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The Social Role of History and the Question of Egalitarian Historical Writing

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Abstract

In this paper, I address a question relevant for the social role of history, namely: what relation between historical studies and society can be established by egalitarian historical writing? Drawing on the contributions of María Inés La Greca, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, and Kalle Pihlainen, I critically discuss how contemporary historical theory responds to this question in the debate on Hayden White's distinction between historical past and practical past. By discussing the three theorists' contributions, I show that the relationship between historians and their audiences produced in them is asymmetrical. All of them, albeit varying degrees, describe historical writing as acts of communication in which historians are placed in the position of those who know better and act, while readers are assigned the position of those who are less well informed and who should submit to the actions of historians. Using the resources of postcritique, I point to the need for theoretical elaboration—the construction of instruments and concepts—to handle the question of producing democratic relations in historical writing. In conclusion, I suggest a brief description of the democratic reading contract of historical writing based on the concept of receptivity.

Keywords

Reading contract. Social role of history. Postcritique.

Introduction

Many contemporary historians want to conduct studies which will play an important social role. At the same time, some of them tend to consider their field as a separate sphere of activity, independent from individual human needs, interests of groups, and the pressures of power. All of them are obliged by the state and scientific grants bodies to consider the impact of their undertakings on social reality.

In 2014, Jo Guldi and David Armitage published *History Manifesto*, a book demanding a change in historical studies, so that it can better use its distinctive dispositions to serve society and, at the same time, make historians more influential in shaping their contemporary reality (J. Guldi, D. Armitage 2014). Over the course of three years, 120 contributions commenting on the manifesto were published, and in none of them did I find voices questioning the social commitment of the project, while many entered into a dispute with the authors about social role of history[1].

Addressing the criticisms of commentators on the *History Manifesto*, two problems can be pointed out. Firstly, the *Manifesto*, in its assumptions, contains an exclusive and hierarchical ideal of historical practice—practiced only by professional historians (and not, for example, economists), using a unique set of research instruments that produce knowledge about reality, which society subsequently adopts and puts into practice (M. Francis et al. 2014; P.R. Pinto 2015, p. 837; A. Zukas 2015; K. Peden 2015). Secondly, Guldi and Armitage leave out many forms of history and historians' engagement in the public sphere, because they understand this sphere very narrowly. They include political decision-makers, boards of directors of large companies, heads of NGOs, representatives of Wall Street. The proper spaces for displaying historical studies results, in their view, are not books, museum exhibitions, television broadcasts, or academic classrooms, but legislative committees or board meetings of global corporations (D. Cohen, P. Mandler, p. 536-538).

Later, in May 2018, Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder published their "Theses on Theory and History," in which they critique the state of American historiography and suggest solutions to the problems identified. The authors first describe American historical writing, in which disciplinary norms and the pandering to their guardians are more important than the production of new historical knowledge that exceeds the framework of existing thinking. Then, among other things, they point out the inevitability of the political involvement of any historical work, since they are all involuntary or intentional social activities that join ongoing disputes,

1 An extensive list of comments on the History Manifesto can be found here: http://scholar.harvard.edu/armitage/publications/history-manifesto

supporting or challenging the status quo, revealing or concealing social tensions. Ultimately, in their demands, they call for a history that openly and consciously engages in public discussions and political conflicts, speaking truth to power and supporting the building of a better future (E. Kleinberg, J. Scott, G. Wilder 2018).

Contributions produced in response to the manifesto drew attention to two issues, among others. First, they questioned the *Theses* built-in opposition of theory and practice, which can paralyze potential users, suggesting that reaching for theory requires crossing a hard-to-reach boundary, a threshold of ability and creativity, attainable for a select few. In this context, attention has been drawn to the use of the word "workmen" to describe the supposedly theory-avoiding historians, and their mode of operation as a "workman like approach," thus suggesting that their practices are of simple, repetitive, conventional (rather than innovative) activities. One can therefore conjecture that theoretically grounded historians occupy an asymmetrical position of intellectuals or artists in relation to "ordinary" historians (J. Catlin 2018; M. Crow 2020; E. Domanska 2022).

Secondly, they criticized the manifesto failure to address the institutional dimension of historical studies and university humanities in general. They stressed that it is difficult for contemporary scholars to undertake experiments, subversive ventures, risk transgressing established patterns, or expend resources on theoretical reflection in the realities of neoliberal universities that demand quick, cheap, measurable, and abundant results. Commentators have speculated whether this lack is due to the strong positions the authors hold in the university hierarchy (S. Mclemee 2018; B. Gilbert 2018; J. Handel 2018).

Thus, it seems that some historians want to change the world and are asking themselves many questions about historical writing that will be an effective instrument of change: how can we improve the authority of history in public debate? Who is the addressee of historical writing? To what extent can historiography change the world? What are the inherent research practices, knowledge resources or writing forms of history that allow it to become effective means of political action?

However, the question that resonates most strongly in the examples above and which I think would resonate with other recent discussions and papers about the social role of history is: what relations between historical studies and society can be established by responsible historical writing, that is, writing that recognizes and analyzes its position in the social circulation of knowledge? This is the question I would like to focus on in my paper.

Addressing this question to contemporary historical theory offers an opportunity to supplement it with a means of constructing equal relationships between historians and their audiences. The latest theory of history has paid increasing attention to the question of the social

role of history. Recently, it has discussed this question more extensively by debating the challenge to history posed by the Anthropocene (eg. "Historical Futures" project at History and Theory by Marek Tamm and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon). In my paper, however, I would like to return to an earlier discussion that emerged in reaction to Hayden White's elaboration of the opposition of historical past and practical past (H. White 2014). Moreover, both share many threads and participants. In this paper I draw on the discussion of the practical and historical past not to offer a different understanding of this opposition, but to show how contemporary historical theory addresses the question of the relationship between historians and their audiences.

Very briefly summarizing White's proposition, the historical past is the systematic knowledge of the past, produced by professional historians that is not used for social, political, or existential purposes. As for the practical past, produced generally by non-historians, is the set of representations of the past to which people refer in their lives, making sense of present actions and planning for the future. White's proposal was read primarily as a criticism of professional historiography for its existential, social, and political uselessness (G. Spiegel 2013). White himself declared that he directed his theoretical attention henceforth to the practical past, since it is the past that responds to the existential needs of people and faces the important problems of the modern world (H. White 2014, p. 43-66).

From the exchange around White's proposal, I have selected three commentaries that are most relevant to the issue of the social role of historical studies: María Inés La Greca, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, and Kalle Pihlainen (M.I. La Greca 2016; Z.B. Simon 2015; K. Pihlainen 2016). I will discuss and comment on them as attempts to theorize history's engagement with debates about social and political problems in the contemporary world. In addition, in my commentary I will address the question of what relation between historical studies and society can be established by responsible historical writing.

By discussing the three theorists' contributions, I will show that the relationship between historians and their audiences produced in them is asymmetrical. All of them, albeit varying degrees, describe historical writing as acts of communication in which historians are placed in the position of those who know better and act, while readers are indicated by the position of those who are less well informed and who should submit to the actions of historians. My observations, therefore, are largely similar to the aforementioned observations of participants in the discussions of the *History Manifesto* and "Theses on Theory and History," who pointed out the hierarchical relations reproduced by both interventions.

I discuss the non-egalitarian components in contemporary history theory from the postcritique perspective, which offers analyses of contemporary humanities based on critical

theory. One of the objections this approach makes to critical theory is the unequal relation it establishes with its objects and audiences. Using the resources of postcritique, I point to the need for theoretical elaboration—the construction of instruments and concepts to handle the question of producing democratic relations in historical writing. In my view, the solution to the problem of establishing an egalitarian relation with the reader in historical writing may be the reading contract based on the concept of receptivity.

Practical Past and Feminist Historiography

La Greca argues that the opposition between historical and practical past is inefficient in the face of feminist historiography. Invoking Joan Scott's writing, she states that "for feminist history, the historical past had always been a practical past, and *vice versa*" (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 400). The founding of feminist historical writing was directed at the struggle for the emancipation of women, who had hitherto been marginalized in historiography and denied their own history. In this undertaking, the search for new and more pertinent knowledge of the past was closely linked to the development of new tactics for political struggle, building models of individual and collective life and "providing themselves a better present and future against past and present oppression" (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 400). At the same time, the original gesture of feminist historiography was to appeal to the past in order to denaturalize contemporary gender identities and portray them as historical, that is, subject to change. According to White's report, therefore, "feminist history began as a practical past" (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 401).

La Greca questions White's pessimistic tone by debating whether academic historiography, including the feminist project, has the energy and resources to support progressive social change, in which she follows Scott in considering two issues. First, Scott recognizes that feminist historiography has succeeded in including women in history, but that the project involved not only supplementing history with women's history, but also transforming the discourse itself, constituted by the exclusion of certain groups of people as non-historical. Second, Scott wonders to what extent the transformation of feminist history into an academic discipline has detached it from matters of social life and political struggle (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 396-397).

Scott resolves both doubts with the same argument. She analyzes the abandonment of feminist history's use of a single, homogeneous, and stable conception of women's identity. It was supposed to work brilliantly in the early stages of the political struggle, as a strong unifying idea for the movement. However, proved completely inefficient when applied to historical studies

revealing diverse, complex, impermanent formulations of gender identity. Feminist researchers at the time were sometimes criticized by activists for relativizing women's identity, in which they saw a symptom of academics' detachment from political reality and accused them of weakening the movement. But in political action, too, the universal formula of the female subject was only seemingly effective, as it excluded a number of groups (defined by class or race, for example) that did not fit into it. Feminist scholars therefore supported activists who demanded the inclusion of different actors and intersectional forms of subjectivity. The discussion commented on, according to La Greca, suggests that feminist history has developed a strong element of self-reflection. It has allowed it to step out of the conservative and theory-averse framework of academic history and begin to establish an alternative historical discourse. In addition, it shows that feminist historians are bringing critical knowledge into the public arena, which can be used in political struggles, as well as to negotiate the correction of the movement itself (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 402-404).

La Greca closes her commentary by articulating a clear and attractive statement: the humanities can support social change by providing critical reflection based on research and theoretical work. As she writes, "there is nothing in the practical past [...] that can prevent its user from appealing to the most oppressive stereotypes or exclusionary narratives to solve his or her problem." (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 409). To change the world for the better, says La Greca, "We need the destructive power of criticism and the constructive power of narrative. These are not easy-to-handle potencies." (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 409). Therefore, we should not abandon the historical profession, as White seems to suggest, because it can still be useful to society. However, it needs further modifications, continuing the feminist project of transforming historiography from an exclusionary discourse into a space for the construction of critical historical narratives for a better future (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 410).

La Greca's generous polemic against White's distinction is, I think, questionable in its final passages, in which she makes a statement on the social role of the humanities. It is easy to see the hierarchical ordering of the relation between scholars and society. Although La Greca indicates "without returning to the old—and well-criticized— paternalist idea of academia as offering enlightenment to the laity" (M.I. La Greca2016, p. 409), she nevertheless suggests that in political struggles a better future can only be produced by critical references to the past provided by professional historical studies and theoretical thinking. As she points out, "the destructive power of criticism and the constructive power of narrative. These are not easy-to-handle potencies", which most likely means that they require properly trained users, and should not be handled by someone without professional training. La Greca explains that the right knowledge and skills can be acquired within the academy: "many of us have found, in our journey through higher education,

alternative narratives for who we were supposed to be in a male-dominated society as well as strong arguments for legitimately choosing them" (M.I. La Greca 2016, p. 409).

Producing an asymmetrical relation between the academy and society seems to me a misguided solution, not only because a non-egalitarian future is not a better future, but also because unequal methods of operation may also encounter the reef that all didactic schemes crash into. These projects assume that unmasking and explaining the mechanisms of social reality will produce a proper consciousness that will drive appropriate political action, as well as a passive audience that will accurately read the educator's intentions and willingly submit to them. A project designed in this way would have to convey a clear, unambiguous, and unqualified message, while critical historical studies do not produce such a "lesson". Their results tend to be ambiguous and conditional, as La Greca pointed out when she spoke of feminist scholars deconstructing gender identities.

Practical Past and the Anthropocene

In his commentary, Simon links White's proposal to the Guldi and Armitage's manifesto mentioned above. In Simon's view, embedded in both projects is the assumption of the developmental character of history, which, in his view, is inappropriate nowadays in the face of the challenges posed to the humanities by the Anthropocene. In the developmental view, history at a deeper level is continuous. Continuity is ensured by the participating subjects of history retaining their identities despite changes. Meanwhile, according to Simon, the Anthropocene should be viewed as unprecedented change, which means the breaking of all continuity of the historical process. Historians can gain a stronger foothold in public debate if they use this framing of the Anthropocene and explain unprecedented change. After all, the public is supposed to be induced to act by a story it can believe. In turn, it is difficult to believe the stories produced by the developmental view, since the reality we face seems to go beyond previous human experience (Z.B. Simon 2015, p. 825-826).

According to Simon, the practical past, as White describes it, is not an appropriate framing for the social role of history. A more pertinent solution for history aspiring to be socially relevant is to develop new ways of explaining reality that treat change as rupture. Simon notes that the framing of paradigmatic change in Thomas Kuhn or episteme change in Michel Foucault could be an inspiration here (Z.B. Simon 2015, p. 820-831).

Simon developed the concept of unprecedented change in a number of articles published after his commentary on White's Practical Past, and continues to do so today. A significant

addition to it, from my point of view, is his 2020 article, "The Limits of Anthropocene Narratives," in which, while still advocating for the framing of Anthropocene as a radical novelty phenomenon, he introduces a new argument into the discussion (Z.B. Simon 2020). More specifically, he claims that narratives — understood here as continuous, ordered stories — domesticate Anthropocene realities. They tie new processes to those that have long been explained, such as capitalism or colonialism, turning the unfamiliar and disturbing into familiar and, thus, less discombobulating. The Anthropocene storytelling is misguided not only because it cannot capture the radical novelty of the current situation, but also because it could disarm and demobilize audiences who, moved by the suddenness and extreme nature of reality, might be inclined to take appropriate action. As Simon points out, "The more such perceived radical novelty is domesticated, the less radical and the less novel it appears, and thus the less it calls for mitigation" (Z.B. Simon 2020, p. 195).

Simon's claim raises my three objections. Firstly, framing the Anthropocene as a rupture has a depoliticizing effect, which also means less mobilizing capacity for the rhetoric of unprecedented change. Simon, however, argues that the argument for using the depiction of the Anthropocene as a radical novelty is its ability to galvanize people into action, while domesticating narratives on capitalism and inequalities are supposed to have a relieving effect. However, it can be questioned whether the shock of confronting a radical novelty will be more mobilizing than familiar political narratives. Practices of political action have already been developed for the former—people know what to do and how to do it—while the latter can result in dismay, confusion, and ultimately helplessness in the face of the unknown.

Secondly, it seems to me that there is a great risk that fear will be the primary affect produced by framing the Anthropocene as a radical novelty. Meanwhile, fear can be overwhelming, cause indifference, push people to struggle selfishly for their own and their family's survival without looking at others, and create resentment toward other groups. Generating fear in society is, I believe, the wrong solution.

Thirdly, the relation between historians and society inherent in Simon's reasoning raises an objection. Simon assumes that historians' framing of the Anthropocene as an unprecedented change will cause society to respond appropriately to the challenge. It seems that society here is seen as passive and unaware, while historians are seen as active and aware. From Simon's reasoning, it may follow that the public is a group of people who are inactive and unresponsive to the dangers that threaten them, lacking knowledge about them and the solutions they can adopt in the face of them. Viewed in this way, the public requires knowledge conveyed in a certain way that will cause them to take the right action.

In other words, historians can steer the passive and ignorant readers of their works

to take action to contain or mitigate the threats caused by the Anthropocene. It seems to me that historians should not build asymmetrical relationships with their readers. First, because reproducing a hierarchical ordering of the world is part of the problem rather than the solution; and secondly, such action is counterproductive. As literary studies focused on reader response have been teaching us for many years, it is difficult to program the reader to "correctly" read our message. While we cannot predict the reader's comprehension and actions, it is likely that if they recognize an asymmetrical relationship with the author inscribed in the text, they will reject its message.

Insularity of History

Yet another commentary on White's opposition of historical past and practical past has been forwarded by Pihlainen. He declares that he does not challenge the distinction suggested by White, but, while the American theorist turned his attention to the practical past after carrying it out, he, like La Greca, focused on the historical past. Unlike La Greca, however, Pihlainen argues that historical writing has little relevance to political struggle or social change efforts. In a nutshell, professional historiography, in his view, is defined by its orientation toward the construction of historical facts. In turn, this task realization is difficult to reconcile with social engagement. Producing an account as reliable as possible of the past in its complexity, randomness, and ambiguity essentially prevents the creation of persuasive, coherent, incisive stories about the past that could serve as vehicles for political argument about the future. Pihlainen argues that the slow and meticulous reading of records and the careful, patient assessment of their reliability, as well as the consideration of multiple paths of interpretation inherent in historical writing, often returning to passages already discussed, will cause the reader to believe in the clumsiness and ineffectiveness of historians. These reading experiences cannot effectively motivate audiences to act for change (K. Pihlainen 2016, p. 417-418; K. Pihlainen 2017; J. Muchowski 2021).

Having given historiography such a diagnosis, Pihlainen goes further and argues for the impotence and insularity of history. In his view, it should not be seen as a discourse that can help us in responding to questions about the social reality state or in evaluating programs of political change. Since the construction of historical facts will not provide us with solutions to contemporary problems, the past, he adds, does not contain reproducible lessons for the present. Again, contrary to La Greca, he states that expert historical knowledge should also not serve to assess the utterances of the practical past. He fears that by appealing to history, for example, we may destroy a potentially progressive non-academic way of relating to the past, suggesting that factual relevance is more important than its social value. However, he offers a different tactic for

challenging harmful memory or identity narratives circulating in the public eye, one that avoids the direct and authoritative involvement of historiography in political struggles suggested by La Greca's and Simon's (K. Pihlainen 2016, p. 420-422).

Namely, Pihlainen advocates that historians use a non-creative writing style. He encourages a stronger exposition of records and a reduction of the narrative framework, which consists of a strong narrator's voice, a clear hierarchy of narrative threads and a lucid, and continuous flow of the story. He also suggests creating complex, voluminous, and uninteresting representations (Pihlainen points to George Perec's book Life: A User's Manual as a model). In Pihlainen's view, this form will be able to modify readers' beliefs about the possibility of obtaining certain truths, lessons, and meanings from historical narratives. It can serve to warn the questionability of any political ideas and actions based on knowledge produced by historians . It would also shift to readers the task of assigning meaning to historiographical work and making it coherent while reading. This form of writing would thus produce a more egalitarian relationship between historians and their audiences, and thus different from the one projected in La Greca's and Simon's argument (K. Pihlainen 2016, 423-427.)

It seems that, according to Pihlainen, history should not follow the expectations of readers demanding attractive clear-cut stories and of theorists and activists looking for a historiography with strong moral lessons for the present. One also gets the impression that Pihlainen's demand is already being pursued by some historians. As he points out, "because of its generic commitment to factual detail, [historiography] already has a natural talent for this—for being boring, irrelevant, non-commercial, and so on" (K. Pihlainen 2016, p. 427-428).

Although Pihlainen limits the authors control over the text and seeks to equate them with the readers, he nevertheless retains one important element of the asymmetrical relationship between the two actors of reading. While he argues that historians should abandon giving lessons to the reader and should not provide them with catchy visions of changing the world, he also argues for practices of presenting the past that will powerfully move the addressee, trigger reflection and action, or push them out of their usual ways of perceiving reality. Such an approach assumes that the reader is passive or unaware. They will know what to do and what to think, but first, historical writing must draw the reader out of a passive stance and activate them (K. Pihlainen 2016, p. 424, 427)[2].

Ultimately, in his commentary, Pihlainen takes an ambiguous position on the division

2 In the discussed article, this way of approaching the author-reader relationship is only signaled, and Pihlainen argues for it more extensively in his book (K. Pihlainen 2017p. 41, 89–90).

between the practical and the historical past, however differently from La Greca. On one hand, he frees history from the overwhelming tasks imposed on it by the public and those in power. His approach exposes a double uselessness of historiography: firstly, as a solution to important social problems, and secondly, as a means of exercising power. On the other hand, Pihlainen emphasizes historiography potential as a discourse that could challenge the construction of the authority of political and social programs with the help of historical knowledge.

Postcritique and the social role of historical writing

How else can one capture the social role of history? What kind of relation with its audience should a responsible history construct? I follow the postcritique approach present in literary studies and political philosophy for more than a dozen years. The main attention of postcritique is dedicated to the analysis of the critical and culture-creating power of affects, including emotions, moods, and dispositions to undertake critique; to the study of the position of the critic, with attention to the questionably frequent inclusion of ordinary social actors as insufficiently self-aware and uncritical; expanding the relationship with the public sphere on an equal footing, in particular moving away from a suspicious attitude toward norms, institutions and the social use of knowledge; challenging the dominance of some ways of doing criticism at the expense of others, leading to one-sidedness and a reduction in the insight and productivity of critique; the relation between the object and its context, including questioning the framing of their interaction, in which the object is treated as a symptom of the work of larger structures. The primary object of postcritique coverage is critical theory (R. Felski 2015; E. Anker, R. Felski 2017). It seems to me that this approach can be useful in responding to the question of what kind of relation a responsible history should build with its audience. To this end, the writing of Jacques Rancière is particularly inspiring in addressing the question of the relationship between historians and their audiences and remains an important component of the postcritique approach (J. Rancière 1994, 2003, 2011).

How can the distinction between the practical and the historical past be understood from a postcritical perspective? Postcritique suggests that historiography is a sphere of activity that, following its own internal rules, seeks to construct historical facts and produces representations of the past. Their components are images that always relate to the world. In the process of configuring representations, they are relocated, combined, and transformed, resulting in the confirmation of the existing order of visibility, or undermining it and transforming it with different rules for the visibility distribution. Seemingly uninvolved historiography turns out to impact and transform the social world.

While I agree with La Greca that the division between historical past and practical past should be challenged, I propose a different argument. Any representation, including the representation of the past, can be emancipatory, however, not in the sense that it serves as an instrument for acquiring power. I mean emancipatory in the sense that it can produce images of egalitarian relations between different things, groups of people, and events, not ascribing positions to people in society, giving them the opportunity to express themselves in any way they wish, and showing reality as a heterogeneous space for disputes playing out. Historical representation can also be conservative and expose hierarchical relationships between different things, groups of people, events, ascribing positions in society to people, linking them to certain forms of speaking out, and showing reality as a harmonious, or tension- and conflict-free sphere.

Historiography seems to have a strong political potential: it can reconfigure the visibility of things, people, and events, as well as dissect and link places, resources, modes of expression, and make various forms of collective life conceivable. La Greca attributes to history the ability to change social reality through critical instruments that expose and explain its mechanisms. Such an approach, however, is undemocratic, as it uses categories of the surface known to all combined with a depth available to a relatively few, as well as higher and false consciousness. Simon believes that history using the right framing of change can play an important role in public debates on the most pressing problems of the present. Finally, Pihlainen, while using the rhetorically catchy slogan of history's impotence and insularity, acknowledges its weak but important disposition to intervene in public debates involving questioning attempts to use the past for political action.

Pihlainen does not define the reader of historiography, so it can be anyone, and he is not afraid to entrust the reader with making meaning or closing the ambiguous representation of the historian constructed past. This is contrary to La Greca, who fears the appropriation of history by oppressive and exclusionary consumers and believes that employing critical resources and constructing narratives requires professional academic training. I believe that Pihlainen is right when he writes that the reader's use of presentations of the past is out of the author's control. In turn, the attempt to control the response to a presentation, to impose a political argument, enters into a didactic logic that produces an asymmetrical relation with the reader. Moreover, as already mentioned when discussing La Greca's arguments, representations of the past based on research and theoretical devices do not prevent looting and hostile takeovers of concepts and stories.

La Greca and Pihlainen respond differently to the questions of who produces historical discourses and what relation between historical writing and society such discourses can establish. In La Greca's perspective, it should be produced and remain under the control of historians trained in the academy, although, as I mentioned, La Greca recognizes the important contribution of

individuals and groups outside the academy to it. In Pihlainen's view, on the other hand, it is generally in the production that, in addition to historians, the contributions consumers participate — and should remain so. The consumers, in the course of reading historical works, supplement them, make them coherent, give them meaning, and draw conclusions. One should beware that Pihlainen, as well as Simon, sees the reader as a passive actor who needs to be stimulated to become actively involved in the reading process. In my understanding, the author can leave the work undetermined and relinquish control over the reading process to allow the reader to take part in its co-creation. The opposition between active and passive readers is inefficient, because the reader always remains active, just as the author does: they read, organize the incoming data, and interpret the work. Historical writing might not so much try to give readers an impulse to more attentive and innovative reading practices, to go beyond conventional fixed modes of thinking about the world, or to pursue new critical knowledge. However it might acknowledge readers as active actors with the resources of knowledge and instruments for interpretation, asking themself and the writings questions, in concern about the problems of the contemporary world.

The reading contract and receptivity

What means of producing historical writing can serve to build egalitarian relations between the historians and their audiences? Rancière asked a similar question about literature in his search for equal forms of writing. In his numerous readings of European literature, equal relations have an unstable character (J. Rancière 2004). I suggest that the reading contract may serve as a device that stabilize equal relations in historical writing. Every utterance, including historical writing, has a contract or pact with the reader embedded in it, suggesting how it can be read and at the same time assigning certain positions to the author and reader. The content of the pact can be signalled by non-textual practices and elements of the historical text. Although historical theory has for many years focused on historical writing as a device of communication, it has paid little attention to the matter of the reader and their response to historiography. This problem has been discussed most extensively in recent years by the much-mentioned Pihlainen, as well as Pia Ahlbäck (K. Pihlainen 2017, chapter 4, 5, 7; P. Ahlbäck 2007).

Employing the concept of the reading contract and applying reader-response criticism provides important insights and instruments, but it can also raise serious questions. It extends the field of theorizing beyond the historical text to the network of connections linking the text itself to authors, readers, and the social world in which the reading takes place. It provides the knowledge and means to describe such components of reading historical writing as the relationship between author and reader, the position of the reader implied by the text, their participation in producing the

meaning of the text, and reading practices—their effectiveness and embeddedness in the social world. At the same time, however, the diagnoses produced by this approach say that the setting up of a specific egalitarian author-text-reader relationship, for example, faces a number of obstacles. The well-argued claims of Stanley Fish or Walter Benn Michaels suggest that it is not the author or the text, but in fact the reader and the conventions of reception operating in their interpretive community that are the main source of the text's meaning, and they define the relation involved in a given utterance (S. Fish 1980; W.B. Michaels 1980). This means that inscribing a reading contract into the text, however configured, is a weak exercise, and its effectiveness will depend on the readers' dispositions.

Previously, I have used the arguments of reading response criticism by saying that the reader can read the contributions of historians in many ways and out of the author's control, making the attempts to guide the reader's reception ineffective. However, this argument can be nuanced and moved beyond an "all or nothing" logic.

The aforementioned works on the reader's response to historical writing focused on the author's design of this response by appropriate text production. Thus, the question was about what writing strategies to implement in order to achieve the desired reading result. Pihlainen suggested constructing complex, lengthy, and ambiguous historical representations, while Ahlbäck suggested using the mimetic method, i.e. engaging readers by inducing the effect of realism (K. Pihlainen 2017, chapter 4, 5, 7; P. Ahlbäck 2007).

In my view, it is worth focusing more attention on the reading itself and the audiences of historical writings. This is suggested by the research on reading and readership carried out over the past few decades, primarily within the framework of literary studies, which has recently gained momentum under the aforementioned banner of post-criticism or in reaction to it. The practices that constitute a reader response do not just boil down to two opposing types of reading activity: whether the reader following the reading pattern (for example, genre) of the work itself, or refusing to undergo such reading. First, the work may suggest several, more or less hierarchized ways of reading (some of them consciously inscribed by the author himself). Second, the process of reading is most often heterogeneous and consists of following most or a portion of authorial and textual cues, objecting to some, overlooking others, and choosing reading paths suggested by the culture in a given place and time, rather than prompted by the work itself. Third, other ways of reading than those assumed by the author and the genre rules of the work may still be useful from the point of view of these two instances (R. Felski 2008).

Different historical works may suggest different reading practices: close critical reading, quick and superficial scanning of the work in search of specific information, recreational reading,

or reading conditioned to identification and strong experiences (shock, enchantment) (R. Felski 2008). Some of them may have been designed by the author using adequate forms of writing, while others found their way into the work unintentionally (for example, the use of some forms of historical writing because of their, let us say, illustrative qualities may entail a suggestion for another reading on the work, inserted without the author's awareness). All of them can function in different parts (at the beginning, in the middle, at the end) of a work of history , more strongly or weakly and subordinated to each other or not.

Reading a history book can sometimes be heterogeneous: it critically follows the historian's argumentation, while at the same time immersing oneself in the attractive examples accompanying the argument, and strongly identifying the reader with the presented issues and characters. At different points in the reading, the audiences may follow the author and the work to a lesser or greater extent, or may skip their suggestions, overlooking them or read in contradiction to them. They may also reach for other ways of reading offered by their culture, or sometimes triggered by individual experiences.

Different ways of reading can work together. The genre rules of historical writing and (more often than not) the author-historians themselves expect readers to adopt a critical and distanced mode of reading, geared toward knowledge production. It does not have to compete with identificatory, immersive, or recreational reading practices, but can interact with them. The experience of being surprised by the reading, empathizing with the characters, and becoming attached to the topics addressed (decolonization, class struggle, or climate crisis) can fuel and enhance critical reading.

I come back to the question articulated earlier: how, with the recognition of the above-mentioned observations about the reading response of historical writing, including the lack of control over the reader, can one build a democratic reading contract into reading? In my view, acknowledging these features of reading historiography does not necessarily mean giving up discussing communication between historians and their audiences, including the reading contract. Given the caveats mentioned above, I propose a non-model conception of the contract, which means that it does not provide ready-made clearly articulated forms of the contract, and each time it is used, it will require significant adaptation and additions.

I believe that the contract should be guided by the pursuit of equality, but this should apply to both parties to the agreement. Historians, recognizing the equal position of their audiences, could suggest an agreement in which they renounce their power over them, which means that they give up controlling readings that would guide readers to the expected interpretations and hinder or prevent those that, in the authors' opinion, are not correct. Therefore, they will not treat readers

with preconceived notions, but by the same token, which does not mean they will submit to them. And since the contract is supposed to hint at the principle of equality, it should dissuade readers from subordinating their reading to themselves or instrumentalizing it. The readers would take into account the reading guidelines suggested by the work, recognizing that the historical work itself can expect something from readers. According to the contract, the audience may wonder: "what is it that this work wants me to notice and negotiate with in the course of the reading process?" (R. Felski 2021).

As I have already mentioned, reading itself appears to be a democratic practice, since, as scholars of reading response point out, it undermines authors' efforts to design reading. The mechanisms of reading implement the principle of equality to a large extent, since the author cannot control the readers, which hold part of the effort and responsibility for reading. Building an equal relationship with the audience, therefore, "only" requires that authors avoid supervisory measures, in addition to minor adjustments suggesting that readers adopt a democratic attitude.

The position of authors and readers assumed by the democratic reading contract can be productively captured by the concept of receptivity, as it is used by Nikos Kompridis. He uses it primarily to reflect on the needs of democratic politics and to rethink critical theory (N. Kompridis 2006; N. Kompridis 2011; A. NORVAL 2010). However, he shows that it is also useful in relation to reading practices by analyzing the response to J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elisabeth Costello*. In this close reading, Kompridis describes how Coetzee's novel addresses the question of receptivity, and then discusses the inability of its readers to undertake this mode of reading (N. Kompridis 2013).

In a discussion with Jürgen Habermas about how political change is possible, as well as how to identify and analyze new practices potentially useful for the common good, Kompridis suggests moving away from procedural rationality in evaluating actions or understandings of the world, and of itself and others. He believes such factors aim to subject the readers to control, to master them and to fit them into established forms of social life, and thus to obscure, smother, domesticate their potential for change (N. Kompridis 2006, p. 187-199, 223-241). In place of such a model of relations, he proposes receptivity — meaning an attentive and critical response to potential change. In this manner, the emphasis is on how we receive rather than how we make or control emerging opportunities for social action. The practice of receiving is meant to position us as "cooperative facilitators", rather than courageous demiurges creating new realities (N. Kompridis 2006, p. 199-210).

This mindset assumes that, when entering into a relationship with new practices, we will reflect on our position in regard to them, observing not only the unfolding action, but also

ourselves. It combines a lack of control with resignation to seeking certainty and knowing what we will learn in the course of taking part in social practice. Vulnerability towards the unknown and unfamiliar here means setting ourselves up in a exposure position to an impact that we cannot predict the effects, allowing for the possibility of being changed by the practice in which we have taken part. In other words, the reorientation suggested by Kompridis is about letting things happen instead of making things happen (N. Kompridis 2006, p. 199-210).

Kompridis at the same time stipulates that letting things happen is not the same as passivity, rather it is another form of agency. It is a strong, attentive, reflective engagement with new social practices. Nor is it a mindless openness to whatever may come, including the usual suspects: fascists or unethically behaving corporations. In arguing against receptivity's openness, Kompridis uses the term unclosed. He explains that "[receptivity] involves and requires a willingness to risk self-dispossession, and thus it is not so much about becoming open as it is about becoming unclosed to something or someone" (N. Kompridis 2013, p. 20). Thus, it is not a passive submission to new activities, but a risky critical engagement simultaneously diagnosing the practice itself and one's own participation in it, as well as allowing one's own views of reality and oneself to change (N. Kompridis 2006, p. 199-210).

How can Kompridis' suggestions be used to describe the democratic contract of authors and audiences of historical writing? It inspires an understanding of the reading process as an activity in which authors and audiences receive the works, rather than trying to capture, take over, control them. I have also mentioned the authors here because they too have to let the reading play out without trying to control it. Reading is not to be subordinated to the utilitarian question of "how can I use the work for my purposes?", but rather "what is it that this work wants me to notice?". It has to be an activity of equal cooperation between work and author, in which we do not just try to deconstruct, transpose, appropriate the work and establish our own meanings on its remains, but precisely to cooperate or negotiate with the author and the work. Receptivity involves reading without assuming to already know the content, it is not suspicious in advance, reflects on readers' position and how they emotionally react to the work. Such reading does not aim to control the reading process. Instead, it carefully engages in it and reckons with the possibility that by taking part in it our views, our knowledge and ourselves may change. But what about the "bad" works, those that carry false, harmful knowledge, hide their intentions, seek to subjugate us to power? A receptive attitude toward reading also involves a critical engagement with the reading process, and has the tools of critical theory at its disposal to expose such works.

How can these ideas be translated into specific practices? And more precisely, with what sort of means would the author be expected to enter into the described equality contract with

the audience? The first step for authors to build such an agreement is to relinquish control over the reading process, including implicitly influencing the audience to read it in a certain way and preventing them from undertaking other reading practices. Authors can construct their books and articles so that they are "unclosed" to different modes of reading. If authors design readings of works in which they do not control their audiences without their knowledge but suggest to them that they can respond to the work in different ways, they will make their relationship with the audience closer to equal, and this may create in the readers a disposition to undertake such an equal reading.

The next step is to undertake reading practices consistent with the idea of receptivity in our own work. We can perform receptive readings of various forms of historical records, as well as the works of other scholars or simply comment on the actions of past human and non-human actors. Most often, this will involve the careful critical reading expected of historians, which in this case, however, should initially take a cooperative rather than suspicious attitude. The willingness to undergo change, which is a component of receptivity, finds its analogue in historical practices in the willingness to modify claims and arguments under the influence of other scholars or when confronted with research material. Often historians do not reveal such modifications in their research process, limiting themselves to presenting the final outcomes of their investigations. From the perspective of building an equal contract with audiences, it would be more effective not to hide these elements of the study from readers and demonstrate that researchers can be wrong, and that new readings can cause a change in the understanding of the object under study, history as discourse, the world, and themselves. By taking the position of a reader with a receptive attitude in our own readings, we can suggest that audiences adopt a similar attitude toward our work.

I would add that the non-creative historical writing suggested by Pihlainen will be useful in implementing these steps. This is because it consists of discussing records and secondary literature more extensively and not rushing to conclusions. It, therefore weakens the narrative frame, by reducing its coherence and giving up closure, as well as weakens the authority of the narrator's voice, which can hesitate and make mistakes.

Finally, the last component of establishing equal agreement with audiences is historians' exposing of research contracts during the course of their investigations. In addition to other academic researchers, these include vernacular researchers, spokespeople of opinion (local and supra-local), informants, archivists, librarians, museum professionals, and other holders of historical records. By entering into and executing receptive agreements with them, we prompt the opportunity for audiences to build a similar relationship with us.

Conclusion

In what directions could historical theory seek answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this article about the relationship between historians and their audiences? It follows from the above considerations that historiography can change the world insofar as, like most utterances, it provides images of social reality with different positions, and populated by many groups. It can offer such representations that transcend the established norms of distribution of space, competence, and identity, or that reproduce those norms. The search for new forms of writing to enhance the political efficacy of historiography seems an idle and risky endeavour. For historiography already seems to have the means to intervene in the public sphere at its disposal. In turn, efforts to enhance their effectiveness by constructing the representation of the past in such a way that the historian has greater control over the audience's response to the representation fall into a didactic logic with the asymmetrical relationship of author and reader inscribed in it. Rather, the more apt course of action is to seek historiographical forms that offer a democratic reading contract, establishing equality between historian and audience. These agreements, inscribed into historical writing, speak of cooperation between the two parties, based on a model of receptive relationship. Such works have open-ended endings and do not provide clear-cut explanations of reality nor lessons for the future but leave it up to readers to assign meanings to the representation and draw conclusions from the past. Further studies could therefore focus on analyzing the contracts that historians make in their works and the ways in which they articulate them. This would make it possible to come closer to answering the question of what kind of relation between historical writing and society a responsible historical discourse can establish.

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