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I. PAST, HISTORY, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY– WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

One of many remarkable things about so-called philosophy (or theory) of history is that the distinction between the past and presentations of the past is often treated as an enormous difficulty that historians have not observed (Hayden White and his many followers)[1]. Some theorists even want to deny that there is/was a past apart from the narratives about it, because it is no longer observable. Transferred to each person's own history, this seems ridiculous. I feel quite certain that I sat down on my desk-chair less than half an hour ago. Presently, I sit there writing this text, but the act of placing my body on the chair is no longer observable. It is part of my past, in the same way as my birth, my matriculation examination, and my first wife's decease. As an observer I cannot tell about all of them (my birth!), and only as an engaged participant I refer to other parts of "my past". But it would be senseless to deny that the history of my changing body from my first remembrance of it up to the present is more than just a story.

Philosophising about history in the sense of the past is something that has roots in the Antiquity (e.g., the Bible, Book of Daniel, esp. ch. 2. 7, and 11). Theorising about history (the past) got a systematic form through Giambattista Vico in his book commonly known as *La Scienza nuova* (1725).[2] His line of thought was followed and varied by G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, to mention some of the most known, but there is no strict borderline between philosophy and (social) theory when it turns to the general development of mankind. Much could be said about such varieties of "theories of history",[3] but this is not the topic of the present article.

History in its other sense, the sense of historiography, is a popular "art" to have meanings about. Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit (more about them in the next section) have left as their legacy the notion that historiography is a variety of art, in the sense that

[1] See White 1978/85, esp. 81-100, and White 1987, esp.42-57; also, see Ankersmit 1994, esp. 97-124; Jenkins1991, esp. 68-70; see also Ankersmit 2012, passim. On White's influence, see H. Paul 2019.

[2] G. Vico, *Principi di una scienza nuova d'intorno alla commune natura delle nazione* (1725), where he wanted to give a foundation for a new science about the common nature of all nations and their development.

[3] Se further Torstendahl 2015a, 174-187, 198-201.

its presentations are representations of the same kind as novels or paintings and should be analysed as such. They agree that there are some rules for writing history that distinguish history works from novels but insist that works on history are entirely fabricated in the mind of the historian and cannot be taken as depicting "the past". They mean that truth (or falsity) is not applicable to history works. Some later theorists have tried to distance themselves from postmodern thoughts by re-introducing empathy and feelings as guiding principles for an engaged historiography, brushing up thoughts of Robin George Collingwood, Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in different forms.[4] The distance to White is, however, not great, for in his last years he also transformed his "philosophy of history" by giving to it a moral direction as a guide for actions in the present and future.

Many contemporary analysts of historiography agree with White (and followers) that historiography is something different from science because it has not the same relation to the outside world. History is deemed to be dependent on the author's mind and is by necessity (taken as a logical premise) narrative in form and therefore, different historians produce different opinions on past occurrences. These conceptions are still current and dominant among those who write under the label philosophy (or theory) of history. Only rarely discussants point out that very seldom the usual conception of history in philosophical works is based on the research works of professional historians and their methods and arguments.

This article will try to deepen out this line of criticism. The following section is devoted to an analysis of the concepts used by others and those used by me in the later sections. The third section relates a couple of interesting efforts to link up theory of history with current historical research and their shortcomings. The fourth section presents an alternative approach to the analysis of historiography. The fifth section presents my conclusions from the analysis.

[4] For some examples of such reasoning, see section 3, below.

II. CONCEPTUAL PREMISES FOR THE ANALYSIS

History, in the sense of what has been the case or what has taken place in the past, is not what this article is concerned with. It will deal only with history in the sense of presentations in words. Pictures might have been included, but I have not worked with examples of art that are not based on a previous written narrative. First-hand painted sources which are not just complements to written reports are rare but are for instance, represented by very old cave paintings and engraved pictures in stone caves in Spain and France.

History as written presentations is not at all uniform. People working with the philosophy of history mostly take examples from one or some books with comprehensive histories of something: a comprehensive history of Spain, the history of Enlightenment in Europe, a history of the Tudors on the English throne, or something similar. Most often they avoid histories of economic or social content. They frequently find that the "histories" that they work with are narrative, and they argue that their choice is strategic, because the authors are often well known professors of history. This demands a comment on professionalism.[5]

In many occupations schooling is required to be acknowledged as a "member" of the occupation before practising as a professional. A barrister or a solicitor are typically used as examples together with physicians, but many other occupations have joined their type of link between a theoretical education and a practice with specific requirements: nurses, school teachers, engineers, journalists, are among them and there is a vague boundary between them and train or lorry drivers, stock brokers, estate agents, and several others. Quite as lawyers and physicians all the other mentioned occupational groups practice their occupation when they are asked by other people to do so or with them as patients or clients.

[5] In previous books and articles, I have gone into the difference between practicing professions and academic professions more in depth. See esp. Torstendahl 2015b. See also Torstendahl 2015a, 7-17. The following two paragraphs summarise the essentials of what I have presented in these publications.

Professionalism among academics staying in the learned world is of a specific sort, or often of two sorts. A professional physicist may write a book on physics from Newton to Einstein or, if the physicist is bold, a book on the physics of the creation of the universe. Such an author will probably have interesting views on the subject. Yet, the first type of book may be found deficient by a researcher on history of science, for instance, in its concentration on a few famous scientists, and omitting the production of their disciples. The second approach, the bold overview, will probably, beside applauds, lead to many critical comments within the profession of physicists for simplifications of serious problems and taking a debatable stance to many other problems. Both these types of presentations would fall outside the sphere of professional physicists, as they go beyond the scope of their profession, even if reviewers can admit that non-professionals might find the such books interesting and informative.

A professional physicist practices as such only in research work on physical problems, not in a presentation of physics. Likewise, professors of history practice as historical researchers only when they work as researchers on historical problems. Both physicists (or other scientists) and historians practice as professional researchers only when they try to create new knowledge by treating problems that they approach with methods recognised in their disciplines. (They may act as professional teachers when they write books of other sorts on matters within their discipline.) If they want to use a new method, they have to fight for its acceptance in the disciplinary community before any results won by such methods will be accepted. In physics such new methods are common, and the validity is regularly discussed for and against.[6] In history such discussions are rare. Two examples may be mentioned: the discussion about source criticism in Sweden from 1910 to the 1950s (in its origin a discussion about which conclusions should be drawn from source criticism, later a "school" fight); and the discussion about "new economic history" (or cliometrics or econometric history) in the US and Europe during the late 1950s-1960s.[7]

An important difference between researchers in the natural sciences and (the discipline of) history is, however, the *nature of the problems*, which they state as important to solve. In the natural sciences these are generally related to the validity of a theory, either a theory already in use, or a theory existent as a hypothesis and in need of verification. In the historical disciplines the problem is usually the *interpretation of a certain set of data* which may be taken as evidence for a hypothetical explanation or understanding. On some occasions but rarely, historians like scientists seek verification of a hypothetical *theory*. Both in sciences and in history there is a body of knowledge, which is taken for valid and, given this accepted body of knowledge, the new theory or interpretation must be shown to be compatible with it. If the news is found not compatible, it is either judged to be false, or a wider problem opens up for the scientist/historian, namely to show how to solve the conflict with (a lot of) statements taken för true in earlier research.

Thus, my first analytical point is that scientific research and historical research show a great but not total similarity, if research is kept apart from overviews. Researchers in both fields strive to solve problems. In both cases the solution requires empirical evidence to be accepted. The empirical evidence can be bridged to the solution of the problem, which is initially raised only within the brain of the researcher. This bridge-building partly consists of conceptualisation of observations, which makes it possible to treat the problem either as a logical problem or as something that is similar to certain other empirically verified (theory-bound) knowledge or structurally connected with such verified knowledge. This bridge-building has to be confirmed by other researchers in their research directly (through repetition of the same) or indirectly (through tests of compatibility with the

[6] A striking example is the Swede Hugo Alfvén's theory of the northern light as a product of space plasma and the magnetosphere, which was discarded by the Englishman Sydney Chapman with a lot of scientists involved on both sides. (See Lindqvist 2023, 363-399.)

[7] Fogel & Engerman (eds.) 1971, especially the editors' introduction, 1-13.

solution of adjacent problems). This holds for both sciences and history.

My second analytical point concerns the internal structure of the so-called philosophy of history. The protagonists of historiography as an object of study most often take "history" as denoting all sorts of presentations of the past. In many cases "history" is stated to be narrative by its nature. The subtitle of one of Hayden White's books is "Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation", where one of the chapters is called "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", but there is no chapter on what role narrative plays in contemporary *historical research*. Sometimes theorists even hold that a definition of any way to "present past occurrences" must contain a "narrative".[8]

When a difference is made between historical presentations that are made to summarise earlier results (either for a wide public or for the use as state of the art) and research presentations aiming at bringing the searchlight to new knowledge produced, the presumption of narration as central for "history" in general is not true. Of course, in stating a problem the historical researcher has to present a background which may have important narrative parts, but the discussion of and solution of the problem are not narrative (see further section 4, below), even if they are summed up in a conclusion by relating them to a pre-existing narrative and clarifying the corrections, which the new knowledge implies in the narrative. Likewise, the astronomer states not only the new information provided by his telescope, but how this information fits in or changes the earlier conception of certain space phenomena.

A third analytical point is the connection between single observations and the written text given as "new knowledge". This connection is created in each single case through a bridge of concepts. When the problem is formulated as related to a theory, the theory also furnishes the main conceptual framework. When the problem has no direct connection to a theory, which is not seldom the case in historical works dealing with individual human actors, the main instrument is to use a quasi-psychological interpretation of the situation in question. Many theorists of history insist that such "understanding" is a more general instrument for historians, but this type of understanding is hard to grasp in precise formulations.[9]

The analytical distinctions made in this section are based on a rather extensive reading of books and articles. In short, philosophers of history as they come to the fore in book-reviews and articles in the most current (American/British) journals in the field[10] do not give a lead to any other bridge between "historical facts" and interpretations than empathy with an author who is in most cases dead and must be the object of another historical investigation for any interpretations of his psychology. My knowledge of theoretical journals in other countries is sparse and mostly confined to *Historia da Historiografia* (Brazil) and *Storia della Storiografia* (Italy), both partly with articles in English. These two journals concentrate on the history of historiography rather than its theory, but they have articles of both these kinds. It must be stressed that many general historical journals also publish articles on the theory of history/historiography. Leading journals in big countries do this rather regularly. However, the content of such articles is much the same as in the journals specialised in the field of philosophy of history.

As far as my knowledge goes neither the American/British, nor the other journals have ever discussed the distinction between history as presentation of past occurrences and history as presentation of research products creating new knowledge.

[8] White 1987. Hayden White is one example, but by no means the first, Theorists of history have varied the theme of historiography as a narrative discipline since the 1960s (Arthur Danto). See further Cernín 2020, 34 pp here esp. 9-12. On Cernín's important article, see below, section 3.

[9] I will come back to understanding in the next section, when I discuss Ahlskog 2021.

[10] In the first hand I refer to *History and Theory*, *The Journal of Philosophy of History*, and *Rethinking History*.

III. EFFORTS TO LINK THEORY OF HISTORY TO CURRENT HISTORICAL RESEARCH

In this section, two articles and a book will be compared. Their authors have a similarity in their approach to the subject matter of historiography namely, they stress that this subject needs to be treated with a consideration of what message historians convey not only in their texts but through inferences from their material. The three texts are not selected as the result of a careful study of many texts on historiography, but rather as efforts that I have found in recent philosophy of history to link theory of history with current historical research.

The three texts are written by Mariana Imaz-Sheinbaum, Jonas Ahlskog, and David Cernín, all of them tackling the problem of the writing of history and how it ought to be understood. They do not intend to prescribe how it ought to be done, though a historian reading the articles will easily find some implied objectives in their sorting out different theoretical approaches. I will treat their articles in the enumerated order.

Mariana Imaz-Scheinbaum (University of Mexico, Mexico City, and University of California, Santa Cruz) has written the article "Beyond truth: an epistemic normativity for historiography".[11] The central point in the development of her argument is contained in the third and fourth sections of her article[12] treating two magistral works on "the discovery of America", S. E. Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages*, from 1974, and E. O'Gorman's *The Invention of America*, from 1958. Imaz-Scheinbaum compares the books by the two authors in their relation to the concept of discovery. According to her, Morison takes the idea of discoveryfor granted and has collected sources that concern Columbus' voyage starting in 1492 in order to tell the story of a great discoverer, while O'Gorman, according to her, from the very beginning has another approach focussing on the concept of discovery and its function in this context. She even quotes O'Gorman saying the following: "Our problem … is to question if the facts that have been understood until now as the discovery of America, should be kept understood in such a way" (260).

As a historian, I would say, that Morison's approach to his topic is "just" to produce a coheren narrative of Columbus' intentions and pattern of actions using all available material on exactly these aspects. No problem, no search for "new knowledge". O'Gorman is justly praised by Imaz-Scheinbaum, though she does not emphasize the word "problem" from his text. He wants to solve a problem and through this he wants to contribute to new historical knowledge. However, his problem is vast and this invites Imaz-Scheinbaum to an interpretation turning into "understanding".

In spite of the fact that two historical works are given a central place in Imaz-Scheinbaum's article, the impression is that they have been chosen to illustrate a philosophical thesis rather than to analyse what historians do. The philosophical thesis is that history in any form other than pure enumeration of factual statements, requires a specific sort of understanding or reorganisation of archival findings in conceptual forms. In this way she wants to attach to the tradition of understanding in a form, which she calls reorganisation (after Catherine Elgin) and which she praises O'Gorman for, while she blames Morison for not doing this. "It is important to remark that after reading *The Invention of America* one does not learn something new about the sources or about Columbus, rather we learn to see what we already knew in a new and original way." (262)

Imaz-Scheinbaum's analysis ends up in a conclusion where she maintains: "My epistemic account takes the idea of understanding and reorganization as essential concepts that enable us to evaluate contending historical views. It aims at recognizing new and insightful ways that historical material can be reorganized to improve our understanding." (263) It would be hard to find any historical researcher, who would oppose such a thesis. On the contrary, very many

[11] Beyond truth: an epistemic normativity for historiography", in *Rethinking History* 2022, Vol. 26, No. 2, 250–266.
[12] Imaz-Scheinbaum 2022, 258-263.

historians have had exactly this purpose, that is, to reconceptualise findings.

Jonas Ahlskog (University of Åbo Akademi, Turku, Finland) has written the book *The Primacy of Method in Historical Research*.[13] The title of Ahlskog's book promises something that many historians would like to see: a philosophically based discussion of the methods used in historical research. It is true that Ahlskog's discussion is much more oriented to methods than Imaz-Scheinbaum's, but partly the philosophers discussed are the same. He states his objective in the following way: "In contrast with the trend of focusing on temporality, retrospectivity and narration, the present book claims that all of our relations to the past in historical research are most fundamentally mediated by the logical commitments of history as method, not by concepts of time and literary form... [P] erhaps most controversially, the book claims that contemporary philosophy of history still has much to learn from classical work in the field by R. G. Collingwood, Michael Oakeshott and Peter Winch." (12) In this way the author emphasizes a distance to the postmodern school, but at the same time claims a closeness to its predecessors in the empathetic school of understanding. The front against the postmodernists in historical theory (Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit and others) combined with a proximity to empathetic philosophy of history forms also a link between Ahlskog's reorientation of the theory of history and that of Imaz-Scheinbaum.

The first two chapters after the introduction describe the development of important branches of philosophy of history from the middle of the twentieth century to its end. In the first of these chapters Ahlskog presents the philosophy of historiography of Karl Popper and Carl G. Hempel, and justly observes their opposite positions to the work of historians, where Popper discards the possibility of any scientific history, claiming that it is always fettered by the ideological standpoints of the historian. At the same time Hempel tries to show an affinity between scientific explanations and those of historians, although he sees the latter as only explanatory sketches. It is worth noticing that Ahlskog does not give any corresponding presentation of the dominant philosophers on history on the contemporary European Continent, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose thinking on understanding went in quite other directions.

The second of the preliminary chapters is devoted to the postmodern theories of history. The background is found in Arthur Danto's dictum: "It is just because we do not have direct access to the past that we have history to begin with: history owes its *existence* to this fact: it makes history possible rather than impossible." (Danto 1965/68, 95). Therefore, all historical writing can be the object of sceptical conclusions about historical knowledge. "Where there are no synthesizing narratives there is no historical knowledge," as Ahlskog summarises this view.

The idea of narration is the main topic of Ahlskog's third chapter. Narration as a necessary form for history-writing was taken up by Hayden White in his *Metahistory* (1973) and by Frank Ankersmit, who also shared Danto's explicit view that the difficulty of not being able to directly observe their objects of study is confined to historians. According to White, representation was the mode of historiography, and it was closer to art than to science. Ahlskog also points out that these narrativists made a difference between individual statements (made on singular actions or events) and "a higher level at which raw data are integrated into a synthetic whole (narrative)", in Ahlskog's words. Ahlskog also observes that Ankersmit has said that it is easy to say true things on individual data in the past but that such true statements do not constitute history (that is, history defined as narration).

Later narrativists have made temporality more complicated, Ahlskog contends. Their main idea is that historical narratives are structured not by past events themselves but rather by the story or narrative form of literary fiction and by the culturally specific concepts that historians use for

[13] *The Primacy of Method in Historical Research. Philosophy of History and the Perspective of Meaning*. New York & London: Routledge, 2021.

representing past events. As a consequence, later narrativists have not made "individual narrative sentences" the object of analysis but rather whole monographs, in Ahlskog's analysis.

Leaving narration, the next chapter (4) of Ahlskog's book focusses on Michael Oakeshott's separation between what he called the practical, everyday life use of the past and the historical, professional use of the past. Ahlskog comments Hayden White's use of Oakeshott's distinction: "If professional history is a disinterested study of the past for its own sake, then this will, according to White, make history irrelevant for our existential and ethical concerns." (78) A page later he says: "In conclusion, I contend that Oakeshott's theory does provide a useful conceptual distinction between two different attitudes toward the past. Nevertheless, the distinction is misleading to the extent that it suggests an absolute separation between practical and historical engagements with the past." (79) It will seem that he takes up a compromising position between the two theorists of history without paying any attention to what the historical professionals do or think about their practice.

Further in his analysis, Ahlskog states that Oakeshott has emphasised (in later works) that there are both practical and historical uses of the past. He called them for modes of understanding, that is, different only in their application to certain data, but both constructions in the mind of the user. Ahlskog's opinion is that White, when he refers to Oakeshott, has totally misunderstood the distinction, when he uses it to discredit historical professionals (81-83). "Hence, Oakeshott would definitely not think, as White does, that one could criticize history for not being relevant to practice."(83)

Finally, in an interesting analysis over several pages that cannot be adequately related here, Ahlskog examines a multitude of concepts relating to historiography (generally called "history" in his text, probably because the everyday references to the past, called practice, are included in its denotation). His analysis in this connection constitutes a philosophical discourse, and its relevance for the practice of historical professionals in their research work is not discussed or shown, even if it is obviously taken for granted.

David Cernín, (University of Ostrava, Czech Republic), has written the article "Historical Methodology and Critical Thinking as Synergised Concepts"[14], which gives still another but, in some respects similar approach to a philosophical analysis that claims to analyse historical methodology.[15] His own presentation of the aim of the article includes the following statements: "The post–truth era is plagued by numerous pseudoscientific theories and narratives that took root in various disciplines. History and historical knowledge belong to the enterprises abused today. ... This paper aims to sketch a solution to this threatening situation with the help of contemporary philosophy of historiography. It is argued that it is necessary to move from historical narratives to the process of historical inquiry itself." (p. 1, Abstract) In the actual article: "This paper focuses on the case of history as a specific scientific discipline as well as a frequently abused source for legitimatization of political narratives. ... [P] hilosophers have been aware of an uneasy relationship between historical theories or narratives and ideological colouring." (2-3) Therefore, the author follows the philosophical discussion from Hempel and Popper to the narrativists and further to the critical reaction to the narrativists approach, he says. (3)

In the main part of the article Cernín starts out with stating: "There are many unresolved issues in historical discourse that are deeply under-determined by present evidence and contending theories or explanations are bound to exist. This pluralism endemic to history can be seen both as a fatal flaw of the field as well as the condition necessitated by its subject matter." (4) However, he also says that it would be an exaggeration to contend that historians usually are of different meanings about their topics. One part of his

[14] Cernin 2020.

[15] The three contributions have been presented here in inverted order of publication, so Cernín has not had the opportunity to read Ahlskog's book before his own article was published, which should be stressed as there are some similarities between these two contributions.

references for such judgments on the historical discipline (or possibly all historical works without specific reference to the academic discipline) consists of earlier historians and theoreticians of historiography such as, Aviezer Tucker and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen,(4) but the bulk is a summary of two discussions in the Czech society, one during the national revival in the 19th century and the other in post-Soviet times.(5-6) Both these examples refer to a very varied sort of historical and ideological narratives and descriptions of Czech experiences plus conclusions drawn from them. Academics seem to have played a role, but it is unclear exactly what their role was and to which extent research was involved.

The rest of Cernín's article is a discussion of the development of the theory of history in three different phases: by Popper and Hempel as a realist and empiricist approach; by Danto White and Ankersmit as "narrativism" of different structures, where White represents the ultimate step that "historical narratives are created deliberately by historians" and not found in their material (9-10); and finally, a return to inquiry, where the main role is played by Leon J. Goldstein in Cernín's presentation. Goldstein made a distinction between the historians' books and descriptions, which he called "the superstructure of history, and the process of historical inquiry itself — the infrastructure of history". "This infrastructure entails the essential features of the discipline of history, namely the intellectual activity of historians in which the historical past is produced, interaction with evidence, source criticism, and uncovering of historical knowledge." (14) This important aspect was neglected by both narrativists [= White, Ankersmit] and neopositivists [= Hempel and Popper], Cernín says, when they focussed on the content and the writing. Goldstein was quite aware that much historical research led to narrative presentations, but his interest was directed mainly to the infrastructure. (15-16)

Goldstein insisted on devoting himself to the epistemological issues, and he meant that historians, while dealing with present evidence were construing the historical past, as opposed to the real past, for which he showed little interest. Thus, he was a constructionist but not a relativist in Cernín's interpretation. Yet, it is important, as Cernín also points out, that even if identical data can be used as evidence for different theories by historians of different traditions or schools, they never deny intersubjectivity and use discussions for clarification of debatable research points. Through a discussion of contemporary history and its methods and materials Cernín tries to find out a sort of compromise between Goldstein's approach and the narrativists.

Although I completely agree that Goldstein very much deserves the attention that Cernín draws to his analysis of a difference between the superstructure and the infrastructure of history writing, I must insist that Goldstein's analysis, with its conceptual distinction between real past and historical past, is still another one of several such efforts from theorists of history to examine "history" in the sense of presentations of the past.

To conclude this section of the present article the result is a great similarity between the three presentations by Imaz-Scheinbaum , Ahlskog, and Cernín. They argue that they want to explore the methods and arguments of historians, but the result is disappointing, as they rarely discuss any research text, and when they do (Imaz-Scheinbaum does) it is hardly the details of any historian's argument (Goldstein's infrastructure) that is followed, but rather the narrative encapsulation of the historical results.

A striking common trait for the three articles by Cernín, Imaz-Scheinbaum and Ahlskog is that all three have a perspective that goes out from philosophy of history. In spite of what they say about the importance of the practice of historians, their analyses of historical practice are conceptually determined by earlier philosophical solutions. Thus, they do not analyse the details of the professional practice of historians and how this practice relates to their presentations of a problem of history. The three authors only rarely approach the conceptualisation of a specific historical problem versus actual evidence that is brought up by a historian. Imaz-Scheinbaum touches this kind of question but drops it,

probably as a consequence of her selection of a very complex historical problem as the basis of her analysis. Nor does any of the three authors scrutinise the variety of problems that historians raise and what this variation means for the problem-solving, even though Cernín mentions a number of different types of topics in historical studies. They write about what historians (in general) do, but such generalisations say little of each individual case of problem-solving, if these are as different as historical problems usually are. Thus, little lead for the analysis of what professional historians do and how they reason is given by the three analysed articles.

IV. MAO'S POLITICAL STRATEGY AS A PROBLEM: FROM SCHRAM TO KNIGHT

The fourth section of the present article is devoted to an effort to exemplify what an analysis of historical research might mean. Only one example is given, a discussion about the complex situation of China and of the Chinese Communist party and its leader before, during and after the Chinese revolution. Only two of many researchers are presented, and their standpoints to problems and new knowledge are given an analysis.

The authors

Stuart R. Schram (1924-2012) and Nick Knight (1947-) were professors, and for a period the former was the supervisor of the second during his studies. Schram started as a graduate student of physical science. He was recruited to the group preparing the nuclear bombs and left the U.S. after the war. He began studying political science in the U.S., wrote a dissertation at the SciencePo in Paris, and published a book on *Protestants and Politics in France* (Paris, 1954) before he took up studies on Chinese history and the Chinese language. In 1967 he moved to London, where he became a professor at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies.[16]

About Nick Knight I have found less data. He is Australian, born in 1947 and graduated from an Australian university before he studied for Schram at SOAS in London. From 1981 to 2008, he was professor of Asian Studies at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.[17]

I will confine my analysis here to one book of each of the authors, For Schram I have selected *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (1963, rev. ed. 1969). For Knight I have taken his *Rethinking Mao. Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought* (2007).

Stuart R. Schram

Schram became a renowned researcher on Mao Zedong in 1966 with a biography about Mao. In *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (1963/69) his studies got a more distinct direction. In the first sentences of the introduction to the latter book lies a research program. "Ideas grow out of history; they also shape history. ... We may ... treat a man's thought as a key to understanding his acts and intentions" (Schram 1969, 15). Schram fulfils his program through the whole book by detailed analyses of the content of every published article by Mao that he found and translated. The first article from 1917 is an indication of how Schram worked. He states that, beside nationalism and a "martial spirit", a third theme of Mao's article is "the importance of conscious action and individual initiative". This third theme contradicts the emphasis on organisation which Mao also stressed. "For half a century, Mao has been torn by the conflict between an ideal of spontaneity and the will to impose the discipline necessary for effective action" (23).

Schram continues with a meticulous examination of every article he could find that Mao has written. His comments are often very striking, showing what he has got from one source or another, what is typical Leninism and what is incompatible with it. His archivistic work is impressive and also his linguistic comments and his analysis from a political science perspective. He has published both Chinese original texts and translations of them, later collected in a series of books under the title of *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949* (7 vols. published by him 1992-2005, additional 3 volumes were published after his death). This work has served as a basis

[16] *Wikipedia*, Engl.ed., article Stuart R. Schram (accessed 14 Oct., 2024)

[17] *Wikipedia*, Engl. ed., article (professor) Nick Knight (accessed 14 Oct., 2024)

for many other researchers and made him regarded as an outstanding scholar. Yet, one may ask if the detailed work of Schram could result in something that was indeed Mao's thinking. Nick Knight thinks that the answer is no. His book is called *Rethinking Mao. Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought* (2007).

Mao Zedong[18] (1893-1976) was born in an upstart landowner's family, had a materially privileged youth, and got a good education. His early confrontations with his father made him seek other people who might serve as models for him, both in Chinese history and among politicians of nationalist and social radical ideas. He did not swallow Marxism when he first met it. These short sentences may serve as a condensed version of Mao's background. He was also a prolific writer of articles in different journals and conference reports, almost always with a political aim in mind. Strategic considerations formed a dominant theme in many of these articles. It is easy to understand that both Schram and Knight could be absorbed of the objective to clarify what was in fact the thinking behind Mao's strategy – letting alone all condemnation of harsh methods and evil intentions that many other Western researchers of the same time (1960s and 70s) saw as fundamental characteristics of Mao as a politician.

What, then, did Mao really want to carry through and which were the means that he enjoined his followers to use? This can be said to be the problem raised by Schram. He does his job as a historian foremost as a close reader of different texts by Mao, but he does not forget to put these texts into their varying contexts of broad audiences in mass meetings and journalism or a limited audience in political committees or organs.

To solve this problem Schram uses a very rare method, nearest equivalent to archaeologists commenting on stone inscriptions from the Antiquity After a narrative introduction extending over one-third of the book, follow a few entire texts and many extracts from Mao's speeches and articles sometimes equipped with brief comments by Schram. Here, Schram goes into the texts and comments (in footnotes) on minor points as well as important ones, closely following the original wording and explicating what it may mean. More audacious conjectures of connections between Mao's words and deeds one may find in the 150 pages of introduction. However, in that context they serve also as guidance for the semantics that is carried through in the choice from of Mao's writings that fills the remaining 300 pages of the book. This practice of dividing Mao's texts from interpretations of his thoughts or his strategy for actions is also, according to my impression, carried through in his main work in seven volumes mentioned above, though I have not done any meticulous study of this matter.

Letting Mao present his thoughts and plans in his own words seems to be Schram's main and real method. However admirable his interpretations of Mao's writings may be, the substantial research news is what he presents as a lead for understanding in the introduction.

Nick Knight

Knight's book *Rethinking Mao* (2007) is in many ways both like and unlike Schram's. It is more traditional in its way to organise the results of his research in chapters (initially often journal articles). There he discusses and draws conclusions about Mao's thoughts. The endnotes, which directly refer to texts by Mao or to texts by other researchers in a strict and conventional way, are more like an appendix to each chapter. However, Knight seldom quotes Mao directly, while Schram's book (and his big work in seven volumes on *Mao's Road to Power*) is full of texts and excerpts (both in Chinese and English) that quote what Mao has said or written. This means that Knight wants to convince the reader through his own formulations, which may be checked in his references, while Schram is eager to let the reader judge if the author's conclusions are correct by confronting readers with the material that he thinks provides evidence for his standpoint.

[18] As most modern researchers on China, I use the pinyin transliteration of Chinese names. Mao was born long before the pinyin system had become standard, and his personal name Zedong appears in several forms in the literature.

In two chapters Knight discusses the methods used by himself, Schram, and other researchers. He is critical to "the various ways, in which the field of Mao studies has constructed its object." Further, he says that as a first characteristic stands out

> "... (an often implicit) endorsement and application of an empiricist epistemology that takes for granted that knowledge of Mao derives through experiencing the 'reality' incorporated in texts, whether those by Mao, by others about Mao, or which purport to capture the 'political contexts' in which the Mao texts were written. Experience, undiluted by the values and theoretical perspectives of the Mao scholar, is the privileged medium through which the 'truth' is achieved. As I have argued, such an assumption is without logical foundation. The second, and related to this acceptance of empiricism, is a disinclination to explore the theoretical and methodological issues that arise in the project to study Mao. The result has been a field characterized by a poverty of theory." (Knight 2007, 40)

Exactly what sort of theory historians of Mao ought to incorporate in their work is not specified by Knight. His emphasis on empiricist epistemology, as the primary object of his criticism, makes the reader think that he has found Schram's approach too credulous, but a closer examination makes this improbable. On one point he is explicit. He discards Schram's interpretation of a Chinese traditional ideology as playing an important role in Mao's thinking.[19] In other places, it seems rather to be Schram's presentation of an overview first and then a detailed approach to the sources that Knight opposes. In the same way as Schram, Knight tries to analyse Mao's thinking about specific themes, but Knight explicitly discusses the sources in relation to different possibilities brought forward by other researchers. He frequently stresses that his interpretations are provisional. The sources used by Knight are those brought to light by Schram, combined with newer archival findings by other researchers.

As quoted above, Knight complains of a lack of theory in the research on Mao. It is easy to state that his own contributions also seem to lack (explicit) theoretical background. It is even difficult to understand if he is talking about epistemological theory or social theory in the few paragraphs that he devotes to this theme. He is more explicit in discarding psychoanalytic interpretations.[20] However, it seems reasonable to combine what he says about theory with his emphasis on the "provisional" nature and not "truth" of the possible results, which appears to lead to a relativism. Knight cites with assent some of the leftist constructivists and relativists – Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Barry Hindess, Paul Q. Hirst, Karl Löwith (i.e., several Frenchmen and Italians, one German emigrant to the USA, but no Germans of the Frankfurt school).[21] However, Knight never (in the examined book) indicates what he has found as applicable theories regarding Mao's world of ideas.

V. RESULTS

By a short comparison of two research texts (these are books, but they are comprehensive analyses of one specific set of research problems) I have tried to show how historical researchers may argue for new results and about problems. The latter is important. The two books comprise investigations of several problems, and these are treated separately by both authors. However, they treat them a bit differently. Schram wants to give readers a full account of all that might matter to solve the problem: What was Mao's ideology? Knight is concerned more about giving a full argument of all steps in a reasoning of what is important in the conjecture of Mao's ideology. For, as he says, there is no final truth about another person's thoughts. I would add, that Schram's approach is an earlier reverse of

[19] Knight 2007, 30-31.

[20] Knight 2007, 28-29, and especially, note 41.

[21] References to the mentioned authors occur in different places, and Knight never writes about them collectively. Knight 2007, for instance, se 37-38, quoting Michel Foucault, and 23, quoting Umberto Eco.

Knight's, but leads to the same result. Schram leaves it to the reader to decide if the material presented is convincing, when the introduction (containing Schram's conjecture) and the main text with full quotes are compared. Knight wants to show to what degree a convincing result may be attained through a "conventional" historical research text.

As I have done in an earlier book, I want to plead for what Peter Lipton calls Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE). Lipton discusses this as the heuristic instrument for scientists. I will argue that it is also the best instrument for historians to bridge the gap between observable facts and conjectures.[22] Texts by Mao are observable facts, but they do not tell what Mao thought or aimed. With several texts and with analyses of political and military situations, it may be possible to create a bridge over the gap between words and action strategy.

The same holds for all sorts of historical research problems. However, in many cases the historian (and even more the archaeologist) knows from the very beginning of research that vital material is missing because much has been destroyed after the events took place or when the state of things existed that the historian wants to investigate. In certain cases, some of this material may turn up through research or by chance. This adds a specific caution to all claims to historical truth, but this caution is of a practical nature and not an epistemological drawback for history.

To sum up: I want to plead that there is no vast distance between Schram's and Knight's standpoints. Both are experienced researchers, and they know the difficulties of the profession, and they know that an inference to the best explanation is what they look for, though they don't use this terminology. They use different ways, and Knight has the advantage to write later and with new material, unknown to Schram, but both use refined reasoning to make their point. Narration is not essential for their research though they have to give some narrative scaffolding for their findings.

[22] Torstendahl 2015, 27-33, 222. The term and the idea I have borrowed from the philosopher Peter Lipton (Lipton 2004).

VI. CONCLUSION

The present article discusses two different main points. One is the often-stated difference between history writing and science, another is the claim by several theorists of history that they have found a fundamental difference between historical research and research made in the natural sciences. Formulated in this way, the thesis brought out here is that both points are stated without good reason and based in prejudices rather than in empirical evidence.

My first case against current philosophy (or theory) of history is that it neglects the important difference between summaries or overviews and research work. This is equally important in the discipline of history as it is in science. Research work does not consist of telling stories about what has happened, neither in astronomy nor in history. Nor do research results appear by telling details of oscillator findings or how to build complex instruments, nor in lexicographic readings of old manuscripts or findings of unexpected tax registers from the fifteenth century. Research amounts to 1) setting a problem to solve and 2) discussing the material that may be used for this end 3) in order to show that the problem has been solved. Failures to solve problems are seldom explicitly accounted for.

My second case against current philosophy (or theory) of history is that even those philosophers who state that it is important to scrutinise what historians actually do, fail to make the distinction between overview and research and fail to organise their argument according to empirical historical research about specific problems. This significant distinction should be made, even if historical professionals sometimes intertwine new research results in an overview. A statement of the problem is seldom lacking, and then the result may be scrutinised as to its validity. The philosophers I looked closer at are relatively young, and they seem to link their texts rather to an earlier generation than to those immediately preceding them. Thus, they connect rather to a philosophy of empathy as the main instrument for historians than to postmodern aestheticism, but the result is in both cases that there is a gulf

between so-called "history" (not called "historical research") and science.

Finally, I analyse – through one example of two authors – a discussion between two historians (one of which had started his academic career as a physicist) about Mao's thinking and his strategy. What I have wanted to show is that the differences between the two researchers are not entrenched in the chronology or any story-telling, but based on methods to vindicate that Mao's partly inconsistent statements are correctly understood and, if so, rightly put into connection with his actions to make a logically consistent whole, sometimes presupposing some changes in the actor's mind. The point is that no specific empathy is needed, though I should add, that I have grave doubts that a psychological theory is sharp enough instrument, to help the historian to arrive to the best explanation of the material in such situations.[23]

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[23] I have argued for this doubt in Torstendahl 2015a, 203-204.

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