

## ARTICLES

### THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SCHOLARLY HISTORY WRITING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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VÖRÖS, László. The social function of historical knowledge and scholarly history writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Historický časopis*, 2017, 65, 5, pp. 785-797, Bratislava. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century historiography remains epistemologically diverse like no other discipline in the social sciences and humanities. Theoretically uninformed, often nationalist, and objectivist (reconstructionist) narrative historians coexist with constructionist and deconstructionist historians who work with social theories and conduct critical analyses within the same institutional frames of regional or national historiographies. In spite of decades of intense plausible criticism – at least in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – the national/nationalist history writing based on rather naïve objectivist epistemology remains influential and forms an important, if not dominant, part of respective national historiographies. The present paper suggests that there are several factors of the lasting reproduction and even thriving of the obsolete epistemological positions that traditional, narrative national/nationalist historiographies are based on. These might be categorized as cognitive, social, and institutional in their nature. The paper analyses particularly the social purpose of the knowledge about the past and the social functions of institutionalized professional history writing. National histories play an important part in the politics of memory and identity; they provide a historical dimension to the ideal (imagined) national community, they also serve as legitimizing or delegitimizing narratives – these functionalities require a strongly objectivist (naïve) epistemology. In fact, the epistemological points of departure of the traditional narrative national/nationalist historians are very similar to the intuitive “pre-cognitive” theories of the past shared by most ordinary people. Both are based on the idea that the past can be narrated in the form of one true story. The paper comes to the conclusion that historiographies – at least in the Central and Eastern European countries – are formatively influenced by social determinants coming from outside the discipline to a much larger extent that most historians are ready to admit. Key words: Social function of history. Historiography. Abuse of history. Legitimization through history. Epistemology of historiography.

The study of the social function of history and historiography is not new and neither is it simple.<sup>1</sup> It is not simple since it poses some serious theoretical and methodological

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1 This article is a slightly developed version of the presentation that was given at the 15<sup>th</sup> congress of the Slovak Historical Society held on May 11-13 2016 in Skalica, Slovakia. Footnotes and references were

challenges. In particular, it is important to distinguish between the declared ideal aims, intentions and conceptions of historians and the actual practice of history writing and its social impact. It is also necessary to distinguish whether we are speaking of universal cognitive or psychological modality, meaning a subjective need for temporal anchoring of the individual's self-image, or about an institutionalized activity, which is part of the processes of secondary socialization of the individual. In my presentation I will briefly outline some of the reasons why professional history writing is epistemologically torn apart to such an unparalleled degree. There are widely divergent views within our discipline about theoretical and methodological issues concerning the very foundations of historiography as a field of scholarship. There is no general consensus on such elementary questions as *how* and *for what reasons* the past should be studied. What is most surprising, within the mainstream of national historiographies worldwide, an obsolete way of researching and representing history prevails, in spite of the fact that it has been widely criticised and plausibly falsified on many grounds for at least half a century now. I will argue that one of the reasons of this peculiar state of matters is that those obsolete forms of research and history writing fulfil important social functions. At this point, however, I would like to state that what I will present on the next few pages merely touches upon a few particular aspects of an otherwise much larger phenomenon.

During the period of the professionalization of historiography in the last 150–200 years, there have been developments not only in the epistemic points of departure and declared ideals and aims of historical research, but also the audience for which historians wrote their works changed dramatically. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and depending on the specific period and regime also in part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians wrote primarily for the educated middle class people, who were interested in public affairs and were regarded as the “core” of the “nation”. The institutionalized mainstream national historiographies most often addressed their readers through the language of the educated middle class. The form of representation was almost exclusively narrative, the logic of the explanation the historians applied was the logic of the nationalizing and nationalist middle class and the value judgements proposed by historians were based mostly on the values of that same middle class.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly to the present times, historians began to write primarily for historians; and many historians started to research problems and ask questions that are too complex, or seemingly too trivial and uninteresting to the lay public. The historiographic practice dramatically diversified so that various orientations and schools have existed and functioned side by side, a situation that continues today. Some currents are consistently critical and analytic, conforming to the highest standards of scholarship, while other are openly naive with approaches to research that do not meet the currently prevailing scholarly standards. Between these two extreme positions, both of which have a definitely minority place in the discipline today, a multitude of intermediate approaches occur.

However, despite these developments the social purpose of knowledge of the past has not changed in its basic function. Philosophers of history and historians of historiography only recently began to study in greater detail the dialectic nature of the communication

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added only to a limited extent.

of professional historians with the public. Historians participate in public commemoration events, are often called by the media as experts at the anniversaries of historical events, great deeds of great men, or the birth/death of historical actors important to a national community, social movement or political party. In such situations historians often “just” play the game orchestrated by the moderator (a publicist, journalist, presenter etc.). Events like these often follow a script, and different kinds of occasion (birth or death anniversary of a person, anniversary of a founding act, anniversary of beginning or ending date of an event and so on) have their different canons of commemoration, that to a certain extent regulate what questions may be asked from historians and what kind of answers should be given by historians. In such situations historians serve a particular social purpose. I will return to this point later. Now it is important to ask how does this purpose, or more particularly, this kind of situation, influence the impartiality, sense of proportion and tendency not to generalize of the historian, and the quality of communicated knowledge? We know that social and political (ideological) influence on historiography exists. A multitude of critical studies of cases, where the public, political or cultural discourse has a strongly formative influence on historical discourse, are already available, and I am not speaking only of outrightly ideological historiographies in non-democratic regimes.

This is not only a trivial theme of research for philosophers, but an important epistemological and ethical problem, and especially concerning historiography out of all disciplines of the humanities and science in general. Physicists, chemists or biologists too communicate with the lay public, but in their case there is no risk that their scientific practice, conceptual apparatus, and methods will be contaminated by naive concepts and thought constructions. For example, it is very unlikely that the theory of evolution would be replaced by some sort of creationism. Perhaps it is not the best comparison, since if such a radical and non-scientific turn occurred in the theoretical foundations of biology, we would have to speak about a significant regression. However, in the case of historiography, despite the long term gradual and progressive sophistication the influence of the non-scholarly sphere remains large.

Naturally, there are various views on the public or social engagement of historians. There are also different views on the purpose of historical knowledge and so on the mission of historians. Views vary between two absolute positions, namely that if historiography should remain a scholarly discipline it must be directed exclusively by the logic of its research practice and guided by an uncorrupted desire to learn about the human nature through studying the past human related phenomena. On the opposite pole is the view that historiography should be a socially engaged discipline, which should actively react to “public demands”. Its activity should be primarily determined by the “needs of society” – whatever that should mean. Between these two poles we find a wide range of intermediate positions, differing in various ways, but most frequently emphasizing one or the other aspect of this complex question. Apparently the majority of historians do not consider this to be an important issue and relegate it to the realm of philosophy or at best the theory of history, which, however, is usually considered as having little practical relevance for the practice of scholarly research and history writing. Understandably there is no single normative answer to the question of whether historians have to publicly engage

and react to themes or questions, which can be described as “questions of public interest” from one or other ideological position, and if they should, then how and to what degree?

Historiography developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a nationalist discipline, which had the primary aim of providing knowledge about the past of the “nation” as the primary referential group of human societies. A vast amount of literature already exists that analyses how historiographies served various societal purposes in the last two centuries. Historians often helped to legitimize regimes or world views; they functioned as ideological producers of knowledge about the past. Narratives about national history took over the function of myths of ancestry and heroism, with the primary aim of creating group solidarity remaining unchanged. In other words, historiography created stories that provided a framework for identification with an ideal community: a nation or ethnic group, religion, denomination or other referential social entity. This is clearly far from being the only function fulfilled by knowledge about the past. As we will soon see, history also functions as a source of self-identification, legitimization, inspiration, tradition and also can serve as a source of critical knowledge about humans as social beings. In other words, history was and is written for various social purposes. It remains an open question what should be regarded as scholarly history and, what social purpose can historiography fulfil without ceasing to be a scholarly discipline?

The criticisms of traditional narrative national historiography<sup>2</sup> from the last half century are relevant to such a degree that they can be resisted only by ignorance. As long

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- 2 WHITE, Hayden. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore; London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, ISBN 0801814693; PAUL, Herman. *The Historical Imagination*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2011, ISBN 9780745650135; ANKERSMIT, Frank. *History and Topology : The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994, ISBN 0520080459; ANKERSMIT, Frank. *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2012, ISBN 0801450713; ANKERSMIT, Frank. *Language and Historical Experience*. Bielefeld : ZfP, 1995; JENKINS, Keith. *Re-thinking History*. London; New York : Routledge, 1991, ISBN 0415304431; JENKINS, Keith. *On “What is History?”: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London; New York : Routledge, 1995, ISBN 0415097258; JENKINS, Keith. *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*. London; New York : Routledge, 1999, ISBN 0415164168; MUNSLOW, Alun. *Deconstructing History*. 2nd Ed. London; New York : Routledge, 2006, ISBN 9780415391443; MUNSLOW, Alun. *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*. Second Edition. London; New York : Routledge, 2006, ISBN 9780415385770; MUNSLOW, Alun. *The New History*. London : Pearson Longman, 2003, ISBN 0582472822; JENKINS, Keith – MUNSLOW, Alun (Eds.). *The Nature of History Reader*. London; New York : Routledge, 2004, ISBN 0415240549; ZELENÁK, Eugen. *Konštruktivizmus a pluralita v histórii*. (Constructivism and plurality in history.). Ružomberok : Verbum, 2011, p. 35-51, ISBN 9788080847746; ZELENÁK, Eugen. *Úvod do kritickej filozofie histórie I. Vybraní autori od druhej polovice 20. storočia po súčasnosť*. (Introduction to the critical philosophy of history I. Selected authors from the second half of the 20th century to the present.). Ružomberok : Verbum, 2015, ISBN 9788056103104 (the work is accessible on-line: <http://www.forumhistoriae.sk/web/guest/-/uvod-do-kritickej-filozofie-historie-i-vybrani-autori-od-druhej-polovice-20-storocia-po-sucasnost>); KOŽIAK, Rastislav – ŠUCH, Juraj – ZELENÁK, Eugen (Eds.). *Kapitoly zo súčasnej filozofie dejín*. (Chapters from the recent philosophy of history.). Bratislava : Chronos, 2009, p. 64-228, ISBN 9788089027286; HORSKÝ, Jan. *Dějepisectví mezi vědou a vyprávěním. Úvahy o povaze, postupech a mezích historické vědy*. (Historiography between science and narrative.). Praha : Argo, 2009, ISBN 9788025701249; ŠUCH, Juraj. *Naratívny konštruktivizmus Haydena Whita a Franka Ankersmita*. (The narrative constructivism of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit.). Ostrava : Universitas Ostraviensis, 2010, ISBN 9788073689353; JANČOVIČ, Ivan. *Fikcia a historický naratív*. (Fiction and historical narrative.). In ŠUCH, Juraj (Ed.). *K otázkam metodológie vied (spoločenských a prírodných)*. Banská Bystrica : Matej Bel University in Banská Bys-

as historical knowledge of the past is constructed and communicated exclusively in the form of a narrative, as long as historians uncritically apply the categories and naïve theories of everyday social practice in their explanations, the resulting histories will not meet the basic standards of scholarly knowledge as they are understood today. The narrative as the form and ordinary language as the means of communication represent constituents with meaning-forming effects over which the historians cannot have sufficient control. According to Hayden White, one of the most widely read philosophers of history of the last half century, the construction of a narrative, method of argumentation and value anchoring of the story depends on tropological prefiguration, which is a result of a pre-critical, unconscious act of the historian's mind. A story, whether fictional or based on facts about real events, always has the same characteristics and is subject to the same rules of construction. According to White every history regardless of how consistently it is based on primary sources, will have the character of a romance, tragedy, comedy or satire if it has the form of a narrative. The argumentation contained in every historical narrative will have either a formist, mechanistic, organicist or contextualist character, and every history account will explicitly or implicitly depart from a specific ideology of anarchist, conservative, radical or liberal type.<sup>3</sup> A historian or an author of any narrative has all these "parameters" under control only to a limited extent. Tropological prefiguration can be metaphorical, metonymic, synecdochic or ironic. According to these, four different (ideal) kinds of figurative language can be identified. These structure and convey meaning at a deeper level and according to White determine all the other above mentioned parameters of the narratives written by historians.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that, for example, the story of the dissolution of the Kingdom of Hungary and founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918/1919 as written by Slovak narrative historians most frequently has the form of a romance or less frequently of a comedy, while narratives by Hungarian historians on the break up of the Kingdom of Hungary (in 1918/1919) and its consequences have the character of tragedy, or rather exceptionally of satire.

The ordinary language used by people in everyday social interactions and by the traditional narrative historians to construct their accounts of history is a source of further difficulties. To put it more precisely, the problem is not language as a whole, but some naïve concepts and categories, especially those concerning the social world and life. When they so to say "contaminate" the scholarly discourse they represent an epistemological problem. The social categories and concepts of the everyday discourses are often reifying, essentialist, stereotyping, generalizing and prone to group entitativism, to name only some of the problematic aspects. In other words, some concepts of the ordinary language are often erroneous from an epistemological point of view because they assign an incorrect ontic status to the social entities they represent.<sup>5</sup> Such epistemologically in-

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trica, 2011, p. 59-76, ISBN 9788055703114; JANČOVIČ, Ivan. K problematike narativy a referencie historiografii a v umeleckej literatúre. (On the problem of narration and reference in historiography and art literature.). In *Historický časopis*, 2010, vol. 58, no. 4, p. 621-632, ISSN 0018-2575.

3 WHITE ref. 2, p. 7-29; ZELENÁK 2011, ref. 2, p. 40-42; ŠUCH ref. 2.

4 WHITE ref. 2, p. 31-38; ZELENÁK 2011, ref. 2, p. 43-46; ŠUCH ref. 2.

5 For a more detailed account of these issues see VÖRÖS, László. *Analytická historiografia versus národné dejiny. „Národ“ ako sociálna reprezentácia*. (Analytical historiography versus national history. The "nation" as social representation.). Pisa : Edizioni Plus, Pisa University Press, 2010, ISBN 9788884927415;

correct concepts with a significant presence in everyday discourses include, for example: *nation*, *nationality*, *race*, (social) *group* or in the period of the last three or four decades also *identity*.<sup>6</sup>

The means and form of historical representation, namely language and narrative, represent only two of the several epistemological/ontological questions to which a historian must pay proper attention and take adequate methodological measures to remain on scholarly grounds of constructing non-fallacious knowledge about the past. This is not just a matter of theoretical speculation, but of significant epistemological problems, that are considered in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences very seriously. Within the research practice of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, social psychology, and literary science to mention just a few branches of scholarship devoted to the study of human phenomena, conscious critical reflection of the researcher's subjectivity, identifying of bias stemming from naïve preconceptions, deconstruction of fallacious "common sense" concepts and construction of a clear analytical conceptual apparatus, belong to the basic methodological-theoretical corpus. If historians adopt these methodological measures it is usually due to the personal determination of individual researchers and not the result of systematic training. The theoretical-methodological corpus of historiography, as it is lectured at the majority of universities, at least in the region of Central-Eastern Europe is still very one-sidedly oriented towards the traditional research practices, such as heuristics and source criticism, that pays little or no attention to the very persona of the historian, the language and the form through which and in which the history is represented.

When I speak of scholarly historiography, I have in mind a research attitude that is consciously reflective on the above mentioned epistemic issues. Scholarly history writing takes into consideration findings in the fields of the philosophy of knowledge and history, theoretical and methodological studies in related disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. From this point of view, the traditional narrative history cannot be regarded as genuine scholarly knowledge anymore. In spite of this, narrative history remains the mainstream form of professional history writing not only in Central and Eastern Europe, but, I dare to say, globally, wherever the institutionalized traditional European model of historiography exists and functions. It is an interesting phenomenon, not found to such a degree in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, that historiographical

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VÖRÖS, László. Ako existujú sociálne entity? Metodologické poznámky k žánru národných dejín (19. a 20. storočie). (How do social entities exist? Methodological notes on the genre of national history (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries).). In KOVÁČ, Dušan et al. *Sondy do slovenských dejín v dlhom 19. storočí*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2013, p. 12-29, ISBN 9788097154011 (the work is accessible on the internet: <http://www.forumhistoriae.sk/web/guest/-/sondy-do-slovenskych-dejin-v-dlhom-19-storoci>); VÖRÖS, László. Vlastenectvo aj šovinizmus, alebo len nacionalizmus? Terminologické a definičné problémy skúmania nacionalizmov a historická komparácia. (Patriotism and also chauvinism, or only nationalism? Problems of terminology and definition in research on nationalism and historical comparison.). In KOVÁČ, Dušan et al. *Slovenské dejiny v dejinách Európy. Vybrané kapitoly*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2015, p. 336-371, ISBN 9788022414487; see references to further literature in these works.

6 BRUBAKER, Rogers – COOPER, Frederic. Beyond "Identity". In BRUBAKER, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge; London : Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 28-63. ISBN 0-674-01539-8; GLEASON, Philip. Identifying Identity: A Semantic History. In *The Journal of American History*, 1983, vol. 69, no. 4, p. 910-931. ISSN 0021-8723.



schools and movements that strive for scholarly rigour in the above defined terms constantly remain minority genres within the general framework of the discipline.

It is general rule in the world of science and scholarship that new approaches, methods or theories that prove themselves valid, gradually become part of the methodological and empirical corpus of the given discipline as long as they are not falsified. In other words, the new methods and theories validated by empirical research after a certain time advance from an avant-garde position to become integrated into the mainstream methodological corpus of the discipline. It is an on-going progressive process, dynamics of which may depend on several factors. However, in the case of historiography it seems that this progress is extremely slow. Within historiographies globally, such recognized and much cited schools and approaches as the *Begriffsgeschichte*, the Cambridge School of intellectual history and the history of political thought, the *Annales*, the *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, varieties of historical anthropology and the history of culture, Microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte* and so on, have remained with their approaches, methods and theories in the position of permanent avant-garde. Some of these schools have 40, 60 or 80 years of progressive development behind them, nevertheless they continue to occupy the position of expert elite fields with little appeal to the mainstream historiography. Why have their methods, theories and knowledge not yet become part of mainstream history writing?

It is an interesting phenomenon accompanied by several paradoxes. The schools and approaches mentioned above partly owe their origin and development to the dissatisfaction of their founders and proponents with the traditional narrative historiography. However, with the exception of a few exceptional leading personalities, they are little known or entirely unknown to the general public. The traditional public image of historiography as a field of scholarship created on the basis of the traditional narrative national (nationalist) historiographies from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries mostly persists to this day. In the view of the public the historian is the scholar who tells a true story about “how it really was”, what really happened with “our” ancestors, “our” national heroes, “our” battles and striving for freedom, independence, and better tomorrows – whatever that may mean.

An interesting feature of this state of affairs arises when we look at the ideal image of a “scientist” from other disciplines. Probably not many people still see biologists as men running around fields with butterfly nets or crossbreeding peas in a laboratory that is actually a garden. The public is well aware of the high degree of sophistication of biology and the existence of specializations and sub-divisions such as microbiology, molecular biology, and genetics. Understandably, the conceptual apparatus of the biologists and the manner of explaining “biology” to the lay public have also changed throughout the past century. I think that it is not necessary to mention further examples from the fields of physics or chemistry. However, a similar argument also applies for instance to sociology. The general perception of sociology and sociologists today no longer departs from the picture of Comtean or Spencerian sociologists from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When researching the causes of this situation, it is possible to come to various different explanations depending on which factors and determinants one wishes to emphasize. However, in principle, the explanation may be of a cognitive, institutional and functional

character. The situation when the leading historical schools and their approaches continually remain within the discipline in a position of an elite avant-garde, and are almost entirely unknown to the public – while traditional narrative (national) historiography not only survives but reproduces itself and morphs into more “scholarly-looking” yet still pseudo-scholarly forms in spite of decades of very relevant criticism – is undoubtedly partly the consequence of the outdated system of history schooling, the training of professional historians, the personnel policies of research institutions, evaluation of the quality of scientific activity, inadequate financing, political pressures and so on. Institutional factors are the simplest to identify and study. But behind them there are the underlying cognitive, psychological and socio-psychological factors. With this I return to the introductory section and the main theme of this presentation, namely the social purpose of *history* (that is, the knowledge of certain aspects of past events), and *historiography* (that is the organized, systematic construction of *history*).

As I mentioned in the introduction, when researching the social function of collective memory and remembering, it is necessary to distinguish between individual cognitive capacity and the need of human beings to create a temporal perspective of their own physical existence in the social and natural environment, meaning the perception of the self as a continually existing integral being “I”, and the institutionalized level of the creation and manipulation of the content of memory. Although I think it is impossible to consistently research one without examining the other; it is important to avoid confusing these levels or inadequately mixing them into one phenomenal whole. There is a large quantity of literature concerned with the social function of historiography.<sup>7</sup> Various authors have worked out different classifications, which I have condensed into three points. The following typology will not be primarily concerned with the function of expert history works written by expert historians exclusively for expert historians. The following typology will deal with the function of historical knowledge in social contexts – beginning with the role of history in the processes of primary and secondary socialization, through ritualized collective acts and ending with the individual “consumption” of history.<sup>8</sup>

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- 7 HOBSBAWM, Eric J. The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions. In *Past and Present*, 1972, no. 55, p. 3-17, ISSN 0031-2746; MOMMSEN, Wolfgang J. Social Conditioning and Social Relevance of Historical Judgments. In *History and Theory*, 1978, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 19-35, ISSN 1468-2303; SCHIEDER, Theodor. The Role of Historical Consciousness in Political Action. In *History and Theory*, 1978, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 1-18, ISSN 1468-2303; FABER, Karl-Georg. The Use of History in Political Debate. In *History and Theory*, 1978, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 36-67, ISSN 1468-2303; FINLEY, Moses I. *The Use and Abuse of History. From the Myths of the Greeks to Lévi-Strauss, the Past Alive and the Present Illumined*. New York : Penguin Books, 1990, ISBN 0140134433; FLORESCANO, Enrique. The Social Function of History. In *Diogenes*, 1994, vol. 42, no. 168, p. 41-49, ISSN 1467-7695; TOSH, John. The Uses of History. In TOSH, John. *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York : Longman/Pearson, 2010, p. 29-57, ISBN 9780582894129; MOSES, A. Dirk. Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism, and the Public Role of History. In *History and Theory*, 2005, vol. 44, no. 3, p. 311-332, ISSN 1468-2303; LLOYD, G. E. R. History. In LLOYD, G. E. R. *Disciplines in the Making. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning, and Innovation*. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 58-75, ISBN 9780199567874.
- 8 The following typology does not claim to be complete. Other functions could be defined, such as history as a form of entertainment or the phenomenon described in expert literature as “public history”, but I omit these for reasons of limited space available and because it is not necessary to introduce here an exhaustive classification to support the main ideas of this presentation.



The classical phrase: *Historia magistra vitae est*, excellently designates the first point of the general typology of the social function of history. Under this function historical knowledge serves primarily as a source of learning concerning social, political, power, economic, cultural and other phenomena for the needs of the present. Machiavelli's *The Prince* can be mentioned as a prototypical example. Niccolò Machiavelli analysed past events and the actions of monarchs, generals or politicians to provide examples to support his ideas on the functioning of power and government. Historical examples served him first of all as a source of practical lessons and as illustrations to support the techniques and methods he proposed for the seizing, retaining and increasing of power over land and people. Understandably, any pragmatic approach to researching phenomena and the actions of people in the past fall under this function. Some branches of military, economic, legal, social, demographic and other fields of historical research are explicitly directed towards obtaining specific information for the purpose of understanding a particular phenomenon in the present or to achieve better results in the tasks of the present. For example, detailed research on various aspects of military campaigns, battles and strategies is an important part of the preparation of officer cadres for armed forces. Future commanders of military operations are expected to learn literally from the mistakes of their forerunners or be inspired by their successful strategies and campaigns.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, some, if not most of the studies of great economic crises in the past are at least partially motivated by the aim of learning more about current and future crises.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, many studies devoted to the undemocratic regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup>) centuries, wars, genocides, discrimination policies, nationalism, racism and so on are partly motivated by the desire to understand those phenomena in order to prevent their repetition.

The *legitimizing function of history* is clearly the most researched aspect of the action of historiography in various countries and regimes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>11</sup> When this function of knowledge of the past is mentioned, the majority of historians and lay people think mainly of the historiographies of undemocratic regimes. However, the works of H. White and other philosophers of history cited above encouraged research on ideological influences on historiography, and, at the same time, on the ideological effect of history on the interpretations and argumentations in political and public discourses. Apart from the explicit legitimization of a political regime, economic system, discrimination against or even elimination of ethnic or other categorically defined groups, political,

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9 MURRAY, Williamson – SINNREICH, Richard Hart. *The Past as Prologue. The Importance of History to the Military Profession*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2006, ISBN 9780511219924.

10 The bursting of the great mortgage bubble in the USA (2008) and the subsequent global economic crisis led to a greatly increased number of historical texts or texts using historical data devoted to the given phenomenon in various periods of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Perhaps the most attention was attracted by the work of the French author Thomas PIKETTY. *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Cambridge Massachusetts : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, ISBN 9788055142487. Piketty is an economist, but he has done extensive work on historical series data and the works of economic historians.

11 For the Slovak context see for instance HUDEK, Adam. *Najpolitickejšia veda. Slovenská historiografia v rokoch 1948 – 1968*. (The most political science. Slovak historiography in the period 1948–1968.). Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2010, ISBN 9788097030230 (the work is accessible online: <http://www.forumhistoriae.sk/web/guest/-/najpolitickejsia-veda-slovenska-historiografia-v-rokoch-1948-1968>), where references to further literature can be found.

social and economic reforms, traditions and so on, it is also possible to investigate the implicit legitimization of stereotypic constructions, social categories and naive theories about the phenomena of social life, or the meaning and significance of history for the national or other collective social entity. The actual legitimizing happens in various forms: for example, referring to social categories as if they were denoting “God-given” natural kinds and entities, justification of phenomena, events, decisions and their consequences as “lesser evils”, “historical inevitabilities” or “natural developments”. Every argumentation of this type inevitably has to start from particular ideological premises that provide a normative framework of what is good and what is evil, what is correct and what erroneous, what is natural and what artificial, what is justifiable and what unacceptable.

The *anchoring* or “identity-shaping” function of historical knowledge is closely connected with the legitimizing function. The majority of people, including historians identify with history narratives about their essential reference groups, be that a nation, social class, religious or other social group or category. Under anchoring and identification, I have in mind the acceptance of great history narratives from an *in-group* point of view, namely appropriation, for example, of the story of the “nation” as a personal story. This is just one of the many mechanisms of social identification. At the same time, some social-psychological research indicates that the quantity and detail of the information known to the individual is not important. The key factor is awareness of the existence of the history of the reference group, mastery of the detail is not essential for the successful functioning of self-identification with the group.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that the second and third functions of knowledge of the past are much more present in social practice and have a relatively greater social impact than the first function, designated *Historia magistra vitae est*. The belief that history represents one of the basic foundations for the existence of social and institutional forms of human organization is one of the almost universally shared dogmas of modernity. The existence of “nations” and similar social entities that, as is generally believed bring about elementary social cohesion, is allegedly unthinkable without something usually called “shared history” or perhaps more exactly historical tradition. And in turn, the long-term existence of social institutions and organizations is unthinkable without social cohesion. It is worth remembering that these beliefs are probably as old as the myths; nevertheless they re-emerged in much sophisticated forms during the period of the Enlightenment and underwent further theoretical development in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These conceptions of the need for a historical dimension still have a strong influence today. They unambiguously condition at least the institutionalized processes of secondary socialization, especially the teaching of history, politics of memory and commemoration rituals.

It is also clear that the *legitimizing* and *anchoring* functions are fulfilled especially effectively by the traditional narrative national history writing. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historiography was established and organized as a scholarly discipline precisely

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12 See CONDOR, Susan. “Having History”: A Social Psychological Exploration of Anglo-British Autostereotypes. In BARFOOT, C. C. (Ed.). *Beyond Pug's Tour: National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*. Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA : Rodopi, 1997, p. 213-253, ISBN 9789042001688; CONDOR, Susan. Pride and Prejudice: Identity Management in English People's Talk about 'This Country'. In *Discourse & Society*, 2000, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 175-205, ISSN 1460-3624.

according to the principles described above. The explicitly formulated goal of the emerging national historiographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was to provide the “nation” with a historical dimension, that is, to construct a narrative history of the “nation” and of “its” state, its institutions and organizations, to write biographies of important men of the nation, to construct historical traditions, which have to appear ancient. In this way, national historiographies contributed and still contribute to confirming and reproducing the reified concept of the nation as an objective historical entity.

The scholarly historiography as defined above cannot really fulfil these particular functions. The schools of critical history writing I have mentioned earlier distance themselves exactly from those properties of the traditional national historiographies, which endow them with the ability to serve the legitimizing and anchoring functions. That is, the narrative form of representation, national (nationalist) frames of interpretation, reifying and essentialist conceptions of social identities and social organization, a myth-like representation of historical actors as hero-like ideal figures, representation of eras, periods or particular events as good times or dark times in the life of a “nation” and so on. Indeed some of the schools mentioned above investigate precisely the origin, development and spread of these fallacious concepts and their functioning as sources of “identity”, legitimacy and self-identification, and thus significantly contribute to their deconstruction.

It is not my aim here to evaluate whether the above mentioned social functions of historical knowledge are inevitable or only the product of certain social constellations, whether they are beneficial or harmful in their effects. It is a complex question that needs to be considered from various viewpoints. My aim is to point to the paradoxical situation in which the public perception of historiography is based on a long outdated form of history writing, and historians are still expected to produce the sort of narratives about the past that are not in congruence with up to date scholarly standards for the humanities and social sciences.

This situation also has an influence on the practice of scholarly history writing, and for this reason, it is a problem that requires attention. Many historians think that these questions do not concern historiography and leave them to the philosophers of history. This usually leads to complete ignorance of the problem, because few historians regard philosophy of history as a partner discipline that has a relevant say in the theory and research practice of their discipline. This is also why historiography is still one of the most epistemologically fragmented disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. When various methodological and theoretical canons exist in the framework of one discipline for some time, it may be part of a process of progressive “fermentation”. However, when opposing and even mutually excluding epistemologies exist alongside each other in the framework of one discipline for a long time, it is usually an expression of crisis. To overcome the crisis, it is necessary to investigate its causes, to understand the factors leading to its long-term persistence. However, such investigation must inevitably be inter-disciplinary.

Historiography in Central and Eastern Europe, but apparently in other parts of the world as well, will probably continue to exist and reproduce itself also in its outdated traditional narrative, nationally and ideologically informed form, because it fulfils

particular social functions. However, at the same time, the clear understanding of this phenomenon is essential for the preservation of historiography as a scholarly discipline.

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## DIE SOZIALE FUNKTION DES GESCHICHTSKENNTNISSES UND WISSENSCHAFTLICHES SCHREIBEN DER GESCHICHTE IM 21. JAHRHUNDERT

LÁSZLÓ VÖRÖS

Keiner der Bereiche der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften ist derzeit so epistemologisch gesplittert wie die Historiographie. Im Rahmen einzelner Historiographien – zumindest in den Ländern von Mittel- und Osteuropa – wirken nebeneinander auf einer Seite narrative Historiker, die aus der Rankekonzeption der Geschichte ausgehen, auf der anderen Seite konstruktivistische Historiker, die mit gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen Theorien arbeiten und sich mit den methodologischen Vorgängen aus anderen Disziplinen der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften inspirieren. Für Historiker die zur ersten genannten Gruppe gehören bildet den Hauptgegenstand ihres Interesses „die Nation“, welche sie als historische Entität verstehen, die gleichzeitig das Objekt sowie handelndes Subjekt der Geschichte ist. Diese Historiker schreiben die nationale Geschichte und oft kommen in ihren Arbeiten auch nationalistische Argumentationen vor. Die zur zweiten Gruppe gehörenden Historiker betrachten als Hauptgegenstand ihrer wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung soziale Phänomene, und sie fangen ihre Arbeiten oft mit der Kritik nationaler/nationalistischer Interpretationen der Vergangenheit an. Verständlicherweise stellen die so definierten „Typen“ von Historikern nur zwei Randpolen dar, zwischen denen eine Menge übergängiger Varianten des Zugangs zur Vergangenheitsforschung ist. Wie ist es möglich, dass innerhalb einer wissenschaftlichen Disziplin langfristig nebeneinander zwei sich gegenseitig vollkommen ausschließende Untersuchungszugänge existieren können? Wie ist es möglich, dass nationale/nationalistische Geschichtsschreibungen nicht nur überleben, sondern sich auch erfolgreich reproduzieren, obwohl mindestens ein halbes Jahrhundert lang die unerbittliche und begründete Kritik ihrer epistemologischer Zufluchten sowie methodologischer Vorgänge dauert? Es gibt mehrere relevante Antworten auf diese Fragen in Abhängigkeit vom Bereich, wo wir uns entscheiden sie zu suchen. Untersuchen kann man kognitive, sozial-psychologische und soziale sowie institutionelle Faktoren. In diesem Artikel konzentriert sich der Autor nur auf einen konkreten sozial-psychologischen und sozialen Faktor, welcher bedeutend zu der Reproduktion des „Paradigmas“ der nationalen Geschichte beiträgt. Dieser Faktor ist: der soziale Zweck des Wissens über die Vergangenheit (also der Geschichte), womit eng auch die soziale Funktion der Historiographie als institutionalisierter wissenschaftlicher Disziplin zusammenhängt. Die nationale Geschichte, also Narrative, über die Vergangenheit des Volks sowie die nationalen/nationalistischen narrativen Historiker spielen eine wichtige Rolle in der Gedächtnispolitik und der Identitätspolitik.

Die nationale Geschichte bietet eine historische Dimension der „Nation“ als der vorgestellten Gemeinschaft – „die Nation“ wird auch dank dem wirklich und tastbar, dass sie „eine Geschichte hat“. Die nationalen Historiographien können diese ihre „Mission“ auch aus dem Grund erfüllen, dass sie aus der objektivistischen Epistemologie ausgehen, die auf intuitiver Ebene einer Mehrheit der Menschen eigen ist. Die Vorstellungen traditioneller narrativer nationaler/nationalistischer Historiker und einfacher Menschen über die Vergangenheit und Kennbarkeit der Vergangenheit sind sehr ähnlich. So die nationalen Historiker als auch die meisten ihrer Leser denken über die Vergangenheit als über ein vergangenes Geschehen nach, das in Form eines Narrativs repräsentiert werden kann, das ein treues Bild dessen ist, wie die Dinge tatsächlich geschehen sind. Der Autor untersucht im Artikel auch weitere soziale Funktionen, die die Historiographie die historische Wissenschaft in den modernen Gesellschaften erfüllt und er kommt zum Schluss, dass die nationalen Historiographien dank der sozialen Anfrage – obwohl sie laut gegenwärtiger Kriterien des wissenschaftlichen Kennenlernens nicht als wissenschaftlich betrachtet werden können – überleben und sich reproduzieren. Die Historiographie stellt aus dieser Sicht eine Disziplin dar, auf deren Regeln und Funktionieren ihre sozialen Funktionen einen solchen bedeutenden Einfluss haben, dass sie die kompletten Grundsteine ihrer wissenschaftlichen Tätigkeit beeinflussen.

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