

Introduction

The basic principles of metahistory that I follow were developed in the 1970s. They are closely related to my attempt to conceptualize and systematically advance the foundations of Johann Gustav Droysen's own *Historik*.⁵ Apart from one significant modification – contrary to Droysen, I explore the question of what history is first and the question of what historical method is second – I generally follow the structure of his *Historik*, as it unites all the essential elements of a theory of history in a coherent form.

The Development of Metahistory Critical reflection on historical theory, as characterized in Droysen's *Historik*, was popular in the 1970s. History as a discipline was confronted with a fundamental critique of its traditional form and new theoretical and methodological approaches to re-form the discipline were considered.⁶ Such fundamental crises in an academic field call for systematic reflection on its constitutive principles. At the time, my attempt to meet this demand was of course defined by the contemporary and traditional standards, contemporary challenges and general discourse. My aim was to seize the innovatory potential of socio-historical thought by adapting the ideas and propositions that originated from the social sciences, especially from sociology, and using them in historical theory and research methods. In doing so, it was important to defend the practical relevance of historical understanding as well as the claims of rationality in academic historical thought without losing sight of its practical political relevance.

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Since then, the position of historical thought has changed dramatically. Analogous to the transformations that occurred in the field of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, a whole range of ‘turns’ has been proclaimed, reflected upon and established, though hardly in any consistently systematic way. If we summarize these turns in view of fundamental aspects and strategies of historical thinking, then we can now also speak of a cultural historical or cultural scientific turn on top of the earlier socio-historical turn. Today, critical new impulses for historical studies no longer come from the social sciences but rather from cultural anthropology.

In response to this ‘turn’ and its related questions of legitimacy and criticism, some have wondered whether the earlier theories of historical studies will be integrated or merely overtaken by the newer ones. I hope to address this controversy in its basic elements with my revised concept of metahistory, without contradicting the relevance of my original idea in its old context in any way. Even at that time I was not able to radically reject the historicist tradition in historical studies, especially its theoretical achievements. It was therefore more straightforward for me to tie post-historicist analytical concepts of social history to the neo-hermeneutic modes of thought that determine the recent developments in the field. By doing so I could simultaneously address and systematically incorporate the ideas on the role of memory and dealing with the past (*Erinnerungs-Diskurs*) that arose from cultural studies.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, historical scholarship was one of the most – if not *the* most – pivotal references for German historical culture (*Geschichtskultur*). It is questionable whether that is still the case today. The overwhelming power of new forms of media, the relentless success of historical museums and exhibits, the lively debates concerning monuments and memorials – all of this threatens to relegate historical scholarship to a minor role in doing what it is in fact, through research, most capable of doing.

Aesthetics, Post-modernism, Post-colonialism To formulate my point more precisely, we are faced with the fact that critical, methodological thinking in dealing with the past risks drowning in the sea of images available to us in the media everywhere and at all times. Aesthetics as a mode of perception has always been an essential element of historical thinking, also in its academic form. But this disciplinary form that is characterized by research with verifiable claims for truth, as well as by a critical handling of socially powerful historical orientations, is at risk of being pushed into the background. A critical attitude no longer appears to play an especially important role in historical culture. The call for transdisciplinary work, and the urge to escape the restrictions of a specific field of study for the sake of the supposed free creativity that all too often comes with it, has pushed aside

the cognitive achievements that result from methodological standards of historical research.

Furthermore, post-modern trends in the cultural and social sciences have discredited the traditional standards of rationality in intellectual pursuits. Under the auspices of post-colonialism and the demands to respect non-Western traditions when dealing with the human past,⁷ claims of universality in academic works are all too quickly discredited as ideological, as a sign of the growing obsolescence of Western hegemonic thought.

These developments contain legitimate criticisms, but advocates for these ideas tend to throw the baby out with the bath water. Metahistory as a theory of history remains committed to explaining explicitly the specific cognitive possibilities that historical thinking as an academic discipline has opened up. The question of truth thus remains relevant. When one demands that historical thinking and its disciplinary rationality be separated from all aspects of our cultural orientation, then historical studies, and metahistorical thinking itself, become conceptually misguided.

This being said, my aim here is to revise my study of metahistory, while remaining committed to the same agenda as expressed in my work twenty years ago under the title *Historische Vernunft*.

Interculturalism Context awareness and the logics of rationality claims within historical thinking help us to recognize the challenges presented in intercultural communication in the period of globalization. We can no longer continue to simply and indiscriminately perpetuate the Western academic tradition, that is, the powerful rationalizing impulse of historical thinking, and assume that it is transcultural. In recent decades, non-Western traditions have become something of a corrective tool, if not an outright alternative to occidental concepts,⁸ by presenting other contextual frameworks of historical thinking that have hardly played any role in the established discussions of historical theory.

Two reactions to post-modern and post-colonial criticism are possible: to defend standards of rationality in critical academic thought with claims of universality in the field of history on the one hand, and to relativize the influence of cultural contexts on the other. Neither is plausible. Instead, it is important that the cultural context of historical thinking in the real world is taken seriously as our driving impulse. At the same time, we need to recognize cross-cultural criteria of truth, which allow the establishment of a transcultural methodological rationality. These criteria are simply based on the fact that even though we all live in different cultures, we as humans have our humanity in common, which we can agree on with good reason.

It is essential to include the fundamentals of being human in our critical reconstruction of the logics of historical thinking and in its specifically

academic ('scientific') claims of truth. Cultural difference should become an inspiration rather than a limitation to historical knowledge.

History as a Field of Study Metahistory as a theory of history also faces another challenge, namely the academic status of 'historical studies' as a discipline. As the organizational structure of historical understanding, historical scholarship has a long tradition that can be traced back to the eighteenth century. The ways in which historical thought developed within this structure varied; the structure or form itself, however, has mostly remained consistent. This might soon change due to the more recent changes in history education at universities. The discipline of history has recently found itself shrinking to a mere component or even fragment of various constellations of knowledge and modes of thought; it is dwindling down to being just one part of a broader course, its cognitive status becoming downright precarious. The creation of curriculum conglomerates most often serves the interests of producing practical and applied competencies. This applied or practical standard does not guarantee any internal cognitive or methodological coherence in the respective contributions of different disciplines to a specific course of study. This lack of coherence carries over to the level of competence in students, blurring the expectations and goals they face in their studies. It especially affects effective and methodological rationality in academic research. This type of academic education severely limits students' critical thinking skills, as critical academic work is based on institutionalized and methodological processes of investigation. This basic inadequacy is cloaked and concealed by the proud language of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. How could either of those things be possible if the original disciplines that they should be based on no longer exist?

Metahistory as a theory of history is a kind of reflexive legitimization of established forms of scholarship. It does not simply establish a status quo in an academic discipline. Rather, it develops standards for the organization of the processes of gaining knowledge based on the methods of cognitive investigation employed in those processes. It emphasizes the inner dynamic of this organization as well as its ability to change and develop. At the same time, though, it offers decisive arguments for the professional character of these standard research methods. It clarifies what it means to 'do history' as an academic field of study. It does so by revealing the necessary requirements for an academic education that claims to provide the fundamental capabilities for critical thinking.

Real World Setting Professionalism is not everything. Without it, academic or scientific historical thinking does not exist. But in its academic form, historical thinking nonetheless refers to factors both in- and outside of its

professional scope. Its relevance as an essential factor in cultural orientation is only apparent if we refer to its academic character, to its definable and methodological rationality, to the foundations and contexts that give it its specific identity, even its own logic. It is obvious that historical thinking bears both differences and similarities to other forms of thinking in the world of academia. What this means can only be explained when we examine the real world setting of historical thinking, which is not abandoned but rather enriched by academic historical thought.

Taking into account the real world setting of historical thinking, a whole new set of perspectives that determine all historical thinking come into view: its aesthetic structure, political function and didactic focus and their related forms, development and impact. Professional historians address the influence of such perspectives in their work. They are not, however, consistently reflected upon or established, but instead dealt with sporadically, or more often unsystematically. Metahistory is an attempt to conceptualize an overall context for such reflections in order to make them more coherent, more insightful and ultimately more effective. We will judge its success here by how far metahistory can go in strengthening the intellectual powers of historical thought that are combined and organized within its academic form.

Notes

5. J. Rüsen. 1969. *Begriffene Geschichte*, Paderborn: Schöningh.

6. J. Rüsen. 1976. *Für eine erneuerte Historik*, Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog. Also idem, 'Grundlagenreflexion und Paradigmenwechsel in der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft', in idem, *Zeit und Sinn: Strategien historischen Denkens*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 50–76.

7. As an example, see S. Seth: 'Reason or Reasoning? Clio or Siva?', *Social Text* 22(1), 85–101. And the works of Vinay Lal, 'World History and its Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(46), 40–47; idem, 'The Politics of Culture and Knowledge after Postcolonialism', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 26(2), 191–205.

8. I refer here to only one example: C.-C. Huang. 2000. 'The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking', *History and Theory* 46, 180–188. An intercultural debate subsequently took place. See 'Chinese and Western Historical Thinking'. 2007. Forum in *History & Theory* 46(2), 180–232. See also J. Rüsen. 1999. *Westliches Geschichtsdenken: eine interkulturelle Debatte*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. (*Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002.)