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# Jörn Rüsen: Theory of History as Aufklärung

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Only a few authors have been as influential as Jörn Rüsen as regards the ongoing debate on history of historiography and, above all, theory of history in the Brazilian academic scene. In fact, since the 1970s there was a continuous flow of Brazilian scholars heading towards Bielefeld, Bochum and then Essen, in order to rejoin – through Rüsen’s conveyance – with a theoretical tradition from which we seemed to be since long torn apart. It was hence a matter of course when a larger Brazilian audiences, which during the 1990s began to approach Rüsen’s project of updating and expanding the German tradition of *Historik*, enthusiastically welcomed his lecture tour of Brazil that took place in the spring of 2010. In this occasion, Rüsen surprised his audience with a great willingness for dialoguing with Brazilian students and professors, as well as for traveling through the great distances that separate Mariana, Brasília, Curitiba, Goiânia, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo.

While visiting the History Department of the Federal University of Ouro Preto, Prof. Rüsen was interviewed by Sérgio da Mata and Valdei Lopes de Araujo. In what follows, there is a transcribed and edited version of this talk, in which Rüsen addressed issues such as: old and new classics of metahistorical reflection, the concept of “unprethinkable”, the possibility of anthropological universals, and the demand for a refreshed idea of humanism.

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*1. Valdei Lopes de Araujo: Maybe we could start by talking about your feelings about theory of history in Brazil. I know that you have been with Prof. Estevão Martins in Brasília and Goiânia. Perhaps you could tell us what you think of the future of theory of history in Brazil.*

**Jörn Rüsen:** The first thing I have to mention is my surprise when I found out that you in Brazil have a very strong discourse and work in theory of history. You have a network of experts, you have a discourse full of life and ideas, you have your own academic journal, and an association of scholars. That is astonishing, because in Europe we usually don’t find such an intensive work brought about by a rather big number of experts. An exception is the situation in the Netherlands, but even there you don’t have as many experts and people who are competent in doing theory of history as in Brazil. The problem I see is that this network is not known outside Brazil. You can call it a scandal, because the Brazilian colleagues do work on the highest level, so you’re marching in the front of the development. It’s of course a question of language: except for some specialists in Brazilian-Portuguese history, nobody reads and speaks Portuguese. It’s like German, and that’s the reason why it’s not known. I would very much like to recommend a new strategy for the theorists here in Brazil: Get your works known outside Brazil, send texts in English translations or originally written in English to the international journals, and do what you can to get a representative text, a collective book translated into English. This would be a worthwhile venture, because theory of history is not an established sub-discipline in historical studies, and Brazil has done theory for more than half a century. It’s a wonderful experience that it’s living here and it has a bright future in your country.

2. *Sérgio da Mata: How do you see the situation of theory of history in Germany today? Do you think the interest on the field has decreased?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** This question isn't easy to answer. There is a strong and a good tradition of metahistory in Germany. The most emblematic figure in this field was Johann Gustav Droysen. But, nevertheless, theory of history is not well established. In the past, there were some specific chairs and positions in theory of history. But most of them vanished, and I'm not so sure whether today there is even a single position that is exclusively dedicated to theory. Young people want to get a job, and if you're only specializing in historical theory your chances to get a good job are very small. Well, I made a career with my specialization in theory, in between historical studies and philosophy. But this was an exception: I'm an outsider. I could make my way only by chance. In your country, things are different. This is really astonishing, and, of course, I appreciate it very much.

Another reason for the weakening of theory of history on the international level are recent internal developments within the metahistorical debate. Lately, many historical theorists have been emphasizing rather the writing of history, the aesthetic and rhetorical elements in the procedures of sense generation, than the rational, methodical, scientific, academic character of doing history as a profession. Most historians are not competent regarding aesthetic and rhetorical matters, so they have to rely on scholars from literary studies and philosophy, like Hayden White. Actually, many good books about historiography have been written by experts in literary studies, who know a lot about what telling stories is about. But unfortunately, they don't know very much about the historical discipline itself. On the other hand, historians have problems to join the discourse about the literary structure of historiography, because professional historians consider themselves as researchers. They think of themselves as scientists (in the German and the Portuguese meaning of the word); they don't feel like poets or writers.

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3. *VLA: In the 19th century, some Germans theorists frequently pointed to a connection between history as a science and history as a form of art, as a literary genre. Authors like Wilhelm von Humboldt stressed that historians were scientists, whose activity had close connections to imagination. Is this distance between theorists, on one side, and historians, on the other, a 20th century phenomenon?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** Yes, it is. Humboldt is, of course, a good example. But he is not representative for historical studies as an academic discipline. Nevertheless, you can find similar statements by Ranke, as well. Ranke said: history is at the same time science and art. In the course of the 19th century, the importance of both sides of the practice of history was not completely overlooked, but the emphasis was on the scientific side, because science had a very prestigious position within the general cultural framework. Of course, such a prestige didn't derive directly from the humanities as sciences, but rather from the natural sciences; and thus the humanities, and at the end of the 19th century the new social sciences, too,

tried to participate in the cultural prestige science had gained. Therefore, you can see why excellent historians like Droysen and others used to emphasize method in their reflections on the work of the historians. When they thought about method, they in the first place meant source-criticism as a strong methodical procedure. By stressing this procedure, they were aiming at coming close to the prestigious field of the natural sciences. On the other side, the art of writing was not forgotten. Gervinus for instance, a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century historian, wrote a *Historik* (a theory of historical studies) as a theory of history writing. A real synthesis of both sides or dimensions in the reflection on what historians do is rare, and sometimes I even think it has not yet been accomplished. Such a synthesis is difficult, because art follows a different logic of sense-generation than science by method. And those who emphasize the literary character of the work of historians are not interested in the methodical aspects of research – in fact they tend to flagrantly ignore them! This is a lack in the awareness of what history is about. And of course many professional historians do indeed recognize this gap, but they will rather spend time going into archives. They also prefer to teach students on how to learn about the past instead of how to write texts.

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What the specialists who are interested in analyzing the writing of history haven't provided so far is an analysis of the special character of texts that are typical for scholars, history university professors, and historical researchers. As a matter of fact, they use to read works like *19<sup>th</sup> century German History*, or *The rise of this or that people*, and they analyze Leopold von Ranke and his great work, as well as some other famous English and French historians, of course. But do they read and analyze the specific academic texts, like articles in scholarly journals? These journals as they were founded during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in all western countries represent much more the new way of doing history, the professional, the scientific way. It would be worthwhile to read the first issues of these prestigious journals in order to see what they stated about history as an academic discipline. All these journals emphasized that objectivity has to be attained by solid archival research. It is also very interesting that all these different journals followed an anti-rhetorical intention: they used to say "we don't do rhetoric!". There is a very famous quote by Ranke polemicizing against rhetoric and claiming for "the naked truth". Ironically spoken: the most naked truth in historical writing is the footnote. I have missed in all this literature on historiography a clear analysis of the linguistic indications for truth claims and for rational argumentation. There is a very famous text – in a way it has become a classic – by Roland Barthes, *Le discours de l'histoire* (1967), which represents this lack of awareness. Barthes starts his paper with a radical criticism on historical studies' scientific claims. He calls these a scholarly "schizophrenia", i.e. he assumes that historians do not know what they are doing. Supposedly, they write texts as all older historians like Machiavelli and Thucydides did. This similarity is true. Barthes was able to show that modern professional historians used similar strategies in forming a historical representation. But he never asked the question "what makes the difference between the old and the new texts"? There is a difference, of course. Modern academic historiography is based on

research. If a professional historian does not refer to solid research, nobody will take him or her seriously, except the meta-historians who only look for narrative styles and overlook the implications that came out of the professionalization of historiography. Hayden White was very clear on this when he said that professionalism only brings about bad narratives.

*4. SM: There is a whole generation of 19<sup>th</sup> century authors that elaborated a theoretical foundation for historical science. In your lecture, you criticized authors like Rickert, Windelband and even Dilthey. What, in your opinion, was not achieved by them? What was "missing"?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** First of all, we have to correctly characterize the work of these people, including Max Weber and a lot of others: this kind of work is frequently called philosophy of history. But it is in fact an epistemology of historical thinking. They are less interested in history as a process of temporal change of the human world in the past, but rather in the way historians treat the past. Their main interest was to show what the distinctive nature of historical cognition is about, since it differs from physics and the natural sciences. History does not bring about a law of historical development – actually, Marxism tried to emphasize this last point, but that is a different story. History doesn't follow the logic of the natural scientific argumentation, but, nevertheless, modern historical thinking has some essentially rational or scientific elements. The thinkers you've mentioned emphasized a basic difference between history and natural sciences. The first one who did it was Johann Gustav Droysen, who distinguished understanding (*Verstehen*) and explanation (*Erklären*) as different modes of cognition. Understanding is the basic cognitive attitude of the humanities, while explaining is that of the natural sciences. Dilthey picked up this distinction and gave it an extended epistemological explanation and foundation. Weber followed Droysen as well (mainly influenced by Rickert); he combined the epistemological with a methodological argumentation. Rickert was not so much interested in hermeneutical methodology, but rather in the logical procedures of historical thinking. He characterized the difference between the two realms of cognition as individualization and generalization.

This distinction was very successful. But later on, it changed, when the distinctive nature of historical cognition was defined by pointing out to its narrative structure. The starting point for this new characterization was the question of rational explanation. C. G. Hempel described it by referring to the natural sciences: they explain by putting single cases into a general law. This model was applied to historical thinking, but it was difficult to identify historical laws. It was Arthur Danto who gave a much more plausible answer to the question on what a historical explanation is. He pointed to a very specific form of explaining things that is completely different from the rational explanation of the natural sciences: explaining by telling a story. That was an epistemological breakthrough; I have become convinced of it because of my close connexion to the German philosopher Hans Michael Baumgartner, who introduced Danto's

analytical philosophy of history into the German discussion on philosophy of history. Telling a story is a very specific form of explaining why things happened. With the discovery of the narrative structure of historical knowledge, metahistory as epistemology took a new direction, that of asking how historians come into view as writers. Analyzing historical texts as narratives brought the rationality of historical thinking out of view. With the discovery of the narrative structure of historical thinking, epistemology of history has dramatically changed. Metahistory no longer referred to Rickert or to Max Weber's methodology of ideal types, which is based on Rickert's arguments. This is a pity, since I believe that the epistemology and methodology of ideal types have something to do with the logic of narration. But this is an open question.

*5. VLA: Would you like to talk about your criticism on constructivism?*

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**Jörn Rüsen:** Well, first of all, constructivism is not new. Droysen had already said that the past in itself is not history. It is only afterwards that we look at it as history. Today, constructivism is a dominant topic in metahistory, because it comes close to the idea of history as a form of art. Artists invent meaning. Artists are creators. It may be that historians are very happy to learn that they are creators of historical meaning, and in fact they are. But you can't deny that historians bring about an input of meaning and an importance of the past to the present, which you can already find in the past documents themselves. Furthermore: is the past not already effective before the historians give it a meaning? I mean: historians do their work in a context, under conditions and in special situations, which are pre-given determinants for their construction. In this context and under these conditions, the past is present as a result of developments which took place in the past leading into the present. I would like to say that before we start to construct history, history has already constructed us. Nobody can deny that there are pre-given conditions for sense generation without which we can't understand what historians do. What historians do depends upon their age and upon their place in the chain of the generations. I, with my 70 years, look at German history in a different way than a colleague who is now 30 years old. Historical sense generation is a complex mixture or mediation of being already constructed and constructing. Being constructed means that elements of sense generation are pre-given and belong to the hard facts of social life conditions. David Carr, a very important philosopher of history, has made clear that history is more than only a construction; that history is an element of social reality. This real pre-given factor of sense generation is overlooked in the constructivist theories. Instead of construction, we should speak of generating sense. By historical thinking, we refer to something in the past that has already features of meaning and sense. The past can be very powerful in the form of tradition. Do we invent the meaning of the human race? No. The meaning is already – at least partly – there; it has already been pre-given. And what about all these documents of the past that are documents of sense or meaning, do we construct them? Do the professors in literary studies construct the meaning of their subject matter, literature? They may believe it. I don't.



6. SM: At the end of your lecture, however, you used a quite original expression: "unprethinkable" (unvordenklich). Could you further explain this concept?

**Jörn Rüsen:** This is a very difficult metahistorical subject matter. The argument runs as follows: the process of historical sense generation is characterized by the simultaneity of being constructed and constructing. While doing history, we realize an inbuilt temporality and historicity of our own life. We are living in the moment when we do our work as historians and, by doing it, we are part of the process that is afterwards addressed as history. Maybe we make a big discovery that changes our cultural world. But while doing it, we can't say what the historical outcome will be. The process of working in the field of sense generation is only a part of the whole field of the human life practice. It is the most real and the most present form of our life we can think about. It is the absolute presence of the moment of our doing history. We could even say that this doing is the most historical event we can do. Because it is a realization of the temporality and historicity of our own life. By doing history, we pursue temporality in the cultural world, and history is the temporal occurrence, the temporal happening of our own life. By doing history, we don't know what it is as history (this knowledge can only be brought about afterwards). At the very moment when we start thinking what it would be as a piece of explicit history, we've already lost it in its presence, and its reality. Now it becomes an object of reflection. As such, it has lost its vitality and in a certain way it becomes dead, like the past is dead for the historians who go into the archives. But this death is not the original reality of the past. It is only a shadow of it. What we find in the archives is a shadow of reality. The most real reality of the past is the case when we do history. This is my argumentation. But we must be very careful not to dissolve the clear distinction between, on the one hand, the reflection we call history, which is dedicated to a subject matter, namely, the past, and on the other hand, the process of realizing one's own temporality and historicity by means of historical sense generation, which is performed in the context of practical human life, and that we may call history, as well. These are two different histories. The point is that the second one is the foundation of the first one. If we think about it, we have already lost it. Therefore, I use the word unprethinkable.

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7. SM: If I may interrupt, is it not the same opposition that Husserl established between "natural attitude" and "theoretical attitude"?

**Jörn Rüsen:** I'd had to check the word *Einstellung*. I don't like it because it is already a relationship to something. But the relationship I think about is not a relationship but a *Vollzug*, a doing, a practice – and not a *Einstellung*. *Einstellung* means a kind of constellation, a mental constellation or something like that. No. What I mean is a mental dynamics: that is the point. *Vollzug* means something like *in doing, in doing time*...



8. SM - *Is it a Handeln (action)?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** Ja! It's *Handeln*, of course, but it is more than only a doing; it is a *Geschehen* (event/happening). There is more in *Geschehen* than in the simple doing. In all circumstances – and that is absolutely true – the outcome is different from what you thought you should bring about. If there is any law in history, it is a law that says that the outcome is always different from the intention of the people who are doing something.

9. VLA: *If you were to give some advice to younger researchers interested in theory of history today, what would you say to them? What are the main challenges to the field now after you gave us a huge work on systematic historical theory?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** Well, I think there are different unsolved problems of highest importance. One is the differences and similarities between interpretation and representation. Interpretation is a cognitive act that belongs to research. Representation is an aesthetic act of forming a narrative. Both are two sides of the same coin, but we don't know what that coin is. It is a text, of course, but what kind of text? That is an open question and it should be solved. A second issue is methodology. What is a historical concept? As I've already mentioned, I believe that we have to rethink the logic of building ideal types in respect to the narrative structure of historical knowledge. A third challenge for theory of history is the growing density of intercultural communication. We do what we do in the context of a western tradition – which is a tradition worthwhile to go on with. But it is a tradition in which "others" are different. It is a tradition besides other traditions. What we have to take much more into account while doing our work is the question "how do we come to terms with the fundamental difference between peoples, individuals, social units and whole cultures concerning their individuality and different identities?" We haven't addressed the issue of identity yet, but historical thinking is a necessary cultural medium to create, present and discuss one's own identity. We as westerners, namely me as a German and European westerner, do it in the framework of historical thinking which is the dominant medium for formulating my western identity. By doing so, I form the identity of others as well. And as long as I say I am a westerner and others are not westerners, I state a difference. Whether the others are happy about what I say about them, that is a completely different question. Edward Said said that he wasn't, but I am not so convinced whether that "no" is really a good one, but that is another question.

What I mean is that we have to widen the discourse on metahistory into a multi-dimensional intercultural discussion by bringing non-western scholars and intellectuals into our game, and by listening to them. We have to integrate what they experience as western, what they think about us, and what they think their own traditions are. Have you ever analyzed in your course on metahistory a text by Sima Qian? You did it! But it is not a standard issue. But you, as my young colleague, you are on the right track. That is exactly what we have to do. In

doing so, we have to confirm and to make clear, what universals are. We make use of them when we do our work as metahistorians. It would be nonsense to say that everything is culturally limited and that beyond these limits there would be nothing. No! There are universals. Of course, there are universals. But what do we really know about the inbuilt universality in modern scientific historical thinking? The Indians and the Chinese said there is a western historical thinking. And they tend to refuse the existence of universals. They speak of indigenous knowledge, for instance. But nevertheless, we can discuss with them, we can understand each other, so there must be more than only some western and some non-western concepts. Otherwise, how could we understand each other? We have to work with our non-western colleagues on the universals and at the same time on the differences on the basis of these universals. We have some paradigms for doing this. For me, for instance, the work of Max Weber is a very convincing western paradigm: how to come to terms with a variety of cultural manifestations of different human life forms? Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*) is an impressive text in which different possibilities of human practical life were put on the table as a conceptual means to find out cultural differences on the basis of universals like *Zweckrationalität* (purportive rationality) and elements of *Sinnrationalität* (rationality of sense and meaning). This is a third field where you'll find a very interesting challenge. And I think of a great opportunity for you people, as Brazilians. You belong to a certain degree to the western tradition, but as Brazilians and Latin Americans you have in your culture a kind of relationship to traditions that we don't have in Europe. Because of the different context of your own history, there is a great chance for historians and philosophers in Brazil to start an intercultural discourse under better preconditions than those we have in Europe. You should take yourself as Brazilians and Latin Americans more seriously than you have been doing until today.

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10. VLA: *We can say that your work is an attempt to recover some core concepts of the modern tradition of rationality in history as a meaning and as a process, which originated within the German tradition of historicism, and I think it is a very successful attempt to recover those concepts. But if you had to point some misleading paths in modern historiography or historical thought what would you mention?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** There is a very strong tradition in the western culture from the very beginning and onwards, which has become very strong in modern times. In *Science as a vocation* Max Weber called it *durch Berechnen beherrschen*. That means that by rational thinking you can become the master of the subject matter you are thinking about. So for instance through the natural sciences we can become the masters of nature. For sure, this can lead to catastrophic results, but we will never come out of technology. We need it. I'm talking about an attitude of mastering, the dream of mastering. This dream was present in the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century historians, too, even though in a hidden form. Today

we call 19<sup>th</sup> century historians the “priests of Clio”, and by doing so we mean they were in a way the masters of meaning. Such an attitude is very dangerous. Let me say it in a very old fashioned way: we need some humility and modesty while doing our work. The second mistake or limit of modern historical thinking is that it suppresses to a high degree the basic human experience of suffering. You can find very impressive words on suffering in Ranke or Herder. In one of the introductions to his Lectures, Ranke expressed of the misdeeds men did to other men and how the chain of these misdeeds had come to the present; and then he said that one tends to turn the back to one’s past in order to complain, and things like that. But then comes the big “but”: that we know it better, since at the core of all these changes is the divine force in history. And then you have this idealistic philosophy, and later on you have another one, a materialistic one.

But after the Holocaust and the crimes against humanity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can’t go on with business as usual. Actually, my most convincing example of a fundamental misconception in historical studies is what historians did after the end of the First World War. What did they do? Business as usual. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed in an industrial way. What about the reactions in the work of the historians against this explosion of inhumanity? Even when new forms of historical thinking did come about, in Germany as well in France, were they a convincing answer to the catastrophe of western culture and civilization in the Great War? I don’t think so. We still have to think about human inhumanity, about human suffering, about events of senselessness that afterwards cannot get sense and meaning. Can we give the Holocaust historical sense? It would be an intellectual suicide to think that we can’t. Here we have some basic fundamental dimensions of historical thinking we still have to explore. We have no alternative but doing it. And there is a consequence that is very important: there are dark elements in history. You know what I, as a German, am immediately thinking about. But even nations that did not commit genocide have some black spots in their self-awareness. The regular way of treating these black spots is either to suppress them or to put them out of the historical image of oneself or of one’s own people and insert them into the image of the others. Here we find a mental root of what is called the “clash of civilizations”. Normally it happens rather peacefully, but in certain circumstances it becomes bloody. What we have to bring about – and this comes close to what I’ve said about inhumanity and suffering – is a way to integrate the shadow of one’s past into the concepts of one’s own historical identity. The Germans were forced to do that by the circumstances of post-war Germany. Others were not forced, but they are doing it, too. The Holocaust is a paradigmatic example, but it’s not the only one. The second post-war generation of Dutch historians asked “why were the Germans able to bring so many Jews into the death camps?” There were very few Germans in the administration of the defeated Netherlands. The answer is clear: the Dutch bureaucracy helped them. And suddenly they discovered a shadow in their own history. Don’t misunderstand me: I don’t attempt to make the German guilt less burdening. My argument is a more structural one; it is a theoretical argument about the mental processes of forming historical identity.

This process is one of the core issues of metahistory. If we are able to integrate the shadows of our own history into our historical identity, we attain a new relationship to the others. For me that is one of the most important conditions under which mutual recognition of differences is possible.

*11. VLA: It seems that the tradition of theory of history as developed by historians did not fully integrate the contributions of a thinker as influential as Heidegger. I am thinking specifically in categories like historicity and temporality. Reinhart Koselleck stands as an exception, if one admits that his project of a history of concepts and his Historik can be regarded as a direct answer to that tradition. How you evaluate that absence?*

**Jörn Rüsen:** The problem of approaching Heideggerian concepts such as temporality is how do you get from such a theory to real history. I believe that it is true that history can only be conceptualized in the framework of concepts which are anthropologically fundamental in general. That is what Koselleck (1997) said in his text. And he proposed categories like old and young, master and servant and some others.

*12. VLA: Enemy and friend...*

**Jörn Rüsen:** And this one, *Freund und Feind*, which comes from Carl Schmitt is the most important for him. Killing and dying is another one. This is convincing; it is convincing that this is a form within which all human life practices take place. But they are a-temporal concepts: it is true for all times, for all spaces, for all societies. But how do you come from this general binary categorization to temporal processes? Whatever history is about, it is in any case based on the fundamental existential experience of change. You can even use Heidegger again: *Endlichkeit*, or *Werden* or *Vergehen* (finitude, becoming, vanishing). To grow, to become, to experience things coming and going: all this is elemental. You have to die, people are born. You can conceptualize these things in an anthropological way as something that is valid to every human being. What about the distinctive nature of this change, because it's a change of real things? A change in the form of domination, a change in the interrelation of people, a change in the attitude in organizing social life, a change in the way of appropriating nature through labor – these are most obvious things historians speak about. And this is the question: you must think in a way so that these real changes can be thought, conceptualized, perceived, as coming from that general transcendental existential categorization. Here is the point Koselleck stops on and says: "Well, *Historik* is the theory of the conditions of possibility for all possible histories". But how do you come from possibility to reality? And here I see the limit in Heidegger, as well. Heidegger's category of *Geschichtlichkeit* is empty. Every human life is *geschichtlich*, historical, but then it doesn't mean very much with respect to the basic historical experience that there is only a special change, a special temporal development, something concrete, something that has the character of an event.

All this is not addressed in Heidegger's *Geschichtlichkeit*. You can apply it to all places but you never come to principles of sense generation. *Geschichtlichkeit* as such has no sense. It is an empty idea. It can point to the sense of the eternity of values through all changes, and so on. But without the possibility of deriving sense criteria from the basic anthropological and existential categories, you can never come from *Geschichtlichkeit* to *Geschichte*.

Heidegger and this kind of philosophy can be understood – and now this comes to my mind, as I speak with you – as a consequence of the experience of the First World War. The experience of the First World War and of pre-war times can be brought into one sentence: it destroyed all pre-given sense structures, and ideas of sense that were very powerful during the 19th century. Let me give you an example. The most powerful category of sense that characterized 19th century historicism was the category of *development*. Development means that what is happening has something to do with current temporal processes. You derive from the experience of the past an idea of temporal development, and then you can place your own time in that development. That is what Ranke did. Historians love to quote that famous dictum by Ranke that “all epochs are immediate to God”.<sup>1</sup> Well, that is true, but Ranke's text goes on to say that an epoch “has consequences in the process of what comes out of it”. In Ranke, it's a very complex thing to understand an era according to its own understanding, that is, to understand it as immediate to God. It has value in itself and, at the same time, it has a value for us. This can only be thought within the context of a philosophy of history that comes close to Hegel's or to Droysen's, in which those values have a kind of continuity through time until they reach us. Classical historicism goes even a step forward. Historicism did not only speak of development as such, because that would be empty as well. The point was: “development of what?” And the answer was: the development of ideas. Ranke used the term *real Geistiges*. It means the human spirit as a form of social reality. Historicism conceptualized a whole hierarchy of ideas that work as forces of change, ideas that are moving human life forms in the change of time. Wilhelm von Humboldt published a short article on the moving forces of world history (HUMBOLDT 2010, p. 82-100). He would agree with Droysen and Hegel that in the deepest ground those moving forces have a spiritual character, that is, a character that defines humankind as being different from nature. *Geist* is an untranslatable German term, and therefore the humanities were called *Geisteswissenschaften*. And *Geist* makes sense. A rather simple but very powerful idea. The moving forces in reality constitute historical change by the power of ideas. For instance the idea of the State, *die Idee des Staates*, or the idea of civil society. It is the same spirit (*Geist*) that moves the mind of the historians in thinking of the past, or thinking about the past.

So, both the spirit of historical cognition and the spirit of history as a subject matter of cognition are one and the same. In this respect historians are

<sup>1</sup> “Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott, und ihr Wert beruht gar nicht auf dem, was aus ihr hervorgeht, sondern in ihrer Existenz selbst, in ihrem eigenen Selbst” (RANKE 1906, p. 17).



the loudspeakers of historical reality. That comes close to what was meant by the expression “priests of Clio”. Historians were thought as the mouth of the spirit, who blows human life in reality. This was a very powerful concept of the educated middle classes all over Europe. This idealism has to be concretized as the spirit moving the minds of the people in their national identity, and therefore nationhood was conceived as a highly spiritual thing. In the 19th century, it got a quasi-religious feature. Droysen’s is a very fascinating, and a very frightening example of that kind of secular religion.

The plausibility of this concept of sense, which was governed by the idealistic notion of *Geist*, evaporated in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I mean, where is the moving spirit in the class struggle with the proletarians? And then you have the newly established power of industry and technology. One may say that is a manifestation of the spirit as well, but it’s not the kind of spirit you’ll find in a text, in historiography, for instance. It’s not the spirit you’ll find in the manifestations of human mind, in culture. The end of the First World War was the last step of this loss of sense. What remained? Only the form, but no longer a sense bearing content. That is *Geschichtlichkeit*. And in this respect, Heidegger can be understood as a reaction against a massive experience of the end of tradition – as well as Max Weber. Heidegger did not express it. Max Weber used to characterize the situation of his time as a lack of sense and meaning in our approach to social reality. He used the metaphor of darkness and night, and night means that the sun does not shine; and the sun is the usual symbol for meaning and sense. But keeping up this historicist structure gave the people the feeling that they were still going on in doing meaningful work. But they had a problem with sense and meaning and the question was what they could find out to replace the idealistic sense-generator of *Geist*. Max Weber said it is simply human subjectivity. In his famous article on *The Objectivity of Knowledge in the Social Sciences* he states that we are *Kulturmenschen*, that we are cultural beings, and have the ability to give a meaning to the world. Historicism said the world is already meaningful, and we have in ourselves that same spirit we perceive as operating in the outside world as the mover of history. Weber’s arguments came out of a context in which people were struggling against senselessness. Its most radical articulation is Nietzsche’s statement on the death of God – and here we should take God as the source and the most essential guaranty for sense and meaning. Intellectuals were asking themselves: “where do we now find the source for meaning”? Heidegger has a place in this intellectual search for a new meaning, and he was as radical as Nietzsche. He said that the whole meaning of western culture (he never thought about Asia), the whole intellectual perception of meaning in the western culture was over. It started with Plato, Socrates and Aristotle; it got its form in metaphysics and it ended with Nietzsche. It has its last climax in Hegel, and then this God died. Heidegger wouldn’t say that this god did die, but it turned out that God was no longer a reliable source for meaning. Because of this, Heidegger’s attitude was the following: let’s go back to a time before the beginning of western culture, before the polis, before democracy, before argumentation. And that is very typical for the intellectual



attitude of a conservative elite, who used to criticize not only modernity, but modernity as the latest outcome of traditional western civilization. There are a lot of other examples. For instance, Heidegger starts thinking about Anaximander and *andächtiges Denken*, and that comes close to myth. At the time after the First World War, we can observe a rehabilitation of myth against rationality. For instance in psychoanalysis, there was Jung and his archetypes. Into this context belongs also the Nazi movement. The Nazi movement as a cultural movement is based on a complete negation of the sense structure of modernity, and it accepted all the modernity and technology and all techniques of running systems, while completely refusing modernity as a concept of meaning and sense.

This is my comment, and I wouldn't say that I now can tell you where the real source of meaning is. My proposal is that we should follow the modern way of looking for meaning, by asking the famous question: what is a human being? This brings us into a fruitful interrelation to classical modern philosophy, and especially to Kant. But we have to rethink it after this development. We have to rethink our idea of what it is to be a human being vis-à-vis the burdening inhumanity of humans in the crimes against humanity. This is much more difficult to bring about than what is assumed by systems theory, or by Foucault's argument that we'd better "forget about humans". But we are humans and not systems. Or take the example of Heidegger who said, that we are the shepherds of the being and that we have to listen to its commands. This is a typical attempt to relate humans to some super-human authority, and this is extremely dangerous if you take that politically. Because - to put it simply - in the name of this super-human sphere, in the name of this higher meaning, in the name of *das Sein des Seienden*, you can treat humans in an inhumane way. This may end up by justifying inhumanity for the sake of a higher value than humanity. We know how that works. It can be done in the name of a classless society, ending in the killing of the *Kulaks*, the small land owners, in Russia. It was a mass murder, a social genocide. The Nazi killed the Jews in the name of "purifying humanity". For them the Jews were like an "illness" for humankind, and the idea was that if we kill all of them, we'll gain back real humanity. Here we may find an insight we have to gain about what it means to be a human being. It is rather easy to give the human beings an orientation, a cultural orientation within which they are willing and able to kill others without any bad consciousness. In the name of a higher value, they can do it. That is the reason why I think we should think again of what it means to be a human being. This is also the reason why we should return to that classical idea (Kant, Humboldt, Herder) that every human is an individual, and represents humankind in a unique way. Here I find the content of *Geschichtlichkeit*: human beings live meaning in *Geschichtlichkeit* because they are as humans, as cultural beings, meaning and sense. Not only in language, but in everything that they do, and this has to be reflected, temporalized. By this reflection the temporality and historicity of the human life get a direction, and historical thinking gets a vision and an idea of temporal change as a meaningful history. With this idea we can now go on and do the work of the historian.

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