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# Outlines of a critical theory of history

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# Outlines of a critical theory of history

For the last twenty years, highly diverse–polyphonic–works grouped under the label “theory of history” have flourished on the international level.<sup>1</sup> In this contribution, I will present my understanding and practice of the theory of history, situating my approach more specifically within the French academic context.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. After the great narratives

In France, a certain number of historians are interested in the theory of history, which is more often referred to as “historiography”.<sup>3</sup> A dictionary of “concepts and debates” in this field was published by Gallimard in 2010<sup>4</sup>, and subsequently a didactic book in 2017 in the famous collection *Que-sais-je?*<sup>5</sup> On the philosophical side, we know that new contributions to reflections on history were proposed at the end of the twentieth century, firstly by Paul Ricoeur, who initiated constructive dialogue between philosophers and historians. We are far from the time when Lucien Febvre declared, with a touch of irony, that philosophizing is the “capital crime” for historians.<sup>6</sup> As it is developing today in France, philosophical research on history does not pursue the ambition that characterized the philosophies of history of Hegel or Auguste Comte, namely providing the sense and finality of “the history of humanity”. This way of thinking about history continued to recede throughout the twentieth century, and has been criticized by both philosophers (such as François Lyotard, who pointed to the end of “great narratives”) and historians (for example Paul Veyne and Roger Chartier). Like many others I prefer the expression “theory of history”, in order to establish distance from the tradition of teleological philosophies of history. What positive content can be attributed to it?

## 2. In the wake of Koselleck

In the 1990s, Reinhart Koselleck’s work began to be translated and known in France.<sup>7</sup> In this historian I found a methodological framework that was both flexible and fruitful, one that helped develop a theory of history after the end of the “great narratives”. Without ignoring the fact that history is part of long-term processes, and contains “structures of repetition” that escape the consciousness of the actors, Koselleck also takes into account the point of view of history as lived by individuals or collectives: he approaches history as both the experience of events and knowledge of the past. His theory of history has attracted the attention of

philosophers, not only with respect to its best-known aspect – the “history of concepts” (Begriffsgeschichte) – but also because it proposes a “theory of the conditions that make history possible”, in other words an investigation of historical categories, of the “fundamental concepts” that structure the experience of history: singular concepts (such as the Enlightenment or the French Revolution), which refer to an event or a delimited series of events; general categories, which are syntheses, “fundamental concepts” that can be applied to different historical periods in accordance with varying emphases (crisis, transition, etc.); and “metahistorical” or universal categories, such as the “field of experience” and the “horizon of expectation”, which constitute the conditions for the possibility of all historical experience. These metahistorical categories, which are certainly debated because of their claim to universality, are the object of a “historical anthropology”, another interesting aspect of the theory of history, which aims to answer the following question: what are the fundamental categories of human beings that make its history possible, as experience and as knowledge? What is the human being as a historical being? All the preceding historical categories coexist with more empirical notions, such as monuments to the dead, giving rise to a “political iconology”; to these we could add other “memory spaces” (lieux de mémoire) in the sense of Pierre Nora, which help orient how individuals live and represent their history.

### 3. A four-part historical typology

In the wake of Koselleck, I have tried to develop a particular form of theory of history, whose main objective is to shine a light on the categories that permeate historical experience by introducing the different levels of analysis required to make distinctions based on a four-part typology: 1) the level of events as they are experienced by actors and witnesses (lived history), 2) the level of traces, sources, and documents left by these events (sedimented history), 3) the epistemic level of the narrative and knowledge of the past proper to historians (known history), which serves as a basis for 4) the general reflections on history undertaken not only by philosophers, but also by historians themselves, novelists, and essayists (thought history, to which theories of history belong).<sup>8</sup> At each of these levels, which must be understood both according to a successive order and as interacting with one another, categories are implemented more or less explicitly to grasp what happens, select what is preserved, question sources, and develop methodologies, as well as to know and represent the past. At the stages of known and thought history, the uses of these categories vary according to historical currents (social

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history, quantitative history, microhistory, political history, etc.) or philosophical schools (German idealism, historical materialism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, analytical philosophy of history, etc.). In the same way that historical knowledge cannot be encompassed in a single monolithic category, as if there were only one school of historians, the approach set out here does not pretend to be the only way of defining the theory of history, which also has a multi-faceted and evolving meaning depending on the academic traditions and authors practicing it.

As I understand it, the theory of history proposes, by taking into account the four levels identified above, to question the categories of historical experience: their terminologies, semantics, contexts of appearance and use, the questions they allow to be asked, their circulations from one domain to another, geographical and temporal fields of application, genealogies, and various theoretical, practical, and political uses, in addition to the degree of reflexivity of the actors or authors who mobilize these categories at a given time.<sup>9</sup> Such a work relies mainly on two types of sources: texts by historians, philosophers, politicians, essayists, novelists, various historical actors, etc.; and a more restricted corpus of theoretical texts, from philosophy and the social sciences, where these categories are objectified, and reflected in a retrospective and critical way. In my work I have limited my field of study to the Western world (Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), with a particular interest in Germany because of my background, and the importance given there to the philosophy of history (Hegel for example) and the theory of history (the Historik tradition inaugurated by Droysen). But depending on the expertise of those who practice it, the theory of history can study the reception and circulation of Western historical categories in other periods and geographical areas, as well as the specific concepts that are forged in non-Western cultures to think about their history.

#### **4. A pair of historical tweezers**

It seems to me that the theory of history thus understood can be useful, at least as a terminus a quo, for all the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences whose concepts are steeped in historicity, including philosophy, which has much to gain by integrating the history of concepts and historical semantics within its research (I am thinking, for example, of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, edited by Joachim Ritter, which inspired Koselleck's dictionary of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*). The theory of history echoes Marc Bloch, who recommended that historians establish a "historical semantics" of certain terms in

order to clarify them (he gave as examples “feudalism” and “capitalism”).<sup>10</sup> It takes up, in another register, the suggestion of Pierre Bourdieu, who invited us to grasp concepts from the social sciences with “historical tweezers”, that is with a critical distance that allows us to “historicize” them and make a “socio-historical genealogy” of their semantics.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, the theory of history is both analytical and critical: it is not only a question of analyzing the semantics of a historical category – of describing its evolution and transformations over the course of time – but also of questioning its validity by examining the arguments (both for and against) made to justify its relevance, and to identify the often implicit normativities associated with it, in the name of which it is valorized or condemned (as in the case of the concepts of “progress” or “acceleration”). In this sense, the theory of history can lead to a critical theory of modernity.

Because of the historicity of historical categories, which means that they are born and evolve over the course of time, and sometimes fall into disgrace or oblivion, their list is variable and never definite. The critical theory of history does not claim to develop an exhaustive and systematic analysis of the categories of history, it is rather an undefined task that must be applied regularly. To do so it proposes a methodological tool, a pair of historical tweezers, whose form and scope can be adapted to different perspectives, which vary according to the research problems of those who use them.

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Professional web pages:

[https://www.sph.u-bordeaux.fr/laboratoire.php?sub\\_section=team&membre=christophe\\_bouton](https://www.sph.u-bordeaux.fr/laboratoire.php?sub_section=team&membre=christophe_bouton)

<https://u-bordeaux3.academia.edu/ChristopheBouton>

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**Tags:** historical categories / historical semantics / Koselleck

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<sup>1</sup> See the site of the *International Network for Theory of History*, URL: <https://www.inth.ugent.be/>. Two very recent publications also bear mentioning: Stefan Berger (ed.), *Bloomsbury History. Theory and Method*, URL: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/discover/bloomsbury-digital-resources/products/bloomsbury-history-theory-method/>, and Chiel van den Akker (ed.), *Routledge Companion to History and Theory*. Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> This blog post is a partial summary of my paper entitled "The Critical Theory of History. Rethinking the Philosophy of History in the Light of Koselleck's Work," *History and Theory* 55, no. 2 (2016), 163-184.

<sup>3</sup> Such as the Groupe d'Études sur les Historiographies Modernes (GEHM) at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), URL: <http://geh.m.ehess.fr>, and the online journal *futurs passés*, URL: <https://www.politika.io/fr/passes-futurs>.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Delacroix et al. (eds.), *Historiographies. Concepts et débats*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Offenstadt, *L'historiographie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Lucien Febvre, "Vers une autre histoire," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 54, no. 3/4 (1949), 241.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Le Futur passé. Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques*, translated into French by Jochen Hoock and Marie-Claire Hoock, Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1990; Michael Werner (ed.), *L'Expérience de l'histoire*, translated into French by Alexandre

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Escudier in collaboration with Diane Meur, Marie-Claire Hooock and Jochen Hooock, Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Christophe Bouton, *Faire l'histoire. De la Révolution française au Printemps arabe*. Paris: Cerf, 2013; Christophe Bouton, *L'Accélération de l'histoire. De Lumières à l'Anthropocène*. Paris: Seuil, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> I believe it is also a way to take up, without the teleological perspective, the Hegelian idea that philosophy is "its time apprehended in thoughts", according to the famous words from the preface to the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (ed. Stephen Houlgate), translated into English by T.M. Knox, Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1949, 85-86.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Sur les rapports entre la sociologie et l'histoire en Allemagne et en France," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 106, no. 1 (1995), 117.