

Feminist Philosophy

Time, history and the
transformation of thought

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Chapter 3

The Demands of the Historical Unconscious

– the Psychopathology of History

Sara Edenheim¹

History is a deferred, symbolic substitution for the traumatic loss the past represents, an imaginary compensation for the temporality of existence, the projection of the desire for a redemptive significance in human behaviour. Consciousness needs this symbolic dimension since it cannot cope adequately, immediately, with the predicaments human behaviour occasions. The historical predicament is psychopathological.²

The liberal humanist orientation in most versions of historical research assumes that a historical consciousness is essential for human beings – often to such a high degree that *human* consciousness in itself has become synonymous with this *historical* consciousness. If history is the “common sense” of a society, then our “sense” is historical. As “common sense” in Swedish and other Germanic languages literally translates to “sane sense” (*sunt förnuft*, *sunt* meaning “healthy”, “sound”, “sane”), there is indeed a direct link to claims on knowledge of history and sanity, which are now lost in translation.

“Consciousness” often refers to cognition or understanding and it is possible to find historians also using concepts such as “historical understanding” or “historical awareness”. The specific term consciousness (*medvetande/Bewusstsein/conscience*), however, dominates within the specific field and perspective introduced by German historians of didactics in the 1970s and

¹ This is a longer and translated version of an article entitled “Historiens psykopatologi” published in *Glänta*, Vol. 2 (2016).

² Martin L. Davies, *Historics – Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 236.

specifically developed by Jörn Rüsen and others. Even though the concept obviously can be found within many other different fields such as philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, neurosciences, psycho-analytical theory, etc., it is not evident from which of these fields historians of didactics have picked it up. Rüsen occasionally refers to the cognitive sciences, mainly in relation to different types of learning, but otherwise there are few definitions of the concept “consciousness” itself in historians’ writing on historical consciousness. Rather focus is on the “historical” part, i.e., what it is that makes (the undefined) consciousness specifically *historical*:

Rüsen’s premise is that we comprehend the past in the form of narratives. Through ‘narrative competence’, Rüsen postulates, historical consciousness informs moral deliberation by connecting past, present, and future into a perceived actuality. Narrative competence brings this actuality into focus along with concomitant moral obligations. By creating a typology of possible narrative interpretations of the past, as his work seeks to do, empirical researchers may ask questions such as ‘What role does historical consciousness play in everyday life, in politics, and in other spheres of life? Are there laws governing its development that are analogous to the laws that govern the development of logical, moral, and other cognitive skills [...]?’³

There are exceptions. In an interview with Rüsen and historian Roger Simon, Simon argues that focusing on identity, recognition, and narrative are insufficient to understand historical consciousness. Simon wants to draw attention to other forces organizing memory and temporality (such as social performance, fragments/trace, or fantasies of wholeness).⁴ Their discrepancies are defined by the interviewer in the following way:

³ Roger Simon and Jörn Rüsen, “A dialogue on narrative and historical consciousness”, in K. D. Heyer (Ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 203.

⁴ Simon Rüsen, “A dialogue on narrative and historical consciousness”.

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For Simon, a historical consciousness is a moral awareness that traces of the past arrive ‘demanding something of us.’ Rösen too recognizes that the past demands something of us, but that something is cognitive coherence and moral action formed through narrative interpretations by the subject [...].⁵

This demand, issued from the past in the cases of both Simon and Rösen, takes a very different form depending on how the past is perceived: as traces or as coherent narratives. For Rösen, the demand is a clear moral imperative: only by knowing your past will you know yourself and know which action is right and which is wrong. The past is here filled with agency, and the consciousness is pre-filled with the capability to handle the demands of the past: it is a consciousness that already knows that by making a narrative interpretation it will manage to translate the demand into a comprehensible message, where only that which is comprehensible is moral. Consciousness hence seems to overlap with the historical: they are one and the same, making “historical consciousness” a tautology that embraces all human thinking and action. This is not specific to historians using the concept, but rather a signifying trait of all historical research that ex-historian Martin L. Davies describes as “organic”: “[t]he organic conception of history has thus a distinct, pragmatic force. It underpins a self-authenticating, holistic view of history ‘as everything’ [...]”.⁶

The historical consciousness is imagined as sovereign and all-inclusive, and therefore there would be no point in going ‘behind’ it, to understand its causes and its constitutive limits. However, this organic history, Davies argues, is a late creation, modern and Western, where we are all assumed to be constituted through historical thinking (“historic sense as natural sense”). In its place, Davies proposes a splitting of the tautology, by showing how consciousness precedes the historical and hence is independent of the historical. His is neither a decon-

⁵ Rösen, “A dialogue on narrative and historical consciousness”, p. 203.

⁶ Davies, *Historics – Why History Dominates Contemporary Society*, p. 38.

structive nor a psychoanalytical approach, but I think this splitting of the historical from consciousness is helpful to start an investigation into the important difference between history and temporality. When Derrida, e.g., states that *time* is the origin of difference, and hence for subjectification, he meant time and not *history*. Historical consciousness is rather based on the assumption of history as the origin of *sameness*; historical consciousness requires recognition and identification over time, not alienation and difference. Even though the differentiation between the past, the present, and the future is intrinsic to historical consciousness (as well as to many other versions of consciousness), the aim of the historical consciousness is to fill these entities with recognizable contents, coherency, and common sense that all make a claim on reality. This is what makes history legitimate in relation to, for example, myths, bad memory, anachronisms, fantasies, and gossip. History hence uses a certain perception of the past to stabilize not only the present, but also the future, by filling these temporal states with coherency and meaning, i.e. what is recognizable as *the same*. To not only be constituted by this historical consciousness, but also to accept it and not interrogate it, are the prerequisites of organic historical research. This consciousness is usually presented as the only resource we have to understand ourselves and our world. Because it demands sameness, Davies claims that the historical consciousness is not only a conservative impulse, but also instigates an unethical approach by foreclosing other alternatives of human action and responsibility. It also, interestingly, produces quite dogmatic and inferior forms of representation:

The 'organic' conception of history is, then, the most comprehensive, coercive version form of knowledge. It explains why history perpetuates 'the same old thing', is regarded as society's 'default knowledge', and inevitably affirmative. It also explains why history is essentially conservative, why it activates archaic, regressive tendencies. Though it imposes itself metaphorically, e.g., as (a) 'an everlasting animal' or as an 'inexorable chain', history proves to be (b) secondary to the

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immediate sense of personal purpose or self-possession [*aesthesis, Eigensinn*], and (c) a subordinate genre of aesthetic representation.⁷

Within psychoanalytic theory there are many ways to relate to temporality and especially the relationship between the past, present, and future. As metaphor, of course, the *Id* could be seen as the past – uncontrollable, incomprehensible drives that constitute us but that are difficult, usually impossible to acknowledge and handle without enormous psychological dangers, just as immutable as the acts of the past that cannot be changed because they have already been committed. Still they are our responsibility since we are dependent on them for who we are. The *Ego*, that present state we always find ourselves in, that we can influence and alter, orient ourselves in, feel at home or lost in, that which we think we know. And then the *Super-ego*, the future, for whom we do everything for, for whom we act and adapt ourselves for, for this is where the verdict will come from, where we will be held responsible for our acts and desires. A very simplified metaphor, but still one example of a relation to past, present, future that is not dependent on coherent narratives for ethical orientation and knowledge.

It is also an approach that takes in account all events and experiences from the past, not only those we remember or have taken notice of and hence have ended up in an archive of sorts. As Djuna Barnes once wrote: “Those long remembered can alone claim to be long forgotten”.⁸ Rather, it is by assuming that most things happening to us are forgotten or foreclosed, and that all we will be able to know about them is that they (forever undefined and unknown) are part of that which constitutes us and our present state, that the unknown, the incomprehensible, the non-colonizable – that which escapes us – is not going away no matter how hard we try. They are there as our memento mori. They are so many and vast, these events and experiences,

⁷ Davies, *Historics – Why History dominates Contemporary Society*, p. 39.

⁸ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: A New Direction 2006; 1937).

forever lost and not recoupable, and what they can teach us is 'only' how to handle and live with lost events and experiences, without dreaming of their redemption.⁹

Why are some events treated as more historical than others? Are they remembered for no particular reason? Of course, all events – also the most well-known ones – are forever lost, but we keep reproducing narratives of them for specific reasons, reasons that have more to do with us than with the events themselves. Arbitrariness and coincidences are part of everything, but the unconscious tries to make sense even of that and hence, retroactively, even the random fluke is accorded meaning. What we have then are unnarratable events (as all events are) that haunt us – sometimes because they are traumatic and sometimes it is just their general unnarratability that haunts us – and then we have the efforts to make sense of some of these events: that we call history. And this history is therefore always contingent.

Now, the institutionalization of historical research and methods has made history 'less' arbitrary and more predictable (one could even say more boring): the national archives organize history in accordance with state laws and state interests, and the archives of social movements organize history in accordance with a specific group's interests. Desire, then, seems to organize history, no matter if it is a nation's desire or that of an individual. *This* could make history interesting and useful, but only if it stops reproducing 'the same old thing'.

Lacan, too, wanted to understand how we perceive temporality. Just as in the case of Derrida, time is not about history or even narratives. Even though language is the cause of the temporal experience, it is language in the form of sentences, words, phonemes, that interest Lacan – not the specific and contextual content of language – as is the case of the historian that has to fill 'the past' with a specific content to be able to write anything historical to constitute the historical consciousness (no

⁹ See also Sara Edenheim, *Anakronismen – mot den historiska manin* (Gothenburg: Glänta, 2011).

wonder this consciousness always ends up belonging to a modernist, liberal subject). A syllable must be placed in front of another to become a word; when I speak, I am dependent on the ability (or rather the limitation) to make a temporal difference between the first and the next syllable, and when I write, I am equally dependent on the spatial difference between letters or signs. This is a physical dependency; we cannot place the syllables and letters on top of each other or utter them all at once even if we wanted to. It is this that Davies refers to as the *real* organic consciousness – as opposed to the historical one that only tries to become organic. The ability to make temporal differences – gaps in time that create a before and an after – is necessary for any language. As we all know, though we often forget it, language is something we all must learn – it is not there from the beginning and, hence, our sense of temporality is not there from the beginning either. More importantly though, the kind of temporality that language requires and that is required of all of us, is not the same temporality which is produced by a historical consciousness. The necessary temporality of language is a source of frustration – every time we say something we are forced to subject ourselves to this temporality that tears up all emotions and thoughts into systematically organized syllables, while simultaneously having to deal with the fact that it is only through this tearing up that we become intelligible subjects before others and ourselves, that it is only through this constant destruction of any imaginary wholeness that our emotions and thoughts can not only be expressed but even constituted (the unconscious is, as Lacan remarks, structured like a language). The temporality of language uncovers our lack and impotence, our inability to communicate freely and autonomously without limitations. This is why we continue to speak, hoping that the continuous flow of words will somehow fill the gaps, make them less noticeable, and maybe even reach a stage of completeness, of a successful transmission, a final concluding remark where nothing more has to be added.

Historical temporality, on the other hand, is a source of enjoyment – not despair – where the petty fantasy scenarios of

the Ego all fall in place, the gaps are filled and the content pointing towards the present (i.e. us), explaining our existence, our origin and our objective. This is why the end of history – famously declared by Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin wall – created a hysteric reaction in the field of history. Not because the field was critical of the liberal capitalist positioning of Fukuyama, but because the statement itself threatened to uncover the underlying fundament of history as a field: that historians always consider themselves to be at the end of history (what Walter Benjamin called “empty time”). At the same time, seemingly paradoxical, the statement also threatened the very idea that historians could become redundant if there were no more history. “The end of history”, hence, worked on two levels: the representative and the literal. The representative was too close to the truth and hence dangerous; the literal was too close to the fantasy scenario of historians: of having filled all the gaps and reached the final concluding remark, and that afterward, all that would remain is the death of the field, the death of the historian. That which in one sense is the force of history – to fill the gaps – is hence simultaneously the most dreaded aim *if* fulfilled. The possible fulfillment of this aim therefore must be foreclosed for the enjoyment to go on – forever into the future. The field of history is founded on this foreclosing of the death drive and the continuation of the imaginary omnipotence of the present/Ego. Davies describes this as follows:

Historians may well claim to revive the past. In reality the past keeps historians alive; through history death directs present life. If the past really were over and done with, history would be redundant, historians superfluous. Were it not so self-absorbed, present historical consciousness would realize that, to identify with the past at all, it must first have produced itself as a historical object, become petrified in historical form. That is ultimately why historical interests are not existential interests, why history is an anaesthetic [an-aesthesia], nothing vital. As a ‘pure culture of the death drive’, the already historicized world is a typically melancholic formation (Freud

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1982: 203). The historicization process conceals a morbid psychopathology.¹⁰

The field of history is founded on this foreclosing of the death drive and the reproduction of an imaginary omnipotent “present/Ego” that this foreclosure enables. There are many reasons why it is important to identify this psychopathology of history: one reason is that this pathology demands a historical consciousness of us all, not least those marginalized groups that can only reach recognition and rights by demonstrating a historical continuity, an inborn identity, and a common experience over time (not to mention those groups that cannot demonstrate such a narrative and hence are left without recognition and rights). As Benjamin wrote, we live in a constant state of emergency, but the demand of a historical consciousness permits us to call this state *progress*:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.¹¹

Is it not quite remarkable how Benjamin’s words, written in 1940, also portray Europe in 2023? His own text has become such a monad, a snapshot, that he claimed we need to shatter the idea of history as inexorable progression. If the unconscious is conditioned by temporality, it is a temporality without any

¹⁰ Davies, *Historics – Why History Dominates Contemporary Society*, pp. 243–235.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concepts of History* (1940) Thesis VIII.

demands on continuity; it is rather discontinuity, disruption, and the silence in between words, that constitute it. The conscious, too, is structured like a language, but with a demand on continuity between the past, the present, and the future, at least when it is forced to be historical. The conscious consists of what the unconscious has condensed, that is, of that which the subject can handle without risking a total dissolving of the self (psychosis), of that which is picked out to build consistent and comprehensible identities (images) of this self. Today there is an effort to build such selves and as in all efforts, a certain pleasure is involved. A pleasure to replace that which hurts – here and now. Through this flight from pain, from the real, history becomes synonymous with consciousness; as a condensation of the past, a corrected comprehension of acts and desires already carried out and experienced by others. This is why history is both conservative *and* pleasurable: it shelters the subject from all that demands change and hence prevents the eradication of the self as it is known by itself. Instead, organic history promises more of the same. If the present is an emergency, which it is, we must look at the past and its relation to our time in another way than the one that is presently mass-produced in an almost hysterical effort to deny us the responsibility of this emergency.