

## Postmodernist Approach to the Discipline of History

Kaya Yılmaz\*

**Abstract:** The postmodernist approach to history is one of the least known modes of historical writing among historians and history educators. Aiming to enhance historians' and history educators' understanding of the postmodern challenge to the discipline of history, this article first presents an overview of the basic features of history and its historical trajectory as a discipline. It then explains postmodernist historiography's conceptual underpinnings, methods, principal concepts, and ideological positions. It also maps out the key debates, criticisms, and arguments that historians of different historical orientations engaged in.

**Key Words:** Historiography, Philosophy of History, History Education, Postmodernism.

### 1. Introduction

Historians and history educators need to know the nature of history to effectively plan, implement and assess historical research. The importance of an adequate understanding of the nature of a given discipline in the teaching and learning process has been recognized in science education. A sophisticated understanding of the nature of science is deemed to be a major goal in science education and a central component of scientific literacy. Science education organizations and science educators stress the role that a nuanced understanding of the nature of science plays in fostering higher levels of scientific literacy (American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), 1993; Bell, Lederman, and Abd-El-Khalick, 2000; National Research Council (NRC), 1996).

The same emphasis on the importance of the nature of subject matter has not been realized in history education yet. However, as Lee (1983) argues, drawing on the insights that historical frameworks provide for studying the past is crucial not only to develop a rational way of teaching history but also to adequately address the fundamental issues in history education. Likewise, Seixas (2002) stresses that being

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\* Dr. Kaya Yılmaz, Marmara Üniversitesi Atatürk Eğitim Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Anabilim Dalı İlköğretim Bölümünde öğretim üyesidir.

familiar with the different ways through which the past is made accessible, meaningful, and comprehensible is a must for advancing historical consciousness at schools and confronting the complexity of the past. Seixas also stresses that unless models in the discipline of history are identified and used in the teaching and learning of history, any framework for exploring students' thoughts about history is destined to remain murky (Seixas, 2001: 546).

Being aware of how historians of different historical orientations construct differing interpretations of the past is one of the preconditions for students of history departments to understand the complexity of the past and to develop an increasingly fine-grained understanding of the past events, people, institutions and processes. Unfortunately, historiographies of different sorts or diverse historical approaches to the past are not sufficiently emphasized in history departments whose students lack adequate training in historiography. What is more, there is an inchoate understanding, on historians' and history educators' part, of how the past is made understandable through postmodernist approach.

The purpose of this paper is to bring a recent but rather contested historical orientation, postmodernist historiography, to the attention of both historians and history educators in order to contribute to the effort to bring about a more sophisticated and meaningful history education. The assumption underlying this paper is that if historians, history educators, and history teachers become familiar with and appreciate the multiplicity of historical explanations, along with the assumptions and ideologies that lie behind each orientation, they can help students not only enjoy a more freedom of choice in constructing their own historical understanding, but also come up with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the past. Aimed at enhancing historians' and history educators' understanding of postmodernist historiography, this article first provides an overview of the basic features of history as a discipline or domain of knowledge and how history came to be recognized as an academic discipline. It then presents postmodernist movement in historiography, its characteristic features, epistemological and conceptual underpinnings, mode of historical explanations, and the key debates revolving around the movement.

## **2. What is History?**

History is a unique interpretive enterprise among social sciences because of the fact that it is both the subject and the object of its own discipline. In other words, the discipline of history refers not only to what happened in the past but also to the act of writing about the past. The nature and function of historical writing is shaped by the

theoretical presuppositions, by means of which the historian reflects on and writes about the past. Frameworks serve as conceptual tools for scholarly historical thinking and writing by enabling the historian to “winnow the infinite number of possible interpretations to a limited number of probable ones” (Christianson, 1991: 47). Downplaying other historical orientations, the historian operating under the banner of a given historical framework singles out particular hypotheses, problems, and questions as significant or legitimate objects of historical study (Christianson, 1991). That is, it is the philosophy of history that provides the building blocks for the study of the past.

Philosophy of history is divided into two basic branches, speculative and analytic, in terms of its substantive (i.e., propositional) and syntactic (i.e., procedural) features. The speculative branch (a) focuses on the actual content of history to find meaning or at least pattern in it, (b) is interested in predicting the future, (c) and aims to shed lights on the following sorts of questions: Does history demonstrate a simple giant unfolding history? Do laws govern history? Has human nature remained the same throughout history (Lemon, 2003, p. 9)?

On the other hand, analytical philosophy of history (a) concentrates on the nature and methods of history as discipline, (b) deals with such topics as objectivity, ideology, and historical explanations (i.e., how historians practice their methods and how they think about what they are doing), (c) aims to illuminate the following types of questions: What conditions must be met for a statement about the past to be true? Is there an exclusively historical way of explaining the past as distinct? Is narrative a satisfactory vehicle for historical knowledge? Can the historian reach objective truth (Lemon, 2003, p. 281)? On what grounds can historians reasonably demonstrate that they know what they claim (Gilderhus, 1987: 70)?

### **2.1. Professionalization of History: the Rankean School**

The professionalization of historical studies along with the redefinition of their theoretical and methodological foundations was entrenched in the process of modernization and nationalism in Europe (Fuchs, 2002). The works of German historians had an enormous international impact on the professionalization of history and the development of rigorous methods of historical research. The belief in the scientific status of history which stressed the non-rhetorical character of historical writing was central to the process of professionalization (Iggers, 1997). Leopold von Ranke, celebrated German historian, was a pioneer in assigning academic status to the study of the past. Just as Herodotus is deemed to be the father of history, Ranke can be regarded as the father of the new objective school of history. Many modern historians

attribute the intellectual foundations of their discipline to this development of the nineteenth century German universities, which influenced historical scholarship throughout Europe and America (Tosh, 2004).

What was new in Ranke's approach to history was his attempt to explain the past in terms of "how it actually was," without making a judgment on it. He established the rules of critical historical methods. "Ranke's elaborate methodology was based on classical philology with its maxim: check the source for trustworthiness and against its own context" (Breisach, 1994: 233). He combined a critical reading of the surviving documents of the past with a careful reconstruction of the historical circumstances in which it was composed. It is only by these means, Ranke asserted, could unreliable historical sources be identified to be used as evidence and the core meaning of the text be recovered (Tosh, 2004). If history was to be written in a dispassionate, objective way, Ranke claimed, "historians should not take sides, nor should they seek to make propaganda out of the past; their task was essentially one of reconstruction" (Tosh, 2004). It is the strength of these claims that made history become an academic discipline in its own right. The term "historicism" refers to this rigorous approach to the past. "Historicism with all its variations is the key term that symbolizes the genesis of modern historical scholarship" (Fuchs, 2002: 148). The major shortcomings of the historicist Rankean school were (1) its lack of attention to economic and social forces and (2) its excessive emphasis on the political aspect of events with almost exclusive reliance on official documents of state (Iggers, 1997: 5).

## **2.2. Idealist-Positivist Cleavage: Art versus Science Dichotomy**

The recognition of history as an academic discipline at universities led to the proliferation in the types of historical writing in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As a result, the boundary among different modes of historical writing became blurry. Still, we can detect two sharply distinctive views of history, idealist versus positivist, both of which characterized historians' visions of what history is and how it should be recovered (e.g., view of history as art or science). For this reason, even rival historical orientations can be put into the same overarching category in terms of whether they belong to the positivist or idealist tradition. For instance, for all the crucial differences between the French *Annales* and Marxist historiography, both belong to the positivist tradition (White, 1987). Therefore, before I explain each distinctive orientation, I will illuminate the issues that stand at the intersection of all types of historiography, by outlining the basic features of the idealist or autonomist and positivist or assimilationist orientations.

Historians of positivist orientation (or the covering-law model) such as Popper and Hempel (a) sought to present their findings as general statements of invariable relationship via the hypothetic-deductive model of reasoning and the use of the syllogism (e.g., given the same causes, very similar effects almost surely would occur), (b) focused their attention on uniformities and regularities -in the course of human affairs to formulate generalization- rather than unique or individual events (e.g., instead of studying the French Revolution, they would investigate the phenomenon of revolution), (c) put the issue of causal explanation in the center of historical theory, and (d) understood the concept causation in the “efficient” sense as a set of prior conditions (Gilderhus, 1987: 72-81; Breisach, 1994: 327-328).

On the other hand, idealist historians such as Collingwood and Elton (a) jointly argued that the analogy derived from the natural sciences could not hold up under the test and that the subtleties of doing history required quite different conceptual schemas, (b) focused on unique and specific events outside of nature, instead of seeking regularities and uniformities, (c) offered that the proper object of historical study center on the human mind or the activities of human mind, (d) contended that the main task of the historian is to think himself into the actions of his historical agent in order to discern his thought (i.e., all history is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind), and (e) understood the term causation in the sense of “final” cause as the will or intention of a historical agent (Gilderhus, 1987: 74-81; Breisach, 1994: 329-334).

Having outlined the advances in historiography and the split between the positivist and idealist views of history, I will move on to explain postmodernist historiography, which has left an imprint in historiography.

### **3. Postmodern Challenge to History**

Postmodernism has called into question the truth claims of not only history but also all humanities and social sciences (Tosh, 2004). The basic postulate of postmodernism is that society and culture are in transformation in which old essentialist assumptions concerning objectivity, truth, industrial growth, rising economic expectations, and traditional middle-class norms have been shaken (Iggers, 1997: 13-14, Munslow, 1997). What characterizes post-modern thought is the attempt to de-center language from the idea of “being” to that of “function,” and the resulting belief that language defines but does not refer to reality and our experience of reality is a function of our language (Jenkins, 1991). The rejection of historical realism (i.e., the past was real and objective) constitutes a crucial theme in the philosophy of postmodern-

ism (Zagorin, 1999). Another major theme of postmodern approach to history is the elimination of the boundaries and hierarchical distinctions between elite culture and academic culture (Cohen, 1999: 126) by means of dehierarchization, deconstruction, demystification, and dereferentialization (Berkhofer, 1995).

Postmodernism symbolizes the death of centers, displays incredulity toward metanarratives, and is characterized by a social formation in which the maps and status of knowledge are being de-centered, re-drawn, and re-described (Lyotard, 1984, 1997; Jenkins, 1991). Zagorin (1999) succinctly outlines the premises of postmodernism in relation to history:

In the most general sense, postmodernism stands for the proposition that western society in recent decades has undergone an epochal shift from the modern to a post-modern era said to be characterized by the final repudiation of the Enlightenment's legacy of belief in reason and progress and by a pervasive incredulity toward all metanarratives imputing a direction and meaning to history, in particular the notion that human history is a process of universal emancipation. In place of grand narratives of this kind, so it is held, have come a multiplicity of discourses and language games, a questioning of the nature of knowledge together with a dissolution of the idea of truth, and problems of legitimacy in many fields (p.5).

Its two principal features may be said to be its conception of language and its rejection of realism. It is a philosophy of linguistic idealism or panlingualism claiming that language constitutes and defines reality for human minds, or rather that there is no extralinguistic reality independent of our representations of it in language or discourse. It regards language itself as a system of signs that refer only to one another internally in an endless process of signification that never arrives at stable meaning. Postmodernism thus denies both the ability of language or discourse to refer to an independent world of facts and things and the determinacy or decidability of textual meaning. By the same token, it also dismisses the possibility of objective knowledge and truth as goals of inquiry (p.7).

The basic precepts of postmodern thought can be summarized as the idea that all old organizing frameworks that took for granted the privileging of various centers, such as Anglo-centric, ethno-centric, gender-centric, and logo-centric, should not be considered as legitimate and natural frameworks (Jenkins, 1997; Tosh, 2004). As a prominent advocate and practitioner of the postmodernist theory of history, Jenkins (1997) asserts that traditional academic history or lower case history is just representation of bourgeois ideology. He accuses traditional historians of being satisfied with the status quo because he thinks they study the past for its own sake and thus concludes that they neither want to change the present nor vision a different future (p. 16).

Why history came to the fore and received the strongest attack in the face of postmodernist criticism has to do with the fact that it is a textual subject and full of grand historical narratives or teleological historical writings. Advocates of the postmodernist thought assert that “the great trajectories that historiography has built around nation, class, and religion are grand narratives that confer an illusory sense of direction on people who think they know about the past” (Tosh, 2004). Rather than historical research methods, according to McCullagh (1998), postmodernists questioned historians’ assumptions and epistemological foundations of the discipline by constructing their arguments around such concepts as truth and objectivity. On the other hand, historians elucidated their methods to counterattack the postmodern thrust, failing to recognize the nature of postmodern argument. Therefore, neither side did justice to each other (p. 4).

In his “critique of the postmodern turn in Western historiography,” Windschuttle (2002) outlines the postmodern critics’ attack on the practice of conventional historiography. According to the postmodernist critique of the discipline, (1) traditional historiography is an authoritarian practice that reflects the ethnocentrism and cultural hubris of contemporary Western society (i.e., the views and interests of the white, middle class, European males); (2) authors of the left, the right, or in between politically, assert their power over their readers in the name of reality by assuming a third person voice and an omniscient viewpoint; (3) historians (a) can only express the ideology of their times (b) cannot be objective enough to see beyond their own class, sex, ethics, or cultural background (p.272-275). To eliminate these problems, postmodernists take, as Jenkins argues, a demystification approach to set the stage for those who are currently deprived of the opportunity to write their own histories and to “free up historians to tell many equally legitimate stories from various viewpoints and types of synthesis” (p. 275).

Just as postmodernists have criticized the assumptions and historical writings of traditionalists, the practitioners of traditional history have been critical of postmodernist approach to history. According to Zagorin (1999), (a) postmodernism is an amorphous concept and a synthesis of different yet related theories, theses, and claims, (b) the skepticism and relativism inherent in postmodernist philosophy cuts the ground from any moral or political stand its adherents might take, (c) practitioners of the postmodern theory of history have overtly advocated a political agenda as much an academic one as Jenkins did, (d) postmodernists’ skeptical and politicized view of historical inquiry is deeply erroneous, inconsistent with the way historians think about their work, and incapable of providing an understanding of historiography as a form of thought engaged in the attainment of knowledge and under-

standing of the human past. Likewise, Woodward (1998) criticized postmodernist theorists for being responsible for the dramatic shrinking of historical scholarship manifested by the sharp decrease in the number of graduate students in history and the number of Ph.D.s awarded in history that fell by more than fifty percent from 1970s to 1990s in the US (as cited in Windschuttle, 2002: 271).

The debates over the postmodernist theory and practice of history also found its way to high schools and universities in the design of the history curriculum. Windschuttle (2000) explains the effects of postmodern discourse on some curriculum developers. Educationalists who designed the new national history standards for American high schools downplayed the notion that doing history should be in line with the principles of historicism and be identified as being disinterested and above ideology. According to them, such an approach to describing, explaining, and interpreting the past is both intellectually obsolete and politically contaminated. They endorsed the argument that it is impossible for historians to distance themselves and their scholarly work from their academic training, attitudes, ideological dispositions and cultures (p.272).

Their contention was that what particular facts, traditions, and heroic personalities are represented in the textbooks symbolize the ideological position of the traditionalists and the political Right who think that their interpretation of history represents the true and objective history that every citizens should become familiar with. Keeping a faith in the claim that being non-political is unattainable, they attempted to replace the traditional account of American history with the one that brings to the fore the concepts of discrimination, exploitation, hostility, and predicaments that women, blacks, and ethnic minorities had undergone but were able to surmount those difficulties to challenge their exploiters, stand up for legal rights, and cross racial boundaries. But, the Republican dominated U.S. Senate went ahead and prevented this effort from being put into practice in high schools in November 1994 (p.273).

According to Zagorin (1999), most postmodernists stand on the left side of political continuum and thus have tended to be supporters of the movement in the universities for women's and gender studies, Afro-American studies, ethnic studies, and gay studies. They have been among the defenders of multiculturalism and the promoters of cultural and postcolonial studies. Windschuttle (2002) makes similar comments on the position of postmodernist historians. He states that postmodernists are identified with their supports for structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, radical feminism, queer theory, critical theory, and cultural studies. They have recently begun to associate their philosophical orientations not with

postmodernism but with the less provocative term cultural studies which supports the same combination of anti-realist philosophy and anti-Western politics (p. 277).

I will conclude this section on history's confrontation with the postmodernist challenge by seeking answers to the following questions. To what extent has postmodernism affected the discipline of history? Did historians take on postmodernist ideas and practice postmodern theory of history? Has historiography ever benefited from postmodern thought and criticisms?

There are a wide variety of opinions among historians with respect to postmodernism, ranging from substantial agreement to complete rejection and uncompromising hostility (Zagorin, 1999). A small minority of historians such as R. Evans have embraced at least some postmodernist arguments in order to counteract against attacks. The majority of historians have been opposed to postmodernist doctrines and viewed postmodernism as a misconceived critique and hope that intellectual fashions will change (Zagorin, 1999; Tosh, 2004). "Its influence upon the thinking and practice of historians is not only fading but increasingly destined to fade" (Zagorin, 1999). Whereas the extreme relativism inherent in postmodernism is less heard nowadays, "the popular appeal of well-crafted historical interpretations of topics of current concern shows no sign of diminishing" (Tosh, 2004). Even though the postmodernist challenge had a significant impact on historical thought and writing, it was not able to devastate the continuities with older conceptions and practices (Iggers, 1997). In short, according to Zagorin (1999), postmodernism is now considered to be a distinctly minority phenomenon among professional historians, most of whom are unwilling to recognize its view of history because they find its doctrines so contrary to their understanding and experience of historical inquiry.

For all most historians' resistance to postmodernist theories, historiography has benefited from ground shaking arguments of postmodernist thinkers. Postmodernism has revived the scholarly interest in the problems of explanation, interpretation, and epistemology. McCullagh (1998) gives credits to postmodernists for having exposed the limitations of descriptions so vividly (p.42). Evans (2002) testifies that postmodernists were instrumental in destroying the economic determinism characterizing the historical writing of the 1970s and 1980s. He further confirms that postmodernists' thought provoking ideas, especially their emphasis on identity, consciousness and mentality, also helped today's historians communicate with a wider range of audiences from different backgrounds (p. 8-14). Zagorin (1999) acknowledges that postmodernist philosophy (a) provoked historians to be more self-critical and aware of their presuppositions and procedures, encouraging them to look more closely at documents, and (b) led historians to recognize the importance of open acknowledg-

ment of the historians' own subjectivity that in turn may make the reader engage in a critical assessment of historical work. Seixas (2000) regards postmodernist theory as a means to enable students to recognize the relationship between the historical narratives and the political interests of those who write historical texts.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The subject matters and methods of historical writing have expanded greatly since the inception of history as an academic discipline. Historiography has become more pluralistic today than it had ever been. Depending on their philosophical orientations (e.g., positivist vs. idealist), world views, belief systems, personal histories, and academic trainings, historians have offered that the material world, culture, societies/civilizations, common people, internal world of human beings or human mind be the proper object of historical writing. "The assumptions of reality, intentionality, and temporal sequences determined the structure of historical writing from Herodotus to Ranke and into the twentieth century" (Iggers, 1997: 3). Today's history is characterized by particularities and divergences, so it is safe to conclude that history can no longer address the identity and experience of all readers through common stories. The kind of history we have today is the one with "the multiplicity of versions competing for attention and emphasizing alternatively elites or nonelites, men or women, whites or nonwhites" (Gilderhus, 1987: 125).

Historians and history educators need to be cognizant of different modes of historical writing or historical orientations in order to assist students in handling conflicting accounts of the past. Different conceptual frameworks used to explain the past "may contradict, compete with, or complement one another, but this means that students should be equipped to deal with such relationships" (Lee and Ashby, 2000: 200). For this reason, history departments should emphasize training in historiography, by means of which students can stay away from accepting any historical claims at face value. It is not the familiarity with the basic concepts of history such as continuity and change, cause and effect but an understanding of "the processes of knowledge-making, the construction of a historical narrative and argument" and the nature of conflicting historical frameworks that "acts as the best insurance against dogmatic transmission of a single version of the past, a practice that violates the core tenets of the discipline" (Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000: 12). When students in history and history education departments are provided with the tools of historiography, they will be in a better position to construct their own interpretations of the past without uncritically believing in any particular version (Seixas, 2000).

### Tarih Disiplinine Postmodernist Yaklaşım

**Özet:** Postmodernist tarih yaklaşımı, tarihçiler ve tarih eğitimcileri arasında en az bilinen tarih yazım türlerinden birisidir. Tarihçilerin ve tarih eğitimcilerinin historiografyadaki postmodernist akımını daha iyi anlamalarını amaçlayan bu makale, tarih disiplininin temel özelliklerini ve tarihsel gelişimini kısaca özetleyerek, postmodernist historiografyanın konseptüel temellerini, metodlarını, başlıca kavramlarını, argümanlarını ve ideolojik özelliklerini ana hatlarıyla açıklamaktadır. Değişik tarih ekollerinin temsilcileri tarafından postmodernist yaklaşıma karşı ileri sürülen temel eleştiriler ve argümanlar da ayrıntılarıyla sunulmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Historiografya, Tarih Felsefesi, Tarih Eğitimi, Postmodernizm.

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