Past the Post-

Philosophy of History After Postmodernism

Abstracts and contributors

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Keynote: On the Debate and Idea of Realism

Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

My talk is three-fold. Firstly, I will briefly comment on the vices and virtues of the most recent contribution to the debate, “The Poverty of Anti-Realism.” I refer to this approach as New Historical Realism. Secondly, I will consider what is required to transform New Historical Realism into a viable philosophical alternative in contemporary philosophy of historiography. It is necessary to stipulate and commit to two particular conditions: the independence and uniqueness of historical accounts deemed real. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish that these conditions are satisfied when applied to the ontologies of historiography. The lesson from the first two points is the need to pay much more, and more careful, attention to the philosophical discussions in philosophy of science and elsewhere in philosophy. There is no point in reinventing the wheel if the intention is merely to use the wheel. Thirdly, I will also consider whether the realism-anti-realism debate might, in fact, be idle. This is how the matter appears from the pragmatist perspective. The relevance of the debate requires that New Historical Realists manage to determine the kind of substantial contribution that terms like “real,” “true,” “counterpart,” “fact,” and so on add to the claims made in historiography and the sciences.

*Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen is co-director of the Centre for Philosophical Studies of History at the University of Oulu. His book* Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography *(Palgrave, 2015), was recognized as the best monograph in philosophy of historiography in 2016 by the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography (ICHTH). This work has been translated into Spanish and Chinese, and was the focus of a special issue in the* Journal of the Philosophy of History *in 2017 (11:1). His most recent contribution to the field is an edited book titled* Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives *(Bloomsbury, 2021).*

Keynote: The Truth of Colligations in History

Behan McCullagh

The keynote talk features a consise reflection on what colligations are, how they work, and what their ontological status is.

*Behan McCullagh is Honorary Associate in philosophy at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. He has published widely on the philosophy of history.*

The Arguments for Colligatory Realism

Adam Timmins

The colligatory anti-realist faces something of a paradox, insofar as on one hand, they argue that colligatory terms have no referents in the past, but on the other, that colligatory terms are indispensable for historical writing. However, indispensability arguments in philosophy normally turn on the idea that we should quantify over the indispensable entities at stake; which begs the question – what exactly is it that makes colligatory terms indispensable? I argue that for the realist, the answer is simple – colligatory terms have the explanatory value they do because they pick out events in the past, and furthermore, that the colligatory anti-realist struggles to find a reason for their indispensability which is not problematic in some way.

*Adam Timmins has recently accepted a post-doctoral position at the University of Ostrava. His book* Towards A Realist Philosophy of History *was published in 2022, and two further books,* Thomas Kuhn: The Reluctant Revolutionary *and an as yet untitled monograph on Kuhn's historical work, are scheduled to be published by Palgrave in 2025 and 2026 respectively. He hopes to see the Chicago Bears win another Superbowl within his lifetime.*

Epochal Colligation

Helge Jordheim

In this talk, I am going to return to the late 18th century and explore how periodization, or in the vocabulary of this seminar, “epochal colligation” is developed both theoretically and practically in some of the earliest works of German historicism. Based on some findings in the works of Gatterer, Schlözer, Herder, and others, I going to discuss briefly how colligations synchronize, unify, and structure historical time, by an act of what we might refer to as “temporal colligation.”

*Helge Jordheim is Professor of Cultural History, University of Oslo, and specializes in the history of time, synchronization, and chronopolitics.*

Renaissance as a Colligatory Concept: History, Epistemology, and Argumentation

Václav Zheng

Philosophers of historiography have expressed conflicting opinions on the validity of colligatory concepts for historical representation, and an oft-quoted example is “Renaissance.” To ground an accurate epistemological understanding of the nature of history writing, I will explore as a case study how this particular colligatory concept was adopted, disseminated, developed, and criticized among practicing historians themselves in the recent decades. By delving into three distinctive streams of modern “Renaissance” discourses (Jewish, Chinese, and American) far removed from the proper Italian/European Renaissance of the 15th–16th centuries, I argue that historians use colligatory concepts not only as a convenient and illustrative scheme in their writing and discussion but also as a powerful and indispensable constituent of both their narrative and argumentation. The adoption of the time-honored “Renaissance” (or similar terms) carries certain teleological if not political meanings in the new contexts, which has been separated from the orthodox Renaissance scholarship, and it reflects a core mentality of post-war and contemporary history writing, exemplifying a hope for future in the past and a glory of the past for the future. Also notably, colligatory concepts are not an exclusive trademark of academic historians but symbolize the collaborative effort and a common episteme of humanities scholars and to some degree also public intellectuals. Therefore, debating whether colligatory concepts can accurately represent the past is relatively meaningless. Rather, we should first acknowledge their realist nature in this world than their apparent anti-realist historical referentiability.

*Václav Zheng is a six-year history PhD Candidate at Johns Hopkins University (USA) and an adjunct faculty member at the Peabody Institute (JHU). His field specialization is cultural and intellectual history of early modern east-central Europe, and his current research lies on utopianism and uchronism in the Polish Renaissance. Meanwhile, he is also a member of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH) and a keen student of the philosophy of historiography. As both a historical theorist and a practicing historian, he is concerned with the actual practice of historiography in the contemporary world and (the postnarrativist) theory of argumentation.*

Three Arguments for Historiographic Realism

Aviezer Tucker

I present three arguments for a realist interpretation of historiography and the historical sciences, arguing that the historical sciences infer information about the past that is probably true. One argument relies on the social epistemology that distinguishes historiography from art, and ideology. The second, builds on the differences between historical counterfactuals and “factual” historiography and reduces those differences to their full vs. truncated evidential foundations. The third argument relies on the history of historiography, on an “optimistic induction,” from the history of the historical sciences, which, unlike physics, have gone through a single founding scientific revolution, and have since expanded without revolutions that overturn previous paradigms.

*Aviezer Tucker is Associate at Harvard University and the Director for the Centre for Philosophy of Historiography and the Historical Sciences at the University of Ostrava.*

Retrospectivity, Evidence and the Constitution of the Historical Past

Jonas Ahlskog

This paper explores “reality” and “evidence” in history as conceptual questions about what it means to understand the past historically. The essay argues that (i) the kind of reality that history is about is defined by the historian’s questioning-activity, and (ii) the historian’s questioning-activity is also what defines the role of the “real past” as a regulative idea of evidential reasoning in historical research. With inspiration primarily from R. G. Collingwood, the general aim of the paper is to explicate the ways in which “evidence” and “reality” are logically dependent on the different epistemic interests that shape history as a form of understanding and thought. Specifically, by attending to conceptual distinctions between different epistemic interests in history, the paper aims to show – in opposition to influential narrativist philosophers of history – that the much-discussed retrospective constitution of the past cannot function as a straightforward warrant for anti-realism or irrealism in philosophy of history. The anti-realist or irrealist conclusion is, I argue, rooted in failures to distinguish between future-oriented and past-oriented retrospectivity. Appreciating this distinction, in turn, reveals that retrospective constitution is not the master concept of history, but rather a function of the specific epistemic interest that historians pursue. In conclusion, the paper contends that understanding “evidence” and “reality” in historical research depends on getting clear about the ways in which the epistemic interest defines the reality that history is about.

*Jonas Ahlskog is University Lecturer in History at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. He specializes in philosophy of history and the history of political thought. Ahlskog is the author of* The Primacy of Method in Historical Research: Philosophy of History and the Perspective of Meaning *(Routledge 2021).*

Anti-realist Misconceptions of Evidence in L. J. Goldstein’s Philosophy

David Černín

The presentation criticizes concepts of historical evidence in the anti-realist philosophy of L. J. Goldstein. The distinction between the historiographic infrastructure and the superstructure distinguishes Goldstein’s philosophy from other constructivist philosophies of historiography, most notably narrativism. His philosophical account does not stress the liberty of historians in constructing narratives and takes historical research seriously as a way of knowing. Goldstein’s argument for anti-realism (or a strong form of presentism) depends on his understanding of evidence in historiography. Goldstein stresses the theory-ladenness of historiographic and archaeological evidence and insists on the primacy of theory.

The presentation shows that anti-realist conclusions are avoidable if Goldstein’s concept of evidence is revised to fit historiographic practices; it is possible to reinterpret then Goldstein’s historiographic infrastructure as consistent with realist historiographic ontology via Aviezer Tucker’s originary approach or with the help of Peter Kosso’s approach focusing on the transfer of information. Historiographic infrastructure and Goldstein’s constituted “historical past” can be grounded in the realistic approach to the past on the condition that we can secure some grounding of evidence in the past. The final part of the presentation focuses on the issues related to the superstructure of historiography (e.g., narratives, colligatory concepts, interpretation) and their relation to the real past, which Goldstein often ignores.

*David Černín is an assistant professor at the Department of Philosophy, University of Ostrava. He has published on topics including philosophy of historiography (mainly epistemology, realism/anti-realism debate, archaeology, etc.), philosophy of history education (the recently published collective monograph “*Dějepis mezi vědou a vyprávěním / History Education between Science and Storytelling*” was an outcome of a project intending to improve history education in the Czech Republic, aiming at skills of critical thinking and media literacy), abuse of historical narratives, and philosophy of Big History. Currently, he is working on several projects with Aviezer Tucker to establish the Centre for the Philosophy of Historiography at the University of Ostrava. They are currently co-editing the* Bloomsbury Handbook of Historical Sciences*.*

Keynote: Narrative History as a Way of Life Revisited

Geoffrey Roberts

*Abstract to come.*

It’s the Historical Method, Stupid: Philosophy of History as Methodological Command

Tyson Retz

Research on the nature of academic disciplines suggests that history is a “pure-soft” discipline, characterised by the pursuit of knowledge within extremely porous theoretical boundaries. By this account, historians are theoretically promiscuous: they work with the theories that best illuminate their subject matter and research aims. However, when it comes to what unites them as a scholarly community, historians are adamant that they possess a clear methodological identity. They consider themselves unrivalled in their use of primary sources and building arguments on a foundation of empirical evidence.

Theoretically promiscuous yet methodologically monogamous, what are philosophers of history to make of this condition? I suggest in this paper that unravelling the intricacies of the historian’s methodological identity offers the philosophy of history the most promise. Appropriately conducted, the philosophy of history serves as the metalanguage of the discipline of history. Historians are notoriously poor at discussing their work at a level beyond the particularities of their subject matter. “They don’t talk much shop,” as one study put it. In this regard, the expanded vocabulary offered by the philosophy of history might help to lure historians back from their longstanding retreat to specificity, the very retreat that enabled the discipline to professionalise roughly two hundred years ago.

While hopeful that the philosophy of history might serve this role, I end by raising two doubts. First, does it condemn philosophers of history to a second-order role, making explicit what historians implicitly do? Second, would historians ever genuinely be receptive to philosophers pronouncing upon the nature of their discipline?

*Tyson Retz is Associate Professor of Intellectual History at the University of Stavanger, Norway. He holds a PhD from the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne, where he developed an approach to the logic of question and answer centred around Gadamer’s reception of Collingwood. His works include* Empathy and History *(Berghahn 2018),* Progress and the Scale of History *(Cambridge UP 2022), as well as articles in* Rethinking History *and the* Journal of the Philosophy of History*. As an intellectual historian he is concerned with illuminating the conceptions of history that govern different intellectual and philosophical traditions.*

(Postmodern) Theory: Historical Imagination vs. Academic Identity Politics

Fredrik W. Thue

In this speech I will elaborate on the following argument, which is based on the premise that historians share some basic “minimal norms” that define the “game of history” (Torstendahl), and which are very seldom suspended in practice by eccentric epistemologies such as various forms of “post-modernism.”

a) All kinds of “theory” have to prove their fruitfulness for historical scholarship in practice – in a wide sense that includes how objects of historical study are constituted, reflected upon etc.

b) This means that “theory” in history belongs to the “context of discovery.”

c) The appeal to “theory” does not in itself prove the validity of any historical interpretation, i.e., it is strictly speaking not part of the “context of justification.”

d) The now widespread call for the historian to “confess” his or her theoretical standpoint, sometimes also one’s social, political and other “standpoints,” before one embarks on one’s empirical study, is unwarranted both for the above-mentioned, principled reasons and for some more pragmatic reasons:

* It unnecessarily turns off readers who don’t share or who even dislike one’s own “standpoint” before they are able to judge one’s historical contribution on its own merits. This unnecessarily precludes or hampers “overlapping consensus” among historians with different theoretical, political and cultural values or “beliefs.”
* It increases the risk of turning scholarly debate into a kind of academic identity politics, where scholars are judged for who they “are” (theoretically, politically, socially) rather than based on arguments, evidence, convincing interpretations, etc. The situation is thus analogous to the (in my opinion largely regrettable) turn towards identity politics in the socio-political sphere.

This does not preclude, however, that the theoretical lens through which a historian has studied his/her object could legitimately be subject to criticism and debate. Such debate must show, however, how such theory has led the historian astray or led him/her to unfruitful or implausible interpretations. Neither does my argument imply that theoretical, “meta-historical” debate has no legitimate place in the discipline of history. But this is a genre of its own, and its relationship to empirical historical scholarship is of an indirect kind.

Based on this general – and admittedly not very post-modernist – argument, I will reflect on the merits, problems, and limitations of (epistemological and/or metahistorical) “post-modernism” in historiography.

*Fredrik W. Thue is Professor at the Centre for the Study of Professions at the Oslo Metropolitan University.*

The Practice of Byzantine History: Past People and Characters

Matthew Kinloch

Contributors to The Poverty of Anti-realism will be pleased (and perhaps unsurprised) to hear that the discipline of Byzantine History has largely escaped the challenges posed to its methodological norms by the various approaches that they collect under the umbrella of anti-realism, idealism, and postmodernism. Those approaches that have penetrated Byzantine History’s disciplinary bubble did so already domesticated as adjuncts to pre-existing realist praxis (i.e., as a reminder to beware the rhetoric and bias of the sources). It is curious that narrativism gained so little traction, given that the modern discipline of Byzantine History is organised around the study of a string of Byzantine historiographical narratives, intentionally composed to pick up where the last one left off, and the production of narrative historiography in the present. By examining how the discipline of Byzantine History has gone about constructing and validating its depictions of past people, specifically emperors and Byzantine historians, I will argue that the discipline’s unquestioning realist consensus creates interpretive problems when it comes to characters, characterisation, and the production of historiographical arguments.

*Matthew Kinloch is researcher at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo.*

On the Ambiguity of Meaning: An Analysis of Theoretical Rejections of Postmodern Thought in (Early) German History Didactics

Hannah Van Reeth

It becomes clear very quickly to the theoretic researcher that the contemporary field of German history didactics has been struggling since its early existence of the 1970’s to successfully integrate postmodernism in its theoretical foundations. The critique of “postmodern randomness” has substantially marked the praxis within the discipline and the conservative mantras of “historical orientation” and “Sinnbildung” have taken over the majority of its professionalized discourses.

In this presentation, I want to present an analysis of the theoretical structure of specific didactical foundations and thereby showcase a possible reason for the generally failed integration of postmodern thought within the discipline of German history didactics. The theses of the presentation are that (1) main disciplinarian theories (or so-called “fundamental categories”) structurally imply a rejection of certain kinds of postmodernist views and (2) that socio-political constellations have hindered its manifestation within the publication corpus and, therefore, within the disciplinarian discourse.

To conclude, I want to shortly address the controversial view of a broad theoretical audience within German history didactics that enthusiastically accepts the postmodern anti-realism standpoint, but dogmatically continuous to advocate for a different kind of “objective realism” within the spheres of meaning and consciousness.

*Hannah Van Reeth has been working as a university assistant (predoc) in the field of history didactics at the University of Graz since September 2023. Previously, she was a member of the “Disciplinary History(ies) of History Didactics” project and was employed as a student assistant at the department in Graz from 2020 to 2023.*

**The Devil Is In the Detail: Complicating the Realism/Idealism Debate**

Giuseppina D’Oro

It is often assumed a) that realism is in a much stronger position to do justice to common sense than idealism AND b) that since if one is not a realist one must then be an idealist, idealism must necessarily fail to vindicate common sense. The philosophy of history has its own version of this view: a) historical realism can do justice to two common sense desiderata, namely that the past is fixed (it does not change) and that this fixed past can be known; b) since if one is not a historical realist one must be a historical idealist, historical idealism must necessarily deny that the past is fixed and that it can be objectively known. This paper casts some doubts on the view that historical idealism runs against common sense by taking a closer look at the inference: if you are not x, then you must be y.

*Giuseppina D’Oro is Reader in Philosophy at Keele University.*

Historical Narratives as Models: Towards an Understanding of Historiography as a Modelling Activity

Roberto Gronda

Philosophy of history must be saved from itself: this is the mission which the editors of the book claim as their own task and which should guide the work of the philosophers of history in the future. It is a powerful statement, but which reflects the present situation of the discipline: in the editors’ own words, “philosophers of history today operate in a milieu of their own, separate from other philosophers and practicing historians alike” (Førland and Mitrovic, ix).

The goal of this talk is to contribute to the de-insulation of contemporary philosophy of history. As philosopher of science, I am struck by the misalignment between the debates in the field of philosophy of history and those in general philosophy of science. While philosophers of science are mainly concerned with formulating model-based accounts of scientific explanation, in the belief that it is models rather than laws or theories that have real explanatory import, philosophers of history do not seem at all interested in this new body of literature on explanation. To my knowledge, apart from Currie and Sterelny’s proposal (Currie and Sterelny, 2017) and a few cursory and extemporaneous remarks that can be found scattered through various works, no serious effort has been made to investigate whether historical narratives can benefit from being conceived of as models.

I believe, on the contrary, that this is a promising route that can provide new and relevant insights for all the parties involved. Indeed, while philosophers of history would gain a new visibility and the discipline could gain centrality in the debates in general philosophy of science – as it was in the 1940s and 1950s – philosophers of science would greatly benefit from enlarging the scope of what can legitimately be considered an explanatory model.

Models are usually understood as idealized reconstructions of some aspects of what is called model target system, that is, that part of the world that is represented by the model. In the case of historical explanation, I hold that a) historical narratives are models, b) the model target system is the past, and c) the data are the set of historical evidence available at the present time.

The thesis that historical narratives should be conceived as models raises two sets of problems that I want to address in this talk. The first is the ontological question of the nature of historiographical models. More precisely, I try to outline a theoretically viable answer to the following questions: which existing theory of models (if any) is best suited to account for historiographical models? To what extent does an understanding of historical narratives as models support realism? And how is it possible to resist the anti-realist conclusions that many forms of fictionalism seem to entail?

The second set of questions is epistemological, starting from the recognition of the epistemic consequences of our structural inability to get in touch with the past as it essentially happened or to manipulate past events so as to produce new data. The main problem is to clarify what and how historiographical models purport to represent. To reach this goal, I address the following questions: what kind of understanding of historical facts – not of historical evidence – can be reached through historiographical models? Which functions do abstraction and idealization play in history? What are the relationships between historiographical models and historical evidence? And between historiographical models and its target system, namely, the past?

By sketching a plausible (yet preliminary) answer to those two sets of questions, I aim at putting forth a general account of historiography as a modelling activity that allows us to place it in strong continuity with all the other scientific disciplines. In doing so, I hope to contribute to overcoming the idea that history – both as a discipline and as a practice of inquiry – should be accorded a special and separate status in the realm of scientific activity.

*Roberto Gronda works at the University Of Pisa, where he teaches Philosophy of Science. His area of expertise is pragmatist philosophy of science, with a focus on the philosophy of scientific expertise and the philosophy of social and human science.*

All in the Family: Philosophy of History and Philosophy of Science as Friends, not Enemies

Veli Virmajoki

I argue that the philosophy of science has much to offer to the philosophy of historiography, for example about the debates about realism and explanation. The philosophy of science has – due to its size as a field – extensive resources and nuances that can be applied within the philosophy of history.

However, I also argue that, more importantly for us here, the philosophy of history has significant contributions to make to the philosophy of science.

First, history is a major source of knowledge about us as human beings and our situation. The generation of this knowledge and its philosophical interpretation should be of interest to the philosophy of science, given that this field fundamentally concerns knowledge that is significant to us. There is no “Science” but sciences, and what unites them is the fact that they produce knowledge. There are no good reasons why philosophers of science and philosophers in general should be uninterested in philosophy of history – quite the opposite.

Second, the trajectories from the past to the present and from the present to the future indicate that science can and will change over time. When science changes, philosophy of science must change. History aids in understanding these changes. However, if we confine ourselves to debates and discourses that are only relevant within our field, we limit our ability to contribute to this understanding.

Finally, given the current state of affairs with the pessimistic outlook on crucial trends, the future should be our main concern. The future depends on our actions and the knowledge on which our actions are based. Both the philosophy of science and the philosophy of history must be prepared to contribute to our ability to understand the changes. This is best achieved by understanding how knowledge is created through sciences and historiography.

*Veli Virmajoki, Docent, PhD, works in futures research. His work focuses on the futures of science, futures of universities, and the impact of scientific developments on society. Virmajoki received his PhD in philosophy, where his work has focused on the philosophy of science and historiography. In philosophy, Virmajoki has explored causal and counterfactual thinking in science and historiography. He has published widely in the fields of philosophy and futures research, mixing the approaches of the two fields. Some of his works in the philosophy of historiography include* Causal Explanation in Historiography *(Springer Nature: Switzerland, 2023) and “What Should We Require from an Account of Explanation in Historiography.”* Journal of the Philosophy of History *16, no. 1 (2022).*

Twilight for the Philosophy of History?

Ian Verstegen

This paper considers the prospects for institutional support of the philosophy of history (as a discipline) and historical realism, which are intertwined, in the Anglo-American world. It is remarkable that the study of the philosophy of history flourishes in countries with vigorous support of public education (e.g. Finland, Netherlands). In those countries where even public education is heavily bolstered by donors and fundraising (especially the US), the logic of equitable support of subjects is not so kind. Following a neoliberal logic, the philosophy of history cannot survive except as a sideline of the “historian of philosophy” within a larger philosophy department. Because anti-realism and relativism are embraced particularly outside of philosophy, as explained in *The Poverty of Anti-Realism* and this conference, realism will increasingly decline as it succumbs to the instrumentalizing needs of other disciplines.

*Ian Verstegen is Associate Director of Visual Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Trained in early modern art history, he also writes on art theory and historiography. He is the author of* A Realist Theory of Art History *and editor of* Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism*.*