

Processing Time – On the Manifestations and Activations of Historical Consciousness

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The little girl sat by her grandmother's kitchen table. The old woman told her about her childhood, several decades ago. The girl was bored. She did not understand why Grandma had not attended school, and why she said nothing about television programs and computer games. Trying to catch the attention of her granddaughter, the old woman anxiously waved her hands. The girl's eyes fell on her grandmother's palm, wrinkled and rough after many years of manual labor. Then she looked at her own soft and smooth hand. Suddenly a historical thought crossed her mind: once upon a time Grandma's palm had been as soft and smooth as her own. Immediately, another thought, at least as well-advised as the first but rather future-oriented, came to her mind: in time, her own palm will also be wrinkled and rough. Thus, in a single line of thought, the little girl had depicted herself as a historical individual. She had entered into a mental process in which notions of the past and of the future became integrated aspects of her understanding of present life. The effort rapidly turned the strangeness and difference of her grandmother's childhood into a notion of identity and familiarity. Consequently, the girl had put her historical consciousness to work.

Temporal orientation

Historical consciousness is an essential dimension of our moral, emotional and cognitive thinking and orientation. It is a time compass that assigns meaning to past events and directs us towards future projects. It

is connected not only nor even primarily to scholarly historical interpretations, but to meanings, memories, metaphors, monuments and myths. Thus, historical consciousness is a basic faculty of temporal awareness without which there would be no humanity in either of the two meanings of the word; that is, no humaneness and no mankind. As human beings, we may lack knowledge of many things that have happened in the past, being totally unfamiliar with diverging scholarly interpretations of feudalism or the French revolution, but we cannot do without historical consciousness.

Although the phraseology relating to historical consciousness is often as pretentious as the lines above, historical consciousness is normally at work in everyday situations, in history classes and in other kinds of direct human interaction, as the example with the little girl and her grandmother clearly demonstrates. However, it is also present in our indirect encounters with history by means of texts or other objectifications of history. From this there follows that historical consciousness must be analytically connected to history in both its basic dimensions: as *res gestae*, or what has actually happened in the past, and to *historia rerum gestarum*, or how we represent and use this past. Consequently, historical consciousness can and must be approached historically as well as functionally. Historical consciousness is certainly *historical*, changing from time to time and from one society to another. However, it would be just as adequate to use the term “history consciousness”, since it highlights a mental activity in which history is functionally processed.

But how do we actually recognize historical consciousness when we see it? Questions of this kind can be multiplied: Is there a straightforward way to translate historical consciousness into a couple of educational competences, needed in a modern democracy? This seems to be assumed when educational history programs declare it a primary objective that students should develop or deepen their historical consciousness. Or, to reverse the questions, which makes them even more problematic: If historical consciousness, as is often argued, is a totality or an inclusion that mentally embraces the three temporal perspectives past, present and future in a complex pattern of condensation and crystallization, what is *not* part of historical consciousness? If historical consciousness is in everything and everywhere, where does it analytically start and end?

It would probably be safe to say that most of us content ourselves with using the concept in a heuristic way. It helps us to raise new questions about the historical dimension itself and its functions and uses in society. In my mind, this is the way it should be. Thus, it reminds us that history often functions and is used differently from scholarly history,

when related to what the phenomenologically inspired Germans denote as *Lebenswelt*. But while concepts such as historical culture and collective memory have been successfully made use of as analytical tools to better understand how history works in human life and society, historical consciousness has not. It seems to me that we still rely heavily on the definition given in the first *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* from 1979, in which Karl-Ernst Jeismann defined historical consciousness as *den Zusammenhang von Vergangenheitsdeutung, Gegenwartsverständnis und Zukunftsperspektive*, “the interrelation between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspective on the future” (Jeismann 1979: 42).¹ This definition is, in my opinion, still valid, but should be elaborated, since it gives few indications of how historical consciousness works in life and society. The purpose of my contribution is in part to reflect theoretically on the concept, and in part to offer a few modest proposals on how historical consciousness can be analyzed in a more productive way in history-cultural studies.

The return of historical consciousness

Let me start from two notions: first, that right now there is an interest in and a need for an expanded concept of historical consciousness. Secondly, that the work done so far in terms of providing it with analytical qualities has been unsatisfactory. How should we understand the current interest in historical consciousness? Undoubtedly, there is an internal scholarly answer. This does not only come from the obvious fact that a focus on phenomena of “being” has given way to a focus on phenomena of “consciousness”. This “cultural turn” has actively demonstrated that language and culture serve to promote the kind of time transgression involved in historical consciousness. The argument, mainly but not only derived from hermeneutical philosophy, goes: in contemporary language and other cultural expressions, past experiences are collected and made use of. But future experiences are also anticipated, because in our contemporary perceptions and interpretations they are ranged in and influenced by linguistic and cultural structures that had existed before the experiences were collected and made use of. In particular, Hayden White has called attention to the “figurative imagination” involved beforehand in all approaches to history (White 1985: 101–120).

1 The same definition is repeated in later editions of the handbook from 1985 and 1997.

This perspective illustrates the important question of whether history as a phenomenon of consciousness fulfils beneficiary orientative, sense-giving functions, or whether such “pre-givens” demonstrate the malevolently repressive or narrowly ideological risks inherent in any use of history. Is historical consciousness, with its focus on constancy and internal coherence, primarily connected to canonicity and hegemony, or can it further pluralist meanings and openness? There is a general idea, propounded already by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, that the appearance of modern society coincided with a new, more instrumental relationship to time and history. An objectively measured and understood sense of time replaced the subjective relationship to time predominant in pre-modern and early modern society. In Reinhart Koselleck’s terminology, modernization meant that the human horizon of expectations became estranged from the space of experiences of human beings (Koselleck 1985).

It goes without saying that the professionalization of history scholarship was part of the same process. For some present-day commentators, this development went a long way in colonizing or usurping the historical dimension from every-day life. In the bitter words of Nietzsche, historical scholarship interposed itself as a gleaming but hostile star between history and life (Nietzsche 1983: 77).² For others, the development of history scholarship is on the contrary essential for the growth of historical consciousness. They have rather blamed the extreme ideological and scholarly modernism of the last century for removing history from life and society (Schorske 1998). This debate, which generally can be interpreted as a dispute between those who judge historical scholarship as being the prime mover and benefactor of historical consciousness, and those who maintain that historical consciousness is part of a much wider socio-cultural process, is in itself no salient part of this analysis. Nevertheless, it may say something important about the temptations and prospects inherent in the concept of historical consciousness.

What unites the opponents is a belief in the need to regain a lost historical consciousness in order to solve various problems and crises of modernity, and to provide a “post-modern” individual and society with a more “vertical” identity, by promoting integration into processes of meaning considered time-transgressing, such as ethnification, Europeanization and victimization. All of these depart from the wide temporal realm of historical consciousness, and from a range of questions with

2 Among later proponents of such a critical perspective can be mentioned Raphael Samuel (1994: 3–8).

temporal extensions: Who are “we”? Who are “the others”? From where do we originate? Where did it go wrong? Where are we going?

Historical consciousness stands out as an indispensable theoretical, heuristic concept if we want to investigate present-day identity formations and changes. They all involve wrestling with a historical dimension that seems hard to bring together with the traditional notion of the goal-rational, linear character of modernity. Koselleck’s idea of conceptual crises and intellectual reorientations as results of an increasingly asynchronous relationship between the different partial processes of modernization seems to carry a particular urgency in our time.

Genetic and genealogical perspectives

Now, let us turn to the second question, why we have difficulties arranging historical consciousness into an analytical framework that might be useful for empirical explorations and teaching purposes. One important answer is that we are still restrained by our traditional scholarly, genetic-developmental-chronological understanding of the essence of the historical dimension. If the past has its own intrinsic value, any involvement by posterity is detrimental. History must be explained and understood prospectively and according to the contexts pre-given by the past itself.

However, it seems to me a fruitful procedure to let a reflected historical consciousness include an enlarged, or rather, a double historical perspective. One of them is surely genetic, focusing on the fact that we are and have a history. It goes without saying that a well-designed genetic perspective, especially if it is allowed to lead up to a temporary “now”, is instrumental in demonstrating that the individual and society exist in time, having an origin as well as a future. There is an obvious need to relate historical consciousness to an individual’s experience of being a part of and an agent in history.

The other perspective is genealogical, maintaining that we make history by reflecting ourselves and our present situation in the past. A genealogical perspective is important to prove that the past is recalled and present in the perceptions, projects and agencies of individuals and society. This means that retrospection is not arbitrary but directed by cultural needs and interest, by historical culture. No doubt, the genetic and the genealogical perspectives may be hard to reconcile. Stormy debates have often been the result when causality contrasts with meaning, prospection with retrospection, distance with proximity, abstraction with concretion, complexion with simplicity, relative validity with absolute validity, reversibility with irreversibility, just to mention a few possible states of

opposition. In my mind, however, a reflected historical consciousness can balance and join these two fundamental historical perspectives in so far that a genealogical perspective can provide genetic history with agency and criteria of relevance, while a genetic perspective is needed not only to supply us with historical contents, but also to help us understand why history is recalled and represented the way it is. In concert, the two perspectives can demonstrate Kierkegaard's well-known dictum that man lives his life forward but understands it backward.

Processing time

Another answer to the question why operationalization is a complicated thing is that historical consciousness is a phenomenon without clear determinants. Should it be defined and contextualized from a disciplinary logic, from psychological considerations, or is it worthwhile instead to depart from reflections on its functions in society? Such a socio-cultural analysis, that I will now turn to, must however be preceded by a qualification of the category of historical consciousness. First of all let me say that the "real" character of historical consciousness is a complicated philosophical and epistemological question which cannot be unraveled here. The factors that determine historical consciousness are a combination of qualities and proficiencies acquired by socialization and cultural traditions. Clearly, the degree of historical consciousness, of its strength and sophistication, varies greatly between different collectives and within them, and through time and space. In my mind, it is merely possible to give some very general ideas of the "essence" and working of historical consciousness. For the empirically interested scholar, the concept must obviously be transformed into more comprehensible analytical categories, such as historical culture and uses of history.

It seems reasonable to imagine historical consciousness less as a depository with fixed contents than as an active processor whose function is to help the individual and various collectives to make sense of the contemporary world, in light of experiences and interpretations of the past as well as expectations for and projections of the future. As is indicated by the concept "consciousness", derived from the Latin words *con* and *scientia*, approximately "knowing together", historical consciousness is best understood as something that in its fundamental features is shared by others who live under similar external and internal conditions. Thus, historical consciousness often processes notions of belonging and togetherness by helping individuals and collectives go beyond the horizon of their own restricted life spans.

There is a lot to be said in favor of the idea that historical consciousness does not process cognitive particulars and disconnected facts of the past. Rather, it is connected to a more general awareness of how human beings come to terms with history. However, singular “facts” probably more often than not function to induce us to start thinking historically; for many Hungarians, the mere mention of the word “Trianon” – a castle outside Paris in which on June 4, 1920 a peace treaty was signed that reduced Hungarian territory by three quarters and the Hungarian population by three fifths – is enough to trigger painful notions of a time-transcending character, in the same way that the date “April 24” – the day in 1915 when the Young Turks started slaughtering Armenians in Constantinople – does for Armenians all over the world (Gerner 2007: 79–109, Karlsson 2007: 13–45). This painful, often traumatic aspect is important. Historical consciousness is actively used for the elaboration and qualification of fundamental questions about human life and society. These questions often give rise to reflections on continuity and change, essence and appearance and necessity and contingency which transcend established temporal boundaries. Among them are identity issues of who “we” and who “they” are, existential issues related to life and death, moral problems of what is right and what is wrong, good and evil, and politico-ideological questions related to phenomena such as justice and injustice or power and powerlessness.

To be sure, such “fundamentals” that may serve as crystallizations of historical consciousness can also be found among multi-layered phenomena such as theories, concepts, proverbs, rituals, symbols, comparisons, analogies and metaphors (Heller 1982: 51–71). Jörn Rüsen’s well-known basic position is that the sense-bearing and meaningful character of historical consciousness is best taken care of by means of a logic of historical narration, in which even apparently shocking and contradictory historical phenomena can be induced to make sense in a narrative, constructed from a fabric of temporal experiences and memories with not only cognitive, but also aesthetic and rhetorical building blocks (Rüsen 2005). Consequently, problems not only of identity, but also of fate, crisis and trauma, can probably be expected to evoke a mental activity related to historical consciousness. In fact, in a discussion on how tenacious turning points or “borderline events” such as the Second World War and the Holocaust influence historical thinking, Rüsen has argued that “crisis constitutes historical consciousness, so one can say that there is no historical thinking without crisis” (Rüsen 2001: 253). As briefly indicated above, radical changes, turning-points, contrasts, antagonisms and revaluations in general, and those charged with a high degree of positive or negative values in particular, can probably have the

same function of stimulating excursions into the temporal realm. All of them obviously have a historical character, because if we have no memory or knowledge of a previous state of things, we cannot characterize a following situation as a break or a change, and simultaneously maintain the context of meaning always inherent in historical consciousness.

Manifestations and activations

It has already been made clear that historical consciousness in itself leaves no traces that lend themselves to scholarly investigation. Therefore, there is a need for an intermediate level of analytical operation between historical consciousness itself and its effects on the individuals' cognitive maps, attitudes and readiness to take action. The reflections, manifestations and articulations of historical consciousness are best analyzed in historical culture. This may be described as the communicative context in which historical consciousness works and the past is given sense. By means of history-cultural products and activities, individuals and collectives orient themselves on the time axis. Historical culture provides concrete answers to questions concerning what various individuals and collectives find worth preserving, teaching, learning, celebrating and forgetting about the past.

To be sure, the collectives in question are still often national ones. Scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that even history-cultural processes related to non-national dimensions such as world wars or crimes against humanity have normally been handled nationally. Scholarly works are obviously part of historical culture. Nevertheless, the traditional approach of dealing with scholarly products, the history of historiography, is not adequate if we want to stress their relationship to historical consciousness. Some differences are salient. One is that history-cultural products must be analyzed not only as effects of prevailing philosophical ideas and scholarly theories, but also as causes to knowledge, conceptions and values of individuals and collectives. In other words, not only the production but also the mediation and the consumption of history must be taken into account within a history-cultural framework. In particular, aspects of the reception of history are seldom addressed by scholars. Existential, moral and politico-ideological motives are often more salient in history-cultural work, and their connection to power relations more explicit. Another methodological difference is that doctoral dissertations and other scholarly products do not normally reflect histor-

ical consciousness as adequately as broadly mediated history-cultural artifacts such as textbooks, films, and historical fiction.

One way of reflecting historical consciousness is to study its activations or the history-cultural uses of history in society. An analysis of history uses must correspond to those fundamental values of life that previously have been characterized as animating historical consciousness: existence and identity, moral, power politics and ideology. What follows is a typology of different ways of using history, produced in order to reach a more general, comparative understanding of the role of history in society. It is based on theoretical links between different needs of history, different uses, different groups and categories of users, and different functions in society. In addition, these uses are thought to possess different degrees of strength and urgency in different societies and historical periods. Since we will seldom find the types in a “pure” state of realization, the ideal-typical, analytical character of the scheme must be emphasized.³

The scholarly-scientific use of history

The scholarly-scientific use of history is based on strict professional, discipline-specific rules and standards. Criteria of historical relevance are more often than not determined from an internal, scholarly value judgment, which means that the history selected for research or teaching is chosen on the grounds of its ability to illuminate an analytical or a theoretical position considered fruitful to develop, or to give further empirical evidence to a historical phenomenon or setting that already has been the subject of scholarly analysis. To be able to carry out a scholarly-scientific intellectual operation of this kind, professional training is normally considered necessary. Part of this ideal self-perception has been the opinion that it is a scholarly virtue to dissociate oneself from the history interests, needs and requests of the surrounding society. Another part has been a belief in the possibility and the wish to distinctly separate the present from the past. Mediation of history is unproblematic, built on the assumption that the unique, scholarly produced history should be transferred as unmodified as possible from the historians’ community to the school and the larger society. Scholarly debates do not normally include references to historical consciousness. If topics such as the Second World War are selected as a relevant issue in history scholarship, the reason is often that “blind spots” of the war should be filled

3 The typology is elaborated from Karlsson 1999. See also Karlsson 2007b: 27–45.

with new knowledge, or that interpretations should include other categories than the traditional military ones.

The existential use of history

The existential use of history is triggered by the experienced need, felt by all individuals to remember or, alternatively to forget, in order to uphold or intensify feelings of orientation, anchorage and identity in a society in a state of insecurity, pressure or sudden change. Memory is a retrospective, present-minded mental process in which we confront or integrate reconstructions or representations of the past, normally images of concrete figures, times and places, with situations in our present lives. Thus, memory can provide the individual with a comforting notion of a connection to or continuity with history, a kind of “presence of the past”, which in turn may bring about an understanding that she is part of something larger than her own isolated human life. Consequently, memory, as well as a more fundamental historical consciousness, fosters identity. The existential use of history is often of a very private nature, not transcending the borderline to “large” institutional and publicly mediated history, and not always leaving its imprint in empirical documentation. It should, however, be emphasized that an engagement in what Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen call the “intimate past”, as expressed, for example, in genealogical trees, diaries and photo albums, often leads to a desire to relate to and participate in “larger” pasts situated outside the narrow family worlds (Rosenzweig/Thelen 1998: 115–146). This becomes particularly evident when memories of “traumatic” or “catastrophic” individual experiences such as wars or genocides need to be psychologically digested and culturally made sense of by being integrated into larger narratives (Rüsen 2004: 46ff.).

The moral use of history

The moral use of history is based on both indignation at the scant attention given to certain aspects of history in a society, and an endeavor to restore or rehabilitate that same history. Generally, the moral use has proved to be prominent in situations where a culturally insensitive government, at the head of a totalitarian or a functionally warped state, is for some reason, such as political-cultural liberalization and newly gained openness, suddenly exposed to criticism because essential aspects of the past have been concealed from the population. Thus, the point of departure of the moral use of history is often a specific event, such as the introduction of a politico-cultural liberalization or change, which often

manifests itself in the publication of an article, book, or other kind of historical artifact with historical “exposures” or “revelations” that meets with a broad social response and, accordingly, gets a paradigmatic significance. All over Europe, not excluding “bystander” states such as Sweden, several decades of disregard or outright secrecy towards crucial aspects of the Second World War and the Holocaust have aroused strong expressions of “historical” indignation that have had dramatic political consequences everywhere.

An ideological use of history

An ideological use of history is related to attempts made, mainly by groups of intellectuals and politicians, to gain control of public representations, to arrange historical elements into a dominant context of meaning. This arrangement is not, as in the scholarly-scientific case, defined by its correspondence to empirical evidence and scholarly discourse in general, but by its correspondence to external tasks, or rather by its capacity to convince, influence, rationalize, mobilize and authorize with the aid of historical perspectives. Consequently, the focus on the ideological use of history is not on separate historical elements, as in the case of the moral use, but on the entirety of the historical construct, on its consistency, its pretensions and pedagogical clarity. The ideological use is intimately connected with the success of those systems of ideas that employ history in order to build up legitimacy and rationalize mistakes and errors in the past by referring to objective necessities or historical laws. In general, the objective of legitimation is often reached by means of absolute chronological boundaries and clear-cut periodizations, black-and-white descriptions, strong continuity lines, and perspectives of unproblematic progress. History has proved especially useful for nationalists, whose main interest is to ascertain a special, symbiotic relation between their own nation and a specific territory, on which historical claims are put forward.

Non-use of history, which should be analyzed as a special case of an ideological use, is not a question of simply remembering or forgetting a historical date, or of subconsciously omitting it from a historical context. Rather, the non-use of history is rooted in the deliberate and ideological adoption by some intellectual and political groups of an attitude according to which history, or some part of it, should be ignored. Here, too, reasons connected with the legitimacy of the non-using society or state, or a conscious effort to rationalize historical misdeeds, is involved. Generally speaking, non-use of history is a successful strategy in societies and states where it is strongly felt that legitimacy should not be built on

history or a cultural heritage, but on the contention that the society in question constitutes a particularly praiseworthy contemporary phenomenon, or on expectations of a rewarding future. A more tangible example of a non-use of history that at present attracts much attention is the denial of the Holocaust or any other genocidal event.

The politico-pedagogical use of history

The last use of history that I will suggest, a politico-pedagogical one, may be characterized as a deliberate comparative, metaphorical, or symbolic use in which the transfer effect between “then” and “now” is rendered simple and unproblematic, while the scholarly-scientific insistence that history be anchored in the structures of the relevant period is toned down, all in consequence of the main purpose, which amounts to summoning history as an aid in attacking what are felt to be severe and concrete political problems in a later era. A political use of history is particularly hard to reconcile with a traditional scholarly use. And indeed, it is more or less commonplace among historians discussing the use and abuse of history to launch a diatribe against the fact that “historians, or would-be historians, all too often become politicians and generals, shaping and reshaping the historical record to score points, clinch arguments, and advance their own solutions and nostrums” (Dallin 1988: 181). To be sure, the political use of history is a traditional and often-used instrument especially in foreign policy. References to Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler in Munich in 1938 have attested to the opinion that a “Munich syndrome” has guided foreign-policy decisions long after the advent of the Second World War (Rystad 1982). There are, however, indications that history has been politically used on a broader scale and more frequently in the last full decade, in which the historical dimension has been widely disseminated. In general, the political use of history is related to the contention that the historical dimension is relevant, as offering guidance for political decisions or help in securing political advantages. An effective political use that guarantees the user great mass-medial attention relates a political issue at hand to a historical event of strong emotional loading. If a group of anti-abortionists choose to compare abortion with the Holocaust, their intellectual honesty can, for very good reasons, be questioned, but not their political intuition.

Coda: Is there an abuse of history?

This discussion finally brings to the fore the problem of where to draw the line between the use and abuse of history. A simplistic solution is to side with a widespread scholarly opinion that the only legitimate use of history is scholarly-scientific, which is guided by rules and standards gradually agreed upon in the course of a protracted professionalization process. In my opinion, it is a highly unsatisfactory position, not least because professional historians no doubt abuse history at least as often as others, by, for example, writing dissertations that no-one outside a limited circle of co-professionals can read and that are devoid of any kind of discussion of criteria of relevance. Do not misunderstand me; professional historical values should not be dismissed. They should, on the contrary, be insisted upon, especially in situations where history is widely used for various purposes in society other than scholarship. However, a scholarly use of history is not the use *par préférence*, but one of several legitimate ways of furnishing the past with meaning.

But if traditional scholarly considerations are not appropriate for a reasonable distinction between use and abuse, what alternative criteria can be proposed, so that revisionists and deniers with regards to the Holocaust or Soviet Communist terror, or nationalistic history warriors in theatres of war around the world, can be blamed? My only answer, admittedly vague, proceeds from an external, non-scholarly consideration: that uses of history that in themselves or in their consequences violate established principles of human rights, by humiliating, wounding or in other ways inflicting suffering on individuals or collectives, are abuses of history.

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