Assis, Arthur Alfaix
What is History for? Johann Gustav Droysen and the functions of historiography

Walkiria Oliveira Silva*

Assis, Arthur Alfaix
***What is History for?* Johann Gustav Droysen and the functions of historiography**
New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014. 234p.

The publication of *What is History for? Johann Gustav Droysen and the functions of historiography*, by Arthur Assis, presents a profitable discussion about the historiography of de Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), an important nineteenth century German historian. Based on the analysis of Droysen's historiography, Assis offers the reader an wide panorama of German historiography during the nineteenth century, centering on the debates about historicism, a dominant paradigm for German historical knowledge in the nineteenth century, and in the reformulation of pragmatic value for historiography. Arthur Assis' work is therefore not only directed at specialists or at researchers of Droysen's work, but at all those who study German and general historiography, intellectual history, and even political historiography, since it highlights the political influences of Droysen's thought.

Arthur Assis is a professor in the Post-Graduate Program of History in Universidade de Brasília, where he works with the areas of theory and the methodology of history. His work configures a deepening of the questions his doctoral research was concerned with, defended in 2009 in the University of Witten, supervised by Professor Jörn Rüsen. The influence of Rüsen's thought will not pass unperceived by a reader familiarized with his thought. During the reading, Assis' dialogue with the thought of Rüsen and Koselleck becomes evident. From Rüsen, also a scholar of the thought of Droysen, the dialogue with his theory of history can be perceived, from the importance of historic knowledge for the intersubjective development of our capacity of orientation in the present, aiming at overcoming our lack of orientation. Koselleck's importance appears in his understanding of the modern concept of history through the

* Doutoranda, Programa de Pós-Graduação em História, Universidade de Brasília (UnB). Brasília, DF, Brasil. walkiria.oliveiras@gmail.com

Revista Brasileira de História. São Paulo, v. 35, nº 69, June 2015. Available at: http://www.scielo.br/rbh
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1806-93472015v35n69018

transformation of the experience of time linked to the genesis of a new range of socio-political concepts which emerged in light of a new set of transformations beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although Assis has other theoretical references, the dialogue with Rüsen and Koselleck is most significant and enriching.

Organized in four chapters, Arthur Assis' book is structured around a general objective to which his general questioning corresponds: through the downfall of traditional exemplary historiography and the ascension of the modern concept of history, the author seeks to analyze how the pragmatic function of history is redefined in the works of Droysen. Arthur Assis thereby aims to comprehend the epistemological foundation which unites the modern concept of historiography to its traditional value. His aim is evident: understanding Droysen's thought taking into account the reformulation and re-signification of the pragmatic function of historical science.

A very notable aspect of the work is how Assis links Droysen's theory of history with his political preferences. As he himself states in the introduction of the book, this connection between Droysen's historical theory and politics is a gap that is very present in studies of the German historian. By analyzing the reformulation of pragmatic nature of history in Droysen's thought, Assis sought diligently to understand the contradictions and tensions between Droysen`s historical thought and his political tendencies given the turbulent European political reality, principally the German one, during the nineteenth century.

The first chapter, "Functions of Historiography until the mid-19th century," fulfills an introductory role, however, one that is no less important, to the later discussion of the reformulation of the pragmatic value of historiography. Starting with George Nadel's concept of the 'exemplary theory of history,' Assis delimits what he understands by traditional exemplary historiography. Here, the most important task of historians was to "locate in the past atemporal models of action to be immediately applied or avoided in the present" (p.21). Based on this concept, Assis constructs a vigorous analysis of the forms and functions which exemplarity has assumed since the historiography of Antiquity, passing through authors such as Polybius and Cicero, until the emergence of the modern concept of history in the second half of the eighteenth century, extending his analysis until the late nineteenth. He reaches two conclusions: the first is related to the unquestionable importance of the exemplary function for Western historical thought, and the second states that

until the end of the eighteenth century, various authors sought justifications which could prove or replace the exemplary theory of history (p.35-36).

Based on the ascension of the modern concept of history and a new perception of time – the temporalization of Koselleck –traditional exemplary historiography came to be seen as a problem for historical learning, and new paths for the revalorization of the pragmatic value of historiography were proposed. In the second chapter of the work, "The Theoretical Design of a New Justification," Arthur Assis explains Droysen's concept of "historical thinking," the basis of the historical method and the reformulation of the pragmatic function of historiography present in the thought of the German historian. Thinking historically, in other words the subjective capacity to connect in perspective the present and the cognizable past, constitutes the basis of historical science and delimits its functions (p.63). In this point, Assis emphasizes the pragmatic effect and the pedagogic bias of history in Droysen, since the social value of historiography is its capacity to awaken in readers the sense of reality (p.77). Here, Droysen's thought is influenced by the ideas of the neo-humanist Wilhelm von Humboldt for whom one of the functions of historical knowledge was to awaken the sense of reality, or, in other words, the capacity to perceive the forces, the ideas found beyond historic events. Assis underlines the hermeneutic nature of Droysen's historic method, since with the factual research there was a link between the past, the present, and the actual researcher. Droysen, as Assis points out, was one of the first intellectuals to use the hermeneutic concept of comprehension as the principal methodical specificity of the human sciences.

Once the function of historic knowledge in Droysen is presented through the re-signification of the pragmatic value of history through the subjective capacity of think historically, Arthur Assis begins the second part of his work. In chapters 3 and 4 he seeks to link the historic thought of Droysen, as presented in chapter 2, to the understanding the German historian constructs of his own present. In chapter 3, "Historical Thinking and the Genealogy of the Present", Assis traces the approximations between Droysen's thought and the philosophy of history of Hegel, highlighting the importance of Hegalian thought for Droysen's concept of history. Assis states that for Droysen, like Hegel and other German intellectuals in the nineteenth century, the idea of the historic process such as the conquest of the idea of liberty was fundamental. According to Droysen, interpreting the genesis of the present signified applying his historical method – thinking historically – to understanding the development of the idea of liberty from its beginning until the present time of the

historian (p.104). Assis also presents Droysen's understanding of political processes whose political consequences had transformed the European political scenario, such as the French Revolution and the Franco-Prussian War. Droysen's comprehension of the genealogy of his own time is explored by Assis in detail. He analyzes Droysen's comprehension of the economic, political, and intellectual policies of his time, such as materialism, rationalism, positivism, and capitalism.

The final chapter, "The Politics of Historical Thinking and the Limits of the New Function," aims to fill the gap pointed to by Assis in his introduction, in other words, to point to the tension and convergences between Droysen's political preferences and his theory of history. According to Assis, after 1840 Droysen was greatly concerned with the formation and transformations of the state of Prussia, while the frontiers between his theory of history and a historiographical production motivated by his political preferences began to become confused. Droysen's liberal-national position and his position congruent with the Savigny's historical school of law are presented and analyzed by Assis, who observes the intimate relations between thinking historically and Droysen's political commitment.

Arthur Assis achieves the fundamental purpose of his book: analyzing Droysen's proposal for the exemplary theory of history, in other words, thinking historically. By presenting the political implications of Droysen's thought, Assis highlights that every theory is always accompanied by the historical experiences of the intellectual himself. In times in which discussions about the uncertainty of the scientificity of history through post-modern analyzes grow significantly, Arthur Assis' book fulfills an important role by reflecting and inducing questioning on the forms and functions which historical knowledge assumes given the experiences and transformation of the present time. At the end of the reading, it remains to us to ask: has historical knowledge anything to teach us historically?

Review received on January 31, 2015. Approved on March 1, 2015.