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Ways of Recounting the Past Across Genres and Media

Stefan Berger / Nicola Brauch / Chris Lorenz (eds.): *Analysing Historical Narratives. On Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past*. New York, NY / Oxford: Berghahn 2021 (= Making Sense of History. Studies in Historical Cultures, volume 40). 356 p. USD 145.00. ISBN 978-1-80073-046-5

In their “Introductory Remarks,” Stefan Berger, Nicola Brauch, and Chris Lorenz describe the present volume as an attempt to redress the “remarkable imbalance between narrative theory and narrative research” (p. 12) that for them defines the conversation about historical discourse. While numerous studies, they contend, have discussed the work of theorists such as Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, and Keith Jenkins, few have investigated history writing as such. There is thus a need for “actual explorations of how narrative strategies work in a variety of historical texts” (p. 12), a need that *Analysing Historical Narratives* is meant to fill. Exemplifying this “variety,” the anthology includes four parts devoted successively to academic studies, school manuals, representations of the past in various media, and national histories. Given the anthology’s stated purpose, I will ask whether the contributors examine the works they have selected “as narratives,” and, if they do, what aspect(s) of the mode they consider relevant to focus on.

The Distinction of History

While describing the entries that make up their anthology as non-theoretical, Berger, Brauch, and Lorenz still deem it necessary to do some theory themselves, in this instance, to ask whether there is a commonly agreed upon definition for “historical narrative.” Narrative, they observe, is now accepted as what Louis Mink (1987, 182) called a “cognitive instrument,” and there is no reason to return to the debates about its legitimacy as a means of explanation that have long agitated the historians’ community. Yet narrative is also the type of textual organization that shapes genres running the whole gamut from novels, to films, to comic strips, to newspaper reports, to scholarly studies, to posts on social

networks. What is required, then, is to determine whether historical narrative has something specific, and – if it does – to identify the forms it currently assumes.

To locate what might be called – in reference to the title of Dorrit Cohn’s (1990) classic study – the “distinction of history,” Berger, Brauch, and Lorenz do not look at minute discursive features such as voice or focalization, but at the relationship that texts establish with their readers. In historical discourse, they argue following theorists such as Kalle Philainen and Marek Tamm, this relationship is characterized by a “factuality” (p. 8) or “truth pact” (p. 9). That is, historians promise to supply information that is verifiable, and they implicitly invite readers to go check for themselves. This pact, for Berger, Brauch, and Lorenz, grounds the prime difference between historical and fictional narratives. Indeed, the option “go check for themselves” is unavailable in the fictional regime. All the texts labeled “historical” examined in *Analysing Historical Narratives*, on the other hand, could be not merely discussed (as they are in the anthology), but scrutinized for factual errors or debatable interpretations. Textbooks and national histories, as we shall see, are especially exposed to critiques, since the versions of the past that they propose are prone to being viewed as formally schematic and/or ideologically biased.

Tradespeople at Work

The first part of the anthology is devoted to “professional history writing,” a label which may or may not apply to one of the texts examined in this section, Thucydides’s *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* (were there “professional” historians in Antiquity?). Of the four essays, two probe the works under consideration at the level of the emplotment. A Hayden White specialist, Herman Paul, does not apply White’s well-known models to the “secularization narratives” that he examines, but the question he asks is similar to White’s: what are the main grand narratives that frame the histories of secularization? According to Paul, two models emerge: “narratives of decline” (p. 88), which describe and regret the drop in church-going in areas such as Great Britain between 1800 and 1950; and narratives of “marginalization” (p. 91), which, while deploring that drop, insist that there is no reason to prefer “churches packed with name-Christians over small groups of people entrusting their lives to God” (p. 91). Both models, Paul concludes, have in common sharing the old “historicist understanding of history,” that is, a view of history as developing in a “linear process” along “distinct stages” (p. 93). Reviewing “narratives of global history,” Gabriele Lingelbach identifies similar master plots in inquiries that delve into the regional effects of globalization. Donald Wright’s study of Gambian Niimi, for example, presents a “victim plot” (p. 105), globalization leading this small African country to the disastrous path of exporting raw material and importing consumer goods. Likewise, Giorgio Riello’s work on cotton describes a process of growing inequality known in the debates on global

history as the “Great Divergence” (p. 107); because of cotton’s rise and eventual success, some regions (mostly in Europe) have become rich, while others (mostly in Asia) have become impoverished.

Staying away from plot patterns, the two other chapters in this section make allowance for issues of perspective and voice. Alexandra Lanieri is interested in the play of viewpoints in Thucydides’s history of the Peloponnesian Wars, more precisely, in the way the author intertwines his own “knowledge” of what happened and the “blindness” of the Athenians (p. 45). This combination, according to Lanieri, enables Thucydides to account for both contingency and determinism, the narrative of the seemingly unavoidable defeat of Athens being balanced by the awareness that the outcome of the war could have been different if the actors had behaved another way. Similarly, observing that poststructuralist theorists have rarely engaged in “close readings of concrete historical texts” (p. 52), Kurt Kansteiner investigates the relative weight of narration, description, and argumentation in Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*. Narration and description, for Kansteiner, are in this work submitted to argumentation, in this instance, to the thesis that the Holocaust has “overshadowed the suffering of other groups in Eastern Europe,” resulting in a “morally and politically problematic imbalance in history and memory” (p. 77). While challenging Snyder’s views, Kansteiner is led to ask who, exactly, is conducting the demonstration. Thus, whereas for classical narratology (e.g., Cohn 1990, Genette 1993) the figures of author and narrator are identical in historical discourse, Kansteiner thinks otherwise. The historian as person, for him, should be differentiated from the “texter,” that is, from the “text-immanent figure” who narrates, describes, and argues (p. 56). It is thus the texter who – among other things – makes the many “tentative statements” included in the text (p. 59), statements that the historian “himself” could not endorse, because they are not safely grounded in evidence.

History in the Classroom

The second part of the anthology deals with school textbooks, that is, with manuals designed mostly for teenage students. Björn Onken and Daniel Wimmer, in the first two chapters, concentrate on the way some specific moments of the past are represented in works used in German classrooms. Looking at contents, specifically at “images of” rather than at plot patterns or textual features, they trace the evolution in textbooks of the topic they have selected. Onken thus explains that ancient Persia is portrayed as “two-faced” (p. 117) in Friedrich Neubauer’s 1912 *Lehrbuch der Geschichte*: on the one hand, as a vast empire that had managed to include different cultures; on the other, as a state striving to acquire new territories, beginning with Greece. This double image, Onken observes, has prevailed in German textbooks throughout the twentieth century, though recent manuals are more nuanced. Some of them now

present the Persian Empire as a “bridge between East and West,” stressing its achievements in such areas as “self-government and religious freedom” (p. 125).

While Onken studies the ways school manuals portray a state, Wimmer deals with the contrasting representations of a period: the Crusades. In *Geschichtliches Werden 2* (1974), Western campaigns to the Holy Land are described as valid and necessary endeavors, whose participants were ready to “sacrifice themselves” in order to liberate sacred Christian places (p. 135). In *Das waren Zeiten 2* (2003), conversely, the Crusades have become illegitimate undertakings, and the Crusaders, “brutal” and “ignorant” aggressors (p. 141). Still, according to Wimmer, the two books have a few things in common. In both, Jews and Muslims play the role of the minority “others” with respect to the majority Christian society (p. 143). Islam, moreover, is often reduced to a “homogeneous block,” set off against a diversified Medieval Christian community in which textbooks locate the “roots of present-day (EU) Europe” (p. 143).

As Wimmer does, Naoki Odanaka compares works published several years apart, in this case, the 1973 and 2014 editions of *Sekai no Rekishi*, manuals that in Postwar Japan survey “world history” for high school students. Focusing on issues of contents, Odanaka praises the 2014 edition for showing how each period “contributed to the development of today’s world” (p. 153), as well as for taking a “truly global perspective” (p. 156) that accounts for the contribution of the East. This edition, for Odanaka, has the double merit of making students aware of their own culture and avoiding “Occidentalism” – the stereotyped view of the West that would be the counterpart of Edward Said’s “Orientalism” (p. 160).

In the last chapter of this section, Everardo Perez-Manjarrez and Mario Carretero consider the role that maps play in two 2016 histories of Mexico designed for 9- to 11-year-old students. The maps included in these texts, they argue, unfold an “implicit master narrative” (p. 171), one that leads from the Spanish conquest, to colonial occupation, to independence through a sequence of battles. This success story, however, for them is misleading, because what is “liberated” is not the “sociocultural land delimitation of the indigenous people” (p. 178). It is the “spatial demarcation resulting from the conquest and colonization,” which maps make into “a basis of the Mexican national territory” (p. 178). Perez-Manjarrez and Carretero also object to the manuals’ master narrative’s focus on the achievements of “great” men, such as the “routes of Hernan Cortes” and the “campaign for independence of Miguel Hidalgo” (p. 178). Such emphasis, they contend, overshadows collective groups’ “practices and customs,” as well as the “social organization” these groups had before the arrival of the Europeans (p. 179).

While the contributors to the section “School Textbooks in History” generally have misgivings towards the works they are reviewing, the question remains of knowing how teachers deal in the classroom with works whose positions they may disapprove, too. Do German teachers explain to their students that Islam does not constitute an “homogeneous block”? Do their Mexican counterparts correct, or complete, the maps that come with the

manuals designed by the “Mexican Public Education Secretary” (p. 171)? If they do, do they expose themselves to blame originating with their school principals or some governmental agency? Surveys covering this topic would certainly be welcome, since they address issues about the relations between the teaching corps and the authorities that control it, often debated today.

Histories Across Media

The third section of the anthology is given to a phenomenon that Berger, Brauch, and Lorenz regard as most symptomatic of our times: the presence of history in a variety of media, including digital networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia. Discussing these new platforms, Robbert-Jan Adriaansen insists that they need to be both taken seriously and approached using a “multimodal analysis” that accounts for their specificity (p. 193). Adriaansen, to make his point, turns to the representation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on Instagram, relying on a detailed statistical apparatus to show how text and image here combine to produce meaning, though in a way that makes the text secondary to the image. The resulting “semantic networks” (p. 204), Adriaansen explains, obviously differ structure-wise from the linear narratives that make up most of the traditional histories. But they also differ from them production- and reception-wise, since they do not originate in a single author but in “latent mnemonic communities” (p. 204) that share the same interests.

Kenan Van de Mieroop turns to neither pictures nor texts but to an object to examine how the Civil Rights Movement is “(re)narrated” (p. 209). The object is an electronic greeting card sent in 2017 for the occasion of Black History Month, a card that represents, seen from the back, the shoulders and the head of a black man, with above him the word “Dream.” This e-message, for Van de Mieroop, includes a narrative. “Dream” obviously refers to Martin Luther King’s famous 1963 speech, which, “so the story goes” (p. 211), will in 1964 and 1965 be followed by the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Staging an African American, the card is also implicitly addressed to the community of which this individual is a member. Indeed, “Dream” should be taken not just as a noun but as “an injunction, an imperative” (p. 212), which impels the recipient(s) of the card to keep imagining how things could get better. Less relevant to the topic “new media,” the second part of the article compares different academic studies of the Civil Rights Movement. Stating his preference for a “long” history that highlights “the continuities of the black freedom struggle,” Van de Mieroop also shares his unease with a “tale of progress” that for him obscures the “persistent inequality” (p. 220).

Tackling German left-wing terrorism of the 1970s, Jörg Requate looks at the ways the actions of the Red Army Faction (RAF) were accounted for in different media, whether films, memoirs, journalistic reports, scholarly studies, or texts mixing facts and fiction. According to Requate, two patterns dominate this

ample production: the “fighting the State” narrative, in which the RAF is unconditionally opposed to the “system” (p. 227); and the “generation narrative,” in which the terrorists’ fight is directed not just against the State, but against the “fathers’ generation” (p. 233). Following the development of these models, Requate points to their “dissolution... into single stories” (p. 234). Surviving members of the RAF started writing books and giving interviews in the 1990s, and so did some of the victims (or relatives of the victims) of the terrorists’ actions. Yet, Requate deplors, “hope at attaining transparency soon vanished” (p. 235). Indeed, several of these testimonies soon turned out to be questionable, and even untrue.

The author of an oft-quoted article, “Historiographic Narration” (2014), Daniel Fulda zooms in on one of today’s best-selling genres: the popular historical novel. To account for this success, Fulda turns to a survey he conducted with his students. Even educated readers, he found out, would at times be fans of the genre, which they liked best when it offered an “adventurous plot,” a “love story,” and/or “multiple points of view” (p. 245). To his students’ comments about storyline and perspective, Fulda adds that characters in this type of novel are endowed with a “common humanity” (p. 247). They feel and think “without any major deviation” from the way people would today (p. 247), thus providing readers easy admittance to the past. Yet Fulda rejects Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s thesis according to which temporal misplacements of this kind should mean that “we no longer live in historical time” (p. 251). Nineteenth-century German historical novels, for example, already displayed the same anachronisms, as they projected into earlier periods the “leading values and guiding social principles” of the era. The “expansion of the present” (p. 252) we witness today, for Fulda, is thus not entirely new. Furthermore, it coincides with the attention to the otherness of the past that still prevails in several domains, beginning with scholarly historiography.

Recounting the Nation

Earmarked to national histories, the last section of the anthology makes space to the Eastern and the Southern hemispheres in addition to Europe. Speaking for the East, and more concerned with issues of balance than with narrative strategies, the Chinese historian Xupeng Zhang asks how national narratives of his own country can become part of global history. As the globalization process, he argues taking a provocative slant, is not global but led by the West, global history is not a history “for the globe” but one that incorporates “the residues of Western-centrism” (p. 267). In other words, whereas Western history can allow itself the luxury to go global “beyond nation-states,” China and East-Asia, because of the differences between the historical developments of the East and the West, “still need to uphold the importance of national histories” (p. 269). Acknowledging that building “a global history with Chinese characteristics” at

this point lacks a “theory” (p. 271), Zhang offers a basic program. This history, for him, should start from the assumption that China is a “constantly changing” political and cultural entity (p. 274), whose development is traceable to both “inner forces” and “global factors” (p. 275). It would then provide a balanced account of the relations between these factors, an account grounded in belief in the “unity of human society” and the presence of “universal laws in world history” (p. 277). Zhang does not explain how this somewhat surprising essentialism should fit together with what he described earlier as the “theoretical foundation” of the Chinese version of global history, namely, a “materialist conception” of what happened in the past (p. 271).

Representing the South, Valdeci Araujo focuses on two versions of Brazilian history. The first one, José da Silva Lisboa’s *History of the Most Important Political Events of [the] Brazilian Empire* (1826–1830), is a “great national narrative” (p. 287) that recounts Brazil’s emancipation from its colonial power, in this instance, “corrupt Portugal” (p. 293). Lisboa celebrates the model that emerged from the 1822 declaration of independence, namely, “the empire in its monarchical-constitutional form” (p. 294). That empire, Araujo points out, encouraged the development of disciplines such as geography and history, affording a model of “state funding and epistemological independence” that lasted up to today (p. 297). Since the “questioning of democracy” that characterizes Brazil since 2013, “challenges to historical narratives” have yet emerged from all sides (p. 297). The journalist Leandro Narloch’s *Politically Incorrect Guide to the History of Brazil* (2012 [2009]), for example, is revisionist with a vengeance. Taking for granted that history is the result of competition between people and ways of life, it describes colonization as the opportunity for indigenous people “to appropriate a higher culture,” slavery as a “partnership in business” (p. 300), and recent Brazilian dictatorships as regimes installed by “heroes” who saved the country from “the communist threat,” bringing about an “economic miracle” (p. 301). Araujo does not tell which version of Brazilian history is currently “winning,” for example, which one is currently in use in public schools.

The last article in the “national histories” section of the anthology takes us back to Europe, specifically to the United Kingdom. Written by a history of education specialist, Arthur Chapman, it compares the “history” chapters in the first (2004) and third (2013) editions of a very particular kind of text: *Life in the United Kingdom* (LUK), the manual – prepared by the Home Office – that candidates to UK residency and citizenship are advised to study before taking the tests. Unlike most of the contributors to the anthology, Chapman is interested less in plot structures than in specific points of grammar and vocabulary that for him inscribe the “relationships” that works “construct with their readers and with the past” (p. 322). The first edition of the manual is thus subtitled *A Journey into Citizenship* and the third, *A Guide for New Residents*, lexical choices that make readers “active” in the first edition, given “guidance” in the third (p. 307). Similar differences can be found in the texts themselves, for instance, in the passages that concern the slave trade. In the first edition, British ships are put in the position of “supplying” the colonies with men and women

from West Africa, while in the third slaves “came” from West Africa, a description that seems to “attribute agency” to people who in fact were “acted upon” (p. 320). To be sure, Chapman submits, the two editions are quite similar in their contents, which stress “continuities” in the development of such areas as “parliamentary democracy” (p. 322). Yet they differ in the “manner in which these contents are narrated” (p. 322), variances that Chapman sees as successfully brought to light by analyses conducted at the micro level of the sentence.

To Conclude

In their “Concluding Remarks,” Berger and Lorenz first return to what they take as the main aspects of current historical production: its mediatization (it admits several channels), spatialization (it covers the whole world), and politicization (it seeks to implement ideological agendas). The editors then make a few “observations,” two of them I will briefly discuss since they bear both on historiographic and narrative theories.

Berger and Lorenz first observe that when the contributors to the anthology assess the specificity of the works they have selected, they generally proceed by way of contrast/opposition. That is, they “compare historical narratives with other historical narratives” (p. 335), setting against each other versions of such moments as the Crusades, 1970s German left-wing terrorism, and the American Civil Rights Movement. Berger and Lorenz could have added that these comparisons rarely bear on aspects of the texts that are properly narrative. In none of the articles, to begin with, does the authors bother to spell out what they mean by “narrative.” The term is taken for granted, except by the editors, who in their introduction borrow Ann Rigney’s definition of the genre as “the representation of a set of chronologically and logically connected events” (p. 2). One cannot but notice, however, that this definition does not match the structure of several of the works examined in the anthology. Textbooks and national histories, in particular, do not proceed from event to event. They move from stage to stage, stage referring in this instance to century, regime, and/or cultural era. Not all histories, moreover, have a narrative structure. Berger and Lorenz mention this important point of textual organization, but they do so in reference to Adriaansen’s chapter on Instagram (p. 337). They do not bring up that data in today’s historical production are often arranged along thematic or analytic lines, not narrative ones, and none of the essays in the anthology investigate works that would fit that different, ‘flat’ structural model.

Moving to the issue of “narrative focus” (p. 338), Berger and Lorenz then point to the difficulty of linking the macro and micro levels of inquiries into the past. They have in mind problems posed by global history, but the remark certainly applies to the way nearly all the analyses in the anthology are “focused.” Most contributors, when they do not take up issues of content exclusively, favor

scrutinizing the works under consideration at the macro level. They are especially given to identifying models of emplotment – trajectories such as “secularization” (Paul), “decline” (Lingelbach), “progress” (Van de Mieroop), and “emancipation” (Araujo). They, on the other hand, generally ignore the works’ micro level, notably items that are routinely covered in the analysis of fictional narratives and would be relevant to the examination of historical writing, such as voice, speed, and frequency. To be sure, as we saw, Kansteiner distinguishes between “author” and “texter,” and Chapman asks who, exactly, is included in the “we” that occurs in one of the guides he is examining. Yet other questions that the anthology raises in passing would have deserved a more detailed treatment. Have historians ever been, as Berger and Lorenz seem to suggest, “all-knowing narrators” (p. 336)? Rather, at least since history became an academic discipline, hasn’t their discourse been characterized by the presence of what Kansteiner calls “tentative statements” (p. 59)? In other words, aren’t historians allowed, and even required, to inform about the lacks and uncertainties of their endeavor? The occurrence of these signs of non-commitment may for that matter be viewed as one of the marks of history’s “distinction,” since they are unlikely to occur in the fictional regime, at least not in heterodiegetic narration. It is doubtful that a so-called classic novel like *Madame Bovary* would include the kind of unreliable phrases Kansteiner identifies in *Bloodlands*, namely, phrases that would present as “unconfirmed” facts bearing on such things as Emma being raised in a convent, buying too much fabric, and having affairs with local men.

To readers of *DIEGESIS*, in sum, *Analysing Historical Narratives* will provide a valuable overview of the various types of cultural production that today fall under the label “history.” Those same readers, however, may be frustrated by the fact that the title of the book raises expectations that are not always met. In this instance, they may wish that the “historical narratives” under review in the anthology had been better analyzed “as narratives,” and not just in terms of their contents or basic plot structures. The book in this respect is unfortunately one more piece of evidence – linguistic turn notwithstanding – that there is very little dialogue between trade historians and specialists in narrative or more generally literary theory. For that matter, I am afraid that the converse is true. When is the last time we readers of *DIEGESIS* or *Narrative* have perused the pages of *History and Theory*, *Re-Thinking History*, or any journal that would include essays on the nature of the historical endeavor?

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