

Engagement – metahistorical considerations on a disputed attitude in historical studies

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A misleading idea of engagement

The juxtaposition of engaged and non-engaged forms of historical thinking is a usual way of perceiving and interpreting historiography. A “non-engaged” procedure is commonly understood as “neutral” or “scientific” (in the broader meaning of the word). It indicates a higher level of claiming for truth, and quite often it is understood as “objective”. But since the concept of objectivity has been discredited and the role of subjectivity in bringing about historical knowledge cannot be denied, it has become rather unclear what the contrary of engagement really means in historiography.

But nevertheless, the juxtaposition is still in use, and can be proved by many historical examples. In the classical German historicism of the nineteenth century a typical case is the difference between Ranke (1795–1886) and Gervinus (1805–1871) in German historicism. Ranke’s slogan that he only wanted to find out “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (how it really was),¹ has become a very famous statement. It indicates the widespread opinion of professional historians that their way of doing history by methodical research can claim a higher plausibility than all other ways of historical thinking. They expressed this claim by defining their profession as science, as “*Wissenschaft*”. Ranke characterised this logical status as an elimination of subjectivity in representing the past. His well-known statement rings in our ears: that it is his intention, “*sein Selbst gleichsam auszulöschen und nur die Dinge reden und die mächtigen Kräfte erscheinen zu lassen*” (so to speak to extinguish his subjectivity and to give a voice to the facts, to bring the mighty powers to the fore).² He insists that there be “*Unparteilichkeit*” (non-partisanship) and “*völlige Objektivität*” (complete objectivity).³

In contrast to this attitude Gervinus is a representative for the historian’s intense commitment to political partisanship. His slogan that the historian is a “*Parteimann des Schicksals*” (partisan of destiny), has become famous in his time. His partisanship was an identification with democratisation as a general process in modern history. When he had to witness the Bonapartism of the new German

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1. L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1514. Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 33 (Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig, 1855), p 8. See L. von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, edited, with an introduction by Georg G. Iggers (Routledge, London, 2011); W. J. Mommsen (ed.), *Leopold von Ranke und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft* (Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 1988).
2. L. von Ranke, *Englische Geschichte, vornehmlich im 17. Jahrhundert*, vol 2. *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 15 (Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig, 1877), p 103.
3. L. von Ranke, *Vorlesungs-Einleitungen*, ed. V. Dotterweich and W.P. Fuchs, *Aus Werk und Nachlaß*, vol. 4 (Oldenbourg, München, 1975), p 80 and following pages.

Reich in 1871, which did not fulfill his hopes for a democratic German national state, he felt personally devastated: "*als ob mir alle Wurzelfasern meiner vaterländischen Existenz abgeschnitten oder ausgerissen wären*" (as if all roots of my national existence were cut off or pulled out).⁴ This example shows that engagement has existential roots and consequences. Gervinus was aware of this, and his contemporary colleagues were aware of this too, but this existential factor reaches deeply into the unconscious regions, where it is much more difficult to identify and criticise it.

Another example is the controversy between Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Thomas Nipperdey about Wehler's book, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*.⁵ One of the main points of Nipperdey's criticism is Wehler's thesis that historical studies have to be committed to a set of norms. He ascribed a task to historical studies:

die emanzipatorische Aufgabe ... ideologiekritisch den Nebel mitgeschleppter Legenden zu durchstoßen und stereotype Missverständnisse aufzulösen, die Folgen von getroffenen oder die sozialen Kosten von unterlassenen Entscheidungen scharf herauszuarbeiten und somit für unsere Lebenspraxis die Chancen rationaler Orientierung zu vermehren, sie in einen Horizont sorgfältig überprüfter historischer Erfahrungen einzubetten (the emancipatory task, to break through the fog of inherited legends in an ideological-critical way, to dissolve stereotypical misunderstandings, to precisely carve out the effects of realised decisions or the social costs of omitted ones, and therefore to augment the chances of rational orientation for our practical lives, embedding them in a horizon of carefully checked historical experiences).⁶

Wehler tried to realise this task and by doing so, he stirred up a debate among German scholars. Against this political commitment Nipperdey defended the academic ethics of objectivity.⁷

Both examples show the same strategy of academic discourse: commitment is understood as running against basic rules of academic neutrality; against this neutrality the idea is upheld that history is based on normative pre-suppositions, and that academic historiography has a normative function of cultural orientation.

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4. Letter to Manuel, 1 April 1867, cited in J.F. Wagner, "Gervinus über die Einigung Deutschlands, Briefe aus den Jahren 1866–187", in *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins*, 82, 1973, p 376. See also J. Rüsen, "Der Historiker als Parteimann des Schicksal: Georg Gottfried Gervinus", in J. Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1993), pp 157–225; G. Hübinger, "Georg Gottfried Gervinus: Geschichtsdenken zwischen Wissenschaft, Publizistik und Politik im 19. Jh.", in *Archiv für Hessische Geschichte und Altertumskunde*, 45, 1987, pp 271–292; G. Hübinger, *Georg Gottfried Gervinus. Historisches Urteil und Politische Kritik* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1984); J.F. Wagner, *Germany's 19th Century Cassandra: The Liberal Federalist Georg Gottfried Gervinus* (Lang, New York, 1995); A.A. Assis, *What is History For? Johann Gustav Droysen and the Functions of Historiography* (Berghahn Books, New York, 2014), especially p 159 and following pages.
 5. H-U. Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1973); T. Nipperdey, "Wehlers 'Kaiserreich': Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung", in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 1, 1975, pp 539–560.
 6. Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*, p 12.
 7. T. Nipperdey, *Kann Geschichte objektiv sein?*, first published 1979, reprinted in T. Nipperdey, *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte: Essays*, 2nd edition (C.H. Beck, Munich, 1986), pp 218–234.

The different way of presenting the past is evident, but is the juxtaposition of objectivity versus engagement convincing? In both cases it is rather easy to demonstrate that both representatives of objectivity show political inclinations and that their controversy reflects different political standpoints in the context of their work. Ranke, for example, in his inaugural lecture in 1836 in Berlin, explained that historical knowledge and political practice are systematically interrelated.⁸

So we have to accept that the difference of attitudes exists, but it does not represent mutually excluding principles of historical thinking. If this is true, we need a new understanding of engagement and its specific mode of doing history in contrast to other modes of doing the same history.

The logic of historical thinking

In order to bring about such a new understanding, it is necessary to analyse the logic of historical thinking, that is, to ask for the basic principles of historically making sense of the past. Before I thematise historical studies and its related historiography I would like to descend to a deeper level, namely to the fundamentals of historical thinking in general. Here we can identify five principles of making sense of, or giving meaning to the past:

- The need for orientation in the temporal dimension of human life, particularly for coming to terms with the experience of contingency.
- The concept of understanding the past as history.
- Abiding by the rules for disclosing the perception of the past.
- Adopting established forms of representing the interpretation of the past;
- Using the representation of the interpreted past in the historical culture of the present.⁹

Every single principle is necessary and all of them together are sufficient to constitute historical thinking as a mental process. Their interrelationship is a dynamic reciprocity. Realising this complexity explains why engagement in the form of being entangled in practical life is a constitutive element of historical thinking in general. It begins with orientation-needs and ends with guidelines for the practical use of historical knowledge, thus placing individuals and peoples in the temporal dimension of their lives. One of the most important procedures of this orientation is related to the identity of the people: Historical thinking is a necessary element of answering the question of who they are.

In this broad and fundamental context the meaning of engagement as a specific way of doing history refers to partisanship in describing topical conflicts historically. Engagement has often been attributed to the meaning of one-sidedness, and as such it is generally criticised as violating the fundamental truth criteria and moral standards of the historian.

8. L. von Ranke, *Über die Verwandtschaft und den Unterschied der Historie und der Politik, Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 24, *Abhandlungen und Versuche* (Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig, 1877), pp 280–293.

9. See J. Rüsen, *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Böhlau, Cologne, 2013), pp 68 and following pages.

Practice and cognition: the rationality of historical studies

In the context of academisation and professionalisation of historiography, engagement has received its specific modern meaning as fundamentally running against basic standards of historical thinking. The decisive factor of this “scientific” way of doing history is the method of historical research. It brings methodical rationality into historical thinking and with it the five principles of making sense of the past change their character. In other words, with reference to our five principles,

- needs of orientation change into interests in cognition;
- concepts of historical understanding change into (reflected) frames of interpretation (or “theories”);
- rules for treating the sources change into methods of historical research;
- forms of representation integrate rational explanations;
- functions of orientation gain elements of practical reason.

Does this “rationalisation” of historical thinking exclude any engagement? Professional historians have tended to make a claim for “objectivity”, thus answering this question with a clear “No!” By “objectivity” they understand that their statements about the past can be intersubjectively tested by empirical evidence and logical coherence of explanation. This claim for intersubjectivity has good reasons, but it does not bring about neutrality of historical knowledge in its relationship to practical life.¹⁰ Neutrality would mean that the interrelationship between the five factors of historical meaning would be split into two halves: needs for and function in orientation on the one hand; and the task of the remaining three factors on the other. But this split is logically impossible since historical thinking, even in its academic form, remains rooted in practical life, although it provides more distance from it. Therefore the term “neutrality” is misleading. Instead, the term “intersubjectivity” is more appropriate: Intersubjectivity does not negate engagement, but gives it a specific form. It subjugates it under the rule of giving reason for its normative (mainly political) claims, and this reason is embedded in historical knowledge as a result of methodical research.

History as a matter of methodical research is an issue of cognition. Historical studies distinguishes itself from other practices, other methods, of doing history by an elaboration of rationality. But the complex interrelationship of the five constitutive factors of historical meaning shows that this rationality is only one dimension of making sense of the past; there are others besides. There are others which cannot be denied in understanding what historical studies are about.

Five dimensions of historical culture

These further dimensions come into view, when we go back to the fundamental constitution of historical sense generation. They are displayed depending on the

10. See T.L. Haskell, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998).

perspective within which historical thinking is used and reflected. Let me enumerate the five (most) important ones:¹¹

- In the cognitive dimension, history is done as an issue of thinking, guided by the idea of truth.
- In the aesthetic dimension, history is an issue of sensual perception, guided by the idea of beauty.
- In the political dimension, history is an issue of power and domination, guided by the idea of legitimacy.
- In the ethical dimension, history is an issue of evaluation (normative assertiveness) guided by the idea of good and evil.
- In the religious dimension, history is an issue of belief guided by the idea of redemption.

All these dimensions are interrelated. In modern times the religious dimension is confronted with a strong secularism in civil society. But it has not vanished, instead it has recruited different manifestations, one of them being a secular (inner-worldly) form of redemption (like Marxism).¹² In the academic field of historical thinking, secularism is necessary, but it has an open flank to the experience of and reference to transcendence.¹³

Vis-à-vis these manifold dimensions and their interrelatedness “engagement” gains a manifold meaning. In general it is not more than a qualification of the interrelatedness, in which one of the dimensions dominates the others. Traditionally the *political* one stands out. In this case engagement might lead to political partisanship as a dominant factor in the web of the complex procedure of making sense of the past. Cognition and representation could serve political aims; cognition might become one-sided or even ideological; the form of historical representation might come close to propaganda; and the forces of religious belief might become weapons in the struggle for power.

A historical example of this one-sidedness in historical thinking is Johann Gustav Droysen’s *Geschichte der preußischen Politik*.¹⁴ When working with the sources for this work Droysen refused to use non-Prussian archives.¹⁵ He deliberately chose the Prussian standpoint in order to support the foundation of the

11. This distinction is a “construction”. It is easily possible to present other dimensions like the ideological or the psychological one (the latter with the important factor of unconscious elements and factors of making sense of the past). See J. Rüsen and J. Straub (eds), *Die dunkle Spur der Vergangenheit. Psychoanalytische Zugänge zum Geschichtsbewußtsein, Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität*, vol. 2, (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1998). See also English edition: *Dark Traces of the Past: Psychoanalysis and Historical Thinking* (Berghahn Books, New York, 2010); M. Klüners, *Geschichtsphilosophie und Psychoanalyse* (V & R unipress, Göttingen, 2013).

12. See G. Küenzlen, *Der neue Mensch. Eine Untersuchung zur säkularen Religionsgeschichte der Moderne* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1997).

13. See J. Rüsen, “Zivilgesellschaft und Religion: Idee eines Verhältnisses”, in J. Rüsen, *Kultur macht Sinn. Orientierung zwischen Gestern und Morgen* (Böhlau, Cologne, 2006), pp 227–239.

14. J.G. Droysen, *Geschichte der preußischen Politik*, 14 vols (Veit, Berlin, 1855–1886).

15. See W. Nippel, “Zum Kontext von Droysens Geschichtstheorie”, in S. Rebenich and H.-U. Wiemer (eds), *Johann Gustav Droysen. Philosophie und Politik: Historie und Philologie* (Campus, Frankfurt am Main, 2012), pp 337–391, especially p 369.

German national state under the leadership of Prussia. This is a clear case of violating basic methodical rules of getting solid knowledge out of the relics of the past in favour of legitimating a strategy of politics by historical argumentation.

Political commitment is only one form of engagement. Another is the *cognitive* form. Here knowledge and cognition and related truth-claims dominate historical thinking despite and even against all other qualifications. Therefore it rather often may go along with a boring presentation,¹⁶ an a-political attitude, a lack of moral commitment and ignorance concerning the role of transcendence in human life. Encyclopaedias are good examples for this dominance of knowledge in presenting the past.¹⁷

By the *aesthetic* commitment, the work of making sense of the past concentrates on the formal quality of presenting it. It may lead to an aestheticism, which doesn't care very much about the solidity of facts and the explanatory power of interpretation, thus ignoring the political relevance of historical thinking. This is very often the case when history is presented in the cinema. The well known film *Schindler's List* (1993), for example, changed the character of one of its heroes (Itzhak Stern) against all the facts in order to comply with the rules of entertainment that there be a clear-cut, black and white painting of friend and foe or hero and rascal. A remarkable case of aesthetising history are the films by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, especially *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* that appeared in 1977.¹⁸

Ethical commitment strengthens the normative elements in historical thinking. In this case historical experiences may mainly function as a source for insight into the effectiveness and applicability of ethical rules in and for practical life. It may reduce empirical evidence to a mere illustration of the validity of these rules, giving political attitudes a moralistic form and thereby ignoring the proper weight of politics with its fundamental difference from morality. It may also dissolve religion into the normative dimension of inner-worldly human life, thus ignoring its fundamental reference to a divine transcendent world.

The dominance of ethics in historical interpretation characterizes a widespread type of making sense of the past: the exemplary one. Cicero characterised it by the slogan "*historia vitae magistra*".¹⁹ A recent example for ethical commitment (and its inclination to one-sidedness) is Fritz Fischer's book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961),²⁰ in which the politics of Germany are made responsible for the outbreak of World War I. This book can be understood as a German historian's moral self-accusation, one by someone who wants to compensate for his earlier commitment to the Nazi regime.

16. Like many PhD theses.

17. I mention only one: H. Cancik, H. Schneider and M. Landfester (eds), *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Metzler, Stuttgart, 2007), *Das klassische Altertum und seine Rezeptionsgeschichte*, 13 vols, *Altertum A-Z*, 5 vols, *Rezeptions- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 1 vol. Register.

18. S. Friedländer, *Kitsch und Tod. Der Wiederschein des Nazismus* (Hanser, Munich, 1986); and English edition, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984).

19. De Oratore II, 36

20. F. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–18* (Droste, Düsseldorf, 1961).

Religious commitment stresses the role of history in articulating the belief in transcendent factors in human life-orientation. It introduces the sacred into the experience and interpretation of the past. Examples of this engagement (to a very different extent) can be found in church history written by theologians. Outside this academic level, religious commitment may suffer from a much higher degree of one-sidedness. It might set aside the other sense criteria in favour of theocracy in politics; dogmatism in cognition; and rhetorical constraints in representation.

As a result of this differentiation of engagement, I would like to emphasise the fact that the usual juxtaposition of engaged and non-engaged historiography is too simple. This is true for the academic historical discourse as well. In a certain sense every historical presentation is engaged, since it includes a constitutive relationship to practical life – in a more or less mediated way. It depends upon the extension and the way of this mediation, whether we address it as engaged or not engaged (“neutral” would be a misleading notion since it ignores the rootedness of historical thinking in practical life and the constitutive role the points-of-view play in the tensions of this life when it comes to making sense of the past by presenting it as history).

The traditional contrast between engaged and non-engaged historiography is an indicator of the extent to which the political dimension of doing history is explicated or hidden. A strict refutation of politics in general is logically impossible, since political points of view are always effective in the conceptualisation of the framework of historical interpretation and in the forms of representing historical knowledge. This applies as well to addressing orientation problems in the context of historical thinking.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to use the distinction between engaged and non-engaged historiography. It can be used to characterise an *unbalanced relationship between the different dimensions*. I have already described this specific constellation in my presentation of the five dimensions. But what does “unbalanced” mean? There is no sixth (meta-)dimension which determines the relationship of the other five. All dimensions have their own right and role in doing history. There is a “natural” tendency of the sense criteria, which constitute the single dimension as dominant or sub-dominant; and this tendency is effectively realised in different forms of historical representation in the wider and complex field of historical culture. But being dominant can be realised in (logically) different ways: either at the cost of others or by respecting their sense making peculiarity.

The problematic side of engagement becomes visible if one dimension limits, hinders or even contradicts the deployment of sense and meaning in the others. This is even possible when the cognitive dimension is dominating. In this case it is possible that cognition becomes ideology, for example by changing political legitimacy into cognitive truth, aesthetics into propagandistic forms, morality into ideology, and religious desires into innerworldly predictions.

The role of historical studies in historical culture

Historical studies are committed to the dominance of cognition. If it avoids the possibility of ideological engagement and does not suppress the sense criteria of its political, moral, and aesthetic dimensions, it can contribute to the historical culture of its time in different ways:

- It is able to accomplish the knowledge of the past by research. Research brings about new knowledge, and its method of interpretation enriches this knowledge with explanatory power. By this knowledge it introduces an element of intersubjective plausibility into the politics of memory.
- It enables people to use this knowledge to criticise problematic historical legacies, and it empowers the argumentative forces in the minds of its addressees by the discursive dynamics of reasoning. So it may strengthen the power of reason in cultural orientation.

One of the most problematic practical functions of historical thinking is its ethnocentric formation, by which it might support and strengthen the self-esteem of those people to which the historians themselves belong. Engagement can be observed as a means of ethnocentrism.

Concerning this danger, historical studies very often serve the needs for an un-balanced historical identity. Its methodical rationality includes the issue of forming historical identity, which belongs to the constitutive factors of historical sense making. The ruling (methodical) idea of intersubjectivity can be applied to the way in which history thematises the concept of identity. In doing so, it may overcome the unbalanced relationship between self and the other. There is always the danger of ethnocentrism luring to give this relationship an asymmetrical structure. This might lead to aggression and violence in the process of self-asserting one's own people in its relationship to other. The idea of intersubjectivity brought into historical culture may overcome this dangerous potential when using history for the practical purpose of identity formation.

Counter engagement

Engagement seems to be the historians' activity when using history for practical (mostly political) purposes. Its one-sidedness therefore needs an antidote: a more careful observance of the past. But this is only one perspective in which engagement in history has to be analysed and treated. A completely different one has not yet been granted the attendance it needs: It occurs when historical thinking is "moved by the past".²¹ Now engagement is the consequence of the determination of present-day thinking about the past by the past itself. This determination has not taken place in the past, but it has done so under conditions of present-day culture as the results of past developments. In this context historical thinking may be seen as an outcome of repetition compulsion (to use the psychoanalytical term).

Unsolved problems, open wounds, traumatic events in the past condition the historians' viewpoint of them in a more or less unconscious way. So it might happen that the history of this past reproduces the one-sidedness of people in conflicts of the past. A speaking example is the distinction of perpetrators and victims. This distinction is necessary, of course, to characterise a constellation of people in past events (besides the bystanders, profiteers, opponents and other groups). But when writing a history of this constellation by using it as a

21. E. Runia, *Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2014).

determination of the perspectives of its interpretation, we reproduce it. Thus the past becomes transported into the present, and located and established here so that the chance of overcoming this old distinction for a more complex and mediated perspective is neglected. The general tendency of victimisation in the historical culture of today can be defined as such a one-sidedness. In order to avoid this kind of engagement, a broader and deeper reflection of its logic is necessary.

Abstract

It is the main intent of this article to correct a misunderstanding of what engagement in historical studies, historiography and historical culture means and what it is about. So, first of all I will shortly describe the widespread notion of engagement as the direct opposite of objectivity in historical studies. In a second step I will show that this juxtaposition contradicts basic principles of historical thinking. For this I will explicate these principles in a twofold way: first, as basic factors of human historical thinking in general, and, second as basic factors of the professional academic treatment of history. Since historical thinking is more than only a cognitive procedure but includes non-cognitive elements, I will identify these elements and clarify their role as determining factors in historical culture. Doing so, engagement becomes visible as a complex interrelationship of different dimensions of historical culture and their basic concepts. As a further step I will discuss the contribution of historical studies to the practical functions of historical culture in human life. To round off the discussion, I will give a short outlook focusing on a form of engagement which has mainly been overlooked and is worth taking into account.

Keywords: metahistory; engagement; objectivity; historical culture.

Opsomming

Die hoofdoelwit van hierdie artikel is om die misverstand reg te stel wat betrokkenheid in historiese studies, historiografie en historiese kultuur beteken en waaroor dit opsluit gaan. In 'n tweede stap wil ek aandui dat hierdie jukstaposisie strydig is met sekere basiese beginsels van historiese denke. Daaropvolgend verduidelik ek genoemde beginsels op twee maniere: eerstens as basiese faktore van historiese denke in die algemeen; en tweedens as basiese faktore van die professionele wyse waarop geskiedenis benader word. Omdat historiese denke meer verteenwoordig as bloot kognitiewe prosedures, en in werklikheid ook nie-kognitiewe elemente bevat, sal ek die elemente verduidelik as bepalende faktore in geskiedskultuur. Daardeur word betrokkenheid sigbaar as a komplekse interaktiewe verhouding met verskillende dimensies van historiese kultuur in die menslike lewe. Teen die einde van die bespreking word 'n kort indruk gegee van 'n vorm van betrokkenheid wat grootliks oor die hoof gesien is, en verdien om in ag geneem te word.

Sleutelwoorde: meta-geskiedenis; betrokkenheid; objektiwiteit; historiese kultuur.