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# Theorizing History or How to Rethink Theory of History through Questions

*Lisa Regazzoni*

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# Theorizing History or How to Rethink Theory of History through Questions

## Theory of history is in the details

In his artwork *Collage ou l'âge de la colle* (*Collage or the Age of Paste*), Man Ray confronts us with the question of when historical ages and thus caesurae are marked and along what criteria. What if paste were to be raised to a category of historical time structuring analogous to the stone, iron or bronze age? After all, its technical relevance is immense, and not only for members of the avant-garde in the arts. Is Man Ray doing "Theory of history" in his artwork?<sup>1</sup>

While probably no one is surprised today that reflection on the geological time category of the Anthropocene is also a topic of theory of history, the paste question posed at the beginning may appear to some as a provocation. The idea is to trigger fundamental questions: What exactly is the theory of history field of enquiry? Who is authorized – implicitly or explicitly – to reflect? In or through what medium(s) or field(s) does this take place?

In my understanding, theory of history cannot be reduced to the theory, singular or plural, of history or historiography. Rather, I see it as a reflexive practice, as *theorizing* about history in a threefold sense. Firstly, about history not as the past, but as a medially constructed unified meaning of what happened, or as the irreducible pluralism of meaning. The open question here is whether and, if so, how it is possible that a plural (postcolonial) historiography practice allows for the postulation of different, if not irreconcilable, formations of meaning. To claim that the meaning is merely the result of rhetorical argumentation defers but does not solve the question.<sup>2</sup> This leads to the second sense of history, namely history as a media differentiated representation of pasts, one that transports traditional meanings and produces new meanings via research questions, categories, concepts, remains, and narrative structures, as well as via theoretical reflections that precede, accompany and follow up on the historical work. Thirdly, I am concerned with history in the sense of a practice of enquiry, defined by the methods, practices and approaches used, and in turn recognized as legitimate by a particular community. Hence this question goes hand in hand with determining which "community" approves of the (traditional) set of rules: the collective of professional historians, those working in professional fields dealing with history

(museum or exhibition curators, artists, filmmakers, history teachers, etc.), societies influenced by western ideas of history, or at least some of these societies?

Understood in this way, Man Ray's artwork is indeed part of this reflexive practice.

## Theory of history unbound

With this compressed offer of a definition of the field of "theory of history", I intend to counteract a number of constrictions that are all too often the result of the search for disciplinary identity or self-positioning in this field. Firstly, I do not confine theorizing to engagement with a corpus of theories produced in the field of philosophy or history. Without denying this corpus its relevance, my thinking also includes fragments of theories and reflections from other cultural fields, as well as exogenous theories (for example, from sociology, ethnology or literary studies). Secondly, I do not equate theory of history with a specific set of topics, whether it is the question of meaning in history (the classic question in the philosophy of history), the question of the narrative preformation of historical thought,<sup>3</sup> or the epistemological question of its methods and approaches<sup>4</sup> or of the structures of time.<sup>5</sup> I argue that thinking about history must be problem-oriented and permit all manner of questions related to it, beyond fleeting time-bound or even fashionable topic formations. This expansion is the precondition for engagement with theoretical questions that first emerge while examining sources and remains. In other words, historical-theoretical questions can – and indeed should – be triggered by empirical research work.<sup>6</sup> The questions that become part of the field of enquiry pertaining to theory of history are thus potentially infinite and cannot be determined in advance. Thirdly, since history is not only produced by historical scholarship, but also takes place in non-academic contexts that are – far more often than we like to admit – in osmotic relation to one another, I consider it crucial to think about these other forms of historical meaning-making.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, history is also produced in other disciplines, from archaeology to cosmology, and in other time scales, so that a joint reflection of these disciplines would be desirable, above the (ontological and epistemological) status of the small section of human history. Fourthly, I distance myself from the exclusivity of writing as a medium for reflection or representation of historical theoretical thought, as shown in the artwork of Man Ray. Finally, in offering a definition, I take leave of the immediate utilitarian expectations occasionally harboured of theory of history: it should provide theories that historians merely have to apply in order to produce "better" stories.

What then is the need for theory of history?

## Theory of history: simultaneously an aid and a disturbance

Theoretical activity, thinking about history in its threefold sense, can steer – supposedly blind – empirical research by offering a set of tools to select, access and grasp historical material. Determining the research question or historical fact to be investigated is already a hybrid operation involving theoretical anticipations or presuppositions and empirical work on the “historical material”. In other words, history without theory is quite simply unthinkable. The bread of empirical work has always been soaked in the water of theory.

But theory of history can, and indeed should, also operate as a continuous disturbance or alarm signal that wakes historians up or keeps them awake in their research work from start to finish. It sounds the alarm in the face of unscientific presuppositions and beliefs, implicit ideologems and imprecise terminology, and warns, for example, of problems and cases of ethnocentrism. With repeated questioning and scrutiny, it will not allow historical researchers respite. Hence one aim of theory of history is to produce a critical historiography and an alert awareness of one’s own positionality.

After all, what is the point of critical history?

Having history(ies) and representing history(ies) is an anthropological need that enables and conditions the action and orientation of communities in the present and in the future. Based on this assumption, there must be at least a minimal collective consensus on the rules and standards of how history(ies) is produced. This holds true as long as history is not a private matter and keeps to the claim of being shared by and valid for a community (consisting of at least two individuals). This minimal consensus provides that the production of history(ies) is generated with methods that are as transparent as possible, accessible and therefore verifiable materials, all on the basis of critical reflection on one’s own positionality and theoretical approaches, and that the resultant interpretations – via the same procedure – can be criticized and revised. Additionally, there is consensus that these operations can be learned and that anyone can (and has the right to) acquire the specific skills in public institutions such as schools and universities, regardless of (social) origin or cultural background. We should bear in mind that a critical, methodological approach to the past in a broad sense should be seen as an accomplishment, which in the case of Europe began as early as the sixteenth century. It served to regulate discourse on the past, which was no longer

to be based on statements by authorities that were not susceptible to verification and were guided by interests, but on statements verifiable by all parties. Although this was an ideal concept and to some extent has remained so, it sought emancipation from traditions and narratives set by authorities, on the one hand, and averted the danger of falling into the trap of historical scepticism, on the other.<sup>8</sup>

Critical historiography has therefore taken – and continues to take – a vital stance against authoritarian, unverifiable interpretations of the past that attempt to control the present and the future of collectives. Whether these critical, method-guided operations can still be considered those best suited to produce histories that can be shared by many people or must at least be seen, given postcolonial critique, as those that have silenced certain representations of the past and continue to prevent them from coming to the fore, is a question that remains the subject of heated debate.

In this situation, theory of history must turn to reflections that affect the field of ethics and consequently the field of philosophy. Any consideration of why a methodically regulated and reflected historiography is good must take into account coexistence in pluralistic societies, which leads us to ask under what conditions this coexistence could function well. In the final analysis, it is nothing less than the question of what is good. This, after all, is the *raison d'être* of theory of history.

Reflection on this last question, however, should be preceded by self-reflection on one's own positionality as a theoretician of history, almost an anthropological self-exploration as an epistemological instance in time and space.<sup>9</sup>

To be continued...

This article is the revised and extended version of a keynote speech given by the author on the occasion of the public blog launch on 4 November 2021 at the Centre for Theories in Historical Research at Bielefeld University. More information on this event and the podium guests [here](#).

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Lisa Regazzoni became Professor of Theory of History at Bielefeld University in June 2020. Her research focuses on the theory and epistemology of historical remains, the mediality of history and modes of representation of the past. She studied philosophy and history at the Universities of Bologna and Heidelberg, and received her PhD in philosophy from the University of Potsdam in 2006. After numerous fellowships in Paris (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Centre Alexandre Koyré, German Historical Institute Paris, École des hautes études en sciences sociales), in London (German Historical Institute) and Princeton (Institute for Advanced Study), she obtained her habilitation in Modern History at the Goethe University Frankfurt in 2020.

<http://wwwhomes.uni-bielefeld.de/lregazzoni/index.en.html>

[lisa.regazzoni@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:lisa.regazzoni@uni-bielefeld.de)

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**Tags:** critical historiography / methodological consensus / theorizing history

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<sup>1</sup> I first posed the question in a [tweet](#) on the editorial Twitter account [@GeTheorie](#) on 14 October 2021. Although this social platform is primarily used for sharing information, networking and self-promotion, our editorial team is keen to launch discussions in the form of questions on historical theory as a field of enquiry. See *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (@GeTheorie), URL: <https://twitter.com/GeTheorie> (23.11.2021).

<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, the arguments put forward by Hans Kellner as to why the idea of a unified meaning in history is indispensable to the discourse on the pluralism of meaning are still valid. See Hans Kellner, "L'impensabile ma indispensabile unità di senso della storia," *Discipline Filosofiche. Unità di senso della storia nell'orizzonte contemporaneo (1)*, ed. Barnaba Maj and Lisa Regazzoni (2000): 73-98.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between rhetoric and historiography has been a topos of historical theoretical reflection since antiquity. As a result of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), it gained renewed virulence and became one of the most discussed questions in historical theory in the decades following its publication.

<sup>4</sup> On the "epistemological turn" in the philosophy of history and its advocates, see Georg Gangl's response to Ethan Kleinberg and João Ohara's contributions: "Facing the Music," *Philosophy of History Now!* (12.11.2021), URL: <https://www oulu.fi/en/blogs/philosophy-history-now/facing-music> (21.11.2021).

<sup>5</sup> To use the words of Reinhart Koselleck in his essay *Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtsschreibung* (1972), the only genuine theory of history is a theory of historical times that focuses on the analysis of time structures. The question of time regimes, time structures, and temporality has gained momentum in recent years. See Sina Steglich's contribution on this blog: "Vom Wann der Geschichte zum Wie des Historischen," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (19.10.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/976> (21.11.2021).

<sup>6</sup> On some of today's challenges in historical research that await adequate theoretical reflection, see the contribution by Edoardo Tortarolo on this blog: "The theory of history and

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the 'fourth revolution,'" *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (28.09.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1280> (21.11.2021).

<sup>7</sup> The question of conveying historical knowledge or its production in non-academic contexts is dealt with, for example, in the profile area [Geschichtskulturen](#) at Bielefeld University, which takes a look at the different sites of historical production and their specific practices, media versions and modes of operation.

<sup>8</sup> I refer here to my remarks in *Geschichtsdinge. Gallische Vergangenheit und französische Geschichtsforschung im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020, esp. in the first chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Bärbel Völkel has made an attempt in this direction. See her contribution on this blog: "Historical Theory(ies) and Critical Whiteness Studies," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (12.10.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/946> (21.11.2021).