

THE PATERNALISTIC LIBERATION OF HISTORY BY THEORY

A LIBERTAÇÃO PATERNALÍSTICA DA HISTÓRIA PELA TEORIA

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Abstract: This paper will revisit the complicated relations between practicing historians and theorists/philosophers of history. The dualist approach described, for example, in Ethan Kleinberg's book *Haunting History* (2017) and in the manifesto authored by Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott and Gary Wilder titled "Theses on Theory and History" (2018) counterposes these two "tribes" and sustains tensions between them. I identify a position expressed in the above texts that calls for renewing the discipline of history by theorizing it as a "paternalistic liberation of history by theory." When we consider "what is to be done" to bury the hatchet between practitioners and theorists, I propose certain strategies of cooperation that might lead to a (localized) neutralization of the long-lasting tensions between them.

Keywords: Practicing historians, Theorists/philosophers of history, Bridging theory and practice.

Resumo: Este artigo revisitará as tensas relações entre "practicing historians" e teóricos/filósofos da história. A abordagem dualista descrita, por exemplo, no livro *Haunting History* (2017) de Ethan Kleinberg e no manifesto de autoria de Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott e Gary Wilder intitulado "Theses on Theory and History" (2018) destaca a divisão e sustenta tensões entre essas duas "tribos". Identifico uma posição expressa nos textos acima que clama pela renovação da disciplina história, teorizando-a como uma "libertação paternalista da história pela teoria". Quando consideramos "o que deve ser feito" para enterrar a divisão entre "practicing historians" e teóricos, proponho certas estratégias de cooperação que podem levar a uma neutralização (localizada) das tensões duradouras entre eles.

Palavras-chave: Practicing historians, Teóricos e Filósofos da História, Renovando a disciplina história.

Resumen: Este artículo revisará las tensas relaciones entre los "practicing historians" y los teóricos/filósofos de la historia. El enfoque dualista descrito, por ejemplo, en el libro *Haunting History* (2017) de Ethan Kleinberg y en el manifesto de Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott y Gary Wilder titulado "Theses on Theory and History" (2018) destaca la división y sostiene tensiones entre estas dos "tribus". Identifico una posición expresada en los textos anteriores que llama a la renovación de la disciplina de la historia, teorizándola como una "liberación paternalista de la historia por la teoría". Cuando

consideramos "lo que debe hacerse" para enterrar la división entre "practicing historians" y teóricos, propongo ciertas estrategias de cooperación que pueden conducir a una neutralización (localizada) de las tensiones persistentes entre ellos.

Palabras clave: Practicing historians, Teóricos y Filósofos de la Historia, Renovando la disciplina de la historia.

The trope of the so-called "traditional historian," so often referenced by theorists and historians of historiography, embodies the "ideal type" of the positivist scholar subservient to the cult of facts, the fetish of origins, the transparency of the historical source, and belief in one singular Truth. This stereotypical archetype is the product of convenient simplifications. It allows one to construct, by contrast, an image of the increasingly "modern" historian (or philosopher/theorist of history) who contests traditional approaches for conceiving and practicing history. Theorists of history employ this construct to formulate arguments on the attendant concerns of historical inquiry (truth, objectivism, historical sources, the status of the historical fact, explanation and understanding) in the spirit of paleopositivism, or a stereotypical and reductive conception of positivism that accuses historians of philosophical naivety and a lack of awareness of what they are actually doing when they research and write history.

Even scholars such as Jerzy Topolski and Hayden White did not avoid falling back on this convenient figuration of the traditional historian. Topolski, for instance, writes:

Historians were (and perhaps remain) convinced that there is only one history that they are bound to convey in their account. This one truth, however unattainable it may be, is singular. Historians, moreover, were convinced that the validity of information derived from a singular source guarantees the truth of the narrative as a whole. They also believed that while there is only one truth, their own narratives are also quite true (or at least closer to the truth than other historians' accounts) (Topolski, 2002, 32).^[1]

In a similar spirit, Hayden White states the following in his account of the contemporary conception of language as a tool for mediating between consciousness and the world:

This will not be news to literary theorists, but it has not yet reached the historians buried in the archives hoping, by what they call a "sifting of the facts" or "the manipulation of the data," to find the form of the reality that will serve as the object of representation in the account that they will write when "all the facts are known" and they have finally "got the story straight." (...) We are no longer compelled, therefore, to believe (...) that fiction is the antithesis of fact. (...) This too would be news to many historians were they not so fetishistically enamored of the notion of "facts" and so congenitally hostile to "theory" (...) (White, 1985, 126).^[2]

It is likewise problematic that unlike historians of historiography, theorists of history often refrain from analyzing historians' texts and instead content themselves with strategically cherry-picked citations and casually referenced names of historians and the titles of their work as adequate illustrations of their theses. We encounter this very scenario, for instance, in Frank Ankersmit's comments on microhistory. Though entirely lacking in analysis or concrete generalities on this kind of historical writing, Ankersmit's text invokes the names of Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to suggest that their books exemplify a correlation between the latest trends in contemporary art and historiography. Yet he fails

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to reference their work or offer a more extensive thesis (Ankersmit, 2001, 51ff). Ankersmit apparently wishes to enlighten historians as to what the phenomenon of microhistory actually entails, given their presumed ignorance on the subject.

I observe a similar mode of relating to “traditional” historians in the younger generation of scholars. For example, in Ethan Kleinberg’s recent book *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (2017), the author seems to follow the ideas of Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962), who wrote about different paradigms as if they were different worlds. In this way, he constructs a conventional history based on two opposing categories: ontological realism (“a commitment to history as an endeavor concerned with events assigned to a specific location in space and time that are in principle observable and as such are regarded as fixed and immutable”)[3] and, alternatively, non-conventional historians who propose a deconstructivist or constructivist approach (hauntology). Even if Kleinberg does not advocate for either of these positions but instead blends them together,[4] the book presents a kind of asymmetric dualism of these two paradigms (conventional/positivist versus unconventional/constructivist) and seems to imply that one of them must be wrong. What is more, I have the impression that Kleinberg believes that “only theory can save history” from decline into a naïve, empiricist condition. I would call this position the “paternalistic liberation of history by theory.” The same observation can be made of the “manifesto” written by Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott and Gary Wilder and titled “Theses on Theory and History” (2018). The authors create a dualism between traditional (conservative) academic or disciplinary history that “reinforce[s] the scholarly and political status quo” (I-11) and progressive, emancipatory critical history that “seeks to intervene in public debates and political struggles” (III-9).[5]

I am, of course, by no means suggesting there is no such thing as a traditional historian attached to “naïve positivism.” I am arguing, rather, that any reductive generalizations that seek to divide the community into “us” (modern and philosophically enlightened and sophisticated theorists – “critical history”) and “them” (traditional, naïve historians – “academic/disciplinary history”) are indications of a certain arrogance and paternalistic attitude prevalent among theorists.

When we speak of the condition of contemporary humanities and history as such today, I argue that this position not only inaccurately describes historical methodologies practiced on a professional level in historical institutions (of course, the abstracted methodology practiced within philosophical institutions is another affair), but also, and perhaps most significantly, ultimately does an injustice to historians themselves and infantilizes the discipline with regard to adjacent fields in the humanities. In the face of history’s dwindling impact on interdisciplinary approaches for studying the past, this practice is misguided, for it reproduces stereotypical beliefs common to other disciplines that already view the historian as a fundamentalist of positivism, and history itself as the most conservative field in the humanities. This attitude relegates the historian to the lowly role of collecting and supplying facts whose findings can then be exploited by scholars from other disciplines to construct refined and theoretically embellished interpretations.

When we observe the shifts taking place in the contemporary humanities and social sciences both within the academy and on the scale of national policies around these disciplines, we find we must reckon with the potential scenario that over the next two decades, the history of historiography, historical theory and methodology of history might be systematically phased out if not eliminated from the syllabi of courses in historical research as a discrete and required subject for students (while history itself might well be absorbed into the humanities broadly construed). Surely, specialists will continue to teach courses on the subject, but these courses will only be offered as electives. This would be a severe step backwards for our discipline – history. As scholars of the past, we must all, regardless of specialization, take up the task of establishing common goals and formulating a framework for mutual support.

To this end, I will now offer a few concrete proposals and suggestions. These ideas have already been incorporated into academic pedagogy and research practices in a piecemeal fashion in some countries, but

I believe they might help scholars in other countries expand their reach and actively engage in generating knowledge of the past. My postulates can be summarized in five points.

1. We should encourage and intensify bilateral dialogues between philosophers, theorists and methodologists on one end and historians on the other. We must finally “bury the hatchet” that has stayed with us for so long, ever since various factors caused the methodology and theory of history to break away from research practices and to be pursued as a kind of “art for art’s sake.” At the same time, philosophy, methodology and theory of history absorb terminology from philosophy of science and/or methodologies of human sciences. This has had the ultimate effect of alienating historians. What I am calling for here is not resignation from the practice of “pure” philosophical or theoretical reflection – to the contrary, I am, however, guided by my pragmatism as well as my confidence in the benefits to be reaped from collaboration. My own experiences have shown me that “pacifist” processes have a productive impact on jointly pursued master’s and doctoral theses (those that involve a historian as well as a philosopher of history, a historian of historiography or historical methodologist). The same can be said of reciprocal juries for graduate theses and shared seminars and consultations. Of course, at many institutions, these strategies for building mutual trust and setting the tone for a collaborative environment have already been put into practice, but on a scale that is far too modest. On another note, I would also draw attention to the work of forging and strengthening bonds across generations and communities. It is likewise imperative that historians who reflect on their analytical toolkits (what they study, how they study it, what obstacles they face in the process and what approaches they adopt) write on this subject. Texts are readily available by methodologists and historians of historiography that analyze the historian’s toolkit, but it is rarely the case that historians themselves will lay bare the arcana of their trade or reflect on the status of contemporary historiography and historical analysis in more general terms (there is a significant gap here that should really be filled).

2. Non-Western historiography/historical analysis has little or no chance of breaking into conversations circulating on the global map if we do not adequately train students to create their own analytical categories and small/middle-range theories generated from their source material. This is simply a matter of building the necessary skills to devise replicable research procedures that take their cue from localized empirical material, and to simultaneously offer up perspectives, concepts and procedures that might be useful for other scholars. To act upon this postulate might yield benefits for historians, methodologists, theorists, and historians of historiography alike. The project of “practical methodology” that I have been developing since 2006, inspired by the sociological method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), offers a response to the shifts unfolding in the contemporary humanities and the status of history as a university discipline.[6] Practical methodology teaches us how to generate analytical concepts and small/middle-range theories by analyzing historical sources.[7] The objective here should be to train historians who not only observe the guidelines of the historian’s craft (for I am determined to defend the professionalism of historical research), but are also capable of conceiving a conceptual apparatus specific to their research subject. They should also be capable of extrapolating from their material to more general terms. To be clear, I am not claiming that it is the obligation of all historians to build theories of their own. However, historical study as a whole should prepare scholars for this undertaking and encourage them to try their hand at it.

3. We must ground the problems discussed in historical philosophy, theory and methodology courses in tangible research practices. In other words, students should not only discuss analytical methods and theories applied in historiography. It is more important to demonstrate these methods using concrete examples that show how they are put into practice. We should also encourage students to try to write their own microhistories, for example, or to conduct research within the framework of the history of everyday life, local history, family history, environmental history, the history of women and gender, postcolonial history, and so on. This brings up the issue of interdisciplinary education as endorsed by the Bologna Process. Ultimately, this would go beyond encouraging collaboration between scholars from different fields. The real goal is to train the scholar of the past in such a way that equips them to function professionally in several disciplines

(that would, of course, reflect their research interests, so that a scholar working on sixteenth-century practices of magic, for example, would have some familiarity with the study of law, history, and anthropology, while a scholar of neurohistory would be trained in both history and cognitive science, and so on).

4. I propose the reform of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. Doctoral programs should open their ranks to candidates who work on niche subfields of historical research (such as the history of taste and scent, the history of emotion and the senses, sonic history, the history of women and gender, queer history, labor history, agricultural history, environmental history, the history of ideas, the history of animals, and so on). These programs should promote creativity, ingenuity, and intellectual boldness without neglecting the guidelines of the historian's toolkit. It is also crucial to contextualize themes arising in courses on philosophy/theory of history, historical methodology and the history of historiography in tangible issues affecting today's world, and to place particular emphasis on the historiographical tradition of practicing local and regional history, transnational history, biographical writing, and so on. On this note, it becomes particularly important to foreground what is known as participatory research. In the process of building historical knowledge, this practice works to engage participants from beyond professional circles of historians and scholars of other fields in the humanities and natural sciences by reaching out to artists, history buffs, and local communities (public history, citizen history, rescue history).

5. The promotion of young, emerging scholars is essential. It is crucial that young scholars participate in international conferences, have access to research fellowships, and collaborate with established historians. It is also imperative that their work be published (in English) in peer-review academic journals with global credibility.

Of course, many of the postulates laid out above have already been implemented in academic institutions (with varying degrees of success). I am advocating for "academic policies" on a more systematic and coordinated level. I therefore propose that we work "at the foundations" and in close dialogue to create a scenario where the (ambitious) student finishing a history degree – aside from having fully covered her/his historical material – should be expected to: 1. be familiar with theories and research methods used by scholars of the past; 2. be familiar with (select) fields and subfields of contemporary historical research; 3. possess the skills to engage a variety of historical sources (and to understand the methods of their critique); 4. possess the skills to create primary sources (interviews, surveys, photographic documentation), and 5. possess a foundational skill set for building theories on the basis of the empirical material being analyzed in reference to existing theories, approaches and tendencies in contemporary historical research.

In summary, I want to emphasize that the upcoming years will be critical for our discipline. We must prove ourselves worthy of our predecessors and pitch our actions against the times, as it were, by counteracting prevailing negative trends such as the reduction of history courses in school curricula, the commercialization of knowledge, the popularization of scholarship, the perception of the humanities as a form of knowledge inferior to the hard sciences, and so on. History without the history of historiography, theory and philosophy of history and historical methodology has no future, and vice versa. We ought to work together to remind one another of this. It is therefore urgent that we develop a shared model for how to move forward in the face of the transformations playing out around us: the changing humanities, the (unfortunately) increasingly effective campaign to convert the academy into a factory (or productive enterprise), and the potential latent in the paradigm gap that knowledge of the past created in non-Western countries can and should fulfill.

It would also be strategic to bring together an intellectual federation of non-Western countries that can operate on the international arena as a "unified front." To do so, we must first identify which research issues are shared between the countries of this region (and approached from a new angle) and simultaneously relevant on a global scale. We must also identify ideas and approaches that might yield replicable research procedures and provide relevant inspiration for current pressing discussions in the academic world. It would also be strategic to edit an anthology of select representative texts of, for example, Australian, Argentinean,

Brazilian, or Nigerian historiography (and historical thought overall) for publication in English, identifying ideas and approaches that might be inspiring for current conversations on the global scale.

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NOTES

- [1] See Jerzy Topolski, "Historians Look at Historical Truth," in the same author's *Theory and Methodology of Historical Knowledge: An Anthology*, eds. Ewa Domańska and Anna Topolska, Poznań: Faculty of History Press, Adam Mickiewicz University, 2022, p. 358 [357-368].
- [2] Elsewhere, White writes: "Since the middle of the nineteenth century, most historians have affected a kind of willful methodological naivete. Originally this naivete served a good purpose: it protected the historian from the tendency to embrace the monistic explanatory systems of a militant idealism in philosophy and an equally militant positivism in science. But this suspicion of system has become a son of conditioned response among historians which has led to a resistance throughout the entire profession to almost any kind of critical self-analysis. Moreover, as history has become increasingly professionalized and specialized, the ordinary historian, wrapped up in the search for the elusive document that will establish him as an authority in a narrowly defined field, has had little time to inform himself of the latest developments in the more remote fields of art and science." Ibidem, p. 28.
- [3] Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 1ff.
- [4] As Kleinberg declares: "This opening onto the relation of presence and absence through a hauntological approach to history accounts for the entangled and unstable relation of presence and absence without privileging one over the other." (Kleinberg, 2017, p. 3).
- [5] Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, Gary Wilder, "Theses on Theory and History" (theses I-1, I-9, I-11 vs III.1-10) [<https://theoryrevolt.com/>]
- [6] This approach, more manifested in my case in the practice of teaching than in writing, is laid out in "Methodology of Grounded Theory," which is part of the article "Problematizing Comparative Historical Studies" [比較史學探索]. *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Issue 13), June 2010, p. 79-81[71-85]. For an elaboration on this text, see: Ewa Domańska, "Metodologia praktyczna" (Practical Methodology) in the same author's *Historia*

egzystencjalna. Krytyczne studium narratywizmu i humanistyki zaangażowanej (Existential History. Critical Approach to Narrativism and Emancipatory Humanities). Warsaw: PWN, 2012, p. 170-176 [161-183].

- [7] This is what Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder propose in theses I-7, where they write: “Given that historians analyze (the dynamic and changing character of) social formations, relations, experiences, and meanings they cannot do without a solid grasp of critical theory (whether it be semiotic, psychoanalytic, Marxist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonial, queer etc.) as well as an understanding of the history of historical knowledge and the theory of history (theories underpinning historical analysis). Only then can we transcend the false opposition between history and theory by producing theoretically grounded history and historically grounded theory. Few history departments have any faculty dedicated to the theory of history or critical theory and instead rely on occasional courses from members with an interest in the field or those few figures outside of their departments to whom they send their students. This demotes “theory” as peripheral to the “real” work of history but also disciplines the students to think of theory as a supplementary exercise that is not integral to historical thinking and writing.” In theses III-1 and III-2 on critical history, they declare: “*Critical history is theorized history.* It does not treat “theory” as an isolated corpus of texts or body of knowledge. Nor does it treat theory as a separate, non-historical form, of knowledge. Rather, it regards theory as a worldly practice (and historical artifact). The point is not for historians to become theorists; theory for theory’s sake is as bankrupt as the idea that facts can “speak for themselves.” The point is for disciplinary history to overcome its guild mentality (disciplinary essentialism) and empiricist methodology (methodological fetishism) — to interrogate its “commonsense” assumptions about evidence and reality, subjectivity and agency, context and causality, chronology and temporality. This would require serious engagement with critical theories of self, society, and history. (...) *Critical history does not apply theory to history or call for more theory to be integrated into historical works as if from the outside. Rather, it aims to produce theoretically informed history and historically grounded theory.*” Kleinberg, Scott, Wilder. “Theses on Theory and History.”

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