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## DEMOCRATIZING PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written about deep changes in the theory and practice of history writing in the last 10–15 years<sup>2</sup>. On the level of practice, these changes have often been described as a retreat from new cultural history, which had dominated the vanguard of research in previous decades. In the field of theory, the transformation is referred to as a transition from linguistic turn to such new domains as ethics of history, experience, material presence of the past and so on. However, the exact direction of the changes remains uncertain, allowing some commentators to conceptualize our present condition as a paradigmatic gap<sup>3</sup>.

Herman Paul's innovative and perspicuous book attempts to accommodate these new developments on the level of teaching philosophy or theory of history to undergraduates. At first glance, it may seem that the author's approach is rather traditional: the textbook addresses virtually all key issues that philosophers of history have discussed since the mid-20th century, such as the nature of history, historical reasoning and explanation, truth, plausibility, objectivity, historical narrative and experience, material presence of the past or moral and political dimensions of history writing. The Dutch theorist of history proposes an accessible and up-to-date analysis of often complicated philosophical problems that are illustrated with examples derived not only from recent historical studies but also from novels, paintings, music and political debates.

However, this is not the main *novum* and strength of the book. The author's goal is more ambitious than simply providing a lively and entertaining intro-

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<sup>1</sup> Review of Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, Routledge, New York–London 2015, pp. 159.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era*, New York 2014.

<sup>3</sup> E. Domańska, *Die paradigmatische Lücke (paradigmatic gap) in den heutigen Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften*, "Jahrbuch des Zentrums für Historische Forschung Berlin der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften" 4 (2010/2011), pp. 34–54.

duction to the field aimed at undergraduate and graduate students and successfully combining theoretical discussions with real-life problems. In *Key Issues in Historical Theory* Paul seeks to reformulate the field of philosophy of history. Below, I would like to focus exactly on this, the most interesting dimension of the book.

Paul starts with an established view of the need to drop the old distinction between speculative and critical philosophy of history (pp. 3–14). As demonstrated previously by Hayden White and several other theoreticians of history, historical research and reflection on history are impossible without tacit or explicit views on the nature of historical reality. This means that the metaphysical dimension, something that critical philosophers of history profess to avoid, is, in fact, part and parcel of every historical work. According to Paul, this leaves us with two options: either to return to the old designation of “philosophy of history” without any adjectives, or to adopt a new name of “historical theory”. Reflecting a rather dominant trend (at least in Anglo-American academia), Paul opts for the latter. However, he attempts to fill the heading “historical theory” with a very specific meaning.

In Paul’s view, historical theory should not confine itself to the analysis of academic history writing; instead, it should be reformulated as “conceptual analysis of *how human beings relate to the past*” (p. 14). He explains the need for this shift in the following way:

For historical theory does not just study historical reality and/or historical thought; it examines, more broadly, how people in the here-and-now relate to what they perceive as their past — by studying it with a book in their lap, by enjoying it in a computer game, by using it for political purposes in a propaganda speech or by drawing moral lessons from it while walking between concrete steles of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. Although not every historical theorist uses the language of ‘relations with the past’, this book will try to show that much of recent work in the field can be described in precisely these terms (14).

The Dutch theorist of history devotes a special chapter to outlining the relationship with the previous approach (30–43). Here, drawing on earlier historiography<sup>4</sup>, he comes up with a heuristic model of divergent relationships with the past and their aims. The author states that one can distinguish five main relations: material, epistemic, moral, political and aesthetic. For the most part, the book is compartmentalized according to this classification, and every relation is covered in a separate chapter (except for epistemic, which is discussed in three

<sup>4</sup> He relies first of all on the works by Jörn Rüsen and Mark Day: J. R ü s e n, *History, Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*, New York–Oxford 2005; M. D a y, *Our Relations with the Past*, “Philosophia” 36, 2008.

consecutive chapters)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, for instance, issues of narrative and experience fall under the rubric of the aesthetic relation, material remnants of the past and broadly defined tradition under material, history wars and the social role of history under political, and truth, explanation and plausibility under the epistemic relation.

The approach of relations with the past provides a framework for the book. It allows Paul to structure the material effectively and to cover key issues discussed in the philosophy of history and related disciplines in recent decades while referring to examples derived from academic and non-academic sources, Western and Asian cultures, and contemporary and ancient histories. According to the author, this heuristic model claims universal applicability.

It is worth emphasizing that Paul's rebranding of the philosophy of history is not as much his individual project as an attempt to conceptualize changes which have taken place in the field in recent decades. Paul himself describes these new developments as a movement "beyond philosophy" (i.e. a growing engagement of theorists of history with literary theory, postcolonial studies, sociology of science, memory studies and so on) as well as a movement "beyond professional historical studies" (growing attention to collective memory, heritage and history beyond academy) (p. 14).

I would dare to lump these two movements together as a pragmatic or practical turn in the philosophy of history/historical theory. *Key Issues in Historical Theory* reflects and promotes this turn. One can even say that Paul attempts to accomplish a "democratization" of historical theory, similar to the "democratization" of historical studies in the West undertaken by social historians and left-wing theorists like Hayden White in the 1960s–1970s.

Indeed, the impact of White on Paul's vision of historical theory is significant and unquestionable. White's severe criticism of theory and history for its own sake and his emphasis on the existentialist dimension of history left its imprint on this and other programmatic statements of the book: "If we want to discover that historical theory is not merely a hobby of contemplatively inclined historians, but a form of reflection on what it means to live in and with history, we are better off starting in Cavafy's café<sup>6</sup>, or with his *Collected Poems*, than with some or other 'ism'" (xii)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from the chapters on our relations with the past, the book also contains two introductory chapters: "What is Historical Theory?" and "What is the Past?".

<sup>6</sup> Paul refers here to the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy (1863–1933) who authored the poem *An Old Man* (1897). Paul opens his book with a quote from this poem related to the existential experience of the passing of time, which, in his view, could serve as the best entry point to historical theory.

<sup>7</sup> One should not forget that Herman Paul authored a brilliant intellectual biography of Hayden White: H. Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, London 2011.

The pragmatic turn notwithstanding, in my view *Key Issues in Historical Theory* manages to maintain the balance between the need to advance theoretical reflection and practical and existential concerns, as well as between addressing difficult philosophical problems and accessibility to undergraduate students and academic historians who have not previously engaged with philosophy of history. Herman Paul writes a timely and innovative book which demonstrates that historical theory can and should be an indispensable introduction to the so-called “second-order inquiries” in history and the humanities; inquiries that distinguish academia from just vocational education<sup>8</sup>. Paul’s focus on our relationships with the past provides a good starting point for questioning the received wisdom about the nature and role of history in contemporary academia and beyond.

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<sup>8</sup> On “second order inquiries” and their role see: S. Collini, *What are Universities For?*, London 2012, pp. 53–54.