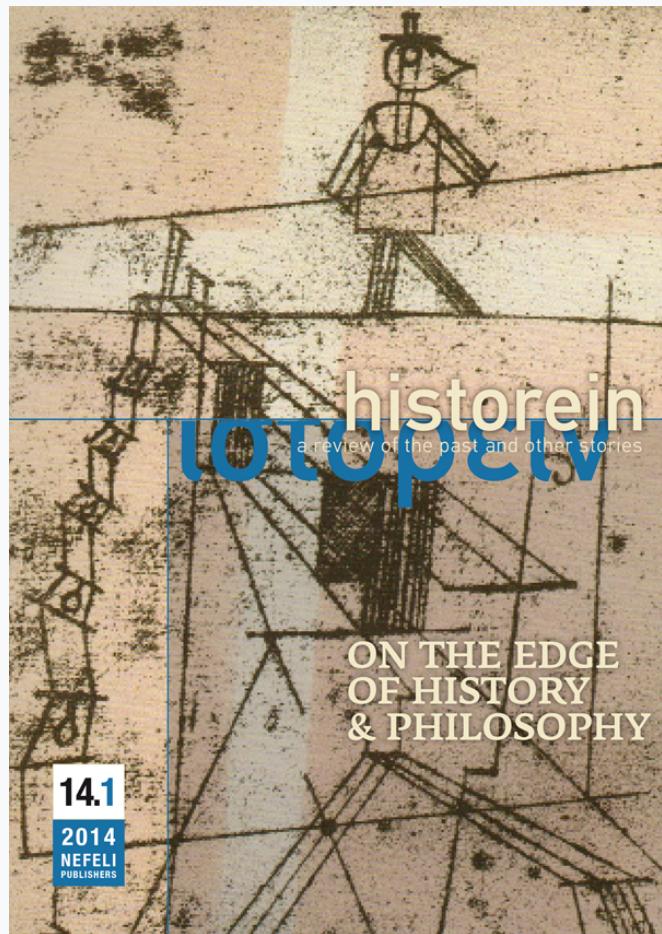


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On the 'strudel and apples' theory of historiography: A reply to Chris Lorenz

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On the ‘strudel and apples’ theory of historiography: A reply to Chris Lorenz

This collection of Chris Lorenz’s essays on the philosophy of historiography and the history of historiography is a valuable addition to the already growing library of translated and original books on the philosophy of historiography published in Poznań, in the larger West Slavic dialect. I wish such a collection of books was available in one of the smaller West Slavic dialects.

Lorenz’s work in the last quarter century reflects the tensions between the two previously dominant approaches to the philosophy of historiography, the positivism of the 1940s and 50s, and the narrative analysis of the 70s and 80s. Lorenz has been trying to overcome both and offer an alternative. He has also rooted his philosophy of historiography in historiography by applying it to concrete historiographical cases, mostly about German historiography.

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I argue that narrative analysis can be compatible with positivist philosophies of historiography because they attempt to answer different questions and so work on different levels of analysis. Narrative philosophies of historiography and the positivist approach to the philosophy of historiography share an emphasis on analysing the writings of historians, rather than their research and methods of inference, confirmation and justification.

The basic positivist project was *explicative*. The task of the philosopher was conceived as conceptual explication, the replacement of a familiar but vague and ambiguous concept by a more precisely characterised and systematically fruitful and illuminating one. The positivists attempted to explicate historiographical explanation, causation, objectivity etc. Since the positivists

had already explicated these concepts before examining historiography, it could either corroborate these explications or be considered vague and ambiguous, all the more in need of philosophic explications. Conceptual explication is independent from issues of justification. It is possible to explicate concepts of explanation or objectivity in a text without having to justify them. For example, if every explanation implies a covering law, as Hempel claimed, it does not imply that the explanation or law is true. Only that they are there. For example, if a historian writes that the economic success of the Soviet Union is best explained by its system of central planning, the positivist would only add that the concept of explanation here assumes a covering law that connects central planning with economic growth and innovation.

Likewise, the narrative analysis of historiography remains on the level of the final text and ignores research. It analyses literary structures rather than concepts but is just as disjoined from issues of justification and explanation. The classical analysis of Hayden White proposed that any historical process can be presented in one of four topoi: The history of Poland in the last two centuries can be written as a comedy, and the history of California can be written as a tragedy. Obviously the difference between a tragic and comedic historiography of the same events is textual rather than historical. Evidence and inference would not change a *topos* once it is established, but at most would be fitted to the pre-existing narrative. David Carr suggested that since humans make history, it already has the structure of a narrative, and so narrative realism is possible. Still, it is obvious that more than one type of story can be told about each historical process, even by people who share a tradition that binds the storytellers with the objects of the story. Without justification criteria, it is impossible to tell which story is right.

The conceptual and narrative research programmes can be consistent with each other. It is possible to do at once conceptual and textual analyses. But neither approach to the philosophy of historiography asks the question about the relation of historiography with the evidence. Both assume what I call the "strudel and apples" theory of historiography. It is obvious that in order to bake a strudel we need apples. Somebody has to grow apple trees and some people have to go to the orchard to harvest the fruit. They must choose which apples are ripe enough and which are rotten and should be discarded. The apple pickers are necessary and their work important. But they are not experts or geniuses. Their work does not require much expertise or even experience. However, once the apples are brought to the kitchen, the genius of the chef is displayed in how he works with them. How he slices or cooks them, which ingredients are added (cinnamon, raisins etc) and how he makes the dough and bakes the strudel. If observers wish to understand why a particular strudel is good or bad, they usually study what happens in the kitchen and not what goes on in the orchard. Likewise, arguably, when historians walk into the orchard of the archive, they pick and choose the ripe "facts" and discard the forged or otherwise unreliable evidence. The facts are collected in a basket and brought to the kitchen of the historian, where the master historian conceptualises, slices and combines them to form explanations and pose causal links as well as structure them in narrative form. Arguably, if philosophers of historiography are interested in understand-

ing historiography, they should not pay too much attention to the necessary but boring collection of facts, but study the construction of concepts and narratives.

However, there are no ripe and ready “facts” in historiography that the historian can pluck like an apple picker can pick ripe fruit off a tree. The archive does not resemble an orchard. It is not made of distinct atomic units that need to be selected and gathered, and then sliced and cooked in the historian’s narrative workshop.

Instead, the historian is searching for relevant evidence to infer from representations of the past that include explanations and causal relations. Since it is trivially true that all present phenomena are the effects of the past, the historian requires information theories that tell which present phenomena are likely to preserve which types of information about the past. The forging of a narrative is only the last stage in a long process of inference. Narrative historiography should be compared with popular science or at most with scientific textbooks, not with scientific research. As Kuhn noted, if we want to understand science, we need to look at what scientists have been doing, at the history and sociology of science, rather than at the textbooks that scientists write about their practices and the histories of their disciplines, which resemble fairytales.

Accordingly, the foundation for the philosophy of historiography should be the history of historiography. Philosophers of historiography need to study the actual practices and methodologies of historians, not their rhetoric and ideology. A successful *practice* of historiography does not constitute nor imply *theoretical knowledge*: successful investors like George Soros and Warren Buffett have not made significant contributions to economic theory. Successful politicians have usually not been great political theorists, and vice versa. Practitioners possess what Polanyi called “tacit knowledge”, a skill that defies articulation and cannot be taught explicitly by oral or written instruction. Professionals, such as historians, doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists and bankers, attempt to present their practices in terms that defend them by fitting them to contemporary models of epistemic legitimacy. They are not aware of their own tacit knowledge. Historians have never practiced the scientism they preached in the late nineteenth century, nor the postmodernism they advocated in the late twentieth century. Nor was Ranke’s historiography based on Platonic idealism. These were just rhetorical figures of speech designed for a particular audience.

Scientific historiography whose methods and results are shared by a uniquely heterogeneous and uncoerced consensus emerged with Ranke in the post-Napoleonic era in European history. This historiography allied itself with the state, if for no other reason because states were the gatekeepers to the archives. However, European statism, at least before 1848, was not nationalist. Historians allied themselves with the Enlightenment, rationalising agendas of multinational empires against myth, nationalism and religion. Nationalism constructed a historiography of eternal nations whose origins fade into myth. But myth makers like Palacký or Treitschke were not scientific historians within the Rankean paradigm.

Lorenz’s association of scientific historiography with nationalism is highly questionable also because the methodological origins of Rankean historiography go back to the late eighteenth century, to the philological methods of biblical criticism and comparative historical linguistics. All these dis-

ciplines infer representations of common causes from their information-preserving effects in the present. They must assume theories about the transmission of information in time; which types of information preserve better information when transmitted along causal chains? Biblical criticism assumed that the names of God mutated more slowly than other parts of biblical texts. Therefore they preserve information about the original parts of the Bible: parts of the same biblical book that use different names for God probably originated in different times and places. Comparative historical linguistics assumed that words for immediate family members, fauna and flora and places change more slowly than other words and so preserve information about common origins of languages such as the Indo-European languages. Ranke assumed that eyewitness accounts written immediately after the event and not for public consumption, such as diary entries, preserve more information than memoirs written years later and for political reasons. All these sciences share the inference of representations of common cause tokens from similarities between their information-preserving effects in the present.

Lorenz emphasises the influence of values on historiography. True, all historiography is value laden. But not all values are equal. In scientific historiography, cognitive values form the basis of a consensus, together with theories about information transmission in time. The primacy of cognitive epistemic values over therapeutic, political, national, religious or other values marks the distinction between scientific and therapeutic historiography. A large, uniquely heterogeneous and uncoerced community accepts historiography founded on scientific cognitive values. Historiography founded on therapeutic values is accepted by particular homogenous groups that are clearly identifiable according to their problems and grievances: Holocaust denial is popular among neo-Nazis who suffer from guilt for what the Nazis did and have a political interest in dissociating the Nazis from mass murder; particular national historical myths are promoted by nationalists of particular national identities who suffer from a deficit in heroic prestige; faith in conspiracies is promoted by particular groups of people who share a sense of helplessness and meaninglessness as the world changes and passes them by. There has always been a market for therapeutic historiography because people and their institutions will always pay to promote or consume therapeutic accounts of their past. The hierarchical struggle for primacy between therapeutic and scientific cognitive values manifests itself in social conflicts. During the nineteenth century, various forged "ancient" poetic documents surfaced in Europe but were exposed despite their therapeutic value for nationalist causes. The poems of Ossian, the "Scottish Homer", were exposed in the early nineteenth century as having been written in the previous century by James Macpherson. In the Czech lands, Tomáš G. Masaryk participated in exposing similar "ancient" Czech poems as forgeries. These poems were written during the Czech struggle for national self-determination to invent a heroic ancient Czech history. The universality of the cognitive values of scientific historiography is demonstrated by Masaryk's dual role as the foremost leader of the Czech national movement, who became the first president of Czechoslovakia, and as a professional philosopher, who made the most significant contribution to the public exposure of the forgeries.

Legitimate historians, like Masaryk, accept a hierarchy of values, according to which their scientific cognitive values take precedence over therapeutic values. We may want to believe that a group with which we identify has always been virtuous and faultless; and that whatever blemishes we find in our group are the product of the evil that was done to us unjustly by some other group(s).

But if this involves overriding the critical cognitive values of the historiographical community, this is exactly what the uniquely heterogeneous historiographical community should not let us believe in.

Legitimate historiography is marked by the precedence of critical cognitive values over other values, not by the absence of other values that generate different historiographical interpretations. Indeed, the presence of values in historiographical interpretation is inevitable. As long as the hierarchical precedence of cognitive over other values is preserved, legitimate historiography can accommodate a myriad of different and conflicting values and ensuing interpretations.

Historiographical interpretations are affected by the noncognitive values of their authors. This is the main reason for the differences between historiographical interpretations of similar topics. Yet, agreements among historiographical interpretations on their scientific cores are made possible by the identical cognitive values they share, and a hierarchy of values that gives precedence to cognitive values over other values. Once the requirements of the cognitive values are satisfied, there is ample space for personal interpretations, value judgments and expositions of value-laden meaning and significance.