What conditions should not prevail? History-based learning. Plea for a negative approach to history-based learning

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What conditions should not prevail? History-based learning. Plea for a negative approach to history-based learning

Lisa Regazzoni’s post And If History Were to Turn Its Back on the Future? A Thought-provoking Interjection rightly questions the connection between historiography, intention and the future.² Going beyond her argumentation, it seems to me that even the basic assumption of a planned or calculable future through the advanced control of nature belongs to the myth of modernity.³ The task of historical science in this concept framework would be to derive the future from the past and make (relatively) safe predictions on this basis. The discipline would then have contributed greatly to a planable future. This idea, a variant of the Historia Magistra Vitae topos, has been strongly criticized, since instructive historical examples against a background of rapidly changing actuality in modernity would always be too late.³ Hence, a reliable prognosis of the future based on the past seems unattainable. At the same time, the (repeatedly failed) attempt to control the future remains an important function (and perhaps the legitimation) of historical science in the context of a capitalist economic order, given that the latter makes processes of trade, labour and chapter appear calculable and, consequently, manageable.⁴

This is also the case, for example, in predictive analytics, which is ultimately based on historical data to predict the future as precisely as possible with the aid of big data and machine learning within the parameters of computational models. It lets the future appear predictable and thus controllable (above all for business enterprises, but also for political decisions). Interestingly, predictive analytics makes very clear that its framework is not about a future that deviates significantly from the present and the past. In its context, the future can only be predicted with a certain degree of probability, either because the future is consistent with the past or a computational model based on the past allows for predictions about a future deduced (with mathematical certainty) from that past. Hence, the various future possibilities that arise from the fundamental contingency of history are reduced to the one (or ones) most probable. But is this what historiography in terms of the future is about, if this is at all seen as a temporal dimension of interest to the discipline? Is it only about a statistically valid prediction of the (most) probable progress of history? In other words, what, if anything, is actually to be learned from or perhaps based on the past for the present and the future?
History and Future?

Lisa Regazzoni’s critique of the mythical belief in the prognostic power of historiography goes so far as to include the inference of desired future states – in the case she discusses, the future of historiography itself. In her words, hoping to influence the future with the help of historiography is “[…] a leftover from our faith in the power of historiography to change history, i.e., in its emancipatory force.” This statement triggered the intended “thought-provoking interjection” for me, since my academic thinking revolves primarily around how historiography and, in a wider sense, historical thinking in the context of historical education could best contribute to an ethically better or at least not worse present and future.³ Thus broadly speaking and with a socio-critical intention, my consideration addresses the “value of history-writing”⁴ in the philosophy of history. At the same time, however, this raises the question of how the applied norms are to be measured, if these are likewise subject to temporal change.⁵ In other words, does scrupulous or even reflexive historical thinking make any difference at all to the individual and/or collective shaping of the present and the future? And how could this be evaluated? None of these fundamental questions will be answered conclusively in this short contribution; rather, this blog post wants to encourage further discussion with some ideas that are largely based on food for thought from critical theory.

With the reference to historical thinking – which, somewhat simplified, means the interpretive dealing with the experience of time and contingency and, at best, their reflection⁶ – my own thoughts in this context are somewhat at odds with Lisa Regazzoni’s remarks. While she tends to refer to the fundamental epistemic possibilities of historiography, I focus on how to deal with the outcome of historical knowledge processes and what we might learn from them. For me, this highlights the question of how a reflexive relationship to historical phenomena helps to enlarge individual and collective spaces of possibility, or self-determination and emancipation.⁷ Which is why the following observation emphasizes the ethical and political dimension of historical thinking and the contribution that dealing with history(ies) can make. I nevertheless see a close tie between these aspects and the fundamental epistemic possibilities of historiography, because in both cases it is up for debate whether and, if so, what consequences historical insights have for the present and the future.

Regarding the thoughts expressed here, the approach described by Lisa Regazzoni in another post⁸ – thinking of history as open, discussable and even revisable – seems central to the issue of an open present and future. This (and perhaps only
this) approach makes it possible to oppose a historiography that, among other problems, all too quickly gives the impression that the past, and with it the present and the future, is fixed and thus determined once and for all.

On the other hand, in my view this approach, which deliberately undermines the emancipatory, future-oriented content of historiography, also leads to a shift in the focus of historiography away from the future, towards narratives about the past that are available in the present. I argue that such an engagement with history is largely self-referential: it dwells on the narrative(s) without taking into account the consequences for anything outside of historiography. A revision of this or that narrative may be the result or, at best, a shift in the respective methodological access – which, inherent to the discipline of science, should not be underestimated. In my opinion, the relevance of the respective narratives as orientation for the future is severely limited if we consciously refrain from asking about a (desirable) better or (rejectable) worse future or future process of development. It seems that in the context of historiography, and especially historical thinking, there is almost no practical relevance in the preoccupation with historiography if a utopian (and/or dystopian) element is rejected in dimensions of the future. For without it there is no regulative difference, which is what makes an ethical interpretation over time possible in the first place. This ethical evaluation dimension, which also refers to the past and must assume a connection between past, present and future in pragmatic terms – one that is certainly neither unproblematic nor easy to deal with – is, in my view, the prerequisite for the ability to orient oneself (ethically) to history(ies) or to reflect on one’s own present and future conditions on the basis of history(ies). These fundamental problems beg the question of what social or practical relevance the engagement with history(s) would have if it were not also about the (social) shaping of the present and the future?

That said, Lisa Regazzoni’s arguments based on dealing with monuments cannot be ignored, that is, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of specifically constructing historical narratives for the future or predetermining future modes of historiography. In addition to this heuristic argument, which is directed at how research methods and the resultant narratives are dealt with in terms of the future, theoretical reasoning also argues against positively deducing the future from the past (and the present). One important argument here is that certain utopias and forecasts monopolize the writing of history and historical thinking about the present for a particular future by virtue of their inherent teleological elements. In this sense, forecasts and utopias sometimes seem to be attempts to narrow the
possibilities of the future or to limit thinking in alternatives. They are linked to the hope of mastering contingency in order to realize the preferred individual future. In this way, the attempt to determine the future from the past quickly degenerates into dogmatism. Historians, in particular, should be aware of the fact that this approach to dealing with contingency is problematic.

So, while I argue, on the one hand, for the need for utopias in the context of historical thinking, I agree, on the other hand, with Lisa Regazzoni that the more concrete this utopia becomes, the greater the danger that future possibilities will be restricted. Be it by experts who believe themselves to be the sole owners of knowledge about a better future, or by social groups seeking to monopolize their interests. This leads to the apparent paradox that the discussion of history(ies) in this case would only be relevant if there was hope that insights gained in the historical process of knowledge might be of some consequence for our possibilities for action in the present and the future. On the other hand, precisely this supposed security, the controllability of the future and the possibility of gaining universal norms from history should be called into question. What options are left then when it comes to learning something from or based on history?

**Negative Learning Based on History**

In the following I would like to argue that learning based on history with a negative connotation is possible, and that historiography can even generate emancipatory power in this way. From the previous considerations it is obvious that deducing what the future will be like from history(ies) is nigh to impossible or even how the future should be (positively) shaped in concrete terms; this is especially true if contingency is seriously taken into account. What is clearly visible, however, in my view, are conditions that should be avoided lest they lead to desperate and harmful circumstances. The negative view of history(ies) then concentrates on making statements about narratives, emphasizing that things should and could be different. It thus remains committed to the previously formulated historical-philosophical perspective that attempts to critique society based on history, with the goal or rather the hope that things may get better, or at least not worse.

On the one hand, this perspective addresses a key issue of the cultural studies approach to history, one that refers primarily to the freedoms and restrictions people are subject to in certain historical situations. At the same time, this issue is the starting point for (historically based) social critique insofar as it clarifies that there are different historical ways of dealing with social (and anthropological)
problems. It is the contingency of the respective historical formations that paves the way for critique, since things could be different.\textsuperscript{18} This potential to be different is at the same time a prerequisite for immanent critique, which, unlike external critique, has no basis in externally applied norms and, unlike internal critique, refrains from using evaluation standards traditionally seen to have universal validity in the field of phenomena. Instead, it relies on the “implicit normativity of social practices”\textsuperscript{19} and consequently refers to the implicit normative principles assumed to be operating in existing practices. Hence, no distinction is made between what is criticized and the norms to be applied – as in the case of internal criticism. The norms are adopted and effective in social practices, but as such they are contradictory and flawed.\textsuperscript{20} In other words, immanent and implicit norms are identified in a theory-based manner and used as a benchmark for critique. As such, implicit normativity can be linked to the rationale behind its inconsistency and flawed implementation, allowing for a statement that things should be different and transforming the benchmark of critique in the process. Analysis and critique are thus intertwined, which is the revealing moment of this approach and sees immanent critique simultaneously as criticism of a specific practice and the norms on which it is based.\textsuperscript{21} Transforming the litmus test for critique during the process of analysis and critique means, however, that the criteria are initially unreliable. Only the actual working of the critical process and its transformation into a future practice can generate safe(r) criteria.\textsuperscript{22}

Even such a negative and immanent reflection on history(ies) calls for an external (transcendental) ethical impulse\textsuperscript{23} that is, in a sense, crucial to the telling of the narrative or critique in question. We could phrase it here in a highly Kantian fashion as requiring an impetus in the form of a regulative idea to indicate the direction of the relevant intellectual exercise in relation to the history concerned. Jörn Rüsen calls this the pre-narrative elements of a historical narrative.\textsuperscript{24} These are of crucial significance especially where something is to be learned based on history. That being said, they should not preform history(s) in such a way that narratives are immunized against insights from the empirical historical process of knowledge. Lisa Regazzoni’s argument that a (concrete) vision of the future should not be specified also applies here.

If the said external impulse is negative, as described here, and rejects distressful and inhumane conditions,\textsuperscript{25} the advantage is not having to produce a vision of the future that is better (and right). An abstract negative impulse containing the hope that it might be better will suffice here. As such, this impulse can to some extent be considered a negative utopia. Hence criticism and what could be learned based
on history(ies) remains negative and accordingly does not limit the openness of a positive shaping of the future.

In practical terms, the ultimate aim of this negative approach is not to persist in negativity (or pessimism), but “to bring out the positive by destroying false, reified positivity [...].” In other words, the negative reference to conditions of suffering in history and the resultant negation of these conditions for the present and the future (which can lead to critique and practices to abolish and overcome them) are designed to create the basis for self-determination and empowerment. Accordingly, a negative approach can and should certainly be interpreted in an optimistic, utopian sense, without this leading to a marked diminishing of future possibilities. The hope for a better future remains abstract and must be negotiated specifically in each case, just as Lisa Regazzoni demanded with Blumenberg. In my opinion, however, it is vital to consider the respective possibilities of and obstacles to freedom, without a one-sided emphasis on the former while rejecting certain conditions of suffering. Otherwise, there is the danger of once again developing a teleological argument that, akin to a history of salvation, describes a supposedly safe path to the better. Seen in this way, there is no great danger that history in a negative approach will aim teleologically for a pre-formulated, fixed final state, since no “positive” external standard is brought to bear and both opportunities and challenges are taken into account.

The hope for a more self-determined future with less suffering expressed in this way is normatively charged without being normativistic. Despite the normative impetus in the context of immanent critique, it is sufficiently open to avoid being exposed to problems of teleology or dogmatism and, at the same time, has the necessary normative claim not to be meaningless or relativistic. Accordingly, indeterminacy and contingency must be given their space. Interpretations of the future based on regulative ideas are not about the one true history that is inevitable or irreversible, but about the possible progression of history evolving from the negation of past conditions to be rejected. Consequently, the future is told from the desire to prevent suffering and enable a more self-determined, more emancipated society. This would allow a tentative horizon for the future to emerge with all its possibilities and becomingness, without implying these with teleological certainty or assuming an inevitable development. And not least, it would open up a space of possibility for other histories, other times and thus other futures. It is by no means my intention to dispute Lisa Regazzoni’s argument, which goes back to Hans Blumenberg, about the individual’s lack of but assumed effective power in modernity. I would, however, counter it with Karl Marx that “Men make their own
history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. Accordingly, the focus on negating individual histories is also grounded in the fact that resistance to what has historically become and exists might be the only thing available in the face of societal preformative constraints, barbarities and ideologies. Reflecting on this impotence and on the hope that things may get better is perhaps the only moment in which something can be learned based on or from history – notably about expanding our own and society’s possibilities for self-determination and the prevention of suffering.

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Tags: Emancipation / Future / Negation

1 I am deeply grateful to my editorial colleagues Britta Hochkirchen and Lisa Regazzoni for their comments on my article. They contributed significantly to the development of the argument.
4 See, for example, Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004.
7 See, for example, on the temporal core of truth (“Zeitkern der Wahrheit”): Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialektik 9.

#English / Theory of History Wide Open


See Adorno and Bloch, Etwas fehlt, 58–77.


Landwehr, Diesseits, 149.


Jaeggi, Das Ende, 93.

Jaeggi, Kritik, 288.


Adorno, Negative Dialektik, 183.


