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REVIEW

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2007). ISBN: 1890951781

Time is out of joint: permanently so, it seems. What struck Walter Benjamin with such force nearly a century ago in borrowing Klee's image of the Angelus Novus—the angel's eyes are cast back over centuries of historical ruin as he is flung into the future by paradise's tempest¹—is for us familiar, all too familiar. Life without interruption, or a smooth, homogeneous life-experience is differentiated by a multitude of group identities, and a periodized biography. Whether in response to, or as a contributing factor in, the modern fact of a fragmentary, divided time, history is theorized as such.

In this regard, consider how Thomas Kuhn's once novel thesis of disruptive—or eruptive—scientific revolutions has effectively replaced the idea of continuous historical development.² Whether adopted in the work of a particular historian or rejected in the name of a different model of historical change, at the very least the Kuhnian model serves as a touchstone for all subsequent histories; it bulks particularly large for those who would undertake to write a history of science after Kuhn.

Implicitly, it is Kuhnian history that Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have in mind in the following passage from their work on the history of scientific objectivity:

[T]his history is one of innovation and proliferation rather than monarchic succession ... Instead of the analogy of a succession of political regimes or scientific theories, each triumphing on the ruins of its predecessor, imagine [the history of objectivity being akin to] new stars winking into existence, not replacing old ones but changing the geography of the heavens.³

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte." *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften*, Erste Band, Erste Teil (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 697.

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2007), 18.

Imagining the firmament of scientific history dotted with all different theories both past and present is a challenging response to Kuhn, for whom each new theory burns so brightly as to blot out all that precede it. Again, with Kuhn implicitly in mind, Daston and Galison write: "In contrast to the static tableaux of paradigms and epistemes, this is a history of dynamic fields, in which newly introduced bodies re-configure and reshape those already present, and vice versa."⁴

Though they would rework the specifics of a Kuhnian, disruptive history to include a multitude of scientific theories within a changing, dynamic landscape, Daston and Galison nevertheless conceive of the advance of historical time as irregular; throughout the book, their preferred metaphorical image of historical change is that of the avalanche.

Just as in the case of the avalanche, preconditions must coincide with contingent circumstances ... Rather than razor-sharp boundaries between periods, we should therefore expect first a sprinkling of interventions, which then briskly intensify into a movement, as fears are articulated and alternatives realized—the unleashing of an avalanche.⁵

Later, in discussing "mechanical objectivity" as the episteme, ethos, and guiding principle of scientific practice in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Daston and Galison again imagine the icy convulsions of historical change: "Like the spring melt of an ice-bound northern river, the change begins with a crack here and there; later comes the explosive shears that throw off sheets of ice, echoing through the woods like shotgun blasts."⁶

Trading in metaphors of revolutionary versus avalanche-like historical change serves a purpose: it hones the language by which the historian reports on his or her findings. In the social sciences, and in theory in general, clarifying terms is in many ways an end in itself. Yet, re-fashioning the terminology of an older theoretical model to fit different data, while useful, also tends to be something of a distraction. Clarifying the model of historical change distracts those who would theorize particular, disjointed histories from the more embracing issue of the ethics of such theorization. Let us be clear on this last point. There will be inter-historical ethical questions that arise within a field of social, scientific study. For example, in writing a history of the American Civil War, ethical questions will almost certainly arise concerning race and the institution of slavery. Yet, these are not the ethical issues that face the modern historian *as* historian. For their part, Daston and Galison acknowledge the ethical questions that arise within their chosen fields of study, namely, the bio-

⁴ Ibid., 19

⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶ Ibid., 124.

logical and physical sciences. They note, for example, the seeming “heartless[ness] of technocrats” and the “indifferen[ce]” of scientific objectivity to “familiar human values.”⁷ Daston and Galison raise the specter of ethical failings within the science just long enough to set them aside in the name of conducting a (Foucault-like) historical study of scientific norms and practices.

In concluding the text, Daston and Galison reflect, briefly, on the larger ethical import of their own history: “To claim that there are multiple virtues, be they epistemic or moral, is very different from the claims that all virtues (or none) are equally well- (or ill-) grounded and that whim may decide among them.” By historicizing scientific epistemologies, and thereby multiplying their epistemic virtues, Daston and Galison conceive of their history as preparatory to, but absent from, the ensuing ethical debate of such virtues. As far as the ethical tasks, responsibilities—or even, questions—that face the historian given her epistemology (of historical time as disjointed), and given the practices that emanate from and articulate that epistemology (e.g., framing a history of objectivity in terms of the images that illustrate scientific atlases over time), Daston and Galison are unequivocal: “All history can do is to demonstrate the possibility of alternatives,” which is to say, in matters of epistemic virtues, “history ... clarif[ies] what they are, how they work, and how much hangs in the balance if one is obliged to choose among them.”⁸

It is this last set of claims that causes hesitation: “All history can do” is to show an episteme as it is; all history can do is to demonstrate which practices follow from the ethos of a particular episteme; all history can do is present, without deciding, the ethical import of an episteme and its attendant virtues. History as a social scientific discipline is thereby exempted from the questions that confront a science when its epistemology is historicized; in short, history is conceived of as disinterested, non-evaluative, and therefore as an *objective* observation and reportage of facts as they are given in the historical record. In this way, the historian with one hand unsettles the seeming givenness of objectivity as a fixed or grounding scientific principle, and unsettles it by way of its historicization, while with the other hand recuperates into history itself a basic or founding objectivity: *in the name of discontinuous historical time, objectivity is dissolved in a field of social, scientific study only to be precipitated out again in the discipline of history itself*. Consequently, the value-laden choices and the virtues and practices that grow out of an historical epistemology get covered over. In other words, questions concerning the ethical implications and entanglements—and, more importantly, the ethical responsibilities and possibilities of doing history—are skirted.

But there is great ethical potential in an historical epistemology that treats time as disjointed or fragmentary; Benjamin’s unique sense of the messianic, for one,

⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

⁸ Ibid., 376.

attests to the ethical potency of such an epistemology. Here it is instructive to follow a different approach to answering the question of the ethical task and promise of doing modern history. Further, it is instructive to do so by availing ourselves of the same Kantian and Foucauldian resources Daston and Galison employ in their own historical study. After all, it is in part through his engagement with the Kantian notion of critique that Foucault is led, methodologically, toward a historical genealogy. In turn, though it is unacknowledged, it is by a kind of Foucauldian genealogy that Daston and Galison conduct their study of the virtues and practices of the biological and physical sciences.

What Foucault gains by this methodological turn to genealogy, and what he lacked in his archaeology, is a means of coordinating his theorization of a particular field of knowledge with the practices that define and articulate that field: the interaction between the practices being theorized and their (practical) theorization is traceable through a genealogical method in a way that is not possible for an archaeology.⁹ Given Foucault's insight into how knowledge and power are related, an ethics of theory follows naturally from the preceding, epistemological point: the interaction between theorized practices and their theorization is not ethically neutral; again, a genealogy is methodologically keyed to the ethical consequences of theory in a way that archaeology is not.

To begin our brief reconstruction of the ethics of theory in general—and the ethics of history in particular—we must first insist on the modernity of such history since it is based upon the modern epistemological view of historical time as disruptive, disjointed, and out-of-sync with itself. Historical time in disrepair now seems to be a settled matter; what has lapsed since Benjamin discerned this structure a century ago is its vibrancy. No longer do we survey history in the stark hues of Klee's reds, blues, and sharp angles. We are instead awash in grey news-copy famines, plagues, wars, and/or natural catastrophes; or, more simply, the high-gloss arrhythmia of digital media. With the entrenchment of an historical epistemology comes a quietism concerning the questions raised by that epistemology and a diminishment of its possible claim on us: change and disruption are learned by rote; they are unthinkingly treated as synonymous with historical time.

We need look no further than ourselves to find out how history has settled into such a state. It is through the lens of modern subjectivity that we view history; it is from the same, subjective vantage that history shows up in its modern disfigurement. The modern subject is active—or characterized by “spontaneity [*Spontaneität*]” in the Kantian sense—it is self-determining, autonomous, self-reflexive, and yet it remains opaque to itself upon reflection. To date the arrival of this modern self is to look back into the written philosophical record and note the terminological drift to-

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” Translated by D. F. Bouchard & S. Simon. In *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984). 76-100.

ward a recognizable objective/subjective distinction: as is the case with all linguistic histories, so too with “subject” and “object” the change is gradual. While Descartes, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, continues the traditional, scholastic usage according to which “object” refers to a mental artifact—a concept or representation in the mind—a hundred years later, in the pages of Kant, “subject” as referring to cognitive and/or perceptual operations and faculties is clearly distinguished from the “object” as the shared reference of such operations for all rational beings.

In making their case that changes in ideas and practices of subjectivity inform changes in the ideas and practices of scientific objectivity, Daston and Galison note that by the mid-nineteenth century, “dictionaries and handbooks in English, French, and German credited Kantian critical philosophy with the resuscitation and redefinition of the scholastic terminology of the objective and subjective.”¹⁰ The implication is that changes in the textual or linguistic record correspond with extra-discursive changes in society in general (it is just this transition from discursivity to extra-discursive practices that Foucauldian genealogy tracks). Just as subjectivity and objectivity are written about differently in texts from the end of the nineteenth century compared to how they are addressed in texts from the beginning of the same period, so subjectivity and objectivity are experienced, lived, or practiced differently by the generation that spans the same time period.

In invoking Kant’s idea of an active, willful subject to make the correlative point that scientific objectivity, as it is modernly understood and practiced, is historically situated—and only recently acquired—Daston and Galison avail themselves of part of Kant’s modernism while neglecting another, related part: an active or “spontaneous” subject is for Kant also a self that is concealed from itself. For Daston and Galison, Kant’s notion of a self-determining subject prefigures what they term the “scientific self,” which appears in the mid-nineteenth century (at just the moment the Kantian terminology of subject and object enters into the official, textual record). Once Kant has drawn the distinction between what is merely subjective in the cognitive and perceptual operations of human beings, and what is objective in those same operations and as such verifiable, epistemologically warranted, and communicable, the scientist’s task is to diminish by strength of will the former in the name of the latter.

The mid-nineteenth century historical record bears out this development in a number of ways. For instance, there is suddenly a new literary genre; or, at least, a marked change in the tone of an older genre. What appears at this time is the intellectual biography of “the scientist, *der Wissenschaftler, le scientifique*”¹¹ as self-disciplined, steel-willed, and self-abnegating. Consider the following excerpt Daston and Galison provide from an 1878 British guide to research methods in physics and

¹⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

chemistry: “[The will is] the strong central authority in the mind by which all its powers are regulated and directed as the military forces of a nation are directed by the strategist who arranges the operations of a war.”¹² Such an idealized image of the scientist as self-denying and (militarily) self-disciplined is absorbed into the practices of the common, laboratory under-laborer. Meticulous journals are now kept, with detailed record not only of the objects of study but of the state of the observer; Daston and Galison reproduce a page from the *Sudelbücher*—or “waste books”—of the scientist, poet and philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: observations of changes in barometric pressure are woven into reflections on Lichtenberg’s own mental and physical state.¹³

As rooted in Kant as these developments in (scientific) subjectivity are, still there is a crucial piece of the Kantian story that is overlooked: it is just this missing piece that accounts for the way history appears to us moderns; it is this same piece that problematizes the idea and practice of an objective history (and makes apparent the ethical task that confronts the historian). At precisely the juncture in the *Critique of Pure Reason* from which one can extract the (modern) notion of an active and reflective subject, one also finds Kant insisting on the opacity of such subjectivity to itself. In acknowledging an active self as the condition of the possibility of a unified object of experience, Kant is careful to situate such a subject at the inaccessible level of the transcendental; this is the significance, in Kant, of identifying the self as the “transcendental unity of apperception.”¹⁴

The representation of an object (of experience) as a synthetic achievement rather than as an empirical given is rooted in a self that is itself a synthetic achievement. Yet, as the transcendental condition of the possibility of an object (of experience), the synthesis of the unity of apperception cannot itself be conditioned. As unconditioned, the synthetic unity of apperception is not determinable, that is, it is not cognizable or knowable to consciousness. All objects of experience are thus tinged with a degree of opacity, which is inherited from the opacity of their transcendental condition; Kant in this way inclines toward empiricism and away from the rationalist, Leibnizian hope that objects might be fully determined (or cognized) by thought alone. To put the same point in more familiar Kantian terms, an object (of experience) is for Kant an appearance; the object as it is in-itself is not knowable (just as/because the self as it is in-itself is unconditioned and thus unknowable).

Stepping back from the Kantian trees in which it is all too easy to lose the forest, what follows is that if modern objectivity is rooted in the Kantian critical project, it is so at the considerable price of a ready and complete access to the object. Given

¹² Ibid., 229.

¹³ Ibid., 236-237; Cf. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *The Waste Books*. Translated by Reginald J. Hollingdale (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990).

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Kritik der reinen Vernunft.” *Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werke*, Band III (Berlin, GER W.: de Gruyter, 1902). B139-140.

the opacity of the self to itself—and here we should recall that Freud, a century later, will have Kant in mind in developing psychoanalysis—if an object is approached through the lens of modern subjectivity it will appear with just the same imperfections that mar the lens. This same disfigurement marks every possible object on which the modern observer would turn a probing eye. Given our present interest in the study of historical time by history as a social, scientific discipline, we can specify the preceding conclusion: historical time appears to history as disjointed, disarticulated, or incomplete just because it is viewed through and from the vantage point of the modern subject. The great tragedy—or comedy, depending on one's Nietzschean sensibilities—of modern life is that the subject becomes acutely self-interested at the very moment of falling into obscurity to itself.

The first generation of nineteenth-century modern theorists was unaware, to various degrees, of the significance of all of this for theory itself. For instance, Kant conceives of the *Critique of Pure Reason* methodologically as a process of reason sitting in self-judgment. In at least this one important respect, Kant is thus blind at the time of the first *Critique* to the broader theoretical exigencies of his own account of subjectivity: critique as a methodology of reasoned self-reflection must need be frustrated by the same obscure fate that faces modern subjectivity. Later modern theorists—and Kant himself by the end of his career—come to appreciate the theoretical (or methodological) problems that arise from the idea of a (Kantian) transcendental subjectivity. In response to Kant, Nietzsche and Marx exemplify the modern theorist in working out, in their own distinct ways, theoretical models adjusted to the modern realities of subjectivity, time, and society. And here we should note one further, more recent close-reader of Kant: Michel Foucault.

Like Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx before him—to all of whom Foucault dedicates an early, eponymous essay¹⁵—Foucault acknowledges the great theoretical potential of Kantian critique; with these same early modern theorists, Foucault also realizes that critique in its traditional, Kantian form is no longer viable given the different structure of modern, historical time.¹⁶ By privileging practices and techniques over discursive formations, Foucault replaces in theory the Kant-like regulative ideas that modern sciences and institutions erect on grounds that have been razed by a process of analysis and critical investigation. What Foucault instead attends to in his genealogical approach is site- and time-specific phenomena that resist the (temporally) pre-modern approach of most discursive analyses. Leaving aside the formidable theoretical challenges that in turn confront a study of historically situated practices and norms, it here suffices to note that in a genealogy both the ob-

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx." Translated by Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift. In *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 59-67.

¹⁶ Cf. Michael Kelly, *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 1994).

ject of study and the means of its study are specific, deeply contextualized, and localized in time and place. As might be expected, the ethics of theorizing in this fashion is comparably site-specific and particular in its focus.

Thus, the ethical burden we shoulder as theorists with a new, modern epistemology of history—one that treats historical time as a fractious, unsteady advance from past into future—is that of the specific, particular, or individual. The focus of Foucault's genealogical studies bear out this point; the late works occupy the space between an uneven, disjointed history, the imperatives that accrue in the interstices of historical time, and the ethical possibilities open to those who have slipped into those dead spaces. Texts like *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* also aim to fit the resources available from the western, intellectual tradition into the margin (and in so doing empower those who have been marginalized by the [un]steady advance of history).

At the level of theorizing modern, historical time and its attendant systems of knowledge and regimes of power, Foucault moves in his later work from an archaeological retrieval of the discursive traces of change left in the knowledge systems of the sciences to a genealogy of the practices of those same systems. What Foucault gains in this methodological change is a theoretical proximity to his particular field of study and, more importantly, a way of gauging the intrusion of his own theoretical practices into whichever topic is under investigation. Though Foucault would appeal to the language of knowledge and power to describe the theory-level implications of his genealogical approach, the language of an ethics of theory seems equally apt given the point at which Foucault arrives at the end of his career. We might, accordingly, read Foucault's interest in the ancient practices surrounding the *hupomnemata* as self-referential: if there is an ethics of the self being practiced in this ancient writing perhaps it reflects the ethics of writing about such matters in an historical study of antiquity.¹⁷

An epistemology that treats of historical time as disjointed, demands, as noted above, a matching theory that is sufficiently pliable to adjust to the uneven terrain of such a history. A theory like Foucauldian genealogy reflects such pliability in its value-bias toward what is local, specific, or marginal. To put the same point in the above Kantian language, a genuinely modern theory attends to what is concealed or obscured in its field of study; a modern theory approaches what is liminal within a particular field of knowledge or what tends toward and anticipates a different set of practices and norms. In short, marginality and difference are the epistemic virtues of all modern theory *as* modern. Given the very insubstantiality of the notion of the marginal by which a modern, theoretical epistemology operates, the ethics that attends modern theory is normatively biased toward adopting alternate theoretical approaches and re-orienting historical studies by various different arrangements

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*. Translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 367.

of site- and time-specific practices. Again, we see just this point being practiced in Foucault's late works: the move from studying incarceration in the early modern period to Victorian-era practices of sexuality to the ethics of self-care in late-antiquity attests to an ongoing ethical concern with how one theorizes history.

By keeping the theory-level, ethical implications of social, scientific study alive in this way, Foucault avoids darkening still further the obscure corners and blind-spots that form within an historical time in disrepair. Whatever ones sensibilities are about the dangers of letting whole sections of historical time fall into obscurity—and with them, the populations that occupy those times—it is nevertheless true that in adopting a modern epistemology of uneven historical time one is ethically committed to just those times and those populations. Here, then, is the real ethical danger of practicing history in an objective guise while appropriating an historical epistemology that is anything but objective: Daston and Galison in their history sever a modern epistemology from its ethical implications (while still attending in their study to site- and time-specific historical practices). Specifically, what Daston and Galison fail to realize in their objective history (of objectivity) is that only a non-objective history avoids presenting theory as ethically neutral. Our modern situation is such that our subjectivity, our history, our claims of knowledge and our social practices are all obscure; the ethical responsibility of the theorist in the face of this is to pay constant (and vigilant) attention to her own contributions to such obscurity.

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