Georg Gangl

Historia Magistra Vitae? The Role of Historiography in Culture and Politics[1]

Historians can be political animals. Take the following two examples among possibly many. "Historians without Borders" (HWB) is an international network of historians based in Helsinki, Finland. It provides historical knowledge and expertise in conflict resolution settings. The network's goals more particularly are the promotion of historical knowledge and understanding and the countering of distortions of history; the facilitation of open access to historical sources and archives; the fostering of dialogue between opposite (national) versions of history; and especially the use of historical knowledge in peace building efforts. For this purpose, HWB maintains a roster of international historians available as experts and arbiters in conflictual political settings and organizes conferences and workshops for historians coming from different and mutually hostile national backgrounds. The network also calls on governments to not pass legislation on controversial historical topics.[2]

HWB is an example of historians, many of which internationally renowned, banding together to pursue political goals that lie beyond their academic work and their immediate disciplinary interest politics, which routinely revolves around securing or defending funds and other resources for the field. Conflict resolution, peace building, and the establishment of dialogue between hostile national groups surely are noble objectives in most people's books, yet they are *political goals* that on the face of it lie outside of the main activities of the (academic) historical profession, which are above all epistemic and pedagogic in character, i.e., teaching and research (and more recently also consist in constant application writing and loads of admin work).

Our second example is the so-called "Münsteraner Resolution" (Resolution of Münster) on "current threats of democracy" of the "Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands" (VHD) ("Association of German Historians" in English) from 2018. The VHD is a professional association of German historians

[1] I would like to thank Fu Lo, Ruud van de Meerakker, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Mikko Kurttila as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous version of this text.

[2] See https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/ (21.04.2021).

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counting more than 3000 members.[3] The resolution, which was passed by a vast majority present at the association's meeting in 2018 in Münster, champions pluralist democratic discourse and dispute within certain bounds, inalienable human rights, and long-term analysis of political phenomena based on the findings of historiography as basis for political and societal discourse. It also takes, more concretely, a pro-EU, pro-migration, and pro-refugees position. On the flipside, the resolution castigates populist, divisive, and nationalist language and agitation in politics and wider society.

As such, the resolution created quite some discussion amongst German historians and it caused a minor stir in the wider intellectual sphere of the German feuilleton, not the least because it was read as an overtly and overly political statement and as "anti-AfD" resolution.[4] The "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) ("Alternative for Germany" in English) is a right-wing populist party that was continuously rising in public approval in Germany in the years prior to the 2018 resolution. In the parliamentary election of 2017, it gained nearly 8 percent in votes and entered parliament for the first time.

The "Resolution of Münster" is without a doubt an openly political document: It takes a stance on central political hot-topics of the day (EU, migration, refugees) and endorses some political principles and repudiates others. More abstractly, it also contains the *contours of a presumed relationship between historiography and democracy* and an understanding of the *main principles of democracy*, both of which not fully explicated in the text. The resolution posits in particular that there is a *positive relationship* and *mutually reinforcing dynamic* between historiography as a scientific discipline and modern pluralist democracy, which exactly allows for the *controversy and dispute within certain bounds* that the historians describe in their resolution. Historical knowledge and understanding are seen as essential for democratic societies and their functioning, just as it is the norms and principles of democracy which protect historiography as an autonomous subject and form of enquiry. From the assumed positive relationship follows that historians qua profession have an interest in *defending* democracy. The language of the document can be quite forceful on this issue despite a lack of full explication of these core ideas and values; the German historians see it as their "duty" to warn against threats to democracy and to "defend" democracy's "historical bases".

As can be witnessed through its declaration, HWB displays similar thinking when it comes to the role of historiography in politics, in the case of HWB especially in conflict resolution and peace building, and the organization also believes that

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3 The English version of the resolution can be found here: https://www.historikerverband.de/verband/stellungnahmen/resolution-on-current-threats-to-democracy.html#c1553 (21.04.2021). Quotes of the resolution are taken from this online document.

4 Thomas Sandkühler, "Historians and Politics. Quarrels over a Current Resolution". *Public History Weekly*, Volume 6, Number 1, 2018, dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2018-12675 (29.09.2021).

democracy plays a central role when it comes to the ensuring of both peace and the conditions for historiography to thrive.[5]

As these two examples show, two among many I believe, historians sometimes engage in political activities and they believe their political activities to be *underpinned* and *justified* by their disciplinary identity as historians. Such political activities by historians, and the reason they put forward for them, lead to the questions that I would like to address in this text: What is historiography's role in wider society? Can that role more specifically underpin and justify certain political goals that historians pursue, such as speaking up against populist politics or engaging in conflict resolution and peace building? Are the values that historians hold qua profession the same as those inherent in modern democratic politics, as the German resolution alleges, so that they have a special interest in retaining and defending democracy?

I think these questions are best approached by first addressing historiography's specific role in society more generally via the discipline's impact on "historical culture". By "historical culture" I mean the complex and manifold "past-relationships"[6] a society engages in.[7] Having scrutinized historiography's contributions to "historical culture", we will turn to the discipline's relationship with democracy. Eventually, a picture of historiography's contribution to both culture and politics and its commonality with and dependence on certain forms of democratic politics will emerge, just as a set of overarching values and practices of justification applicable to all these spheres should come into view. To speak with Cicero, historiography and with it historians are in an important respect "life's teacher"[8] ("historia magistra vitae"), though they can play this beneficial role only under certain political conditions which they therefore have an intrinsic interest in maintaining.

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5 See https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/the-historians-without-borders-declaration (15.09.2021). See also Erkki Tuomioja, "History and Conflict: How Historians Contribute to Conflict Resolution and Conflict Prevention". https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/history-conflict-can-historians-contribute-conflict-resolution-conflict-prevention/ (29.09.2021).

6 Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited". *Palgrave Handbook in Historical Culture and Education*. Edited by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, 83.

7 The originally German concept of "Geschichtskultur" is variously translated as "history culture" or "historical culture" into English. I use "historical culture" in this text throughout. To my ears, this term sounds less clumsy than "history culture" does in English, and more importantly, it is also used by a summatory publication about the field such as the *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. (Carretero, Berger and Grever 2017).

8 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*. Harper & Brothers, New York 1860 (55 BCE), 92.

Historiography and Historical Culture

Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen give a handy initial definition of historical culture when they write about the concept's constituent parts: "The term 'historical' refers to past events, including thoughts and ideas. The term 'culture' comprises shared attitudes, values, and perceptions of a group of people"[9]. Historical culture, in other words, describes a society's relations and attitudes to the past.[10] Central to the understanding of the term and the direction the debate around it has taken have been the works of Jörn Rüsen, who has been developing his thoughts about historical culture ever since the early 1990s.[11] Rüsen's notion of historical culture distinguishes three levels on which our relations to the past manifest themselves: a cognitive, political, and aesthetic level whose ultimate sources are the anthropological mental operations of thinking, wanting, and feeling. The cognitive realm is organized around truth and knowledge, the political around power, and the aesthetic around form and beauty.[12] Historical culture at its most fundamental is the framework through which individuals create *historical sense*, a central notion in all of Rüsen's thinking. By orienting themselves within and interpreting the passing of time in the continuum of past, present, and future, people constitute historical sense or meaning. As a result, they gain a (historical) understanding of their lives and life-worlds, develop a sense

9 Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 77.

10 In this broad definition, historical culture might be seen as the natural subject matter of the field of "historical theory" which has been taking more and more shape in recent years. One influential book on the subject describes "historical theory" at its basest as "reflection on how human beings relate to the past". Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*. Routledge, London and New York 2015, 3.

11 Jörn Rüsen, "Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken". *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur heute*. Edited by Klaus Füßmann, Jörn Rüsen and Heinrich Theodor Grütter. Böhlau, Köln, Weimar and Vienna 1994, 3–26; Jörn Rüsen, "Geschichtskultur". *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*. Edited by Klaus Bergmann, Klaus Fröhlich, Annette Kuhn, Jörn Rüsen and Gerhard Schneider. Kallmeyer'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Seelze-Velber 1997, 38–41.

12 Rüsen 1997, 39–40; Rüsen 1994, 11–17.

of purpose and direction, and create collective identities. The successful completion of this process results for Rüsen in the "narrative competency"[13] of individuals.[14]

As such, the past-relations of historical culture appear in the *historical thinking* and *consciousness* of the individual members of a society on all the three levels outlined by Rüsen, that is people relate to the past cognitively, politically, and aesthetically, and these relations are also embodied in *objects* and *institutions*. While historical consciousness and thinking pertain to individuals, historical culture designates the phenomenon on a group- or even a society-wide level.

In modern societies, there are various institutions that are specifically tasked with creating or maintaining relations to the past as there are institutions that create or maintain relations to the objects of the past. The actual creation or reproduction of historical culture is therefore often fostered by, if not itself fully performed within, certain institutions; especially those of the modern nation state.[15] The nation state endorses and legitimizes certain views and interpretations of the past which are in a further step disseminated through public educative institutions such as schools and museums. Schools, museums and similar organization are in this sense special "mnemonic institutions"[16] that proliferate a certain understanding of the past, which often functions to structure the social and cultural memory of the individual members of the society. Beyond these "mnemonic institutions", historical culture also

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13 Jörn Rüsen, "Historisches Lernen". *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*. Edited by Klaus Bergmann, Klaus Fröhlich, Annette Kuhn, Jörn Rüsen and Gerhard Schneider. Kallmeyer'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Seelze-Velber 1997, 262.

14 Rüsen can be classified as a "narrative essentialist" in a double sense of the term. Firstly, narrative is for him essential for the creation of historical sense, there is no such sense without the employment of narrative. Secondly, this sense-making is essential for the identity formation of every human being (Rüsen 1994, 9). With the latter argument, Rüsen is close to thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre who has similarly emphasized the centrality of well-crafted life narratives for the successful formation of the identity and the self-development of individuals (Alasdaire MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Duckworth, London 2007). This stands in stark contrast to thinkers such as Hayden White and most postmodernists who see coherent (life) narratives as a repressive fictions created through language and rhetoric and as part and parcel of the great tales of a modernist age now passé in our postmodern times (Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1988, 1–26; Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past*. Routledge, Abingdon 2017.). Personally, I firmly stand on the side of the narrative essentialists. I do not only believe that coherent life narratives based on true beliefs about the past are essential for individual identity and wellbeing, I also think narratives are central to historiography as a form of representation, in that they are ideally suited to represent the causal nexus of the past. See Georg Gangl, "Narrative Explanations. The Case for Causality". *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Volume 15, Number 2, 2021, 157–181.

15 Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914". *The Invention of Tradition*. Edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, 263–309.

16 Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 74.

"materializes" itself in specifically built structures like monuments or other *lieux de mémoire*, in the widely used French phrase by Pierre Nora[17], such as commemorative plaques on buildings. Finally, historical culture also consists of itself immaterial components such as historical jubilees, remembrance days, and rituals that are created with one or another historical interpretation in mind and for one modern purpose or another.

However complexly mediated by (state) institutions, historical objects, memory sites and routines, at the bottom-line historical culture is (re-)produced by individuals through their thoughts and deeds. And no matter if we agree with Rüsen that historical sense making is an anthropological constant, it is obvious that most people mentally engage with the past in some way or another throughout their lives, which can be called *historical thinking*, and this for a plethora of cognitive, political, aesthetic, emotional and potentially other reasons. As part of their historical thinking, people form *historical arguments* and *historical judgments*. By historical argument, I mean (informal) arguments of which at least one of the premises is historical in nature, that is it concerns a past state of affairs broadly understood, while the conclusion reasoned for on the basis of the premises of the argument might or might not be about the past. A historical judgment, further, is a "single existential judgment"[18] about some past state of affairs in the sense of judging it on the "rightfulness" of its very being, in the form of something should or should not have been or should or should not have been done. Historical judgments as such often are parts of wider historical arguments.

Individuals engaged in everyday historical thinking, in historical arguments and judgments, might very well argue badly for a variety of reasons. They might assert factually false claims stemming from a lack of historiographic knowledge or understanding, or they might work with spurious analogies or draw unfounded conclusions thanks to limited analytical and critical reasoning skills. The general framework and the concepts applied by the historical reasoners might also be philosophically inchoate or straight-out contradictory, or people might reason with some ulterior motive or interest in mind which unduly influences their historical thinking. There might also be hidden motivations behind the thinking that are not fully conscious to the thinkers themselves, say of a rationalizing and apologetic kind as is often the case when justifying one's own (past) behaviour or that of one's own group. In short, all these influences, thinking flaws and fallacies might turn everyday (historical) thinking *ideological*, leading it fundamentally astray when it comes to arguing about and judging past and present.

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17 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*". *Representations*, Number 26, Spring 1989, 7–24.

18 Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. Continuum, New York 1972, 227.

Taking these insights about the constitution of historical culture and the workings of historical thinking together, we see a complex picture emerging about a society's relations to the past. Historical culture as a whole is largely sustained and reproduced by historical thinking, which is potentially ideological. At the same time, ordinary historical thinking takes many of its interpretative frames, cues, and facts from wider historical culture. This "historical source material" for everyday thinking is mainly provided through the institutions of historical culture, with educative state institutions being of central importance here, whatever the purpose of any individual's historical thinking in detail may be.

Professional historiography is part of the complex intermesh of the historical culture of modern societies, though it occupies, as a subject of tertiary education taught in universities, a specific place and exercises particular functions.[19] Historiography most centrally acts in this intermesh as large-scale *regulatory instance and corrective* about historical beliefs on the cognitive level of historical culture, correcting historical thinking and institutions where they are ideological; or at least it has the unique power to do so. This is so because of the *epistemic and discursive characteristics* that set historiography apart from ordinary thinking about history and that enable it to produce reliable knowledge about the past, i.e. historical facts, beyond individual or institutional distortions or ideologies. Historical facts are generated through the methods by which historiography connects to historical sources, or in more general scientific parlance, to the evidence. Historiography cannot reinstate the past, it is not an experimental science in other words. Instead, it studies the past via the traces it left in the present which, when interpreted, become the evidence for some statement or theory about the past or another.[20] Historians track the "information-causal chains"[21] that lead from the events and processes in the past they are interested in to their traces in the present. They scrutinize whether these chains of evidence are independent of one other and whether the signal of the past that is received is untainted by any noise (and if they need to and can, they remove the noise and strengthen a signal that it is faint or nested in some way or another).[22] Historical knowledge, when scientific, is

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19 This does not mean that all professional history producers who work scientifically necessarily do so within universities. There are other (state) institutions such as extra-mural research institutes and museums where scientific historical work is done as well, in museums often in conjunction with various pedagogical projects and other activities that aim at imparting knowledge and understanding about the past, and there are institutionally unbound individuals that might do scientific historiographic work.

20 Georg Gangl, "The Essential Tension. Historical Knowledge between Past and Present". *History and Theory*, Volume 60, Number 3, September 2021, 513–533.

21 Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past. A Philosophy of Historiography*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, 74.

22 Peter Kosso, *Knowing the Past. Philosophical Issues of History and Archaeology*. Humanity Books, Amherst 2001, 75–85.

in its core based on the assessment and interpretation of (independent) sources, in a process that is reflective and open to criticism and revision.

This reflectiveness and openness to criticism is mainly realized discursively through historiographic disciplinary practices geared at both the critical examination of historiographical arguments and works more generally and eventual consensus, through such practices as (double-blind) peer-review and open and equitable debate. Objectivity is safeguarded procedurally in such discourse through the assessments by peers who share in the field's methods and in the principal goal of the discourse to generate knowledge above all other things. In review and debate, intersubjective scrutiny and potentially warrant are established beyond the relations an individual work of historiography establishes to the evidence, which stand for objectivity in relation to the past. Under the ultimate goal of coming to an uncoerced consensus, and with no ulterior motives or dire consequences that might come from disagreement to fear, criticism in historiography can be levelled factually yet forcefully, focusing on the issues at stake alone. These guiding principles of the discourse along with other disciplinary quality assurance mechanisms such historiographical education guarantee that it is the arguments that count in historiographical debate.[23]

The identities of the parties involved in this discourse – issues such as their race, gender, social status, etcetera that might play a central role otherwise – are of no immediate concern in historiography thanks to these procedures. Neither is historiographical discourse about power or material interests, or at least determined by these factors in any overtly obvious way, as a lot of political discourse is; or much like much of general public discourse of society where many different motivations and interests intermingle in ways often difficult to disentangle. Ideally at least, "the unforced force of the better argument"[24] is the decisive factor in the normal goings-on of disciplinary historiography, as it is in any other properly functioning scientific discourse. Historiographical discoursing therefore also has *exemplary function* for

[23] For the discursive aspects of this process, see Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "Moving Deeper into Rational Pragmatism. A Reply to my Reviewers". *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Volume 11, Number 1, 2017, 83–118.

[24] Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application. Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London 1994, 23.

society and its historical culture in cognitive matters and it can serve as a *model* for any rationally oriented discourse and for rational conflict-staging and resolution.[25]

Historiography's specific epistemic and discursive characteristics ensure that it can play the role of reliable knowledge producer about the past for wider society. Shading of into philosophy of history, historiography also embodies a general *historical* or *historico-philosophical framework* which furnishes a general understanding of the relation of past, present, and future and in this sense aids in historical orientation and underpins a proper historical sense in individuals. This general outlook that modern historiography provides might be called *historicist*. The main tenet of such a historicism is the "historization" of all of human society and thinking, turning all human doings into products of history, although there are no reasons in principle to limit "historization" to the *humanum*. Through this "historization", historiography becomes central for the understanding of the present, which would be nothing but for its past, and as such it also relativizes the present and present thinking in terms of their own historical conditionality and situatedness. At the same time – thanks to historiography's critical methods and discourse and amply visible in all the knowledge created about the past by historiography so far – this historicism does not collapse into any more radical form of relativism that flat-out denies the possibility of any knowledge about the past. Modern historiography stands for the general historicist insight in the historical genesis of past and present, the fundamental difference between the two that this often entails, and the ensuing centrality of understanding the past in its own right, while all the same upholding the possibility of knowledge about it through the epistemically responsible and regulated practices of the discipline.[26] This historicist framework is central for any historical thinking that takes the past seriously and it is even more important as a general premise for any reasoner who engages in historical argument or judgment and does not want to end up in the clutches of ideology. Historicism as showcased

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[25] Some might argue that this view of historiographical discourse represents an "ideal speech situation" (Jürgen Habermas, "Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence". *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 13, Number 1, 1970, 367) that is unrealistic and that the actual goals of academic historiographical discourse are prestige and career advancement, and not knowledge production. Academia and with it academic discourse, the argument continues, are shot through with privilege, power, and cultural capital and far from being the rational discourse I have depicted. While I would not deny the workings of privilege, power, and cultural capital in historiography, I still maintain that prestige and career advancement mostly come by the currency of knowledge production as measured in the disciplinary discourse itself, and that this discourse is arranged in such a way so as to thoroughly limit the obvious workings of these motives exterior and often hostile to the production of knowledge.

[26] Gangl 2021, 518–528; Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*. Routledge, Abingdon 2009, 211–223.

in historiography and theorized by its philosophy is a proper broadband antidote for individuals and societies steeped in ahistorical and anachronistic ideologies.[27]

It is the central task of university education in historiography to both teach students the methods and discursive practices of the discipline and to educate them more generally in the *reflective and regulated use of their critical reasoning faculties*.[28]

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[27] Christopher Lloyd, *The Structures of History*. Blackwell, Oxford 1993, 2–4. My use of historicism differs in several important respects from the German tradition of historical thinking, mainly of the 19th and early 20th century, that goes by the same name in English. (The original German name of the tradition is *historismus*, so occasionally it is also translated as "historism" into English.) While German historicism first championed the critical method towards the sources that is still a hallmark of scientific historiography and the ontological and epistemological historicism that I have also emphasized (everything human, including our thinking tools, are historical and can thus be understood through history), it was characterized beyond that by another three features that my historicism does not share: a) an emphasis on the state and "great men" as the ultimate driving forces of history; b) a rejection of any overarching values; c) a rejection of broader conceptual thinking in historiography (Georg Gerson Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*. Wesleyan University Press, Middleton 1983, 3–13.). These further stipulations are not necessarily linked to the philosophical and methodological core of historiography that comprises ontological and epistemological historicism as well as the critical method towards the sources, and I reject all of them while holding on to that philosophical and methodological core. Further, traditional historicism maintained a sharp distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities where the former were thought to deal with the lawlike phenomena of nature devoid of sense or purpose and the humanities with "unique and unduplicable human acts, filled with volition and intent" (Iggers 1983, 5). (This differentiation is commonly known as the difference between "nomothetic" and "idiographic" approaches.) My historicism does not entail this sharp distinction between the spheres of nature and the human world, and between the respective sciences and approaches to them, either. There are historical natural sciences such as evolutionary biology whose objects need to be understood historically and who share a common approach to evidence and common ways of inference with human historiography, just as much as there are historiographical *explananda* that are not unique and unrepeatable events and that do not prominently involve in their *explanatia* volition or intentions (Gangl 2021, 161–172; Carol Cleland, "Philosophical Issues in Natural History and Its Historiography". *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*. Edited by Aviezer Tucker. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2011, 44–63.). Besides, knowledge production in non-historical, usually experimental natural sciences is itself historical and social which merits approaching them historiographically and sociologically.

[28] Some more education than none at all in general philosophy and especially philosophy of history would further aid in this endeavour. Philosophy of history, of which the author of this paper considers himself a part, has been a thriving and ever-growing discipline in the last fifteen or so years. On the state of the art of the discipline and what it has to offer to both historiography and philosophy, see Aviezer Tucker, "The Future of Philosophy of Historiography". *History and Theory*, Volume 40, Number 1, February 2001, 37–56; Frank Ankersmit, Marc Bevin, Paul Roth, Aviezer Tucker and Alison Wylie, "Philosophy of History: An Agenda". *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2007, 1–9; and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "A Conceptual Map for Twenty-First-Century Philosophy of History". *Philosophy of History. Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*. Edited by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen. Bloomsbury Academic, London et al. 2021, 1–23.

Prospective historians learn in pedagogical settings to pose relevant questions, to formulate theses, to find, assess, and interpret sources, to form reasonable interpretations and conclusions, and to properly represent their research findings in narrative form; and to do all of this in a reflective and critical way.[29] While some of the steps of the research process just outlined are specific to historiography, or at least to the historical sciences, they can serve as a more general model or heuristic as to how to approach and deal with the past responsibly in a cognitive setting. To a certain extent, they represent the *skills, dispositions, and attitudes* towards the past and its discussion that befit all people who want to speak reasonably and responsibly about history, no matter whether they are historians or not.

To sum up, historiography provides to society and its historical culture both *reliable knowledge* about the past and a g*eneral framework* and *heuristic* for thinking historically. Under the general premise that is it good to hold true and well-formed beliefs, society has an interest to build its historical culture in the cognitive realm upon the insights of historiography and to establish a generally historicist outlook and atmosphere as best as it can. The same is also true for the individual members of a society who in the last resort (re-)produce historical culture. Their historical thinking, as far as it engages with the past *cognitively*, should be based on the framework, heuristics and the knowledge provided by historiography; this is especially true of the historical arguments and historical judgments they form. From historiography's role as provider of historical knowledge and proper historical perspective also follows that the discipline stands in an antagonistic relationship to all distortions and abuses of history, however they might be motivated, and all actors that attempt to hamper free historiographic discourse aimed at knowledge production and consensus on factual matters.

Historiography further represents a *rational discourse* that can act as a model for other parts of society that wish to engage in discussions and debates that are fact-oriented and consensus-driven. It also aids in developing general *reasoning skills* and historically sensitive criteria for the assessment and judgment of human action. These skills, once acquired, act as a propaedeutic and heuristic for individuals that they can put to good use in all sorts of situations. Together with situationally appropriate historical knowledge and the general historicist perspective historiography also has on offer they can be used to arrive at well-formed and warranted arguments and judgments that are not limited to the realm of the past.

These characteristics of modern historiography explain how the discipline is in a unique position to deliver reliable knowledge of the past to society, along with the other epistemic goods just spelled out, which together help to improve the argumentative

[29] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*. Pearson Education, London 2002; Daniel Little, *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History*. Springer, Amsterdam 2010.

quality of societal discourses and the conflict resolution abilities of society as a whole. "Historians without Borders" and the German resolution therefore do well in emphasizing the unique contribution historians can make to solving the problems of society via their impact on historical culture but also beyond it in the realm of politics itself, be it by preventing violent conflicts as HWB does or by warning against the rise of political actors that aim at destroying rational and fact-oriented discourse as in the German resolution. Actors such as those described in the German resolution and conditions such as war and violent conflict seriously undermine historiography's potential to perform its central task. From that follows that historians have an intrinsic interest and a rational justification for engaging in political activities that try to avoid these conditions and oppose these actors, especially when they see their work impeded or threatened by them. Similarly, do society and politics have an interest in supporting a (politically) independent historiography if they see value in factual knowledge and rational discourse about the past (which democracies should).

None of the above, however, means that historiography is the key to all of society's questions and problems, even only concerning its relations to the past, or that historians know everything about the past or that their propositions about it are necessarily correct. For one thing, there is no reason to believe that information about everything that happened in the past has survived to the present. It is very likely that there are things about the past we will never know for a dearth of evidence, that is information preserving signals and traces in the present; just think about the patchy structure of our knowledge of human prehistory as compared to, say, what we know about the 19th century. Also, despite all the precepts, methods, and practices I have outlined which make historiography into a scientific and rational endeavour, it might very well be that some corners of historiographic discourse, beyond the underdetermination just mentioned, are vague or riddled with ideology, and therefore uninformative in cognitive matters. It might even be that the profession as a whole, under certain conditions, is captured by ideologies or that it is forcibly subdued by the powers that be for their ideological needs.[30] In short, while there is no reason to believe that modern historiography can give us a full and infallible picture of the past or that it is always immune to the problematic influences of ideology or power, it is the most reliable institution for producing historical knowledge devised so far in human history, and in this sense indispensable for historical culture. However, this issue points to the fact that historiography is dependent upon general conditions and principles that it can only produce to a certain extent by itself. These conditions and principles, which we will talk about next, are mainly secured by the democratic state.

[30] Tucker 2004, 254.

Historiography and Democracy

The state is the centre of organized power in modern societies, it holds the monopoly on the (legitimate) use of force. The state is often also thought of as the main site of democracy in a society and as the addressee of most if not all democratic politics, no matter if democracy is understood in representative terms focusing on parliaments and elections or in more direct or deliberative ways. Given that the state holds the reins of power in a society and controls its main institutions of coercion, the so-called repressive state apparatuses, the *relation* to the state and its *inner constitution* should be of essential concern to any non-state actor and endeavour, historiography included.

However, the state, in its modern form at least, is not just coercion, it also contains a substantive *deliberative* element in its procedures of governing, administration, and arbitration, and that on many different levels and in many different state institutions and sites. By deliberation I mean here with Simone Chambers "the weighing of reasons or considerations in relation to a practical decision"[31], with *democratic* deliberation specifically ensuring the equal inclusion of everyone affected by the deliberation in the considerations in question. Deliberation in this sense depends and thrives on reasoning, discussion, debate, and the exchange of arguments broadly understood. Deliberative debating should not be understood in overly rationalistic terms though, it might include testimony, narrative, rhetoric and emotionally charged language of all sorts which can be used by public arguers to express their concerns and viewpoints in ways that fall short of explicit arguments.[32] Also, everyday reasoning is, as we have seen for the case of historical thinking in the last section, likely to be shot through by ideologies which express themselves in various argumentative shortcomings and fallacies.

Some think that deliberation should be exhaustive, in the sense of full-scale direct or council democracy, incorporating most or all of a society's communal decisions on all levels.[33] This obviously does not square with any modern state setting which incorporates areas and issues that are not deliberated about at all publicly for better or worse, such as matters of national security and intelligence, or for which there exist high thresholds for any binding practical decision even if deliberation takes place, such as in constitutional matters. When it comes to modern democratic states

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31 Simone Chambers, "The Philosophic Origins of Deliberative Ideals". *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Edited by André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge and Mark Warren. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, 55.

32 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

33 David Graeber, *Direct Action. An Ethnography*. AK Press, Oakland 2009, 228–236.

it is therefore more sensible to think of them as complex "deliberative systems"[34] next to civil society where discussion and deliberation might take place incessantly and in a more unregulated fashion. Deliberation in modern states is in this sense *distributed* and *emergent*, taking place at different times in various state sites with differing intensity. The deliberative process itself is often also *compartmentalized* in these settings, "with some venues (and persons) providing high quality reasons, other venues (or persons) having greater capacity for active listening and finding common ground, and still others functioning to include the marginalized or catalyzing new ideas"[35], to name a few aspects central to deliberative processes.

Fundamentally, deliberation is based on *respect* and *reciprocity*, on the recognition of others as equals in their humanity and in their reasoning abilities, but also in their potential involvedness in issues of common concern. Of course, these relations of respect and recognition and the values they exhibit have social presuppositions and underpinnings. There needs to be a general recognition of a basic equality of people for wide and inclusive deliberation to have a chance to happen, which is far from being a common assumption throughout much of human history. Equality of opportunity to participate and to actually make a difference in the deliberations for all those potentially concerned is a requirement for such a discourse to be called democratic. Pervasive coercive powers or institutions that hinder reasoning or order people to acquiesce must be absent or at least incapacitated too. Further, a basic orientation towards something like a common good, however defined, that comes from the deliberation and that is perhaps even the goal of the deliberation needs to be presupposed. Otherwise, the discourse is not led sincerely even if superficial debate takes place. A plethora of reasons might thwart such a process and undo any of the presuppositions just mentioned, not the least of them socioeconomic inequalities and the social disenfranchisement of minorities and otherwise marginalized groups. The state plays a central role in all this not just as the venue for deliberation but also as vehicle for the obtainment of these conditions in the first place (or conversely, their fundamental thwarting).[36]

Theories of deliberative democracy in the sense discussed here make no claim on the actual contents or results of the debates led in a society. They theorize and define a "meta-discourse"[37], a consensus on the *rules* and *procedures* conducive to successful

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[34] André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge and Mark Warren, "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction". *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Edited by André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge and Mark Warren. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, 14.

[35] Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren 2018, 14.

[36] On these preconditions and the standards for good deliberation, see in detail Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren 2018, 4–8.

[37] Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren 2018, 20; see also, Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1996.

deliberative discourse and the *rights* individuals have as parts of them, though most proponents of deliberative democracy also believe that deliberation delivers some fundamental epistemic, participatory, and other goods. In deliberative democracy then, the democratic ideals of inclusion and respect are in the setting of practical and collective decision-making wedded to the principles of rational discourse based on the principle of "giving and asking for reasons" (Wilfrid Sellars), defining the preconditions for coming to good decisions for all those potentially involved.

Deliberation embodies forms of *procedural and communicative rationality* that differ fundamentally from the forms of rationality that have been emphasized throughout much of the history of philosophy.[38] Reason here exactly consists in subjecting oneself to deliberation, to making contestable truth claims, and with that to the systematic criticism by others in an ongoing communicative process. In the best of cases and the most rational of discourses such as in historiography and other sciences, such deliberative processes might very well result in intersubjective agreement without any coercion, itself indicative of true beliefs about the subject matters of concern.[39]

Such deliberative reasoning is fundamentally different from the use of force or coercion, from threats or manipulation. Indeed, the process of "giving and asking for reasons" is the appropriate form to recognize and respect other people as people fundamentally like us in their freedom – a point already stressed by Kant in the second formulation of his famous categorical imperative, i.e., to treat others "never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end".[40] This Kantian point was taken up, elaborated on, and made into a social and political philosophy by Jürgen Habermas and other philosophers of deliberation.[41] The crucial point here is that communicative reasoning is always already a communal activity, requiring at least a You and an I. In this sense, it differs profoundly from instrumental or purely subjectivist reason that can be pursued by one individual alone, disregarding and *against* the reasons and interests of others. Communicative rationality is even beyond any purposive rationality pure and simple as it problematizes, or positively, justifies purposes in the first place in a wider collective setting. Indeed, communicative reason is intrinsically self-reflexive in ways these forms of rationality are not since it might itself become the subject of deliberation as a matter of course, addressing its own purview, limits, and the restraints imposed on it by society.

Depending on the individual society, its structural composition and commitment to deliberation thus defined, a society might be said to be more or less (communicatively and procedurally) rational, as rationality itself might become more or less a *disposition*

38 Habermas 1994, 32.

39 Tucker 2004, 27–36.

40 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997 (1785), 38.

41 Chambers 2018, 66.

and *reflective attitude* of the members of that society. Alternatively, societies might be criticized for their lack of rationality in important aspects or sites of themselves, or for their systematic production of social pathologies that hinder and foil the development of rationality and rational dispositions in individuals. Yet, philosophy itself can only establish the principles of communicative rationality and deliberation, it can scrutinize their underpinnings and preconditions, but it cannot by itself bring them about or guarantee their continued application. Neither can it predetermine the contents of deliberations or even their general success. These issues mostly lie with the constitution of wider society in which the state and historical culture play a central role and in which historiography has a say too (in the way outlined in the last section).

Deliberation has been widely recognized as procedure and means to improve the results of considerations and discussions and to produce genuine epistemic goods, that is for improving the quality of knowledge and practical decisions along with producing intersubjective warrant for them.[42] Historiography is a prime example of a well-structured form of deliberation whose goals are knowledge production and eventual consensus. Deliberation is an epistemic activity even in more practical settings where decision-making is the immediate goal, but its epistemic character and its ability to produce high-quality epistemic goods are especially obvious in scientific discourses such as historiography.

Deliberation understood in this way allows for *wide controversy within certain formal bounds* set by the requirements of respect and reciprocity. This is exactly the structure of the discourse presupposed but not fully explicated in the "Münsteraner Resolution" of German VHD (see introduction). In the resolution, all arguments are deemed legitimate as long as they heed historical facts and respect the inclusive rules of the deliberative process itself, that is, as long as they do not resort to the falsification of history and exclusion or denigration of other (potential) participants in the discourse. (Something populist political actors did according to the resolution.)

Historiography is not only a prime examples of a rational discourse underpinned and substantiated by the theory of deliberation and communicative rationality, historiography also delivers some of the expert knowledge upon which deliberative democracy and deliberate state systems more generally depend. This knowledge can be used in deliberations with all practical intents, in arbitrations just as much as in arguments themselves or for the purposes of finding consensus. As we have seen in the last section, the methods of historiography enable the reliable production of knowledge about the past, just as historiography delivers other epistemic goods such as a historicist outlook and a heuristic for approaching the past to wider culture and

[42] David Estlund and Hélène Landemore, "The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation". *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Edited by André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge and Mark Warren. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, 113–131.

society. The democratic and deliberative state as the site of (legitimate) coercion in a society safeguards for its part the conditions under which historiography can produce these epistemic goods; in most of its configurations the democratic state robustly ensures equality and the rights to free speech and free association. Further, under the state's monopoly on the use of force no one can force the other's arm, if fairly applied. With this, the use of threats, coercion, or violence to further one or another usually non-epistemic goal is principally outlawed in historiographic discourse, and this exactly allows historiography to concentrate on its inner deliberative procedures. The success of this *interrelationship of divide and mutual reinforcement* is obvious when compared to other political configurations. Stable democracies with strong deliberative standards have a proven track record of non-interference in scientific matters, historiography included, just as historiography can act precisely on these grounds as politically impartial expert on matters of the past in wider social debates and (state) deliberations. Compare this setting to the treatment of historiography in systems of an authoritarian creed, or to the uses history is put to in traditionalist societies of the past and present, which all bend the past to their dogmatic needs.[43] Or most obviously in the history of modern Europe, with the "success stories" Fascism and the Socialism of the East produced on these matters.[44]

This eventually brings us to some of the questions this text began with, i.e., the (meta-)political positions and interests historians might hold or are entitled to oppose based on their identity as historians and the characteristics of their disciplinary endeavour. First, there are the structural obstacles, distortions, and pathologies a society exhibits, both in its actual deliberative practices and in its education of people to become competent reasoners. Historiography as a knowledge-producing and truth-oriented discourse has an interest to establish the *conditions* that enable competent deliberation, though it is a matter of debate to what extent this necessitates fundamental changes to the economic and political order of modern Western societies. Among the conditions of prime importance in this respect are the generally democratic and deliberative character of the state system which ensures the non-interference of the state in historiography and safeguards the discipline's freedoms from without through guaranteed constitutional rights and the threat of (legitimate) force. The deliberative character of the state also makes sure that it is receptive for the unique expertise historiography has on offer.

In wider society, there is the general background of tradition and ideology as they present themselves in historical culture and other settings and which are often presupposed without much reflection and justification, especially in traditionalist societies, where they can easily take on the form of indisputable dogmas. Such dogmas,

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43 Antoon De Baets, *Crimes Against History*. Routledge, Abingdon 2019.

44 Tucker 2004, 75; Aviezer Tucker, *The Legacies of Totalitarianism. A Theoretical Framework*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015.

as all petrified tradition and thinking, are veritable obstacles to free deliberations, in respect to who might be allowed to take part in them, in the way issues can be discussed, and on the question of which topics might be permitted to be discussed in the first place. In terms of the actual participants in the discourse, there are those who intentionally undermine it for their own ulterior motives, often exactly by wielding tradition or some other dogmatic belief system as their argumentative weapon. These participants engage in the discourse insincerely and manipulatively and they often disrespect and denigrate other potential participants of the deliberation. Typical actors of this sort are the demagogues and populists that have risen in popularity all over the Western world in the last two decades. Or all kinds of authoritarian or nationalist strongmen who intervene into historiography, its institutional structures, and historical culture more generally in the name of the nation and national glory but whose actual goal in all of this is facile self-legitimation. All of these actors want to arrest and disrupt genuine historiographical discussion and deliberative debate and they usually also work to unravel the democratic achievements that safeguard historiography.[45] Historians intent on perpetuating their endeavours therefore have good grounds to oppose them, along with unreflective tradition and all sorts of ideology and dogma, as all of them thwart the rules of deliberation and their disciplinary organization. Given their expertise, they also hold some of the knowledge and the tools needed to debunk the disinformation and the manipulative tactics of these actors.

Conclusion

Finally, I come once again back to the two examples of historians acting politically with which we began this text, "Historians without Borders" (HWB) and the "Resolution of Münster" of the "Association of German Historians". It should have become clear throughout this text how the activities of HWB such as peace building and conflict resolution can be motivated by historiography's essential dependence on deliberative discourse and its preconditions which are both seriously threatened in the case of militant conflict or war. Historiography for its part brings into these settings expert knowledge about the past, about past conflicts and wars, along with a general perspective that facilitates the understanding of the complexities of actions past and present. It can also stand in these settings as a model for a rational and consensus-driven discourse which at the same time can sustain considerable amounts of disagreement and controversy without disintegrating into violence or coercion.

We have also seen through scrutinizing the concepts of communicative rationality and deliberation how pluralist discourse within certain formal bounds and mutual respect and recognition undergird both professional historiographical discourse

[45] Robert Misik, *Die falschen Freunde der einfachen Leute*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2019.

and deliberative democratic practices and institutions, just as the resolution of the German historians alleges without giving much substantive reasoning. Next have we explicated the presumed positive and reinforcing relationship between professional historiography and democracy that the resolution stipulated as well, just as we have shown that historiography can provide reliable knowledge and a general historical perspective, along with other epistemic goods, to politics and society more generally. At the same time, the espousal of the deliberative and communicative principles underpinning their practice puts historians into an antagonistic relationship with actors and thought patterns that disrupt these principles in historiography and wider society.[46]

As to the actual political positionings of the resolution – pro-EU, pro-migration, pro-refugees – these are more immediately political matters that seem on the face of it to fall outside the purview of securing the conditions for historiographical work and discourse, although they are often linked in circuitous ways to issues about historiography and democracy in the thinking of those attacking both more generally. While not being given in the resolution or addressed in this text, there might very well be good reasons to endorse them too. I have my doubts though whether these are reasons that can be endorsed by historians based on their identity as historians, but I leave this question open here. Obviously, historians might endorse a wide variety of political positions for which there is no justification through their professional identity as such but for which they nevertheless feel strongly and are expected to give reasons when questioned.

Historiography can indeed function as "life's teacher" under the right circumstances, as I hope to have shown in this text. Cicero adds to this, though, that historiography is the "the witness of time, the light of truth, the life of memory" and the "herald of antiquity, committed to immortality"[47]. This sounds poetic and intriguing but is not exactly identical in its individual stipulations with the role

[46] I do not claim that the historians that form HWB or those that adopted the German resolution acted the way they did because they explicitly endorse these principles or the political interests that follow from them. I have no knowledge about the individual motivations of either demographic. The argument here concerns what positions they have reason to endorse based on their very identity as historians and as reasoners more generally, no matter whether they or any historian is actually aware of those reasons or acted because of them. I do maintain, however, that the specific relationship between historiography and democracy and the understanding of the value of historiography for society and intellectual discourse that are displayed by HWB and stipulated in the resolution can best be made sense of through the positions I elaborated in this text. My efforts can in this respect be seen as a "rational reconstruction" of the positions of the German historians and the members of HWB as they present themselves in the resolution and their political agendas. Incidentally, this form of rational reconstruction was also championed by Jürgen Habermas. See Jørgen Pedersen, "Habermas' Method: Rational Reconstruction". *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Volume 38, Number 4, 2008, 457–485.

[47] Cicero 1860, 92.

historiography plays and can play in modern societies. But then, there are relations to the past and ways of historical sense-making over which historiography has no say. Despite of what I have been arguing throughout this text, I have no wish to deny this. In cognitive matters though, and in all matters of collective deliberation, we have good reasons to rely on historiography when speaking about the past or when using the past to argue about the present or the future. Just as historians have good reasons to speak up when they see the foundations of their honourable enterprise threatened.

Abstract

In this text I analyze the relationship between historiography, politics, and wider historical culture. Starting point for my argumentation are the organization "Historians without Borders" and a contentious resolution by the "Association of German Historians" from 2018. In a first step, I shortly reconstruct the relationship between politics, historical culture, and historiography that is presupposed by both the organization and the resolution. Next, I argue that historiography has a specific and unique role to play in historical culture and democracy as producer of historical knowledge and understanding and that there are legitimate political interests that directly stem from those activities. In particular, based on their professional activities historians have good grounds to stand in for the establishment or maintenance of deliberative democratic systems with which their professional endeavour shares many principles and commonalities.