Humanities

Inquiry Into the Growing Demand for Histories

The disenchantment of the world through the intervention of science and technology did not leave the humanities unaffected: From the mid-1960s onward they have repeartedly considered themselves as being in a state of crisis. Notably, they criticize the dominance of the natural sciences, not least when it comes to public attention and funding, but also with respect to the more and more scientific standards of communication and organization. While macro-analytical studies have shown that the humanities participated in the general growth of the academic system in the 1970s, and actively responded to it by internal specialization and differentiation (cf. Weingart et al. 1991: 14ff.), representatives of the humanties painted a different picture. They not only insisted on being a special 'culture' (Snow 1959) or 'tribe' (Becher 1989) but, more precisely, on a special function, namely that of 'compensating' for what got lost in contempary society: Most prominently, Odo Marquard suggested that the humanities were important in that they tell stories that help to sensitize and orient people in a throroughly scientized world (cf. Marquard 1985; accordingly, this function would need a specific science policy, cf. Pöggeler 1980). In this view, the scholarly research of, say, cultures, languages and histories contributes to enlighten and empower people so as to rationally act with and among modern technologies.

Historians, while engaging in non-academic enterprises as well (e. g., expositions), predominantly pursue this task within the confines of academia. Interestingly, internal specialization shows, among other trends, a shift toward modern history, social history, history of non-European countries as well as of technology including science and medicine (cf. Weingart 1991, chapter 2.3) – obviously, these histories are designed to equip the members of contemporary globalized, high-tech societies with orienting knowledge. Accordingly, the discipline engages in epistemic self-reflection: In particular, it reflects upon its self-proclaimed specificity of telling stories. Its narrativity (cf., e. g., Rüsen 1987), its rhetorics (cf., e. g., White 1990), its centrisms (eurocentrism, androcentrism, …) center stage in various debates. Writing histories (or his-tories, for that matter) has become a target for science studies as well (cf. also Paul, this

volume). Thus far, however, scholars have predominantly concerned themselves with external factors, such as growth, specialization and differentiation as well as with science policy (Frühwald et al. 1991); with views held from within the humanities (Prinz / Weingart 1991), as well as with transdisciplinary productions of humanist knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994). In the following essay, Wolfgang Prinz suggests to conceive of histories (whatever their area of research or methodology) as serving a specific demand – the demand for an overwhelming cultural concern in making sense. Histories, more than re-constructing the past, construct the present. Seemingly complying with the historians' own account, Prinz gives the theme a special twist, though: Making sense does not so much result from science political ambition (cf. above) but from folk psychological necessity.

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Making Sense

Wolfgang Prinz

We,
amnesiacs all,
condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present,
have created the most elaborate of human constructions,
memory,
to buffer ourselves
against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time
and the irretrieveability of its moments and events.[1]

I am a fan of historical studies and I have always admired them from an amateur's perspective. Still, at the same time I have always had mixed feelings when it comes to understand what scholars in historical studies are actually doing and what the point of their business is. Today I believe I know the answer. The point of their business is making sense of facts. Yet, I am not sure whether I really understand what this means. For instance, since I find it difficult to think of sense as a thing that is somehow inherent, or residing in facts I cannot see an obvious difference between the making and the faking of sense. Further, since I think of sense as a thing that always needs to be shared with other contemporaries I cannot see an obvious difference between the making of history and the making of politics. Of course, I realize that many scholars in the field hate this proximity and alleged affinity, but I also know that a number of others enjoy it quite well.

Mixed Feelings

My mixed feelings about history are threefold, with admiration, envy, and trust as chief ingredients.

First, I admire historians for the coherence of the stories they tell and for the boldness with which they create them from scarce sources and documents – that is, from highly selective left-overs that provide evidence about a very small number of events, as compared to the vast pool of events that may actually have happened. To be sure, my admiration is not only for the beauty of the stories but also for the boldness of the claim that they tell the truth.

Second, my envy has ever pertained to the high appreciation and esteem historical studies earn in our culture. In a way, it is a hallmark of the ideology of modern Western civilization, that the best way to understand what is going at a given time is to explain it in terms of what has happened before. Interestingly, this principle is not only applied to macro-social entities like cultures, states, or peoples, but to micro-social entities such as firms, families, or individuals as well: Everybody believes that the study of the past is a prerequisite for the understanding of the present, and everybody is convinced that historical studies, as we know them, can do this job quite well. This is why I envy them.

Still, and third, I also distrust them. The reasons for my distrust are the reverse of the coin that explains my admiration. If it is true that the stories about the past are bold constructions on the basis of highly selective evidence, it is, in my view, indispensable that reflections about selectivity and bias (both deliberate and imposed) become an integral part of the scientific endeavor to construct such stories. I do not see much of these reflections, though, and this is what fuels my distrust.

I was trained as an experimental psychologist, and this may explain part of the story. Psychologists, too, are trained in selecting and interpreting data that help them to understand other people's actions. However, they are systematically trained to distrust what people tell them and even mistrust their own understanding of what they see these people doing. Moreover, when it comes to relating data to theories, psychologists have developed a methodological culture of taking the selectivity of their data base into account – as well as the inevitable bias inherent in such selectivity. Given this background, my mixture of admiration and distrust may not be too surprising. Likewise, my feeling of envy can be traced back to my professional background, too. Psychologists, unlike historians, do not often enjoy public appreciation for doing their job well. Therefore, my envy comes as no surprise.

What does it actually mean to tell a story about events that happened in the past? For the rest of this chapter I will discuss two aspects of selectivity and bias inherent in historical studies. First I will discuss the issue from the viewpoint of the facts to be conveyed. How are stories produced from facts and how do facts get picked and glued together for the sake of telling stories? This may be called story

semantics. Second I turn from story semantics to story pragmatics and discuss selectivity and bias from the viewpoint of the discourses addressed by stories. How do stories get adapted to the audiences they want to speak to and how do new stories get streamlined to catch attention and compete with old ones?

Ways of Making Sense

What does it mean to tell a story *about events that happened in the past*? How can the story we tell today be related to the events that happened yesterday? In which sense can such stories be true? First I will examine how stories get individuated and how the facts for a given story are selected. Then I will turn to the inner workings of stories about human actions, that is, the basic semantics of integrating and making sense of their bits and pieces.

Picking facts. Stories need to have a beginning and an end, and this is true of both fact and fiction. Stories about historical events are both written and read in the understanding that they pertain to facts, that is, events that have actually taken place. Facts, however, have no inherent beginnings and ends, and therefore the beginning and the end is always in the story about the facts and never in the facts themselves. This may be trivial to state, but I do not see much reflection of this triviality in historical studies. Quite on the contrary, they often convey the impression that their stories begin and end where the happenings that are being told have their natural and inherent opening and closing.[2]

Let us suppose that we have fixed where our story begins and where it ends. Further, let us assume that we know a number of facts about events that have happened in the domain and the time of our story. For the sake of the argument, suppose that we know of 1,000 such facts. Obviously, we are then faced with the issue which of these events belong to our story and which not. How do we decide which ones we should pick? Again, the facts themselves do not tell us. It is the framework of the story we have in mind that helps us make our decisions.

The story we have in mind determines where it begins and where it ends and what belongs to it. Let me call this top-down selectivity. At the same time, we are faced with heavy bottom-up selectivity. Bottom-up selectivity arises from the simple fact that what we can know about events that happened in the past can always be merely a tiny

sample of all the events that actually happened. To put it in an extremely naive form, 1,000 events of which we know, in the time window and in the domain of our story, may be 1,000 out of 1,000,000 that have actually happened.

Even worse, the sample is by no means representative. It is, on the contrary, biased in various ways. Such biases of what we can know as compared to what actually happened have often been discussed. I will not go through them systematically, but only mention some of them. For instance, one source of bias comes from the fact that most of what we know about events in the past is derived from intentional artifacts, that is, objects and documents fabricated by certain individuals for certain purposes. We may have access to the events contained in, or documented by, these artifacts, but to the huge number of events that are not thus documented, we have no access at all. Second, only a tiny fraction of all these artifacts has survived until today. The vast majority got lost, and it is certainly not by chance which ones got lost and which survived. This creates another source of bias in what we can know about past events. Third, the information that we actually access and, hence, the pieces of knowledge we actually know, will once more form a subset of those pieces that we could know if we had access to all sources still available.

Interestingly, this picture is completely homologous to what textbooks on Psychology have to say about the functional locus of forgetting in human memory. According to text-book wisdom, forgetting (i. e., selective loss of information) may occur at three different levels: encoding, storage, and retrieval. If an event that has actually occurred in the past is no longer available for report in the presence, this may be for three reasons. One is that it was never entered into the memory system at all; second, that it was in fact entered into the system but got lost during storage; and third, that it was entered, is still there, but cannot be retrieved.

The problem here is not that we know so much less than actually happened. The problem is rather that the sample of events of which we know can never be taken at random from the population of events that actually happened. Both top-down and bottom-up selectivity are ubiquitous and inevitable in historical studies and there is no way to escape from the biases inherent in them.

What can one do in a situation like this? Again, I cannot resist drawing on a psychological analogy: When a person suffers from a

deep-seated unsolvable conflict, psychotherapy has two basic options. One is to suppress, or even repress, the unpleasant thoughts related to this conflict and to find a way to lead a decent life all the same. The other is to make the unpleasant thoughts explicit and give them a role in the client's life (which will then be somewhat less decent, at least for some time). When we translate these two options from psychotherapy to history, one is to forget about selectivity and tell stories as straight as possible. The other is to recognize selectivity and tell stories with this proviso. Any historical study has to choose its position somewhere between these alternatives.

Gluing facts together. Stories are, of course, much more than mere collections of certain facts, as my cartoon-like sketch has suggested so far. Rather, the point of a telling story is to make sense of certain facts by gluing them together in a particular way. Once more, there is a tricky relationship between making sense of the facts contained in a story and making sense of (and, hence, legitimizing) the story itself. The story makes sense (as a story) to the extent it shows that the facts make sense (as facts). How, then, can (stories about) events that happened in the past make sense?

With respect to this, the business of history is once more closely related to that of psychology. This is because both of these endeavors are (at least in large parts) concerned with explaining and evaluating human action and because both share (at least to some degree) a common conceptual framework for doing so. Much of this framework is provided by the beliefs and convictions shared by folk psychology (or, more specifically, by the wisdom of its Western-culture brand). Folk psychology provides a framework of basic semantic principles for understanding human action. The logic of folk psychology serves to glue facts together and makes stories coherent. Whether or not and how a fact gets integrated into a given story depends on whether or not and how it fits into the folk-psycho-logic of the story. Therefore, this logic acts as another constraint on possible stories and, hence, as another source of selectivity.

The semantics of folk-psychology is used in two major discourses: action explanation and action evaluation. As concerns action explanation, folk psychology offers two views: a subjective view that looks at the action as originating in, and caused by, the acting subject him/herself, and an objective view that looks at the action as caused by

factors acting upon the actor, irrespective of whether or not they are mentally represented.

The subjective view makes use of the *logic of reasons*. This view explains the occurrence of certain actions in terms of certain mental states preceding them and, presumably, causing them. People perform certain actions for certain reasons. For instance, a person who is hungry may have the wish to get rid of this state, and he/she may believe that this wish can be satisfied by having a meal. This belief-and-desire-type of account is ubiquitous in action explanation in every-day discourse and much of both historical and psychological discourse still relies on it. Of course, when it comes to explaining more complex actions than having a meal like, for example, taking far-reaching political decisions etc., belief-and-desire explanations may assume much more complex forms. Still, the basic scheme is unaltered: The occurrence of a certain action is explained by (a complex chain of) mental antecedents. In such cases, the chain of antecedents will often take the form of a dialogue – be it internal within the actor him/herself or external between the actor and some of his/her contemporaries.

Conversely, the objective view makes use of the *logic of causes*. This view explains the occurrence of certain actions in terms of certain causes that either lie in the actors themselves or their environments. Causal action explanations can bypass, as it where, the actor's mental awareness. For instance, we may account for the fact that a person acts in a particular way in a particular situation by tracing this action back to a state or a trait we attribute to him/her (e.g., we think: my colleague did not say hello to me this morning, because he was in a bad mood – or because he is a reserved person anyway). Or we may attribute the occurrence of an action to external conditions (e.g., my colleague did not say hello to me, because his parents did not teach him adequate social behavior, or the like). In our everyday folk-psychology discourse these two forms of action explanation are mainly applied to the behavior of individuals. However, they can be, and in fact are, likewise applied to the behavior of collective agents such as governments, administrations, or corporations.

Evaluating facts. At first glance, the logic of causes seems to be entirely different from the logic of reasons. Unlike rational explanations that refer to mental states as causes, causal explanations refer to

nonmental causes like states and traits in actors or their environments. However, when one turns from action explanation to action evaluation, it becomes apparent that the two views are not that much different. Their common ground becomes obvious when it comes to the discourse of evaluating actions in moral terms. For the discourse of evaluation it plays no major role whether we explain the action in terms of reasons or causes. In both cases we take it that the agent could have acted otherwise and is therefore responsible for the action. Hence, at least in the discourse of evaluation, folk psychology tends to believe that human agents are capable of exerting control not only over the network of reasons (of which they are aware anyway), but also over the network of causes of their actions (of which they are usually unaware). In a way, the discourse of action evaluation requires that causes be converted into reasons – in which format they are then entered into consciously controlled action decisions.

In sum, I submit that the logic inherent in folk psychology puts strong constraints on ways in which stories about past events can make sense. By saying that I do not mean to say that historical explanations are just psychological explanations. I'm far from claiming that folk psychology provides a sufficient framework for historical explanation. What I do claim, however, is that folk-psychology categories form a necessary constraint for historical explanations: There is no way of coming up with stories about past events that do not conform to the logic of reasons and causes for action explanation. Still, historical stories differ from psychological stories in several respects. For instance, psychological stories tend to be stories about the actions of individuals and their explanation in terms of reasons. Conversely, historical stories tend to be stories about the actions of collective agents and their explanation in terms of causes.

Ways of Sharing Sense

What does it mean *to tell a story* about events that happened in the past? How are the stories that one can tell constrained by the fact that they are communicated and addressed to certain audiences? How are our ways of making sense affected by the ways of sharing sense? Let me mention three of such constraints.

Syntax. Every storyteller knows that telling stories is a particular form

of literature that requires a particular format and follows a particular syntax. Stories are more than just linear concatenations of facts that follow each other according to a temporal, rational, or causal scheme. Rather, their implicit syntax requires that their plot follows a basic scheme, requiring (more or less) stable states in the beginning and the end and culminating in (more or less) exciting happenings in between – thereby converting, as it were, the initial state into the end state.

There is yet another sense in which stories are more than just concatenation of facts in accordance with certain schemes. Good stories have a point and good storytellers have a way of communicating their story such that its point becomes apparent. The point of the story is what people still remember after they have forgotten most of the facts. Again, a story's point has two faces: It makes the causal and rational structure underlying major events in the story apparent in a new and interesting way and, at the same time, it thereby makes it obvious that this particular story about these particular events makes sense and is justified as a story. In a way, then, a story's point is the meeting point for the making and the sharing of sense.

Audiences. S/he who tells a story usually has a particular audience in mind, to which the story is addressed. Quite obviously, the storyteller's notion of his/her audience puts important constraints on the way the story is being told. The audience and the story form part of a particular discourse whose participants share some basic knowledge in the domain the story belongs to, some basic beliefs and expectations about major issues in that domain and, perhaps, some basic rules about the proper way of exchanging and discussing views about these issues. Therefore, when it comes to telling stories audiences are not accidental circumstances. Instead, they are constitutive facts in the sense that s/he who tells a story has no way of escaping and freeing him/herself from the story's audience – however implicit it may be.

This is true of both facts and fiction, but for stories about facts it has crucial implications. One is that it creates a dual commitment on the storyteller's part. On the one hand, s/he is committed to the known facts about past events. At the same time, however, s/he is committed to present and future audiences of the story in the making, and there is often no obvious and no easy way to convey the logic underlying human action in the past to a present-day audience, let alone unknown future audiences.

Another implication is that storytellers will always tend to pick one out of several possible audiences – even if they are not aware of it. Picking an audience is, in a way, equivalent to selecting the discourse of which the story in the making is supposed to form part. Hence, picking an audience determines to which beliefs and expectations the story will have to speak, which issues it will have to touch upon and which expectations it will have to fulfill. Stories about past events can obviously speak to a number of different audiences, such as the scientific community (in a narrow or a broad sense), the political community, communities discussing ethical, moral, or legal issues, or even the broad community of laymen with historical interests. The stories historians have to tell can be addressed to each of these communities, and each of them puts different constraints on the way these stories should be told.

Markets. Whenever a story about certain events in the past is born, it enters into a world of already-existing stories about the same, similar, or at least related events. In other words: it enters into a story market where, in the long run, only the fittest stories will survive. Yet, unlike living beings, stories do not compete with each other directly. Instead, what they compete for is attention and prominence in the discourse they are meant to form part of. In a way, these discourses and the mentality of their participants is, at any time, formed and shaped by the reception of a certain body of already existing texts and stories. This is the mental scenario the new story encounters and this scenario forms the market place in which any new story has to struggle for survival. Stories speak to certain other stories (and compete with them) by virtue of the fact that they speak to certain audiences that constitute themselves on the basis of certain texts and stories. This is what the logic of discourse amounts to: story audiences and story markets are two sides of the same coin.

Therefore, each discourse has ist own story market, and a given story's fitness on this market is determined by the rules and criteria that apply to that discourse. On each of these markets a number of factors will contribute to a story's survival, for example, how true it is, how realistic, rational, how straight, informative, instructive, how authentic, coherent, convincing, how enlightening, exciting, entertaining it is, etc. Though strictly scientific discourses should only be committed to truth, that is, the extent to which the story reflects

happenings in the past, even these discourses are also committed to some of the other criteria, and this applies even more to most of the remaining discourses.

The Past and the Present

My conclusion, then, is that the business of telling stories about the past has two faces: reconstructing the past and constructing the present. My point here is not that these two faces exist – this is a commonplace notion. My point is rather that, contrary to commonplace wisdom, the commitment to the present is much stronger than that to the past, and that this applies to both the making and the sharing of sense. I realize, of course, that not many scholars of history will be prepared to accept this message. This may not be surprising in view of the fact that reflections about the past play an explicit role in their daily business, whereas constraints arising from the present are only implicit. Further, since deep-rooted ideology tells us that the present is constrained by the past, we cannot easily accept the notion that our understanding of the past should, in turn, be so much constrained by the present.

Like in the theory of therapeutic intervention, there are two options here. One is to stick to that ideological belief and keep on uncovering the truth about the past. This is what happens in analytic therapy. The other option is to regard the endeavor to uncover the truth about the past as an integral part of a complex psychodynamic process that takes place in the present. This is what happens in cognitive therapy. Scholars of history are in the uncomfortable position to find their way between the Scylla of the past and Charybdis of the presence.

Man may well ask the animal:
Why do you not speak to me of your happiness
But only look at me?
The animal does want to answer and say:
Because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say
–
But then it already forgot this answer and remained silent:
So that man could only wonder.[3]

Notes

1 Sonnabend, Geoffrey (1946) Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter, Chicago/IL: Northwestern University Press (p. 16).
2 A beautiful recent example is provided by the opening statements in three major authoritative accounts of modern German history. "Am Anfang war Napoleon", "Im Anfang war das Reich" and "Im Anfang steht keine Revolution" – these are the very first sentences by which Thomas Nipperdey, Heinrich August Winkler and Hans-Ulrich Wehler speak to, and compete with each other in the way they open their respective accounts of German history in the past two hundred years (cf. Volker Ulrich's review of Winkler, H. A. [2000] Der lange Weg nach Westen. Bd. 1: Deutsche Geschichte vom Ende des Alten Reiches bis zum Untergang der Weimarer Republik, München: C.H. Beck, in "Die Zeit" 13/2000, which itself opens with the assertion: "Auf den ersten Satz kommt es an.")
3 Nietzsche, Friedrich ([1874] 1980). On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, Indianapolis/IN, Cambridge/MA: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc., (p. 8).

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