

# Nature and the Historization of History

– a Commentary

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In his text, Kragh gives a brief but very informative overview of the idea that nature itself is historical, i.e. subject to change over time. He includes a discussion on whether even the natural laws themselves may be changing in this way, and ends by asking if nature is “truly historical” in the same way as human societies are. He answers in the negative. One of the arguments he uses is that while a historian can think back in time and identify with the historical actors, the scientist cannot in the same way imagine being a dinosaur or a molecule.

Kragh's own narrative is historic. He starts with early ideas about the world being subjected to some kind of organic decay or ageing, and goes on to the “much too narrow time-scale” offered by the Bible. Buffon and Kant are presented as examples of thinkers who heroically break with this limit, while the second law of thermodynamics, from the mid 19th century, marks the final entrance of an irreversible modernity. It is difficult to structure this kind of narrative without making it one of progress and gradual development. Thus, historicity follows two strands in Kragh's text. It struc-

tures the description of how natural phenomena were interpreted in new ways, while at the same time these new ways themselves are of just that historical kind which used to present their gradual emergence.

It is difficult to see how such a structure could have been avoided, but it still can be worth noting that it contributes to naturalize history. It seems to imply that the idea of history has been constant in the Western tradition, and that this idea – quite naturally – is identical with our own. This, of course, is not the case. For centuries, history meant the *description of things that were*, hence also the term natural history. Modern ideas of history and historicity emerged in exactly the same period as that in which nature was historicized. From the 18th century onwards, history gradually came to be understood in terms of time, change, development, processes, even progress. In earlier epochs, history had for a large part been a narrative genre, frequently concerned with matters of good examples and parallelity between e.g. modern princes and ancient models. Historiography meant interpreting the

present with the aid of examples from the past, the analytical challenge being to find the right example not just to explain the present situation but also to seek advice as to what should be done.

Classical theories about the ageing and even the decay of the world were understood in terms of a natural cycle, likening the life of the world to the life of single human beings. Over time, the soil had become less fertile, and the “forces” of nature less strong. These ideas were summarized in the well-known figure of *mundus senescens* – the old, feeble and ageing world. As late as the 18th century these ideas were seriously discussed, not least because the change and decay were also interpreted in moral terms (Frängsmyr 2000). Humanity had degenerated since the age of heroes, and nature with it. But returning to the example of the ancestors might give a means to rescue the world from its present, rather unsatisfactory state. Old theories might thus be employed to propagate new industriousness and agricultural and economic improvements.

The change towards a more modern way of thinking about history, including linear temporality and an understanding of the future as neither determined by past examples nor bound to an organic life cycle, happened gradually – not only in natural science but in general. And the modern understanding of history was not a model *applied* to natural history, it was in part *developed* in that field. Steno’s studies of fossils, Hutton’s of earth stratigraphy and Buffon’s break with the biblical time limit did not only contribute to the historization of nature, but also to the historization of history. New ways of thinking about natural phenomena and the impact of processes taking time – frequently even time-spans of so far unimagined length – also had far-

reaching consequences for the understanding of the structure of social change, for the character of the man-made world (Toulmin & Goodfield 1965).

Incorporating such new ways of thinking into historiography did not come easy. Nonetheless, the perspectives recently developed within natural history – or the natural sciences, as the term gradually came to be – did provide help. Historians and antiquarians followed the lead of the scientists. The new theories of weathering, erosion or post-glacial rebound represented new ways of thinking about time, change and stability, contingency and predictability, even if the theories themselves did not directly apply to social conditions. The historization of history demanded considerable mental resources, as it seriously questioned a number of connections and causalities traditionally taken for granted.

To illustrate some of the problems involved, I would like to cite an example from a Norwegian topographic text, from 1794. The military engineer E. Hoff tries to explain why there is a pot-hole in a hillside, far from any sea or lake. How has it been made, and by whom? In the Norwegian vernacular, pot-holes are called monks’ holes, and Hoff starts ascribing the pothole to “the lazy and scheming monks” of a pre-reformation past. But the explanation does not satisfy him, and is also “somewhat insulting” to the monks, so Hoff tests other explanations:

If the sea itself has once been the cause of this hole in the solid rock – for a river or stream cannot, according to the nature of the present area, have existed – one probably has to accept the theory of the Swedish poet and historian O. Dalin and others about water reduction, according to whom, in particular Dalin,

the sea in a period of approximately 1800 years decreases by 13 fathoms or 78 feet. But this requires a time of approximately 9000 years back, which is contrary to the almanac of the good Moses as well as to all experience (Top.J, bd.3, hft. 9, 1794:27).

The theories of water reduction were developed by the Swede Anders Celsius and widely publicised by the historian Olof von Dalin in his work *History of the Kingdom of Sweden* (1747–62). Dalin argues that the present Sweden once had been a number of small islands (Frängsmyr 2000). In Hoff's case, the theory indicates that the pothole must have been made more than 9000 years ago, which he simply finds improbable, given that the world was commonly accepted to be about 6000 years old. Even if the modern theories may be the most attractive, Hoff finds it difficult to support them "without being regarded as a heretic of Biblical chronology." He exclaims in deep frustration:

How uncertain, how contradictory most things are, in particular from the oldest of times, which can now only be estimated by guesses and not proven; for how can the Mosaic accounts be combined with the perhaps too exaggerated chronological calculations of the most ancient peoples? The infallible ancient monuments in Asia, Africa and especially Egypt seem to be far too discrepant with the commonly accepted chronology. The good Moses, no matter what a great and excellent man he otherwise was in his own time, must also probably be excused if he was less of a Chronologus than a legislator – for in his time there was no Whiston (Top. J. bd.3, hft. 9, 1794:39).

William Whiston, Newton's successor in Cambridge, attempted to reconcile biblical accounts with new scientific knowledge. In his book *A New Theory of the Earth*, from 1696, he argued that the events in the Old Testament must be "decoded" as accounts of historical events, the Flood being caused by the passing of a large comet. Hoff himself seems to prefer the same kind of harmonizing theories, but does not quite succeed. What worries him is not just chronology and the relationship between history and natural history. In Hoff's argument, knowledge is bound to person, and person to honour. Rejecting a theory or an explanation implies rejecting the person related to it, giving vent to a suspicion that this person is untrustworthy and without honour – an impostor or a fraud (see also Eriksen 2007). Hoff's problem is not just to reconcile a newly historicized nature with old ideas about history, but also to negotiate relationships between truth and honour.

## References

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