



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera

Virtual Historiography – Nine Hypotheses

Lucian Hölscher

Cite as: Lucian Hölscher, "Virtual Historiography – Nine Hypotheses," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 22/02/2022, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/2986>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/2986>

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Virtual Historiography – Nine Hypotheses

Modern historiography is well-known for its transitory character. A few years after their publication, most history books are already “historical” in the sense that readers no longer take them for an actual and accurate description of the past. What can be done to counter this ephemeral weakness of historiography?

1. My ideas about a future historiography start from the impression of the great vulnerability of historical knowledge, because according to the prevailing theory of history, all historical narratives depend on present points of view and interests. Hence, as soon as times passes and these perspectives fall out of acceptance, historical knowledge changes quickly, producing a rapid devaluation of what was accepted knowledge before. There has been a lot of criticism about this already, questioning for instance the consistency of such an idea as “the present point of view”, and the legitimacy of historians to define it. But so far there has been no suggestion for an alternative.

2. My suggestion for improving a future historiography includes possible future experiences within our historiography. If it were possible to anticipate future points of view regarding the past within our historical narratives, historiography would not be as devalued as it is now.

3. But how is this possible? It is true that we do not know what will happen in the future, and hence we do not know what experiences and impressions a future historiography will set out from. While people in the present do not know about future events, they do know quite a lot about the categories that they will use to judge the political and moral quality of these events. For instance, it is highly probable that in ten or twenty years, categories such as “humanity”, “sustainability”, and economic “need” will come to mind when assessing the value of new technical and social projects. In anticipating the future, such categories may quite well be more important than the projects themselves. This may serve as a starting point for a future “virtual historiography”.

4. Another starting point is the (relative) stability of ideological narratives over the last 150 years. Looking back at the history of the twentieth century, broadly speaking we find a socialist, liberal, conservative, fascist, and “green” or environmentalist historical narrative, with each competing for the dominant interpretation of the past. They change from time to time, both in their impact on public consciousness and in the way they rely on past events, but there is a high probability that one of these narratives will also capture future events that we are

not yet familiar with, thereby producing new experiences and points of views of the past.

5. By “virtual historiography” I do not mean the report of events that have never happened, but rather perspectives of historical development that were not successful in the long run. Virtual historiography pursues the path of past futures: it explains “how things could have been” not by asking “what would have happened if...”, but rather what contemporaries believed would unfold.

6. By taking into account the contingent nature of all historical change, “virtual historiography” opens historical narratives up to the possibility that heretofore utopian past futures may be realized at a later time, such as the socialist “realm of freedom”, the fascist *Volksgemeinschaft*, and the green vision of ecological equilibrium, all of which have failed to be realized thus far. But that does not mean that they cannot come in the future, like the realm of God in Christian eschatology. By extending the scope of historiography beyond the horizon of what appears to be “the past” today, it opens historiography up to different historical narratives that may be accepted at a later point in time.

7. “Virtual historiography” thus knows many pasts that exist parallel to one other, and that are activated when current experiences make one of them seem plausible. I would therefore suggest that a future historiography describes the twentieth and twenty-first century in a kind of historiographical parallelism. Let us describe the past in parallel narratives from the point of view of socialists, liberals, conservatives, environmentalists, and fascists, as Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-on did in their history of Israel and Palestine in 2015.¹

8. The methodological point of such a historiography is to fix the past futures of these narratives at each stage of historical development, asking questions such as: What did contemporaries (i.e. socialists, liberals, conservatives, etc.) expect to happen at the beginning of World War I? How did they change their point of view at the end of the war? A systematic consideration of past futures may counterbalance the hitherto dominating perspective of our contingent present, by opening historiography up to a more stable consideration of the past based on a variety of possible future points of view.

9. For example, virtual historiography can explore what view we would have had of German economic history if the government had pursued the project for an agrarian-based society at the turn to the twentieth century; if the socialist revolution had succeeded in 1918; if Nazi Germany had won the Second World War; and if the Cold War had turned into a “hot” war at any time between 1945 and 1990.

Studying these heretofore unrealized possibilities may provide a better understanding of: a) left and right wing narratives of the past and present; and b) the dangers and chances of future historical events that will change our concepts of the past.

This blog contribution is a revised version of the author's contribution to a panel discussion with Ethan Kleinberg, Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz, Kristin Platt, and Lisa Regazzoni on [How do we want to write history in the future?](#) The panel was held on December 14, 2021 at the Institute for Social Movement in Bochum (Germany).

Lucian Hölscher, born 1948, is professor emeritus of Modern and Contemporary History and Theory of History at Ruhr University in Bochum. His most important publications in the field of contemporary history include *Weltgericht oder Revolution. Protestantische und sozialistische Zukunftsvorstellungen im Kaiserreich* (1989); *Neue Annalistik. Umriss einer Theorie der Geschichte* (2003); *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (2nd ed. 2016); and *Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit* (2020).

Tags: past futures / time / virtual historiography

¹ Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-on, *Die Geschichte des anderen kennen lernen. Israel und Palästina im 20. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2015.