Theory of history as a reflexive endeavor. Tracing the “beginning”

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An unfinished workpiece; it is being face-milled; the machining process begins. Further machining of the unfinished workpiece would be impossible without a plan surface. Finally, it needs a measuring reference. A beginning has been made here in the working. What would a “beginning” in historical-theoretical activity look like? Where does working on theory of history begin?

From a student perspective, it could be asked: Do I have to have read and understood Marx, Kant, Herder and Hegel before I can comment on theory of history? Lothar Kolmer, who has written a short overview entitled Geschichtstheorien, remarks: “In my own teaching experience, Marx and Kant are still known as names, but very few are in a position to say a few sentences about them; most people have never heard of Herder and Hegel. Furthermore, it is hard for many of the students to grasp and interpret difficult texts with more complex statements” (own translation).1 So, is historical theory something abstract and difficult that I as a student should avoid as far as possible? Are the so-called classics compulsory reading before I even attempt to think and write about historical theory?

The question made me think back to a seminar paper I wrote as an undergraduate student on the finiteness of coal resources in the nineteenth century. I got praise for my “theory work”. Interestingly, at the time I had no idea that I was working theoretically. In this context, I drew on Reinhart Koselleck’s categories of “Erfahrungsraum” and “Erwartungshorizont”.2 I came across it by chance when Reinhart Koselleck’s book Vergangene Zukunft was recommended in a seminar. Linking the two historical categories to my work on the finiteness of coal in the nineteenth century produced a different point of view and a different way of looking at the traces and writings of contemporaries that I am probably only now becoming aware of in after-thinking. This other consideration, this other thinking gave me the opportunity to shift my perspective. Is theory, then, a pair of glasses with which I can order a narrative and make sense of the past? Does historical work compel theoretical work? Or even the application of theory to an empirical science?

Theory, and this has been my belief so far, is more than application. It can become a pair of glasses to see differently with and broaden a perspective. Just as it

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“happened” to me while reading Koselleck. Through this it was also possible to reflect on what history could actually be. These are signs and “beginnings” of historical theory. The view through glasses is especially common in the social sciences. The metaphor serves to reflect on one’s own way of looking at and interpreting phenomena. In my social science studies, for example, I learned how to change glasses, or rather the lens, and experiment with different ways of seeing other texts. That said, however, the lens needs to be worked on in the same way. I think the title of the blog expresses this aptly. Theory of history requires being at work. In other words, theory is practical doing. It is not, as Anna Karla notes, that “[h]aving gone through the compulsory theoretical part, the empirical pièce de résistance can now take centre stage.”

To avoid this theory obligation, basic historical-theoretical questions should be dealt with early in the study course. This applies to those who devote themselves to a subject-specific study, but also to those who are keen to become active in historical education. Seriously addressing the question of “What is history?” is probably the key to approaching any further theoretical work. This is the kind of starting point that is needed for the self-assurance of one’s own subject. Things can proceed from there.

The procedure may consist of changing the milling tool and drilling a hole. I continue to use the plan surface as a reference. I measure my next step from there. My attempt to create a hole may fail. Was it the wrong tool? Did I lack dexterity or was I too careful? Doing historical-theoretical work is not a finished workpiece.

Presenting this process in blog format is an opportunity to be in and stay in conversation about “being-at-work”.
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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Tags: Beginnings / Being-at-work / Reflexivity

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4 Jörg van Norden locates this question at the core of the field of theory of history. See his contribution on this blog: “‘There are no truths outside the Gates of Eden’ (Bob Dylan),” Geschichtstheorie am Werk (26.10.2021), URL: https://gtw.hypotheses.org/801.
5 Although the workpiece will eventually end up as a finished product, signifying an end to the work on it, it remains part of a work in progress, wears out and perhaps at some point appears again as raw material for numerous fresh “beginnings”.

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