Reflections on Theory of History Polyphonic

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Theory of History Polyphonic

I.1 Theory of history is, or should be, an inherently polyphonic endeavor. This coincides with my argument in *Haunting History* about the ways the past itself is polysemic and requires attunement to the multiple possible pasts that haunt our present.

I.2 Theory of history involves being attuned to the ways histories can be told, written, and encountered. It is, in this respect, a mode of listening not only to the past, but also listening for the myriad ways that the past comes into our present.

I.3 Scholars of the past should always be speaking of and listening to its multiple iterations even when the historian’s focus is on one aspect or event. Theory of history provides the tools to listen to the past in this way, and it is through work in theories of history that one becomes attuned to the different and differing notes.

I.4 Training in theory of history allows us to interrogate the methods and motivations underpinning any given approach to the past. Such approaches to the past are multiple, therefore our theoretical investigations, our theories of history, should likewise be so.

I.5 The “theory” in theories of history can be defined as a meta-language that enables us to discuss, debate, disagree, and agree about the multiple and differing understandings or representations of the past as well as the ways in which they present themselves to our present.

I.6 What’s more, this meta-language is not restricted to the discipline of history but opens the discourse to all those interested in the past. The dialogue occurs across disciplines, across practices, and times. Theory of history polyphonic extends beyond disciplinary history, opening the field up to all those who engage with the past. It holds the potential to make audible those actors, events or stories traditionally kept outside the realm of conventional history.

History Monophonic

II.1 Conventional historical research and writing is by and large monophonic, as the practitioners of disciplinary history are not trained to hear the other notes.
II.2 Over the past fifty years, there has certainly been an increase in the geographic areas and types of subjects deemed worthy of historical investigation. However, the highly positive expansion of subjects and areas has been undercut by the way these challenges to dominant historical narratives continue to rely on the established and accepted norms of historical discourse. As a result, these new histories replicate the historical conceits of the narratives and fields they purport to engage with or replace. The song remains the same.

II.3 The varieties of “history” on offer are all variations of the same theoretical and methodological rules. The choices offer no real choice at all. Our current historical method is considered more advanced by the measure of it being considered superior compared to those that preceded it, which is to say, solely based on its moment in time with little to no reflection on the other theoretical or methodological possibilities that are available.

II.4 Monophonic history assumes that things could not have happened otherwise, any other way.

II.5 Even perspectivalism adheres to the monophonic regime because it is a proliferation of sanctioned and restrictive choices or points of view. It is talking over rather than listening.

II.6 The conjuring trick of monophonic history is that the melodies have slight variations that adhere to the same rules, thereby appearing different and dynamic, but most of all catchy. They appeal to us because we have heard them before, and this familiarity makes them all the more restrictive. Our dependence on the familiar makes us resistant to what sounds different, to other forms of music.

II.7 Rather than helping us listen for the multiple and conflicting possibilities that an investigation of the past enables, our current practices seek to smooth over dissonance in the name of a cohesive but monophonic methodological or disciplinary whole. Historians are trained to hear less.

Theory of History, Historical Theory, and Philosophy of History

III.1 Privileging the term “historical theory” over “theory of history” is one way that the monophonic regime enforces its rules. The difference between the two terms, “theory of history” and “historical theory,” appears subtle but is actually far-reaching with regard to the power dynamics of boundary building it is profound. As Hayden White often said, from the standpoint of grammar, the terms “theory of
history” and “historical theory” are not synonymous. In his words “theory of history is a case of the objective genitive and has to do with the possession by ‘theory’ of whatever it is we mean by ‘history’ while ‘historical theory’ is an adjectival form that uses the subjective genitive: thus, it is ‘history’s theory’ or whatever it is that ‘history’ takes ‘theory’ to be that is the issue.” The seemingly innocuous substitution of terms actually determines whether it is theory that dictates reflection on what history is can be or history that dictates what theory is or should be.

III.2 Use of the term “historical theory” ensures that it is history and historians who dictate what is acceptable as theory. It is a question of power and, as pointed out above (II.7), the emphasis on cohesion deactivates the dynamics of theory of history polyphonic in favor of the methodological or disciplinary whole of a theory possessed and domesticated by the discipline of history, and hence rendered monophonic.

III.3 Theorists of history might turn to philosophers of history for help and there is much to be learned from the these kindred spirits. There is, of course, substantial overlap but much depends on one’s definition of who counts as a “philosopher” and what counts as “philosophy”. The broader the definition, the more one finds overlap with theory of history.

III.4 Currently, the field of philosophy of history is occupied by very few practicing philosophers aligned for the most part with the analytic tradition. Their concerns seem to be more with understanding the rules or laws regarding what historians do rather than what history or the past is. Its relation to history and historians is similar to the one Husserl identified between the philosophy of science and the practices of scientists.

III.5 The point is that while the alliance with theory of history is strong in terms of interest and content, philosophy of history distances itself, like disinterested observer, from the power dynamic at work in the relation between the terms “theory of history” and “historical theory” as a disinterested observer. Philosophers of history are, in the end, interested in philosophy, whereas theorists of history are interested in history.

III.6 One question worth pursuing is whether philosophy of history is a polyphonic endeavor, or whether its goals and objectives tend toward monophony?
Toward a Theory and Practice of History Polyphonic

IV.1 No matter how restrained, purged, or flat conventional history may appear, all historical accounts are haunted by other possible pasts that can, as such, enable multiple histories. It is to these ghosts that we should be attuned.

IV.2 These are the histories that need to be heard, not in the purged, restricted, and methodologically homogenous version demanded by conventional history, but as histories that open space for multiple and conflicting logics of how we encounter, account for, and recount the past.

IV.3 The instability of such open possibilities is disturbing, and the monophony of conventional history serves as an anesthetic that desensitizes us to the often jarring effects of historical thought. By contrasts, theory of history enables us to listen to both the dissonance and the harmony that our accounts of the past produce.

IV.4 Historians and all scholars who work on the past should be trained in theories of history so that they more fully understand the complexities and multiplicities of their object of study: temporal, geographic, cultural. This multi-dimensional understanding of the past enables different cultures, classes, times, voices, and logics to speak, thereby unsettling any single dominant historical narrative or telling.

IV.5 This needs to be achieved via dedicated courses in theory of history taught by scholars who are expert in theory of history. The explicit instruction of theory of history should be no less important to historical training than geographic area, time period, or thematic field.

IV.6 The occasional section on “historical theory” cursorily included in a required methods course is insufficient. When theory is dictated by the history being presented, the “history” at work is never put in question or under pressure.

IV.7 As a meta-language, theory of history polyphonic encourages scholars from disparate and differing fields to engage, and to learn from one another in regard to how they build their histories, value and weight their evidence, and determine which actors/actants occupy the foreground and which the background.

IV.8 Explicit training in theory of history teaches researchers to listen to the dissonances, the jarring clashes, and thus for the possibility of the strange or unfamiliar. It makes scholars attuned to multiple possible pasts, rather than disciplining them into history of a single note.
These hauntings are multiple notes that evoke other times and temporalities as more than memory. They are the past surging into the present and pushing us toward the future. This is the tempo of polysemy.

Conclusion

As argued in the Theses on Theory and History, the goal is neither for theory to supplant the practice of history nor for a monolithic and monophonic Theory to dictate how history or any encounter with the past should be carried out. Nevertheless, theory of history does offer prescriptive guidance for the practice of history insofar as it attunes one to listen differently and otherwise.

Theory of history must be made explicit so that the practitioners of history become attuned to these other notes, attuned to those aspects of the past to which we do not normally listen.

It is this understanding of history — messy, unkempt, multi-dimensional — that holds the key to societal change; it is theory of history polyphonic that attunes us to such an understanding.

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Tags: historical method / metahistory / philosophy of history