

# Lo(o)s(en)ing the order of history: Some aspects of historical studies at the intersection of modernity, postmodernity and the discussion on memory

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## 1. Topical challenges of historical studies

Historical studies as an academic discipline currently finds itself in an academic discussion in respect of its root, functions and principles. There is reason to feel satisfied. At the same time there is also reason for feeling uncomfortable. The sense of satisfaction has a bearing on the renewed attention that is being accorded to history in the realm of the humanities. One of the most dominating issues up for debate is memory and its role in human culture. ‘Memory’ covers the entire field of dealing with the past. It includes dealing with the realm of history as subject matter and as a mode of re-calling the past literally back to life in respect of representation in the cultural framework of human activities. On the other hand, the prevalent awareness of historical representation gives professional historians reason to feel uncomfortable since it very easily transcends (and even neglects) strategies of dealing with the past, which constitute historical studies as a discipline or as a ‘science’. This state of

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affairs has a direct impact on the professional status of historians. The discourse on memory tends to pay scant attention to the cognitive procedures which furnish historical knowledge with the element of rationality and which give the outlook at the past the validity of objectivity and legitimate professionalism with claims to truth. It also seems to put aside historical studies as a culturally inhabited place for dealing with the past, *vis-a-vis* the lively forces of moving memories in the life of individuals, groups, nations and whole cultures. The academic involvement with the past seems to be enveloped in a realm of shadows. There is a distinct absence of enlightened knowledge, particularly in respect of the importance of research. Disclosures in the places of memory (*lieux de memoire*) suggest that history has emigrated from the fields of academic research and professional historiography to the open field of symbolising representation. It is no longer restricted to the constraints of reifying and alienating methodical procedures.

This uncomfortable situation of historical studies has already been prepared for a long time by the discourse on *postmodernism* which has brought about a radical doubt in respect to the cognitive principles of historical thinking and historiography in its specific ‘modern’ form of historical studies. The discussion about postmodernism as a challenge to the humanities has become weaker, but the challenge, intended for historical studies, is still very strong. Its ‘disciplinary’ structure and outfit – still effective in the study of history and the professionalisation of the occupation of historians including teachers in history – has lost its voice. Instead of the professional academic practices of producing historical knowledge, the cultural practices of re-calling the past as history and representing it in the symbolic order and orienting forces of cultural life have gained an enormous interest not only in the humanities but even more in public life where memorials, monuments, anniversaries and other institutions and ceremonies of collective remembrance play an important role.

Historical studies as a discipline and the status of professional historians are contradictions in a context within which the clear features of cognitive achievements are fading away. Put on to the ground of living memory, historical studies, seems to lose its fundamental principles of cognition. Can the role historical memory plays in shaping human identity and orienting human activities simply be applied to historical studies as an academic discipline or as a ‘science’ in the broader sense of the word? If it is recognised at all in the discourse of memory it appears simply as an agent of ideology, presenting history according to the interests and needs of elites, as a weapon in the struggle of power to be used by those who have the power to define the semantic terms of trade in the field of constructing, deconstructing and re-constructing collective identity. Related to the poetic and rhetoric strategies of furnishing the past as history with the life of topical human activities it appears as a hermaphrodite of scientific rationality and literary shape, as an ambiguous figure synthesising scientific rationality and literary textuality, to spell it out clearly: as a failure (an outage) with a very doubtful cultural function.

## 2. Metahistory as a discourse of answers

Most of the arguments which threaten historical studies by ignoring its specific cognitive procedures or criticising its ideological function, are delivered and worked out on a level of discourse which can be described as 'metahistorical'. It reflects history and its various modes of dealing with the past; it is not a mode of dealing but a theory about dealing with the past. Even if this reflection is not directly or explicitly related to historical studies, it nevertheless, cannot be neglected, since at least some of its issues aim at the heart of historical studies. These are: mainly the sense-criteria which were used to give the past its specific historical meaning and significance for the present; the constitutive role of needs and interests in dealing with the past; and the function of remembering. Orienting human activity and forming all kinds of identity are of constitutive importance for historical studies.

So historical studies has to pick up this reflection and relate to its cognitive strategies of bringing about solid knowledge of the past. This also has a bearing on the professional writing of historiography. Doing so it continues a *tradition of reflecting itself*, of doing metatheory in pursuit of remembering, re-calling and representing the past, which is even older than its status as an academic discipline.<sup>1</sup> Such reflection has already taken place in the tradition of rhetoric in historiography. It has played an important role in bringing about legitimacy to historical studies as an academic discipline with special claims to scientific rationality and the corresponding validity of its interpretation. In Germany for example the process of professionalisation and 'scientification' of historiography got its first push more on the metatheoretical level than on the concrete level of dealing with the past.<sup>2</sup>

Metahistory as the self-reflection of historical studies is an established tradition in the discipline.<sup>3</sup> It accompanies historical research and writing through all its developments in respect of changes, crises, stagnations, revolutions and debates concerning status as an academic discipline, relationship to other disciplines, epistemological preconditions, cultural functions and the principles of cognitive work.<sup>4</sup> In Germany there even exists a term which designates this specific self-reflection of historical studies: 'Historik'. It is a tradition which debates the principles of historical studies, an inner-disciplinary pre-established discourse, which enables historical

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1. Cf. H.W. BLANKE, D. FLEISCHER, and J. RÜSEN, Theory of history in historical lectures: the German tradition of Historik 1750-1900, in *History and Theory* 23(4), 1984, pp.331-356.
  2. This is one of the main points of H.W. BLANKE, D. FLEISCHER, (Eds): *Theoretiker der deutschen Aufklärungshistorie*. (2 vols, *Fundamenta Historica*, I. (Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1990); cf. id. *Aufklärung und Historik. Aufsätze zur Entwicklung der Geschichtswissenschaft, Kirchengeschichte und Geschichtstheorie in der deutschen Aufklärung* (Spenner, Waltrop, 1991).
  3. The classical text in the German tradition is: J.G. DROYSEN, *Historik, historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, (Edited by Peter Leyh, Vol.1. Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1977). English translation of the *Grundriß* (the part given to the students as a scheme of the main argumentation): *Outline of the principles of history*. (Boston 1893, reprint New York 1967).
  4. Cf. H.W. BLANKE, D. FLEISCHER, and J. RÜSEN, Theory of history in historical lectures: the German tradition of Historik 1750-1900, in *History and Theory* 23(4), 1984, pp. 331-356, also in: J. Rüsen, *Studies in Metahistory*. (Human Science Research Council, Pretoria, 1993), pp. 97-128.

studies to bring its specificity into the discourse about the general and fundamental issues of dealing with the past.

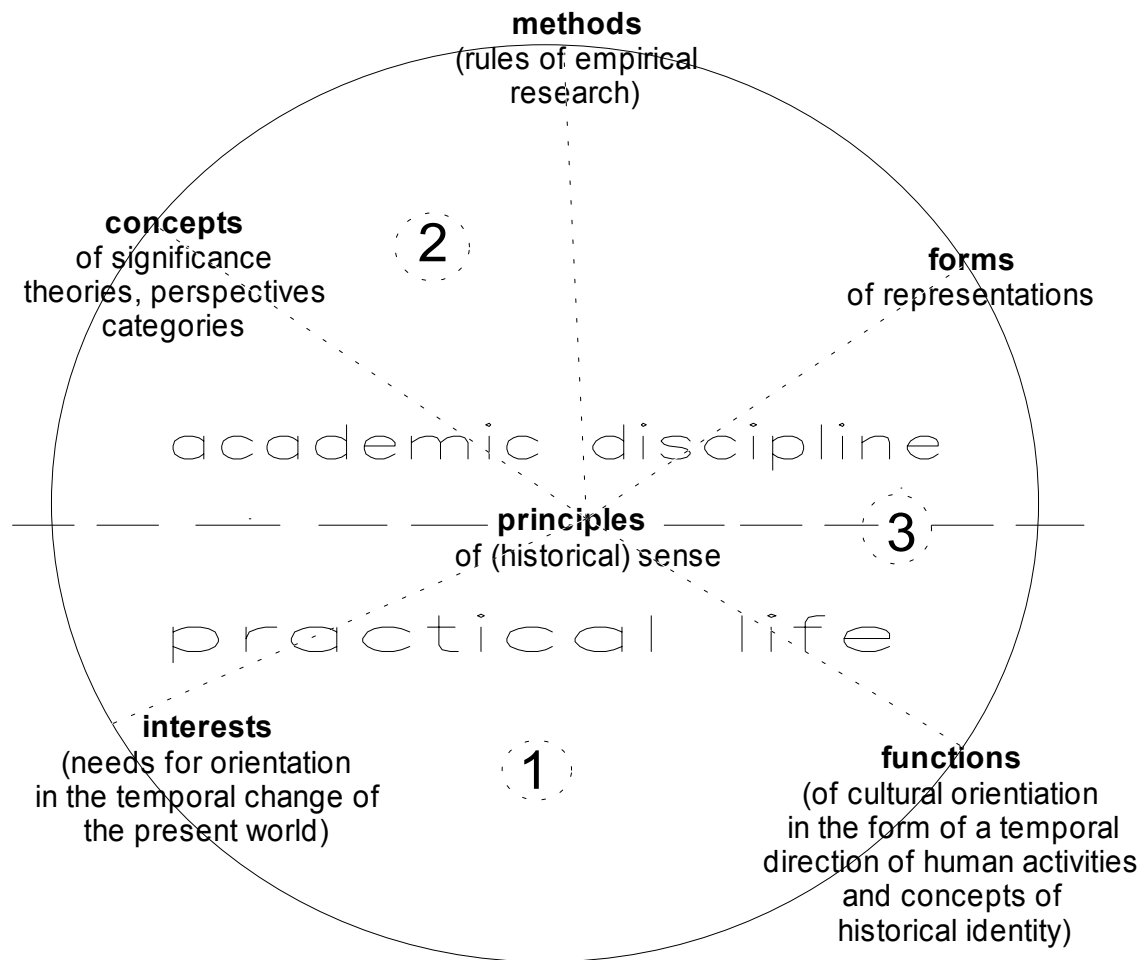
To the same extent in which historical studies is challenged by postmodern criticism of the modern way of doing history (which puts its 'scientific' image into radical doubt, and by the discourse on memory, which lets its disciplinary structures dissolve) historical studies has to mobilise and to revise its tradition of self-reflection. It has to reflect itself again, to explicate, legitimate and also criticise its cognitive status and its claims to a certain validity brought about by the methodical procedures of research. Historical studies can do this by keeping up the already established modes and results of metahistory as a discourse in the context of its disciplinary constitution. In order to do so historical studies first has to explicate and elaborate its cognitive structure by which it gets its specific shape in the vast field of culture where history is created in different modes of remembering, re-calling and representing (and at the same time forgetting and suppressing) the past.

### **3. How to understand historical studies - a model of the discipline**

This cognitive structure of historical thinking cannot be explicated without systematically taking into account its constitution and function in practical human life, since its specific logic is constituted by its relationship to the cultural needs of human activities. It is one of the most important points of merit of the topical discussion on historical memory. Historical thinking takes place in the realm of memory. It is also committed to the mental procedures by which the recollection and representation of the past is dedicated to the cultural orientation of human life in the present. The recollection of the past is a necessary condition to furnishing human life with a cultural reference framework, which opens up a future perspective, grounded on the experience of the past. On the other hand, it would be misleading if historical thinking and with it the whole work of historical studies, is stressed only by following the cultural needs of practical human life; it has its own 'logic' as well – the logic, which is mainly characterised by the methodical rationality in dealing with the empirical evidence of the past. Both sides – the relationship to practical needs and functions and the rationality of methodical cognition – have to be considered together.

This can be done in the form of a scheme, which explicates five principles of historical thinking and its systematic relationship (*See Fig. 1*).

### **Fig. 1 The disciplinary matrix of historical studies**



Scheme of  
the disciplinary matrix  
of historical studies

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| <p>1: <b>political</b> strategy of collective memory<br/>2: <b>cognitive</b> strategy of producing historical knowledge<br/>3: <b>aesthetic</b> strategy of poetics and rhetoric of historical representation</p> |
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One can use the term of Thomas S. Kuhn and speak of the ‘disciplinary matrix’ of historical studies (without following his argumentation concerning the development of sciences and the impossibility of applying his ideas of science to the humanities). The five principles are:

interests in cognition generated out of needs for orientation in the temporal change of the present world;

concepts of significance and perspectives of temporal change, within which the past gets its specific feature as ‘history’;

methodical rules of empirical research;

forms of representation, in which the evidence of the past, brought about by interpretation into the concepts of significance, is presented in the form of a narrative; and finally

functions of cultural orientation in the form of a temporal direction of human activities and concepts of historical identity.

Each one of these five factors is necessary. Together they are sufficient in constituting historical thinking as a rationally elaborated form of historical memory. (It may be useful to underline that not every memory is in itself a historical one. Only if memory goes beyond the limits of the life-span of the particular person or group concerned, should we speak of a specific 'historical' memory. 'Historical' indicates a certain element of temporal distance between past and present, which makes a complex mediation of both necessary.) The five factors may change in the course of time, i.e. in the development of historical thinking in general and historical studies in specific, but their relationship, the systematic order, in which they are dependent on each other, will remain the same. In this systematic relationship all factors depend upon one fundamental principle, which gives the interrelationship its coherence and characteristics, which historical studies has in the context of variety in historical change and development. The fundamental principle is the *sense-criterium*, which governs the relationship between past and present, within which the past gets its significance as 'history'.

For the greater part of its development as a discipline, historical studies has mainly reflected on the cognitive dimension of itself in respect of the prevalent debate in metahistory. Practitioners of the discipline were eager to legitimate its 'scientific' status and claims to truth and objectivity. It enabled them to give the discipline the right to participate in aspiring to the cultural prestige of 'science' as the most convincing form, in which knowledge and cognition can serve human life. This was done in a wide variety of conceptualisations of the 'scientific character'. In most of these manifestations historical studies claimed for itself a certain epistemological and methodological autonomy in the spectrum of academic disciplines. Doing so it remained aware of some non-cognitive elements, still valid and influential in the work of historical studies, mainly in the field of writing history. Only after the linguistic turn however could these elements and factors be seen as being as important as the cognitive dimensions. It is made plausible in the proposed structure of the five factors of historical studies, if one looks at specific interrelationships. Interests and functions in historical studies is committed to a *political strategy of collective memory*. It places the work of historians into the context of the struggle for power and makes it a necessary means of legitimising or de-legitimising all forms of domination and government. In the relationship between concepts and methods it is mainly committed to a *cognitive strategy of producing historical knowledge*. This strategy constitutes the scientific character of historical studies. It subjugates the discourse of history to the rules of methodical argumentation, conceptual language, control by experience and gaining consent and agreement by rational means. And in the relationship between forms and functions it is committed to an *aesthetic strategy*

*of poetics and rhetoric of historical representation.* This strategy places the knowledge of the past into the features of present day life, furnishing it with its forces to move the mind by cultural orientation. Taking all the strategies together, historical studies can be made visible as a complex synthesis of dealing with the past in three different dimensions: aesthetics, politics, and cognition. This synthesis represents an order of history as an integral part of culture.

The proposed scheme of the constitutive factors of historical studies shows how the work of the historians is, on the one hand, influenced by and related to practical life and on the other hand, displays its own realm for gaining knowledge beyond the practical purposes of life orientation. It explains why history always has to be re-written – according to the changes in interest and functions of historical knowledge in human life – and why, at the same time, there is a continuity and a development, and even a progress in the cognitive strategy to get solid knowledge about the past. With this scheme it is possible to pick up the tension between modernity and post-modernity and the challenge of the discussion on memory and to bring it into interdisciplinary self-reflection of historical studies, thus moving it towards a deeper and more up-to-date awareness of itself.

It is my intention to correct misleading confrontations. Most of the postmodernist attitudes to history and historical studies have brought about the impression that there is a strong contradiction between modern and postmodern elements of historical thinking. Following the guidelines of the proposed scheme this contradiction can at least be relativised and even be changed into a strategy of argumentation, which opens up a perspective of development of historical studies, in which modern and postmodern features can be synthesised.<sup>5</sup> The same is true in respect to the distinction between memory on the one hand and history on the other: The vitality and relevance of memory very often have been seen as contradictory to the strength and rationality of historical knowledge gained by methodical research. There seems to be a contradiction between serving human life, even being an element of it, on the one hand and putting memory into the cages of accumulated knowledge without a direct function in practical life on the other. This contradiction makes us forget the fundamental interrelationship between memory and history. It produces a wrong awareness of historical studies as a cognitive procedure. It is my intention to overcome this opposition of arguments in favour of a discourse, which shows how historical studies can develop and gain a new self-awareness according to its new perspectives and strategies.

As every scheme illuminates complex phenomena and at the same time takes parts of it outside our awareness, it should be indicated that there are elements in dealing historically with the past, which are not addressed by the proposed system of prin-

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5. Cf. J. RÜSEN, "Historical enlightenment in the age of postmodernism: history in the age of the 'new unintelligibility'" in *Studies in Metahistory*, pp. 221-239; J. Rösen, "Historical studies between modernity and postmodernity" in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (1994), pp.183-189.

principles. In the realm of constitutive interest there is already an *experience* of the past. It is substantially different from the experience treated methodically in the realm of empirical research. The past is already present when historical thinking starts with questions, initiated by the need for and interest in historical memory. It plays an important role in shaping these interests and needs. This is the case in very different forms: as an effective tradition; as a fascination of alterity; as a traumatic pressure; and even as forgetfulness, which, nevertheless, keeps the past alive by means of suppression.

#### **4. The strong order of history – historical studies in the process of modernisation**

Modernisation in respect to the principle of historical sense has two simultaneous meanings. It is relevant to a new concept of history and a new approach to the empirical evidence of the past. The new concept consists of a category, which discloses the temporal relationship between the past, present and future by an idea of a comprehensive internal connection called ‘the history’. History as a totality of temporal change of man and world is categorised by the idea of ‘progress’ or ‘development’. The new approach is categorised by rational means of cognition, which enable the historian to disclose the moving forces of temporal change in the human world. It constitutes the entire entity and totality of ‘the history’. Modernity in historical thinking has brought about the idea of *the* history. Before the mid-18th century one could not speak of something like *the* history. Instead of this totality or temporal whole comprising past, present and future, there were only histories, stories, historiographies. There was however no idea that could be a phenomenon called *the history*. ‘The’ history means a factual entity of temporal change, which internally combines past, present and future into one comprising totality of time. The late Enlightenment conceptualised this entity within the context of the historical category of progress. Historicism stuck to it and subsequently changed its categorical form into the concept of ‘development’. Modern historical studies explicated it with different concepts of structural change. The development of historical studies can be described as a development in the conceptualisation of this entity called *the History*.

In the field of historicism it was thought that *the History* is constituted by means of the mental and spiritual forces of human activity. In the German language this force was called *Geist*, and it gave the humanities the name of *Geisteswissenschaften*. The Annales School, Marxism and the various concepts of modern historical studies as societal or structural history have brought about different and much more complex concepts of the entity, which we call *the* history. In a critical turn against the historicist idealistic conception of the idea of history they understood history as being constituted by a very complex relationship between material and mental forces. The second essential element of historical sense, common to all manifestations of historical thinking in the process of modernisation, is *method*. Professional historians in the academic environment are more or less convinced that there is a rational



method, which enables them to find out by research, (in Ranke's famous words:) 'what really has happened'.<sup>6</sup> It is argued that by using the conventional methods of research there will come about insight into that very entity called *the* history.

The first step in the process conceptualising historical method took place in the Enlightenment when the procedures of source critique were systematised. The next step was historicism, which for the first time, brought about the idea of historical interpretation as the essential operation of research. (Many historians, still today, think that the essential methodical operation of historical studies is source critique. It means they have as yet not learnt the methodological lesson of historicism.) Interpretation changes the mere facts, the findings of source critique, into *historical* facts by putting them together along the lines of the idea of history as a meaningful temporal relationship of past, present and future. Interpretation transforms empirical evidence into history. The last step of developing historical method was the already mentioned step of theorisation. In the Annales School theory was implicit. In Marxism and in social or societal history it was explicit as proposed and paradigmatically realised by Max Weber.

## **5. The broken order of history - Historical studies in the new unintelligibility of postmodernism**

Postmodernism is first of all a critique of the principles of modern historical thinking. On the level of the constitutive principles of historical sense this criticism says that the modern idea of *the* history is nothing other than an Euro-centric ideology without any factual evidence. Since it destroys all other forms of cultural identity, it is not at all a historical thought mainly guided by rational argumentation (reason, method and theory), but by the will to power of the European nations over the rest of the world. Therefore it is ideological, it is destructive and it does not open up a future perspective at all. The only prognosis of the prevalent perspective of history (based on the idea of progress and development) is that of catastrophe. The postmodernist concept of history radically and totally negates the idea that there is something like one single and comprising historical process of the development of humankind. History is not a factual entity at all; it is nothing other than a fictional image. Accordingly postmodern metahistory describes the principles of historical thinking in a completely different manner. It does not emphasise method in the form of rational argumentation and according to the rules of empirical research. Instead there is an accent on the poetics and rhetoric of narration. So the concept of postmodern historical thought is the opposite of modern historical studies.

In its modern form historical thinking furnishes human activity with an orientation towards the idea of temporal change, which can be used as a guideline for simultaneously changing the world and bringing about a collective identity. Postmodernism destroys the plausibility of this function and replaces orientation with imagination.

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6. It reads: "...wie es eigentlich gewesen". See L. VON RANKE, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, (2. Aufl., *Sämtliche Werke* 33/34, Leipzig, 1874), p. vii.

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Since there is no real entity called *the* history this historical imagination is constituted by elements of fiction. In principle it cannot orientate practical activity. (A practical activity, oriented by fictions, will end in a complete disaster.) Nevertheless, in terms of the five principles of historical cognition proposed above, there must be a function of orientation. Postmodernity in history indeed offers a function of orientation. It is a very specific one – a way of orientating human life in a manner that is similar to dreams. Psychoanalysis has taught us that we need dreams in order to come to terms with reality. And to me this seems to be the function of orientation in postmodernist historiography and theory of history. In some ways it is a compensation for the negative results of modernisation. It is an aesthetic consolation brought about by historical memory in respect to the crisis of progress and the threat of a catastrophe – a simple continuation of the process in which modernisation will inevitably lead the world.

What are the new elements of historical thought brought about by postmodernism in historical studies? There is an essential point, which defines the distinction between postmodern and modern forms of historical thought. A modern form of historical thought realises a genetic connection between the past and present by its concept of temporal change. Historical thinking gives the impression that the past moves towards the present day situation. This genetic connection between past and present is completely destroyed and negated by postmodern historiography. By doing so postmodernity claims to restore the dignity of the past. There is a German word, which expresses this dignity to be won by cutting the genetic ties between past and present. It is *Eigensinn*.<sup>7</sup> Its meaning combines a significance of its own with elements of obstinacy and stubbornness. It is an obstinacy against the integration of past forms of human life into a process, which leads to our own life form. *Eigensinn* means significance against this integration. Little children who do not like to obey their parents are *eigensinnig*. They react against their parents' will by pursuing a stubborn activity of their own will. This is the way the past is presented by postmodern historiography.

We should not forget that already Leopold von Ranke, the leading German representative of historicism has formulated a principle of *Eigensinn* by saying: "Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott".<sup>8</sup> But Ranke, at the same time, always accepted the idea of a comprising temporal development bringing past, present and future together in the totality of *the* history.<sup>9</sup> This idea is completely refuted within the post-

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7. Cf. the reflection about this word in: LÜDTKE, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitserfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Ergebnisse-Verlag, Hamburg, 1993), especially p.9 sqq.

8. "Every epoch is immediately related to God". See L. VON RANKE, "Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte", in Th. Schieder and H. Berding (Eds.), *Aus Werk und Nachlaß*, II (Oldenbourg, Munich 1971), p. 59.

9. In the same text where the just quoted word is said, we find the following passage: 'In der Herbeziehung der verschiedenen Nationen und der Individuen zur Idee der Menschheit und der Kultur ist der Fortschritt ein unbedingter.' (*Ibid.* p. 80). (In attracting the different nations and individuals to the idea of humankind and culture there is an unconditional progress.)

modern framework of history and historiography. So postmodern historiography is persistently at loggerheads with the concept of development. The most radical conceptualisation of this negation of development can be found in Walter Benjamin's late theory of history.<sup>10</sup> Here he speaks about the commitment of historical memory to a time concept, which he characterises by the metaphorical expression of 'the tiger's leap of the moment'.<sup>11</sup> In this image every temporal chain between the different phenomena in the past is cut off in favour of a unique occurrence thus gaining a substantial historical significance. In this temporally condensed significance it becomes apparent in present life through historical memory like a tiger jumping into our minds and bringing about an irritation of our common consciousness in respect to the awareness of the temporal change of our lives. This is postmodernism *avant la lettre*. Here we can find the most interesting concept of anti-developmental or anti-genetic ideas of history.<sup>12</sup>

Postmodern historiography thus produces counter-images to the present-day situation. These counter-images are presented in new forms of historiography. We have become accustomed to calling them narrative. It is however a misleading term. Every historiographical form of text is narrative. Besides this logical or epistemological meaning, narrative means a specific form of historiographical presentation, which can be distinguished from others. 'Narrative' means a historiographical presentation, which prefers events and interactions. If we compare Natalie Davis' story of the return of Martin Guère to the productions in the usual academic form of social and economic history loaded with a lot of footnotes, statistics and graphics, we can understand the quality of a 'narrative' historiography. Narration stands against explanation,<sup>13</sup> lively description against abstract analysis, or – to use a revitalised metaphorical dichotomy – warm empathy against cold theory. Another specific trait of postmodern historiography is micro-history. As the very postmodern form of presenting history it is opposed to macro-history. A single person like Menocchio<sup>14</sup> or Martin Guère<sup>15</sup> and not a society or a class are shown, a life span or even only a few days instead of an epoch or a long-run development, one day and not a century, a small village and not a state or an empire are dealt with. This is the subject matter of postmodern historiography.

Postmodern historiography claims to have developed a new and different research strategy. It is opposed to developing and using theoretical concepts. In order to

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10. W. BENJAMIN, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I(2). (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1991), pp. 691-704.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 701, 694.

12. See LUTZ NIETHAMMER'S very enlightening interpretation of Benjamin's theory of history: *Post-histoire. Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?* (Rowohlt, Reinbek, 1989), pp. 116 sqq.

13. Cf. L. STONE, The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History, in *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), pp. 3-24.

14. C. GINZBURG, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Reprint, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992).

15. N.Z. DAVIS, *The Return of Martin Guère* (Harvard University Press, Boston, 1984).

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characterise its new methodical approach to the past, postmodern historians like to quote the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz who proposed 'thick description' instead of theory construction.<sup>16</sup> 'Thick description' is the methodical means, by which the past shall gain its own significance, its *Eigensinn*. The past shall be no longer submitted to genetic structures, by which modern historical thinking combines it with the present day situation in one line of historical development. This turn against genetic theories is essentially combined with a new hermeneutical approach to inquire into the lives of the people in the past. Historians working in this area have lost interest in reconstructing the structural conditions of human life in the past. By doing so, they have resorted to explaining the real lives of the people. What they are in fact doing is to stress the way the people experienced and interpreted their own world. They inquire into the awareness of life conditions by the people in question, thus trying to give them back a cultural autonomy of dealing with their own world in their own specific way, which is different from ours. The paradigmatic methodical strategy of this new approach to the people's own awareness and understanding is oral history.

In respect of the content of historical commemoration it can be said that postmodern historiography is in favour of the victims of modernisation, mainly of the lower classes, minorities, and, not to forget women. Women's and gender history are in many respects closely related to the postmodern conception of historical studies. In the leading conceptual works on historical experience postmodern historiography gets its inspirations from cultural anthropology and ethnology. In respect to the orientation-function of historical commemoration postmodern historical studies present a growing interest in the aesthetic quality of historical experience. History has to produce a picture, an image of the past with an aesthetic quality.

## 6. Order of history through memory?

The thematisation of historical memory came along with postmodern attitudes to history. It can be understood as an attempt to open up a new source for generating historical sense. It has disclosed a new plausibility, which is grounded in the fundamental and universal cultural function of memory as a means of identity building and orienting of practical life. Metahistory indeed should start its work of reflecting, criticising and legitimating the principles of historical studies with an analysis of memory as the root of historical thinking. Doing so it supports the postmodern attitude towards the sense-creating creativity of the human mind, set into work by those who recall and represent the past in order to live present day life. It affirms imagination and other non-cognitive forces of the human mind, such as politics as being essential for recalling the past and placing it through memory into the moving mental forces of present day life.

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16. C. GEERTZ, Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture, in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York 1973), pp.3-30.

In the traditional forms of metahistory the rootedness of historical cognition in practical life and its dependence upon it, has been discussed mainly as a problem of viewpoints and perspectives to be solved in accordance to the claims of truth and objectivity, with which historical studies transmits the use of history for practical purposes into the realm of solid and valid knowledge of the past.<sup>17</sup> By thematising memory historical studies gets a much broader and deeper insight into its relationship to contemporary practical life. It discloses a mental force of its guiding sense principle, which it could not become aware of by simply asking for truth and objectivity as a matter of the method of empirical research. It has to realise that the cognitive procedures of gaining solid and valid knowledge out of the empirical evidence of the past, is always substantially related to aesthetic principles of representing and to political principles of using the past in the cultural framework of present-day human activities. Thus realising memory as a source for a powerful constitution of sense criteria, historical studies can accept the postmodern emphasis on aesthetics and rhetoric as a necessary contribution to its metatheoretical self-understanding. On the other hand metahistory is still committed to cognition as an element of making sense of history, which cannot be neglected at all (as long as cognition is a necessary element of orienting human life). Doing so, it reaffirms the methodical rationality of historical thinking by positioning it in the depth of memory itself. There is no memory whatsoever without a claim for plausibility, and this claim is grounded on two elements: The trans-subjective element of experience and the inter-subjective element of consent.

Memory is essentially related to experience. The one-sidedness of postmodern criticism neglected this essential element. So in the metahistorical discourse of the last decade memory could be handled as a strong argument in favour of an unlimited subjectivism categorically conceptualised with the term 'fiction'. This term is then supposed to characterise the ontological status of history as a matter of memory and representation. Stressing the essential relationship of memory to experience metahistory thus can resubstantiate the methodical rules of historical research as a specific means of treating experience. Doing so the rationality of the historical method can no longer be seen as alienating and reifying history or as depriving it of its use for human life. The order of history brought about by the creative forces of the human mind in recalling and representing the past gets back the solidity of being grounded in experience.

Inter-subjectivity is the other element of historical sense, which cannot be neglected at all in recalling and representing the past through the mental forces of human memory. History cannot play its cultural role without the consent of those to whom it is addressed. If it is realised as mere fiction, history immediately would lose its cultural power. Its plausibility does however not only depend upon its relationship to experience. It depends upon its relationship to norms and values as elements of

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17. See R. KOSELLECK, W. MOMMSEN and J. RÜSEN (Eds.), *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit Theorie der Geschichte, Beiträge zur Historik I* (dtv, Munich 1977).

*Historia* 45(2), November 2000, pp. 255-270.

historical sense as well, which are shared by the community to which it is addressed. In this respect metahistory has to reflect on the rules of discourse, which bring about inter-subjective consent as methodical elements of historical cognition. This will bring it back to modernity since modernity can be explicated as a certain mode of dealing with norms and values. The formal structure of universal validity itself is a sense-building principle in historical cognition. This principle is rooted in the fundamental and constitutive intent to consent and agreement of historical memory. Doing this history gains a normative order with which it can only fulfil its cultural function.

### **7. Regaining the order of history by mediating modernity and postmodernity?**

There have been only a few attempts in the field of metahistory to bring about the new self-awareness mediating and synthesising modern and postmodern features of historical thinking with a synthesising and mediating principle of memory. Concerning the constitutive principle of historical sense the main question remains: How can the universalistic approach of modernity towards history become mediated with the ideology critique and the particularistic approach of postmodernity? The postmodernist critique of the concept of ‘the history’ has to be taken very seriously. I think we have to accept this criticism in so far as it points to an ideological generalisation of one history to *the* history. And this has really been the case in the process of modernisation from the enlightenment up to the present.

So I think we have to concede indeed that there is only a multitude of histories and not *the* history as a factual entity. Nevertheless – and that is my modernist point in this argument – we need an idea of the unity of historical experience otherwise historical thinking will lead us into a state of complete relativism. And the price for relativism is too high. We still need historical categories by logical reasons; without them we can’t think historically. Additionally, we need a concept of history, which meets the topical experience of the growing one world. (To emphasise micro-history while living in a macro-historical process, sounds like pushing away a challenging experience instead of meeting it by historical interpretation.)

But how can we bring about a concept of the universality of historical development and, at the same time, accept that there is only a multitude of different histories or a multi-perspectivity in historical thinking? Within the diversity of historical perspectives a unity of history can only be brought about by universal values in the methodical operation of historical interpretation. The point is that we need a guiding value-system, a universal value-system, which affirms the differences of cultures. I think that there is a fundamental value, which can be brought into a strategy of historical interpretation, a value, which is both: universal and simultaneously legitimates multi-perspectivity and difference. I think of a normative principle of mutual acknowledgement and recognition of differences in culture. It is possible to elaborate on this principle within the confines of a cognitive structure, which will strengthen the hermeneutical element of historical method. This structure can bring about a new approach to historical experience, which synthesises the unity of man-

kind and temporal development on the one hand and the variety and multitude of cultures on the other. Based on such a principle of historical sense historical studies can develop a meta-theoretical self-understanding, by which it does not only meet the challenges of its time at the end of the second millennium, but contributes to a start into the third, in which humanness remains an issue of the order of history.

### ***Opsomming***

#### **Die los(making) van die orde van geskiedenis: Enkele aspekte van historiese studies by waar modernisme, postmodernism ontmoet in die gesprek oor herinnering**

Die verskynsel van herinnering wat tans omvangryk onder bespreking is, word van naderby ondersoek in die konteks waar modernisme en postmodernisme mekaar kruis. Metahistorie, ook bekend as *Historik* in die Duitse tradisie, word gebruik as 'n manier om te verstaan hoe historiese studies geposisioneer kan word binne die konteks van 'n nuwe denkraamwerk. Daar word geredeneer dat in die aftakelingsproses van ontwikkeling het postmodernisme die weg van *Eigensinn* ten koste van konvensionele wysheid ingeslaan – baie op die geaardheid van 'n hardkoppige jeugdige. Hierdie houding teen genetiese teorieë word gekombineer met 'n nuwe hermeneutiese benadering tot die ondersoek na menslike lewe in die verlede.

Die skrywer kom tot die gevolgtrekking daar 'n veelheid van geskiedenis bestaan. Die dissipline kan nie net tot *die* geskiedenis beperk word nie. 'n Normatiewe beginsel van gemeenskaplike erkenning en respek vir verskillende kulture is nodig. Dit kan 'n nuwe benadering tot die waardering van historiese ervaring meebring.