upon that, and to structure these remarks around *three perspectives* on what 'turning points' in history might mean, and then to return to the idea that the lines between them can blur, or at least that they may all interact and overlap in complex ways.

There are, as already noted, the turning points that historians seek to identify in the material conditions of life in the past. For instance, we can explore transformations in land, and its use, in political arrangements, social conditions, or the means of production *in the past*. There are obviously questions about who holds power, and who is dispossessed and disempowered. Such focus on the 'turning points' in the structure of entire societies is the most obvious sense in which the phrase exists. As when historians might write about how the Russian Revolution was an epoch-changing moment in world history.

Next consider *the ways historians seek to identify the mood or beliefs of past societies about its own changeability*, and its capacity to turn. For instance, historians might track alterations in the vocabularies, or, to use Foucault's term, the 'discourses' that past societies have available for understanding their own capacity to transform themselves. This history of perceptions of turning points is at least to some degree a distinct matter, from actual material changes: a volcano exploding and burying a town with lava is not the same thing as metaphors of the volcanic in political rhetoric; apocalyptic language can occur even in times of social stagnation. Needless to say there can be a gap between the historian's interpretation of what was happening in the past, and that period's own self-understanding, as it were, of what was happening at the time, or if its import.

Third, we can talk of 'turning points' in the way historical inquiry itself is conducted; so historians talk about the 'gender turn', the cultural turn', the 'linguistic turn', 'the emotional turn' and so on

in historical approaches to the past. As my 'Annales' or 'micro-history' examples suggest, historians, at particular moments in *history* have opened up new questions and methods. There are turning points in what historians are excited by; there are new 'ways of seeing' the past, not just debates about the turning points that have occurred *in* the past.

The historian might be interested, for example, in why many people in Victorian England thought the bourgeoisie had triumphed, and how they insisted that the middle classes were the ascendant power. The historian may or may not agree that this was so, or at least might qualify the exuberant terms in which the claim was previously made, either by champions of capitalism, or by its opponents. Some after all have sought to challenge that verdict – the assumption that a full bourgeois revolution had really occurred, say in Britain - or at least that it had swept all before it in the manner that many once claimed. A case in point, the book by Arno Mayer, entitled *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, which argued that the aristocracy in fact still, to a large degree, ruled the roost, circa 1900, or even 1914 in Britain.

The same goes for the Arab Spring – you could write a history of perceptions that an epochal shift occurred, and you might then write, later on, a different – perhaps more sober, or at least different – assessment of what actually changed in practice.

A famous example here of the disjunction between a past perception of 'turning point' and the later judgement is provided by the celebrated historian, the first of the 'TV' historians' to become a household name, A.J.P. Taylor. In *The Course of German History* (1945), Taylor observed that the revolution in Germany in 1848 (the year of European Revolutions at large) was a turning point where history failed to turn. He was referring here to the restoration of the old guard, soon after the revolutions; so he wanted to insist on the gap between the dreams of the time, and the actual results.

It's worth reading his quotation in full: '1848 was the decisive year of German, and so of European, history: it recapitulated Germany's past and inspired Germany's future...Never has there been a revolution so inspired by a limitless faith in the power of

ideas: never has a revolution so discredited the power of ideas in its result. The success of the revolution discredited conservative ideas; the failure of the revolution discredited liberal ideas. After it, nothing remained but the idea of Force, and this idea stood at the helm of German history from then on. For the first time since 1521, the German people stepped on to the centre of the German stage only to miss their cue once more. German history reached its turning-point and failed to turn. This was the fateful essence of 1848'

Sometimes these three levels I have just described – change in the past, perceptions of change in the past, and changes in the historians' stance towards the past - all operate together, so the historian does something new, even as he or she suggests a world in the past was 'turning', and also observes how people at the time recognised that 'turn' to be occurring – perhaps all of these were the case.

An example here would be the ground breaking post-war writings of historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson who were part of what was known as the Communist Party Historians' Group. They sought to explore changing conditions of working-class life, labour and struggle, changing perceptions of that struggle (the emergence self-consciously in that class of a sense of itself as sharing an identity as a class) and, in the process, they pioneered a new way of writing history, and opening up quite new questions about history, influenced by various currents of thought in the human sciences of the time.

The CPHG marked a turning point by pioneering a new version of social history, in conscious rejection of the legal, diplomatic, high-political or ecclesiastical history that had previously dominated the field, and at the same time in rejection of overtly romanticised celebrations of 'the English people'. They also fostered a new, more complex understanding of the dynamic relationship between socio-economic and cultural forces.

In the process they challenged the view that it was possible mechanically to understand writing, still less feelings, attitudes or group identities by routinely attributing them to the subject's economic location. So they were Marxists who rejected an economistic version of Marxism, as well as rejecting traditional

historical focus near exclusively upon those who held 'power' on the land or in the factories, or in government, church, or the army. So it was a turning point in how Marxism was mobilised in, or critiqued by, historians. These writers were concerned with economic factors, of course, but their achievement was to demonstrate, again and again, the impossibility of making simple assumptions about the relationship of 'superstructure' and 'base' in understanding the subjective life of history's actors.

Another member of the CPHG, Christopher Hill reshaped the field of seventeenth-century studies when in a famous book he showed how the Levellers, Diggers and other radical sects who emerged within a time of revolution in seventeenth-century England responded to change, and in turn reshaped their world. The title of his book, again rather pertinent to the present discussion, was 'The World Turned Upside Down'.

The historians who had emerged from the CPHG explored group phenomena and class phenomena in ways that provided, *inter alia*, a more illuminating collective portrait of previously ignored working people, especially 'labouring men'.

Perhaps, thinking as we are here at this conference of cinema, we could make links to the new forms of social realism that became popular after WW2, which opened new subjects to view, and in turn pioneered a new form of cinema. We could think of the world of 'The Bicycle Thieves' (1948), or later, make reference to films about the gritty, quotidian reality of working class life in the North of England. Thompson's great book, *The Making of the English Working Class* in the early 60s was a close contemporary of novels and films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

Another turning point came when a generation of feminist historians challenged such histories and historians. They now mapped the marginalisation, or even at times the way of rendering invisible the experience of agency of women in, say, 'labour history'. Works in this period had titles such as *Hidden From History* (to cite a book from that time by the historian Sheila Rowbotham). This 'turn' to women's history, and increasingly to the exploration of the categories and effect of 'gender' on both sexes, and upon the nature of the gendered

assumptions that may shape the historian's own world view, had implications both for the form and the content of historical writing.

I also want to invite for question how cinema and psychoanalysis might have affected the writing of history, and *vice versa*. There is much to say here, but suffice just now to raise the question how far, for instance, certain techniques or styles in cinema may have affected the way historians write, or how they think of time and space. It would be interesting to compare narrative techniques in historical writing with those of the cinema, and the different ways, in different phases of the century, that story tellers may conventionally choose to 'zoom in and out', offer 'close focus', make dramatic 'cuts' in the sequence, provide particular kinds of tracking shot', 'wide angle views', or stitch together different elements, perhaps to create an illusion of far greater coherence than really applies. How far, I wonder, inadvertently, or intentionally, might some successful best-selling historians now pace their narratives, in line with certain Hollywood movie conventions?

It is also worth considering here how far Freudian thought has been a 'turning point' in how historians have related to the historical past. Rather little, I'd say in British historiography, perhaps more so in America. Such turning points or sometimes such missed encounters - in history might in turn open up new historical questions: why was such and such a thinker the catalyst for so much historiographical change? Why did Marx or Foucault matter so much more to British historians in twentieth-century Britain than Freud, or any of the key followers, whose impact reached quite far into at least some other areas of the academy? And one might ask if that 'non encounter' between psychoanalysis and historiography is now starting to turn as well.

It is striking that there has been so much focus in recent years on the history of the emotions, including very notably on war, masculinity and mental breakdown. Some historians have written eloquently of the psychic life of soldiers and of civilians in the Great War, using personal letters as a key source. Certainly many historians now have become preoccupied with the

emotions, for example with looking for turning points in attitudes to love or grief, or rage, or laughter, seek to pinpoint the moment in time when for instance crying in public was or was not socially acceptable, especially for men. This is not to claim that this kind of terrain is mostly explored, or indeed that it necessarily would always be best explored, in psychoanalytic terms.

Perhaps the kind of distinction I am making here between at least three different senses we might use 'turning points' can also be said of psychoanalysis. For instance a case study may convey the patient's sense of a revolution or of a world turned upside down; second, the analyst may offer his or her own 'take' on what is really going on, noting times of equilibrium, or of radical change in the psychic life of the patient (even if the patient says nothing is changing, the analyst may detect a turning point – or vice versa). And third, the analyst may transform his or her own 'way of seeing' the past and the present, via some new development in theory and method itself, or perhaps thanks to the patient.

Were there more time, I'd have liked to look at other examples where tumultuous change occurred in the past, and in the way we understand the past – perhaps here one could talk more of the historiography of the Darwinian revolution, or the psychoanalytic 'revolution in mind', as George Makari calls it in his recent history of the origins and development of the movement during Freud's lifetime, but I will leave it there.

I would like to recall here, as an endnote, Freud's own penchant, sometimes in telegraphic form, at others in more extended remarks, for describing the decisive jolts that have occurred in history, not least the jolts that have disturbed human complacency and narcissism. One example must suffice, his famous reference to three revolutionary developments in thought that, between them, fundamentally dislocated our sense of time and space, our presumed centrality and specialness in the supposed, 'grand scheme of things', and even in our sense of self-control and self-knowledge. These were of course, according to him, the moment when Copernicus challenged the belief that the sun revolved around the earth; when Darwin showed that humans were part of the natural world, the product

of evolution' (his title, the 'Descent of Man' had a double sense for many of his contemporaries), and third, when Freud showed that even the ego is not master in its own house.