Reply to professor Ankersmit

Professor Ankersmit’s reflections on ‘the future of the past’ are, as we have come to expect of him, cogent, insightful, and provocative. I think he is wise to focus on the ‘traditional, collective past’ of modern bourgeois society and of the historians of the bourgeois period who succeeded in transforming historical studies into, if not a science, at least a profession.

It is ‘the past’ of bourgeois society (and of the historians who have served it) that is threatened by the effects of contemporary economic and technological processes which make necessary a thought of changing the familiar ‘subject of history’.

The subject of traditional historical studies is bourgeois society (its antecedents and its others) organized as nation-states for the economic, military, and political competition among ‘peoples’ for the resources and markets of the world. As the hegemony of what were once considered to be Western economic, scientific, and technological institutions is extended over the globe, the carapace of merely national aims, goals, and interests falls away - like the liftoff rocket of a space shuttle - and the new economic system goes into a kind of ‘weightless’ flight of a ‘history-less’ system of production and exchange as an end in itself. Already bourgeois historians show bewilderment over the very possibility of a ‘history’ conceived on a worldwide scale. Detached from all specific ‘places’, the ‘history’ that suddenly engulfs us seems to be a history without a subject, a ghostly history, a history without a past. So Western historians turn to the task of reinventing not their discipline but the old ‘subject of history’. They will try in the decades to come to find the origins of a new global subject of history within the historical genes of the old, bourgeois subject. Some historians will try to document the origin of the new in the old subject of history, while others will stress the novelty of the new subject and its discontinuity with the pre-global organization of states and societies.

But it is the death of the old subject of history that is being mourned in all of the current talk about ‘collective memory’, ‘lieux de memoire’ and a past that is to be ‘remembered’ rather than analyzed for what it can tell about the present. The problem is not to invent a new methodology for the study of the new ‘subject of history’, but to imagine figures adequate to the presentation of its strangeness and monstrosity.
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