Models and Paradigms in Ancient History

Just as one cannot create a geometry without preliminary postulates, so it is impossible to write history without employing a priori assumptions and analogies. Thinking about history, like all other cognitive processes, requires one to move from the simpler to the more complex, from the better known to the less well known. Consequently, all historians use models, whether or not they are conscious of the process. Those historians who are willing to state the premises of the models they employ expose the theoretical basis of their work to testing by critics. This, it seems to me, is a good thing.

Historical models are derived from the experience and thought of an individual or a group and no model is value-free. The use of the model entails importing into the past aspects of ideology which are not native to that past. Ideology, according to my definition, includes assumptions about human nature and behavior, opinions on morality and ethics, general political principles, and attitudes toward social relations. Thus, in my formulation, the use of models is an inevitable part of the historiographic process and models invariably involve the importation of ideology. Furthermore, model choice and design is influenced by ideology. Since it is impossible for the employer of any given set of models to understand all of the ideological aspects of the models he uses, perfect objectivity is impossible. But this conclusion should not be a cause for despair. Self-awareness about the influence of ideology will help historians to understand the main constraints any given model entails. And, as Chester Starr has pointed out, it is the job of critics to point out ideological factors the author himself has missed.

There are, of course, a great variety of models for the historian to choose from, varying in their origins and the truth-claims made on their behalf. Some models claim universal and exclusive validity: traditional Marxist materialism, for example, claims to have discovered the universal engine for social change in the evolution of the relationship of classes to the mode of production; all phenomena not covered by this model are regarded by traditional Marxists as "epiphenomena" or "superstructure," and so unworthy of serious attention. Other models are derived from the analysis of specific historical circumstances and applied to less-well known historical circumstances. These "circumstantial" models are not typically based on universalist truth claims and do not assume explanatory exclusivity. Instead, they are defended on the basis of suitability. The question one asks of such a model is not, "will this model explain all history?", but "will it help to explain specific aspects of a society in which I am interested?"

Granted the inability of the historian to achieve an objective, ideology-free, "external" standpoint, should all models and the historiographic products derived from them necessarily be regarded as possessing equal analytic/explanatory value? The intuitive answer is, of

---


2Chester G. Starr, The Flawed Mirror (Lawrence, Kansas 1933) 32.

The Ancient History Bulletin 3.6 (1989) 134
course, "No." and I think that this intuitive conclusion can be defended, if we replace the unobtainable goal of "objective truth" with a goal of "meaningfulness and usefulness."

The reality of the historical past can never be reproduced—and therefore can never be completely comprehended. But the past can be represented in meaningful and useful ways. By this I mean that no historiographic product can recreate the past in all its richness and complexity, but the historian can hope to model the past in ways that are both reasonable and testable. Consider the analogy of cartography. No map can reproduce the reality of even a small geographic region at any given point in time. No scale model could do justice to all of the complexities of the topography, geology, biology, population distribution and so on of (say) modern Attica. And yet it is possible to produce maps of Attica that are both meaningful and useful. For example a road map of Attica that would enable a motorist to drive from Sounion to Marathon without getting lost represents meaningful aspects of Attica in a useful manner. Furthermore, our hypothetical motorist can test the map against her own perceptions. If, as she drives along, she perceives many cross-roads and interchanges not depicted on the road-map, she will judge the map inaccurate and so useless. On the other hand, she may also perceive buildings, trees, and geological formations not depicted on the road-map. But this does not cause her to say that the map is useless, since her primary concern is getting from Sounion to Marathon and the road map claims only to be a roadmap, not a universal map of all perceptible features. If she is interested in these other aspects of Attica she may turn to other maps that do not show roads at all, but represent geological features, topography, and so on in meaningful ways. Each map will be judged by its users on the basis of its clarity and accuracy in representing what it claims to represent.

A historical model or historiographic product should represent some aspect of the past in a way that is meaningful and useful. By useful, I mean that the model—like a map—should help the user/reader to get from one point to another: diachronically from one point in past time to another or synchronically from one set of phenomena to a contemporary set of phenomena. The reader/user of a model (and here I include historiographic products which themselves "model" or represent aspects of the past) will judge the model by criteria similar to those used by our hypothetical motorist. The reader will ask whether the model accounts for all of the perceptible phenomena—i.e. the evidence known to the reader—that the model should account for, given the scope of its claims. If the reader knows of a significant body of relevant evidence that the model does not account for, he will likely judge it useless. This is, I think, the process that has led many historians to reject the claims of universalist/exclusivist models. On the other hand, the reader may find that the model has introduced features that demonstrably did not exist in the past. An example would be A.W. Gomme's demonstration that it is invalid to employ a modern naval operations model to ancient naval warfare, because ancient warships could not stay at sea for longer than a couple of days. The "usefulness" criterion therefore allows for the testing of models and consequently for deciding that model A is better than model B.

A model or historiographic product is (in my formulation) "meaningful" to the extent that it makes sense to readers and has heuristic value for them: that is to say to the extent that it helps people to act in "the real world" and to assess for themselves the significance and implications of their own and others' actions, by viewing those actions against a broader context. The study of the ancient past is not a closed, self-referential system. Interpretations of the past inevitably find their way into extra-disciplinary contexts, and can affect decision-making and action by non-historians in significant ways—as, for example, the current "historians' debate" in Germany makes clear. Most historians, I think, intuitively grasp the heuristic function of interpreting the past and recognize that human actions have moral valence; and this intuitive understanding renders it unlikely that historians will treat all models as if they were of equal value.

For the past to be made accessible as a heuristic device, it must be ordered: Each individual must, at a given time, "anoint" certain models by granting them explanatory primacy. Professional historians normally take (or at least attempt to take) control of the ordering/anointing process because (inter alia): a) they themselves are called upon to explain the past in ways that will seem meaningful to non-professionals (e.g. in undergraduate lectures) and they recognize their social obligation to provide a reasoned assessment; b) they feel that they have a proprietary disciplinary interest in controlling interpretations of the past; and c) they have a rational desire, based in part on self-interest, in seeing that interpretations of the past used by (for example) politicians are based on the highest possible standards of honesty and rigor.

An integrated set of explanatory models can be described as a paradigm; a set of anointed models that remain in general use over a long period of time, as a dominant paradigm. The paradigm concept was developed by Thomas Kuhn in his analysis of the sociology of scientific knowledge. Kuhn argued that the history of modern science could be explained by the consequent establishment, challenging, and overthrow of a sequence of paradigms. According to Kuhn, scientists in any given field tend to adhere to a single paradigm until a critical mass of data not explained by the paradigm is amassed. The old paradigm is then discarded and a new one adopted that covers the known data. A dominant historical paradigm, then, will be the primary explanatory tool that most historians of a certain time will be likely to use in analyzing aspect x of past society y.

Historical paradigm formulation, by its nature, inevitably entails emphasizing the importance of certain categories of past social activity and cultural products, while obscuring others. The ordering process presumes that the activities and products highlighted by the paradigm are "central" to a heuristically meaningful understanding of the society in question. Categories of activity and cultural products relegated to the sidelines by the dominant paradigm may not disappear from view, but are necessarily made to appear relatively insignificant. This

Footnote:
Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago 1970) passim. This article is a revised version of the introduction to a paper I presented as part of a panel on "Re-constructing Athenian Political History" at the APA meeting in January, 1989. I would like to thank my fellow panelists and the members of the audience for their insightful comments and criticisms.
can obviously be problematic, e.g. in the case of long-dominant paradigms that obscured the contribution of women to and their oppression by Greek and Roman societies. But the inevitable tendency of paradigms to emphasize and to obscure is not an argument against paradigms, but rather an argument for an ongoing process of paradigm reformulation.

The development and deployment of historical paradigms is, I believe, necessary and inevitable given the sociology of historical knowledge. But, unlike scientists, ancient historians do not have the benefit of a constant accumulation of significant new data by which our paradigms can be tested and challenged. The danger therefore exists that our paradigms will become ossified and their ideological postulates will be hidden through constant usage. We may tend to forget that the paradigms we use rest on ideologically-based models and so we may start regarding our paradigmatic products as "objective truth." Meanwhile, because of developments in other academic disciplines and changes in the value system of the society at large, the ideology that underlies our paradigms may become increasingly foreign to those outside the field. The result of this process is that the heuristic value of "professional" readings of the ancient past for explaining the present is diminished and our work loses (contemporary) meaning. In the end, ancient historiography may be reduced to intradisciplinary debates over questions that are of primary significance within our paradigm, but meaningless to anyone outside the field. Meanwhile, given the intrinsic heuristic value of the idea of the ancient past, the function of interpreting it for a wider audience will be taken over by persons who may not have an adequate knowledge of or respect for the evidence. Therefore, I would suggest that ancient historians must not only be willing to test their own and their colleagues' models against the available evidence, but they must think long and hard about the ideological presuppositions entailed in their dominant paradigms. If we do not challenge ourselves, we will simply become irrelevant. And this, it seems to me, is a bad thing.

Josiah Ober
Department of History and Philosophy
Montana State University
Bozeman, Montana 59717
Volume 3
INDEX

SHEILA AGER, Judicial Imperialism: the Case of Melitaia .................................................. 107
EUGENE N. BORZA, Some Toponym Problems in Eastern Macedonia
For Georgi Mihailov .................................................................................................................. 60
TRUESDELL S. BROWN, Solon and Croesus (Hdt. 1.29) ...................................................... 1
DAVID CHERRY, Soldier’s Marriages and Recruitment in Upper Germany
and Numidia ......................................................................................................................... 128
A. JAMES CULLENS, Professio and Decoctio in the Tabula Heracleensis ......................... 85
ROGER B. CULVER AND DAVID MacDONALD, An Astronomical Interpretation
of Caracalla’s Shield ............................................................................................................ 18
JAMES DEVOTO, Pelopidas and Kleombrotos at Leuktra .................................................. 115
P. DANIEL EMANUELE, The Battle of Mytilene: the Engagement at
the Harbour Mouth ............................................................................................................... 91
FRANK J. FROST, The Last Days of Phalasarna ................................................................ 15
CHARLES D. HAMILTON, Diodorus on the Establishment of the Second
Athenian League .................................................................................................................. 93
MOGENS HERMAN HANSEN, Demography and Democracy—A Reply to
Eberhard Ruschenbusch ....................................................................................................... 40
PETER KARAVITES, Thuc. 2.85.5: Some Implications ......................................................... 25
PETER KRENTZ, Xenophon and Diodoros on the Battle of Abydos .................................. 10
KONRAD H. KINZL, Regionalism in Classical Athens? (Or: An Anachronism
in Herodotos 1.59.3?) ........................................................................................................ 5
JOSIAH OBER, Models and Paradigms in Ancient History ............................................... 134
GEORGE E. PESELY, The Origin and Value of the Theramenes Papyrus ..................... 29
TERENCE T. RAPKE, Cleisthenes the Tyrant Manqué ....................................................... 47
G.J. SZEMPLER, E.W. KASE†, M.P. ANGELOS, The Donation of M’. Acilius
Glabrio, cos. 191: A Re-interpretation .......................................................................... 68
LAWRENCE TRITLE, Epilektoi at Athens ........................................................................... 54
J. VANDERLEEST, Appian’s References to His Own Time ............................................. 131
CHRISSOULA VELIGIANNI, Xάρις in den attischen Ehrendekreten der
Klassischen Zeit und die Ergänzung in IG I³ 101, Z. 35-37, 51-52 ................................ 36
MICHAEL B. WALBANK, A Proxeny-Decree of 353/2 B.C. (IG ii² 139 + 289) ............ 119
MICHAEL B. WALBANK, Pronous son of Thyion of Samos ......................................... 52
DAVID WHITEHEAD, Secretaries, Charidemos, Poteidaia: The Date
(and Personnel) of IG II² 118 ......................................................................................... 102
GRAHAM WYLIE, Why Did Labienus Defect From Caesar in 49 B.C.? ......................... 123