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Die Religion und das säkuläre Bild der Vergangenheit



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The project that I intended to pursue during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was one on the way the nineteenth-century Catholic reaction to secularization affected secular philosophy, specifically twentieth-century philosophers' interpretation of the philosophical tradition. That project still remains to be done. Instead, I wrote two papers and the first half of a book manuscript.

One of those papers did deal with the announced area of research, exploring the nineteenth-century Catholic reaction to the development of a secular historiography and the way this affected the Catholic concept of tradition. I argued that Catholic intellectuals in the early part of the nineteenth century sought to expand the concept of tradition in order to use it as an aggressive defence against the threat of secular culture. In a second stage in the second half of the century, this expanded notion of tradition was rejected because it did not conform to the need for finding a strategy of accommodation to modern science and to modern social systems that would at the same time make it possible to reject both modern social theory and the positivist philosophy of science.

In a second paper, I sought to compare the various conceptions of the ideals of the humanities as they evolved in nineteenth-century France, England and the United States. In this paper, I argued that the continued survival of prenineteenth century attitudes towards the humanities was necessary for ensuring the continued social relevance of these fields.

Where the humanities became either too aesthetic or too scientific, they tended to lose this relevance. In these three countries, contemporary humanists perceived this problem, and therefore resisted the introduction of the German model of academic research. While this opposition was unsuccessful in blocking the importation of the German model of promotion as a reward for research activity, it continues to influence strongly the way the humanities are taught to students.

I wrote the paper about the Catholic concept of tradition in order to provide a context for the confrontation between secular philosophy's image of its past and official Catholicism's image of its philosophical past. During the course of writing this paper, it became clear to me that I had to go further back and write about the origins of the secular conception of history in order to explain the Catholic reconstruction of Catholic history in an historically aware and culturally secular context. Since most of the Catholic authors I had been reading were French and Italian, I began to research the origins of secular concepts of history in these cultures. I then wrote a draft of a book manuscript about French historical theory in the early eighteenth century, in which I argue that one origin of the modern secular conception of the historical past can be found in the memoirs composed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The reasons that I think this literature was so important are two. First, a retrospective view to the past was first applied to one's own life, to contemporary history. This retrospective view was then transferred from the subjective and contemporary past to non-contemporary history. Second, the genre of memoirs provided a context for the development of a purely secular culture uncluttered by religious dogma.

My plan is now to turn to the second part of my study and show how Catholic intellectuals confronted this private, subjective and purely secular view of the past in their attempt to fashion a counter-history.

While my interest in the images of the past as a theme in the struggle between religious and secular cultures has remained constant, the scope of my study has, if anything, grown wider. One reason may be the experience of the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The exposure to other fields made one conscious of the diversity of discourse and intellectual orientation. It became clear to me that I had been thinking about the central problem that preoccupies me, secularization, in terms of the assumptions of an historical discourse that I simply presumed. The growing emphasis on the concept of retrospection in my work was partially due to the perceived need to explain the nature of historical thinking to non-historians through explaining its origins.