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Introduction

Historians and 'the current situation'

Kalle Pihlainen

This issue of *Rethinking History*, like the forthcoming one, 'Futures for the past' (20:3), has been a long time in the making. Originally, the idea was to bring together a selection of authors who had participated in the inaugural conference of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH), held in Ghent in the summer of 2013. Both issues were to be devoted to a further exploration of the main topic of that conference, namely, 'The future of the theory and philosophy of history'. Plans have, as plans do, mutated along the way, however. The foci envisioned for these two special issues soon diverged, with the idea that one would be called 'Historians as engaged intellectuals' and the other 'The future of historical theory'. But then, changes again: as the articles came in, it became clearer and clearer that these were, in fact, themes that are far harder to separate than I had expected, especially in the current climate in talk about history and its nature and role.

Without actually attempting to make firm pronouncements about anything as nebulous as 'the current situation', or even 'our' current situation, it seems clear that historians as well as theorists of history have recently been increasingly interested in the relation of academic history to contemporary experience – and, some of them, in historians' responsibilities regarding social and practical problems. Hence it also seems safe to say that the future for thinking about history will continue to involve the question of the historian's social and political role. Crucially, however, interest is not focused on a politics of history alone – or indeed even primarily. (Notwithstanding, of course, the fact that everything is about politics *too*, in the sense employed here.) While the questions of the purpose of historical research and writing remain significant, there is now also a strong sense of the inevitable presence of 'history' in all things human, a sentiment that has, I would say, not yet been as explicitly articulated in the recent debates on the public role or public relevance of history. (For relatively recent views, see the forum on 'The Public Role of History' in the October 2005 issue of *History and Theory* and the essays collected from *Historically Speaking* in Yerxa 2009.)

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Even though history as a discipline is obviously a historical phenomenon – and, as such, has always been in the service of specific interests – it seems that there is again more talk about historians as existentially *historically* positioned and aware, as if their

investment in academic history is always necessarily part and parcel of all personal experiences. For adherents of this point of view, there is some inescapable connection that historians (and perhaps people in general) have with the historical past, the past beyond their subjective experience, which is present in their daily lives. Particularly in this context, it is at times hard to see exactly what 'history' and 'historicity' are being used to signify, and collective rethinking of the employment of those terms is needed.

At least in the immediate vicinity of such more experiential and practically formed climates, three broad but reasonably distinct alternatives present themselves for approaching the question of historians' responsibilities – and thus the question of the nature of history as a discipline too: The first, and for me personally the most obvious, would be to continue to focus on the construction of meaning in historical discourse and hence also on the ideological and political consequences of doing history. In such blunt form at least, this approach may be out of sync with current sensibilities in the field, however. The second alternative is to think history in the very broad strokes already described above. Although such an all-encompassing 'historical' viewpoint still permits discussion of what historians should do on a number of practical levels (of epistemology, sensibilities or character, for example), it does not to me seem the most productive for tackling the theme of historians as engaged intellectuals that has informed this present special issue. The impact of history is automatically spread to society at large and any responsibilities here are primarily to the past and to some innate or 'natural' way of relating to it. The third alternative might be best evoked with Stanley Fish's characteristically catchy and pragmatic appeal to academics to *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008); for history, this would effectively mean shoring up the integrity of *historical* knowledge and separating it from more general talk about the significance of the past. Much like the more romantic option of viewing history as self-evident (and consequently of historical knowledge as self-regulating, by one means or another), also this alternative could be seen to let historians off the hook with respect to social responsibility, leaving it to disciplinary consensus and 'methods'.

Whichever view of history and relating to the past one opts for, 'taking a stand' appears, at present, a fashionable thing for historians and theorists to be doing. Perhaps surprisingly, given its evident affinities with the last of these alternatives, Michael Oakeshott's idea of 'the practical past' – brought to centre stage in theory of history by Hayden White during the last decade – is being used to articulate large swathes of the debate. Even the interest in some more general historicalness and 'historicity' *within the discipline* is now collecting under the umbrella of this term. Responding to this trend, several of the articles in this issue – and even more in the forthcoming one – position themselves with

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regard to the feasibility of the separation between the practical past and what is often viewed as its detached other, 'the historical past'. For that reason too, and not only to remember Ghent in 2013, I am pleased that this set of essays will appear in time for the second conference of the INTH. The theme of this second network conference – to be held in Ouro Preto, Brazil, this August – is 'The practical past: On the advantages and disadvantages of history for life'.

Of my many attempts to think up a title for this special issue that would embrace all these various aspects of historians' ties to present-day challenges and experience, 'History in the world' finally felt most appropriate. So much so, in fact, that I could not then let go of it despite having already used it for an essay of my own before. As in that essay, which tackled the question of history's social and political engagement by investigating the relation between historians and readers in Hayden White's work, the most important consideration for using this formulation here is to highlight the simultaneous obviousness and contradictions of thinking history as 'in the world'. The title was originally inspired by Ronald Aronson's classic 1980 book on Sartre, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosophy in the World*. In this formula, *engagement* and the social responsibility of the philosopher-intellectual are foregrounded without implying that these can somehow be separated from personal, experiential conditions. Other reasons for choosing the 'history in the world' rubric are hopefully equally evident. Foremost, it seems effective for incorporating the (at least so often intuitively assumed) link between the past, present and future, as well as related ideas about the significance of the past 'in itself'. While I personally take issue with ideas of any 'natural' historicity, and particularly with any ethical or political conclusions that might be drawn thereof, that dimension is not excluded by the formulation either. Thus it can readily suggest more involved descriptions of the dynamics between stories, language and lived experience in 'our' engagements with the past too, whether those be 'historical' or 'practical'. Finally, it continues to invite discussion of new and experimental forms and sites for history.

Against this admittedly broad background, then, the articles in this issue tackle more focused instances of 'history in the world'. The first of the articles, 'The republic of historians' by Marek Tamm, presents the case of historians' involvement in the construction of the Estonian state in the 1980s and 1990s. The Estonian case is particularly relevant here because of the concentration of historians who assumed an active role in politics. While this overlap between historical and political thinking is interesting in and of itself, Tamm's examination further gives the impression of historical arguments having been used effectively for a 'progressive' politics – something that theoretical approaches to historians' political engagement do not always present as the most obvious outcome. In his exploration, Tamm has deliberately avoided elaborate theorizations of the case, instead using the rich empirical material to show readers how particular discourses were constructed and how the past was used in quite different ways.

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By investigating the legacy of Pierre Nora's idea of the 'age of commemoration', Kenan Van De Mieroop's article foregrounds and questions the neutrality so easily ascribed to history as a discipline. In 'The "age of commemoration" as a narrative construct', Van De Mieroop illuminates the dynamics by which alternative voices become suppressed through appeals to history – even history in the present. In his analysis, dissenting opinions are incorporated into the over-arching narrative of the crisis of French identity, and history and historians somehow continue to be viewed as immune to the dangerous presentism that memory discourses are, instead, claimed to involve. The social role of historians here has not been small: as a consequence of the focus on the contest between history and memory, many pressing issues relating to – as Tony Judt

(1998, 10) had it – the country's 'intolerable burden of competing pasts' have been sidelined.

In their article, 'Thinking the past politically', Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly tackle the issue of historians' responsibilities head-on in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For Norton and Donnelly, historical practices are unavoidably political and the discipline continues to serve and reinforce agendas of nation-states. The construction of collective identities and the sanctioning of actions in the present are thus an integral part of the historian's work. And this work is carried out by connecting the present to the past and to the future through diverse disciplinary practices – foremost, perhaps, epistemology, methodology and conventional forms. The article aims to counter the privileged standing of history by offering up alternative political and artistic framings that lead audiences to reconsider traditional practices and to question the logics of history as they have come to know it.

In an equally engaged manner, Anton Froeyman studies historians' roles in the *Historikerstreit* and the Australian 'History Wars' in terms of, as his title puts it, 'The ideal of objectivity and the public role of the historian'. Froeyman's take is that, in both of these cases, views of historians as objective significantly interfered with their public engagement. This interference did not play out as one might expect, however: According to Froeyman's analysis, the ideal of objectivity and the related emphasis on facts and scholarly competence was present in the rhetoric used to undermine opposing views but failed to temper the historians' own moral and political arguments. As Froeyman points out, the fact that so many of the underlying commitments remain unpronounced, as tacit assumptions of the historians' 'creed', is a significant factor in making possible the kinds of confusions and acting at cross-purposes that he unearths here.

In 'Calliope's ascent', Rik Peters finds the solution to the question of history's practical relevance in reconnecting historical knowledge with action. Here, separation between history and any practical past is not an option. Instead, his article focuses on outlining the connections between narration, experience and action, in order to show how history inevitably functions as a form of practical knowledge. Importantly, this is not a simple pragmatic matter of

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how history can be used, but a redescription of our understandings of history, returning to the sensibilities of 'classic' and, arguably, 'historicist' philosophers of history. For Peters, meaningful contextualization and understanding the emotional connections forged through language between the participants of a communication offer the means to 'cure' history of its current shortcomings. In this conceptualization, historians are necessarily engaged because their work inscribes them into history and points toward the future.

Like Peters, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon takes on the question of how conceiving of the past unavoidably connects to orientations in the present and hence also to visions of the future. Simon's approach is very different, however. His focus is not on continuities and 'historical' understanding but on the identity dynamics of dissociating with the past as it is represented by historical knowledge. That version of the past only defines what 'we'

no longer can be, and the ethical impetus for change comes from the future. Whether intentionally or not, his essay title accepts Sir Bob Geldof's recent challenge to intellectuals as reflected in name of the essay collection *You're History!* (Brown & Kelly 2005), affirming that, indeed, 'We are history' – but with a twist. For Simon, history as a public endeavour only makes sense once we readmit the idea of history as a course of events to our thinking, yet without reanimating classic philosophy of history positions.

The final article here, 'History, power and visual communication artefacts' by Katherine Hepworth, rounds off the issue most appropriately. I am happy to have been able to poach her article from among the regular contributions to the journal. Her investigation of the complexity of the conditions of knowledge production and communication promises to offer improved tools to historians' for 'reading' the past. Even though the article does not engage directly with the social role of history, it sheds much-needed light on how practices of power persist in material culture and hence infiltrate historians' work. Hepworth provides convincing examples of how 'history' can not only be thought of as 'in the world', but to thoroughly permeate it. In making clearer the means by which the past exerts its influence through cultural artefacts, her analysis thus also aids in understanding why the past is so often and easily spoken of as still being 'present' to us. With an opening up to this kind of thinking, perhaps history and historians can finally begin to take on board other similar approaches – actor-network theory, for instance.

Before handing over to the authors, I want to revisit some related debates and discuss basic principles. Over the last decade or so, it has become something of a mantra to say that theory of history has over-indulged on the problematics of the linguistic turn. According to this storyline, it is time to leave behind the long-prominent focus on language and 'narrativism'. A problem with popular receptions of the 'narrativist' debate, however, is that it has insistently been misunderstood in terms of its scope. And most of the objections to it have been based on this misunderstanding. Those on the 'narrativist' side have, in

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fact, and when one goes back and reads these theorists rather than historians' interpretations of them, never offered a theory of history (in the sense of the discipline) or of some kind of History, but only a theory of history *writing* (again, the need to find some shared understanding concerning the most basic vocabulary). When one reads the debates with that point in mind, it seems impossible to miss the qualification that narrative or constructivist theorists of history only talk about what can be characterized as the representational aspect or 'the writing phase' of the historian's work, never really about their investigations of the past, 'the research phase'. (For an explicit discussion of this, see White 2014; also see, for example, Jenkins 2009.)

One thing that this differentiation between the research and writing 'phases' (which is only a heuristic distinction, to be sure) should make immediately clear is that what we tend to often think and talk about as 'theory of history' is a theory of representational problematics, somewhat tailored to the specific questions that history writing faces, *but in reality only quite minimally*. The other thing that this realization highlights is that historical methodology offers almost nothing to this representational side of the

practice. Indeed, there is instead a very strong contradiction between the aims and intentions involved, and there is also baggage attached in the form of commitments to rather different ideologies: the practice of history is constituted quite conservatively, often simply as an undisclosed reflection of bourgeois values and etiquette, whereas the philosophical problematics of representation are significantly attached to various 'radical' and 'oppositional' positions.

The way that this contradiction between the academic and the engaged roles of the historian plays out in contemporary expectations has been provocatively noted by Howard Zinn (2006, 72), who writes: 'We're historians; we're supposed to be here to talk about history and present our papers and leave matters of life and death to politicians. ... we no longer have a citizen among us. Somebody who will go beyond our professional prison and take part in the combat for social justice.' In this same 'into the world' register, we may also recall Tony Judt's reminders regarding the responsibility of scholars to assume the roles of citizen and engaged intellectual. For Judt, according to one oft-quoted claim, 'the disposition to disagree, to reject and to dissent – however irritating it may be when taken to extremes – is the very lifeblood of an open society. We need people who make a virtue of opposing mainstream opinion. A democracy of permanent consensus will not long remain a democracy' (Judt 2010, 155; see also Judt 1998. Viewed in this context, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon's idea of the 'apophatic' past assumes a greater urgency too).

This general notion of the historian-citizen who participates in 'the combat for social justice' serves well to frame the idea of *historians* 'in the world' here. What position a historian takes on a particular issue is not, however, determined either by their being intellectuals or historians. Examples of conservative as well as radical historians abound. But accepting the charge to dissent changes

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the situation. Such dissent and 'disobedience' (see Jenkins 2009), the 'virtue of opposing mainstream opinion', offers more prescriptive force for determining historians' values. Nevertheless, because of the nature of history as a discipline there *are* complications to which historians are especially vulnerable. (See especially the article by Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly in this issue for their analysis but also regarding the work of Martin Davies on this matter.) As a case in point, although *The History Manifesto* by Jo Guldi and David Armitage (2014) has recently made a big splash for its advocacy of history's 'speaking truth to power' in 'big' and improved ways, it seems blind to some of the core problems that theorists of history have already been grappling with over the last half-century. (A number of the authors in this issue, as well as in the coming one, refer to *The History Manifesto*, yet it appears to divide opinion among them too.) To me, there is no arguing either with the social diagnosis that Guldi and Armitage offer, or indeed their basic premise that historians could and even should be more involved with public concerns; the means that they end up recommending seem, nevertheless, to lead to quite conventional and problematic history. (For other recent work on the idea of historians as socially engaged and/or dissenting, see, for example, Berger 2016 and Dorfman 2016).

None of this is intended to say that historians cannot engage with socially significant questions in productive ways as public intellectuals. (The articles here give numerous examples of historians doing precisely that.) They may often be unable to do this in their professional capacity, however, since in the case of *history* 'in the world' – of historians acting as historians as opposed to acting as citizens – the discipline and the various attachments to intuitions about the meaningfulness of the past interfere. The hard question thus is: Can history as historians tend to do it, following some 'historical methodology' (even one augmented by something like 'big data', for instance), accommodate political engagement? More specifically, can the discipline offer opportunities for engaged or radical histories?

In a brief but memorable celebration of radical history in a theme issue of the similarly entitled journal, historian Ellen DuBois, like other contributors to the volume, placed that term firmly in the context of the political commitments of the 1960s, identifying it with a 'passion for social change' (DuBois 2001, 91). But, for her, radical history is not only about the engaged nature of intellectual activity. It does something more: 'what distinguishes "radical history" for me from other sorts of subversive intellectual and academic postures is the degree to which it incorporates a commitment to remain active and engaged in *historical* change in the present' (DuBois 2001, 92, emphasis added). Something particular appears to result from being a historian, then. According to Dubois: 'The great gift of our profession, if we choose to take it, is having the long view, knowing that "it" has happened before, will happen again, and is always different.' From this at once engaged but also 'historically' committed perspective, and acknowledging the acceptability or even demand

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for alternative points of view and the espousal of contradiction and disagreement within the historical profession today, she ends by proclaiming: 'radical history rules!' (DuBois 2001, 92)

While it seems that even mainstream academic history has indeed come a long way since the struggles of the 1960s to include oppositional viewpoints and to recognize the complexities of truthful representation, the historian's dual commitment continues to hold a tension. On the one hand, the kind of presentism advocated in all these calls is admittedly often today seen as a desideratum for history. Think also Dominick LaCapra, Hayden White and Keith Jenkins, for instance, but also of the way that attention to historians' practical and contemporary perspective has spread to quite standard rhetoric concerning history – a cynic might say that mounting pressure on scholars in the humanities to justify the value of their work has something to do with this overall emphasis. On the other hand, however, there still exists the lingering and disciplinarily ingrained belief that the investigation of past reality can effectively control ideological abuse. There is something in the specifically 'historical' nature of knowledge, of change, and so on, that is supposed to keep us on the right path. Again, a cynic might suggest that this is the only available route to sufficiently pragmatic justifications of historians' work in a consumption-oriented culture. It offers quick and easy appeal. What is history for, after all, if not to teach lessons and to show us some truth about being human? Or to curb excesses that result from too short a perspective on things. And so on. Taking this

route now also offers a quick and easy way to history's (continued) domestication, however.

The mutual hostility that the different attachments construct between 'proper' history on one side and 'activism' and 'politics' (or even 'revisionism' or 'propaganda') on the other gives the impression that the creation of a theoretically and formally sensitive and simultaneously historically accurate and disciplinarily acceptable work of history is extremely difficult. Yet why wouldn't a conventional but sufficiently 'reflexive' historian be capable of history in an engaged or radical register too (regardless of the specific take on the nature of history that they have)? One way of explaining this is indeed to say that they will feel the need to be well-mannered and tame. They are, to echo Zinn, simply 'supposed to be here to talk about history and present their papers'. And when they venture beyond their 'professional prison' (or safe-house, depending on how one views it), they risk being left outside the practice proper – consider, for example, the view that many historians promote of Zinn as 'shaky' on the history-front. (Although perhaps the risk is not always so great; Anton Froeyman's article in this issue goes a long way toward reminding how far respected historians can stray from their professional role without it causing problems.) Another way of explaining things lies in digging into the automatic disciplinary assumption that if historians simply take care of history, history will take care of itself. But even that formulation of 'historical' responsibility can be thought

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of differently: 'To sustain a commitment to the "time before now" ... suggests that we must continually develop our relationship with it and that part of that process of commitment is to dissent from orthodoxies. All historians have, in effect, a duty of discontent.' (Jenkins, Morgan & Munslow 2007, 1)

One argument deserving to be made is that we don't have the same kind of radically disobedient or oppositional histories as we have literatures, for example, as a consequence of the nature of the theory (or more precisely non-theory) concerning the research 'phase' and historian's professional expertise. If the theory and method of historical research are a reflection of the ideals that influenced history's formation as an academic genre – and what else would they be? – then it is no wonder that oppositional efforts *within* history are so easily incorporated into a disciplined, polite and non-contrarian discourse. In this setting, it appears to be fine to debate the facts but not the values that those facts are used to justify (or which the facts are simply presented as 'in themselves' legitimating). But what sense does that make in any world beyond polite and proper dinner conversation? Why so much fuss about arguing over individual facts – the establishment of which should, after all, be par for the course for the discipline – rather than the ideologies informing the work?

What all these various problems suggest is that to follow any 'post-narrativist' storyline successfully, and, perhaps more importantly, to build any kind of sensible theory of the cognitive and research practices of history, we still need proper analyses of the contents and formation of historians' expertise as well as practice-based studies of what historians do. Even then, this would in no way alter the problematics outlined by the 'discursive' or 'narrativist' side. It might, however, make the complexity of the theoretical issues more evident to a broader range of historians. One central difficulty

has long involved intuitions about 'reality' and its accessibility. Core understandings regarding the figuring of facts and the creation of 'fictions' by historians, the argument regarding there being no entailment from individual facts to values, or the inevitability of our 'discursive condition' (as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has so aptly labelled the situation), all continue to be regularly countered by furious pointings at something concrete. Yet the fundamentals of social construction should be especially clear to historians – and the finger-stabbing could thus be far more nuanced.

With sensitive readings of the philosophical problematics on both sides of the debate, it will hopefully be possible to find more common ground. The common intuitive experience of some 'entailment' from, or 'meaning' in, concrete reality could then be rehabilitated to more theoretical talk about history too, as long as it is first sufficiently clear that we are only ever operating with socially constructed reality, both as we encounter it 'now', 'immediately' and as it extends into the present from the past. On this level, there is no denying that the discursive networks we are all embedded in have at least some hold in the ways they mediate experience as well as in the ways they extend into our present from the past in terms of the commitments they involve us in *vis-à-vis*

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'the current situation'. Yet none of this is to claim that these engagements cannot still be rejected (there is no entailment, after all), but only to point out that any acceptance or rejection takes place in relation to endless discourses, practices and objects, and hence needs to expressly negotiate them. There is never a way of ignoring our (socially and discursively constructed) realities and the web of valuations that we always already find ourselves in. Indeed, the notion of 'figuration' alone, as introduced into the debates by Hayden White, captures this dynamic clearly enough, despite the various critiques of 'narrativism' as some absurd textualism.

After taking into account all these qualifications, there is then nothing very wrong with thinking that the concrete too is 'present' and 'accessible' through the discursive reality that we are thrown into, which constitutes us, and which we in turn reconstitute. (This process has long since been wonderfully elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre in terms of a continuing dynamics of an internalization and externalization of meanings and valuations, for example.) From a pragmatic point of view, one compromise can simply be to take these influences and this reality seriously in terms of at least a 'call' to a certain type of action, if never a straightforward entailment. Crucially, the role of 'past-talk' in this nexus of meanings is quite different to what it is if we think we are attending to questions of truth and reference. As in the argument for there being no entailment from 'brute' facts to values, focus needs to be on the level at which meaning is constituted. At the same time, this meaning constitution should not – especially from a politically concerned point of view or in a discussion of engaged intellectuals – be conceived of as radically subjective but as part of projects of communication. The most interesting challenges for historians are thus not primarily epistemological or disciplinary ones. Whether facts are 'true' or 'false' or values or beliefs are 'right' or 'wrong' is not the problem. The question is how we deal with them.

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