

History and analytical philosophy of history in Germany: a special relationship?

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The organizer of this conference, Timothy Goering, has asked the invited participants to address at least one of the two following questions, if I did not misread the texts he sent around. The first question is: Why did and does analytical philosophy not influence philosophy of history as it was practiced in Germany after 1945 – often called ‘Theorie der Geschichte’ - in any substantial manner? The second question is 2: What role could or should analytical philosophy play in both German ‘Theorie der Geschichte’ and in the German ‘Geschichtswissenschaft’?. I have been under the impression that Timothy himself is of the opinion that philosophers and historians in Germany could immensely profit from analytical philosophy, and that he would be happy when we would provide him with some convincing and positive answers to his second question.

In my contribution of today I want to question Timothy’s two questions and actually ask what kind of questions they are. One could see this as my small and undoubtedly helpless attempt to contribute to analytical philosophy of history today.

I want to address Timothy’s first question by the way of some counterfactual reasoning – which was quite popular among some analytical philosophers I read – and therefore I want you to imagine the following situation, or better: imagine the following conference. My imaginary conference does not take place at the Ruhr-University Bochum, but at the University of Cambridge, the place of birth of analytical philosophy. This conference in Cambridge is not organized by Timothy Goering but by a like of his, who I shall call Timothy Harris for simplicities sake. In Cambridge Timothy Harris has been studying both analytical philosophy and British history for some time. Next to that he took some extra courses in Paris, Freiburg and Berlin. In those places he learned many interesting things, but first and foremost that the

philosophy professors in those cities on the European continent had a complete different understanding of philosophy in comparison with his professors in Cambridge. In his philosophy classes abroad Harris learned a lot about Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, not to forget about Foucault and Derrida. Harris learned all about metaphysics and dialectics, and was almost taken away by phenomenology, hermeneutics and deconstruction. Harris found this all amazingly interesting stuff and started asking himself why his philosophy professors in Cambridge apparently did *not*. Then he realized that also the British historians he had been studying with had stubbornly refrained from using continental philosophy when they reflected about history, that is: in those rare moments in which they were reflective *at all*.

Then, all of a sudden, Timothy Harris got an idea: why not organize a conference in order to answer his two burning questions? First and foremost: why is there so little interest among British philosophers and historians in continental philosophy in general? Second: why did those few British historians and philosophers that did reflect on the philosophical foundations of history, *not* include continental philosophy in their reflections, although the continental philosophers had developed such interesting ideas about history? Why were the British philosophers and historians so damned British and *not* continental? This is the end of my story about a counterfactual conference in Cambridge.

Now I owe you an explanation for the fact that I am bothering you with this counterfactual story. Well, I did this for two reasons: first, I wanted to clarify that the first question of our real conference here in Bochum is a question meant to explain something that is supposedly *absent* – the *non*-reception of analytical philosophy in German history and philosophy. In short, the question asked is *not* to explain something that is present: the supposedly continuing dominance in German history and in German philosophy of specific German traditions of thinking about history, resulting in an academic specialization that is supposedly specifically German: ‘Theorie der Geschichte’ or ‘Geschichtstheorie’. The questions that are structuring this conference are clearly suggesting that there is a German *Sonderweg* in philosophy of history, which is in need of explanation. Well, as a former student of the *Sonderweg*-discussions in modern history I have become slightly suspicious of the ‘negative’ way of framing questions,

that is questions meant to explain why something is absent – for instance, a stable democratic political system in Germany before 1945 or analytic philosophy of history in Germany since 1945 –and not present. This ‘negative’ way of framing a question always implies the suggestion that things would have been much better if the absent had been present and thus if actual history had been different. A ‘negative’ question thus always is hiding a ‘positive’ counterfactual history as its stowaway-passenger, to borrow a metaphor from Eelco Runia....

Instead of asking why analytical philosophy is supposedly absent in German ‘Geschichtswissenschaft’ or in German ‘Theorie der Geschichte’ – or asking why continental philosophy is absent in Cambridge or wherever – I want to suggest to rephrase this type of questions in a *comparative framework* and to replace the present – absent dichotomy by a comparative gliding scale in terms of relative ‘influences’. And of course the question how one can establish intellectual influences in intellectual history are far from simple, as we know at least since Quentin Skinner has tried to answer this question. But we simply can’t expect an answer to any question concerning intellectual ‘influences’ before we have first answered the question how to establish and measure intellectual ‘influence’.¹

This suggestion implies two changes in the research design of both Timothy’s. First, my suggestion implies in the first place that one has to go about in an empirical way, meaning that one has to establish the facts before one can explain them. After all, we actually do *not* know yet what the predicament of analytical philosophy was in Germany, nor what its relationship was to the German ‘Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft’ – whatever definitions we use of analytical philosophy and of post-analytical philosophy - and there are other views on this distinction than the one suggested by Michael Beany, views that suggest that philosophers like Rorty, Davidson, Putnam, Brandom, Taylor and Mc Dowell can be labeled as ‘post-analytical’ in a meaningful sense.² Therefore my suggestion implies in the second place that one can *only* posit

¹ See Gary Browning, “Agency and Influence in the History of Political Thought : The Agency of Influence and the Influence of Agency”, *History of Political Thought*, 31 (Summer 2010) : 345-365

² Michael Beany, ‘What is Analytic Philosophy’, in: Michael Beany (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2013, 3-29; Herbert Schnädelbach, ‘Analytische and postanalytische Philosophie’, in:

something about the role of analytical philosophy in Germany in *comparison* to what happened in other states – for a moment assuming that the frame of the national state is a useful frame of analysis, an assumption that can clearly be doubted given the many philosophers that have crossed national borders.³ One could think of France, Poland, Finland or the Netherlands as suitable comparison cases for Germany, or even the UK. So whatever one argues for Germany's supposed particularities, one should proceed both in an empirical and in a comparative manner.

Let me now elaborate a bit on the two changes I suggested in the research design. I will start by examining the alleged fact that analytical philosophy of history has barely influenced the 'Theorie der Geschichte' in Germany. Against this supposed fact I will formulate a number of objections. For simplicities sake I will restrict my observations to the period between 1960 and 1990. And for simplicities sake I will also restrict my observations to authors who explicitly claim to be dealing with analytical philosophy, so I can leave the question how to define analytical philosophy aside.

First, one can state the obvious fact that analytical philosophy was and is certainly present in Germany, at least since the 1960's. Wolfgang Stegmüller in Munich was quite influential for at least two decades, also international. Among his many books the multi-volume *Probleme und Resultate der Wissenschaftstheorie und Analytischen Philosophie* was best known. And like many other states, Germany has its own "Gesellschaft fuer Analytische Philosophie" – since 1990. Next to that there are quite a few books in German that claim to be analytical contributions to specific domains in philosophy, like ethics.

Second, there was at least *one* philosopher in the German speaking lands who published a book specifically dealing with analytical philosophy of history before Doris Gerber published her

idem, *Analytische and postanalytische Philosophie. Vorträge und Abhandlungen 4*, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, 9-45; Pascal Engel, 'Is there such thing as post-analytic philosophy?', Conference Clermont Ferrand Societe de philosophie d'Auvergne 1995; James Williams a.o. (eds.), *Postanalytic and Metacontinental. Crossing Philosophical Divides*, London 2010.

³In the German case it is quite clear that the borders with the other German speaking states like Austria and Switzerland have been very porous for a long time. Austrian philosophers like Stegmüller and Acham temporarily held chairs in Germany, just like the Swiss philosopher Emil Angehrn. The German philosopher of history Lübke in turn temporarily held a chair in Basel.

Analytische Metaphysik der Geschichte in 2012, and this was of course Karl Acham who published his *Analytische Geschichtsphilosophie* in 1974.

Third, one could argue that the most productive and the best known philosopher of history in Germany, Jörn Rüsen, has taken Arthur Danto's classic *Analytical Philosophy of History*, as a major point of reference for his 'Historik' in general and his ideas concerning narrative explanation in particular. Danto's book was translated into German in 1974 and published by Suhrkamp. In 1980 Danto's book was published as a paperback, so it certainly has enjoyed a broad readership.

Fourth, one can observe that another well known German philosopher of history, Hermann Lübbe, was strongly influenced by analytical philosophy in his attempt to rehabilitate *Historismus* in his book *Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse* (1977). His position has been characterized as 'analytical Historismus', which is to the point in my view. Next to Lübbe's *liaison* with analytical philosophy we can state the fact that one other influential German author explicitly claimed to take issue with Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy – and that was Karl-Georg Faber in his bestseller on *Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* in 1971, a book that was reprinted 5 times!

Fifth, one could and should broaden the view so to include the philosophy of the social sciences into the picture, for the simple reason that at least between the 1960's and the 1990's it was not uncommon to regard history as a (potential) social science. Within this broadened picture one cannot miss the fact that in every philosophical reflection on the nature of the social sciences, the question whether social sciences should strive after causal explanation or after hermeneutic understanding is absolutely central. Of course the 'Erklären versus Verstehen' controversy goes back to Droysen and Dilthey in Germany, but the discussions from the 1950's onwards always hark back to the discussion between Hempel, Oppenheim and Nagel on the one side and Dray, Scriven and Donagan on the other – also in Germany. This discussion on the role of general laws in historical explanation ran out of steam in the 1960's but it continued in the 1970's as the debate on rational explanation – the term was coined by Dray – and on the explanation of 'basic actions'. Hendrik von Wright's book *Explanation and Understanding* (1971)

was widely received and discussed in Germany, as was Oskar Schwemmers *Theorie der rationalen Erklärung* (1976). Von Wright's successor book *Handlung, Norm und Intention* (*Action, Norm and Intention*) in 1976 would even be published in German by Walter de Gruyter Verlag. In Germany Thomas Hausmann published an overview of these discussions in his book *Erklären und Verstehen. Zur Theorie und Pragmatik der Geschichtswissenschaft* in 1991, which was explicitly advertised as a contribution to analytical philosophy of history.

Last but not least we also should not forget that Jürgen Habermas transported quite a bit of analytical philosophy to the German philosophical discussions on social science by integrating analytical philosophers from Wittgenstein to Davidson in his discussions, from *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (1967) to his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981). From the other end of the philosophical continuum and in the same time, Hans Albert in Mannheim did his best in his many *Traktate der kritischen Vernunft* to further the cause of analytical philosophy against 'the German ideology', which for him basically consisted of the intellectual heritage of Hegel and Heidegger.

So, all in all, we can conclude from my short and impressionist 'fact finding mission' that analytical philosophy was neither absent from the German philosophical scene in general, nor absent from the more specific German 'Theorie der Geschichte' in particular. Therefore we should be cautious in framing our *explanandum* and must try to avoid 'methodological nationalism' before we assume a new German 'Sonderweg', this time in philosophy.

My reservations concerning the assumption of a German 'Sonderweg' in philosophy of history also pertain to the assumption that the term '*Theorie der Geschichte*' can be read as something exclusively for German historians, because this is simply not the case. Take the leading international journal in philosophy of history, published in the US: it is named *History and Theory* and subtitled *Studies in the philosophy of history*. The concept "theory" was and is in use in many places and in many disciplines as an equivalent of the concept of "philosophy" – an equivalence that goes back to the Greek word 'theoria'. For instance in England where

philosophers regard epistemology and the “theory of knowledge” as the same thing.⁴ Or in France where “théorie” and “philosophie de la connaissance” are used as synonyms.

The same story holds for “philosophy of science”, that is also known in Germany as “Wissenschaftstheorie”. That is also the case in the Netherlands: “wetenschapsfilosofie” and “wetenschapstheorie” were and are also used interchangeably.

Even the labels “Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft” and ‘Theorie der Geschichte’ are not exclusively German. In Dutch the labels ‘theorie van de geschiedenis’ and ‘theorie van de geschiedwetenschap’ have been in use since the 1970’s – next to ‘filosofie van de geschiedenis’ or ‘wijsbegeerte van de geschiedenis’. And the Dutch historian Jan Romeijn (1893 – 1962) had previously introduced the term ‘theoretische geschiedenis’ as far back as in 1937 as an (umbrella) term for his historiographical and philosophical interests that broadly overlap with “Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft”.⁵ There was even a Dutch journal entitled *Theoretische Geschiedenis* that existed between 1974 and 2001 in which year it was integrated in the *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*.⁶ It has been recently completely digitalized and is now accessible on line thanks to the very active INTH-crowd around Berber Bevernage in Gent.

This leads me to my second suggestion concerning any research design that intends to clarify the strengths or weaknesses of the analytical tradition in Germany, and thus clarify Germany’s ‘national particularities’. I am now talking about the need for international comparison before we can jump to any conclusion concerning German strengths and weaknesses because strength and weakness are always *relative*: relative to the *research questions* asked and relative to the *comparison cases*. In this context the Belgian philosophers of social science, Jeroen van Bouwel and Erik Weber (following Bas van Fraassen and Peter Lipton) have identified four basic types of

⁴ See: Kerwin L. Klein, *From History to Theory*, University of California UP 2013; Chris Lorenz, ‘History and Theory’, in: Daniel Woolf and Axel Schneider (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol.5, Oxford UP: Oxford 2011, 13-35.

⁵ Jan Romeijn, *Historische lijnen en patronen. Een keuzewerk van essays*, Amsterdam: Querido 1976.

⁶ See: Ed Jonker, ‘Consensus, conflict en conciliantie in de Nederlandse geschiedfilosofie’, in: *Geschiedenis en cultuur: achttien opstellen*, ed. Ed Jonker and Maarten van Rossem (‘s-Gravenhage: SDU, 1988), 29-41; Leen J. Dorsman, ‘Geschiedfilosofie in Nederland na 1945: een overzicht’, in: F.R. Ankersmit a.o., *Over nut en nadeel van geschiedtheorie voor de historicus* (Leiden: Leidschrift, 1988), 99-116; Jo Tollebeek, ‘De ekster en de kooi: over het (bedrieglijke) succes van de theoretische geschiedenis in Nederland’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 110 (1995), 52-72.

why-questions, that are important to distinguish and keep apart – because what looks like the ‘same’ question may have various meanings and thus different different answers.⁷

Because of the ‘relativity’ of questions to comparison-cases or contrast-classes the question ‘Why was analytical philosophy weak in Germany?’ is ambiguous to say the least. This question is ambiguous because it might be the case that the influence of analytical philosophy in the domain of ethics in Germany turns out to be strong in comparison with Belgium but weak in comparison with Finland. And it might be the case that the influence of analytical philosophy in the domain of philosophy of history is weak in Germany in comparison with the Netherlands and Poland but strong in comparison with France and Spain. This might all be the case – or it might not. However this may be – and this is my point today - until we have factually established what the case is, and until we have made explicit which questions we want to answer and which contrasts are of analytical interest to us, we better refrain from explaining anything at all. That would be my suggestion today to anybody interested in the role of analytical philosophy in Germany.

⁷Jeroen van Bouweland Erik Weber, ‘A Pragmatist Defense of Non-Relativistic Explanatory Pluralism in History and Social Science’, *History and Theory*, 2008, 168-182, distinguish why-questions ‘asking for an explanation for a plain fact’ from why-questions asking for an explanation for a contrast in properties. Besides they distinguish why-questions asking for an explanation for a contrast between two objects - an *O-contrast* from why-questions asking for an explanation for a T- (temporal) contrast. Also see Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, Oxford 1980, and: Peter Lipton, *Inference to the best explanation*, London 2004.