

Mapping historians: historians' orientations and historical production

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Narrative historians have long exhibited greater or lesser awareness of their own agency as authors, where absolute objectivity is precluded. Indeed, historians' reports of the past include their own orientations or attitudes, which can also be examined in historians' autobiographies. In this article we present a study in which a questionnaire was used to ask historians about their orientations toward their subject matter. How do historians approach their work as agents and what might this reveal about the nature of historical production? In our model, we have distinguished four criteria, sorted the answers using statistical analysis and weighed the results in the light of our expectations. Indeed, by exploring historians' presuppositions (exemplified in examining historians' autobiographies), historical production can be seen as an institutional process also steered by historians' orientations and agency with important philosophical implications for the integral relationship between historians' public and private roles.

Introduction

The reflexive questions concerning the historian's task, as presented in the questionnaire that serves as the basis of our study, is an approach designed to capture a particular matrix of historians' orientations and attitudes that serves to open up a tacit dimension in the production of history by the "historian as agent" (cf. Polanyi 2009 [1966]). In this article, we would like to show that it is the historians' orientations and attitudes that is tacitly embedded in their work, at least as much as their knowledge of and methodological expertise in the fields they study, which contributes to historical production as an institutional process with potentially important philosophical implications for the integral relationship between the public (cultural and institutional) role of the historian as a representative of the discipline of history and the private (individual) role of the historian-as-author.

For this reason, it is important to establish that historians, just as human agents in general, possess presuppositions that steer them (whether or not they are aware of such steering), and that such presuppositions also filter how they understand and interpret what they find, however subtly. Even E. H. Carr advocated the principle that we first "[s]tudy the historian before [we] begin to study the facts," in order to find out what "bees he has in his bonnet," so that in reading the work of history we can "always listen out for the buzzing," as he rather drolly put it (1964, 23).

If we would take such advice to heart, it would mean that historical texts cannot be divorced from the persons who write them. This perspective reverses the normal point of view of "the landscape of history" (that is, the view of the past from the perspective of the historian) to the processes of the historian-as-agent who writes these texts within a socio-cultural matrix of experience in specific times and places (Certeau 1988, 60–69; Spiegel 2007, 13). Before proceeding to the case of historians' autobiographies, in order to examine

more carefully the claims staked out above, we will first introduce the model of historical production and an analysis of the questionnaire upon which the model is based.

Introducing the model of historical production

The model of historical production features four sectors divided by two intersecting continuums; see Figure 1, in the following section, for reference. (The original model of historians' orientations, as applied in the questionnaire, together with the tables of analysis, can be found at <http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/history.pdf>). The vertical continuum represents the complex social and cultural context (backdrop) of a place at a particular time. In other words, the vertical continuum comprises the context in which decisions are contemplated and acted upon, as situations arise in the environment – the locus of potential agency and experience in time and place – in which the two opposite poles represent, in the upper position, agency ("the environment changes") and, in the lower position, adaptation ("the environment does not change"). From this perspective, the upper position constituted by sectors P3 (left side) and P4 (right side) can be described as representing the "agentic horizon", while the lower position constituted by sectors P1 (right side) and P2 (left side) can be described as representing the "adaptive horizon" of the model.

The horizontal continuum represents the agent, in this case, the historian him-/herself – whether focused on traditional methods of historical production, or on theoretical frameworks in the philosophy of history, or focused on the debates between historians or philosophers of history, or even committed to totally new ways of thinking about approaching the past. This continuum represents historians' orientations – that is, attitudes toward history that become manifest in the body of his or her professional historiographical output. Attitudes become manifest in this model, precisely because the horizontal continuum comprises the personal orientations from which decisions are contemplated and acted upon – the locus of interests and the problem-solving skills construed to serve those interests as demonstrated (in this particular instance) by individual historians – in which the two opposite poles on the continuum represent, on the left-hand position (P2 and P3), a closed schema (a "focus on one's own ideas", as in a theoretical framework, even against the grain of accepted opinion) and, on the right-hand position (P1 and P4), an open schema (a "focus on data", including the opinions of other historians). Our proposed model thus distinguishes four sectors of historical production as four different types, based on criteria contained within the two intersecting continuums. This establishes common starting points within all four domains that include attitudes within a socio-cultural environment, in given situations of historical production.

Historians' orientations

What motivates historians in their work? In what follows, we present the data collected when we asked three groups of Finnish historians what they think about their own orientation to their subject matter. How do historians, in general, orient themselves towards their subject, that is, towards history as a phenomenon and history as (scientific) work? To find out, we prepared a questionnaire with 23 statements, based on Jyrki Reunamo's model of agentive perception (cf. Reunamo 2007a, b; see the Appendix in the above-mentioned web material), and distributed it on three occasions. In the first instance, ten Finnish professors, researchers and postgraduate students from the Section of Social Science History, Department of Political and Economic Studies in the University of Helsinki filled out the ques-

tionnaire in spring 2007. The second instance was May 2007, when the questionnaire was distributed at a countrywide history workshop for postgraduate students, which included both history professors and postgraduates from the history departments of the universities of Tampere, Helsinki, Rovaniemi, Turku and Oulu. Altogether 12 persons in this second group filled out the questionnaire. The third instance for the questionnaire distribution was at a history conference at the Department of Applied Sciences of Education in the University of Helsinki. Although the latter conference participants were mostly doing historical research, the majority were researchers and postgraduates of educational sciences. Once it was decided that this research would only be about the orientation of historians, this resulted in only four acceptable questionnaires. The participants in the research evaluated the statements on the six-point scale between strongly disagree and strongly agree, after which the questionnaire was analysed statistically (for the statistics see the above-mentioned web material).

It should be stressed here that, first, we understand from the outset that the different fields of history represented by those who were kind enough to fill out our questionnaire most likely come from different research traditions that, in turn, realize different levels of self-reflexivity in their work. We also understand, second, that the respondents include professors, researchers, and postgraduate students; that is to say, they include seasoned historians along with researchers and historians in training. Moreover, the fields and the levels of expertise that are represented here arise from among several universities in Finland. Therefore our respondents represent a very heterogeneous group, whom we cannot pretend offer cohesive results across the board for which to speak on behalf of all historians. Nor can we even make the lesser claim that they are representative of all historians in Finland; they are not representative across the board on either count. Our purpose in distributing such a questionnaire to such a heterogeneous group of historians was for experimental purposes, as tied to a more general hypothesis with philosophical implications that will be explored to some extent in the section on academic autobiography, below.

Keeping in mind the heterogeneous nature of the respondents whom we are referring to here as "history researchers" or "historians", on the whole, they agreed most with the statement: "I am ready to discard my existing research results in light of new evidence" (see Table 2 in the web materials mentioned above). It goes without saying that the importance of historical evidence should be strong among historians. Indeed, the validity of evidence is, in general, the most important criterion for them among the given statements. It is also worth noting that they agree consistently on the importance and value of the evidence. This statement therefore had the least variation among historians' orientations (see Table 3 in the web materials). The second most agreed upon statement was: "I am interested in uncovering the complexities and ambiguities of the process". As a group, the historians thus appear not to be lured by all-purpose arguments; they seem, rather, to accept the blurring of clear-cut categories and to tolerate ambiguity. They also feel that it is important to look for the variety of factors that affect the research results. The value of historical evidence and the complexity of history are shared points of view for historians, as the variance among evaluations is second smallest among statements, next to evidence. In fact all respondents agreed on these two statements. As the two statements are shared by all, they are also interwoven. The complexity of historical evidence thus comes to the foreground, which underlines the role of interpretation and the role of one's presuppositions in the results.

The two statements that were most controversial were: "I try to let history reveal itself through the facts, to really understand what happened" and "I am concerned about the legitimacy and status of my research in the field" (see Table 3 in the web materials). Historians

differed substantially in their values concerning these two statements. There was even one researcher who stated that to really open him- or herself to and understand history was not important at all, but he or she still highly valued historical evidence and acknowledged the ambiguities of history. We interpret this as describing a researcher who wants to expose the historical facts as purely and objectively as possible and thereby interfering as little as possible with his or her own interpretations, while simultaneously denying the role of personal presuppositions. There was another researcher who was not at all concerned about the legitimacy of his or her research, but was still highly concerned about the complexity and evidence of his or her research. We suggest that this represents the researcher's personal concerns about the quality of the research while disregarding the value of acknowledgement by his or her peers within the community of historians.

The statement that mostly divided historians' opinions was "I am trying to find out or describe my findings in terms of narrative emplotment (organizing the evidence according to a narrative logic)". This underlines researchers' different attitudes regarding their own styles of reporting their results, quite in keeping with the idea that historians use "neutral", "ordinary language" to report their findings. It is worth noting, in this regard, that historians who tended to describe their findings within a distinctive narrative logic, tended to disagree with the statement "It is important to model or theorize the historical process" (see Table 4 in the web materials). Such an outlook suggests that those who acknowledge their use of figural language in their texts also deny a theoretical framework for the data. Thus, the theoretical foundations of historical research are controversial issues revealed most notably in the statement "The value of my research is in its strong theoretical clarity and power", which had the second largest variation among all statements (see Table 3 in the web materials).

It was not only individual historians that differed in their values and opinions about the value of historical theory, but there were also differences among the three groups (researchers in the Section of Social Science History, the participants at the national history workshop for postgraduates in May and the participants at the educational history conference; see Table 1 in the web materials for differences in the averages among the three groups' evaluations). In the Section of Social Science History the theoretical orientation was among the most important, which reflects the more conscious training in methodology necessitated by the social historians' objects of research, while the participants from different universities and educational sciences valued a theoretical orientation less than average. That is, the former researchers stressed that "It is essential to find a good framework which explains the events" more often than the latter historians in educational sciences.

The statements "I want to participate in socio-cultural development with my research" and "History as science produces new tools for societal development" were more valued by the historians of educational sciences. This seems natural, as the very nature of education is to sustain and cultivate ideas that can be appreciated by and used in society. Thus the motives for research include the aspects of personal or societal advancement. The educational historians shared the concern for uncovering the complexities of the phenomenon and they also highly valued the role of evidence, whereas they were not as prepared as other historians to discard their results in light of new evidence. Perhaps this particular orientation of historians in the field of education is expressed in their choice of research questions or in their way of publishing their results.

The historians represented here differ not only in their backgrounds, but also regarding factors on valuing different historical orientations (see Table 6 in the web materials). Of these four groups of factors, four reliable groups of statements can be produced, which are

internally consistent (see Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10 for the reliability analysis of the four groups thus formed). The four identifiable factors of historical orientation can also be described as reliable descriptors of their factors and are presented in Figure 1, below.

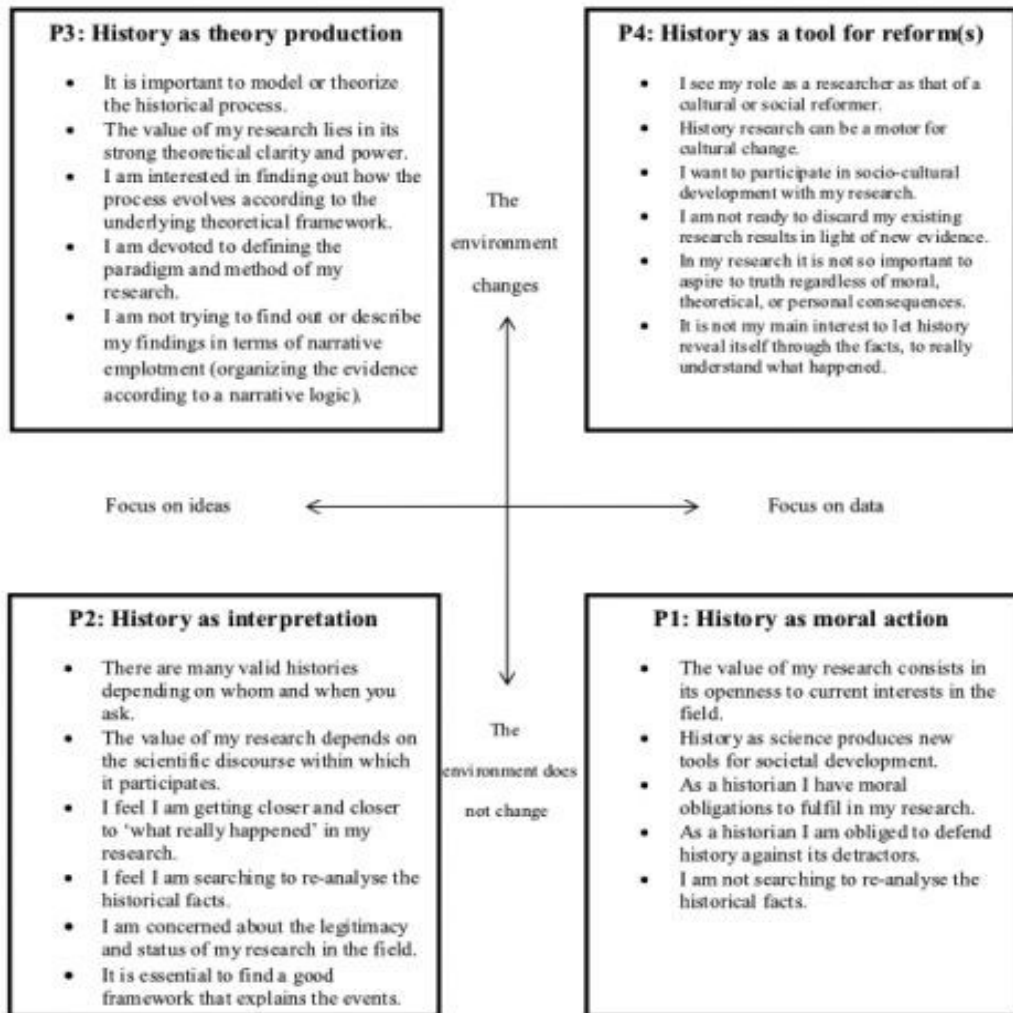


Figure 1. The four orientations of historians after statistical analysis (cf. Reunamo 2007b) [Click a link at the top of the page to enlarge the image (pdf-file)]

There were two statements that did not contribute to the reliability in any of the four orientations. The first was "I am interested in uncovering the complexities and ambiguities of the process". This statement described everyone and so it was not possible to include it in any one specific category. The other statement that did not fit the categories was "History can cumulate, such that my research is a small part of the historical whole". While preparing the statements this one was anticipated to be a part of the southeast sector of the model (P1). But because the quest for historical truth could not be placed in that sector

without a gross decline in statistical reliability, the general description of sector P1 evolved from "History as facts" to "History as moral action". Moreover, the general description of the southwest sector of the model (P2) also needed reconsideration. Originally it was thought to describe "History as discourse", in which generally accepted truths (metanarratives) no longer existed. Nevertheless, the statement "I feel I am getting closer and closer to 'what really happened' in my research" clearly increased the reliability of the factor, thereby enforcing a new description of the sector. The statement implies a belief in some kind of historical "truth" and the possibility of genuine understanding, thus sector P2 was subsequently relabelled "History as interpretation" along the lines of the phenomenological/hermeneutical tradition.

In the northwest section of the model (P3), the statement about "narrative employment" was originally categorised as belonging to P2, but was found (in its reverse form) to increase the reliability of section P3 of the model, namely "History as theory production". As in the previous sectors of the model, P4 (in the northeast section) also required some re-definition following the statistical analysis of the statements. Our presupposition was to label this fourth sector "History as social reform". In the analysis the role of reform was sustained, but two additional statements (in their reverse form) enhanced the description. The history researcher who sees history as a source for reform is less interested in aspiring to the "real" truth of the past than those in the other sectors of the model and is, consequently, also less interested than other historians in focusing solely on "discovering what really happened in the past". While surprising at first glance, such an outlook may be interpreted from quite another angle.

We suggest that this outlook values the integral, contiguous elements between the past and present, insofar as old data may harbour within it hidden elements, where the focus is not on a linear search for "truth(s)" necessarily, but rather on new ways for old data "to speak to the present", thereby emphasizing the feature of "living circularity and plasticity" of history in being remade, remoulded and (in this light) "reformed" to solve abiding human problems. Indeed, Dutch historian Eelco Runia suggests that "metonymical presence and metaphorical meaning [in the historical text] are locked in an evolutionary dance", the configuration of which promotes leaps of understanding facilitated by what he describes as "bridgeheads to the unknown" (2006, 22). Such features of plasticity and change also point to the tacit role of readers of histories as unseen partners in this active evolution of historical production, as Finnish narrative theorist Kalle Pihlainen has recently argued (2008). These additions, moreover, make up "History as a tool for reform(s)", and while this orientation may at first seem unfamiliar, our findings are reflected in the observations of a growing number of historians including, for example, Beverley Southgate (2005, 2007), Geoff Eley (2005), Gabrielle M. Spiegel (2007), among others. Southgate speaks to the issue, when he states that "by deliberately opposing consensus, histories might be practically used to challenge existing (intellectual and socio-political) frameworks, with the ultimate goal of human betterment" (2007, 71).

Which sectors did the historians favour? The scale for evaluations was from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). The sector that historians in our survey favoured the most was "History as interpretation" (section P2), the mean score among statements in that factor being 4.15. It was closely followed by "History as theory production" (section P3) with the mean score of the statements being 4.08. "History as moral action" (section P1) came in third with a statement evaluation mean of 3.70. Historians in general did not see themselves as using "history as a tool for reform" (section P4), although the mean score of the statements in this category varied from 2.0 to 4.83. For the whole picture it is

important to keep in mind that all the historians in our survey share the most valued statements of historians concerning the readiness to reconsider evidence and relate to the complexities of history.

In sum, the above model, and the survey upon which it is based, has captured a particular matrix of historians' orientations and attitudes that serves, in turn, to open historiographical production more powerfully, if more meaningfully, to the "historian as agent". Indeed, all four orientations affect this production in the way in which the tacit choices of historians are related to this process.

In now turning to the theme of historians' autobiographies with reference to the history/literature debate, we would like to draw a direct parallel between what is commonly referred to as the "fact/fiction" divide, on the one hand, and the "public/private" divide, on the other hand, which our model specifically addresses. More to the point, it is the "dichotomy" between the two intractable sides of both divides that mislead the philosophical debate and, for this reason, is incapable of ever offering a satisfactory solution. Indeed, the key that we offer here is to understand the "continuous nature" of the two entities: their relationship in the production of the other, and not their separation and mutual exclusion. The theme of historians' autobiography is a means by which this relationship can most easily and briefly be shown.

Historians' autobiographies beyond the history/literature debate

Kuisma Korhonen (2008a, b) has drawn attention to works of literature, such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and Sven Lindqvist's *A History of Bombing* (2000), that stand in the breach between literature and (personal) history, and thus what some theorists today would still regard as an unresolved breach between fact and fiction (Korhonen 2006; Pihlainen 2002). Well over half a century ago, the medievalist Geoffrey Barraclough firmly noted that "[t]he history we read [– –] though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements" (in Carr 1964, 14; cf. Beard 2009; Scott 2004 [1996]; Gorman 2007). Notwithstanding the ongoing controversy (and, thus, the continuing need for distinctions among the terms employed in this debate [e.g. Cohn 1999; Walsh 2007]), literature is often inspired by personal experience and is sometimes thinly veiled autobiography, as Korhonen (2008a, b; cf. Southgate 2009) convincingly demonstrates. Even more interesting for the present argument is the case of historians' autobiographies. As Carolyn Steedman candidly admits in *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*,

This is not to say that this book involves a search for a past, or for what really happened. It is about how people use the past to tell the stories of their life. So the evidence presented here is of a different order from the biographical; it is about the experience of my own childhood, and the way in which my mother re-asserted, reversed and restructured her own within mine. (1987, 8.)

In the framework of historians' autobiographies, Steedman reveals the sensibilities of her profession as a social historian when she states that "memory alone cannot resurrect past time, because it is memory itself that shapes it, long after historical time has passed" (29; cf. Friedländer 1979; Benjamin 2006). Thus, Steedman's professional focus on social history, including that of childhood, can therefore be said to be deeply informed ("shaped" in the above sense) by a personal past in which her own (different kind of) childhood experience has served as a plumb line of sorts in the histories she writes about it.

For his part, American historian Jeremy D. Popkin (1999, 2003, 2005) has systematically examined historians' memoirs/autobiographies, and shows that these works occupy the liminal space between history and literature more unambiguously than even non-historians writing the stories of their lives. And whereas autobiographies in the past have been explicitly frowned upon as sources in the professional literature, Popkin has traced the emergence of historians' memoirs over the last quarter of a century among the professional elite of France and the USA, who – in many cases – have lived as personal witnesses of the era they have written about in their professional lives (Popkin 1999, 726–727; cf. Tommila 1998; Friedländer 1979, 1997, 2007).

Indeed, Popkin also traces the change in historians' attitudes towards their own (and others') autobiographies along the same temporal trajectory of change in which the practices of, especially, social history have come to embrace microhistory and the history of everyday life as viable extensions of method and subject matter within the discipline (Popkin 1999, 28; cf. Burke 2001; Jenkins & Munslow 2004; Southgate 2005). In other words, there is a shift of focus that concentrates on the singular experiences of persons, as opposed to experiences derived from generalization, which echoes the Bakhtinian focus on "the single utterance", where (in this sense) the historian's autobiography constitutes a single life concretely contextualized in time and place.

One conclusion that can be derived here is that this space between history and autobiography demonstrates an absence of clear-cut lines drawn between the known/remembered fact(s) and the emplotment of selected and interpreted events within one's own life – often in accordance with the social norms and "the official interpretive devices of a culture", i.e. particular tropes – let alone the emplotment of events from other people's lives in different places and times, including situations of an extreme and traumatic nature (e.g. Friedländer 1979, 1997, 2007; Runia 2004; White 2004, 2006). In short, if one extrapolates from the circumstances of autobiography to history proper, the attention to language and style, not to mention attention to socio-cultural factors that enter into it (let alone the psychological factors involved with trauma and extreme events), serves in their own specific ways as a type of filter or "veil" in the gap between the reader and the past, and certainly not as a "curtain" that is pulled aside to reveal such events in full (Daddow 2004, 421). Be that as it may, this does not justify, even for narrative theorist Hayden White, that a passage from Holocaust survivor Primo Levi would "be read as fiction or apprehended as an 'imaginary' invention", even if Levi took some poetic license in his factual description of Auschwitz (White 2004, 116; cf. Pihlainen 1998, 10–13).

Seen in this light, we suggest that remnants of an underlying "linear" vision and vocabulary of the historical profession – that separates and dichotomises rather than unites and synthesizes – vies directly with a more "dynamic", processual vision that has not been developed enough, despite the mainstream acceptance and employment of "process-talk" (e.g. Spiegel 2007, 2009; Poster 2007; Ermarth 2007; Bynum 2009). In this sense, we are moving from a perspective in which language has hitherto served symbolically within a system of representation (as a determining cultural force), during the era of the "linguistic turn", to the contemporary shift in which language works as a deliberate tool in a dialogical "sense-making process" deployed as "moves in social interaction" (Hyvärinen 2006, 33; cf. Pihlainen 2008; Ermarth 2007, 60–61) for the purpose of connecting people and their activities as a "socially binding force" (Seuren 2009).

When, for example, "memory alone cannot resurrect past time, because it is memory itself that shapes it", as Steedman claims, then we must begin to acknowledge not the "object-like" nature of the historical product, but rather the living circularity and plasticity

of the past in being remade, remoulded, reformed through the prism of a constantly changing present as experienced by individual historian-agents. Mark Poster comes remarkably close to such a position, in suggesting that "[p]erhaps a convincing way to illustrate the change in agency connected with changes in media is to examine the methods of historians and ask about their agency in archival work [– –] [where] [t]he machine [– –] becomes an aspect of the agency of the historian, an integral part of the research project" (2007, 48).

Thus, what we have attempted, by way of capturing historians' agency within this particular matrix of historians' orientations and attitudes, is to lay bare and exemplify the way any group of historians are tacitly imbued with the social conventions (culture) of his or her time and place as a given. In fact, historians cannot escape enculturation, socialization, and training, if they aim to succeed as historians at all, no matter what their field of interest, methodology, or individual research experience. In our work of showing a "tacit dimension" in historians' orientation underlying their historiographical contributions, we have confronted head-on the dichotomy of a public-private divide in historical production (cf. Pihlainen 2001). For, as has been suggested above, autobiography and history are indeed closer than first meets the eye at the level of language and text. Admittedly, however, bringing awareness of presuppositions by way of self-reflection (as in the case of historians' autobiographies) may be more useful in some fields of historical research than in others; certainly the main examples, above, focus on social, cultural, and intellectual history. But, what this exercise has to offer in terms of self-reflection and awareness need not be completely lost on other fields of historical endeavour. The point is that the relationship between the public and private sides of the historian *qua* historian constitutes two sides of the same coin, quite in the same manner that fact and fiction (or history and literature) cannot be so easily separated, after all.

To borrow an organic metaphor, just as the tree cannot survive without its network of roots hidden, for the most part, out of view beneath the soil, so too the discipline of history as a cultural entity could not exist without the thinking, feeling persons who occupy their posts, contributing their share from different points of view in their areas of expertise and interest – eventually incorporated into the public face of history. As Alun Munslow has recently put it, "the subjective ethical claim becomes central in the historian's creation of the-past-as-history. As might be imagined, like everything else [– –] the concept of 'the historian' must be fundamentally rethought" (2010, 102).

Conclusion: future directions for the model of historical production?

The results presented here merely open the topic, in any case, but it would be of interest in terms of developing the model further to compare historians in different contexts. Do historians around the world differ in their preferences? What is the role of researchers' gender or age? The work of Popkin implies that there are extensive differences and a range of outlooks between generations of historians from one country to the next, as revealed in their autobiographies, and all that this entails from the socio-cultural to the personal levels. Indeed, how does a country's historical past reflect historians' preferences, as those pointed out by Popkin between France and the United States? How does the researchers' family background or personal history (e.g., Saul Friedländer's mid-twentieth century, western, European Jewish background) affect their focus and evaluations? What are the historians' epistemic and ontological presuppositions?

In other words, the model would need further refining. The two main continuums presented in the theory part of the article need more attention, for example, as they harbour

an implicit potential for uncovering more subtle distinctions than can be elaborated in the present study. Overall, however, by mapping essentials, such as historians' orientations (commitment to "ideas/intellectual frameworks" vs. "data" on each end of the horizontal continuum) with respect to historians' agency (commitment to "change" vs. "consensus" on each end of the vertical continuum), the model offers a dynamic configuration within which to view the problems. In short, the model opens up a new processual standpoint from which to argue both the problems and the potential of historical production beyond a public/private divide. Indeed, exploring the relationship between individual orientations and the public roles within cultural institutions, as served by these same individuals, anticipates a pathway beyond history's modernist foundations and the misleading focus, until very recently, on written language as a problematic hindrance to interpersonal understanding through time, rather than its primary vehicle. This shift of focus is at hand.

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