

Review

Michael J. Kelly and Arthur Rose (eds), *Theories of History: History Read across the Humanities* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 264 pp. ISBN: 9-781-47427-132-5. £102.60 (hbk); £35.96 (pbk).

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It has been 60 years since Patrick Gardiner penned his introduction to *Theories of History*, a selection of texts drawn from a period of almost three centuries whose common feature, according to their compiler, demonstrated a concern with identifying the operative factors in history in a style similar to that in which the physical sciences had produced understandings of the causal laws governing the events of nature. Beginning with Vico's defence of history as the science that generates knowledge of what human beings have made with their own minds and ending with a debate over the correct procedures of historical explanation, this mainstay of historical theorizing made plain to generations across the middle decades of the twentieth century that no approach to history, no matter how purportedly antitheoretical, could be separated from philosophical questions concerning the nature of human freedom, reason, development and conceptual change, the relation of history to science, as well as the possibility of producing comprehensive schemes within which historical material could be systematically organized.

Whereas history's old rivalry with the physical sciences provided Gardiner's contributors with a measure against which history's properties could be identified and evaluated, a large scale democratization of the past in recent decades has called on those interested in a continued questioning of history's purposes and properties to cast their net wider. It is not to science that history looks nowadays to see its own reflection, but to history's cognate disciplines in the humanities at large. In the philosophy of history, in spite of commendable and ongoing efforts to reinvigorate the analytical style practised widely in Gardiner's time, it is now the score of theories given currency in the linguistic turn that more often determines research agendas and contributes to shaping public discourse on the role of history in society.

Michael J. Kelly's introduction to a new version of *Theories of History* affirms that the linguistic turn reconnected history with its cognate disciplines in a way central to understanding historical practice today. But while contributions representing the spectrum of humanistic inquiry – anthropology, archaeology, architecture, art, design, education, medieval studies, music, theatre, law, literature, rhetoric and philosophy – support Kelly's interdisciplinary claims, the book at the outset is marred by the overstatement that Alain Badiou's concept of 'evental history' is a common resource for modern-day thinking in the humanities. According to Kelly, Badiou's theories feature prominently today in the humanities and thus "pervade" this volume. In fact, only two of the book's additional nine chapters bring to bear Badiou's theories on the volume's diverse subject matter.

Following Arthur Rose's attempt to reconcile two antithetical conceptions of the collective in the Extended Mind and Anthropocene, in which Rose discusses the implications for literary history of "scaling up" our conception of human beings to think of them as geological agents, J. P. E. Harper Scott and Adi Efal-Lautenschläger draw on Badiou in expounding their respective claims. For Harper Scott, whose interest is in music history and shifting attention from the question of its object to the question of the nature of its subject, Badiou creates a space that frees music history from the finite facts of a situation and places it in the realm of truth available universally and infinitely to all times and all people. Efal-Lautenschläger follows suit in her exploration of humanist habitus alongside its traditional rival in the natural sciences. Four subjects – instruments, elements, documents and moments – according to her, define the humanities and supply practitioners with common methodological problems rooted in the troublesome relationship between realism, truth and events. With the help of Badiou, Foucault and Bergson, Efal-Lautenschläger finds joint purpose for humanists in their desire to habituate themselves to the reality of the past.

Two chapters in the middle of the volume explore themes more familiar to scholars of historical theory and method, not least because they come from two renowned philosophers of history, Rik Peters and Frank Ankersmit. Peters notes the contribution that insights from rhetoric have made to historiography while observing that the reverse is not true – that while history has learned from rhetoric, rhetoric has not learned from history. The Greek notion of *kairos* adopted by rhetoricians and historians conceived an action as appropriate to its occasion, and the theory of the "historical situation" in modern-day rhetorical studies carries on this legacy of regarding rhetorical discourse as a response to a historically determined situation that it seeks to change. Peters cites R.G. Collingwood's criticism of Thucydides that in making his "speakers say what was called for by each

situation”, the judge of “what was appropriate” was none other than Thucydides. What the theory of history can contribute to the theory of rhetoric is how a past action can be deemed appropriate to its situation from the perspective of present-day standards, values and concepts. Collingwood’s theory of encapsulation, inseparable from his more well-known reenactment doctrine and logic of question and answer, supplies for Peters the resources for overcoming subjectivist-objectivist oppositions and showing how the present-day questions that animate historical investigation secure the objectivity of the past while attending to the inescapable and necessary fact that history reflects our present-day commitments and concerns.

Ankersmit addresses similar themes in discussing how lawyers and historians relay facts from past to present. Taking as his case study the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Ankersmit argues that although both lawyers and historians are professionally bound to facts, they deploy facts in different ways, and this explains the TRC’s preference for juridical discourse over historical discourse, in spite of its mission to investigate and come to terms with South Africa’s troubled past. Whereas historians extract from facts the substance with which they paint a picture of the world, lawyers move in the opposite direction by applying the rules of the penal code to the facts of an individual punishable action. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s work on the temporal characteristics and interdependencies of past, present and future, Ankersmit explains how a juridical approach allowed the TRC to “stretch the present” in ways most in keeping with its mission, while casting aside the input of historians who could only muddy the waters in providing multiple and incompatible pictures of the past.

Samaila Suleiman’s chapter on the Nigerian “history machine” extends the theme of state intervention to consider the forces that shape history’s diverse sites of production. Charting the development of historical writing in Nigeria from the late nineteenth century to more recent debates about how to federate different ethnic identities into a coherent national narrative, Suleiman throws light on connections between political prerogatives of the day and the composition and conduct of Nigeria’s key cultural and intellectual institutions, drawing particular attention to the asymmetric processes by which documents, memories and artefacts were converted into historical knowledge serving nation-building. How history has been viewed as something that governments use to serve their needs reappears in Andre Szczawlinkska Muceniecks’ study of history and archaeology’s occasionally tense relationship. His story of their mutual distrust and labelling of one another as simpleminded positivists says much about the view of historians from the outside and, in particular, how they have responded

to developments in theory over the previous century. Muceniecks narrows in on the debate in archaeology between “minimalists” and “maximalists” concerning the extent to which written sources should be viewed as windows to the past, and in so reviewing the criticisms touches on methodological issues germane to the variety of forms of source criticism.

The volume’s penultimate chapter returns to the earlier theme of history’s irreducibility to the category of historical fact. Javier López-Alós examines a selection of Francisco de Goya’s etchings known as *Disasters of War* to determine their place among differing interpretations of the Napoleonic-era Peninsular War in Spain. The power of Goya’s etchings, according to López-Alós, consists of their imprecision, a perceptive lack of detail that recreates confusion and indeterminacy as a fundamental feature of Goya’s vision of the conflict, and by extension López-Alós’s conception of their implications for historical writing – to value in historical sources not their ability to recount what has happened, but their ability to bring into view the vague, ambiguous and perpetually uncertain reality of human existence. The final chapter by Sarah Teasley also revisits earlier themes, this time the Anthropocene and the power dynamics that shape the design of human beings’ engagements with social, political and environmental issues. Teasley sees the potential for historical method, understood as an essentially problem-posing, sceptical and reflective research approach, to contribute to the need in design research to detect complexity, nuance and bias as part of the overall necessity to construct spaces that redress unequal distributions of power and agency in society. The historian’s methods are those best able to identify and redress inbuilt inequalities; moreover, designers need a new history to announce the arrival of the Anthropocene.

This is a book more about history as it is conceived in the humanities than about the theories that inform and underpin history as an autonomous and methodologically distinct form of knowledge and practice. With the exception of Peters and Ankersmit’s chapters, there is little attention to the epistemological, methodological and normative questions that have anchored debate in the theory of history since its rise alongside Rankean historiography and Hegelian-style historical speculation. The introduction asserts peculiarly that philosophy currently steers historical theory excessively and to the detriment of historical practice, all the while launching the book on the theoretical platform of a key figure in twentieth-century philosophy, Alain Badiou. Concerning the Frenchman’s influential position within the modern-day humanities, this reader would have liked to have seen what historians are known to provide best – evidence for their claims.