

Relations to the past: a research agenda for historical theorists

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Herman Paul, Department of History, Leiden University, The Netherlands

h.j.paul@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

What are current tendencies in historical theory, judging by the inaugural conference (2013) of the International Network for Theory of History? In this article, I note two tendencies: an interest in history beyond the academy and a desire to overcome the theoretical polarization that has characterized the field in past decades. Subsequently, I argue that these tendencies can be seen as reflecting a single research agenda, which, in turn, can be described in terms of 'relations to the past'. I unpack this notion, borrowed from Mark Day, in some detail, explain what sort of questions it helps address, and offer two examples, from in and outside the historical discipline. If I am right in arguing that this research agenda captures much of what is currently being offered under the flag of historical theory, then historical theory seems on its way to become a field of expertise on the ways in which both historians and others relate to the past.

Keywords: historical theory; philosophy of history; relations to the past; Mark Day; International Network for Theory of History

Introduction

In the past few years, there has hardly been a better occasion for reflection on the future of historical theory than the 2013 inaugural conference of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) at Ghent University. In the pages of this journal, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen recently reported about the sometimes heated debates that took place during this conference, about the great variety of intellectual traditions that were represented by participants from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, as well as about the inevitability of the question: how is this field – 'historical theory' or 'philosophy of history', which for

convenience's sake I will take as synonymous – likely to develop in the near future (Kuukkanen 2014)? During coffee and lunch breaks, I have heard many people wonder aloud in what direction the field is currently heading. Did the more than one hundred fifty papers presented over the course of four days display a sufficient amount of cohesion to allow for some cautious predictions about the near future of the field?

Given that the INTH conference was a near-perfect showcase of what is currently being offered under the heading of historical theory or philosophy of history, it is worth examining in some detail what sort of key words figured in the lecture titles, what sort of themes were most prominent in the more than forty parallel sessions that took place in the Blandijnberg building, and what sort of common threads ran through the program. The future of the field, after all, largely depends on what its practitioners currently consider worth presenting at a conference entitled 'The Future of the Theory and Philosophy of History'. So, rather than speculating how the field *might* develop under ideal circumstances, or prescribing how the field *must* develop in order to catch up with such neighboring fields as the philosophy of science, I should like to ask: what tendencies, convergences, or trends can *actually* be discerned among historical theorists and what does this suggest about the future of the field?

In what follows, I will first identify two tendencies among current-day historical theorists: an interest in history beyond the academy and a desire to overcome the theoretical polarization that has characterized the field up until recently. Subsequently, I will argue that these tendencies can be seen as reflecting a single research agenda, which I describe in terms of 'relations to the past'. I will unpack this notion, borrowed from Mark Day, in some detail, explain what sort of questions it helps address, and illustrate this briefly with two examples, from in and outside the historical discipline. Although not all historical theorists may want to describe their work in terms of 'relations to the past', I shall argue that the research agenda identified in this paper nonetheless describes much of what is currently being offered under the flag of historical theory, and therefore offers as realistic a view on the near future of the field as one can reasonably hope for.

Two tendencies

If the Ghent conference offered a near-perfect overview of the field in its current state, then what tendencies can be discerned in the themes and approaches presented on this

occasion? Unlike Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, I do not think that current trends point in the direction of a 'philosophy of historiography' as advocated by Aviezer Tucker (2009). Although Kuukkanen, following Tucker, makes an intelligent case for such a philosophy of historiography, defined as a branch of the philosophy of science that examines philosophically the sort of knowledge that historians produce about the past, this was not a dominant approach at the INTH conference. To the contrary, if there is one thing that the program booklet of the INTH conference forcefully illustrated, it was that historical theorists have opened the windows, so to speak, and come to display a lively interest in non-academic modes of historical thinking. They have discovered that the resources developed by such thinkers as Arthur Danto, William Dray, Hayden White, and Frank Ankersmit can fruitfully be applied to novels, new media, political apologies, public debates about contested sites of remembrance, and archaeological theme parks. Consequently, many of them have ceased to focus exclusively on the kind of knowledge historians produce. What is attracting increasing amounts of attention is not the kind of professional historical knowledge on which Tucker and Kuukkanen propose to focus, but rather the broad variety of ways in which the past is being defined, remembered, interpreted, narrated, explained, enjoyed, and repressed outside the historical discipline.

This is not to say, of course, that traditional analytical philosophy of history was absent from the Ghent conference. There were panels on, for instance, 'Epistemological Problems Reconsidered', 'Causation Reconsidered', and 'The Narrativist Tradition Reassessed'. However, I counted dozens of papers that did not fit the confines of analytical philosophy of history, mostly because the 'history' they subjected to scrutiny was not a kind of 'history' that historians would recognize as such. These included papers on historical experience – no less than four panels were devoted to this broad-ranging theme – visual culture, history in the digital age, history education, identity politics, and historical justice. Major conversation partners were not only Danto, Dray, and Louis Mink, but also, especially, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida, all of whom conceived of history in much broader terms than analytical philosophy of history used to do. Among the keynote lectures, François Hartog's contribution on regimes of temporality was most illustrative in this regard: it dealt with how entire societies position themselves vis-à-vis what they regard as their past. So, whatever 'history' means, the INTH conference certainly conveyed that it should not be limited to academic historical studies.

If this is a first tendency or convergence that struck me during the conference, a second one – less obvious perhaps, but equally important – was a desire to overcome some of the theoretical polarization that has characterized the field in past decades. It is not too long ago that one could locate a colleague on the map, so to speak, by asking whether he or she was ‘for or against Hayden White’ or, in my own Dutch context, ‘for or against Frank Ankersmit’. There existed at least two camps, each with their own philosophical orientation and favorite topics (explanation and narrative being the two most prominent ones). Remarkably, however, the INTH conference program included not a single session on, let’s say, ‘the promises and dangers of postmodern philosophy of history’. To the contrary, quite a few papers expressed a desire to build bridges between schools or traditions that in previous decades seemed widely removed from each other. This was perhaps most evident in Jörn Rüsen’s keynote address, which outlined a multi-dimensional model explicitly designed to integrate previous work on the semantic, cognitive, aesthetic, rhetorical, and political aspects of historical thought (cf. Rüsen 2005, 132-5).

If this desire for integration is representative for the state of the field, as I have the impression it is, especially though not exclusively among younger practitioners, then it is worth exploring how this second tendency relates to the first one I noted: a growing interest in non-academic modes of dealing with the past. Are these two separate developments or are they in some way interrelated?

Relations to the past

Although the two can exist independently of each other and correspond to distinct lines of inquiry, I should like to argue that they *can be seen* as two aspects of a single research agenda. I do not claim that this is an explicitly articulated agenda or that it is an agenda that every single participant in the Ghent conference wholeheartedly applauded. My claim is a more modest one: I will argue that both the expansion of the kind of ‘history’ that historical theorists find worth analyzing and the attempt at integration of work done on the explanatory, narrative, and political dimensions of historical thought, among other things, can be seen as two sides of a single research agenda, understood in the broadest possible sense of the word – not as a distinct project, but as a broadly shared set of beliefs about the sort of work that historical theorists should currently be encouraged to do.

A helpful vocabulary for describing this research agenda is offered by Mark Day, who speaks about 'relations to the past' (Day 2008a; see also 2008b, 9-11). Day introduces this notion to remind historical theorists that there are more dimensions to historical thought than the epistemological one on which they have traditionally focused. In Day's own words: 'The argument is premised on the philosophical relevance of the epistemic relations already noted, and turns upon showing that further relations are built upon, underlie, or are otherwise entangled with historiographical epistemology' (Day 2008a, 418). These additional relations include at least moral, political, and aesthetic ones, but arguably also a 'material' relation, referring to genealogies that tie historians to a past out of which they themselves have emerged. For as Day convincingly points out, historians are 'a product of the past, including that portion of the past which they choose to study' (ibid., 421). Although one may add even more relations – economic or religious ones, for instance – I do not think that the *number* of relations is what matters most. Crucial is rather Day's claim *that* various relations to the past always interact in any attempt at understanding, interpreting, or experiencing the past.

One way of distinguishing these relations is to define them in terms of the *aims* they pursue. Characteristic of an epistemic relation to the past, then, is its pursuit of epistemic goods such as knowledge or understanding of the past. Likewise, a moral relation aims at moral goods such as goodness and justice, whereas the aims pursued by an aesthetic relation may include beauty and pleasure. This implies that relations to the past are teleologically oriented: they are defined by the goals (*teloi*) they seek to acquire. Given that people usually pursue more than one goal in engaging with the past, relations do not exist independently from each other: they overlap, interact, and influence each other in ways that can be more or less harmonious.

These 'relations to the past', then, allow Day, not unlike Rösen, to argue that work on the rhetoric or politics of history – for example, Hayden White's analysis of plot-structures in historical texts (White 1973) or Howard Zinn's study on the politics of historical representation (Zinn 1970) – should not be seen as *contradicting* a type of philosophy of history focused on epistemological matters, but as *enriching* our understanding of historical thought by drawing attention to other, non-epistemic aspects of it. For Day, the notion of 'relations to the past' has the potential of integrating work as diverse as Carl Hempel's (1942) covering-law model of historical explanation (epistemic relation), Eelco Runia's (2004)

reflections on parallel processing (material relation), and Mark Salber Phillips's (2013) analysis of the negotiation of closeness and distance in historical discourse (aesthetic relation).

This, to be sure, does not mean that, all of a sudden, a perpetual peace among historical theorists has emerged. Integration of different approaches does not imply exclusion of substantial disagreement, just as entanglement of various relations to the past does not imply that these relations go harmoniously together. To the contrary, it is easier to think of examples, in and outside the historical discipline, in which political, aesthetic, and epistemic aims are in tension with each other than to imagine a case of harmonious coexistence. Accordingly, the point of Day's model, as I understand it, is not to downplay disagreements or tensions, either between relations to the past or between schools in historical theory, but to offer a vocabulary for specifying in what respects they complement and/or contradict each other.

If this shows Day's affinity with one of the current tendencies identified above – a desire to overcome the theoretical polarization of a generation or so ago – the notion of 'relations to the past' also nicely captures the expanded sense in which 'history' is nowadays understood, as including not only academic historical studies, but also the historical discourses, experiences, and memories that exist in wider society. In fact, what makes the notion of 'relations' attractive is precisely its ability to cover not only various historical genres, varying from genealogical research to military re-enactment events and from autobiographical writing to historical tourist trips, but also both 'doings' and 'things done', that is, both performances and products (Paul 2011). It includes voluntary relations to the past, as in the case of historical city walks, but also involuntary ones, such as childhood memories, traumas, and traditions. It covers inferences, explanations, and narratives, but also experiences of loss and feelings of nostalgia.

So, in my reading, Day's relations to the past correspond quite closely to the tendencies I discerned in the INTH conference program. Day offers a vocabulary for studying history in a broad sense of the word, that is, including non-academic modes of dealing with the past, and for integrating theoretical insights from various schools in twentieth-century philosophy of history by distinguishing between overlapping and interacting relations to the past.

A research agenda

This vocabulary, then, enables us to describe the research agenda announced above. As I said, it is not a research agenda that is necessarily endorsed by all participants in the Ghent conference. However, it is an agenda – in the broad sense of a relatively widely shared set of beliefs about research questions that are worth pursuing – in which the two tendencies witnessed during the INTH conference come coherently together. In fact, it is a research agenda to which a majority of the papers presented at Ghent can be regarded as contributing, regardless whether or not their authors would accept Day's vocabulary.

I see the agenda as consisting of two parts. The first one tries to elucidate the question 'what is history?' through philosophical analysis of case studies from in and outside the historical discipline. To that end, it addresses three questions:

- (1) What relations to the past can be seen at work in this particular case study? In other words, what aims are being pursued in engaging with the past, explicitly or implicitly?
- (2) How do these relations relate to each other? Do they stand at equal footing or does one of these relations occupy a hegemonic position? In the second case, what sort of hierarchical constellation of aims can be distinguished?
- (3) What means are employed for reaching those aims? That is, what sort of experiences, narrative templates, arguments, models, and theories are used in pursuing the aims identified under (1)?

While these are largely empirical questions, the second part of the research agenda is more explicitly evaluative in nature. (Please note the wording: analysis and evaluation can, of course, never be fully separated.) This second part also revolves around three questions:

- (4) What do the story forms, arguments, models and so forth identified under (3) allow one to perceive, to say, or to think about the past? And what do they, deliberately or not, exclude, ignore, or suppress?
- (5) In so far as these modes of engaging with the past belong to a genre (i.e., academic historical studies) with well-developed performance standards, then how well do they meet these standards?

- (6) How exactly are such performance standards to be understood? What demands, for instance, do such criteria as accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, originality, fruitfulness, and openness (Bevir 1999, 103) make on one's relations to the past?

Let me give two examples to add some flesh to the bones of this argument. The first one is Alain de Botton's and John Armstrong's 'Art Is Therapy' project: a 'philosophical intervention', as they called it, in the permanent exhibition of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (2014). It consisted of large, yellow post-it notes with explanatory comments on some of the most renowned paintings in the collection. Instead of providing historical details about the artist, the patron, and the style of the work, as museum captions usually do, these alternative captions tried to provide moral lessons, along the lines advocated in De Botton's and Armstrong's book *Art as Therapy* (2013). Concretely, this meant that the two philosophers adorned a stately, seventeenth-century painting depicting the regents of an Amsterdam spinning house in full regalia with a post-it note saying: 'Never trust politicians in power. All politicians are scoundrels.' Apparently, De Botton and Armstrong were not afraid of providing unequivocal moral instruction.

In this case, then, answers to questions (1) and (2) are not difficult to give. A moral relation to the past was entangled with an aesthetic and an epistemic one, in such a way that the moral one took precedence over the other ones (the epistemic question whether Karel Dujardin, the painter of this work, would have agreed with De Botton's and Armstrong's moral lesson was not even raised). As art critics did not fail to complain in reviews of the project, the moral procedures at work in this case – our third question – were comparatively easy: the philosophers did not hesitate to project their own moral views back on a seventeenth-century work of art, without a moment of reflection on the moral, or not-so-moral, sentiments informing the view that 'all politicians are scoundrels'. In terms of question (4), this means, among other things, that the opportunity for enriching one's own moral repertoire with moral views from other times and places was closed from the very start. Whether question (5) applies to this case is not entirely clear. Given that the 'Art Is Therapy' project did not belong to a recognized genre, it is difficult to specify what kind of standards it had to meet. One might argue, however, that both the distinctiveness of the genre (seventeenth-century group portraits) and the specific morality implied in it (hierarchical power relations are to be respected) were compromised to an extent that the

yellow post-it note next to Dujardin's *The Regents of the Spinhuis and Nieuwe Werkhuis in Amsterdam* (1669) had actually very little to do with the painting. Which is to say, in response to question (6), that attention to the 'foreignness' of the past requires a certain amount of intellectual openness, defined as an ability to stretch one's imagination beyond the limits of one's own views and opinions.

My second example is Richard Westfall's well-received biography of Isaac Newton (Westfall 1980). Although this book was quickly recognized as a superb work of scholarship, the author confessed in 1985 that therapeutic sessions with a befriended psychologist had revealed to him to what an extent he unconsciously had modeled Newton after his own, ideal self. In Westfall's words:

I now understand that the ideal self I drew in Newton was more than just a superbly achieving intellectual; he had a significant ethical dimension as well, a Puritan ethical dimension. I presented Newton as a faithful steward, a man to whom his master had entrusted an extraordinary talent, a man determined not to bury his talent in the ground but to employ it in order that he might return more than he had received (Westfall 1985, 187-8).

Question number (1) is, again, not difficult to answer: moral, political, aesthetic, and epistemic relations to the past were all at work here (not to mention a religious one, because of the Biblical origin of Westfall's metaphor of the faithful steward, and a material one, given Westfall's Christian roots). But how these relations related to each other – whether Westfall's moral identification took precedence over his epistemic ambitions or not – can be determined with some precision only if we have some understanding of the epistemic standards that scholarly biographies are supposed to meet as well as some idea of what, measured against those standards, an excessive amount of moral identification would be. Our answer to (2) therefore requires at least a provisional answer to (5) and (6), which aptly illustrates that the first and second parts of the agenda cannot be separated. As for (3) and (4), interpreting Newton through the prism of the faithful steward metaphor amounted to drawing attention to his industriousness, self-control, sacrifice, and sense of responsibility. At the same time, it kept such motives as ambition and desire for status

largely out of sight, which raises the question how one-sided Westfall's portrayal of Newton was.

Although I obviously run much too quickly through the questions that make up the research agenda outlined above – each of the six questions would require more careful attention – I touch on these examples only in order to show that the agenda combines what is traditionally known as 'historiography' and 'philosophy of history'. This is why I suggested that a majority of the papers presented at the INTH conference in Ghent would fit with this agenda. The agenda is premised, however, on the assumption that 'history' needs not to be limited to academic historical studies, but can also include histories of the kinds one encounters in museums, newspapers, parliaments, novels, life-stories, computer games, and tourist guides. So, without prescribing anything, the agenda allows and even encourages historical theorists to apply their philosophical tools to case studies outside the academic realm.

Conclusion

A skeptical reader, finally, might ask: Why is this important? What is wrong with a more traditional 'philosophy of historiography', focused on the studies in which professional students of history engage? I entirely agree with Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen that much fruitful work could be done in this area. In fact, my own current project on epistemic virtues is almost entirely focused on professional students of history – on the habits and dispositions in which they were, and still are, being disciplined for scholarship's sake. So, let there be no doubt that I consider it entirely *legitimate* for historical theorists to focus their attention on academic historians. However, like many of the colleagues who shared their vision of the future of the field at the INTH conference, I do not think this is *sufficient*. For everywhere in society, people maintain relations to the past and run into difficulties by overemphasizing some relations at the cost of others – as De Botton and Armstrong arguably do in reducing the history of art to a propaedeutic course in an unashamedly present-day kind of morality.

Therefore, if historical theorists want their field to be more than a marginal subfield of the philosophy of science, as most of them seem to do, then these broader 'historical cultures' offer plenty of opportunities for showing that philosophical analysis can contribute to more self-reflective and hopefully more fruitful ways of engaging with the past. If historical theorists want to apply the resources available in their field to narratives,

experiences, hopes, and dreams circulating in wider society, then Mark Day's notion of relations to the past, as interpreted in this paper, provides an excellent starting point.

There is no need, however, to end this paper on an apologetic note. For the research agenda laid down in this paper makes no claim at originality. Even if the vocabulary in which I described it is perhaps not yet familiar, the tendencies it seeks to capture are widely shared, or so the INTH conference suggested. Therefore, even if, for whatever reason, the terminology of 'relations to the past' turns out to be less attractive than I think it is, it remains the case that much of what is currently being done under the banner of historical theory can be described in terms of the research agenda laid out in this article. And if these current tendencies give a clue of the direction in which the field is currently heading, it seems that historical theory is becoming a field of expertise on the ways in which both historians and others relate to the past.

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