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# "History Culture" and the Continuing Crisis of History

The notion of a "historical" or "history culture" comes with a number of in-built tensions, the recognition of which is important for discussions of the associated, "historical" phenomenon. While much has already been done to reduce these tensions in recent years[1], efforts to promote the nomenclature and hone its functionality may benefit from further conceptual clarification. Some of the main terminological as well as orientational challenges certainly deserve to be briefly discussed before elaboration of the usefulness of the conceptualization itself. Obviously, none of these challenges and problems are new or, as such, specific only to this compound formulation. Yet, considered together, they can hopefully offer opportunities for thinking "history culture" in ways that lend it to effective deployment in the future.

Controversy regarding the term "history" is well-recognized and the idea of the crisis of its referents likewise much discussed. For the purposes of this article – and in line with the overt goal of promoting "*history* culture" over "historical culture"[2] – I try to move away from stricter, albeit common and useful definitions of "history" as history writing or the academic study of the past, that is, "the discipline", as well as from any metaphysical views attributing to it a concreteness and independent reality as, for example, a course or progression of events or as involving some specific

1 See, in particular, the *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017.

2 For an excellent introduction to the state-of-the-art specifically on *historical* culture, see Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited". *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 73–89. Although the majority of formulations of historical culture (and particularly the German *Geschichtskultur*) rely heavily on the work of Jörn Rüsen, I do not rehearse his position in detail here. Rüsen's work is already well known, playing a formative role in the main debates, whereas my goal is to defend a different emphasis regarding the dynamics involved, particularly with respect to locating "historical" authority. For more on Rüsen's core arguments, see, for example, Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*. Translated by Diane Kerns and Katie Digan. Berghahn, New York NY 2017; for a succinct introduction, including the psychologizing aspects of his argument, also see Rüsen, "Die fünf Dimensionen der Geschichtskultur". *Angewandte Geschichte: Neue Perspektiven auf Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit*. Brill, Leiden 2014, 46–57.

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"development". Needless to say, simply having to present such qualifications also already hints at the contents of the crisis "history" faces.[3]

On the academic side of things, there are two main challenges: the first to the epistemological authority of history as representation and narrative and the second, relatedly, to the discipline's loss of societal influence in the face of memory, heritage and patrimony, as well as the many other forms of "remembering" impinging on its long-held turf. Then, on the speculative side: to teleological and over-arching explanations, which have predominantly come to be viewed as unconvincing.[4] Vital to the overall debate is to acknowledge that "history" can never intend solely a simple record of the past (or indeed some *thing* itself), but always involves selection, description and valuation – or, more aggressively put: opinion – be that invoked by academic historians, pundits, political actives and activists, content producers and artists, or the broader public. In this, the academic study of history and non-professional "histories" are no different. Crisis and confusion are thus to be expected, and historians' professional identification and self-justifications are centrally at stake. "Issues of memory have", notes Andreas Huyssen, "become part of public discourse and cultural life in ways rarely achieved by professional historiography alone"[5]; or, as Tony Judt elegantly articulates the ensuing problem: "The place of the historian in all this is crucial but obscure."[6]

Even though the crisis of history appears to have been broadly acknowledged in all these aspects, the connected idea of the "historical" is less commonly scrutinized – the utility of the word continuing to be easily assumed but seldom demonstrated. Vocal critics of its use can be found particularly among constructivist and "postmodern" theorists of history, however[7]. The key challenge regarding the term can be summed up by asking after the extra content it brings to the contexts in which it is invoked. What is the point of its use in a statement referring to, say, "the historical conditions

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3 "The crisis of history" is not uncommonly invoked, but I use the phrase here to remind of Andreas Huyssen's diagnosis in the introduction to *Present Pasts*; his view is a useful one, especially for theorizing parallel discourses, and his general observation that "[t]oday, we seem to suffer from a hypertrophy of memory, not history" concurs with most other assessments; see Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2003, 3.

4 For an interesting selection of essays aimed at complicating the conventional reading of the trajectory of teleological histories, see *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*. Edited by Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Bloomsbury Academic, London 2015.

5 Huyssen 2003, 5.

6 Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*. Penguin Press, New York, NY 2008, 198.

7 See, for instance, Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline*. Routledge, London 2003 and Alun Munslow, *A History of History*. Routledge, London 2012; also see Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past*. Routledge, New York, NY 2017.

of nineteenth-century Finnish farm life"? How do these "historical conditions" differ from the less assuming "conditions" of that very same farm life? That is to say: what does the word "historical" add to a description of a particular context? – or, for those so minded, to a particular *historical* context?

Or take, for instance, the case of "historical re-enactment" – what does the "historical" bring here? Any re-enactment by definition relates to past events, so invocations of the historical can thus reasonably be expected to involve a further valorization of some kind. Perhaps a broader sociocultural significance to the object of re-enactments is implied? Clearly importance of some sort is attributed to these events, and it seems fair to read that importance as one concerning "history" either as a discipline and practice or as some (imagined) monolith and storehouse of cultural meaning (although "language" or "social memory" might be better candidates for the latter). At the same time, this is not necessarily always the case for, say, "history" villages or the reconstruction of "historical" milieus – and hence situating such phenomena under the label of heritage or patrimony would perhaps be more obvious. It would certainly be less problematic.

Appeals to the "historical" can introduce the added difficulty of advocating situating things in a particular time and place – suggesting, that is, that these things belong to the past, as do "historical actors", for instance. But this is a less worrisome connotation, and related confusions are more readily avoided. Naturally, cases where the term is unproblematic through sustained and clear usage abound too: historical study, historical methods, historical facts – all relatively firmly attached to the formal study of the past; or, on the non-academic side of things, historical imagination, historical fiction, historical novels – all still somehow restrained by the reality of the past as well as, potentially, but not comprehensively, by the formal knowledge relating to it. Regardless, and for all the reasons stated, I will advocate for "history culture" here and eschew the – to me – harder-to-justify epithet "historical". There are other, equally warranted ways of dividing the labour between these concepts, however; Jerome de Groot, for one, opposes academic history ("History") to "the historical" more broadly in a decidedly productive way.

For de Groot, central is understanding the extent to which *some* orienting toward "history" permeates contemporary culture. There is no questioning the "variety of discourses that use history; the complexity of interrogations, uses and responses to that history; and the fracturing of formal, technological and generic systems", or, for that matter, the way these "contribute to a dynamic and massively important phenomenon".[8] Most significantly, there is an implied democratization of engagements with the past, doing away with the more conservative, often academic view that

[8] Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. Routledge, London 2009, 4.

professional historians and the institution are there to somehow "protect" the past[9] – indeed, it is this democratization that provides the possibility for opposition and dissent. According to this diagnosis, the "non-professional" side of history culture would not be subject to (at least the same kind of) political restraint. In the words of Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly: "Forms of past-talk beyond academic history are free to be openly positioned and politically committed."[10]

In attempting to relate all these concerns to "history culture", it also behooves one to qualify the term "culture", albeit in a very minimal way to avoid an otherwise endless debate. The central (hopeful) assumption that must be articulated is that not all aspects of "culture" are equally thoroughly subject to "history" or to some historicizing desire. As a minimal distinction, it seems to make sense to say that "history culture" (and, indeed, "*historical* culture") involves some explicit if not even intentional referencing of the past. Common-sensically: all elements of culture – all modes of thinking, languages, rituals as well as all material artefacts – *obviously* "have" a past; but common sense is exceeded when that past-having is enough reason to consign a particular phenomenon to the category "historical".

Whatever concepts one decides to employ, fixed definitions will likely elude us. As de Groot so well puts it, "the 'historical' in popular culture and contemporary society is multiple, multiplying, and unstable."[11] In this condition, the best an academic commentator can hope to do is to keep abreast of the main developments of – de Groot again – "the diffusion of History into multiple 'historicals'".[12] And there are other limits to keeping up, not associated with growing popularity or the complexity of influences and interconnectedness:

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9 For a detailed study of the nature of "historical" and "academic professionalism" as based "in norms of historical scholarship", see Rolf Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism*. Routledge, New York, NY 2015. Concisely on the professionalization of history in relation to the nation-state, also see, for example, Stefan Berger, "History Writing and Constructions of National Space: The Long Dominance of the National in Modern European Historiographies". *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 39–57. In parallel with such work on history "professionalism", Beverley Southgate – in his inquiry into *What is History For?* – has most usefully rehearsed some of its "professed purposes" as well as "hidden agendas" and elaborates on the justification of the *status quo* as a central particular in the latter category: see Beverley Southgate, *What is History For?*. Routledge, London 2005, 74 ff.

10 Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly, *Liberating Histories*. Routledge, London 2019, 8; see also Pihlainen 2017, particularly on "oppositional histories". This is not to say that all forms of control would necessarily be absent: as de Groot (2009, 237) rightly notes, there is a coercive aspect to this freedom too, when seen in the broad context of consumerism and commodification: "The presumed democratization of historical knowledge that attends interactivity and access is part of a liberal discourse of inclusion" – which, like all such discourses, simultaneously serves to exclude or domesticate potential opposition.

11 De Groot 2009, 4.

12 De Groot 2009, 2.

> *Non-academic or non-professional history – what has been defined as "public" history – is a complex, dynamic phenomenon. While "public" history is increasingly attended to by historians, the implications of new ways of engaging with the past have not been thoroughly investigated. This is often the result of professional distaste for the various popular forms of history, emerging from a critique of a popular and a theoretical model of the cultural industries which encourages a binary of high (History) versus low (heritage or "the historical").*[13]

In my electing to go with "history culture" as the operative, umbrella term to include all the various modalities for engaging with the past, a related choice and decision is involved, and one that perhaps needs to be further underlined: salient to my advocacy of an embracing "history culture" – as to de Groot's usage of "the historical" and Norton and Donnelly's deployment of "past-talk" – is to try to approach the sphere of "history" beyond academia as at least potentially free not only from professional historians' possible "distaste" but also from their oversight – crucially: to recognize the room for "political and social advocacy"[14] that such an attitude can clear for contemporary, non-academic engagements with the past. Thinking in these terms, there is hopefully less implication of an understanding or societal orientation that is necessarily indebted or subject to the history discipline or to professional historians. Importantly, that is, there is less definitional space for all of this "history" culture to be policed by or even answerable to "official" history than there would be in definitionally "historical" strategies for orienting oneself to the past.[15] There, after all, is the key to what the "historical" signals in examples like that of "historical conditions" or a "historical situation", whereas the alternative "history" here can perhaps, for lack of the same baggage, be more readily viewed as including aspects

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13 De Groot 2009, 4.

14 Norton and Donnelly 2019, 9.

15 If we were to further assume professional history as truly in service of the powers-that-be, the notion of "historical culture" could imply even firmer, patently ideological control over interpretations. By this reading, critical observations like Sande Cohen's that contemporary "'[h]istorical culture' ensures that Capital is never narrated in the nonsubject position (of uninteresting waste, for example)" highlight the problem of any indebtedness; see Sande Cohen, *Academia and the Luster of Capital*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN 1993, 93–94.

free of history "proper" – as embracing independent forms of, to introduce yet another concept, "*parahistory*".[16]

A great deal hinges, then, on how we choose to conceive of the relation between professional history and "parahistory" – for present purposes: all the myriad other forms of engaging with the past – within the general family of history culture. On the one hand, avoiding indebtedness to the discipline appears important; on the other, suggesting an overly strong break can lead us to overlook also the positive interactions involved.

## The place of authority and control in history culture

Beyond all the terminological and disciplinary challenges, the harshest critique that might be directed at history culture overall rests on an objection often raised against history as an academic practice by "postmodern" theorists. This criticism has been incisively presented by Sande Cohen, who – coming at things from a leftist and expressly poststructuralist perspective – takes aim at professional history's association with what he sees as capitalist and neoliberal practices of governing and control; for Cohen too, it is first and foremost academic history's alignment with conservative power structures and authority that prevents it from engaging fruitfully with other, potentially more actual and dynamic cultural and sociopolitical discourses. Specifically, it is the assumption of objectivity – or at least a fetishization of the idea of it – that leads the academe and so many historians to complicity in perpetuating received values and structures.[17] This idea of objectivity rests, in turn, on a misperceived relation between past, present and future in historical discourse – as if these were fixed and causally related rather than situatedly and narratively constructed. Broken down to this level, however, the objection seems to apply also to broader history culture *to the extent that it is taken to be notionally homogeneous and*

[16] Although put forward in passing by Hayden White in an otherwise much-cited essay, "The Modernist Event". *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 1999, 66–86, "parahistory" has remained a largely overlooked term, but one that I find particularly apposite (for my employment of it, see Pihlainen 2017 as well as Pihlainen, *Parahistory and the Popular Past: Acts of Historical Production*. Routledge, New York, NY (forthcoming) 2022. The usage of the Greek "para-" often adds overtones of inferiority, however, and good arguments could be given for favouring a gentler and potentially less evaluative Latin-inspired neologism instead: "cohistory".

[17] In describing the daily orientation of academic history work, it seems fair to say that professional histories at least *operate* with a relatively unambiguous ideal of objectivity in mind (even if historians are intellectually cognizant of the challenges involved). We can, that is, justifiably agree with Norton and Donnelly (2019, 8) "that professionally authorised histories are constructed on the illusion that their ideological positioning is somehow determined by the contents of their primary archival data; that the evidence itself 'shows' that a certain judgement about some aspect of the past arises out of a reading of that data".

*as having some innate explanatory power as regards valuations*; both these features inevitably lead to its being conservatively oriented – and, as long as aspects of it are assumed to be answerable to professional history, both are easily attributed.

In part anticipating the liberating kinds of visions outlined by de Groot as well as Norton and Donnelly, Cohen, in *Academia and the Luster of Capital*, forcefully tackles academic history's ideological complicity under the rubric of a "disappearance of history", suggesting that, at the very least, history's role in public discourse is a diminishing one. While this aligns with celebrated descriptions of the rise of memory culture – as already in Pierre Nora's attention on the *lieu de mémoire* or David Lowenthal's appraisal of heritage – as well as with proclamations for the end of history under some utopian, (neo)liberal accord, any disappearance of history is still something to only look for today, however, and may not be fully forthcoming ("reports have been greatly exaggerated", and so on). Where Cohen's criticism really comes into its own in the present conjuncture is with respect to the manifestations and uses of so-called historical consciousness and their insistent ties with academic criticism; for him, "'historical consciousness' is mostly one with academic valuations and hierarchies".[18] By this he means that any appeal to the "'historical' is always a *political* entanglement, of joining the existing 'sides'".[19]

What seems urgent, then, is that Cohen's and others' desire for a more radical history not be read as primarily directed at history *contra* other forms of remembrance, but instead at the practices of meaning-control involved in producing hegemonic contents to any such discourses. Or at least this is how I would elaborate these commitments. Just like history, "memory" can be in service to the nation-state; it is the disappearance of the overall connection with authority more than the loss of academic history's mediating role in controlling memory culture that poststructuralists like Cohen ultimately champion and, it seems to me, some historians on occasion even appear to decry. Certainly, Nora, for one, sounds in equal measure fascinated and dismayed when he remarks on the "runaway inflation" in commemoration, a phenomenon that he sees as having metamorphosed into "a loosely organized system of disparate commemorative languages, which assume a different kind of relationship with the past: one that is more elective than imperative and that is plastic, alive, and subject to perpetual elaboration". Or, indeed, when he famously claims that, since no

[18] Cohen 1993, xxiii; for a critique of the idea of historical consciousness, also see Pihlainen (forthcoming) 2022.

[19] Cohen 1993, xxiii.

unified state interest continues to motivate the various memory practices, "[t]here is no commemorative superego: the canon has vanished".[20]

For many intents and purposes, this general vision of the popularization of relations with the past could be approached by way of numerous other thinkers too, of course. Take, for example, Raphael Samuel's forceful defence of "unofficial knowledge" of the past, including "popular memory", in *Theatres of Memory*. Or, for that matter, Carl Becker's famed if now decisively out-dated characterization of "Mr. Everyman". Appeal to "everyone their own historian" can offer also further opportunity for seeking a minimal definition of history; for Becker, this definition – in its (mathematically speaking) "lowest terms" or simplest form – was straightforward, but exceedingly broad: "History is the memory of things said and done."[21] Each perspective one brings into the picture introduces more complications and further nuance too, however. Samuel is somewhat conflicted on the question of authority in relation to his formulations, whereby much of the "living history" he defends, for example, would belong to carefully curated environments. And Becker, in the case of the "Everyman", in turn, appears ready to dispose of this question completely. Even if presuming that "memory" is akin to a prime or lowest term for "knowledge" about the past is in many ways problematic, it supports his move from a focus on the academic historian to broader "historical" thought. Indeed, the most important thing to note in this connection is his choice to settle on "knowledge" and "memory" instead more typically directing attention to *the study* of the past; the turn away from any primacy of the discipline is clear.[22]

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[20] Pierre Nora, "The Era of Commemoration". *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past. Volume III: Symbols*. Under the direction of Pierre Nora, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Columbia University Press, New York, NY 1998, 609–637, 614. As Stefan Berger (2017, 39) also notes, history's authority has long been closely connected with the nation-state: "Professional historians gained their special status in close alliance with national states, both existing and aspiring ones, that recognized the enormous potential of national history writing for collective identity construction".

[21] Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian". *The American Historical Review*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 1932, 221–236, 223. This minimal definition fails to sufficiently emphasize the extent to which Becker already, importantly, views history not simply as the pasts of particular things *in themselves*, but always only as they are available *to us*. Thinking back to Becker additionally serves as a reminder that the discussion of history as a discipline as opposed to a natural, generalized orientation to the world has lasted throughout most of its comparatively brief existence; as has, to be sure, the discussion of "relativism" in one form or another.

[22] This is also how Nora reads Becker, assuming Nora's reference here to be intentional: "The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian. The demand for history has thus largely overflowed the circle of professional historians"; see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*". *Representations*, Volume 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989, 7–24, 15; or, indeed, Nora (1998, 636) somewhat later: "Everything has its own history and has a right to that history".

Since Becker's influential address, however, history and memory have increasingly been viewed as distinct and often even mutually excluding. And, while there is no justification for denying the existence of *some* elective affinity between various forms of engaging with the past, it seems a helpful starting point to accept the separation at least of academic history and broader history culture – whatever the preferred term for this. Sadly, further distinctions are complex and often contradicting, and one can become stuck in the weeds of the terminology of the historical *versus* the practical past, public history, popular history, living history, historical memory, collective memory, cultural memory, communicative memory, political memory, public memory, heritage, patrimony, historicity, historical consciousness, historical experience, presence, and so on and so forth.[23]

I rehearse some of these alternative formulations in order to underline the central point: *whether the absence of critical control should be promoted or opposed is a key question for conceptualizing history culture*. The terminology used in answering is secondary, but effectively informs and directs the effort. At issue in describing recent shifts in this cultural landscape is not, then, any inherently societally radical nature of memory culture or other parahistory, but – as with professional history, popular media or, indeed, any cultural form – the level of control exercised over these. What Cohen's critique helps us do is separate the actual reach of "history" from the ways we tend to use the word ("the semantic systems of its occurrence"[24]) in order to see this habitual "history"-talk for the controlling, political discourse it is. On this view, the need or desire for an entrenched and embracing historical consciousness, culture of commemoration or history culture is largely an elitist and, by extension, academic and conservative one; according to Cohen's reading (consonant with Nora's and others'), "contemporary experiences do not cohere with 'history' as their conceptual sense and may not be reducible to a time spun out of an integrating consciousness".[25] Thus, although an attachment to some such integrating aspect of "history" remains relevant to many engagements with the past, the current enthusiasm for broader history culture seems to also bring opportunities for exceeding it.

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23 In addition to sources already mentioned, useful work for charting parts of this conceptual territory specifically with regard to the place of academic history in it can be found in Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies". *History and Theory*, Volume 41, Issue 2, 2002, 179–197, Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 2004, Kalle Pihlainen, "The Eternal Return of Reality: On Constructivism and Current Historical Desires". *Storia della Storiografia*, Volume 65, 2014, 103–115 and Hayden White, *The Practical Past*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 2014. For a brief and helpful summary of "memory theory", see, for example, Jan Assmann, "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory". *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*. Edited by Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2010, 121–137, 122 ff.

24 Cohen 1993, xxiii.

25 Cohen 1993, 90.

While there are significant differences in the prognoses that historians like Nora, theorists of the "postmodern" like Cohen, or close readers of contemporary history culture like de Groot, Norton or Donnelly (none of whom is unsympathetic to "postmodern" thinking), have made with respect to history and the historical, there is a key similarity too: the role of academic history within overall engagement with the past is seen to be declining.[26] And, assuming the conventional understanding of such "official" history as gatekeeper to authorized knowledge of the past, this diminishing importance could indeed imply a liberation of the rest of "history" (of, that is, "parahistorical" representations of the past) from the academic fact-checkers and, as a consequence, its greater blending with the present. After all, as Huyssen points out regarding the crisis of history: "In times not so very long ago, the discourse of history was there to guarantee the relative stability of the past in its pastness"[27]; in contrast, the more present and alive our vision of the past, the more we invoke, negotiate and contest it on a daily basis and in everyday life.

But all this enthusiasm has its dangers too, and generalizations of the desirability of democratization and consequent critique against the history discipline fail if they presume loss of authority to be only a good thing. If the result were indeed an emancipatory fragmentation to "everyone their own historian" it could lead to the utopic possibilities envisioned. But authority and control can quickly pass on to the various other experts of history culture: to the media, to pundits, to curators of (often profit-making) institutions, to local historians, to collectives of enthusiasts,

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[26] One should note the changes that have taken place with regard to public interest in "history" during the decades separating these books. This may in part explain the differing expectations concerning its future. The triumphant return of the historical novel over this period is one evident marker. But, more generally, as de Groot (2009, 2) reminds: "Since the early 1990s, 'History' and genres of the 'historical' have grown exponentially as cultural artefact, discourse, product and focus. […] 'History' as leisure pursuit boomed." This boom is well borne out by de Groot's analyses, ranging from conventional print and televisual representations to digital and virtual "encounters", and from popular archaeology through the numerous means for fetishizing old buildings all the way to the often dramatic revelations discovered through individual DNA testing. And it has, of course, been noted by many other influential commentators too. Huyssen (2003, 1), for one, points to how – in no small part as a result of new representational technologies – "[t]he past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable in earlier centuries". Similarly, Roy Rosenzweig examines in detail (and quite early on) the online history boom that was, he claims, making "Everyone a Web Historian" – even if they were subject to much government and corporate interest and direction in this pursuit, as Rosenzweig also critically shows; see Roy Rosenzweig, "The Road to Xanadu: Public and Private Pathways on the History Web". *Journal of American History*, Volume 88, Issue 2, 2001, 548–579.

[27] Huyssen 2003, 1. Or indeed, as Cohen (1993, 85) more insistently formulates this: "The name 'history' ensures that no 'living' struggles are recognized until compared and reduced to an exchange 'with the past'. Any event can be historicized; no event comes to anyone as 'historical'." For a similarly critical view of the extent to which this attitude permeates contemporary culture, consider Martin Davies' idea of "historics" in Martin L Davies, *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society*. Routledge, London 2006.

and so forth.[28] And critical concerns regarding that authority and control will then also shift. Worryingly, "post-truth" does not mean "post-authority" and authority will devolve ultimately even to demagogues when experts and expert knowledge has been sufficiently devalued. Depressingly common statements to this effect can be readily found in present-day political culture, of course, all along the groupthink lines of: "He speaks the same truth that we believe."

When it comes to investigations conceived of with conventional history in mind it should be no surprise, then, that the need for specifically "historical" authority is strong. To give a quick example: parallelling the shift in empirical focus to conventionally marginalized and "unimportant" topics in the now-mainstream traditions of social history, cultural history or microhistory, for example, the history of everyday life (in great part still equivalent to the German *Alltagsgeschichte*) and various history workshop approaches particularly in West Germany and the UK attempted to also cross the boundary separating history experts from the actors, bringing this history more aggressively into the domain of public creation. Yet, judging by reports of this kind of "activist" involvement and "history from below", it seems that – perhaps by nature of the task – content creators in such explorations soon begin to call for better awareness of "historical" rules and practices. In other words: the limitations of one's non-expert role and the "historical" responsibilities involved are quickly felt as long as there remains a persistent belief in the authority of the "historical" itself.[29]

On my reading, debate specifically on "*historical* culture" belongs largely to this camp where – through identification and "historical" purpose – "historical" authority and control are part of the setup. Beyond anecdotal reports of broader, popular history work and intuitively associated responsibilities, there are also prominent theoretical arguments for the continued elevating of professional history within the overall matrix of these various engagements – many of them to be found particularly in German and Dutch debates, and often relying on the foundational work of Jörn Rüsen. This general orientation of tackling historical consciousness and "*historical*" culture as important for societal cohesion and governing has naturally been further

[28] In this sense, "history" is a moving target and, as de Groot (2009, 2) insightfully reminds: "Consumption practices influence what is packaged as history and work to define how the past manifests itself in society". Excellent evidence of this can be found in de Groot's own recent shift in focus to the ways in which innovations in genetics can inform historical research and affect our understanding of what constitutes history; see Jerome de Groot, *Double Helix History*. Routledge, London (forthcoming) 2022.

[29] For more, especially on *Alltagsgeschichte*, see *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Edited by Alf Ludtke. Translated by William Templer. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1995.

strengthened by the popularity and development of these terms in academic educational discourses[30].

In their overview of *historical* culture, Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen concisely summarize the rift that appeared between "academic historiography on the one hand and popular history on the other" along with the broad turn to memory and heritage (notably, in parallel with the rise of new histories within academia).[31] It seems, though, that there is some slippage in this tradition between various approaches to memory specifically with regard to demarcating *historical* culture. The obvious strength of the move is that it takes attention away from a blanket notion of "history" while refuting easy oppositions between different forms of engagement with the past. Thus, in recognizing the extra-curricular sources of historical thinking and knowledge, it is markedly better suited for analyzing our (situated) historicity as well as the associated, often knee-jerk appeals to the rhetoric of history than would be excluding the sphere of "parahistory" altogether. The difficulty that remains, however, is with the way in which responsibility *as "historical"* constructs an internal hierarchy within conceptualizations of *historical* culture.

Where Nora and Lowenthal, for instance, noted the lack of state or institutional control over, respectively, a new form of memory and the growing populist trend in heritage, Grever and Adriaansen appear to underplay if not exclude at least the more radical and partisan forms that have come to the fore with this shift. It seems, in fact, that they can support the conclusion that "[h]istoriography and memory are […] both regarded as intrinsic and mutually constitutive parts of historical culture"[32] primarily by favouring those parts of it that evidence some oversight. In contradistinction to the views I have argued for above, then, this formulation of *historical culture* appears to centre on engagements that are more obviously aligned with and responsible to(ward) professional history. Yet, considering that "*historical* culture" as a conceptualization is purposely aimed at overcoming oppositions between representations of the past, reserving a curatorial role for the various "history" professionals seems incongruous.[33]

The attachment to professional history should perhaps not surprise, however, since this approach of investigating *historical* culture concentrates heavily on

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30 For detail on this background, see Peter Seixas, "Historical Consciousness and Historical Thinking". *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 59–72.

31 See Grever and Adriaansen 2017.

32 Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 76.

33 In a more recent analysis of the meanings of "historical consciousness", Grever and Adriaansen have, it should be noted, moved some way toward unpacking this dynamic; see Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Consciousness: The Enigma of Different Paradigms". *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Volume 51, Issue 6, 2019, 814–830. For his part, Nora goes back and forth with regard to the extent to which "memory" is subject to control. But this follows to some extent from the voluminous materials and diverse phenomena he tries to pull together – a difficulty that, admittedly, all discussions of "*historical* culture" face.

institutional sources, even if the range of these sources and authorities is broadened to include, as Grever and Adriaansen note, "(semi) popular" ones such as "mass media and similar institutions". Significantly, the formation of "historical thinking", "historical knowledge" or "historical learning" still remains closely attached to an educational and almost civilizing orientation[34] – after Rüsen's work and the related history didactics tradition in which it has so far had the greatest impact.[35] In this sense, it comes across as having a narrower compass than "the historical" for de Groot, and would also seem to exclude much of the commemorative as discussed by Nora or the "heritage glut" described by Lowenthal, standing instead in closer proximity to some "historical" authority.

## Parahistory and critical interest in the past

By way of generalization, the popularity – or indeed "glut" – of parahistorical representations (most emphatically observed under the signs of heritage and commemoration) may be said to present with two key symptoms: increased volume and fragmentation as well as some reassignment of authority and control. Or, as Tony Judt depicts this: firstly, "[w]e commemorate many more things; we disagree over what should be commemorated, and how". And secondly, in Judt's reading too, memorial material is often now intended not, as it was, "to remind people of what they already knew" but "to tell people about things they may not know".[36] In such a situation, it can be difficult to diagnose whether particular representations are motivated by some critical or civilizing "historical" approaches and culture or whether they simply effect a socializing and domesticating function unrelated to any loftier expectations.

The challenges presented by this state of affairs have been described by Pierre Nora in customarily evocative prose:

> *the very dynamics of commemoration have been turned around; the memorial model has triumphed over the historical model and ushered in a new, unpredictable, and capricious use of the past – a past that has lost its peremptory and constraining organic character. What matters is not what the past imposes on us but what we bring to it. Thus the message of the past, regardless of its nature, has been confused. It is the present that*

[34] Cf. the summary given by Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75.

[35] For a self-evaluation of this impact, see Jörn Rüsen, "Looking Back – A Pensive Balance". *Rethinking History*, Volume 22, Issue 4, 2018, 490–499.

[36] Judt 2008, 197.

> *creates the instruments of commemoration, that seeks out dates and figures to commemorate […]. History proposes but the present disposes.*[37]

Nora's characterization of a past that once had "constraining" character and a "message" for us, clearly identifies the feature that most readily appears to distinguish academic history within broader history culture (and one crucially linked to the professional objectivity–authority expectation): detachment, or – on the other side – attachment and need. While much of the work of professional historians undoubtedly involves some underlying "historical" or historicizing urge, that urge is well contained by their practices, whereas it seems much "parahistory" is predicated on personal import and collective utility. As a consequence, as David Lowenthal so iconically puts it: "For historians the past grows ever more foreign. But the public at large cannot tolerate an alien past and strenuously domesticates it, imputing present-day aims and deeds to earlier times, clothing previous folk in their own mental garb."[38]

So, even accepting presentism as one constitutive aspect of the crisis of history, it seems fair to say that presentist attitudes are held differently by professional historians and the broader history-making and consuming public. Where most historians today are (whether willingly or grudgingly) likely to admit that they can never escape their present-day perspective or keep it out of their interpretations, few would see this personal perspective as the main motive for working on the past. Instead, knowledge about the past (historical knowledge) still holds some intrinsic value. "Going to the past" primarily for its political suasiveness, entertainment value or other utility would be disciplinarily unacceptable. This is not to deny that historians might be drawn to the past for existential and "experiential" reasons too, but rather that such orientations are at least tempered by professional commitments. And this obtains, one hopes, for all motivations, whether political, practical or sentimental.

As already suggested, the main formulations offered of *historical* culture appear oriented toward preserving this "professional" attitude. Yet, when taking *history* culture to embrace parahistory more *broadly,* investedness and utility seem to be

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[37] Nora 1998, 618. This again dovetails with Lowenthal's view of heritage: "History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes"; see David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, xv.

[38] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, 595. Compare this with Hayden White's (2014, xiii) description of "the practical past" as "the past that people as individuals or members of groups draw upon in order to help them make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations".

significant impulses.[39] The greater challenge here comes, however, from separating personal motivations from the collective and particularly the institutional. Existential questions and the need for "historical" experience seem to be the central *raison d'être* of going to the past outside a disciplinary context. Were it not for some innate need to historicize oneself and one's (to an extent particular) story and, likely, some related processes of identification, why turn to the (collective) past at all? After all, political arguments can be had on a presentist level, and fantasy as well as present-day oriented imaginaries and entertainment abound.

Could it then, further, be that institutional control of interpretations often appears necessary precisely because the personal is so readily brought into the collective "historical" too? Without doubt, there is a great deal of confusion with regard to the related boundaries here the further away we move from academic history. Even in academic debates, rhetoric by which the "historical" is vital to personal as much as collective self-understanding is omnipresent in discussing contemporary relations with the past, and separating these levels is not always a priority. By way of example: in seeking broader (if not indeed even universal, "anthropologically constant") criteria for "historical judgement", Jörn Rüsen presents a somewhat startling conception of the *function* of "historical thinking", but one much in line with the overall acceptance that personal and professional "history" blend relatively seamlessly in conceiving the "historical". Here Rüsen allows only two kinds of criteria: First, those "which relate one's own life-experience and expectations to the experience of the past". Through these, "[t]he past is presented as a mirror in which both the life-situation of the present and its future perspective become visible and understandable". And, second, those "which endow people with solid *self-esteem*". With these latter, "history functions as a means to be used in the power game which people have to play in order to become

[39] I include the other, non-academic but institutional forms of engagement with the past in "parahistory" here, but this arena could also be further defined, particularly with respect to the matter of attachment. Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt make a similar claim regarding interest as an operative and distinguishing feature of memory in surprisingly straightforward terms: "The change from memory to history can take place under various conditions. Firstly, an event becomes the exclusive property of professional historians when there are no witnesses left to tell its story; it recedes into the distance. Secondly, when historical events which once captivated the public imagination and which were rehearsed in monuments and rituals lose their emotional grip, they become the object of scholarly investigation. Thirdly, the shift takes place when historians engage with national myths, analysing and deconstructing these as figments of a self-serving collective imagination"; see Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, "Memory and Political Change: Introduction". *Memory and Political Change*. Edited by Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, 1–14, 9. Although one assumes that this is not intended as an exhaustive rendition, it seems that theirs is a distinctly different kind of memory to that described by Nora, for instance, for whom the intertwining of history and memory is often quite far-reaching.

recognized by others" and, ultimately, to form "a solid collective identity".[40] Much could be said of the underlying assumptions about human nature here too, but the point now is rather to show how common a propensity it is to relate to "history" on a personal level in these debates.[41] For Peter Seixas, likewise, it is evident that "our experiences and understandings of this world are as conditioned and shaped by our inheritances from the past as ever; we can never think ourselves outside of our historical situation".[42] This is obviously true, but, more often than not, the "historical" does not retain a wholly neutral sense, however, and serves to smuggle in the need for (disciplined) historical knowledge.

There is, of course, an underlying and more neutral phenomenological dimension to consider too, and one that strongly challenges the more extreme arguments for simply ignoring the past and living "ahistorically": the past *is* "present" in our daily lives through material remains and material commemoration, through rituals and everyday practices, and through language and ideological orientations. The question of how to understand our ensuing "conditionedness" and such "presence" is a decisive factor, and has spurred much contention, however.[43] Particularly the legitimacy of employing and projecting personal experiential terms onto collective and cultural practices presents a challenge. Take "memory", for example: extending the dynamics of memory as a personal, psychological process to cover the collective level of remembrance and memory practices is clearly a mistake if viewed as anything more than a figure of speaking.[44] The same goes for stretching the idea of experience

40 Jörn Rüsen, "Criteria of Historical Judgment". *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*. Edited by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag and Jörn Rüsen. Brill, Leiden 2005, 133–141, 135–136.

41 Even as fierce a critic of history as a representational practice as Elizabeth Ermarth admits to a historicizing tendency (and, surprisingly, she also uses the word "history" for this): "History is the default mode for most of us most of the time"; see Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "The Continuing Modesty of History". *History and Theory*, Volume 51, Issue 3, 2012, 381–396, 393.

42 Seixas 2017, 60.

43 For an analysis of some of these debates, see Pihlainen 2014.

44 See, for example, Kansteiner 2002 as well as Pihlainen 2014; cf. Paul Ricoeur 2004, 93 ff., who tries to overcome this by introducing the level of familial and local memory between the strictly personal and the broadly collective.

from the realm of the direct and personal to something like "historical experience".[45] There are better concepts for these, and those who insist on using experiential ones (for explanatory ease and effectiveness, one presumes) foster this confusion.

None of this is meant to deny the value of thinking about phenomena like "collective memory", "cultural memory" or "historical experience", for example, but rather to say that particular care is needed in understanding that these are all instances of meaning production collectively and *retroactively* – inevitably in the cultural or collective present, after the fact – and that their existence depends on representation and discourse, not on reality or experience *per se*. (*Regardless* of the obvious fact that these presents are also compounded and the formation of collective memories and cultural experience is likewise a "historical" process.) Except for those possessing a romantic "historical" attitude and imagination, the past does not offer relief or understanding in any particularly remarkable way. And even for those so inclined, the minimum definitional move should be to explicitly consider that these are cases of *mediate* experience; whether attention should *then* turn more to the manner of mediation rather than the mystification of the past being real in the same sense as *im*mediate experiences is a question whose answer depends on one's reasons for engaging with it. Obviously, it is seldom possible or indeed even necessary to choose one over the other fully – but simultaneous attachment to both motivations can lead to challenges in theoretical formulations.

As regards the connection and appropriate balance between (vetted) historical knowledge and broader history culture: perhaps, at the very least, we might take to heart a lesson advocated by Howard Zinn: "What we learn about the past does not give us absolute truth about the present, but it may cause us to look deeper than the glib statements made by political leaders and the 'experts' quoted in the press."[46] Such a pedagogical and critical function should not be attributed to professional history alone, however, since (as per the basic lessons learned from the crisis of history), firstly, facts cannot alone introduce interpretations and, secondly, historians'

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45 In the recent search for immediacy and "experience" in theoretical debates, Samuel's terminology of "living history" could potentially help delineate reasonable use with regard to experiential engagements with the past. Generally, on re-enactment and "living history", see Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. Revised edition. Verso, London 2012 [1994], 169 ff.; see also Vanessa Agnew, "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present". *Rethinking History*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 2007, 299–312 on what she terms history's "affective turn" and Mark Salber Phillips, "Introduction: Rethinking Historical Distance". *Rethinking Historical Distance*. Edited by Mark Salber Phillips, Barbara Caine and Julia Adeney Thomas. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013, 1–18 on the question of distance in the re-enactment context. Importantly, as Samuel (2012, 176) claims: "'Living history' – despite, or perhaps because of, the oxymoron – is a trope which shows no sign of exhausting its imaginative appeal".

46 Howard Zinn, "Afterword". *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*. Harper Collins, New York, NY 2015, 683–688, 684.

professional commitments necessarily compromise them in fairly established ways. Instead, it should be obvious that parahistorical discourses are capable of generating critique: "These historical products bear within them a potentiality for reading against the grain or introducing new ways of conceptualising the self and social knowledge; and in this they might be valuable for their defiance and dissidence."[47] Of course, where (and how), precisely, the line is then drawn between acceptable, "historical" approaches and idiosyncratic, more personal ones, is a harder issue.

Connecting with this emancipatory orientation (which surely – to be fair – is the aim of most debates on *historical* culture), Alexandre Dessingué makes a persuasive case for the necessity of a *critical* historical consciousness for navigating different ways of dealing with the past. For Dessingué, a key component of this critical consciousness is to be found in the acknowledgement of the epistemological limits that characterize academic history and that might hopefully be similarly recognized in all the various history culture practices: "the necessary epistemological tension, which is at the very heart of the historian's work and of all representations of the past, should be a privileged arena for history education and a central resource to enhance a critical historical consciousness."[48] We might do well, that is, to foreground the components of the crisis of history in the sphere of public and popular debates too.

The crucial take-away is that "historical" meaning is not "out there" but neither does appealing to the past involve a free-for-all. This can (and often is) defined as a dual problem for practices of engaging with the past: history cannot give us meaning but neither can we legitimately make the past up *ex nihilo*. The questions then raised are clearly important: How does professional history legitimate itself? How do parahistorical interpretations relate to this? And, perhaps most importantly with respect to the idea of history culture, how can popular uses of the past justify themselves without the authority of disciplinary veracity? But this still begs the question of why these are the options we allow ourselves. Why should the history discipline and affiliated institutions either have control of interpretations or hold no role in broader history culture? On this point, greater general historical literacy is needed, to which end the crisis of history should be widely embraced. The ability of historians to serve as fact checkers needs to be recognized but the limitations of historical facts *vis-à-vis* interpretations need likewise to be clear. Admitting the conditionality of interpretations does not deny historians the right to interpretation, but it should make all participants aware that any authoritative capacity to interfere in alternative interpretations is always only to the extent of falsifying through documentary evidence; historical imagination belongs to everyone, and the discipline cannot legitimately rule on moral, political or aesthetic preferences unconnected

47 De Groot 2009, 5.

48 Alexandre Dessingué, "Developing Critical Historical Consciousness: Re-thinking the Dynamics between History and Memory in History Education". *Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 2020, 1–17, 8.

with that evidence. Through a general acceptance of these points, historians can then engage in broader debates with their expertise considered in appropriate measure.

Whatever the exact articulations we embrace, it is only once history culture is conceptualized in a way that grants the "parahistory" within it sufficient independence from academic history that its full utility can be assessed – including its role in fostering critical dialogue and tempering often-dominant "authorized" versions of the past. Further, it is in this context, that we need neither lament the solidarity and cohesiveness of disciplinary interpretations nor fear the wide popularity of vernacular versions of the past. Instead, in an ideal world – with an ideally formed history culture – an appropriate balance could be sought. And, even without such balance, recognizing the various tensions but also attached opportunities can lead to worthwhile critique. At the very least, viewing non-professional history culture as a parallel (indeed, a "parahistorical"), valid and viable arena for dealing with the past admits uses of the imagination that would be frowned upon within history "proper" or even within the extended but still institutional "historical". It is, after all, within this arena with all its creative outlets where historical knowledge and discourses of memory and experience can mix in culturally productive ways without undermining the distinct functions of history or of remembrance, that is, of the professional study of the past or of broader, parahistorical discourses of identification and memorialization. Most importantly, as with the more familiar arguments concerning the place of memory in historical thinking, such an understanding allows us to better picture the contributions of both "historical" and "memorial" cultural practices in the formation of our so-called historical consciousness as well as in the critical appreciation of received histories.

**Abstract**

The article takes aim at a core difficulty with many current conceptualizations of "historical" culture – that of striking a balance between the common attribution of special privilege to the discipline of history and professional historians and a potential, emerging democratization of talk about the past. Seeking some working middle ground is seen as particularly timely given the contemporary media culture environment where sentiment appears to increasingly favour choosing one's positioning relatively freely from facts and expertise. To this end, views presented under the umbrella term of *historical* culture, which largely appear to reserve a curatorial role for the various history professionals, are complemented by more explicitly emancipatory orientations from debates on perceived shifts in public focus to heritage and memory as well as from key postmodern-inspired approaches to thinking about the past. Several terminological recommendations are argued for, chief among them a reconceptualization of the overall field in terms of *history* culture, whereby professional history and popular and public "parahistory" practices might more readily be viewed as on equal footing.