

Historicus* in Resonance, Understanding, Encounter

Experiencing history beyond competence grids

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Abstract

In this miniature the author of the book “Historicus* - Wie wir Geschichte erleben” (2023) presents his key ideas to an English-speaking audience. He analyses individual “historical acts”, describing them under the perspective of “Resonance”, “Understanding”, and “Encounter” and uses various language games to do this (e.g. Hartmut Rosa, Charles Taylor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Avishai Margalit or Emanuel Levinas). At the end he transforms his theoretical results into the profile of a persona called Historicus*.

Keywords

hermeneutics, ethics of history, experiencing history, resonance, historical acts

Introduction

Resonance, Understanding, Encounter: These are the keywords I use in my book “Historicus* - Wie wir Geschichte erleben” (Scriba, 2023) to describe how people experience history beyond official competence grids, published by school authorities.

I’m launching this idea against the background of the fact that teaching history often does not achieve these goals and that people tend to fall back to lower levels of historical reasoning. According to earlier observations by Bodo von Borries (1995), I hypothesize: There are emotional needs, expectations of meaningfulness, and worldviews that in engaging with history play a very different role than those addressed in school curricula and competence grids. So the concept of this book is:

What is “Historicus*”? I propose a notion for talking about dealing with history that is closer to the needs of people than German discourses on this topic seem to normally offer. What will “Historicus*” give to us? If we want to teach history closer to the audience and if we want to understand better how the audience effectively uses history for their purposes, we need a different approach than the competency grids given, e.g., in school curricula; for this the book offers a proposal. So teachers may easier assign their students’ mental prerequisites before planning their interventions.

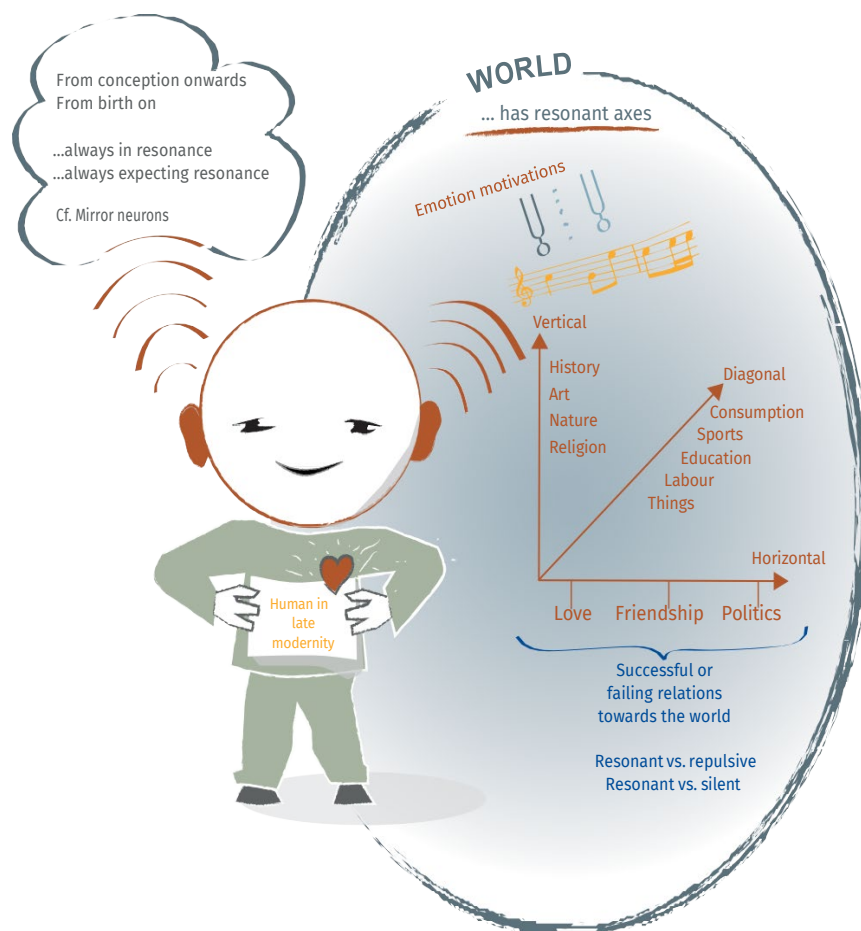
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Why “Historicus*” is important? For making these discourses more operable I create a persona, “Historicus*”, in order to check if one can really describe what persons do when they deal with history. Reflecting the meanings of the three key words, I create a theory of historical acts: So, we may describe what people really do when they feel affected by the past and when they deal with history, i.e. when they do historical acts.

Resonance

In the first main section, I develop the concept of resonance. Following the sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2016), who describes human world relations in the metaphor of musical resonance, I also illuminate history as an experience of resonance; here history appears as one of the human relations towards the world, i.e. where people resonate with the world motivated by their needs for meaning and for interpretation.

Figure 1: Human in resonance – following the ideas of Hartmut Rosa (Scriba, 2023, p. 38)



On this basis, I locate the modern European self in various time regimes, as described by François Hartog (2015). Even being conscious of various time regimes, historical resonance experiences are primarily non-cognitive experiences, but bodily experiences in the sense of corporeality, as conceived by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). As a result of the chapter on resonance, *Historicus** appears as a persona, who

1. perceives itself, especially since the processes of Enlightenment and Modernization in Latin Europe over the last 300 years, as a point-shaped self - buffered for instance against cosmic influences: This self experiences itself with its psychic interiority (“Innerlichkeit”), while searching for meaning (“Sinn”) in a fragilized world, and thereby constructs a secular experiential sphere of history (“historischen Erfahrungsraum”) by communicating with other subjects (cf. Taylor, 1996),

2. lives in a coexistence of different regimes of historicity, whereby the hegemonic notion of timelines as a narrative guiding pattern since 19th century historicism is increasingly relativized, especially in late modernity, by presentism in dealing with historical heritage, (cf. Hartog, 2015) and
3. seeks not only cognitive, but also aesthetic and narrative resonance in its corporeality (cf. Merleau-Ponty; De Certeau, 1991), which is intended to lead to physical and psychological homing (Beheimatung) by means of the construction of meaning through the experience of time (cf. Scharnowski, 2019). Dealing with history seems to promise such resonance. Historicus* seeks resonance in historical acts. They experience history in resonance.

Understanding

In the second main section, I conceive of history as *understanding*: I attempt to re-read the hermeneutics conceptualized by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and to assess its scope for historical didactic purposes. So, I go contrary to a long tradition of marginalizing hermeneutic approaches in history didactics. While distancing myself from Heidegger's ontological presuppositions, which Gadamer certainly refers to in his main work *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1961), I see Gadamer's language games as metaphors, which allow to describe ways to perceive and to experience history. I share Gadamer's hypothesis that we are "surrounded by history", i.e. that we cannot escape our historicity. This applies anyway - whether we are aware of our historicity or not. I use Gadamer's concepts of *hermeneutic circle*, *of history of impact* ("Wirkungsgeschichte") and his metaphor of *fusion of horizons* ("Horizontverschmelzung").

Figure 2: Fusion of horizons (Scriba 2023, p. 297)



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Even if we experience history holistically - for example through images, staged spaces or triggered emotions - our understanding ultimately pushes us towards verbalization, towards narration. Therefore, historical understanding occurs in *logopetal historical acts*. In principle, this also applies when we recognize the limits of verbal narrativity and occasionally ask about the special functioning of deixis, the power of images (cf. Boehm, 2007).

Here, I have explicated the medium of understanding, thereby amplifying Gadamer's thinking. So Historicus* has gained in character. They encounter the history surrounding them and presenting itself with tact and taste. In doing so, they go through dynamic processes of understanding that gradually promote better understanding, in which they gradually revise their prejudices.

Encounter

In the third main section, I look at history as an *encounter* with "the Other". This may mean both "the other" in the generic masculine as another person and "the other" in the neuter, i.e. something that appears to be completely different or alien. With this terminology, I am following philosophical statements based in Jewish traditions of thinking where specific experiences of exile, diaspora, and alienation are reflected. And I'm embedding this in Reinhart Koselleck's concept of the *experiential space of history* ("Erfahrungsraum Geschichte").

I then describe the encounter in this experiential space using the language games by philosophers of Jewish thought, Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Buber conceptualizes encounter as a mutual transformation in the so-called *between* ("Zwischen"). Levinas, on the other hand, conceptualizes encounter as being obligated by the other, specifically by the face of the other, which morally "subpoenas" one. Here, I ultimately metaphorize history or "the history that presents itself to us" as the Other (Scriba, 2023, p. 381); this analogy presents itself concretely as follows:

Like the summons by the face of the Other, I cannot in principle escape being enveloped by history, the potential presence of the Other. Although I can try to look away or to eliminate the traces of the past from my field of vision, from my own horizon, by building walls, such an endeavor is a reaction to the presence of the past, i.e. paradoxically it remains present. In this respect, history always summons and demands behavior from me. [...] Dealing with the Holocaust requires catch-up solidarity - in the form of mourning, remembrance, vigilance against the risk of repetition, confession in the face of racist incidents. An exemplary family history, such as presented in the exhibition under the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, is the face of the Other, which brings me as a visitor to further acts of history: Questions about why, feelings of grief and anger, questions about alternative courses of events (How could something like this have been prevented back then?) and conclusions for my own thoughts and actions (What can I contribute to 'Never again Auschwitz!') (Scriba, 2023, p. 381).

The philosophy of dialogue, which was developed primarily by Martin Buber (1878-1965), necessarily ethicises memory and remembrance out of its own nature and is thus in tension with the norms of Cartesian scientificity. Those who carry out historical acts are thus inevitably exposed to a competition of different claims, a *competition of norms*: different stakeholders wrestle over how Historicus* deals with presented history. In public discourse, Historicus* does not act alone, but always in interaction with others. Therefore: When Historicus* carries out historical acts and examines them, methodically a stakeholder analysis must always take place. This means that in order to understand historical acts, it is always necessary to ask which claims determine these historical acts from the outset. If you acknowledge the inherent tension of different claims in historical acts, this also opens up a mindset for remembering historical issues from the perspectives of different people who are more or less affected - without having to exclude certain perspectives as a supposedly fundamental attack on my own loyalties (cf. Michel Rothberg's term "multidirectional memory") (Scriba, 2023, p. 389).

I then deal with the *ethics of memory* and this in applying also the concept of *temporal plurality*. In doing so, I link reflections by the philosopher Avisai Margalit (*1939) on "*emic*" and "*etic*" memory and on "*chrono-ferences*" by the modern historian Achim Landwehr (*1968). Both are based on the premise addressed by Yosef H. Yerushalmi (1932 to 2009), that remembering is an ethical imperative.

For conclusion: The imperative to remember may be motivated ethically or morally, but not necessarily scientifically – especially watching the Western concept of “looking for truth by taking distance”.

This directs the questions to *Historicus**: Is it good to remember? Does remembrance or memory have an ethical or moral value (cf. Scriba, 2023, p. 392)? Margalit derives this imperative from the necessity of survival; he also identifies a tension between smaller, natural communities such as families, known as “thick communities” having their often non-reflected ethic claims, and larger communities linked by more abstract ideas, such as societies and nations, known as “thin communities” declaring explicitly moral claims.

For the question of ethical and moral claims in historical narratives, this means that even and especially in balanced narratives, moral and ethical impulses become effective in their tension between scientific detachment, adherence to general moral principles directed at all of humanity and nature, and the ethical principle of loyalty to a “thick community”. *Historicus** thus performs their historical acts in the triangle of tension between morality, ethics and scientific distance. This also applies to their balanced narratives. Topics such as the Holocaust, modern slavery, especially in America, or genocidal colonial crimes show how quickly the prioritization of one source in such historical acts triggers sensitivities motivated by other sources (Scriba, 2023, p. 402). So overall: *Historicus** is exposed to an inherently ambiguous and consequently dynamic memory imperative, which also varies in intensity. In Western cultures, the scientific norms of a still largely historicist regime of time are still effective as well as the privileging waking consciousness (cf. Scriba, 2023, p. 428).

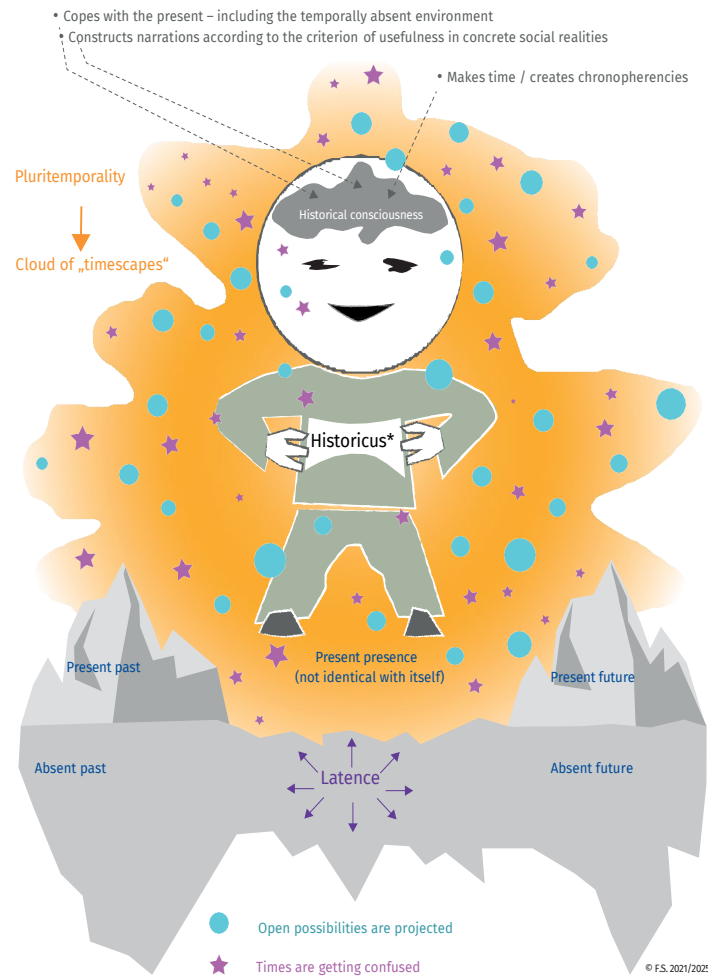
People’s relations towards the world such as memory, remembrance, but also forgetting, inevitably contain a temporal dimension. For whenever I remember something, whenever a group remembers something or transforms it into cultural memory, something that has passed is prepared for the present, something that has passed gains presence. It is therefore plausible, that the German historical theorist Jörn Rüsen (*1938) qualifies historical relations towards the world in his writings on historical theory as: “the formation of meaning through the experience of time” (“Sinnbildung über Zeiterfahrung”) (Rüsen, 1990, p. 11, pp. 157–158). If someone experiences a relationship to history as resonant in Rosa’s sense, then, principally shapes meaning via experiencing time even if perhaps not always cognitively elaborated, but in any case, sensually and bodily in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. In the Latin-European cultural context, it has become plausible to metaphorize this experience of time on a timeline.

If we historicize the timeline as a legacy of pre-Christian biblical provenance, the scope for thought opens up to look at other forms of time perception and conceptions of time. The early modern historian Achim Landwehr (*1968) calls the different relationships to time “*chronofereces*” (Landwehr, 2020, *passim*, pp. 22–24, pp. 245–248). By this he means that humans have the ability to establish relationships to absent times (Landwehr, 2020, p. 249). In fact, humans live in *pluritemporality*, of which they become aware in different ways and which they bring to discourses in different ways (Landwehr, 2020, pp. 43–46, cf. example Carlsbad USA *ibid.* pp. 267–294). Landwehr outlines some methods of how people “make time” (Landwehr, 2020, pp. 50–63, pp. 161–175, see Scriba, 2023, p. 435).

The idea of pluritemporality provokes: Especially historicist traditions, which move more or less unreflectively in the idea of the timeline in the sense of a developmental novel. However, if one reflects on the possible temporal relationships in everyday life, then the coexistence of different patterns becomes clear. Pluritemporality is therefore part of everyday life. People’s relationship to this pluritemporality is summarized by Landwehr in the concept of “*chronofereces*”. He defines:

Chronoferece is meant to express that people and collectives are able to refer to non-present times, that is, to imagine pasts and futures of different kinds in order to make them present-absent times. [...] They are therefore characterized by the simultaneous status of absence and presence ... (Landwehr, 2020, p. 245) (cf. Scriba, 2023, p. 437).

Figure 3: Historicus* in time-scape, pluritemporality following Achim Landwehr (Scriba, 2023, p. 438)



Consequently, the science of history must define itself as a discipline for temporal relation (Landwehr, 2020, p. 258). For the persona “Historicus*”, this means that they turn out to be an expert in pluritemporality (see Figure 3): Effectively, Historicus* has a field of vision, that is also a space for the projection of open possibilities of uncertain realizability: they may look at alternative possibilities, at the selection of events or their interpretation (Landwehr, 2020, pp. 65–66). (cf. Scriba, 2023, pp. 444–445).

Historicus* thus always “cares” for a group in their historical acts when they work on their chronoferencies in historical acts and live their contemporaneity with its pluritemporality in a resonant and reasoning way. In doing so, they are moved by tensions generated between the three poles of “humanistic moral principles”, “proximity ethics”, and “scientific distancing norms”. In doing so, they encounter the Other as a past that presents itself, inviting them into a space of possibility and enabling transformation. They experience history in resonant contemporaneity, driven by tensions that can be described in terms of moral philosophy (Cf. Scriba, 2023, pp. 445–446).

Persona Historicus* speaking

Because the dramaturgy of this essay focuses on describing personal perceptions and personal experiences of history, I will now summarize the results in the words spoken by the persona Historicus*. In doing so, I am following the *six logical levels* developed by the psychologist Robert Dilts (Dilts, 1993) to describe personalities. These levels are not entirely uncontroversial in detail, but are sufficient for my purpose in order not to forget an essential aspect of human existence and thus also historical experience.

Figure 4: Persona Historicus* (Scriba, 2023, p. 451)



Level 1: Environment - being at home in the Latin-European-historicist time regime

"History surrounds me - and I can't take off my Latin European glasses." (Scriba, 2023, pp. 451–452)

Level 2: Behavior - understanding as resonance and narrative reasoning

"The past evokes something resonating in me. I want to understand it and to construct fact-oriented narratives to do so." (Scriba, 2023, p. 457)

Level 3: Skills and knowledge - enabling narrative timescapeness (Zeitschaft)

"I can cogently narrate my relationship to the past - and become wiser in the process. I perform acts of history." (Scriba, 2023, p. 464)

Level 4: Values and beliefs - the possibility of fact-oriented sense-making in timescape

"I can form meaning in the tension between several non-metaphysical sources of morality and thus reflect on timescape - in a fact-oriented way and based on methodology, developed since the 18th century." (cf. Scriba, 2023, p. 469)

Level 5: Identity and belonging - reflective and dynamic homing of the modern self

"I can also make myself at home in the volatile late modern age. I can flexibly integrate different relationships to the past and different perspectives of memory into my modern, buffered self without it splintering in to fragments." (Scriba, 2023, p. 474)

Level 6: Spirituality - reflected contemporaneity as a spiritual resource

"My relationship to the past can help me to know, that I can feel carried in my life." (Scriba, 2023, p. 480)

As the model of the six levels of personality shows, different levels interact in all subjects, from seemingly unchangeable circumstances to action and knowledge to spirituality. Dilts' levels support each other. Historicus*, our persona, experiences timescape - feeling strong, medium or no resonance at all - and situates themselves in relation to it: considering the circumstances, in historical acts of dealing, ability-related, value-oriented, identity- and affiliation-related and also spiritual quality. In such a timescape they experience

- how they have become the person which they see themselves and their world as at the moment,
- what distance they have from previous worlds here and elsewhere - describing and judging,
- how "hot", "cold" or "tempered" knowledge of the past affects them,
- how strongly or how little historical acts influence their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

It remains, close to Levinas: there is social evidence that humans and animals do not want to suffer without reason. That is why Charlie Brown (cf. Rüsen, 2003, p. 21) is probably right after all: he still hopes that yesterday would be better. (cf. Scriba, 2023, p. 488). Also, professional historians and history teachers should be aware of their (hidden) hopes.

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Review

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Research ethics statement

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