



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

Between identity, power and truth: The use of theory in the science of history

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Cite as: Uwe Walter, "Between identity, power and truth: The use of theory in the science of history," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 05/10/2021,

<https://gtw.hypotheses.org/912>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/912>

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Between identity, power and truth: The use of theory in the science of history

In the system of handling history academically, theory is clearly (also) a matter of distinction. This holds true whether theory is used or not: For many ancient historians who work closely with the material or indeed even render it accessible, for Monumenta medievalists or historians of diplomacy and editors who immerse themselves in the files, rejecting “theoretical flights of fancy”, conceptual apriorism or the subordination of sources to an “add-on” theory or even one that is extraneous to the discipline is all part of a professional self-understanding and in this sense has a community-building effect. And anyone who sees this otherwise can hardly deny the tremendous achievements of such scholarship beyond defensive positioning but will gratefully avail of the organized archives of the past. Slightly different but ultimately quite similar in its rejection is Golo Mann’s dictum of history as an art form based solely on knowledge (the classic controversy with Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who insisted on the need for theory in the science of history).

On the opposite side of the barricade, the declared use of theory has a far greater formative impact; in the sense of Gehlen’s concept of institutions, it is both a relief and a source of security. Historians worked for a long time on their own in Humboldtian “solitude and freedom”, collectively shaped by a somewhat formal methodology as stipulated, for instance, in Bernheim’s textbook, and by a broadly defined historicism. Some of them were formed into small identity groups, at best via *schools* of great masters and recognizable as such (although as researchers they may in reality have proceeded very differently on an individual basis, since truly great masters were highly liberal). As seen, however, in *History as Historical Social Science*, personal affinity to a particular *school* seemed excessive when it came to using a theory or mix of theories that promised superiority or to confessing to do everything but abstain from theory. The notion of an “explicit theoretical framework” was not only a matter of life and death in the Bielefeld Friday Colloquium.

This was quite rational, both psychologically and in terms of career strategy: those who followed that maxim marched on the path to victory and were spared from being weighed down by the question of whether their “own” hermeneutics, concocted and advanced in their individual research process, was indeed up to the task and the material involved. In the thoroughly organized doctoral factories of our time, “external” doctoral students are even seen as poor devils, since – like

old times – they have to make their way in the shadow of a master, (unless they are producing commissioned work, which exists and certainly has its dignity). Fortunate, on the other hand, are those in special research units or graduate schools (or established members of a research group) who are presented with (or as the common denominator jointly develop) a sophisticated theory design and vocabulary book of terms, which is in turn confidently referred to in the introduction to their own work and perhaps even contributes to harnessing the material. Hence, committing to a theory in an institutionalized research context is a relief, creates identity and (under favourable circumstances and preferably via the catchword “paradigm”) also lends disciplinary power – paradoxically, this is particularly the case with the research policy insistence on interdisciplinarity, which in turn is usually obliged to take a far more theoretical approach than disciplinary research when it comes to looking for a common logic without having a profound knowledge of the content of the other discipline(s).

And what about the truth? It doesn't take a radical constructivist's stand to see that truth also has a strong social component in the sciences. For valid (*true*) insights to impact on the respective target community of recognition, submission rituals must be celebrated, a conformist style of thinking displayed, certain patterns shown and concepts invoked. The easiest way to do this is to make an explicit *reference* to theory. At the same time, the actual *use* of theory in the course of research work on historical material and objects tends to be highly diverse in practice: A particular research design developed with the help of various theories *can* be helpful in shedding new light on the subject matter and gaining genuine insights; but it can also be confined to conjuring up classic quotations and the masters' words in a rhapsodic frame, as was typical of prefaces and introductions to empirically grounded and methodologically diligent studies from the now defunct GDR.

The argument so far should be subjected to a historicization test that goes back further than the 1970s. I regard theory usage as the historian's version of metapragmatic operations. As such, these are substantially older than theory as it is understood today, but they too emerged as markers of distinction. Thucydides and, later, Polybius reflected on conditions and procedures that might lead to more profound statements about the past than common speech (Thucydides) or the predecessors and competitors (Polybius). The philosophy of history, i.e., the question of meaning and purpose in the overall course of events, transcending mere contemporaneity, or of constants and repetitive structures in historical occurrences, likewise goes back to antiquity. As an intellectual draft with a high degree of abstraction, it can be understood as a (material) theory of history.

When Johann Gustav Droysen began holding history lectures in Jena, it was a turning point for theory development. Droysen was initially reacting to a new challenge, at least that's how he described it. The fanfares of the positivist natural sciences could be heard loud and clear: "Our wisest men in Jena are already teaching that only microscopes and scales are science, that their mathematical method is the one true method, not unlike what Hegel's students once did with philosophy, until philosophy got spattered with mud because of it."

Droysen counterpointed the unspecific standard teachings for historians that had hitherto held sway with an "exploratory understanding" of historical material from a past that was still present. Here too, it was a question of distinction through professionalization, which in the disciplinary competition for attention and authority also aimed at making the academic study of history into a science. In the attempt to gain recognition and the power of definition, previously valid prerequisites for historiography – impartiality, diligence, the ability to interpret universally along established patterns, and rhetorical and literary presentation skills – were clearly no longer adequate.

The first theoretical feature in Droysen's design is the Aristotelianizing survey and dissection of the entire field of operation, here methodology (heuristics, criticism, interpretation), systematics ("historical work" on its materials, forms, workers, purposes) and topics (exploratory, narrative, didactic, discussive presentation). Droysen's understanding of the history of humankind as recognizable, coherent and processually unfolding gave meaning to these phenomena in all their diversity and can be interpreted as an orientation based on the philosophy of history for the practice of historical science. And here, of course, he was epistemologically Kantian in his claim that historians would have no subject matter without foregoing concepts, categories and questions. Finally, with the concept of "moral powers", he pointed the way to future research, for example on marriage behaviour or beer thirst, for which there was scant interest and no empirical basis in his time – theory as an overriding and revealing force.

What conclusion can be drawn from what has been outlined so far? For me, first and foremost, a certain understanding of *theory* that is somewhat reduced on the horizon of possibilities. I do not see it as framing one's own thinking, research and writing with a *design* that promises advantages from the toolbox of the usual master thinkers in vogue. Instead, I regard it as an instrument for injecting the basic virtues of the historian – curiosity, scepticism, respect for the dead and for what has been handed down – into a habitus and a practice. This includes an open-

mindful encounter with stimulating texts and drafts, even outside one's own field, as well as the carefully considered structuring of a subject area, neither completely far ahead nor simply catching up but in a hermeneutic alternating process with work on the material and, finally, the constant sounding out of possibilities for abstraction. That said, it would be presumptuous and unrealistic to utterly reject the use of theory that I have just critically apostrophized: the self-forming, relieving, even monumental melding into specific scientific echo chambers. After all, despite assumptions to the contrary, even historians are sometimes social beings.

Translated by Sunniva Greve

Uwe Walter (born 1962) has been Professor of General History with special consideration of Ancient History at Bielefeld University since 2004. His main research areas include the historical culture of the Roman Republic (*Memoria and res publica*, 2004) and the general history of the Roman Republic, as well as ancient and modern historiography. Recent books: *Political Order in the Roman Republic* (2017); *Antiquity Beyond the Day* (2017) *Greek History c. 800–320 B.C.* (2022, with Raimund Schulz, Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte). He is co-editor of the "Historische Zeitschrift" and "Studien zur Alten Geschichte" (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht). More recent essay publications beyond Ancient History include work on the universal-historical designs of Karl Jaspers and Ernst Nolte in comparison, and on Siegfried Kracauer's "History. The Last Things Before the Last".

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Tags: Distinction marker / Droysen / Habitus