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Theory and Practice of Historical Writing in Times of Globalization

Abstract: In recent years, radical changes have taken place to the ways of thinking of historical writing, its methodology and its meaning as a specific field of knowledge. These changes are connected with the historical situation of which it is itself a part, and are also concerned both with a dispute within the discipline and with the current ethical-political debates that cannot accurately be removed from attempts to better understand today's world. As part of these changes, we are faced with a radical review of historiographical paradigms. These changes concern not only the practice of historical writing, but also the role of history as a source of political legitimation and as a way in which individuals understand their belonging and commitment to the political-institutional frameworks within which they lead their lives.

Like no other human science, history is an essentially interdisciplinary field whose boundaries are hard to define. Its repertoire of concepts not only has to do with the detailed and documented empirical reconstruction of what happened—it also has an interdependent relationship with other social disciplines concerning the topics involved in each case, so that any innovations in the theories of those disciplines have an impact on historical narratives (just as historical reconstructions can help to test and reconfigure them). On the other hand, historiography itself is also situated in a historical context, which it tries to understand simultaneously with shaping its concepts.

The normative dimension of the historical account concerns not only the values a historian shares with her contemporaries, but also the secular role of history as a source of legitimation of power and of the identity policies for civic education. The changes in this role also entail modifications to the way individuals understand their belonging and commitment to the political-institutional frameworks within which they lead their lives.

While recent debate in historical theory has revolved around two main themes—namely, the narrative structure of historical discourse and what we might call the ‘memory paradigm’—with globalization (and the thematization thereof in the context of the new ‘global history’), we enter a postnarrativist stage of the debate, in

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which, as regards the first theme, the *empirical* character of historical research is recovered. In this way, it becomes possible to exit the blind alley of historiography understood as a purely linguistic construction, consisting in a matrix of timeless rhetorical and narrative devices, independent of any cognitive claim. As regards the second theme, by placing history in the context of the debate concerning a better understanding of its own time, it is possible to account for its role in the exploration of the past as well as in the diagnosis of the present and the attempts to think of and act in future events. One of the consequences of the post-ethnocentric ‘global history’ project is a critical rehabilitation of key aspects of the vilified ‘speculative’ philosophy of history.

I

History has undergone, at least for the last fifty years, a crisis and successive transformation of the traditional canons that used to dominate its self-understanding as a discipline and which had been established following its final ‘professionalization’ (Iggers 2008, p. 108) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European university spaces. This current crisis can be compared to that of the foundations of mathematics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both in the case of historiography and in that of its epistemological theory, the reasons for this transformation are not purely internal to the historian’s workshop, but have to do with changes in the structure of the contemporary world to which her interpretation of the past belongs.

These changes cannot, in fact, be separated from the ongoing globalization process, on which various factors converge and whose consequences are not yet altogether clear. It is an epochal process that challenges the premises of modern thought as well as those of the so-called postmodern narrativism, insofar as the latter refuses—in its radical versions—to establish a cognitive connection between historical experience and historiography. Concomitantly with the questioning of traditional theoretical assumptions, there emerge paradoxically new forms of historical writing that imply unconventional paradigms whose theory is only beginning to arise.

The topics I will address next involve the historical situation of historiographical practice under globalization, the changes concerning the subject or theme of traditional history, and the changes brought about by all this regarding its conceptual repertoire, as well as key aspects of its methodology and postulates that used to be considered decidedly ahistorical. These changes, as we will see, also involve historical metatheory and some rehabilitation, though with strong caveats from the long vilified ‘speculative’ philosophy of history. Fi-

nally, we should consider the consequences of the foregoing for the internal re-arrangement of the discipline, the way of organizing how it is taught and, more importantly, its cognitive and normative contribution in the context of contemporary societies, with a view to an extended public sphere at the global level.

First of all, we should start by specifying the realm of history against other fields of knowledge based on its specific object of study. As is generally known, the term 'history' has many meanings. Usually a distinction is drawn between its reference to the objective course of events, on the one hand, and its narrative manifestation, on the other—but the polysemy does not end here (Brauer 2009, pp. 19–38). In any case, it is significant that the word 'history' should always be accompanied by a genitive—the 'history of...' – and it would seem that any object or subject could take the place of these suspension points, from the 'history of the Peloponnesian War' to the 'history of Roman painting'. It is this flexibility of the term that has triggered the view that history, rather than having a specific object of study is simply one approach to any object, perceived through its changes over time. While there is certainly some truth in this, it is also true that we mainly associate the word 'history' with a specific theme (though it is usually taken for granted): the changes in collective life and its forms of social and political organization.

A key example of this theme in the modern world (at least since the emergence of history chairs at universities) has been that of the 'nation state', fulfilling a similar role to those previously played by monarchies or religions. This is shown by the fact that the need for constructing historical accounts and teaching them went hand in hand with the demands for a retrospective legitimation for the establishment of states, and that it ran parallel to the creation of archives, museums and 'sites of memory' (Nora 2001, pp. 23–43). In the case of the histories of states—like in those of nations, religions and the more or less vague concept of 'peoples'—there is usually (besides any theoretical interest in how the events took place) a political mandate concerning the justification of power, as well as the development of criteria for citizens' belonging and identification (Berger / Donovan / Passmore 1999; Berger / Lorenz 2010). This can clearly be seen in the role of history at school, beyond its claim of providing 'objective' knowledge of the past. Therefore, when we talk simply about 'history', we tend to think of national histories or of human history in general, where the former would be protagonists in a wider context.

While it is true that history is implicitly associated with the transformation of the collective life of nations and their political and social organizations, another one of its non-thematized assumptions is some idea of a common framework integrating the most diverse human activities, as belonging to the same 'period'. This assumption of totality may be a byproduct of the construction of

History with a capital initial, but it should not necessarily be interpreted as suggesting a hypostatized collective subject, but as a possible space for interaction among various factors

This presupposition of a history common to humanity, shaped by the presence of multiple states organized around a limited territory with a horizon of contemporaneity, remains at the basis both of the historiography of nations and of teaching curricula, and is also shared by the view of history still held by the reader of a historiographical text. Precisely this relationship with the public is also an undeniable aspect of historical discourse, which distinguishes it from that of other disciplines to the extent that understanding a historiographical text does not seem to require any specialized knowledge. Accordingly, history has privileged access to public opinion—and it is no coincidence that most disputes, particularly about recent history, have to do with contemporary political struggles. However, over the last few years these assumptions have been moving away from the central stage of historical narratives—which does not actually mean that they are no longer written.

This shift of the nation-state axis is due to several factors. These certainly include the fateful experiences of the role of totalitarian and dictatorial states, particularly after the Second World War, which have led us to question the scope and limitations of state power as such and, at the same time, the globalization process under which they have in fact lost some of their sovereignty in economic, military, communicational and political terms, given their growing interdependence and international regulations. Simultaneously, academic history has not only increasingly abandoned its role as a source of legitimation of power but in many cases it has adopted a critical function that erodes identity accounts, delegating to a discredited popular historical literature or an ‘official history’ the various attempts to legitimize the present by the past.

If we now ask ourselves about the subjects that are today likely to replace national secular exploits, we cannot avoid mentioning three—two of which have a long tradition, though they appear with different features in contemporary historiography. I am referring to the notions of ‘civilization’ (Fisch 1992, pp. 679–774), ‘empire’ (Walther 1992, pp. 171–236) and thirdly – the main topic I seek to address—to the concept of ‘global’ (Brauer 2016, pp. 51–65). A multiplicity of subjects should be added, which go beyond traditional histories (insofar as they include concepts previously considered ahistorical), such as: childhood; insanity; women; death; ‘mentalities’ (Duby 1961, pp. 937–966); and hence also the history of the very ‘concepts’ (Palti 2011, pp. 227–248) governing historical reconstructions, which were previously taken for granted. But also worthy of addition to the list are geographical areas such as the Mediterranean, the Caucasus, etc., or subjects such as bread, silk, wine, etc. However heteroge-

neous these subjects may seem, they have in common that their historical path transcends changing national borders and that they do not focus on states.

Some of these subjects have given rise to the development of new disciplines such as ‘conceptual history’, ‘women’s history’ or later ‘gender history’, etc.; others, such as ‘environmental history’, transcend the traditional division between human and natural sciences. Concerning the first two subjects mentioned above, the notions of ‘empire’ and ‘civilization’, both retain features of what Koselleck calls ‘asymmetrical’ (Koselleck 1989, pp. 211–259) relational concepts insofar as they inevitably establish a contrast regarding certain peoples or nations as inferior to others, even when historians seek to adopt a neutral perspective or write from the victim’s point of view.

But, before addressing these, we should mention a key subject matter that emerged from the beginning of historiography and that implies by its nature a ‘transnational’ approach. I refer to ‘war’ as the subject of historical accounts—even when it has generally been narrated from the winners’ point of view or by those who believe they have been unjustly defeated. ‘War’ will undoubtedly remain one of the main topics of historical narratives, but it is also possible to verify here a major change precisely in that it is no longer a source of legitimation in itself for states, empires and civilizations—a change in values that becomes apparent in the significant renaming in most countries of the ‘Ministry of War’ as ‘Ministry of Defense’, around the end of the Second World War.

While the notion of ‘empire’ has recently undergone a revival because of its reformulation in postmodern Marxist social theory by Hardt and Negri (2000), still it has not inspired meaningful historical reconstructions, while the concept of ‘civilization’ has, on the other hand, been rehabilitated in contemporary historiography. We can notice a recent rebirth of the term ‘civilization’, which was already present in Spengler and Toynbee’s metanarratives, and extensively discredited by professional historians, from the points of view of both historiography and political theory in the 1990s (Conrad 2016, pp. 175–179). It is a somewhat vague notion that, on the one hand, was already designed by Herder to avoid the *aporias* and constraints of a concept of ‘progress’ that held Europe and the so-called ‘Western and Christian world’ as its main protagonists and sidelined other cultures—but that on the other hand, regardless of its alleged descriptive character, did not always expressly involve normative aspects that both imply a positive assessment against opposing concepts (such as ‘barbarism’, ‘primitivism’, ‘savagery’, etc.) and grant its own ‘civilization’ a privileged status. In its updated versions, the aim is to overcome the distortions of Eurocentrism to the extent that ‘civilizations’ are portrayed as closed, incommensurable containers, with an untainted original identity—but at the same time they run the risk of advocating the identity they consider their own as a standard, based on which it

is sufficient to interpret global developments (e.g., Sinocentrism, Afrocentrism, Islamocentrism, Latin-American-centrism). I think it is with good reason that Sebastian Conrad considers these variants nothing but “a response to current experiences of globalization” (Conrad 2016, pp. 175). As is generally known, global and ‘glocal’ are merely two sides of the same phenomenon.

II

After around the second half of the twentieth century, besides (1) the shift of the nation-state axis toward other collective entities, such as the aforementioned notions of ‘empire’ and ‘civilization’, there has occurred a gradual but increasingly rapid (2) fragmentation of the history field—like a cracked mirror into multiple topics and problems which are hard to classify—and subsequently, (3) the attempt to reunify that diversity around a main theme and to establish as far as possible a general perspective, based on which internal connections might be set up. It is precisely in this context that, along with other similar attempts, a new historiographical field has taken shape—namely, ‘global history’.

To account for this phenomenon, we could start by contrasting two relatively new disciplines, ‘global history’ and ‘microhistory’ (Ginsburg 1993, p. 10–35—for a very different view closer to postmodernism, see: Szijártó / Magnússon 2013). Despite first appearances, these are not diametrically opposed, but rather complementary, genres. In both cases there occurs a ‘change in time scale’ *vis-à-vis* traditional history. Regarding the former, it involves reconstructing (based on short time fragments or portions of individuals’ lives in specific social and cultural contexts) the way of life in a given period that thus becomes iconic. The emergence of this type of approach converges with others, such as that of the ‘history of private life’ or of ‘daily life’, ‘oral history’, ‘history from below’, and all of them with the emergence of the ‘memory paradigm’, the rise of which has been led at least since the 1990s (judging by its impact on public opinion, though its theoretical development began earlier) by the studies of the Shoah and studies of ‘genocide’ in general.

But the extensive debates about the scope and limitations of the opposition between the memory and the history paradigms (Tamm 2013, pp. 458–473) should not lead us to ignore the impact of the studies of memory in historiographical practice itself. What these new fields have in common is precisely the increasing inclusion in their narratives of the first-person perspective—both that of the victim (or victimizer) and of the witness, which used to go unnoticed in traditional impersonal histories and even in social history.

Of course, what is noticeable is the emergence of historical themes such as those above, which establish new narration subjects such as ‘women’, ‘childhood’, ‘the Mediterranean’, ‘death’, ‘madness’, and ‘sexuality’ (not forgetting Michel Foucault’s pioneering works, even though they cannot be considered strictly historiographical). Here, fragmentation has to do with historical subjects that cannot be detached from contemporary political struggles claiming for rights, or from certain nations, regions or minorities whose histories have been silenced and are expressly or implicitly written from the standpoint of an emancipatory project.

The emergence of ‘conceptual history’ has been established as a large, recent field of studies that shows the temporal dimension of a repertoire of categories that were considered ahistorical, ‘natural kinds’, with which historians used to read the past. Something similar can be said of the ‘history of the present’ (*Zeitgeschichte*), whose emergence as a discipline is also recent. With its establishment as a research field of its own, the traditional canon of the necessary ‘historical distance’ is broken (Bevernage / Lorenz 2013, pp. 7–25). We should add to this a series of historical narratives dealing with new historical fields, such as the birth of ‘environmental-’ or ‘eco-history’, which straddles the boundaries between human and natural sciences.

Concerning ‘global history’, we should distinguish the emergence of at least two subject areas: on the one hand, ‘globalization history’, about which there is already extensive literature, involving a series of disputes over the criteria for establishing its periods and dates; and on the other, the birth of so-called ‘global history’ as a genre of its own, different from ‘world history’ and its close relatives, ‘transnational history’ and the so-called ‘big history’, ‘intercultural history’, etc. ‘Global history’, as shown by the bibliographic boom over the last years, has established itself as a specific discipline representing a new point of view of ‘world history’ after the criticism of Eurocentrism and Poscolonilism.

However, unlike the notion of the nation-state, or that of imperialism, ‘globalization’ means, rather than an entity, (1) a process, whose contours are difficult to establish and, simultaneously, (2) a space for multicausal interaction. Unlike the notion of ‘capitalism’ (which is undoubtedly one of its key aspects and about which there have been many theories and discussions for at least two hundred years), in the case of globalization, its theory—much like its objective development—is a work in progress, and it would be unilateral to consider it merely a phase of late capitalism. It seems to potentially hold forces leading to new forms of dependence and marginalization, as well as to a new era of Enlightenment and emancipation of a citizens’ network that covers the whole planet, with both things being probably true at least at the current stage.

But from the point of view of historiography and its theory, the aim is to establish a kind of system of interconnections covering various aspects of the sociopolitical, military, technological, communicational and cultural scenarios, which may in turn help to explain the increasing homogenization at the international level, both of consumption habits and of the mainstream representations of the ways of life considered appropriate for today's world.

However, unlike the concepts of 'universal history', 'world history' or the 'history of humanity', whose sense is highly vague and seldom defined, 'global' history refers to objective processes involving changes in economics, in the mass media and the means of transportation, in the available techniques for transforming nature, in health systems, and in institutionalized standards in national and international agencies, as well as in many NGOs— but it also involves the standards of scientific knowledge and, in this case, of what may be considered by consensus an 'objective' historical narrative. What takes place in labeling a history as 'global' is not only a larger-scale, and hence more comprehensive, approach, but also a search for the explanation of processes that cannot be understood solely from an endogenous perspective. This concept refers to a space of interaction among many factors and differs from the notions of both 'dialectical totality' in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition and from the notion of 'world-system' suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1974–2011), insofar as in this space there is room both for causality and for contingency, both for intentional action and for dysfunctionality.

In any case, it is necessary to distinguish the discussion about the meaning of globalization (and of 'anti-globalization' movements) from what constitutes for historiography a subject area in itself, for empirically exploring changes and events that are taking place in the world and which could subsidiarily help either to confirm or to test theoretical approaches.

In fact, the larger the scale, the bigger the difference between historical discourse and literary narrative, since historical discourse involves anonymous processes (such as the increase in birthrates, the increase in economic growth, the changes in institutional forms, etc.), whereas literary narrative seems to be associated with certain characters, their actions and their fate. While this happened already with social history, it is especially the case with global history.

While narrativism has contributed to the rediscovery of the narrative dimension of historical texts, it has failed to set forth, in its more radical versions, a theory of the specific structure of historical narratives. In Hayden White's school, historiography is thereby deprived of its cognitive claim as an empirical discipline. While history thus comes closer to literature (which proves, by some quirk of thought, more useful in its more recent postmodernist versions—and particularly in 'docudrama' (White 2014, p. 29)—for bringing us closer to 'real'

events), historiographical theory moves further away from historiographical practice and its most recent developments. White's metahistory of the historical imagination in the nineteenth century does not seem to be able to find its equivalent for twentieth- and twenty-first-century historiography, into which social and political theory has burst, just as new genres have emerged that are increasingly difficult to reduce to literary narrative. It seems to be more concerned with establishing what history should be, rather than with accounting for its latest developments.

III

There have been attempts to characterize the historical situation of contemporary man, both as regards the most significant changes in society and mainstream ideas, using different terms such as postmodernism, postmetaphysics, 'postnational constellation', 'post-traditional society' or post-history. All these epithets seek to show the new contours of today's world for the purpose of examining its causes and consequences. Instead, the 'globalization' concept has prevailed since the 1980s and exponentially more so since the 1990s (Mooney / Evans 2007). In fact, today nobody hesitates to associate the notion of globalization with an objective historical phenomenon and not with a specific theory that may and must be discussed. Furthermore, we could still say that the aforementioned terms represent—along with others, such as, for instance, the 'environmental' movement, the revival of 'cosmopolitanism' or 'multiculturalism', and the rise of a culture of 'human rights'—different attempts to understand and redefine political alternatives in the context of a 'globalized' world. What appears as controversial are the different ways of understanding globalization as such, but not the fact that it designates a series of phenomena characterizing today's world and the irreversible scenario in which future generations will live.

From the perspective of historical theory, the ongoing globalization process has many consequences. The first of these is (1) a return to topics belonging to the classical philosophy of history as a concern for the objective path of worldwide events. Of course, the aim here is not to advocate a 'speculative' philosophy of history that used to interpret the past as a one way street toward a promising (or eschatological) future, but simply to account for an increasingly interdependent world in which historical events cannot be explained in the limited context of autonomous nation-states and in which (albeit for different reasons from those Kant or Hegel had in mind) the globe assumes a common 'destiny'. In fact, the so-called ecological crisis, the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the proliferation of social media (partly beyond governmental control), the homoge-

nization of consumption habits and of forms of industrial organization and collective institutions, as well as the advent of para- and supra-governmental institutions, etc., but also (and not least) the emergence of an extended public opinion that is not indifferent to the process of critical review of the ways of organizing social and political life, all portray a changed scenario that theory cannot ignore. Incidentally, in fact, the idea of the nation-state had already been a successful global export product from the West at an earlier stage, and where state structures did not exist or were only partially present, the rebellions against colonialism and imperialism were paradoxically part of its introduction.

Secondly (2), with the emergence of the new historical genres, a new form of universalism also appears. On the one hand, what occurs in historiographical theory, as in many other areas, is a standardization of the forms of discourse—what Sebastian Conrad calls the ‘formatting’ (Conrad 2016, p. 203)—of what is deemed an acceptable historical narrative, as shown in the guidelines for the submission of papers for international conferences and ‘publications’. On the other hand, disciplines such as global history, contemporary history or women’s history transcend the scheme of national histories because of their very subject. This brings about the gradual dismissal of a particularistic, endogenous perspective. It is significant that, even in the histories of certain peoples, the fact that their author or reader should be a foreigner may prove irrelevant or make them even more interesting, to the extent that their point of view does not seem conditioned by prejudices of belonging. The well-known precept about the necessary ‘distance’ as a requirement for the objectivity of the historical account (Salber Philipps 2013) is based on two grounds that need distinction: the first has to do with the possible distortion of the facts according to the narrator’s involvement; and the second is that events are considered to be still in progress, so it is not yet possible to assess their consequences. (Of course, concerning this latter point, boundaries are really hard to define.) But, as regards the former, the criterion of ‘distance’ can be applied not only chronologically, but also simultaneously based on the ‘foreigner’s’ view, to the extent that comparative history written from a global perspective relativizes the local representations of the meaning of events.

Thirdly (3), the establishment of these new historical genres makes explicit not only the link between theory of history and political theory and, hence, the *normative* dimension of the historical discourse, but also of its *cognitive and explanatory* claim. ‘Global history’ does not seek to be something like a synthesis or point of convergence of different historical approaches, but proposes a space for interaction and ‘integration’ (Conrad 2016, pp. 67–68) that expands the synchronicity and diachronicity spectrum to explore possible causal relationships among past events and helps to place them on a wider horizon.

In conclusion, we can distinguish five levels for anchoring the process of transformation of the field of historical studies. The first has to do with the historical situation of the contemporary world in the context of the ongoing globalization process. The impact of this situation is directly shown by the emergence of 'global history' as well as by the different attempts to establish the 'history of globalization' or 'globalization in history'. Also, we should mention the 'global' perspective of historical studies concerning the most varied subjects. The second level involves the changes within the discipline of history itself—the emergence of new subjects and fields that transcend nation-states, as well as the review of basic concepts that used to dominate the canon of the professionalization of historical studies.

The third level refers to a rehabilitation of a philosophy of history from a planetary point of view, to the extent that the question arises again (based on various developments, such as climate change, the nuclear threat, the emergence of para- and supra-national organizations(about the global meaning of events, without falling for this reason into a speculative or teleological theory about an inescapable fate for humanity. Thinking from a global perspective has become a must, given today's challenges, as is an ethical commitment to future generations. The fourth involves the recovery and redefinition of the notion of 'historical totality', understood not as a substantive subject independent of collective actions and institutions or as a 'system', but rather as a space for multiple possible causalities and interactions to be empirically examined.

The fifth and last level refers to the role of history in the ethical-political debate *vis-à-vis* an enlarged, worldwide public sphere. As the discussion about the so-called Holocaust (mentioned here because of its iconic 'global' role, as a negative 'historical sign' [Kant] of times that accompany the contemporary world as a shadow) shows, the historian's historical description of what happened not only puts 'the limits of our representation' (Friedländer 1992) to the test, but precisely for that reason, it is part of a contemporary debate that leads to a review of the normative assumptions that may go beyond their mere application.

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