

Is There a Future for History?

On the Need for a Philosophy of History and Historiography¹

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Within the philosophy of history the main focus has been on problems regarding the ideal typical division between the sciences and the humanities. However speculation on ideal forms risks neglecting the epistemic problems regarding historical research, writing history and education. Therefore the philosophy of history needs a new dimension by supplementing it with a line of thinking Harry Jansen would like to call the *philosophy of history and historiography*, in short PHH. Very much like the painter Velazquez, who in his *Las Meninas* invites people to look into the mirror and see themselves as rulers, Harry Jansen wants to invite historians to look into the mirror of historiography and see themselves as users of epistemic tools. This requires the historian to view historical interpretations from a comparative perspective. Historical texts not only inform us about the past, they can also be seen as providing insights into the intellectual operation of historical production. These insights show not only the richness of historiography but above all they provide the historian with the theoretical tools with which that richness can be acquired.

Is there a future for history in the twenty-first century world of globalisation? An affirmative answer depends on the historian's receptivity to change with respect to historical research, writing history and history education. For instance, globalisation requires rethinking received forms of periodisation. The traditional partition of history into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern Times needs reconsideration because of its exclusive European perspective. Although time and periodisation are always subject to the space of experience ('Erfahrungsraum') and the horizon of expectation ('Erwartungshorizont'), as Rainer Koselleck would say, nevertheless some adaptations in the direction of a more or less global approach are possible.² In the footsteps of Janet Abu-



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Diègo Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Lughod and Robert Kaplan, historians might consider for example dividing history into three periods – before, during and after European hegemony –, though there are other options.³

Issues concerning periodisation call for the study of temporality, a philosophical field riddled with pitfalls that have almost defeated a whole range of philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger. Temporal problems are linked to other philosophical problems relating to research, explanation and representation. The problem, for instance, whether the Renaissance is the last flicker of a civilization in decline or the dawn of Modern Times questions the issue of continuity and discontinuity.

Other questions also come to the fore when we rethink the ins and outs of the discipline of history with an eye to the changing world of the twenty-first century. Understanding other civilizations does not only require knowledge, but also empathy and imagination regarding different cultures. Jorn Rüsen has made an important remark in this respect:

Historians should explicate and reflect their own historical perspectives and concepts of interpretation. They should confront them in a systematic way with the perspectives and concepts of interpretation that are a part of those traditions and cultures with which they are dealing. This mutual checking is more than a comparison: it introduces elements of *methodologically rationalized empathy* (italics HJ) into the work of the historian, and empathy is a necessary condition for recognition.⁴

All of the above issues belong firmly to the field of the philosophy of history, but it is unfortunate that traditional philosophers of history do not really take them into account. Until now the main focus within the philosophy of history has been on problems regarding the ideal-typical division between the sciences and the humanities. From Wilhelm Dilthey to Frank Ankersmit there is a solid disposition to maintain that division.⁵ In that tradition history is usually seen

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2 R. Koselleck, “Erfahrungsraum” und “Erwartungshorizont” – zwei historische Kategorien’, in: idem, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (second edition; Frankfurt am Main 1989).

3 J.L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, Oxford 1989); R.D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York 2010).

4 J. Rüsen, ‘How to overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the Twenty-First Century’, *History and Theory* 43:4 (2004) 118-129, especially 127.

5 F. Ankersmit, ‘Representatie als cognitief instrument’, *Algemeen Nederlands tijdschrift voor wijsbegeerte* 103:4 (2011) 243-262, especially 245.

as belonging to the humanities, although from the beginning of the twentieth century a trend to defend a more 'scientific' ideal type of the discipline is discernible.

As a consequence of this tendency towards ideal-typification three theories of justification came into being in the philosophy of history, to wit hermeneutics, post-positivism and post-structuralism. Hermeneutics is situated in the tradition of Wilhelm Dilthey, post-structuralism can be connected to the ideas of Ankersmit and post-positivism prefers a more science-based approach. All three intend to speculate about ideal forms of historiography. The latest textbooks of philosophy of history published in the Netherlands in the 1980s show the marks of such an evaluative method.⁶

However speculation on ideal forms risks neglecting the problems mentioned above regarding historical research, writing history and education. Although historians pay a great deal of attention to methodological and historiographical difficulties, they tend to ignore epistemic problems, as a result of which the consequences of a hermeneutic, post-positivistic or a post-structuralistic approach in historiography remain obfuscated. Both historians and representatives of the prevailing philosophy of history lack the instruments to reveal the historiographical rationalities pertaining to the three philosophical approaches. Therefore the philosophy of history needs to be supplemented by a line of thinking I would like to call the *philosophy of history and historiography*, in short PHH.

A PHH-approach aims at investigating the different rationalities in history writing and provides the tools to do so. As such it *supplements* speculation about the ideal historical explanation and makes the philosophy of history more historiographical and historiography more historico-philosophical. In 1971 the Hungarian philosopher of science, Imre Lakatos initiated a *rapprochement* between history and the philosophy of science. Paraphrasing Kant, he commented pithily: 'Philosophy of science without history of science is empty; history of science without philosophy of science is blind'.⁷ I propose to paraphrase Lakatos' squib for the historical sciences as follows: 'A philosophy of history without historiography is empty; historiography without philosophy of history is blind'.

6 J. van der Dussen, *Filosofie van de geschiedenis. Een inleiding* (Muiderberg 1986). Van der Dussen advocates a hermeneutic, Collingwoodian point of view in writing history; A. van den Braembussche, *Theorie van de maatschappijgeschiedenis* (Baarn 1985); Chr. Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden* (fifth edition; Amsterdam, Meppel 1998). Van den

Braembussche and Lorenz both defend a post-positivistic, societal history approach. F. Ankersmit, *Denken over geschiedenis. Een overzicht van moderne geschiedfilosofische opvattingen* (Groningen 1984). Ankersmit stands up for a post-structuralistic perspective.

7 I. Lakatos, 'History of Science and its Rational Reconstruction', *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 8 (1971) 91.

Temporality, as we have seen above, is but one of many philosophical problems encountered in history writing. It will lose its emptiness and receive its full clearness by showing differences in time construction between, for example Fernand Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism* and Amy Chua's *Day of Empire*.⁸ Whereas Braudel employs a compounded time model of core and periphery, Chua makes use of a temporal approach consisting of a rise-and-fall construction. Such a PHH-use of historiographical models benefits higher education in history especially.

On the other hand, including a philosophical point of view can dispose of historiography's theoretical blindness. For instance exploring the different historical roots of historiography reveals the ontological, or rather the ontographical assumptions, which are strongly related to these roots. In the next section I will elaborate on this issue to show what PHH can mean. The final sections of this article will set out a PHH-view on the teaching of the philosophy of history at universities and colleges of higher education, as well as history teaching in secondary education. The PHH-approach, as well as temporal and ontographical items, encompasses argumentative, narrative and aesthetic aspects. Regrettably, the space of this paper does not allow dwelling on all of these issues.⁹

Historical roots and ontographical assumptions

Since the dawn of history as an academic discipline its ontographical assumptions have undergone three huge metamorphoses. In the footsteps of romantic nationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, history first focussed on states, politics and great men (hardly any women). This type of history writing, called 'monumental' by Nietzsche¹⁰, had a great impact on the ontographical assumptions of professional historians. It regards individuals and their actions as the core business of the historian. Since history developed as the central discipline within the humanities in the nineteenth century, it framed its disciplinary tasks in clear opposition to those of the sciences. By the beginning of the twentieth century a vehement reaction to this division arose. Historians of a Marxian and Comtean blend began to strive towards a union between the humanities and the sciences. An extreme example of this change

8 F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: Volumes I-III* (London 1981-1983); A. Chua, *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers rise to Global Dominance – and Why They fall* (fourth edition; New York 2011).

9 Regarding these issues see Harry Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd. Geschiedenis in drievoud* (Nijmegen 2010).

10 See F. Nietzsche, 'Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben', in: idem, *Werke I. Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen 2*, Karl Schlechta (ed.) (Berlin 1969) 220-225.

in domain assumptions can be found in the inaugural lecture given by the first Professor of Social and Economic History in the Netherlands P.J. Blok in 1894. Blok stated:

Let me start by saying, that I have little affinity with the famous difference between the humanities and the sciences [...]. I do not hesitate for one moment in putting them in line with one another in method as well as in object. Like ants, beavers and bees acting in their societies according to strict rules the secrets of which we do not despair of discovering, so man lives in his society according to strict rules and laws that govern the wild negro as well as the civilized European, the old Egyptian as well as the modern Japanese.¹¹

Indeed, Marx, Comte and also the sociologist Durkheim focussed more on societies than on states, more on data, rules and conditions than on individuals, and more on structures than on actions. Societal (Hobsbawm) and structural history (French *Annales* historians) became the key words in these new ontographical assumptions of the historian, which I call the systems-approach.

The third metamorphosis took place after the 1970s, following the linguistic, cultural and aesthetic turn in the humanities. As I have designed my PHH-model in a reflective reaction on this epistemological turn, it is useful to deal at greater length with this change. The start of the metamorphosis may be found in Hayden White's *Metahistory* in which he presents a linguistic, or to be more specific, a tropological interpretation of nineteenth century historiography.¹² Other representatives of this cultural turn in history writing are Frank Ankersmit and Chiel van den Akker. In his *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* Ankersmit claims that the nature of history writing is metaphorical.¹³ This is illustrated by way of Burckhardt's study *The Culture of Renaissance in Italy* in which Burckhardt proposes to view fifteenth century Italian culture as a renaissance. Renaissance is thus used as a metaphor for the fifteenth century. In *Beweren en tonen* Van den Akker argues that the historian's language is concerned with metaphorical exemplification.¹⁴ Other, more postmodern, philosophers and historians adopt a fairly radical position when following Rorty's adage 'language goes all the way down'.

11 P.J. Blok, 'De geschiedenis als sociale wetenschap', in: L. Noordegraaf, *Ideeën en ideologieën. Studies over sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland 1894-1991* (Amsterdam 1991) 16-35, especially 20: my translation. See also Jansen *Triptiek van de tijd*, 65.

12 H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, London

1975). See also: H. Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Malden MA 2011).

13 F. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague 1983).

14 Ch. van den Akker, *Beweren en tonen* (Nijmegen 2009).

Without breaking away from the metaphorical approach of the historical text, White, Ankersmit and Eelco Runia rediscover the reality of the past in experiencing its aesthetics.¹⁵ According to these philosophers of history, the aesthetic experience of past reality can best be conceived as 'sublime' because it refers to an experience, which is moving, disturbing or even horrifying. The trope of the Holocaust is the most pointed combination of a metaphorical approach and the sublime experience of reality. Another, less horrifying approach that combines metaphorical language with a moving experience of the past can be found in Brook's study *Vermeer's Hat*. His experience of the past arises from several paintings by Vermeer that open up windows on the seventeenth century world economy.¹⁶

The ontographical triad has three corresponding ways of creating synoptic constructions or, in the words of Mink, of 'seeing things together'.¹⁷ The synoptic constructions of the actionistic approach, the first part of the triad, are made up of 'continuing entities', as the American philosopher of history, Maurice Mandelbaum, has called things such as states, cities, cultures, companies, et cetera.¹⁸ In societal history, the second part of the triad, the synoptic construction of data takes the form of statistics, structures and systems.¹⁹ In the third part we find 'holistic' representations of historical experiences from persons, events, paintings, books et cetera.²⁰

Although this triad of approaches has different moments of birth, none of them is out of date. Historians still read, investigate and write from an actionistic, a structural or an experiential point of view. Three historiographical remarks on slave trade and slavery can illustrate this triptych of approaches. In his *A Short History of the Netherlands* Peter Rietbergen shows an actionistic point of view of the history of Surinam by stating that 'to cultivate the land, the Company (the West Indian Company, H.J.) imported numerous black slaves from West-Africa'.²¹ The German historian Peter Kriedte gives a structural and quantitative analysis of the slave trade:

15 H. White, 'Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation', *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982) 113-137; F. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford 2005); E. Runia, 'Into Cleanness Leaping: The Vertiginous Urge to commit History', *History and Theory* 49:1 (2010) 1-20.

16 T. Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York 2009) 22-23.

17 L. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca N.Y. 1987).

18 M. Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore, London 1977) especially 11. See also: Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd*, 212-217.

19 W. Stegmaier, *Der Substanzbegriff der Metaphysik* (Tübingen 1974) especially 24 and Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd*, 223-231.

20 F. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford 2001) 213. See also: Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd*, 239-245.

21 P. Rietbergen, *A Short History of the Netherlands: From Prehistory to the Present Day* (Amersfoort 2008) 101.

Auf England entfielen zwischen 1761 und 1810 ca. 43,3 % der exportierten Sklaven, auf Portugal 28,2 %, auf Frankreich 16,9 % und die übrigen 12,6 % auf Nordamerika, Holland und Dänemark (7,9; 3,1 bzw. 1,6 %) [...]. Die Profite waren nicht unbedeutend [...]. Sie unterlagen freilich starken Schwankungen, da der Sklavenhandel mit grossen Risiken verbunden war.²²

Richard Price, an American historian and cultural anthropologist, combines personal and historical experiences when he writes:

About 1900, my grandparents emigrated as youths from the Old World, seeking their Fortune in the Land of Opportunity. I was born in the 1940s in New York City, a third generation (Euro-) American. About 1680, Alabi's paternal great-grandparents, young enslaved Africans, were transported by force to the New World. Alabi [...] was born in the 1740s in the Surinam village of Timba [...].²³

By way of conclusion I want to argue that this brief inventory of the ontographical building blocks in the historical discipline in relation with their synoptic constructions and historical origins demonstrates the importance of PHH. PHH undermines the illusion that there is only one type of history writing by revealing the three forms underlying all contemporary historiography. This triadic conception must be regarded as an analytical tool that should be used to evaluate and assess the possibilities and constraints involved in writing history. In the above discussion on the importance of PHH, I have referred exclusively to philosophical implications of historiographical results. Knowledge of ontographical and comparative possibilities and of explanatory, temporal and tropological devices shows the richness of historiography and most of all its theoretical applications. It provides history writing with a wider range of uses and the historian with more options in his performances.

Performance is another core element of PHH as it consists of a reflection on the intellectual operation of historical production.²⁴ In the production of history the historian has to perform activities such as reading, selecting, defining, associating, interpreting and formulating that all involve making choices. Rethinking periodisation is only one example of the need for new performances in history as a discipline. An enhanced awareness of the philosophical possibilities and constraints of these performances will make the historian much more reflective and thoughtful. PHH is therefore not only a plea for a specific methodology or for certain epistemic virtues, although

22 P. Kriedte, *Spätkapitalismus und Handelskapital* (Göttingen 1980) 147.

23 R. Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, London 1990) xi.

24 See the aforementioned study by Paul, 'Performing History'.

they remain important, but most of all a plea for insights into the intellectual operation of historical production.

In higher education PHH will teach students of history that historical texts should not be taken at face value. In my opinion this adage concerning texts constitutes a vital point of departure in developing a university curriculum. Students should be trained in the analysis of all kinds of historical texts on their PHH implications; in other words, the ontographical, the synoptic, the argumentative and the temporal and aesthetic aspects of the production of historical texts. Handbooks of historical theory should provide students with texts and tasks for training in these aspects.²⁵ In addition such a perspective on the teaching of history in secondary education will reveal that the current curriculum is oriented exclusively towards an inner story of the history of Europe and the Netherlands (respectively, 'de tien tijdvakken' and 'de canon van de Nederlandse geschiedenis'). A triadic approach offers a more pluralistic, empathic and a more external perspective in which the positive and negative contributions of the Netherlands and of Europe to world history can be examined.²⁶ ◀

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25 With my textbook *Triptiek van de tijd* exercise material is forthcoming.

26 See H. Jansen, 'The Little Dog of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi', *World History Connected* 9:3 (2012) and Chapter 26 of Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd*.