

Rethinking Time

ESSAYS ON HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS,
MEMORY, AND REPRESENTATION

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The Productive Dilemmas of History

PETER ARONSSON

A concept's tenacious core

Both as word and concept, *history* in its broadest sense refers partly to the past itself and partly to narratives about the various realms of the world, natural as well as cultural. It can take the form of the rise and fall of nations, but also of strange customs, natural features, and animal life. Practical, useful knowledge.

This range of meanings, together with the applicability and contemporary relevance of historical knowledge, evokes all of the theoretical concerns that currently preoccupy Western thinkers, complicated by the additional factor that the past no longer exists. What can we know about events which took place before our time? Why should we know? Why and for whom should we narrate the past? These questions lie at the root of the enduring topicality of historical thinking and its *tenacious dilemmas*.¹

My first thesis will be that the concept of history has a very general and tenacious core of formalized and communicated knowledge about the world. The framework of this general significance accommodates a series of essential, productive, and tenacious negotiations in the form of different kinds of history, scientific and otherwise. My second thesis will be that a very large part of this historiographical development takes place within these stable parameters. The often dramatic emphasis on change in the historiographical tradition is the result of a focus upon transformational processes and a (successful) strategy of professionalization within the discipline of history. Traces of this duality are captured by commonplace expressions such as “nothing new under the sun” and “history never repeats itself” as well as in various theoretical

paradigms. Here they will be presented as stable parts of a productive and contradictory whole rather than as an ambiguity to be removed by theoretical cleansing.

Various individuals and professions have regarded themselves as having a vocation, and some as being authorized to confer general validity upon their own version of history. Institutions such as museums, scientific disciplines, and various modes of preservation, presentation, and mediation have served to stabilize and sanction the means by which traditions are carried on. As a cultural construction, historical narratives are a communal resource insofar as they lay claim to a validity that goes beyond mere personal opinion.²

As a field of enquiry, history seeks to produce solid knowledge, and claims on the basis of its methods to be a guarantor of historical truth.³ Aesthetic, ethical, and utilitarian considerations pose a threat to objectivity. The history of writing history in this way became the history of how limits were placed on the improper influence of considerations that were seen as falling short of the evidentiary requirements of intersubjective analysis. The most important advances in history writing in the nineteenth century were tied to methodological developments, which in turn coincided with an era in which history became the overarching form of knowledge for the study of culture.

That which can be explained can also be altered. History became simultaneously a subject and an object, both for itself and for we humans. The dialectic which was thereby created, according to Reinhart Koselleck and many others, is something specific to the modern era.⁴ Their principal claim is that a rupture occurred during the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Where previously history had denoted a series of significant narratives, the concept of History freed itself as its own object and subject. In their account, it has always been the case that "ohne Geschichte keine Erinnerung, keine Gemeinsamkeit, keine Selbstbestimmung sozialer Gruppen oder politischer Handlungseinheiten, dis sich nur im Medium gemeinsamer Erinnerung zusammenfinden können." Yet it was not until the Enlightenment that History became a concept on a par with, and an alternative to, such forces as destiny, God, violence, justice – in short, a foundational social concept capable of explaining processes, progress, development, and necessity. In his highly valuable discussion of the relationship of

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“the space of experience” and “the horizon of expectation”, Koselleck has himself contributed to our understanding of history as an activity or practice. It is this aspect of his argument that I find most useful in the present context.

However, I am convinced neither that it remains productive to focus on change brought about by the Enlightenment, nor that progress can be achieved only by focussing on methodological questions. This perspective ignores fundamentally significant usages of history that have a longer provenance. By focussing exclusively on methodological developments (in truth, only a handful of the methods that have actually been used), the space for self-reflection in professional historiography has been severely curtailed, and the space for moral, aesthetic, and utilitarian reflection has been left to actors outside the academic domain.

The overarching purpose of this essay is to open up a space for historical-theoretical reflection that can absorb the modes of historical representation that have been created within the broader field of historical culture, expanding what has largely been a narrow study of methodological advances and the writings of canonical historians by those working in the fields of academic historiography or historical philosophy.

History is an act of communication and, in two senses, a collective form of knowledge. Its object is always a collective even when represented by a person or, indirectly, by studying others, as in Herodotus’ history of the Persians. It lays claim to universal applicability, at least for the group whose narrative perspective it favours, the reading subject of communicated history. Rhetoric of this kind requires a public. Thus it has been all the way from Pnyx, the meeting-place for rhetoricians and the populace, not far from the Acropolis in Athens, where the first historians sought to convince their audiences of the necessity for action (to unite and fight), through the Renaissance city-states and the educational ideals of Humboldt University, up to the virtual communities of the internet generation. Despite being underdeveloped, the media- and public-history perspective on history can draw inspiration from an array of contemporary historical theorists. History is told about something, for someone, for various reasons. When the audience changes from slaves to serfs to citizens or consumers, it also changes

the conditions under which history needs to be, can be, and should be written.

The domains and tools carved out by historians over a hundred years ago in order to consolidate their professional status today need to be supplemented with more interfaces for communication with society and people. The specialist journals, conferences, and ranks of professional advancement need to be connected with and develop the needs of society in a self-reflexive and critical dialogue. Currently, the strategic visions of research policy place a value only on technology research, and adapt the system of meritocratic evaluation accordingly, with an exclusive focus on narrowly conceptualized innovation systems and intra-disciplinary professional exchanges at the international level. It is a dire omen for those studying culture and for a society that needs academic disciplines with premodern origins, holistic, and pragmatic ambitions, and a vital engagement with the human predicament.

What I am proposing – namely, a dynamic thematizing of the historical dilemma that can make historical narratives and hence communication and dialogue relevant for longer periods of time and for different fields – is intended to make possible a historical-theoretical evaluation of ethical and aesthetic dimensions that can make history more reflexive (and thus more scientific) and equip us to highlight more forcefully its relevance for knowledge production.

I will begin by noting that there are numerous parallels between contemporary controversies in cultural theory and debate and similar exchanges in the early modern period and antiquity. This stems, in turn, from the fact that the concept of history has a very general significance, making it a kind of rag-bag containing every epistemological problem under the sun. I base this statement on the fact that these issues, which have been argued over for a long time, need to be understood as productive dilemmas that deserve to be sustained rather than quashed. The aim is to include human and social perspectives that stand in a more authentic and multi-dimensional relation to the human environment than our highly specialized academic discipline are capable of appreciating. This communicative entity requires the creation of more roles, which will assume key functions in the creation of history. The old division of labour in the humanities, which was

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integrated within a national evaluative schema, needs to be replaced by a more complex framework that is responsive to the ongoing renegotiation of value, identity, and utopia at the individual, local, and global level.

To focus exclusively on change and renewal is to conceal the underlying continuity that characterizes history as both concept and discipline. By foregrounding continuities in the form of tenacious dilemmas, it becomes possible to view the subject and historical narrative from a perspective that has long been suppressed within the academy.

Productive dilemmas

As a concept, history reflects and represents occurrences from the past. Whatever their form, these embody a series of tenacious dilemmas, tensions that stem not from some intellectual incoherence but rather from epistemological preconditions, the phenomenon of time itself, and the transitory character of human existence. Using these dilemmas as the backdrop for a reading of historiographical representations ranging from the ancient Greeks to our own era, I contend that they have, to a varying degree, been prominent and relevant in every age. This approach towards understanding the dynamic relevance of historical representations may be able to effect a renewal of the way history is used in our own time.

1. *Reality or representation.* In what sense does the past exist? Did it have an unambiguously independent reality, or do our belated efforts to interpret its remains in fact create the past? For decades, arguments among cultural theorists have taken the form of a struggle between a majority of historians, who defend a realist approach to knowledge, and a provocative postmodernist position which insists on the fluid and uncertain relation of knowledge to anything beyond discourse. Between them, a constructivist position has emphasized the formative power of knowledge while nonetheless emphasizing that it is constructed by “something”. The various positions intersect with long-standing ontological arguments between materialists and idealists.⁵

2. *Science or art.* The answers to the preceding question lead onto the debate over whether writing history is a science or a creative artistic activity. Can historical research and the writing of history be pursued in the same fashion as the natural sciences, or does it require its own norms? The ideal of truly transparent representation, or at least the verifiable intersubjective method, is being continually reformulated in light of its dependence upon the aesthetic qualities, particularly narrative form, of historical representations. The perspectival, situational, and empathetic connectivity of a narrative position which joins present and past must be weighed against the necessity of a detachment that guarantees intersubjectivity, not individual preferences, will dominate a history that must serve as shared experience. These are paradigmatic positions which all writers of history act upon.⁶

3. *Living or dead history.* What are the conditions for history to be a living reality in contemporary society, rather than being treated merely as an archaic and meaningless phase of passing time? The duty to remember, the fear of forgetting, the desire to learn and predict – each of these positions generates both lightness and darkness, stories and oblivion. What belongs in the light changes according to the vanishing point chosen, yet it is not arbitrary. An array of possibilities can be discerned, including Friedrich Nietzsche's distinction between useful and harmful history, in which the former increases our room for manoeuvre, wisdom, judgement, victories, or revenues.

4. *Unique descriptions or rule-governed patterns.* Is knowledge best presented descriptively, by means of illustrative narratives and accounts, or nomotetically, by means of general laws? Since Aristotle (384–322 BCE), history has typically been seen as required to present unique occurrences, while science seeks out general laws. History teaches only the particular and superficial aspect of past events, while poetry and theory supply its wider underlying truths. As far back as the ancient Greeks, however, history was already associated with the chronological and sequential investigation of how significant events, *Res gesta*, had entailed consequences, and with the rhetorical presentation of these events as a whole. This connection between active event and history creates historical narratives which are politically and ethically relevant.⁷

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Since the nineteenth century, the needle has swung between the ideal of explanation or understanding, that is, to answer the question “why?” with a causal relation or by means of presenting a new context.

5. *The particular or the whole.* Is history a long series of single events with no inner pattern other than chance? Can every individual have his or her own account of history, or does that presuppose the existence of and participation in society? What does a relevant context look like? Demands for broader context are not a recent invention. Almost two thousand years ago, Polybius held that history could only be written in relation to a central sequence of events, in his case the birth, rise, and fall of Rome. In a number of respects, this approach is one of the strong contextual imperatives that have lasted over time: the development of the state through war, politics, and territorial change remains the framework of history even if its scope is widened to include economics, culture, and the world of ideas.

6. *Freedom and determination.* What degree of freedom do human beings have to make their own way into the future? How constrained are we by the traditions and conditions into which we are born? This dynamic is to be found in every historical account, and represents both the desire to present an overarching coherence and continuity and the desire to liberate ourselves from precisely these forces by using history as the model for an alternative future of creativity, imagination, and freedom. The clearest instance of this tension comes in Nietzsche’s attack on the destructive aspects of the fatalism that frequently accompanies history writing. He called for engagement – whether in the form of solicitude, criticism, inspiration, or individuality – in order to break the trammels of fate.⁸

7. Are traces of the past *relics or narratives*? Questions of methodology have a long tradition, too. What are the surest ways of using traces from the past, and how should they be used? Does the best path to historical knowledge lie in temporal, spatial, or cultural proximity, or, quite the reverse, is distance needed in order to see and judge fairly? Historians have always had opinions on these topics. The methodological advances by historians around 1900 largely comprised a deter-

mination of what were genuine historical traces and what were later accounts of the period under investigation. Artefacts were considered to be reliable testimony where narratives tend to give rise to systematic doubts.

8. What *use* is historical knowledge? Does it form the basis for wisdom about life, a *Magistra Vitae*, or is merely a factual reconstruction for neutral purposes, or is the point that individuals for various reasons should derive enjoyment from the past? Is its primary value that it legitimates the ruling order or that it is capable of supplying the tools for criticizing it? Thucydides wrote in order to teach the art of war. Polybius was more expansive, giving reasons for why general history, pursued through the personal research of a learned man, offered the soundest foundation. They were followed by a succession of thinkers who continued to argue that history was a source of wisdom: Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Hume, right up to the historical sociologists of our own era, among them figures as diverse as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Charles Tilly. This holds doubly true for the historians of public debate: in our day conflicts and crises are invariably interpreted in the light of previous experiences that are more typically chosen on the basis of their ideological convenience than from any desire to acquire knowledge without preconditions. On the other hand, there are always the professional historians and their Stoic antecedents: a genuine seeker after truth demands an exactness and an objectivity that are not governed by a desire to divert or startle contemporary onlookers. It is harder to find principled defenders of history writing for pleasure, but its practitioners are numerous.

9. *Critique or confirmation.* A central aspect of the question of history's value relates to whether its overall purpose is to create a stable context of identity and stability, or, its opposite, the ability to criticize and the historicizing of all *a priori* considerations. Powerful forces confront each other at this point, with a hardening of the polemical tone and a reversion to political positions: the first tendency inclines towards conservative stability as a social logic, and the second hopes for radical changes driven by reform or revolution. Yesterday's critics and victorious revolutionaries easily become tomorrow's conservatives. The need

to hold up positive, and occasionally negative, models capable of encouraging progress is among the most timeless characteristics which history telling shares with religious myths. Legitimacy and power rest on it.

Conclusions

The productive dilemma outlined here gives rise to fields of discussions with shifting centres of gravity, hybrids, and mixtures in which unqualified extremism is a rare occurrence. Our review thus does not result in a choice of the correct means of practising history but rather enables us both to appreciate in just how many forms it can take place and to assess the motive forces and consequences which they entail at the level of individual and society. It creates the possibility for a richer perspective on the creations of history, their use and potential, than is typically the case with more educational history textbooks. In so doing, my aim has been to strengthen its scientific rigour by adducing new dimensions and a greater degree of communicative reflexivity, and thereby enhancing the relevance of history as a discipline within the framework of a broader, vital, and more diverse historical culture. This approach is intended to defend the most banal as well as the most ambitious intellectual concerns of historiography. Its purpose is not to rescue such practices for the university but to offer a serious reply to the wider historical culture.⁹

Position-taking in these dilemmas is determined to a great extent by the intellectual agendas at stake in various communicative contexts. They are always connecting and negotiating cognitive, normative, and aesthetic values. Within this matrix, the value of knowledge is continually being renegotiated. More specifically, the professionalization of history-writing with which we are familiar has benefitted from the need for a neutral arena where those in power negotiate the meaning and content of history. Instead of fearing such exchanges, we should increase our respect for the different forms of logic – existential, ideological, aesthetic, economic – that are necessary for the dynamic task of historical reflection. Reflexive care for these tenacious but productive dilemmas should increasingly attend to its deep roots in cognitive,

ethical, and aesthetic dimension – or in order to follow Plato on the relation between the true, the just, and the beautiful. This reflexivity cannot be cultivated in isolation but must be shaped in a communicative context. History is knowledge of something that has been given form – for someone and for something. The former is explicit, the latter often implicit. Historical study, as I have argued, should be reflexive, representational, and knowledge-promoting in each of these directions.

Notes

1. Martin Kylhammar, *Den tidlöse modernisten: en essäbok* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2004), 224.
2. Ett längre och mer utvecklad argumentation för denna ansats, se Peter Aronsson, *BeGreppbart - Historia* (Malmö: Liber, 2011).
3. Rolf Torstendahl, *Introduktion till historieforskningen: historia som vetenskap* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1971).
4. Otto Brunner, (ed.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland. Bd 3, H-Me*, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982); Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and crisis: enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* (Oxford: Berg, 1988); Reinhart Koselleck, *Erfarenhet, tid och historia: om historiska tiders semantik* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2004).
5. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, (Eds.), *Manifestos for history* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2007).
6. Hayden Whites identifikation av olika troper ha givit modern näring till denna diskussion.
7. Per Landgren, *Det aristoteliska historiebegreppet. Historieteori i renässansens Europa och Sverige* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2008), s. 30f.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen. Zweites Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*. (Leipzig: E.W. Fritsch, 1874).
9. Peter Aronsson, *Historiebruk – att använda det förflutna* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2004).