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History Culture as a Marker of Past-discourse

In 2018, a new master's programme was launched at the department of the History of Sciences and Ideas at the University of Oulu: *History culture and philosophy*¹. A lengthy deliberation preceded the choosing of this name. We believe that this programme provides a unique opportunity, certainly in Finland but also globally, to study what has come to be known as theory and philosophy of history. *History culture and philosophy* contains a representative selection of topics and an opportunity to write a master's thesis in this area.

Although single courses and modules, and sometimes more, exist in a handful of universities worldwide, there are really no degree programmes in philosophy of history, in particular. One may be tempted to add that neither are philosophy of history and philosophers of history often found in departments of philosophy, or history, and therefore, that this absence of philosophy of history degree programmes goes hand in hand with the poor institutionalization of philosophy of history.

But why was this name chosen? Why is the word 'history culture' in the title? Provided that philosophy of history forms the core of the programme, the name could, in principle, have been 'philosophy of history,' but there were weighty reasons to opt for the more comprehensive 'history culture' AND 'philosophy.' One is that 'philosophy of history' is (often) linked with something arcane, dusty and old, and as a consequence may be mistakenly understood to refer only to the likes of Hegel. Hegel is certainly part of *history culture and philosophy*, but study options go well beyond, including examinations of and angles to various contemporary phenomena. In brief, 'philosophy of history' as a name would have referred too narrowly only to explicitly philosophical and conceptual studies of history, and possibly even only to some specific traditions, such as the analytical philosophy of history. The guiding idea of *history culture and philosophy* is that one can study history and the past from various angles while doing it theoretically and philosophically. This is the main reason for arriving at the name 'history culture and philosophy.'

The authors of this volume reflect on the meaning of 'history culture' and also apply it in various ways, of which more below. In broad terms, 'history culture' covers all those ways in which images and understandings of the past, and history more generally, are generated and used. It covers a wide variety of approaches,

¹ More specifically, *history culture and philosophy* is an orientation or a study track on the MA-level in History of Sciences and Ideas.

means, meanings and events dealing with the past and history, which can take and have taken the most diverse manifestations.

As this broad definition already indicates, history culture as a concept is not sharply defined. This may be understood as constituting bad news, since conceptual fuzziness is typically taken as a weakness. A concept with blurry boundaries is not as powerful and useful as one with sharp boundaries, because the former is not always capable of determining whether a specific instance falls inside or outside its scope. However, vague concepts can be useful and conceptually discriminatory enough in most circumstances, as is the case with the notions of bald or cold, for example. We are not able to define when precisely a person is bald or what exactly is cold, but these concepts are successfully applied nonetheless. Indeed, the vagueness of ‘history culture’ appears as a strength, because history “lives” in the daily lives of people in so many ways that only broadly encompassing ‘history culture’ seems to cover them all. In particular, ‘history culture’ is something more general but also inclusive than the research and writing of history. For example, people have tried to engage with the past for centuries by erecting statues but such history conserving practice is more commonly to be carried out through digital media and games today. These both exemplify history culture.

In the master’s orientation, then, there are three main components, which all include several elective courses. The first component is (a) the tradition of philosophy of history, which covers analytical philosophy of history, hermeneutics in philosophy of history, old master’s in philosophy of history, cultural philosophy of history, pragmatism in history writing and narrativism. These reflect various explicitly philosophical and conceptual approaches on how to understand both history and the writing of history. The second is (b) the writing of history in society, which includes theory and history of historiography, postmodernism and ethical questions in history writing, political use of history, remembering and oral writing of history and new media. The emphasis is on the uses, and the misuses, of history and the various forms, new and old, in which history is (re)presented in society. The third component is (c) history and the production of knowledge, which consists of philosophy of the historiography of science, historical epistemology, and history of concepts and the philosophy of conceptual change. This third component forges links to approaches that are not conventionally understood as falling under the umbrella of philosophy of history, such as the writing of the history of science and conceptual history.²

The concept *history culture* is of German origin but has found its home in the Finnish language. It is arguable whether the same settling has happened in English. One

² For more information, see <https://opas.peppi oulu.fi/en/programme/16461>.

indication that it has not is a question posed by some native speakers: they have wondered whether there is a comma missing between 'history' and 'culture' in the title *history culture and philosophy*. Another is that there is no consensus even among those who are using the notion as to whether 'history culture' or 'historical culture' is the more preferable term. It seems that so far there is no standard, or perhaps even fully accepted, English usage.

In the first paper of this special issue, Kalle Pihlainen tackles this question head on. His paper is the most explicit conceptual investigation of the papers in this volume. It delves into the meanings and legitimacy of 'history culture' and 'historical culture' against the backdrop of what Pihlainen calls the crisis of history. The crisis is reflective of two aspects. The one is the disputed right of professional history to produce uniquely authorized conceptions of history and the other is history's loss of societal influence to memory, heritage and patrimony – in general, to many forms of "parahistory." Pihlainen argues that 'history culture' should be preferred over 'historical culture' so much so that the latter is void of meaning and can be deflated in many contexts. Pihlainen asks: What does the term 'historical' denote or add in the expression "the historical conditions of nineteenth-century Finnish farm life" over and above "the conditions of nineteenth-century Finnish farm life"? Not much, it seems. Further, Pihlainen argues that an object's past-having is not enough to make it historical, whatever additional signification is given to 'historical' here. By contrast, 'history' in "history culture" refers to "some orienting toward" history, and there is undeniably plenty of that in our culture.

Pihlainen strives to problematize the traditional control and oversight by professional history over lay interpretations of the past. Sometimes parahistory is seen as answerable to professional history, a gatekeeper of authorized knowledge of the past. By contrast, some argue that academic history is ideologically complicit in favouring the powerful, and perhaps even their economic interests. This seems to lead to a conclusion that sounds a little surprising: instead of deploring the diminished importance of the discipline of history, this should be celebrated as "a liberation of the rest of 'history.'"

The question of whether an interlocutor can be allowed to exercise one kind of meaning control over the interpretations of the past is pivotal in debating the nature of acceptable history culture. As Pihlainen says, "*whether the absence of critical control should be promoted or opposed is a key question for conceptualizing history culture.*" Pihlainen promotes a participatory history culture and parahistory predicated on the personal import and collective utility of the past rather than viewing knowledge about the past ("historical knowledge") as possessing some sort of intrinsic value. He asks, "how can popular uses of the past justify themselves without the authority of disciplinary veracity?" and proposes that professional history should have a very limited role in history culture. Naturally, professional historians have a "right to interpretation" but their interference should take the mode of "falsifying

through documentary evidence”: “historical imagination belongs to everyone and the discipline cannot legitimately rule on moral, political or aesthetic preferences unconnected with that evidence.” Once this is understood, there is still room for historians to engage in public debates as experts, argues Pihlainen.

As mentioned, there is no uniform commitment to either ‘history culture’ and ‘historical culture’. Often they are used near-synonymously, although the choice may be something more than terminological. This is also the reason that uniformity has not been enforced in this volume. In what follows, I will use the term the authors themselves have chosen in their papers.

In the second paper of this special issue, Jukka Kortti focuses on the roles that historical culture and historical consciousness play in the narrating of a nation. He makes an interesting terminological point: Anglo-American scholars often use ‘public history’ instead of ‘historical culture.’ Kortti is interested in how historical thinking, or the “sensing of history” rather than historical knowledge based on theories and methods, is manifested in society. In particular, he focuses on the historical consciousness of Finns in his analyses. It appears that Finns are “history people,” that is, interested in the past in many ways, such as watching films and movies, visiting historical sites, and so on.

Kortti points out that there are certain narrative templates that organise and shape new accounts of a nation. Nationalism is a specifically forceful narrative, even a master narrative, that has shaped historical consciousness. Its function is to keep a nation together and strengthen the political and cultural unity of a nation. Naturally, it is not only or even mostly academic histories that shape this consciousness, although they have also contributed to it, but there is instead a wide variety of forms in the service of nation building in historical culture: museums, national days and celebrations, and various media, such as films. Indeed, it seems that history is being increasingly both politicised, as in the Finland 100 celebrations, and mediatized. While it seemed, for a moment, that national narratives were waning, they are now resurging in Eastern Europe and in the USA, for example. In Finland, topics to be celebrated have diversified to cover both the more traditional ones, such as war, and newer ones, such as the creation of the Finnish school system and the welfare society.

The essence of Kortti’s contribution could be said to be two-fold. On the one hand, he wishes to highlight the various ways in which other than academic historiography shapes historical consciousness (and has shaped national narratives) and, on the other, he calls for more studies on the production of the contexts and purposes of how a nation is narrated.

In the third paper of this volume, Ilkka Lähteenmäki embraces the concept of historical culture and focuses on what he calls “popular historical culture”: the result of digital media influence in and on historical culture. He notes that digitization has profoundly changed the media environment, and therefore, rather than only

attempting to use the resources of memory studies to enhance our comprehension, we need “media cognizant understanding of historical culture.”

Although Lähteenmäki emphasizes that there are many such historical cultural practices, whose understanding may also require some other kind of expertise than historical, he is most interested in the functioning of historical information in popular culture and, in particular, in popular media – on how historical content is constantly remediated and spread across media. There are two particularly interesting features to this. Representations of the past have been scattered across different media: from tv to the internet and from films to games. In this sense, and with respect to historical consciousness, it is as Pierre Lévy has said: “[n]o one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.”³ Historical representations complement and compete, as if creating a large historical world with the result that history is represented across different platforms. As Lähteenmäki puts it: “Films are wonderful for emotional engagements, games can do immersive environments or show systems, texts are searchable and contain huge amounts of information, social media encourages participation, digital encyclopedias link topics etc.” The other particularly interesting feature of contemporary popular historical culture is that media representations are “entry points to history-related content” rather than complete representations in themselves. One can use these representations to deepen historical understanding or to continue engagement on another platform. In the end, historical culture may not provide a holistic framework that ties together the academic and the popular, and educational institutions, but the notion seems apt when we try to understand the multitude of practices being used to study and learn history in the contemporary digital environment. Participatory culture has already changed our relation to the past, claims Lähteenmäki.

Tiina Kinnunen’s paper engages with the manifestations of historical culture. She studies the history of history culture instead of examining history culture from the present day, as is more customary. Further, she delves into this history from a specific vantage point: the history culture that emerged around the Finnish author and activist Minna Canth in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, Kinnunen examines how Finnish women’s association (*Suomalainen Naisliitto*) created and maintained history culture around Canth. Kinnunen’s focus is specifically on the articulations of these activists that were aimed at upholding her memory and passing it on to future generations. Canth was narrated as a Finnish strong woman. Kinnunen argues that this study contributes to “our understanding of history cultures as phenomena with multilayered histories that can be examined in past contexts and circumstances.”

³ Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA 1997, 13–14.

Canth was an exceptional female writer in Finland. Despite the fact that she was a radical writer in her own context, and that she was so fiercely concerned with gender and equality issues, Canth has been revered and remembered in numerous ways: by way of a stamp, a flag day and a society in her honour. Although it was mainly a community of women that upheld the history culture around her, she was not excluded from the national canon either. On the one hand, Canth was part of the national project reinforcing Finnish national identity and, on the other, she was part of an international feminist history culture and assumed a place in the gallery of “Great Women” in history. She was portrayed as “a force for advancement and equality who fought for the rights of not only her own gender, but of others who had been overlooked as well.”

Kinnunen observes that history cultures in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century were used for various ideological, political and cultural purposes. In the case of Canth, narratives contribute to “an emotional regime based on admiration and gratitude and charged women with a related responsibility to remember the idealized figures and their sacrifices for their own gender.” The representation of sacrifices and expectation of gratitude can be observed not only in literary form, in canonized texts and the writing of history (“continued memory”), but also in festivals or anniversaries and monuments (“ritualized and frozen memory” respectively). Although biographies assume the greatest role in this paper, and perhaps in the history culture around Canth too, all these aspects are studied here. Interestingly, not only is Canth’s memory used as a source of empowerment but some projects, like that to erect a statute of Canth in Helsinki, themselves became exemplifications of female achievement and are a part of this history culture in their own right.

The fifth paper of the volume by Kari Väyrynen is likewise an application of history culture to the past, but its focus is more on the conceptual than on the material manifestations of history culture. The framework for Väyrynen’s paper is what he calls the “Experience Society.” This refers to the current tendency to emphasize living experiences and their commercial use. The experience society looks for “spectacles,” which can take the form of the writing and consuming of historical narratives, too. The notion of experience in focus in the paper is of German origin (*Erlebnis*), and should be translated as “living experience.” It has a strong affective dimension. The members of the experience society value living experience because of certain kinds of “high experiences,” which are seen as existentially important and as providing an intense “feeling of life.” One can think of bungee jumping here.

Väyrynen argues that understanding the concept and its history is important because it can make us more critically aware of some current phenomena in our society: “We should ask ourselves what is ultimately important for us existentially – do we need more adventures, game simulations of history, or other commercial applications?” According to Väyrynen, “the vision of Heidegger has been realised remarkably well in our modern *Erlebnis*-society and *Erlebnis*-industry.” This means

that our society has individualized, and become one in which everyone looks for her own happiness as a subjective experience. It is doubtful whether this ultimately brings happiness, notes Väyrynen.

In history culture, the features of the experience society are manifested in, for example, museums, which seek to produce affective experiences that can compete with historical movies or games. Further, Väyrynen establishes that this is conventionally seen in historiography too in many ways, such as the interest in wars, heroes and revolutions, and more recently also in criminality and violence, marginal groups, madness, suicide, drugs, sex and so on. The lamentable consequence is that this tendency marginalizes less spectacular and harder-to-digest topics, including many conceptual and theoretical issues, which could in fact reveal something significant about human life.

The final paper in this special issue is most explicitly argumentative defending the role of professional historiography and its standards in creating historical culture for the protection of democracy. Georg Gangl examines the political goals of historiography and historians by attending to cases in which political ends are sought: The Historians without Borders network and the “Münsteraner Resolution” (Resolution of Münster) on “current threats to democracy” of an important professional association of German historians (*Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands*). Both defend democracy by defending historiography, historical knowledge and countering historical distortions. The main question of the paper is: What is historiography’s role in wider society? And can political aims be legitimate goals for historians? Gangl views historiography and democracy as essentially linked: the latter forms the framework of certain reflective and deliberative practices in which historiography performs a critical and corrective function with regard to historical thinking in society.

Gangl argues that most people engage with historical thinking and, therefore, they form historical arguments and judgments as part of this practice. The link to political thinking is closer than one might realize: “Historical culture as a whole is largely sustained and reproduced by historical thinking, which is potentially ideological.” This is where professional historiography enters the picture: “Historiography most centrally acts ... as a large-scale *regulatory instance and corrective* about historical beliefs on the cognitive level of historical culture, correcting historical thinking and institutions where they are ideological.” Furthermore, Gangl places the historian in a central role. He believes that it is “the unforced force of the better argument”⁴ that is the decisive factor and that historiography “can serve as a *model* for any rationally oriented discourse and for rational conflict-staging and resolution.” Furthermore, regarding historical culture, Gangl writes that historians can provide a certain

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application. Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2004, 23.

“*historical literacy* to society” through the use of critical faculties and methodologies in deliberating the production of historical knowledge.

This volume has been a collective effort of the scholars of the University of Oulu and the Centre for Philosophical Studies of History. It would be too much to claim that any shared agenda or conception emerges from this set of papers. The conceptual impreciseness of ‘history or historical culture’ and an ongoing debate of the appropriate term and its application guarantee this much. Nevertheless, some unifying threads can be found.

The first may be a little underwhelming. That is the common origin and the conceptual authority of ‘history culture’ or ‘historical culture.’ Most authors highlight the German origin and the central role of Jörn Rüsen as a “father” of the concept. Some other key players are recognized too, such Maria Grever, Jan-Robbert Adriaansen, and Jerome de Groot. Yet, it is true that many of the papers engage in conceptual innovation. For example, Pihlainen is critical of the term ‘historical culture.’ Lähteenmäki seeks wider applications of the term explicitly in relation to popular media, as does Kinnunen with respect to feminist history.

In general, history or historical culture refers to (a) various kinds of “past-relationships,” to use Gangl's expression. Some of the authors emphasize society relations in general (Gangl), while some write about more specific forms, such as “an emotional regime” articulated and organized in institutions, various media, ideologies, and attitudes (Kinnunen). If this past-relatedness unites, so also does the fact that (b) history culture can be take both material and immaterial forms, manifested as statues, computer games and speeches, for example. Perhaps the most important feature of history and historical culture as seen through the contributions of this volume is that it refers to something (c) wider in culture and society than scientific, disciplinary or professional forms for studying and writing about the past. For example, Kortti writes about “the wide range of activities in which images and information about the past are produced, mediated and used,” and further, about the social construction of historical consciousness and the sensing of history in societies. Lähteenmäki thinks that history culture is present “in most (if not all) parts of culture.” Also Väyrynen writes about the situation in which one specific cultural element is so widely manifested that we can speak about society as named after it (the “experience society”). History or historical culture is then something broader than knowledge, broader than a profession, and also broader than any representation (since it also involves use), and it is both material and immaterial.

This last point brings to the fore an interesting aspect of history culture that creates some tension among the authors of the volume. All of them call for more studies of how the past is manifested, represented and used in society. Kinnunen studies statues,

magazines and memorial days and Väyrynen the way that one idea has spread through society. Yet more pointedly, Pihlainen talks about “parahistory,” Kortti about a “wide variety of forms,” Lähteenmäki about “popular historical culture” and “participatory culture.” Pihlainen, Kontti and Lähteenmäki appear to think not only that these forms of history culture should be studied but also that non-professional producers of history should be encouraged to actively engage with the past. By contrast, while recognizing that lay people have a role in shaping historical consciousness, Gangl emphasizes the role of professional historians as a regulative and corrective authority about historical knowledge based on their experience and professional standards. The contrast is greatest to Pihlainen, who suggests that we should cherish the diminished role of professional historians, although he too approves their role as correcting mistakes and falsifying through documentary evidence. Maybe that is indeed the most important question: provided that history is written and represented widely in society and in many forms, what should the professional historian’s role be? Should it be that of an expert or should it be something much more minimal, leaving history-generation to society, as much as possible?

Is history or historical culture then a useful concept? I think that it is and that its significance is in its being a marker concept that refers to a past-discourse, which may itself be implemented in innumerable ways. Once it is recognized and understood that there is a discourse like this, and once that this discourse is configured by those who want to study it and participate in it, a more systematic examination may begin. The immediate question is: In what form, where and by whom is history writing done? And a natural follow-up question is: How is the use, and perhaps misuse, of conceptions of history regulated and governed? It is almost certainly true that it is governed by some rules, whether or not they stem from commercial, disciplinary, anthropological (that is, as emanating from people’s inborn desire to write and make history) or other interests. Finally, yet another important question: Who, if anyone, has the right to control this discourse, and, if someone does, on what basis? The clearest demarcating line is between those that emphasize the significance of public and lay history, whatever form it takes and those that stress rational, and perhaps professionally held, standards of correctness.

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