New historicism and poetics of culture

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During the first decade of 21st century much international and intercultural discourse about the international relations, literature, politics, culture and historiography influenced by philosophical, political and historical thinking about modernism. Recent debate centred around identities, minority cultures, questions about „we”and „them”about the new place of minority cultures in postmodern societies. Rüsen J. ¹ has placed accent on ethnocentric cultures of historiography, on master narratives that define togetherness and difference as essential for identity, „the history as clashes of civilizations”. The main elements of ethnocentrism are: asymmetrical evaluation, teleological continuity, and centralized perspective.

Rüsen replaces these asymmetrical elements in postmodern era with normative equality, reconstructive concepts of development that emphasize contingency and discontinuity; and centralized perspectives with multi-perspectivity and polycentric approaches to historical experience.

Adopting these possibilities would lead to a new mode of universal history rooted in a concept of humankind that can help solve the problem of ethnocentrism. This idea of humankind conceptualizes the unity of the human species as being manifest in a variety of cultures and historical developments. This is in fact the traditional concept of historicism, which can be further developed towards a historiography that responds to the challenges of globalization and cultural differences.

The New Historicism serves as new paradigm in historiography and bringing back narratives into the evaluating processes. The New Historicism sees the world in complex, instead of teleologic development in processes of uncertainty, possibility and discontinuity, history as experience, humanity as plenty of cultures, altering different historical pathways, and seeks answers for cultural differences and globalization processes.

Most famous representative of New Historicism historiography is Stephan Greenblatt, who questions the methods of national historiographies, especially their’s totalizing tendencies. He thinks, capitalism moves between totalizing and differentiating trends: between uniformity and diversity. We cannot understand history if we only see generalisation tendencies and miss the details, differences, because the latters can help to understand contradictions, to think about history as easily interpretative process.²

The New Historicism focuses on those groups, who decide on power discourses, focuses on cultural activity as central to historical analyses, on political, anthropological and cultural values.

Most often used phrases in the New Historicism are the next: anecdotes, politics of body, bureaucracy, inclusivity, circulation of power in cultural and social texts and discourses. Discourses are concentrated not only for those in power (politicians, lawyers, policemen, writers), but all who are part of the regime. New Historicists study the model the hegemon

¹Rüsen, J.: How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the Twenty-first Century. History and Theory, Theme Issue 43 (December 2004) 118-129

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forces consolidate the status-quo, how they co-opt the centrifugal groups, make compromise in power games.

The New historicism sees the texts as embedded in cultural-social context, sees history as uncontinousness of literature, hegemony as power of dominant culture, culture as means of formalizing power and institutions. It treats culture as capital for making the power more abstract, as means influencing people by education, communication, publicity, mobilizing armies and police force for breaking the power of other cultures.

The new Historicism ends with historiography focused on political history, great stories, and places accent on everyday small narratives legitimizing status –quo.

Instead of ideology as external force (in case of Marxist historicism), the New historicism values ideology as personal matter, personal viewpoint. In contrast to ethnic centred national histories, the new Historians studies the role of knowledge in history, processes of marginalization, narratives and discourses of movements behind mainstream stories, the power as non-phisycal one, but one as dynamic relationship: how we form our relationship with other people; the power as influence a dominant group.

Greenblatt reflects on Jameson theory about the dualism in case of public and private spheres, dualism of aesthetic and politics, about utopia a society without classes, and questions Lyotard’s vision about a unified and monolithic capitalism without cultural, political and aesthetic differences.

The method of the New Historicism called by Greenblatt as “Poetics of Culture”, he sees historical and literary texts as autonomous entities, studies the relationship between texts and sociohistorical contexts. Greenblatt understands that texts not only documents of social forces that inform and constitute history and society, but that fashion individual identity and sociohistorical situation. By means of an economic metaphor, Greenblatt explains how texts and other symbolic goods, by circulating in a society via channels of negotiation and exchange, contribute to the distribution of social energy, by which he means the intensities of experience that give value and meaning to life and that are also indispensable to the construction of self-awareness and identity. The beating heart, as it were, of this whole process of circulation is identified as a dialectics of totalization and differentiation, as a powerful social force that oscillates between the extremes of sameness and otherness. In several books Greenblatt has elaborated the various aspects of this Poetics of Culture, such as the circulation of social energy, the dialectics of totalization and differentiation, and the process of self-fashioning. By Ankersmit, historiography is less secure in its attempt to represent the world than art is; historiography is more artificial, more an expression of cultural codes than art itself. Historiography is a suitable paradigm for studying certain philosophical problems, particularly epistemology, or codified representation. Representation always requires the presence of two sets of non-referential logical dummies; disturbing the symmetry between these logical dummies gives rise to the position of realism and idealism. Epistemology is strongly inclined to disturb this symmetry. The parallels between recent developments in art and those in historiography demonstrate how much historiography is part of the contemporary cultural world. The deficiencies of modern philosophy of history can largely be explained by its tendency to neglect the cultural significance of the writing of history. We no longer have any texts, any past, but just interpretations of them. The evident multi-interpretability of a text causes it gradually to lose its capacity to function as arbiter in

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4 F. R. Ankersmit: Historical Representation. History and Theory 27 October, 1988, 205-228
the historical debate. It is necessary to define a new link with the past based on a complete and honest recognition of the position in which we now see ourselves placed as historians. In recent years, many people have observed our changed attitude towards the phenomenon of information. For postmodernism, science and information are independent objects of study which obey their own laws. Language and art are not situated opposite reality but are themselves a pseudo-reality and are therefore situated within reality. Because of the relation between the historiographical view and the language used by the historian to express his view - a relation which nowhere intersects the domain of the past - historiography possesses the same opacity and intensional dimension as art. The essence of postmodernism is precisely that we should avoid pointing out essentialist patterns in the past. There is reason to assume that our relation to the past and our insight into it will in future be of a metaphorical nature rather than a literal one.\(^5\)

Two new ways of looking at forms of knowledge were practiced in France roughly between 1965 and 1985. The postwar *Annales* school of history broke from "narrative" historical accounts to "nonnarrative" accounts synchronic, quantitative accounts not in story form. At the same time, the structuralists (eventually replaced by the poststructuralists) made history a special target as they began questioning the primacy and security of meaning and the strategies for constructing meaning in narratives. If structuralism and its aftermath is to be said to have had an effect on history, it would be the reinvention of reading, conceiving reading as a more complex and elusive process than it formerly had been, and exposing more and more of the accepted, fundamental components of human life as constructions. Three writers, Paul Ricoeur, F. R. Ankersmit, and Hayden White, recognize narrativity as a worldview, rejecting the *Annales* school distinction between narrative and nonnarrative history. These three see story history as a genre. They agree with the poststructuralists on the allegorical nature of history, but their arguments are, unconventionally, morally based. Their discussions of the constructions of narratives serve less to undermine history than to reground it as a humane discourse.

By Ankersmit the history is history of mentality, studying differences in historical representations, and methaphores are also historical products. So the voice of historian becomes important, his or her culture, personality, language and aesthetic style is crucial and interdisciplinarity became the method of new inventions.

In case of narratives messages are mixed: historical discourses suffer in heterogeneity, and we have to raise the question of evaluation. It is about the question of historical knowledge, about synthesis of cognitive and normative discourses. Narrative combines "heterogeneous" language games in such a way that neither appeal to "truth content" nor to "justice" suffices to decide the question of which of two competing historical explanations is, as a whole, superior. Frank ankesmit represents the so called narrative idealism, his critic, D.Carr, the so called narrative realism. \(^6\)


A procedure of historical explanation is proposed which integrates two approaches used by contemporary historians. The motivational model, focusing on the various kinds of motives encountered in historical narratives, and the deductive-nomological model, which focuses on the importance of external events, can be linked together to yield a better integrated explanatory system. The two approaches can be bridged by establishing even more general laws underlying ones already applied, or by searching for substantiations of causes and laws in the origin of the entire historical process. One needs to recognize that both motives and external events can be found in the historical process. Sequences of causes and effects in narratives have as an essential feature the intertwining of causes interpreted as motives and causes interpreted as external events. The objective conditions explained by the deductive-nomological model should find their reflection in the motivational model in the way that agents take cognizance of these conditions.\(^7\)

Historians holding a determinist view of actions do not think it appropriate to blame people for doing what they couldn’t help doing; for those believing there is an overall pattern to history, individual morality is beside the point. Finally, since earlier cultures had values different from ours, it seems unjust to hold them to contemporary standards.\(^8\)

How deals with New Historicism with historical processes? The New Historicists think the men is burned into the world of narratives. In western histories the history and fiction are aparted. The new task is to connect the two worldviews and to look after similarities in two genres. They think history writing is an imaginative as novel writing. The events are dispersed, but they are parts of stories, and the historians’s task is to dig into the stories. The event partly is an ontological phenomena, the narrative is part of linguistic and cognitive processes. The narrative is a result of cognitive processes as knowledge content, and it has also a poetic character, result of creative activity, aiming to communicate historical experiences for everyday life-orientation.\(^9\)

Historical narration is a system of mental operations defining the field of historical consciousness. It is poetic in that it is the performance of creative activity by the human mind in the process of historical thinking. The purpose of historical narration is to make sense of the experience of time in order to orient practical life in the course of time. Three elements distinguish an historical narration from other forms of narration: an historical narration is tied to the medium of memory; it organizes the three dimensions of time (past, present, future) in a concept of continuity; and it establishes the identity of its authors and listeners. In order to develop the concepts of continuity and the stability of identity, an historical narration must fulfill four functions: affirmation, regularity, negation, and transformation. Four types of historical narration correspond to these four functions: traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetical. There is a natural progression through these four types of narration, with critical

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\(^7\) Jerzy Topolski: Towards an Integrated Model of Historical Explanation. *History and Theory* 30 October, 1991, 324-338

\(^8\) Richard T. Vann : Historians and Moral Evaluations. *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 43 December 2004, 3-30

\(^9\) Phillip Stambovsky: Metaphor and Historical Understanding History and Theory 27 May, 1988), 125-134
narration serving as a catalyst. The four types are present in all historical texts, one dominating, the others secondary. Modern historical studies are unique in being informed by theoretically and methodologically organized empirical research. The articulation of theories in history means a progress in reasoning. This affects the role of the concept of continuity of time, which is no longer a given and has become a subject of discussion.\textsuperscript{10}

As a contextual phenomenon, metaphor operates in fundamentally different ways in divergent universes of discourse. In historiography, Maurice Mandelbaum's incisive typology of forms of historical discourse affords a comprehensive conceptual basis for foregrounding the three fundamental ways that metaphor functions. Each of the three functions of metaphor facilitates historical understanding on a different epistemological level. Heuristic imagery advances deliberative, analytic understanding and falls within the domain of explanatory discourse. Depictive imagery presentationally facilitates the (phenomenological) apprehension of meanings and occurrences; it is a component of narrative, which includes sequential, discourse. Finally, cognitive imagery, operative on the metahistorical plane, orchestrates interpretive discourse and thereby governs the way that events (or actions) may be known in and of themselves.

There are competing meanings of "master narrative" in current theoretical debates over history and culture. The phrase "master or meta narrative" has grown popular for describing stories which seem to assimilate different cultures into a single course of history dominated by the West. Master narrative, But our increasingly global situations demand stories that can describe and explain the worldwide interactions of diverse cultures and communities. From this convergence--a growing wariness of global stories coupled with situations which seem to demand them--has emerged a popular new double plot of world history in which cultural differentiation and cultural homogenization go hand in hand. But our new "postmodern" distinctions between master and local narratives have carried over the venerable antinomy of people with and without history, and the search for timeless formal principles differentiating "historical" and "nonhistorical" modes of discourse and ways of being threatens to create new varieties of essentialism.\textsuperscript{11}

New "annalistic" model of history and historical investigation implies a new concept of historical event: instead of being seen as an element within a historical narrative, the historical event is defined as the common reference point of many narratives that can be told about it. The annalistic model also implies a new concept of historical change: instead of being defined as the change of an "object" within a set of given historical parameters, historical change has to be perceived as the change of parameters related to a given historical object. A new concept of history follows from the annalistic model: instead of history being a metaphysical unity of space and time (the destiny of mankind, the positivist's world of facts), in which everything is linked to everything, it is instead the product of historical judgment carried out by those who design stories about their own past, present, and future. To the "annalist" a world is imaginable in which no history has existed, exists, or will exist. The article analyzes three aspects of the concept of historical time: it demonstrates the huge variety of temporal

\textsuperscript{10} Jörn Rüsen: Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason. History and Theory 26 December, 1987, Bei. 26, 87-97

\textsuperscript{11} Kerwin Lee Klein: In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the Peoples without History. History and Theory 34 December, 1995, 275-298
structures in history; it argues for the foundation of the representation of historical time in linguistic concepts; and it discusses the relationship of fictionality and reality in historical discourse. Finally, the annalistic model is compared to the traditional concept of history established by historicism in the nineteenth century.  

What are the lessons for Central Europe using New Historicism:

- First, the local history of CEE countries didn’t become part of the history of western metanarratives. Central European narratives are missing from western Canon, and live only in memories of people’s of the subregion.
- Second, the local histories are missing behinde grand events, and there is no correlation between micro and macrohistorical processes, microregional modalities.
- The history of ethnic groups, diaspora histories are hidden histories in generalizing tendencies of etnocentrist national historiographies. It’s time to insert ethnic narratives into dominant state histories, to analyse and study the power structure of cultural hegemonies. A place can be described in different narratives: Transylvania as part of meta-narrative in Daco-Roman theory, meta-narrative in ancient Hunnian history as land of prince of Csaba, narrative in renewing Hungarian Kingdom by Transylvanian Principality, and narrative intercultural and interreligious co-operation of local Hungarians, ethnic Saxons, Romas, Vlachs and so on, and narrative as the borderland area in case of premodern Habsburg Imperia.
- In case of Komarom, Komarno new historicism can open new perspectives for diaspora communities: the historiography of diaspora in a new state formation, intercultural exchanges with recent and former state, new narratives in unifying Europe: about minority lyfe-style strategies, strategies of differentiation against unifying strategies of new nationalist states, developing city-region histories as local histories.

Summary:
The new postmodern and alternative historiographies gives new impetus for historiography and culture, gives new chances for people and diasporas, native people, subaltern people for rewriting history as permanent exchanges of cultural experiences. The poetics of culture is about the circulation of social energies, about unifying and differentiating aspects of history, about narratives, metaphors, stories and discourses. It’s time to integrate alternative knowledge contents of history of those who didn’t become the part of the Canon.

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