



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera

The theory of history and the “fourth revolution”

Edoardo Tortarolo

Cite as: Edoardo Tortarolo, "The theory of history and the “fourth revolution”," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 28/09/2021, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1280>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1280>

License:



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

The theory of history and the “fourth revolution”

For a long time, the theory of history has had a bad reputation. Among practising historians engaged in the analysis of a specific issue, the conviction has long prevailed that through systematic recourse to a set of sources it was possible to narrate a past event in full and, in so doing, to present readers with an implicit or explicit analysis of an aspect of human life from the past. This strongly empirical and therefore anti-theoretical view resulted in considerable efforts throughout the twentieth century to understand the genesis of relevant realities of human life. It must be acknowledged that it also led to blatant distortions, whether intentional or unintentional, based on the ideological manipulation of sources. Against this backdrop it is clear that empiricism alone is not sufficient to enable historical practice to adequately answer the questions initially posed. Sources have a “right of veto” over historical practice, which is what differentiates historical narrative from fictional narrative, but to think that historical narrative is a mimetic reproduction, a simulacrum, of past events and processes is scarcely credible. There is no doubt that the plethora of reflections, comments, and criticisms that can be ascribed to the post-modern and post-colonial realms contained a vein of Pyrrhonism. However, this intellectual constellation has positively reintroduced the idea of the theory of history into the conversation. It has revived the principle that history is a praxis of knowledge that has to be critical about the way it describes its objects of study and the way it analyses and describes the processes and events it is interested in. There is a consensus now that data “does not speak for itself”.

This need to be attentive to one’s own progression in historiography is at the core of the theory (or theories) of history required in historiographic practice: reflexivity on how one conducts analysis and narrative activity is a prerequisite for maintaining credibility.

While it is clear that sources are the foundation of historical work, it is also evident that the increase in sources over the last century has been remarkable and has enabled a growth in readership and opportunities for historians.

Sources have increased exponentially with the “fourth revolution”¹, which has changed the potential for communicating and preserving information. However, it is not simply a matter of having additional sources, which require new and non-traditional verification mechanisms and modes of interpretation, such as iconography and economic quantities which have long been incorporated into historiography. It is a question of integrating into the history of the past the

dimensions that only the cutting-edge scientific developments made possible by the “fourth revolution” have introduced into our view of reality around us and into our past. The theories of history must critically examine how these new sources – genetics, climate history, and cognitive science, to name but a few – can be integrated into historical practice. The “fourth revolution” in historiography cannot be limited to a critically verified procedure of adding new dimensions to the vision of the past, even if in much greater quantity and quality in recent years. The “fourth revolution” is bringing the dematerialisation of sources and their infinite multiplication to every historical practice, as there are no longer any physical limits to the medium to contain their proliferation. A material theory of the history of recent years has to keep in mind the dematerialisation of the sources as a core transformation in the praxis of history.

Already today, the creation of virtual libraries of enormous proportions and statistical databases of all kinds has made a greater amount of information, of recorded events, available. The “fourth revolution” has blurred the boundaries of good sources, relevant to the study at hand, and revived the issue of the falsification of sources and accountability in the production of documents. It has multiplied the possibilities of narratives and made their circulation easy.

From the point of view of reflection on the “history of history”, it seems that the circle of transformation that began in the modern age with Humanism and the Renaissance is now complete. The fundamentally rhetoric narrative-argumentative approach to the past was challenged by anti-narrative erudition, based on the materiality of sources, on inscriptions and epigraphy, on archaeology, numismatics, palaeography, diplomatics, and the objects of the past preserved in the *Wunderkammern*. Modern history was born from the encounter/clash between the philosophy of history and erudition, in the ever unstable balance between conflicting tendencies. Now the infosphere produced by the “fourth revolution” has also made its way into historiography. Not everyone has realised this. Many use old fashioned *Kulturpessimismus* to frame a transformation that has begun but whose developments we can only glimpse and guess at.

This transformation must also be taken into account on a theoretical level. It is not merely a question of the information overflow that digitisation of archives of all kinds creates in the study of the past: organisation results in reduction. Historiography still needs to structure this data in a way that makes sense of what is analysed and narrated. A collection of years and events does not correspond to

an acceptable historical text, nor is it conceivable that artificial intelligence could replace the selective, argumentative, and narrative capacity of a historian even if it had the capacity to select an enormous quantity of evidence from the past.

Theories of history must take into account a transformation of human beings over time. The shift in the perception of the past indicates change, not the disappearance of historical identity. Contrary to the claims of historians involved in twentieth-century historical practice, there is a huge demand for historical narratives. The past is moving in unexpected directions, linking historians, audiences, and contemporary experiences in different ways. It is not a question of abandoning reflection on theory, but on the contrary of always being in “self-reflexive mode”, which evaluates opportunities for emancipation from traditions and evolution within the historical discipline. This theoretical effort must be applied above all to two areas in which interest in the past is to be found. The first is the contamination between the new sciences, from neurology to genetics, whose contribution to the interpretation and narration of the past has already manifested itself but has yet to be defined. In the framework of a renewed world history or “big history”, cross-fertilisation with the natural sciences is crucial but must be mediated by the interaction with the specific categories of historiography. The second area is dissemination through the gamification of history: the digital specificity of the reenactment of the past requires a theoretical reflection. While the playstation console may never replace reading Herodotus or visiting a museum, it is already part of the contemporary experience of Gen Z interested in “seeing” and reconstructing the past.

Translated by Vanessa Di Stefano

Edoardo Tortarolo has been a Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy, since 1993. He was a Humboldt fellow in 1989 and 1990, he was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in 2006, and he was the Fulbright Distinguished Lecturer in Italian History at Northwestern University in 2010. His research interests cover eighteenth to twentieth century intellectual history and the history of historical writing. He co-edited the third volume of the *Oxford History of Historical Writing* (2012).

Email address: edoardo.tortarolo@uniupo.it

Link:

https://www.ae-info.org/ae/Member/Tortarolo_

<https://upobook.uniupo.it/edoardo.tortarolo>

Tags: digitisation / self-reflexive historiography / sources

¹ Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution. How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.