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Towards a Broad and Inclusive Theory and Philosophy of History

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Towards a Broad and Inclusive Theory and Philosophy of History

Histories written from feminist, post- or decolonial, and racial-critical perspectives are powerful examples of the kind of polyphonic historical understanding about which Ethan Kleinberg invites us to think. However, these histories and the theories that make them possible are still considered “special cases” apart from mainstream historiography and theory of history proper. A broad and inclusive definition of theory and philosophy of history can help us overcome this problem.

Ethan Kleinberg's *Reflections on Theory of History Polyphonic* were a provocative, highly stimulating read, as I had expected.¹ Building upon the *Theses on Theory and History*, which he coauthored with Joan W. Scott and Gary Wilder,² Kleinberg makes a compelling argument for an understanding of theory of history as a “polyphonic endeavor” 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.” Such a theory of history challenges what Kleinberg defines as a monophonic conception of history – a conception we could readily connect to the ontological realism he sharply criticized in his *Haunting History* as well as in *Theses*.³ Here, I would like to consider some things that I believe expand rather than challenge his *Reflections*. (1) I think the destabilizing function Kleinberg ascribes to theory of history has already resulted in good, critical, and challenging works, though still mostly at the margins of “mainstream” historiography; (2) also, a broad notion of theory and philosophy of history could avoid the problems presented in III. 3-6 by rethinking what counts as theory (and philosophy) of history.

Destabilizing Monophonic History

As I have written on Twitter,⁴ I think the destabilizing function that Kleinberg (correctly, in my own opinion) attributes to theory of history is already being performed within historiography, more specifically in histories written from post- or decolonial, feminist, racial-critical perspectives and outside the Global North. To be sure, both historiography and historians in Latin America and other former colonial holdings could be (and sometimes were indeed) just as conservative and monophonic as their European and North American peers. Being outside the

boundaries of what are still considered the “main hotspots” for intellectual work, however, and originally excluded from the very possibility of rational thought, many intellectuals throughout former colonial areas have long grappled with their own place in the “Universal History” their European colonists had envisaged. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that some of the most important developments in recent historiographical thought arise from these previously excluded or marginalized voices and resonate theories often crafted by and for these groups.

Fostering a polyphonic understanding of history requires a kind of openness to dissonance and the willingness to recognize, as Kleinberg noted, that “all historical accounts are haunted by other possible pasts that can, as such, enable multiple histories.” Though theory of history can indeed provide such insights, I am not sure that merely adding dedicated courses in theory of history will be enough. In Brazil, we have these courses and still have to deal with the “ontological realist” kind of historian Kleinberg rightly criticizes. One might argue that this is the case because not all courses in theory of history are taught by “scholars who are expert in theory of history”, an argument with which I am inclined to agree. This kind of course is too easily taken over by the generic contents of a course in “historiography”, where students learn the canonical “discipline history”⁵ of history – here, in particular, it goes something like historicism, the French “positivists”, Marxist historiography, the *Annales*, and British social history. Historiography courses are welcome, and they do have their value, but theory of history is probably more than that (a problem I will return to later). I agree with Kleinberg that theory of history should be included in the curriculum. However, just as teaching and learning ethics does not necessarily result in “more ethical” graduates, I am afraid that teaching and learning theory of history does not necessarily result in more theoretically proficient graduates.

When I pointed to what I think are some of the most important developments in recent historiography, I did not mention global, big, and deep histories – and not by accident. As Samuel Moyn wrote a few years back,

Just as the globe provides a larger space, an extended time line merely allows a longer frame. To think about what happens in the sunlit uplands beyond the confinement of the local and time-bound, you need a theory. Data – including big data about the long term – is never self-interpreting. Nor is orientation toward the past for the sake of the future solely a problem for which more information is the solution; it is ultimately a philosophical problem that only speculation can solve.⁶

In somewhat narrativist terms, our available modes of emplotment are not empirical, but normative. For all the potential benefits that larger canvases and timeframes could bring to our relations with and knowledge of the past(s), only theory can bring forth a polyphonic historical understanding. Moreover, one cannot fail to notice that, though they might reach truly global scales of analysis, global histories have not had any effect on the power asymmetries and unjustified hierarchies that posit the Global North as the legitimate and most prestigious locus for knowledge production. This is not necessarily an inherent deficiency of the method; it is a problem of/for theory.

Theory and Philosophy of History and “Other Theories”

We must consider then what it is that counts as theory of history. As I mentioned previously, many theory courses in Brazil end up with a linear presentation of “Western historiography”, where social and cultural history (of a specific kind, time, and place) is the apex of our historical thought. On top of that, other “theories” such as feminist theory, critical theory, and post- and decolonial theory are still mostly absent from our theory of history syllabi.⁷ Kleinberg’s *Reflections* have interesting remarks about three different terms that are usually interchangeable (or at least used interchangeably): historical theory, theory of history, and philosophy of history. Kleinberg refers to Hayden White’s own words to argue against historical theory (III.1). As for philosophy of history, he claims that the “very few practicing philosophers” of history tend to distance themselves “from the power dynamic at work” on our field (III.4-5). My own take on this issue is that our field is what we make of it,⁸ and so is its name – a position with which I believe Zoltán Boldizsár Simon might also sympathize.⁹ White’s words have indeed convinced me that “theory of history” is a more interesting option than “historical theory”, but I am not sure about the distinction with “philosophy of history”.¹⁰ Let me expand on that.

As in social theory, in theory of history some approaches are deemed to be “theory proper”, while others are not.¹¹ The problem is that the criteria for such distinctions are either unclear or based on troubling gendered, racialized assumptions. Syllabi seem to always have room to accommodate another white, European or North American, male author no matter how unrelated his interests are to history or the past, while non-white, non-European, non-male authors face a much narrower entrance.

If we consider a broad notion of “theory and philosophy of history” as *reflections on or about our relations to and knowledge of the past(s) in a polyphonic, diverse, and*

critical manner, we might not only dissolve any relevant distinction between theory of history and philosophy of history, but also make a clear case for the inclusion of more and more diverse perspectives into the repertoire of theory of history. To be clear: my intent is not to clump all “theory” together into a single Theory with a capital T. There are probably good reasons to distinguish between, say, feminist theory and decolonial theory – which does not mean that there can be no overlapping between them, or other kinds of interesting combinations and intersections. Not all social theories (in a broad, inclusive sense, including feminist theory, post- and decolonial theory etc.) have clear connections to our relations to or knowledge of the past(s), and not all social theorists have an interest in what we could call the “historical” aspects of their theories. However, many social theories do have important connections to theory of history or may at least have relevant issues to raise regarding our relations to and knowledge of the past(s) and, as such, might as well be included in our repertoire. I believe that such a broad and inclusive definition of “theory and philosophy of history” allows for a truly polyphonic understanding by inviting a diverse range of “theories” and their theorists to engage with our relations to and understandings of the past(s) without threatening to dissolve relevant distinctions between them.

Final Remarks

Kleinberg’s *Reflections* are a most welcome call for a polyphonic understanding of both theory of history as a field and of the past(s) itself (themselves). For too long we have maintained “Universal History” as an implicit, though unrecognized, ideal for the writing of (monophonic) history. Polyphonic histories are already being written, thanks at least in part to the impact and wide circulation of different theoretical positions, most of them from previously excluded voices, regions, and traditions. Kleinberg is correct to call for dedicated courses in theory of history taught appropriately by subject experts, even if merely creating these courses cannot guarantee the expected results. My own take is that we ought to push for a broad and inclusive definition of theory and philosophy of history, one that is aware (as Kleinberg himself is) of the unjustified hierarchies that exclude or diminish the intellectual work from outside the Global North, but also one that recognizes the potential for overlapping and cooperation with social theories in the broadest and most diverse sense.

Portuguese abstract: Em suas Reflexões sobre uma Polifônica Teoria da História, Ethan Kleinberg nos convida a pensar a teoria da história enquanto uma atividade desestabilizadora, capaz de abalar a hegemonia de narrativas monofônicas sobre o passado. As histórias escritas de pontos de vista feministas, pós ou decoloniais e crítico-raciais já dão exemplos muito poderosos do tipo de narrativa sobre o passado que essa polifônica teoria da história torna pensável, embora ainda sigam sendo consideradas como tipos “especiais” de histórias, separadas daquilo que se considera como história convencional ou geral. Da mesma forma, as teorias que tornam essas histórias possíveis (teorias feministas, pós ou decoloniais e crítico-raciais) permanecem apartadas tanto da teoria social, como se fossem teorias de alcance restrito no mundo social, quanto da teoria da história, como se suas reflexões não fossem relevantes para pensarmos nossas relações com e nossos conhecimentos sobre os passados. Levando adiante as Reflexões de Kleinberg, proponho que pensemos em uma definição ampla e inclusiva de “teoria e filosofia da história”, auxiliando-nos a superar essas separações e enfatizando a importância da reflexão teórico-filosófica tanto para pensarmos nossas relações com os passados quanto para abrir espaços para novas narrativas possíveis sobre esses passados.

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Tags: history writing / relations to the past / social theory

¹ Ethan Kleinberg, “Reflections on Theory of History Polyphonic,” *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (14.09.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/757> (14.09.2021).

² Wild On Collective, “Theses on Theory and History,” *Theory Revolt* (May 2018?), URL: <http://theoryrevolt.com/> (15.09.2021).

³ Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History. For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

⁴ You can check the thread here: João Ohara ([@ohara_j](https://twitter.com/ohara_j)), “Great piece by [@ekleinberg](https://twitter.com/ekleinberg) (...),” *Twitter* (14.09.2021), URL: https://twitter.com/ohara_j/status/1437762123896082435 (16.09.2021).

⁵ I still think this classic article by Stefan Collini is useful: Stefan Collini, "'Discipline History' and 'Intellectual History'. Reflections on the Historiography of the Social Sciences in Britain and France," *Revue de Synthèse* 109, no. 3-4 (1988), 387-399.

⁶ Samuel Moyn, "Bonfire of the Humanities," *The Nation* (21.01.2015), URL: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bonfire-humanities/> (15.09.2021).

⁷ Including my own, an absence I am trying to solve as I write this post.

⁸ Of course things are more complicated than that, but bear with me for a moment.

⁹ Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, "Do Theorists of History have a Theory of History? Reflections on a Non-Discipline," *História da Historiografia* 12, no. 29 (2019), 53-68.

¹⁰ Though, of course, Kleinberg notes that it depends on "one's definition of what counts as a 'philosopher' and what counts as 'philosophy.'"

¹¹ Jana Bacevic has made the point about the issue in social theory: Jana Bacevic, "How to Think About Theory (interview with Mark Carrigan, 28 June 2018)," *janabacevic.net* (26.08.2021), URL: <https://janabacevic.net/2021/08/26/how-to-think-about-theory-interview-with-mark-carrigan-28-june-2018/> (15.09.2021); Maria da Glória de Oliveira and Ana Carolina Barbosa Pereira have both raised similar questions regarding the history of historiography and theory of history, respectively: Maria da Glória de Oliveira, "Os Sons do Silêncio. Interpelações Feministas Decoloniais à História da Historiografia," *História da Historiografia* 11, no. 28 (2018), 104-140; Ana Carolina Barbosa Pereira, "Precisamos Falar sobre o Lugar Epistêmico na Teoria da História," *Tempo & Argumento* 10, no. 24 (2018), 88-114.