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Theory on the ground. A few remarks on theory of history

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Theory on the ground. A few remarks on theory of history

The following text describes the relationship between history and theory in five interventions. The fact that it by no means covers the topic exhaustively lies in the matter itself rather than the brevity of the form. Theory of history unfolds in the course of conversation. Its allies are provisional ways of thinking and tentative expressions rather than an architecture of solid concepts.

1. Theory of history is ubiquitous

No dissertation without a chapter on theory: what sounds like a platitude describes what has emerged with more and more clarity in German-speaking historical scholarship over the last thirty years. Historical research, not merely on contemporary history, now has both feet on the ground in a “world of social sciences”¹ that is expanding at high speed. At the same time, the study of history has materialized into a busy factory for theory recycling. Not only is it permissible to acknowledge the theoretical insights of neighbouring disciplines, it is also imperative to take them to task, evaluate their substance and deconstruct them in the context of their emergence.

2. Theory of history is on the fringe

Having gone through the compulsory theoretical part, the empirical *pièce de résistance* can now take centre stage – this impression arises where the display of concepts and cache of methods are particularly sophisticated, only to shrink all the more quickly to the mandatory framework of an introductory and concluding chapter. Both experimentally and institutionally speaking, theory of history has much to weather. The few relevant publications confine themselves to the Anglo-American world, professorships are rare, and degree courses virtually non-existent. Those who pursue theory of history do so for the most part in relation to their “real” area of research in the early or late modern period, medieval studies or the antiquity. Theory of history tends to occur when the “firm” keeps a few play areas open for professional dabbling.

3. No history without theory

Theory of history is neither a suffix science (“... and theory of history”) nor an intellectual hobbyhorse. It is more of a magnet, one that allows the iron filings of

empiricism to be directed, aligned and, yes, redirected. Koselleck's right of veto, more precisely that of the sources, merely prevents the worst kind of dissipation; it does not itself create order. Something that needs to be communicated, however, calls for a certain tidiness that has less to do with the sudden explosion of what has hitherto been orderly and far more with its subtle erosion and foreseeable collapse under the weight of time.

4. Those who write history must abstract from theory

Marc Bloch recommended using a child listener as a litmus test for the success of historical scholarship.² Two or three sentences should be enough, technical terms are temporarily out of place. As an alternative to the child, you could imagine a "wide audience" and, instead of the explanation by a potential patriarch, exhilarating verse from a science slam. Traditionally and for good reason, *brevitas* does not head the list of virtues in the Humanities. And yet, historical facts demand their quintessence, which is built in equal part on theory and empiricism. From this twofold basis, it can be argued with gusto to what extent a "case study"³ emerges from a theoretical scrum, drags behind as an empirical rearguard or races ahead as the trendsetter of new knowledge.

5. Theory of history is a matter of dosage

As in so many cases, the challenge here is to maintain a healthy distance without abandoning the necessary closeness. Spread the nets wide. But allow some free rein where poking around in the dark begins. Get as close as possible to the sources. Get your hands dirty. Wear the elegant gloves of theoreticians, not as self-protection but out of respect for the subject matter, like in the archives. Always use "tact" when writing.⁴ Ask big questions. Be satisfied with small answers for the moment if they go straight to the heart of the matter.

Translated by Sunniva Greve

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Tags: empiricism / interdisciplinarity / provisional

¹ Rüdiger Graf and Kim Priemel, "Zeitgeschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften. Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59, no. 4 (2011), 479–508.

² Marc Bloch, *Apologie der Geschichtswissenschaft oder der Beruf des Historikers*. Ed. Peter Schöttler. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002, 5.

³ Matthias Pohlig, "Vom Besonderen zum Allgemeinen? Die Fallstudie als geschichtstheoretisches Problem," *Historische Zeitschrift* 297, no. 2 (2013), 297–319.

⁴ Bloch, *Apologie*, 31.