



History from Scratch: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This is the first Special Issue of the online journal “histories”, launched in 2020. We gave it the title “History from scratch—voices across the planet”. It seemed appropriate for the occasion of the launch to stop for a moment in our scholarly life, and try to reflect on a new start, on what doing history currently means, and what it could be in the future according to various wishes. The idea was to collect experiences and opinions about the purpose of our discipline, conventions and restrictions, under-researched or over-researched subjects, etc. As the journal is born digital and open access, it was possible to collect voices from many places. In this Special Issue we include eight articles, and they are from and/or about every continent: Australia, Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas. We take this as a symbol for the journal’s outlook, not more and not less.

Reflection needs open, experimental spaces and often tends towards essay-like formats and not so much towards the standard journal format. Under the influence of the sciences, the latter has imposed itself as the “true” academic style in recent decades. Excellence seems to be achievable only in this form, as some parts of academia maintain. They thereby imply that high-quality scholarship can be measured and ranked by means of one standard only. In reality, however, there are various scholarly genres with their proper virtues, each one offering options for producing excellent work. The genres themselves cannot be classified in any simple way. Thus, in this issue, we deliberately abstained from reducing the articles to a standard format.

The eight articles included are a random selection. As chance would have it, four groups of two can easily be arranged. The four themes are: Winners and losers, technology and environment, lawyers and philosophers, archives and the time-axis. In what follows, I give a short and personal account of the contents. Hopefully, it can also help lead some interested readers to the articles themselves with their fuller picture and meaning. At the end, I will point to a common feature that links them all and that might be characteristic of present-day and possibly future historical scholarship.

1. Winners and Losers: Historiography as Power

“Historiography has not been kind to history’s losers”, writes André Liebich (*History and its “Losers”*) [1]. In a short and well-informed paper, he recalls aspects of the “Glorious Revolution” in Britain and the equally celebrated American Revolution which do not loom large in the public mind. The British Jacobites and the American Loyalists lost their political power in 1688/89 and 1776, respectively. In consequence, they were at the mercy of the winners’ judgment, and in the long term, faded from historiography or were revived by revisionists, according to circumstances. Nowadays, not many people know that the descendants of the exiled King Jacob II were used in the 18th century by the British population to express dissatisfaction with the comparatively unattractive new Hanoverian monarchs. Not so many are aware of the fact that only one-third of the population in the thirteen colonies in North America joined the rebels in 1776, whereas roughly the same amount remained faithful to Great Britain (the remaining third being uncommitted). Therefore, the American Revolution was not only an uprising against a foreign power, but also a civil war. In spite of the many revisionists who battle the dominant interpretation of the Revolution, they did not succeed to dislodge the most popular treatment that tells “the saga of how a new and exceptional nation achieved and spread liberty and democracy”.



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Historiography and asymmetric power, conflict and possible reconciliation are also issues discussed by Urs Hafner in his original article *Drinking Coffee with my "Victims"* [2]. However, the context could hardly be more different. It is the encounter with a woman and a man in 2019 who were furious about a history-related article the author had written in a particular situation. Would such a face-to-face discussion after the fact lead to a solution? People quite often disagree about texts, but they rarely sit together over a coffee to speak their mind. If they do, it is rarely examined in the literature. The "postproduction" of texts usually remains in the private realm, outside the reach of historical scholarship. The disputed article concerned the initiative taken by the Swiss government to investigate its former coercive welfare measures. Before the 1980s, in Switzerland (as in many other countries) numerous persons were affected by coercive welfare measures and were now expecting compensation. Right from the start, in the political debate, they were defined as victims of the state, and it is about this fixed role and its consequences that the conflict arose. Hafner had used the word "professional victims". At the encounter, halfheartedly, he apologized for it, and he is careful, with the present article, not to repeat the scenario.

2. Technology and Environment: Which Developments?

Ute Hasenöhl writes about *Histories of Technology and the Environment in Post/colonial Africa* [3]. She is scanning both a large field and a large continent with her core question: "How did technologies and the environment shape human life (and vice versa) and how did those experiences compare for different social groups and societies?". This results in an impressive survey of studies for the recent decades and centuries. One guiding line concerns the inclusion of non-human actors, inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory. Another framework is given by the booming global history and the discussions on how to depart from eurocentrism and reach an independent, balanced view on the societies under study. Hasenöhl reminds us to be attentive to the realities of life on the ground and to challenge top-down models of thinking. Technical systems may work in a way defying academic ideas about systems: "Caught up in our expectations of which utilities are to be regarded as essential and how infrastructures should be organized to foster (urban) life, we often fail to question whether centralized systems of supply are actually the most feasible or efficient solutions given the socio-cultural, ecological, topographical, and last but not least, financial conditions on site".

One case in point in the discussions about development is the "industrious revolution", a concept proposed by the Dutch-American economic historian Jan de Vries. In order to underlay it with global data, he has also used Japanese findings from Akira Hayami. Now, this discussion goes East again with the article of Satoshi Murayama and Hiroko Nakamura ("*Industrious Revolution*" Revisited) [4]. A central element in De Vries' concept is the demand for consumer goods in early modern times, which stimulated peasants in the Netherlands and other European countries to work harder and sell more products on the market in order to satisfy the new desires. The Japanese case presented here does not primarily concern such rural-urban market relations, albeit they existed on the island. Instead, it focuses on a nearly self-sufficient economy in a peripheral region north of Kyoto. The regional people, and particularly the women, worked hard too, but they were not driven so much by market incentives. The authors propose to include religious faith as motivation and to speak of "diligence" rather than of "industriousness" when characterizing their activities.

3. Lawyers and Philosophers: The Systematic Imperative

The aim of Susanna Menis' article *How to Write a Positivist Legal History* [5] is to learn lessons from two well-known English jurists of the Enlightenment and the Victorian Age and their classic works: *Commentaries on the Law of England* by William Blackstone (1765) and *A History of the Criminal Law of England* (1883) by James Fitzjames Stephen. Both have been presented as the "fathers" of criminal law pedagogy and doctrine. Textbooks and discourse regarding the teaching of the legal discipline in Britain still follow, to a large extent, what they proposed and how they organized the existent heterogeneous material. Thus, the teaching of criminal law took the form of a positivist enterprise aiming at the

law which has actually been laid down by the country's legal system (and not going into natural law theories). Blackstone and Stephen committed themselves to a rationalization of the law and its coherent literal presentation. Since the 1960s, a revisionist current has strongly criticized their approach as an attempt to increase and mystify legal power. Menis offers a critical reading of this critique: In-depth explorations of the jurists' life and work suggest that there was no intentional master plan of autocratic social control.

Another group of intellectuals often struggling with systematization are philosophers. Similar to legal history, the philosophy of history has its own tradition. Susanna Rizzo and Greg Melleuish draw from that tradition in their wide-reaching article *In Search of the Origins of the Western Mind* [6]. The starting point is the hypothesis by psychiatrist and writer Iain McGilchrist that the physical foundation of Western rationalism is the dominance of the left side of the brain and that this dominance first emerged in ancient Greece. The two authors discuss the relationship between thought and language, and between rationalism and literacy. They agree with McGilchrist with regards to the changes in culture and brain activity in classical Greece. However, they do not confine that development to Europe but include similar developments in Asia. The concept of an "Axial Age", proposed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers for parallel intellectual transformations in Persia, India, China, and Palestine during the first millennium BCE, supports the argument. In conclusion, rationalism does not appear as the exclusive prerogative of the West. Western rationalism is only one of the various rationalisms developed in that time period.

4. Clio's Basics: Archives and the Time-Axis

In an elegant essay, Lila Caimari draws our attention to the fact that the archive, the classic instrument of historiography, has become a new, vibrant site of engagement in our days (*The Archive's Moment*) [7]. Drawing on her experiences in Argentina and Latin America, and with a broad knowledge of international literature, she outlines a number of trends that point in this direction: The emergence of archives for victims of military dictatorship, reclamation of public rights, such as land titles of indigenous groups, new uses in cultural and artistic projects, etc. The archive has broken away from its almost exclusive attachment to the historical discipline and has become a dynamic, interdisciplinary institution. Part of the dynamics is due to the rapid development of digital technologies, which also gives rise to new inequalities, especially in the Global South with precarious infrastructures. The often little-considered digital focus on prestigious sources can greatly change the research landscape. The author recently experienced this impact first-hand during the lockdown in the Corona pandemic, when she became completely dependent on digital archives for a current book project and had to give it a new direction.

Jon Mathieu, the author of the present lines, explores the notions of time and temporality in a work-centered review article (*Is Historical Temporality "Heterogeneous" and "Contingent"?*) [8]. The notions are both difficult and central for historical scholarship. They exist in many varieties, which renders generalizations challenging. An interesting attempt has been made by US-scholar William H. Sewell in his *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation* (2005). He qualifies historical temporality as fateful, contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous. It is rare for a historian to be so explicit. Sewell was inspired by discussions with sociologists and anthropologists during his transition from social to cultural history in the 1980 and 1990s. This article examines the question of whether and how the change of the intellectual environment impacted the theoretical outcome. Are Sewell's attributes to historical temporality plausible for historical scholarship in general, or do they reflect the boundary work of a particular group?

5. Inclusiveness in Current and Future Scholarship

As I re-read the eight articles of this Special Issue to write this introduction, I was struck by how often the authors implicitly or explicitly advocate for the inclusion of people and stories, also with an eye to future research. Or am I mistaken? André Liebich includes the fate of the losers of the British and American revolutions, whose gloriosity turns the public spotlight quite one-sidedly on the winners. Ute Hasenöhl, in her research surview

of African technological and environmental history, is committed to focusing and valorizing phenomena that are neglected in the prevailing Anglo-European historiography. Susanna Rizzo and Greg Melleuish, to cite a third example, do search the Origins of the Western Mind, but they decidedly point out that literacy and rationalism existed elsewhere too.

Inclusion is often a question of justice, and as historians, we may and should be freer to deal with it than some other actors are currently able to. In an open discussion, historical research can expose power relations and examine their legitimacy without being banned from speaking. There are probably also authoritarian and presumptuous forms of inclusiveness. At least, we should not rule that out from the start. In our small, random sample of historical articles, inclusion only became a problem in one case. Urs Hafner disagreed with his “victims” on the question of whether they, as politically rehabilitated (included) persons who had been wronged by the state with coercive welfare measures, could now expect unlimited, non-criticizable attention. Why he then decided, despite little prospect of success, to have a cup of coffee with them is not entirely clear. However, it is optimistic. Personally, I feel it is a great disadvantage of this digital world that we cannot meet with all our new interlocutors worldwide in this way to talk about our ideas and latest projects.

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