

Introduction:

How to Understand Historical Thinking

Lasset uns unser Ziel so rein, so hell, so schlackenfrei
annehmen, als wir's können; denn wir laufen
in Irrlicht und Dämmerung und Nebel.
Herder¹

History is much more than only a matter of historical studies. It is an essential cultural factor in everybody's life, since human life needs an orientation in the course of time which has to be brought about by remembering the past. Historical studies are a systematic way of performing this function of orientation. In order to understand what historians do one should start with this fundamental and general function.

Human life has its very specific time order. Nietzsche has described it at the beginning of his "Second Untimely Meditation:"

Consider the herds that are feeding yonder: they know not the meaning of yesterday or today; they graze and ruminate, move or rest, from morning to night, from day to day, taken up with their little loves and hates and the mercy of the moment, feeling neither melancholy nor satiety. Man cannot see them without regret, for even in the pride of his humanity he looks enviously on the beast's happiness. He wishes simply to live without satiety or pain, like the beast; yet it is all in vain, for he will not change places with it. . . . He wonders also about himself—that he cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him.²

The burdening chain of memory has become a fundamental condition of human life, because human beings have lost their guidance by natural instincts and are forced to replace instincts with a self-created cultural framework of orientation. The loss of instincts has opened up a new realm for experiencing time—it appears no longer in the pre-given order of a biological system but as a change of the world which has to be brought into a cultural order of significance and meaning. It appears as a challenge for interpretation. As such it has

the character of contingency: A permanent irritation to be deliberately brought into an order of insight and understanding. Contingency means that things happen in a way that forces people to move their own mind to come to terms with them. Compared with the determination of instincts this movement of the human mind can be called freedom, and time as contingency can be understood as a shadow of freedom. Human beings have lost the natural guidance of animals in pursuing life, they are “thrown” into the freedom of culturally creating the guidance of their lives by themselves.³

This freedom is a matter of hard work. Time has to be made intelligible by reflecting its experience as a matter of interpretation. By interpretation time gets a sense and acquires a significant feature: it becomes history.⁴

What is history? In respect to the anthropologically universal function of orientating human life by culture the answer is very simple: history is time which has gained sense and meaning. History is meaningful and sense-bearing time. It combines past, present and future in a way that human beings can live in the tense intersection of remembered past and expected future. History is a process of reflecting the time order of human life, grounded on experience and moved by outlooks on the future.

Across the huge variety in which this cultural feature of time we call history has been realized, all its variations share a common mental practice and form: narration.⁵ By narration time gains sense. Narratives transform the past into history; they combine experience and expectation—the two main time dimensions of human life. As a synthesis of experience and expectation it includes a relationship to the human subject as well—its identity as a coherence of the self in the changes of time. Narratives create the field where history lives its cultural life in the minds of the people, telling them who they are and what the temporal change of themselves and their world is about.

The chapters of this book try to survey this field. They follow different coordinates which intersect and meet at knots of significance, bringing about what we call the sense of history. One coordinate is the procedure and logic of historical narration; a second one is cognitive principles of rationality and truth claims in historical thinking; and a third is the practical function of historical thinking in human life. By these three lines of inquiry and analysis three different modes of understanding history are integrated that used to be presented as conflicting if not contradictory.

Truth claims and rationality constitute historical studies as an academic discipline or as a “science” in a broader sense. History is a well-established academic discipline with a long and stable tradition and with a deeply rooted self-confidence of its professionals. Historical representations have always claimed for truth, but in the course of the modernisation of history toward an academic discipline of professionals, historical truth more and more became alienated from its traditional version as a matter of the morality of the historians. It was presented and reflected as a matter of research which followed its

own specific method. This method defined historical thinking as a “science,” which needs professionalism in the form of a trained and skilled practice in dealing with source material.

Even today scholarly professionalism in history and claims for historical truth are closely interrelated. Academic training still furnishes historians with cognitive skills that make them feel superior in telling “how it really was” (Ranke)⁶ to all others who also deal with the past (for example, novelists, filmmakers, educationists, politicians etc.). Nevertheless, there has always been an uncomfortable feeling for professional historians when they thought about the relationship of their discipline to the natural sciences, and made attempts to declare their discipline a science. These frequent attempts have never really been convincing.⁷ There has always remained an awareness of a fundamental difference between the natural sciences and history as a part of the humanities. Historical studies traditionally tried to maintain truth claims and a capacity for scientific objectivity, but at the same time they tried to mark a difference from the natural sciences by stating their own logic.⁸

For more than four decades *narrativity* has gradually become the most convincing answer to the question for this distinctive nature of history.⁹ Historians tell stories, and story-telling follows the rules of narration; and these rules essentially differ from all modes of scientific argumentation which are based upon and aiming at general laws, if possible in a mathematical form. The disclosure of its narrative form has more and more turned history away from reflecting and explicating truth claims and methodical procedures of getting valid knowledge about the past. It moved away from the sciences and came closer to literature, as narration is a linguistic procedure for creating meaning, of which the fine arts and (mainly) literature are paradigmatic. Historical sense does not have the logical feature of a law of nature, but of a pattern of significance in which norms and human subjectivity play an important role. This is one of the main results of the so called “linguistic turn” in history or, more precisely, in understanding the work of the historians.

In its scientific meaning historical truth was understood as “objectivity”—an overcoming of all subjective particularity in interpreting the human world. Historical narration, instead, is focussed on this subjective particularity.¹⁰ It discloses and represents human subjectivity in making sense of the world. ‘Identity’ is a key word of this ascription of subjectivity to history. History is a specific intellectual procedure (and its manifestation) of interpreting the past in a mode that the people of today understand their own world and their difference from others. This understanding includes a future perspective of their world and themselves; it is committed to the value system of their cultural orientation. In understanding temporal change history combines experiences and values in the indivisible whole of a narration.

But the linguistic turn in reflection on history failed in addressing the truth claims in dealing with the past, which were still moving the minds of the

historians. Even when professional historians presented the history of their own discipline as full of partiality and political and moral commitment, they could not but claim for truth.¹¹ What they said about the nonobjectivity of history, its essential subjectivity, can still be confronted with the question of whether what is said about the past “really was the case” or not, and historians made a lot of efforts to convince the reader with a positive answer. What about this truth? Historical narrative has to be analyzed in respect to its distinctive nature, its difference from fictional literature, its specific interest in empirical evidence. This brings about a new awareness of *historical interpretation* as an argumentative mode of putting the facts of the past into a coherent historical order. The emphasis on narrative has led to new knowledge of the poetical and rhetorical means of a symbolic (mainly linguistic) representation of the past.¹² Historiography was analyzed as a symbolic order, as a text, which is structured according to the rules of aesthetics. This emphasis caused interpretation as a cognitive procedure and its methodical rules of research to disappear.¹³

Representation or interpretation? This alternative is not at all convincing. History is both, and it is high time to distinguish them and analyze their different legitimacy on the one hand and their close and principal interrelationship with each other on the other hand. This brings theory back into the reflection on the historian’s work, since theory is a specific (“scientific”) logical means of historical argumentation in the procedure of interpretation. Representing the result of it is another part of the same activity of doing history and should be clearly distinguished from interpretation.

Representation and interpretation depend upon each other. Decisive for this mutual dependence is the practical function of historical thinking in human life. Can we understand its power on the human mind without its claims for truth? But what underlies this truth? Is it only the factual evidence of the past? As such it has no power since its factuality is only a consequence of its having passed away. As a fact of the past (“what really was the case”) history is dead—but does it live only by fiction of the present? As a simple fiction with no reference to something “real,” nobody would listen to historical narratives when dealing with the difficult questions of historical identity and future perspectives of human activity derived from the past.

In order to find out how and why history is both—factual and fictional, empirical and meaningful—one has systematically to take into account its narrative character. As a narration history is a part of the cultural orientation that human activity and suffering require. Historical narration is a part of social communication within which it gains and unfolds its mental power. “Historical culture” is the very field of human life where history is a part of social reality and not only a reflection on it.

History is a narrative construction of the human mind. It uses cognitive means of creating sense of the experience of the past and it uses poetical and rhetorical means of bringing this sense into the effective cultural framework of

human life. But at the same time those who do this construction and negotiate it in their social context are constructed themselves. They have been shaped by the same past which they are historically dealing with.

This double nature can be disclosed and brought into view if the practical function of history is considered. This function includes both the need for history as cultural orientation in human life and the potentials of fulfilling this need in the human mind.

The following chapters are constituted by the systematic interrelationship of narration, interpretation and orientation in and by history. History is treated as a mode of thinking, but that does not mean a narrow perspective privileging the cognitive dimension of dealing with the past. On the contrary, the political and the aesthetical dimensions are systematically taken into account. The emphasis on addressing sense criteria is committed to the attempt of broadening the perspective in which history appears as an essential element of human culture. This is supported by a threefold mode of argument: Case studies put the issue of history into a historical perspective. Here the emphasis is on classical authors, modern developments and current debates. Systematic argument is the second strategy for reflecting on history. Here the emphasis is on fundamental problems such as theory, objectivity, typology, comparison etc. Finally, there is an attempt to reflect on history in a pragmatic way. Here the emphasis is on developing historical consciousness, and learning history as a process of gaining narrative competence.

The mixture of these three modes of argument should bring history into a complex perspective with a variety of outlooks—meeting the power and fascination history has in our lives.

Notes

1. Johann Gottfried Herder, "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit," in idem *Zur Philosophie der Geschichte. Eine Auswahl in zwei Bänden*, vol. 1, *Abhandlungen, Fragmente, Notizen*, Berlin, 1952, 522 (Let us take up our aim as clean, as bright, as free of slag, as we can, since we walk in twilight, dusk, and fog).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins, New York, 1985, 5.
3. Immanuel Kant has expressed this cultural quality of human nature, this constitutive "being thrown" into freedom in the third sentence of his "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht" (1784): "Die Natur hat gewollt: daß der Mensch alles, was über die mechanische Anordnung seines tierischen Daseins geht, gänzlich aus sich selbst herausbringe" [Nature has intended that man develop everything that transcends the mechanical ordering of his animal existence, entirely by himself] (A 390—trans. T.M. Greene and H. Hudson); I quote it according to the 1st edn (A); Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. 1. Teil (Werke in 10 Bänden, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. 9), Darmstadt, 1968, 31–61.

4. Cf. Jörn Rüsen, "History: Overview," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, Amsterdam, 2001, pp. 6857–64.
5. Cf. Chap. 1.
6. "Wie es eigentlich gewesen," in Leopold Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1514*, Sämtliche Werke vol. 33, Leipzig, 1855, viii.
7. Cf. Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in W.H. Dray, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and History*, New York, 1966, 5–53.
8. Cf. e.g., *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. W.H. Dray; *A New Philosophy of History*, eds. Frank R. Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, Chicago, 1995.
9. A breakthrough to narration in the discourse on explanation as a mode of "scientific" argumentation was brought about by Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge, 1965; the difference from the traditional understanding of "scientific" explanation (called "rational") is evident, if one compares Danto's philosophy with the classical text of a positivistic understanding of history by C.G. Hempel, "The Function of General laws in history," *Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (1942), 35–48.
10. Cf. chap. 4.
11. An excellent example is Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity-Question" and the American Historical Profession*, New York and Cambridge, 1988.
12. Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973.
13. Cf. The polemic by Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our past*, New York, 2000.