Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera

From the When of History to the How of the Historical

Sina Steglich

Cite as: Sina Steglich, "From the When of History to the How of the Historical," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 30/11/2021, https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1755.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1755

From the When of History to the How of the Historical

A Commentary on: Achim Landwehr: Diesseits der Geschichte. Für eine andere Historiographie, Göttingen 2020

On this Side of History: the title of the book brings to mind a mental or intellectual localization. Anyone who is on this side of history understands it not as something transcendental or beyond reach, but as something close and tangible. Yet this kind of proximity could also be broadly understood as a precondition for — or at least a facilitator of — understanding. History up close raises challenges. Once we abandon the idea of history as something temporally distant and distinct from us that can be observed and analysed from a safe distance, we lose our familiar retrospective point of view. If we, who are firmly anchored in our present, leave this viewpoint behind, everything we traditionally call "history" becomes fluid, and ceases to be the opposite of everything that is not history, namely the present and the future. History seen in this way is not clearer or easier to understand and explore; on the contrary, it becomes fuzzier and more problematic.

We could tentatively or heuristically refer to this process as "fluidization". This is echoed by the cover of the book. What we see is not a single line depicting the irreversible arrow of time leading from the past to the present and the future. Instead we see multiple lines overlapping each other, building up a web of different layers or waves of time. As the subtitle indicates, the book argues "for another historiography" — one that is clearly no longer structured by the two dimensions of time and space, and does not run along a single timeline in which one can move backwards and forwards. Landwehr's proposed historiography seeks to open up further dimensions, explore alternative possibilities of getting in touch with absent times, and find different, more appropriate modes of writing history. The approach he suggests is based on the assumption that we are not rooted in a firm present from which we can cast our eyes back to recognize history as something distinct from us — as something closed, or even finished. That is the programme of *On this Side of History* at a glance. In the following essay I will explore three aspects of the book.

Transforming the Transcendence of History into an Immanence of the Historical

The first and primary assertion of *On this Side of History* is the transformation of the transcendence of history — of history as a collective singular — into an immanence of the historical. This is much more than just a terminological game. It leads to the fundamental question of what is implied by our belief in history as history, as well as our use of this term. This is not to say that we must defer to one of the most prominent discussions of the use (and abuse) of history, namely Friedrich Nietzsche's three versions of history: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.[1] It is sufficient to acknowledge that history is always a mode of self-assurance that inherits the hope for, and promise of, orientation in and through time(s). It does so in multiple ways. History as history is clearly differentiated from the present of its observers, in contrast to the future that causally results from it, or at least follows from it chronologically. History is a complex that we seek to understand from a temporally distant point of view, one that we want to explain hermeneutically, or even one that serves as a master teacher. Regardless of the nuances of these different possible uses for history, there appears to be a consensus that something like history does exist, and it is something that we as individuals and societies can remember and functionalize for didactic purposes or cultural memory.

This shows us more clearly what is implied by the abandonment of history as history and the adoption of the historical: a gesture of fundamental uncertainty and confusion. Breaking up history and reconfiguring it as the historical offers far less self-assurance and orientation, because the historical is soft and fluid, not monolithic, and rejects any claim to completeness. It does not offer a meaning that automatically takes shape as a shared, acknowledged consensus. But this shock does not mean that the historical is irrelevant or arbitrary; rather, it has its own potential, and calls for other modes of functionalization than history perceived as something real, as something temporally closed and finite. What happens when the guardrail of "finished" history gives way to the open space of the historical as a new realm of possibility? How can we cope with the insecurity that the historical inevitably confronts us with? How can we transform this challenge into something fruitful? And what modes of knowledge production does the historical enable?

This Side of History in the Beyond of Temporal Indexing

First, every historian — and all those who think historically — would need to decentralize the hegemonic idea of a chronometric norm, and accept other ways of relating to past, to absent times. In the process we would cease to engage primarily in temporal indexing — in fixing divisions between frozen and erratic "befores" and "afters". As Landwehr himself puts it: we would no longer prioritize the question of when, but instead focus on the question of how historical relations can be established. More specifically, and to quote the title of another of Landwehr's books,[2] how can we draw links between the present and multiple non-present times that we cannot access, due to the simple fact that they are past and gone? We must establish relations between ourselves as observers and the "there" of historical times, and these relations will provide a basis for asking questions and identifying historical objects that we want to interpret. These relations are chronoferences: bridges between our temporal "here" and one or more temporal "there(s)". But if we follow Landwehr's argument that chronological order is a stabilizing factor that does not itself enable historical understanding, and if we take seriously his approach of breaking up the "temporal immobility" (p. 235) of historiography, where does this lead us? How can we use individual and hybrid chronoferences to gain historical insights that are not merely subjective, but shared and possible to evaluate? How can we use chronoferences to produce profound historical knowledge that can be recognized as more than just individual understanding or subjective meaning? How does throwing chronoference anchors into the deep sea of the past — in other words, producing isolated connections between our "now" and one or more "before(s)" — allow us to conceptualize a phenomenon like historical change? Or is this category now redundant, given that such a dynamic is an attribute not of the historical itself, but of our practice of "chronoferring"? Put the other way around, the practice of chronoference — of multiple diachronic relations — raises the question of why the conceptualization of time in linear terms is so dominant. Dealing with time as a linear category seems to have a specific value and benefit that prevents us from playing with other definitions, or from trying out different ways of grasping the historical. Is this an important cognitive coping strategy to help us tame time's chaos, impose order on past times, and retrospectively reduce contingency? And if so, how can we better cope with contingency if accepting the historical as a "trove of the latent" (p. 109) in place of history generates even more complexity, fluidity, and contingency?

Historical Insights: A Question of Scale?

One final point. *On this Side of History* is not just an exploration of the temporal nature of past times and our ability to grasp them adequately. As the focus on chronoferences indicates, the book is not just about relations between different times, but more generally about what we recognize as historical objects worth analysing, and what we recognize as historical problems worth discussing. It is about what we recognize as historical and why, or what we recognize as historically relevant and important. A simple example may illustrate this: the event. What constitutes an event as such? What happens to an event if nobody witnessed it or can remember it? Or even more fundamentally: did an event in the past even happen, if no one noticed it? These small thought experiments hint at the fact that the sphere of the historical that is accessible to us is itself highly filtered and contingent, and that obviously not everything that has ever happened has left visible traces in our present, or can be detected through relics of past times. That is why the concept of the chronoference touches upon more general questions, such as where we should throw our chronoference anchor and why. Do we "chronofer" consciously, targeting a specific event that we are already aware of? Or do we do so without particular aims without knowing what we can and will find in the dark depths of the historical, and without knowing whether we will be able to decipher and interpret what we uncover? How do we choose our chronoferences? How do we validate something from the timespace of the historical, and how do we contextualize it in order to finally narrate it? When should we take a holistic, panoramic perspective, as global historians often do, and when should we take up our magnifying glasses to follow the paths of microhistorians? And even more importantly, what do these different approaches presuppose? How does our chosen scale prefigure what we can see and discover? And to what extent does this make us blind to all that lies beyond the scope of our scale?

Achim Landwehr's thoughts in *On this Side of History* invite us to focus less on the "when" of history than on the "how" of the historical. He asks us to acknowledge that temporal indexing and our practice of chronological narration are not the only possible modes of grasping the historical. It is therefore promising to rethink and redefine not only all of our temporally grounded categories — our common attempts to systematize and interpret non-present times — but also our narratologically inspired forms of presentation, along with our ability to recognize historical objects as historical, and to derive more nuanced historical meanings from them.

This blog contribution is the revised version of the comment by the author at the *Domino Talk* with Achim Landwehr on *Jenseits der Geschichte* (Beyond History) held on 24 June 2021 at the Center for Theories in Historical Research (Bielefeld University). Further information here.

You can comment in German, English, French or Italian under the German version of the blog contribution.

Sina Steglich is a Research Fellow in Modern History at the German Historical Institute London. She received her PhD from the University of Mannheim in 2018, with a thesis on the history of temporalities in the nineteenth century. Prior to coming to London, she was Research Fellow at the Chair for the History of Humanities at the University of Konstanz, where she developed her current project on "Nomadism as a Discursive Figure of (Post-)Modernity". Her research interests include the theory, methodology, and history of historiography, the history of knowledge, and intellectual history from the nineteenth century to the present.

Contact: s.steglich@ghil.ac.uk

https://www.ghil.ac.uk/team/sina-steglich

Tags: chronoference / history of temporalities / pluritemporality

---

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben," in: *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Die Geburt der Traödie. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-III, 1872-1874*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972, 239-330.
[2] Achim Landwehr, Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit. Essay zur Geschichtstheorie. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2016.