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Mapping Theory of History after the Linguistic Turn: New Realism and the Epistemic Approach

Mapping Theory of History after the Linguistic Turn: New Realism and the Epistemic Approach

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Abstract

During the last decades of the 20th century, the theory of history experienced an influence of the linguistic turn, primarily through the narrativist movement. Recently, however, interest in narrativism and the linguistic turn declined, and several new approaches to the theory of history emerged. In the paper, I discuss just two of them and, where relevant, I focus on how they transform or criticize narrativism. Namely, I explore new realism and an epistemic approach. The latter approach is developed in various forms, from which I select the so-called pragmatist non-representationalism and the approach focusing on the role of evidence in history. The paper aims to categorize and to characterize a couple of interesting positions as well as to offer a very selective map of what has been happening in the theory of history after the linguistic turn.

Keywords

Theory of History, Linguistic Turn, Epistemology.

Introduction

One of the usual stories about what happened in philosophy/theory of history (the term "history" is reserved for the historical discipline) in the 20th century goes like this.[1] There were two dominant discussions in the field starting from around the middle of the century. First, Carl Gustav Hempel's paper from 1942 "The Function of General Laws in History" (HEMPEL, 1942) received a lot of critical attention and the topic of historical explanation was the first popular issue, which was discussed by such authors as William Dray, Michael Scriven, Morton White, Alan Donagan and others within what is sometimes called "analytical philosophy of history". Many authors were very critical of Hempel's view that historical explanation is structurally the same as scientific explanation: explananda are subsumed under scientific laws or other generalizations. Moreover, even though Hempel's paper was mainly about explanation and the use of laws in history, the ensuing discussion also addressed related issues of causation and the status of history as a discipline.

Second, around the 1970s, the focus turned to different topics – the issue of how historians present their findings in their texts, and the literary form of historical narratives or the linguistic representation that takes place in history. As Richard Vann puts it, while commenting on the 1980 issue of *History and Theory* about Hayden White's *Metahistory*, "What only now becomes clear is that something like a paradigmatic shift had occurred; for the next twenty years historians' language, not explanation or causality, would be *the* topic around which most reflections on history would centre." (VANN, 1995, p. 69) Indeed, during the last decades of the 20th century, many authors focused specifically on the language and narrative form historians use. For, as Nancy Partner claims, "History is narrative in form, virtually by definition, because narrative is what brings the seriatim stream of time under control for intelligible, meaningful comprehension" (PARTNER, 2013, p. 2). Several authors highlighted this peculiar aspect and attempted to analyze this and related issues in one way or another. Some of them zoomed in on the literary means used in history writing, others were more interested in the linguistic nature of historical practice. In any case, the focus was on the text, language, and literary form, or related aspects of the historical discipline. This shift in the theory of history is usually associated with the *linguistic turn* or with *narrativism*.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the linguistic turn, narrativism, and the questions they raised in the theory of history have failed to attract as much attention as they did in previous

1 See, for instance, (VANN 1995, SIMON, KUUKKANEN, 2015, AHLSKOG, 2018 or KUKKANEN, 2021) regarding "first explanation, then narrative" story.

decades. Gradually, it has become evident that philosophers and theorists of history are looking for other topics. In this paper, I plan to discuss a part of what happened after the linguistic turn lost its appeal. Namely, I hope to identify a couple of interesting approaches which followed the narrativist phase of the theory of history. In a very basic and trivial sense, what happens later is usually influenced by what happens earlier. Hence, where appropriate, I try to show how particular questions and specific answers that emerged from discussions during the narrativist phase have influenced subsequent approaches in the theory of history.

First, I briefly characterize the linguistic turn and narrativism in the theory of history. Then, using a case of Frank Ankersmit, I illustrate how interest in this approach gradually receded. Finally, I identify a couple of approaches, namely *new realism* and an *epistemic approach* to the theory of history (the latter divided into pragmatist non-representationalism and the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach), which are currently under development and debate.[2] To avoid possible misunderstanding, I do not claim these few approaches dominate the field today. Also, I want to add that I do not offer an intellectual history but rather a tentative map of only a part of what happened after the linguistic turn, with a couple of observations on the links between these various approaches. I merely want to suggest how to look at the present state using specific categories and labels that cover only a portion of what is discussed and elaborated in the field. Moreover, I realize it is risky to reflect on a process of transformation while it is still underway. It is always safer to wait and explore developments with the benefit of hindsight. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for authors to speculate about ongoing processes while they happen, such as social or intellectual trends. Some of the analysis, categories, and labels may catch on and be fruitfully used later; others will fade into oblivion.

Linguistic turn and narrativism in the theory of history

The linguistic turn takes language as a primary subject of study, analysis and problematizing. Language is not perceived as a transparent medium, as something to look through, but rather as something to be critically examined. Ankersmit puts it in the following way: "the text must be central – it is no longer a layer *through* which one looks (either at a past reality or at the historian's authorial intention), but something which the historiographer must look *at*" (ANKERSMIT, 1994b, p. 128). Nevertheless, characterizations of concrete authors differ slightly. Some associate the linguistic turn with several far-reaching claims: "language is the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning … our apprehension of the

2 I borrow the label "new realism" from Georg Gangl.

world, both past and present, arrives only through the lens of language's precoded perceptions" (SPIEGEL, 2009, p. 1) or "language is self-referential" (SILVA, 2015, p. 402). Whereas others characterize it more humbly, as "questioning of each and every privileged relationship between language and reality" or as introducing "the impossibility of any privileged access to reality" (RANGEL, ARAUJO, 2015, p. 336, 337)

Speaking more generally, in philosophy of language, linguistic items are usually viewed as denoting and as expressing something (of course, when it comes to details, there are endless disputes). Thus, the linguistic turn, at a very general level, could be viewed as an approach that, instead of straightforwardly studying items such as the mind, nature, existence, events, etc., examines the linguistic expressions used to talk about them. Instead of analyzing X directly, one asks what "X" denotes, refers to, expresses, etc. or how "X" is used in particular contexts (PEREGRIN, 2005, p. 18).[3]

In the theory of history, the linguistic turn brought "language to the foreground of attention and recognized the power of language to constitute as well as reflect reality" (PARTNER, 2013, p. 6). However, as Vann rightly maintains, the key point of this turn in the theory of history is that not merely words or statements but primarily larger textual wholes are explored:

> Once history is seen as literature, questions of genre, plotting and the fundamental organizing principles of historiography come to the fore. These had been systematically repressed in so-called analytical philosophy of history, which like all analysis tended to decompose historical discourse into its smallest intelligible units, like the two-sentence narrative. (VANN, 1995, p. 61)

Or, to mention Ankersmit's observation connecting linguistic turn, narrativism and holism: "Quine's argument in favor of the linguistic turn was translated by narrativist philosophers of historiography into the claim that we must focus on the historiographic text as a whole for a correct understanding of how historiography may account for some part or aspect of the past" (ANKERSMIT, 2009, p. 201). Hence, not (or not only) words or individual statements but entire historical works are of interest. This is one of the key features of the narrativist philosophy of history.[4] It is underlined by both its advocates and its critics. For instance, Ankersmit, a prominent

3 See also (DUMMETT, 2014, p. 6), who claims that "analytical philosophy was born when the 'linguistic turn' was taken" and a classic collection on the linguistic turn (RORTY, 1967).

4 Verónica Tozzi Thompson claims we owe the term "narrativists" to William Dray who used it to refer to certain authors (TOZZI THOMPSON, 2022, p. 113). The terms "narrativism" and "narrativists" are used in various ways, but they most often refer to the views of Louis Mink, Hayden White, and Frank Ankersmit (and those who inspired them or those whom

narrativist, maintains that his approach to history focuses primarily on wholes rather than on individual statements in historical works. This assumption is behind all three pillars of narrativism he formulates in his *Narrative Logic*: According to him, philosophers and theoreticians should focus on whole historical texts because these construct specific proposals, metaphors, which show us how to approach past events and, in contrast to individual statements, they do not depict past reality in a simple correspondence sense of the term (ANKERSMIT, 1983, Introduction). Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen also emphasize this holistic point behind narrativism. In their itemized characterization, they offer the following:

> First, narrativism correctly shifted attention from atomistic statements about the past or fragments of a text to entire texts of historiography and the features of texts. Second, it suggested that texts provide and amount to synthesized views of the past. Narrativists gave this synthesizing entity various names, such as "narrative," "narrative substance," or "representation." Third, narrativists remarked that texts exhibit qualities (coherence, fullness, meanings, and so on) that have no counterpart in the past and that should be understood as "subject-sided" creations and postulations about the past by the historian (SIMON, KUUKKANEN, 2015, p. 155).

Thus, also in their reading, the focus on entire historical works, on whole texts, on synthesized views is one of the key aspects of narrativist philosophy of history. Moreover, since these wholes or synthesized perspectives do not straightforwardly derive from the past reality or from the evidence it left us, they are taken to be constructions. Therefore, "narrative constructivism" is probably a more appropriate name for what happened in the theory of history around the 1970s when authors such as Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and others argued for a novel view of historical work.

To better understand what happened after the linguistic turn, it is necessary to briefly outline how the linguistic turn and narrativism (narrative constructivism) were presented, analyzed, and criticized in heated discussions. However, one should bear in mind that not everything attributed to narrativism reflected what narrativists (or most of them) argued for. To add one more well-known triviality, sometimes it is not what authors claim but what they appear to be claiming that is more influential.

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they inspired), mainly from the1970s and 1980s.. Not everybody uses these terms but, for instance, Ankersmit speaks often about "narrativist philosophy of history" in his earlier works (ANKERSMIT 1983, ANKERSMIT, 1994a).

Besides the emphasis on historical works as wholes, narrativism is usually presented as turning attention from research to interpretation and writing. For, as some narrativists claim, it is during the latter phases that the most important things happen in history. It is within the selection and interpretation process that the outcomes receive their final form. Moreover, since historical texts are viewed mainly as narratives, narrativism holds that there are several common features of history and literature (arts). Some critics take a step further and claim that narrativism erases the boundary between history and fiction: Historians construct stories, and stories belong to the realm of fiction; ergo, history is fiction writing (DOLEŽEL, 2008, p. 30). Although this is not necessarily fair criticism, this move highlights the fact that historians should be viewed as authors in a powerful sense. They decide which literary means they employ, what kind of structure they impose on the events they write about, and the ideological undertone of the final historical work. If one thinks along these lines, is it not the case that historical works are just like works of fiction? Do they have any referents? Is it not the case that historical works could be treated as creations to be studied and examined as literary artifacts? Maybe, when analyzing historical works, we need to examine the forms they take, the literary tools they utilize, and not how they describe reality or how they work with sources.

I believe that some of the claims and implications made above do not constitute the core of what narrativists maintain. Nevertheless, these claims appear in some discussions and criticisms and, to be fair, some unclear formulations of specific authors from the extreme wing of narrativism could be interpreted in this or a similar way. That is why not only the emphasis on language, but also on the entire historical works and construction taking place in history, should be considered. Also, more radical views about history as a form of fiction, an anything-goes approach to interpretation, and relativism should be considered when thinking about the linguistic turn and narrativism. Even though these points do not constitute the core of what leading advocates argue for.

Frank Ankersmit and the linguistic turn

Ankersmit is undoubtedly one of the leading authors associated with criticizing a more traditional approach to history and with defending narrativism and the linguistic turn in the theory of history. His book on *Narrative Logic*, his papers from narrativist philosophy of history and his later work on historical representation received a lot of attention; they inspired some and provoked others.

In his entry on "Narrative and Interpretation" (ANKERSMIT, 2009), he makes a distinction between a *rhetorical* and a *philosophical* approach within narrativist philosophy of history. I find this distinction pertinent and very useful when looking at the developments of the last decades. It helps to specify the background and interests of individual authors, and it helps to illuminate how they approached history and which questions and tools they found important. General claims according to which narrativists were interested in the text and language of historians are illuminating to a certain extent, but at the same time, they hide significant details about what and how they wanted to accomplish. Hence, Ankersmit correctly distinguishes between those who approach historical text from a more rhetorical and literary perspective and those who raise more philosophical questions regarding the relation between language and past reality.

Hayden White and his followers argue that historical narratives are "verbal fictions ... the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (WHITE, 1978b, p. 82). By applying rhetorical figures to history, exploring the emplotment of historical narratives, and emphasizing commonalities between history and fiction writing, they develop rhetorical narrativism.[5] On the other hand, authors such as Arthur Danto and Louis Mink raise more philosophical issues about the semantics of historical writing. They are interested in the hidden presuppositions behind our understanding of concepts such as the past, narrative, and representation, and that is why they fall under the philosophical approach. Clearly, both approaches problematize language and see it in a non-transparent way (more like a sophisticated tool for study rather than an innocent medium), but the difference is that one concentrates on the literary and rhetorical dimensions of historical language, whereas the other is interested in philosophical issues and presuppositions.

Bearing this helpful distinction in mind, let me briefly look at the work of Ankersmit and how he develops his position with respect to narrativist philosophy of history and the linguistic turn. In the 1980s, in his book on *Narrative Logic* and in some of his papers, including "Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History", he advances his narrativist understanding of history, which problematizes the more traditional view. (Later, he will become one of the most influential narrativists, and his work will be one of the most discussed in the field.) One of his main points is that the focus should not be on historical research (facts) but on historical writing (selection, interpretation, how to see the past) (ANKERSMIT, 1994a, 2.3.), hence, mainly on entire historical texts he calls "narratios". In his early works, he talks a lot about "narratios", "historical narratives"

5 "Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same..." (WHITE, 1978a, p. 121)

and "narrative substances" but, to be fair, he is not embracing the approach of literary theory and occasionally, as in one of his theses, he warns that we should *not* see "historiography as a form of literature" (ANKERSMIT, 1994a, 1.5.). So it seems that from the very beginning he does not fall for a fashionable literary approach, although he does not object to talking about "narratives", "narrative interpretation" or "narrative substances".

Let us move further in time. In his "Statements, Texts and Pictures" published in the collection *New Philosophy of History* in 1995, Ankersmit makes a distinction between the so-called pictural and literary approaches to the study of history. He argues that "not literature but the visual arts function as a model or metaphor of the study of history" (ANKERSMIT, 1995, p. 238).[6] It means that at this moment he not only presents his own view but also states a clear preference for a pictural approach, and he voices certain doubts regarding a literary approach, although "this by no means involves a rejection of what theorists such as White have said about the historical text as such" (ANKERSMIT, 1995, p. 214). However, later, when he explicitly embraces a vocabulary of "historical representation" in the first chapter of his *Historical Representation* from 2001 called "The Linguistic Turn: Literary Theory and Historical Theory", he openly criticizes the literary approach as not useful for historical theory. The last part of this chapter is suggestively called "The Dangers of Literary Theory for Historical Theory". Here, Ankersmit argues as follows. Whereas literary theory is helpful when it comes to history of historical writing it has nothing to teach us, and judging from the title of this part it might be even dangerous, when it comes to historical theory: "But literary theory is wholly useless as a theory of history: it has not said and could not possibly have anything of interest to say about the issue of how the historian succeeds in representing the past" (ANKERSMIT, 2001, p. 74). These are blunt words which show that Ankersmit, to use his useful distinction, embraces a philosophical and rejects a rhetorical (literary theory) approach. At this stage, it seems he not only shows where his preference is but also that the alternative approach within the narrativist philosophy of history or within a broadly construed linguistic turn is not promising.

Finally, in his 2005 book *Sublime Historical Experience*, he reflects on the changes in historical theory, a field that was, for more than two decades, influenced by studies of language, an emphasis on linguistic aspects, and the priority of theory. After several years of narrativist discussions in historical theory, he is exploring a new research agenda, and he is understandably not so enthusiastic about the linguistic turn as he was when he explored and promoted it decades

6 Therefore, Tozzi Thompson appropriately distinguishes between the literary and aesthetic approaches. "Whereas White offered a literarily informed theory of the historical work, in 1983, Frank Ankersmit introduced his own aesthetically informed proposal" (TOZZI THOMPSON, 2022, p. 119). This shows that various informative divisions could be made within narrativism.

ago. Hence, he realizes the limits of the language and theory-focused approach, and he presents more general worries regarding the "prisonhouse of language". That is why the central question of his book is: "whether it is (historical) experience that may enable us to break through the walls of 'the prisonhouse of language'" (ANKERSMIT, 2005, p. 4). According to him, "Philosophy of history, in the last half-century, has predominantly been an attempt to translate the success of philosophy of language to historical writing. ...[yet] it never asked itself the question of whether other guides might not be more helpful in the endeavor to clarify our relationship to the past" (ANKERSMIT, 2005, p. 10). Thus, he wishes to transcend this type of approach and that is why this "rationalism" taken from philosophy of language "will be rejected here [in the book] in the name of the notion of *experience*" (ANKERSMIT, 2005, p. 10).

It is not surprising that even one of the leading advocates of narrativism and the linguistic turn in the theory of history, after the years of working within this framework, first, makes a distinction and raises doubts about usefulness of an important part of the framework (namely about rhetorical or literary approach) and later even ponders the idea of shunning narrativism and embracing a different framework (the notion of experience) to explore our relation to the past. I think this nicely illustrates that, over time, narrativism and the linguistic turn lost their appeal, and, understandably, new paradigms superseded them.[7]

What next?

There is no one sharp breaking point at which linguistic turn and narrativism were transformed, superseded or replaced by other approaches in the theory of history. Some authors started to focus on different issues while narrativism was still passionately discussed; others waited longer. Various interesting questions, approaches and efforts appeared around the turn of the century and in the first years of the 21st century. To name just some of them, Eelco Runia and Frank Ankersmit reflected on experience, Herman Paul focused on the virtues of historians, Giuseppina D'Oro and Jonas Ahlskog elaborated an approach emphasizing human agency, Ewa Domańska explored approaches transcending humanistically oriented history, Marek Tamm discussed issues related to memory, Zoltán Boldiszár Simon and others analyzed temporality and challenges of Anthropocene for history.[8] In this part of my text, however, I am going to examine

7 To be fair, even after Ankersmit explored the notion of experience, he wrote again on such topics as historical representation and related issues. See, for instance, his book *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (ANKERSMIT, 2012).

8 Of course, the lines and categories could be drawn also differently. For an instructive overview of the state of philosophy of history at the beginning of the 21st century, see *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (2021).

two other general approaches that I find very interesting and, moreover, some of their proponents directly respond to certain views debated within the linguistic turn and narrativism.

Namely, I want to discuss *new realism* and the *epistemic approach*. The first label covers accounts of Branko Mitrović, Tor Egil Førland and Adam Timmins; the latter approach, with a relatively general and unilluminating name, is more heterogeneous and covers various positions and views with a dominant epistemic focus. Here, I discuss two versions of this approach. First, the *"primacy of evidence in historiography" approach* developed by Aviezer Tucker, who emphasizes the role that evidence and inference play in the generation of historical knowledge; also, Georg Gangl and David Černín share this general framework in some of their works, see (GANGL, 2021, ČERNÍN, 2019, ČERNÍN, 2025). Second, some authors argue for a non-representationalist understanding of historical knowledge. The latter position could be linked to emphasis on specific practices in the case of Paul Roth or emphasis on the argumentative nature of history in the case of Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen. To coin one instructive label fitting all is difficult, but maybe *pragmatist non-representationalism* comes quite close to what these authors argue for.

I see proponents of both new realism and non-representationalism as responding to certain narrativist views or questions that emerged during the previous decades, when the linguistic turn had considerable influence on the theory of history. What are these views, questions, or points? How do these recent approaches react? Generally, what are their basic features?

Is (was) there any past out there, and is it possible to know what happened in the past?

Irrespective of whether a negative response to this question provides a fair summary of narrativism, some narrativist authors and their accounts are interpreted as being skeptical about the existence of past reality and the possibility of knowing what happened. New realism explicitly counters such views by claiming that the past reality exists (existed) and that historians can acquire knowledge of it. New realists, such as Branko Mitrović, Tor Egil Førland and Adam Timmins, dispute specifically some narrativist and postmodern accounts they sometimes call

In the introduction, the editor distinguishes the following "orientations" in the last section of the collection: "history and philosophy of history (HPH), post-humanistic paradigm shift (Domańska), more-than-human history (Tamm and Simon) and humanistically oriented historiography (D'Oro)" (KUUKKANEN, 2021, p. 9). In their paper from 2023, Georg Gangl and Ilkka Lähteenmäki distinguish between actor-centered or humanistic philosophy of history, constructivism, pragmatist philosophy of history, philosophy of history in practice or "history and philosophy of history" framework, and evidentialist framework (GANGL, LÄHTEENMÄKI, 2023).

"constructionism", "constructivism" or "idealism", as well as views of some authors who will later be linked to the epistemic approach.

I find this new realist approach in the theory of history very interesting, although I have grave doubts about its critical analyses of opponents' views (I raised my objections elsewhere, see ZELEŇÁK, 2024). First, let me make a few comments about the label. Although Mitrović published a book (MITROVIĆ, 2020) in which he outlines what he calls a *materialist* philosophy of history, I think it is fair, both given the core of what all of them defend, what they criticize and what they argue for in *The Poverty of Anti-realism*, to call them "realists". One can probably find the most explicit statement of their realist position in the *Poverty* volume, namely, in the introduction "Being Realist about History". The whole text is very polemical, and it contrasts anti-realism with their preferred realism. Obviously, realists reject anti-realism understood as "unremitting skepticism" about the knowledge of the past (FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. vii). However, the details are, of course, most interesting. First, Førland and Mitrović tell us what realism is not. To simplify, historical realism is *not* a naïve position arguing for some kind of direct experience of the past, claiming that historians are unaffected by their background or rejecting "the power of the linguistic or literary form" (FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. xi). A nice example of how linguistic turn affected even realism. Subsequently, they present a positive account of realism: "At the heart of historical realism lies the basic confidence that the past has existed" (FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. xi). Moreover, they add "a couple of other convictions": "the past is unchangeable – how could it be otherwise when it is gone?" and "historians indeed are able to present true accounts of the past by assessing the available evidence" (FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. xii). In his chapter in the *Poverty* volume, Timmins characterizes historiographical realism as follows: "a realist about historiography believes that a) the past can significantly constrain the accuracy of what we write about it, and b) that historical accounts are, to varying degrees, successful in providing knowledge and understanding of the past" (TIMMINS, 2023, p. 5). Moreover, one can find similar characterizations of realism in their other works (MITROVIĆ, 2020, MITROVIĆ, 2022, TIMMINS, 2022). Since they adopt and argue for views they attribute to realism, it seems proper to call the position they defend realism.

When it comes to the specification "new", the reason for using it is more practical, and it also aligns with the broader background and discussions in the field. Of course, in the past, some realist authors have defended traditional views or challenged constructivism, for example, G. R. Elton, R. Evans, and C. Behan McCullagh. But Førland, Mitrović and Timmins constitute a more recent group of authors who published their critiques of postmodernism and constructivism, and argued for their realist positions at approximately the same time: Førland published his book in

2017, Mitrović in 2020, and Timmins in 2022. Even more importantly, they joined forces and prepared a joint volume that criticizes anti-realists and outlines realist views. Finally, all of them seem to be similarly disappointed with the most influential journals in the philosophy of history, and they seem to maintain that realism is ignored or underappreciated within the field (TIMMINS, 2022, p. 14, n. 6 and FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. xvii-xviii). Thus, it is appropriate to subsume them under one label both because of their views on realism in the theory of history and because of their common critique of the current "establishment" within the field.

Finally, let me come back to the core of this approach in the theory of history. First, these authors rigorously criticize anti-realism and constructivism, and, in this sense, they are unwavering opponents of what was argued for by advocates of the linguistic turn and narrativism in the theory of history in the previous decades. Hence, they opt not for moderate corrections but rather for radically opposite positions that they take to be more reasonable. Second, they defend realism which has at least two key pillars: ontological (the past existed, there was the past which constrains what historians write about it) and epistemological (historians can know what happened, they discover what happened, "their descriptions are true insofar as they correspond to the historical past" (MITROVIĆ, 2020, p. 29-30)). Finally, in their works, they discuss related issues such as facts, causation, objectivity, individualism, etc. These discussions, however, seem to be specific to individual authors. For instance, Førland offers an extensive examination of objectivity and the interaction between history and politics, Mitrović presents his specific materialist account, highlighting the role of causation, and Timmins focuses on historical facts (see FØRLAND, 2017, MITROVIĆ, 2020, TIMMINS, 2022).

New realism thus instantiates a critique and replacement of the linguistic turn in the following sense: it rejects the anti-realist responses provided by narrativists and substitutes them with realist views. Nevertheless, new realism addresses many questions similar to those posed by its opponents: What is the semantics of history? How do statements and entire historical texts relate to the past? How should we understand the terms such as "the Renaissance", "the Cold War", etc. that historians use in their works? Therefore, it does not seem to be exaggerated to link the birth of new realism to the demise of narrativism.

Does the narrativist emphasis on historical writing mean that there are no more important dimensions of historical work? Moreover, is there a way to understand historical knowledge focusing on other dimensions?

Narrativists think that theorists of history should focus on the phase of historical writing because it has been neglected and deserves more systematic elaboration. This, of course, does not necessarily mean they think this is the only phase of interest or that only the examination of the literary or textual dimensions deserves the attention of theorists of history. This could be understood as merely turning attention to something significant that has not been sufficiently discussed in the past. Whichever way one thinks of it, there are authors and approaches in the theory of history that emphasize different issues or dimensions of history. Moreover, if, under the influence of the linguistic turn, one focuses exclusively on language and literary aspects of historical works, one may – in an extreme case – end up with a view that history is close to fiction writing. And such a view may lead to epistemic skepticism: historians do not gain knowledge of the past; they write stories.[9]

An example of a very different position is a view that emphasizes the role of evidence and analyzes what could be done with it. Usually, evidence is perceived as something historical knowledge should be built around. However, how exactly should this happen? One may, for instance, infer historical knowledge from the information, signals or material evidence left by past events and actions. Hence, the examination of evidence, reasoning, and inference procedures, which fall into what is sometimes called the infrastructure of historiography, should be at the center of the philosophy of history. In fact, these presuppositions are behind an approach to history that could be called the "primacy of evidence in historiography". How does it contrast with linguistic turn and narrativism? Whereas narrativists focus on what is sometimes called superstructure, the final texts or historical writing, the view emphasizing the role of evidence focuses more on how we arrive at knowledge about the past. The crucial role in this is played by evidence. As Georg Gangl and Ilkka Lähteenmäki put it, according to this approach

> all knowledge of the past is inferential and must be inferred via the information traces that the past left behind in the present, that is, the evidence. For evidentialists, the relationship between (information) theory, evidence, and the products that historians craft therefore becomes the issue of central philosophical importance. (GANGL, LÄHTEENMÄKI, 2023, p. 184)

Aviezer Tucker presents an interesting and probably the most developed account that emphasizes the primacy of evidence in the theory of history. First, he criticizes, among others,

9 But we need to be careful here because, in fact, mainstream narrativists do not necessarily draw such a radical conclusion.

skeptical views according to which history is either fiction writing or it is so ideologically laden that it cannot offer any reliable knowledge about the past. In this way, he explicitly challenges narrativism and the linguistic turn; he mentions such authors as Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins (TUCKER, 2024, section 4, TUCKER, 2004, p. 19).[10] But what is more important, he is optimistic about the knowledge of the past, and he offers a sophisticated account of how to approach this issue. His epistemic and empirical program examines "the relations between evidence and historiography. The immediate, primary, subject matter of historiography is evidence and not events" (TUCKER, 2004, p. 18). Thus, he is interested in "how historians infer probable knowledge of the past from information-preserving evidence in the present?" (TUCKER, 2024, p. 19).

Let me briefly characterize this approach. What should be of interest are not the ultimate historical works, such as textbooks or popular history books, but how historians work with evidence and how they derive knowledge. In his 2004 book, Tucker puts it in terms of evidence, common causes and inference. Faced with various pieces of evidence, historians are usually able to infer common causes of the evidence. For instance, by studying various reliable accounts of eyewitnesses and other documents, historians can infer what happened in the past; for example, they infer that a signing of a document took place. Hence, given the available signed document and various testimonies, historians conclude that a specific act occurred in the past. In his more recent work, Tucker prefers to articulate his view using the terminology of origin, historiographic reasoning, knowledge generation and knowledge transmission. In a nutshell, past events and actions are information sources that leave informative traces. Even though a lot of traces and information are lost, some information signals usually reach the present. They are transmitted through material remains, testimonies, documents, etc., and historians, if they are lucky, have access to this evidence. Then comes the historiographic reasoning that helps historians to derive knowledge from the evidence: "Historiographic reasoning is displayed when historians decode the information in the evidence to infer the existence of its origins and some of their properties" (TUCKER, 2024, p. 19). For example, examining the material remains of ancient Roman buildings at various sites, historians infer which materials the Romans used for building their houses. Taking into account both material evidence and reliable writings from ancient times about Roman architecture, they infer details about how they constructed their buildings.

10 "Historiographic skepticism holds that there is no knowledge of history. Historiography is indistinguishable from fiction, and often reflects ideological and other biases of its authors and their cultures. It is impossible to know with any degree of certainty what happened in the human past" (TUCKER, 2004, p. 19).

Of course, the details of Tucker's account are more complicated, involving his examination of knowledge transmission ("When historical evidence transmits knowledge, the premises of historiographic reasoning, the evidence, transmit more or less reliable information to historiographic conclusions" TUCKER, 2024, p. 4), knowledge generation ("By contrast, historiographic reasoning *generates* knowledge when the evidential premises are not reliable enough to transmit knowledge, but their historiographic conclusions pass the epistemic threshold for knowledge" TUCKER, 2024, p. 4) and Bayesian foundation of reasoning used in historical sciences. The key point for this text is that the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach turns the philosophic focus on how historical knowledge is produced by the treatment of the evidence. To use Tucker's terminology, this approach is interested in how historians reason to arrive at their findings from the preserved information (evidence), which, if treated correctly, allows them to learn more about their information sources (common origins, past events). For past events are information "explosions", and the role of historians is to study what is left of these explosions to offer their accounts. In other words, historians encounter inputs (evidence, documents, material remains) and infer outputs: knowledge about the past (origins).

To relate and contrast this approach with the linguistic turn, the evidentialist approach replaces the key issues of the theory of history. It is no longer the texts of historians nor the construction of final historical works. Instead, according to the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach, the crucial question is how historians infer historical knowledge. Thus, the focus is on research, evidence, inference and historical knowledge.

Is it really the case that history is more like fiction writing or the construction of original proposals, and does it follow from this that historical knowledge is impossible?

To repeat, narrativism focused on historical writing and historical texts, which were sometimes compared to literary works. Of course, there were some differences. Recall that Ankersmit distinguishes between literary and pictural theories of history, or that Tozzi Thompson distinguishes between literarily and aesthetically informed proposals. Irrespective of the details, as soon as history was linked to works of literature or visual arts, epistemology was tacitly overshadowed and sometimes even explicitly discarded. Some may object that this is an overly harsh interpretation of narrativism. Still, on this critical reading, which I admit may be disputed by more sympathetic readers of narrativism, narrativists usually ignored epistemic questions because not historical knowledge but historical writing and the construction of historical narratives were in the limelight. On one interpretation, this is understandable: as soon as you devise an account

of history in terms of construction, literary or artistic production, the issue of knowledge is out. History is not about historical knowledge; it is about creation and construction.

Irrespective of this suggestive line of thought, there are some authors who are close to constructivism, yet, for them, the issue of historical knowledge is the central issue of the theory of history. For them, to think about history as a discipline means to examine epistemically interesting issues such as historical explanation, the evaluation of historical works, the rationality of history, etc. Thus, one must be careful while considering the link between constructivism and historical knowledge. Constructivism does not necessarily entail skepticism about historical knowledge. Only some versions may reject it.

This context helps to position the second version of the epistemic approach in the recent theory of history. Paul Roth and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen are primarily interested in the issues related to historical knowledge (ROTH, 2020, KUUKKANEN, 2015). Although some of their critics do not pay attention to this (see TIMMINS, 2022), they are far from being skeptics. They are convinced historians arrive at historical knowledge, and the important thing is to specify how this is done and what kind of knowledge it is. A short answer is that they think of historical knowledge within a non-representationalist framework. It means that neither historical works nor historical knowledge should be modelled using the dualistic correspondence or representation framework. Let me briefly characterize the framework they oppose: on the one hand, we have words, language or the mind, and, on the other hand, we have fixed chunks of reality such as events and human action. On the representationalist understanding, historical works depict or correspond to these chunks of reality, and historical knowledge is achieved in terms of correspondence to these chunks of reality (FØRLAND, MITROVIĆ, 2023, p. xii). However appealing this may seem, Roth and Kuukkanen reject this picture of history and knowledge. As Kuukkanen writes: "To try to make sense of historiography through a rigid scheme of representationalism would be misleading and will only take one further from the central observations: interpretations are inferentially born and are constructions by nature" (KUUKKANEN, 2015, p. 65). However, and this is important, this does not mean they reject historical knowledge as such. Only if one ties the notion of knowledge exclusively to the correspondence view, skepticism about knowledge results. If, however, one is open to other notions of knowledge, freed from correspondence, representation and related subject-object dualism, one does not have to conclude that historians cannot offer any knowledge about the past.

It is true that Roth and Kuukkanen view history as the result of practical, constructive steps. Moreover, they like to draw on the views of several influential narrativists such as Mink and Danto. (Hence, one may conclude they oppose a realist understanding of history and endorse

constructivist views. Although at least Roth, defending a position he calls irrealism, claims his position goes beyond the debate between realism and anti-realism (DEWULF, ROTH, 2022, p. 208).) It means that they adopt some of the assumptions of the linguistic turn. On the other hand, they do not see historical works as fictions but rather as outcomes of concrete steps historians make. Roth focuses on the constitutive steps, practices, and categories that historians devise. For instance, when historians talk about "wars", "conflicts", "splits" or "agreements", they constitute these events. Roth invites us not to look at these categories and events they name as given, but rather as something constituted, as a result of specific knowledge of their consequences, as a result of particular background and training of historians who talk about them, etc. (ROTH, 2020). Kuukkanen focuses on the argumentative nature of history. He tells us to explore the main theses historians argue for in their works. Moreover, to evaluate conflicting theses present in different historical accounts, we are invited to examine various dimensions of concrete historical works such as epistemic values (coherence, scope, originality, etc.), the argumentative qualities of these accounts and how they fit within a broader context (KUUKKANEN, 2015). Again, Kuukkanen invites us to examine what historians *do* in their accounts. That is why, even though there is a certain proximity to narrativism, Roth and Kuukkanen develop quite a separate and novel epistemic approach to history.

Since Roth and Kuukkanen are interested in concrete practical steps taken when historians explain or construct their theses,[11] and given their non-representationalism, I think it is possible to call their version of philosophy of history "pragmatist non-representationalism". As Serge Grigoriev claims, "The pragmatist perspective commits us to the epistemic primacy of historical inquiry, meaning that, at least in matters of a contentious sort, philosophical reflection remains essentially accountable to the processes and outcomes of historical practice" (GRIGORIEV, 2018, p. 98). Although they differ in detail, both are interested in concrete historical works, in practices of historians, and they avoid stipulating some first principles to be applied to history (see ROTH, 2004, KUUKKANEN, 2015).

Different sources influence the pragmatist dimension of their accounts. Roth likes to draw on Wilard Van Orman Quine, Nelson Goodman, or Ian Hacking (hence the importance of holism, practices, entrenchment, and communities). In contrast, Kuukkanen is inspired by Robert Brandom (hence the role played by inference and the discursive dimension). Here, however, I take their rejection of "the traditional idea of representation as correspondence" as a key feature of their pragmatist accounts. As Grigoriev puts it

11 In the case of Roth, it is his emphasis on habits and community-sanctioned procedures and in the case of Kuukkanen his focus on argumentative steps.

> one distinguishing feature of the pragmatist approaches to the problem of representation consists in their rejection of what Dewey once called "the spectator model" of encountering reality, preserved intact for eternity and admired respectfully from afar. Instead, pragmatists believe in engaging reality actively – in both practically and cognitively productive, transformative ways (GRIGORIEV, 2024, p. 64).

Historians are not observers comparing texts with the past reality. They are scholars with distinct training, working within concrete paradigms and taking specific steps in their work. Their historical accounts are products of particular decisions, discussions, criticism and approval of communities. This is the general framework the pragmatist approach to history offers, although concrete versions differ in their specifics.[12]

To sum up, the pragmatist non-representationalist accounts developed by Roth and Kuukkanen differ, but they both transform narrativism in similar ways. On the one hand, they embrace constructivist assumptions about the role historians play in constituting what they explain and talk about. On the other hand, they replace interest in literary or aesthetic analyses with interest in historical knowledge, i.e., in issues of historical explanation, evaluation, etc. Thus, they both draw on some aspects of narrativism and reject others.

Finally, I briefly compare this epistemic approach with the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach. Both Roth and Kuukkanen focus on plurality in historical discussions; they also develop their accounts as responses to historians' disagreements and competing interpretations. They consider how to analyze differing explanations or how to evaluate competing interpretations. The "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach, on the contrary, underlines consensus: "most historians agree on most of their historiographic outputs, and even more so on their epistemic inputs, the evidence" (TUCKER, 2024, p. 10). Therefore, to simplify, there is a difference between these approaches in what they choose as characterizing history. Moreover, Roth and Kuukkanen clearly draw on narrativist discussions and points made by Danto, Mink and others. Hence, their accounts could be viewed as a development or a substantial transformation of topics and observations made during the narrativist phase. On the other hand, Tucker, with his focus on agreement, has hardly any links to narrativism. His interest in the research phase of historical work signals that his inspiration comes instead from the philosophy of science.

12 It is noteworthy that several authors have recently examined the link between history and pragmatism, see (VIOLA, 2020, BINDER, 2023, GRIGORIEV, 2024).

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to repeat and develop a couple of observations about narrativism and the three approaches discussed above. First, let me use an illuminating distinction between the so-called superstructure and infrastructure of historiography. It is clear that narrativism, new realism, and pragmatic non-representationalism focus on what is sometimes called the superstructure of historiography: these approaches primarily explore textual wholes or singular sentences; to simplify, they concentrate on historical works. What is the semantics of historical texts? How do specific terms, sentences or whole chunks of text relate to the past? Is there a way to avoid a correspondence framework and still uncover something informative about the outcomes of historical work? The interest in these and similar issues characterizes both narrativism and the two new approaches. Of course, they differ in their answers. Whereas narrativism defends views close to anti-realist and constructivist understandings of history, new realism rejects them and argues for a realist position in both ontology and epistemology. Pragmatist non-representationalism instantiates an approach that shares several constructivist assumptions with narrativism, as Kuukkanen and Roth find many interesting points in the works of Danto, Mink, and others. However, at the same time, Kuuukanen and Roth show that their non-representationalist framework has a firm epistemic footing, and they explore topics such as historical explanation and the evaluation of historical accounts. To sum up, even though Kuukkanen and Roth offer original accounts that cannot be reduced to narrativist philosophy of history, it is clear that there are certain affinities with narrativism in their generally constructivist approach to history.

On the other hand, the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach focuses on the infrastructure of historiography. This is what distinguishes this approach not only from narrativism but also from the other two approaches. It is historical research; the notions of evidence, inference, or reasoning are at the centre of philosophical attention. That is one of the key points making this approach so original and special among other positions in contemporary philosophy of history, which usually study the outcomes of historical writing. Finally, both versions of the epistemic approach (pragmatist non-representationalism and the "primacy of evidence in historiography" approach) share an epistemic focus, although it would need to be further explored in which concrete aspects their understandings of historical knowledge differ. What is clear, however, is the fact that non-representationalists embrace a very different view of knowledge from new realists. It is the view of knowledge free of the notion of correspondence.

How fruitful and convincing are these approaches? Given my preference for a non-representationalist understanding of historical works, I find pragmatist non-representationalism

most convincing (see ZELEŇÁK, 2022). However, I welcome the growing number of realist accounts, which help fuel a critical discussion within the field. Thus, I appreciate that several authors have sought to update realism in the theory of history and to contrast it with the views of their opponents. Nevertheless, not all debates in the field after the linguistic turn fit the realism-constructivism controversy. The approach focusing on the role of evidence does not seem to fit easily into any of these isms. Maybe also because of this, it may become a fruitful ground for developing a more detailed understanding of research in historical sciences. Whichever position one finds most convincing, I think all three approaches discussed above are interesting, and the mere fact that various approaches are currently being developed in the theory of history demonstrates that the field is still alive.

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