

Dimensions of reflexivity

Andreas Körber  *

University of Hamburg, Hamburg

Abstract

This article presents two forms of reflection in historical thinking as the operational dimension of historical consciousness. This distinction not only allows for a refinement of the differentiation of levels or “niveaus” of historical competence according to the FUER-model,¹ but also proves suitable for addressing recent questions regarding a shift in historical culture – including, among other things, recent challenges to traditional historical thinking and learning posed by popular interpretations operating on a different scale than the usual meso-scale-history of decades and centuries, as well as by the emergence of a digital historical culture, including the use of AI – in a historically informed manner and within historical learning. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications and consequences for the culture of learning and assignments in history education.

Keywords

Historical consciousness, historical thinking, niveaus, reflectivity, reflexivity

1. Introduction²

Historical Consciousness obviously is again (or still) a subject of debate. We all know that non-German-speaking and especially Anglophone history education has long been at odds with the concept of “historical consciousness,” not least because of a very different conceptualisation of the field of academic engagement with school learning processes (curriculum studies and pedagogy vs. the continental understanding of didactics), but also with regard to broader concepts of education. The 2012 reissue of the volume “Theorising Historical Consciousness” (Seixas, 2012) documents this, as does the new and original conceptualisation by Paul Zazanian (2025). In Germany, too, the term remains controversial – first for being a hypertrophic, even “empty”, formal category, lacking content, distracting either from critical insights (Jung & Staehr, 1983, p. 38) or from concrete knowledge and skills (Rohlfes, 1986; Sauer, 2014). Today’s debate is some-

1 In the following, the term “level(s)” denotes the more general notion of qualitative differentiations, whereas “niveau(s)” refers to the specific differentiation proposed within the FUER-model. At some place in the argumentation, both become more closely linked.

2 I dedicate this article to Peter Seixas in grateful memory. It is based on a keynote at the “gde conference” in Basel in September 2025, 10 years after our joint keynotes at the same place, on the topic of translating concepts of History Education, resulting in two separate but interrelated publications (Seixas, 2016; Körber, 2016). The present keynote again is based on prior Canadian-German collegial exchange on the topic of “reflexivity”, this time with Paul Zazanian.

* **Contact:** Andreas Körber ✉ andreas.koerber@uni-hamburg.de
University of Hamburg, Prof. Dr. at the Faculty of Education, Hamburg, Germany

what different, namely whether it (re-)presents a specific European, Western concept of history, excluding or superimposing non-European ways of dealing with the past.

Is it wise then to further elaborate the concept, and again by suggesting “reflexivity” (cf. Heuer, 2013)? I still do think so. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen and Maria Grever insist that “historical consciousness” mainly refers to a specific condition of humans in (especially Western) modernity, not some set of “skills”. This (of course) is correct in a philosophical perspective (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). In didactic contexts, however, the term “historical consciousness” has a quite distinct notion of an individual characteristic to be developed towards a reflective or reflexive form by learning, teaching and education.

For clarifying this understanding of historical consciousness, I will begin once again with a – now shorter – excursion into the history of the concept in the recent history of German history didactics. “Reflective Historical Consciousness” goes back to a presentation by Waltraud Schreiber – to the context where the FUER-group’s version of competencies originated (Schreiber, 2002; Körber et al., 2007; Körber, 2015). At its core was an understanding of history teaching in which both learners and teachers are conceptualised as actors who, through their thoughts and actions, influence their own perception of subjects, methods, etc. and that of others – and who are and become at least in principle aware of this.

This stipulation met with some criticism at the time. Bernd Schönemann contended that all historical consciousness must necessarily be reflective. On the other hand, the term “reflective historical consciousness” is quite ubiquitous nowadays in the literature (e.g., Borries & Meyer-Hamme, 2005) and even in curricula (e.g., Sächsisches Staatsministerium für Kultus, 2019) – a fact that may be taken as proof that reflectiveness as a characteristic was not quite so self-evident after all? Instead of rehashing this debate, I would like to present a few contexts and considerations on how a more advanced qualification of historical consciousness and historical learning as “reflexive” might look and how this would differ from “reflective”. In the following, I propose a twin-set of such differentiations: one (*reflexivity I*) within the conceptual frameworks with which our society in general, from broader history culture to academic discourse, addresses the task of generating meaningful historical knowledge, and another one (*reflexivity II*) as a characteristic of an elaborate level of historical thinking. The first of these forms thus marks the presence and use of a specific class of concepts of time and history within the field referred to in the FUER-model as ‘Historical Subject Competencies’ (insofar as competencies of historical thinking do not refer to the ability to grasp the past in and of itself, but rather to grasp it and its meanings). The second form of reflexivity in this model is addressed in the distinction between niveaux of proficiency and helps to define these in somewhat greater detail.

2. Reflexivity I

Arguably, a first form of reflexivity of historical consciousness would be reached if the temporal condition of historical knowledge and thinking were addressed more explicitly, instead of being taken for granted, as is often the case in the current theoretical conceptualisation of historical consciousness and historical thinking. For example, one might qualify historical consciousness *reflexive*, if not only the dangers of activating modern and recent concepts for perceiving and analysing past phenomena (“presentism”) and therefore the virtue of actively trying to de-centering one’s view from its present character are reflected (!) upon, but also the fact that even if it were possible to view a past from its own temporal conditions, only, without acknowledging and applying our own conceptions, that knowledge were devoid of any significance for us today. Reflexivity in this view, that marks the acknowledgement of the ineludible relationality of historical knowledge and our own positional role in its construction.

Even within this area of general insights and attitudes, which I refer to as “reflexivity I” here, the just sketched form is, however, probably not sufficient for historical thinking in view of humanity’s current needs of orientation – at least not under recently developed conditions both within our societies and in theory of history. The narrative concepts which have up to now shaped history didactics and research in Germany and beyond (e.g. traditional, exemplaric and genetic/developmental conceptions of history)³ are currently suspected of being inadequate in light of recent existential challenges. Especially within the theoretical framework provided by

3 Rösen’s concept of “exemplaric” here does not refer to sth. having the quality of being an example for sth. else, but to a logic of historical thinking searching for rules applicable across times by identifying similarities (see Körber, 2015, p.11).

Jörn Rüsen, the goal of historical thinking is always (1) the (co-)constructive acquisition of temporal orientation, i.e. the confirmation and examination of the “location” of the individuals and collectives who think and argue in this way both within the present, but primarily in relation to past times (“identification”; reflection on identity), (2) the clarification of one’s own and others’ expectations (both neutral and objective, as well as hopes and fears) for the future, and, centrally, the possibilities and limitations of present actions with regard to these experiences “in the light” of the past.

This triad of (1) “interpretation of the past”, (2) “perception of the present” and (3) “expectations for the future” as the basic structure of historical consciousness (Jeismann, 1977, p. 14), continues to shape research, normative discussions and pragmatics in the discipline to this day. In view of the named current challenges, however, it no longer seems sufficient. Despite all the reflection (!) that this conceptualisation reveals on the interplay between historical theory, research and didactics – the perspective it presents is still one whose expectations for the future appear, in a sense, ‘unclouded’ by existential concerns. When Rüsen claims that “people must think historically in order to live”, that “they can only understand their present and plan their future if they turn to the past” (Rüsen, 1983, p. 26), it is about opening up perspectives towards the future “into which one can act intentionally” (Rüsen, 1983, p. 52). Historical thinking and historical consciousness thus are concepts for this present generation (only), for maximising its (our!) opportunities in the light of the past. Can this understanding still suffice?

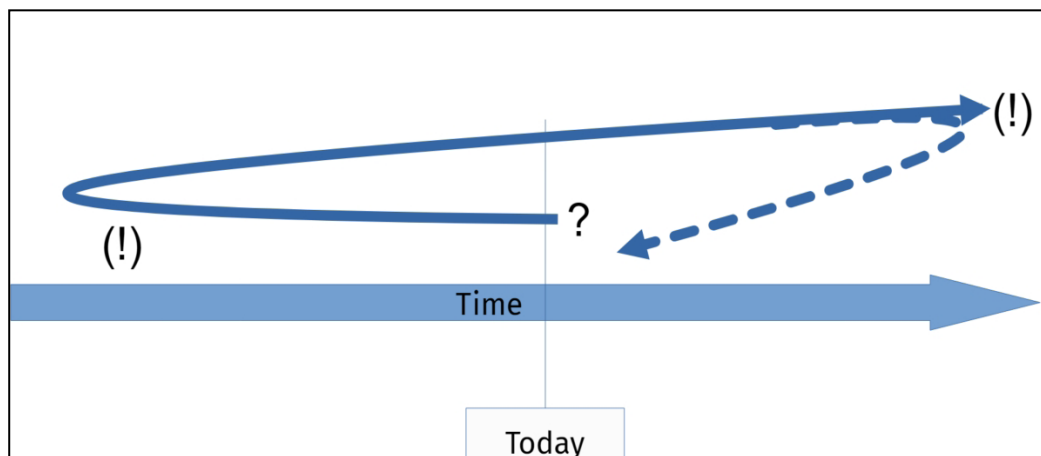
To this concept of historical consciousness and to historical thinking *sensu* Rüsen challenges are posed by perceptions of humanity as a species having entered a new era in its history, (the Anthropocene) as well as of other immediate or imminent threats to human order or even existence, discussed under the “climate change”, “tipping points” and “last generation” (see on the historical consciousness of climate activists Sieberkrob & Reusch, 2025). All these buzzwords are narrative in nature, i.e. historically structured, insofar as they relate present experiences to past circumstances and developments, using information obtained through more or less rigorous research, and to expectations for the future. This also applies to, e.g., Yuval Harari’s projections of *homo sapiens* being on the brink of leaving the realm of animals towards a new position within nature by ‘trans-human’ integration of technology (body-/brain-computer interfaces) and by gaining technological control over not only the reproduction but also the design of future humans (Harari, 2014; Harari, 2017). Such a development would constitute a ‘game changer’ – and not in the sense of re-distributing opportunities within the game of life only, but rather of re-defining humanity altogether. Humanity would no longer be an animal among others (albeit already a very powerful and influential one). To be able to consciously and explicitly design the characteristic and abilities of the own species and that of others would indeed transform humans to a kind of gods.

At first glance, one might think that under such changed conditions, the entire wealth of experience of human coexistence in the past, and thus historical thinking and historical consciousness, would become meaningless for the newly empowered species of *homines dei*. But it would be wrong to draw that conclusion. Even after such a transition, Historical consciousness and historical thinking would still be possible and, indeed, needed for orientation – provided, they address and take into account the differences in the logic of relationships and effects before and after the transition. Just as we must examine human experiences from earlier times not to ask whether, but to what extent and how they can be significant today, future **hommes de Dieu** should not simply ignore these experiences and our own present-day ones, but must relate them to their own circumstances in a nuanced way – if only to recognise that their own possibilities were not always available, but even better, to grapple with the conditions under which they achieved their possibilities and limitations. Our present idea of linear change would no longer suffice. New forms of meaning-making need to be developed. This is how “unprecedented change” (Simon, 2021) challenges historical thinking as a point of orientation, and in which Rüsen’s typology and current propositions to extend it “upwards” are clearly not sufficient (e.g. my own suggestion of “pluri-genetic” and Bodo von Borries’ of “evolutionary narrative” as the next logic of historical meaning-making; Körber, 2015, pp. 12–14).

Historical Consciousness therefore needs to be conceptualised as the interpretation of the past, the perception of the present and the expectation of an open future with its own position in it. According to the traditional concept outlined above, historical thinking consists of turning a temporally oriented gaze to the past and then, armed with the knowledge gained about the past, turning back to the present and to the future, which is now no longer quite so open but has become a field of action. The fundamental fact of plural perspectives thus gives rise not to a single historical orientation, but to several, which should be as compatible with each other as possible.

I would now like to contrast this model with a second one that does not simply view the future as open, but to a much greater extent as also a consequence of present and past actions, thereby changing the concept of historical orientation. This model could be conceived as outlined in Fig. 1. The model supplements thinking directed towards the future as a separate field of action with an arrow symbolising an anticipated retrospective view of future generations on their own thinking today. The historical orientation question is no longer primarily or exclusively “who are we in view of the past?” and “what can we do today?” or “what should we avoid doing in view of the experiences in and from the past?”, but rather “who will we become for the people of the future into which we have been acting?” and “who do we want to have been in their eyes?” (Willemsen, 2016). Historical orientation and historical thinking addressing these questions must not only provide guidance for the future, but also guidance in view of our responsibility towards the future. A related concern has recently been formulated by Germany’s Supreme (Constitutional) Court in a rule on climate protection (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2021).

Fig. 1: Historical consciousness taking into account anticipated future retrospection.



As is the case with all forms of historical thinking, this expanded form of historical orientation does not take a universal form, but needs to reflect the different perspectives people have. In all historical thinking and historical consciousness, people do not only have to (be able to) apply the cultural and social conventions available to them via their groups and societies, but to explicitly reflect upon them. In the light of the present challenges, however, individual and collective present positions and perspectives within a history culture and historical discourse must also be taken into account in terms of the possibilities they provide and the responsibilities they bring along. The future of historical thinking is thus expanded to include the perspective of a “future 2” (cf. Körber, 2019).

A differentiation between “reflective” and “reflexive” modes (and levels?) can be made here, too. The traditional understanding of historical orientation and historical thinking is ‘reflective’ insofar as it uses insights into the past, as reconstructed, and their connections with each other and the present, to construct expectations, hopes and fears. It can be considered reflexive only insofar as it takes into account one’s own evolving perspective as a potential cause for the future.

Finally, the two concepts of reflectivity and reflexivity can be related to each other and intertwined. Just as ‘reflective’ historical thinking directed towards an open future can be carried out at different levels of quality – on a basic niveau according to the FUER-model, involving a non-systematised, inconsistent, spontaneous kind/type of concept formation; or at an intermediate one, involving the use of conventional concepts and their elaboration through reflection – the same is true of reflexive historical thinking and historical consciousness. It is worth briefly considering the extent to which this expansion of the concepts of historical consciousness and historical thinking establishes a new pattern of meaning-making.

At first glance, identifying this logic as a new pattern of meaning-making within an updated Rüsenian typology of patterns of meaning-making seems attractive. ‘Reflexivity’ would then not be the defining feature of all historical narration, but rather of this particular type. To do so, however, would not make much sense. Taking a future perspective can indeed be achieved using existing patterns of meaning-making. For example, traditionally: ‘Our descendants will see the origin of X in our actions’ (presumably their misfortune with regard to the climate), or

exemplaric: 'How future generations will judge our actions depends, as always, on how they are organised socially'; or genetically: 'Whatever we do today will trigger further developments in this direction, which we cannot foresee'.

Rather than defining a new pattern of meaning-making, reflexivity might constitute a new, complementary entry in Rüsen's other typology, that of criteria for the assessment of a narrative's quality: In addition to the empirical, (since 2013 also:) theoretical, normative, and narrative plausibility (Rüsen, 2017, pp. 38–39; cf. Körber, 2015, pp. 17–18), it would reflect, to what extent a historical account or statement takes into account future generations and societies merely as abstract heirs of the consequences of our actions or rather as historical actors in their own right, whose meaning-making material includes our actions and omissions, among other things.

However, extending the temporal component of historical consciousness and historical thinking to include the future perfect tense is not just about anticipating how future generations will interpret events retrospectively. As is the case with the looking back at the past, the anticipation of a future retrospective must also inform our own sense of temporal contingency: Even though it is possible to construct the future as not completely obscure by reflective thinking (i.e. by applying existing categories etc.), the reflexive mode of historical thinking consists in recognising our own position and role in the venture of narratively constructing a (rather than *the*) future and of our possible interrelations with it. In *reflective* traditional historical meaning-making, the future appears as shaped by conditions formed in the past and present.

Within the "*traditional*" mode of historical meaning-making, not only are the present and the future conceived as a time in which conditions that arose in the past (whether through invention, development, the attainment of a new state, or even the loss of an earlier one) continue to apply, but the latter is also conceived as a time that, under the conditions of the validity of this temporality – which has since been set aside – looks back in turn to its own past and thus also to our present. Traditional narrative manifestations of this historical consciousness – supplemented by the future perfect – thus reinforce the orientation toward stability already inherent in the classical concept of historical consciousness: According to this line of thinking, future generations cannot and will not view and judge us – or our shared past – solely from perspectives that are structurally comparable but otherwise different (*exemplaric* meaning-making) or even from perspectives that are constitutively further developed (*genetic* meaning-making).

"*Exemplaric*" patterns of meaning-making, on the other hand, develop a guiding force when the future perfect perspective of historical thinking is incorporated. Based on the examination of (as many as possible) past cases and the development of a conception of the regularities that underlie their specific differences, this perspective should inform our historical thinking in such a way that future generations will view our times differently than we ourselves would, namely in the same way that we examine the past – guided by an understanding of regularities – not so much as the concrete origins of our lived world, but rather in terms of the rules "behind" it that endure through the ages. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that a judicious focus on recognised mechanisms of human and social coexistence would be well-suited to taking future judgements about our actions into account as well.

Finally, "*genetic*" meaning-making will have to assume that future generations will not view the past – and thus us as well – from arbitrary, yet distinctly different perspectives. However, these perspectives must also be understood as the result of our actions within this current of directed change. If we are to stand the test of the future, we will have to extrapolate past developments into the future – not merely as an option, but as an obligation.

This form of reflexivity has several components. I will mention only three here:

Firstly, it concerns the ability, skill and willingness to perceive and evaluate:

1. the impact of one's own contingent location and historical thinking on our views of history;
2. the importance of our agency as individuals with historical awareness, acting based on constantly negotiated historical perspectives; and
3. our significance for future generations and their reflections on us and how we dealt with what will then be our shared past.

Secondly, as a consequence, it is important to critically examine the concepts and principles of historical thinking. All reflection on one's position in relation to the past is structured using principles that may seem similar or even identical, but which are actually quite different. Their interrelationship, therefore, must constantly be redefined in light of the above outlined changes. The concept of 'presentism', for example, is familiar to us in many different forms, each of

which has its own justification, but also its limitations when considered alongside the others. To what extent is 'presentism' the main flaw of historical thinking? Is it evidence of a continuing bias towards today's structures, as (Wineburg, 1999) suggests, or is it a necessary attitude that cannot be overcome, but must be constantly considered? To what extent does it (or something similarly named) shape our historical thinking, not in terms of correct or wrong methodology, but much more fundamentally (*sensu* Hartog, 2015)? Here, the second version of reflexivity gains significance.

Thirdly, the current planetary condition necessitates a re-evaluation of our individual and communal self-image, as well as our concepts of responsibility and guilt: The long-standing combination of humankind and its responsibility cannot be considered solely in terms of individual decisions and actions, but also needs to be addressed in terms of the possibility of being virtuous and oriented towards well-being while simultaneously being detrimental to the planet as part of an impersonal and unconscious geophysical force (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 3).

3. Reflexivity II

Nevertheless, the definition of reflexivity presented so far – explicitly taking into account the temporal position of one's own historical thinking and the personal role in shaping the resulting narrative relations – is still insufficient. Against the backdrop of the brief debate mentioned at the outset concerning the concept of 'reflective' historical consciousness, I would like to propose an alternative form of reflexivity, which involves making a more systematic distinction between 'reflective' and 'reflexive' – specifically for pedagogical reasons. As you might expect, in my attempt to differentiate the reflexive from the reflective, I draw on our understanding of the differentiation between levels of thinking in the FUER-model of historical thinking competencies (Körber, 2015, pp. 21–27). I would argue that reflexivity is a feature of an elaborate, whereas reflectivity is a more conventional niveau. In contrast to Lawrence Kohlberg's stage model of moral development (Kohlberg, 1983), "conventional" here does not mean that people at the corresponding stage largely follow the logic of what their fellow human beings do and do not do (*così fan tutte*).

Historical thinking at the conventional niveau, according to the FUER-model, can certainly be independent and even critical. It is, however, characterised by the (ability) to draw on socially available and established ideas, concepts, and methods in their established understanding. Reflexivity, however, constitutes the more elaborate niveau of this ability.

In this sense, *reflectivity* means reflecting on one's own actions – in our field, for example, on one's own interpretation, historical judgment, etc., as well as the use and evaluation of sources – through a conscious, deliberate, and (potentially) accountable application of established concepts. It is significantly more substantial and reliable than situational and spontaneous action. It encompasses the ability, skill, and willingness (here the competence becomes apparent) to explicitly reflect on what has been explicitly learned (in class or elsewhere) – but in a way that essentially involves one's own flexible and adaptive application of existing concepts, etc. – an ability to justify the classification of phenomena into one category rather than another, to use one's own concept rather than another, to employ one method rather than another, etc. New situational challenges are approached reflectively by drawing on conventions.

Reflexivity, by contrast, is a heightened form of reflection – a reflection on action, the self, and others – that is no longer bound to conventions as a point of reference; unforeseen challenges to action – those not previously considered or cast in the mold of conventions – are addressed in a reflective and reflexive manner

4. Significance for historical thinking and learning

Historical knowledge, thinking, skills etc. do not exist per se in a single fixed form to be "acquired". Instead, it includes the ability to refer to social conventions, perspectives, etc. as well as the willingness to engage with other people, institutions, etc., their perspectives, concepts and categories. Historical education therefore needs to include a moment of "mutual exploration of subject and world" (Klafki, 2007), and therefore requires a certain degree of reflection, not least because its aim is not simply to learn "the" supposedly fixed knowledge about "the" monolithic

past (“as void of perspective, interpretation and representation”; Thorp, 2016, p. 1), but rather to enable people to participate in a historical culture that is constantly discussing its understanding of and relationship to the past. Without further development, such historical learning remains limited in a specific way in that it effectively suspends the cultural frameworks of historical thinking and of individual and social orientation in the dimension of time – and does so at the level of the adult society of the time. Reflective historical thinking is independent, but bound to the concepts and instruments of the dominant historical culture.

However, these framework conditions have not only changed in the past and will change again in the distant future – they are changing before our very eyes. Historical thinking that applies established concepts, perspectives and terms only extends as far as these conventions – especially in a form that can be taught in schools – already take them.

We are currently (and probably always have been) faced with a multitude of challenges to established forms of historical thinking – not just with a state of research that is always approximating a “truth”. A few of these challenges are outlined below.

- Digitalisation and digitality as the hallmark (Stalder, 2017; Gramelsberger, 2024) of a new historical culture significantly altered the technical possibilities for accessing/obtaining, processing and formulating, disseminating, receiving and communicating information and statements about the past and its significance. Decades ago it was “historiographically produced knowledge” that was “distributed” (e.g., via didactics) (Pandel, 1990). In today’s communication culture, which is no longer relying on analogue mass media (Giesecke, 2006), not only the roles (author, mediator, recipient) have been fundamentally merged or reconfigured, but also the social and economic structures of influence distribution. New and often opaque dependencies not only on the social media algorithms that define timelines and create “bubbles” – define how members of our societies can gain access to others’ as well as voice their own historical information and interpretations. Accordingly, the social and technical frames for historical discourses take new shapes and can have different implications. According to Jason Steinhauer’s (2022) nostalgic, almost defensive view, history is shifting from an intrinsically valuable endeavor of individuals focused on authenticity to a time-critical commodity of attention driven by the (digital) market with new ideas of validity and plausibility checks (swarm intelligence, public discussion) that do not completely replace established forms, but rather reshape and transform them.

- The conventional concepts of (mostly meso-) scale in historical thinking of space (local, regional, national, continental) and time (months, years, decades, centuries, millennia) are challenged by the increased influence of humans on the environment and humans’ growing awareness thereof (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 1). To merely complement them with macro-versions of the same logic seems not to suffice. Recent conceptual developments also affect our understandings of the agents and/or bearers of history (e.g., “Big History”; Christian, 2011; Harari, 2014) and the interrelations of temporal perspectives (see above). With regard to the temporal in particular, we need to consider in how far conventional ideas of the passage of time and of patterns of continuity (traditional, exemplary, genetic, progress and regression) are applicable to other scales, respectively whether they may function very differently on these scales. To what extent and with which implications and limits can genetic concepts such as progress be applied to large temporal scales? How can different or even conflicting propositions on the macroscale be compared to each other? How can they be related to narratives on other scales, e.g. to the meso-scale of classic and the individual scale-level of micro history – consider e.g. the simultaneity of optimistic (Pinker, 2012; Rosling et al., 2018) and pessimistic messages (Extinction Rebellion’s “tipping points”; cf. Sieberkrob & Reusch, 2025) on the same macroscale, the history behind regional wars (Ukraine) on the conventional meso-scale and traumatic experiences of witnesses. And how does this affect our concepts of history and history education? Considerations of this kind require not only a reflective application of but also/rather a reflexive inter-relating of concepts.

And finally, the same holds true for our disciplines specific conceptual repertoire: Regardless whether Zoltán Boldiszár Simon (Simon, 2021) is right or not in asserting that Western history culture holds neither any more expectation of a better future hope into progress nor is it rather indifferent of it, but instead dreads it as only to be imagined as catastrophic: the very existence of the concepts Simon diagnoses means that we must all grapple with their orientational logic. We can no longer merely reflectedly apply all these concepts but have to reflexively consider the scope and premises of such concepts influencing our orientations.

Such an understanding differentiating between reflective and reflexive modes as characteristics for different qualities of (historical) consciousness does fit in with the concept of differentiating levels of historical thinking within our FUER-model. There, we suggested three main “niveaus”, depending on the logic of how concepts, methods, procedures etc. are addressed and

handled: basic (“a-conventional”, i.e. spontaneous and situative form, non-consistent), intermediate (“conventional”, i.e. consistent in the ability to access and utilise conventional forms), and elaborate (“trans-conventional”, i.e. able to apply and to examine conventional concepts, criteria, etc. critically (Körber, 2015, p. 41).

The distinction between reflective and reflexive introduced here, now allows for a highlighting differentiation, partly within the intermediate and partly between this and the elaborate niveau: Whereas a lower-conventional niveau might be diagnosed if someone perceives that conventions exist in a certain field and seeks to acquire them, a fully reflective manifestation of the intermediate level is given, if a person is able to consciously and correctly select and apply conventional concepts, methods, etc. – being able to explicitly justify their choice, while still taking the respective concept as such for given.

The distinguishing characteristic of a reflexive elaborate level, then, is not so much the ability to choose between different conventional terms and to justify this choice with reference to established rules, norms and conventions, but lies in the fact that the specific manifestations of the conventions are subjected to critical examination. This quality of historical thinking, qualifying it for being considered reflexive, also entails a superior awareness of one’s own role in and contribution to its specific form and results. Reflexive thinking then is one which fully commands the conventional concepts and routines, but transgresses them towards a kind of non-conventional form again, this time defined by not grasping the conventions, but rather by really understanding them, their premises, implications and possibly limitations.

An example for this may be the already addressed concept of witness (“Zeitzeuge” in German) having emerged after WW2 as the hallmark of a new way of preserving historical experience and knowledge and relating it to later generations (Sabrow & Frei, 2012). On a basic level of understanding, people might simply consider elders as valuable sources of information on “the past” due to their presence at a certain event, not different from a recent accident’s witness. At the lower intermediate level, historical witnesses’ character as engaged narrators about a past from personal, non-neutral, mostly victims’ experience may be grasped, though possibly without consequences for engaging with eyewitnesses and interpreting their narratives or to reflect and communicate about them. To consider and discuss the “dual nature” of eyewitnesses as both primary sources and retrospective accounts belongs to the reflective, intermediate level. Reflecting on the implications of this dual nature goes a step further. To consider the extent to which the qualities and expectations associated with the term “eyewitness” (such as the normatively and morally charged perspective as a victim) apply in a specific case or should be assessed differently, e.g. in the case of a post-1945 internment camp’s inmate, implies a reflexive approach to the concept.

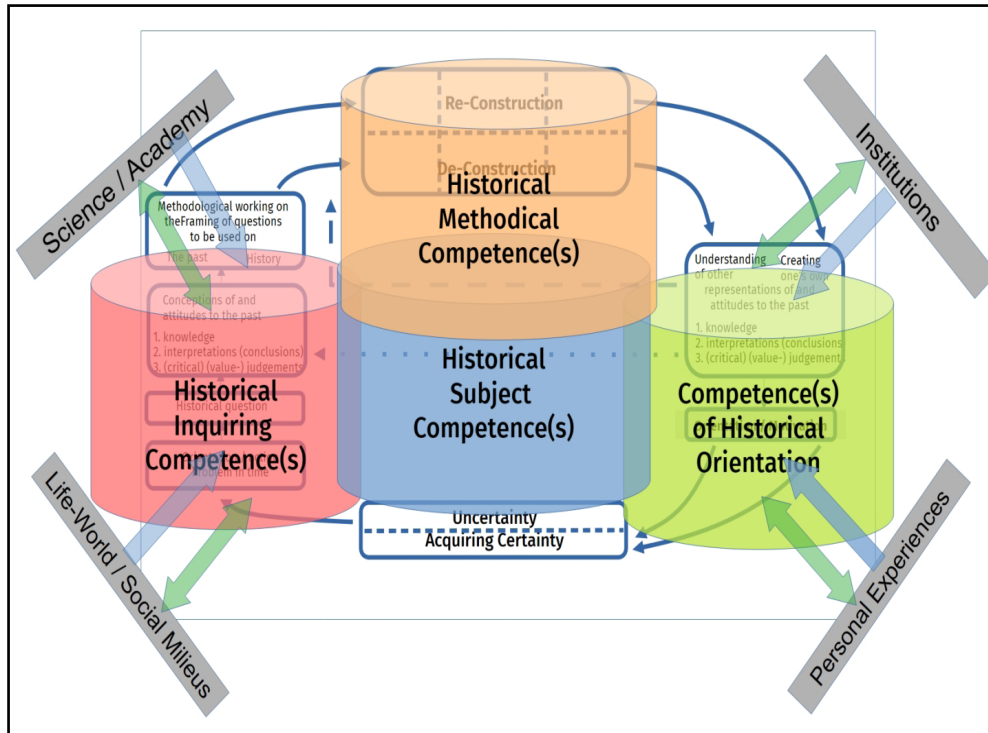
In another way, the distinction may help with addressing recent challenges to this specific historical and memory-related concept of witness(ing) as first-hand, personal, experience-laden and engaged, but also authoritative form of telling about sensitive histories. Some actors in this field try to preserve this rather new achievement in the light of most witnesses disappearing due to old age.⁴ These efforts developed from recording witnesses’ narratives in textual form via videography to interactive 3D-volumetric-video-representations, in which an artificial intelligence matches “users” questions to pre-recorded original answers (USC Shoah Foundation, n.d.). Within the intermediate niveau, while non-reflective ways of thinking might lead to an uncritical selection between these forms solely on grounds of availability, reflective thinking (still intermediate) can help to distinguish between the capabilities and limitations of the new technology and media applying it. A full appreciation of the implications and consequences of the different forms for memory culture and historical thinking, however, requires an engagement in reflexive thinking which must go beyond assessing the empirical results of these new forms achieving similar perceptions of real human encounters as successes (Schreer et al., 2022; cf. Hilsmann et al., 2020), towards reflecting on the implication of such simulation for one’s own historical thinking and society’s history culture in general. What, for example, might blurring the gap between the time of the recordings of the witnesses’ statements and that of the simulated dialogue mean? And what are the affordances but also implications of one being able to ask similar questions almost without limitations in a way one would never do with a real person? Can we still be “partners in dialogue” – or are we mere “users”?

To conclude on a more general note: Reflective historical thinking can be regarded as a level on which the implications of a set of conditions on the process of asking, methodically gaining

4 cf. Aleida Assmann’s usage of Vansina’s term “floating gap” between communicative and purely cultural tradition (Erl, 2011, pp. 28, 48).

knowledge, reflecting etc. can be addressed consciously and responsibly (blue arrows in Fig. 2), whereas the reflexive (elaborate) level is given when the interrelation between conditions and options, their implications and consequences and historical thinking can be reflected as a two-way inter-relation (green arrows) – also including the interrelations with academic, societal, life-world, and institutional forms of (historical) knowledge and thinking (cf. Körber, 2021, p. 5).

Fig. 2: Reflective and reflexive niveaus of historical thinking as one-way (blue) and two-way (green) consideration of conditions, concepts etc. in historical thinking. Basis: the FUER-Model (Körber et al., 2007).



Finally, this distinction can also be linked to a typology of (modern) humans' relating to and interacting with their world, recently proposed by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Drawing on differentiation by Hermann Schmitz, he distinguishes between a *constellative* mode, categorising the world it into discrete *constellations* of properties, associated with rules for rather standardised activities (Rosa, 2026), and a *situative* mode. The former mode, characteristic for modernity, ensures reliability and justice (by excluding arbitrariness), but at the same time restricts or even prevents actions which do not conform with the categories and rules. It thus champions *performing* the within the constellative logic over *acting* by specifically human perceptions and standards. Following this distinction, non-reflective, (basic) thinking and acting is "situative",⁵ characterised by the inability to make use of the constellative conceptualisation of the world, its institutions, rules etc., leading to highly situative, inconsistent and unreliable acting. Reflective thinking, then characterises the conscious ability to view the world via the constellative forms and to perform within them, ensuring reliability, interconnection, and freedom of arbitrariness. Reflexive thinking, however, does not mark an opposite form to constellative acting, but rather belongs to a complementary and higher form of ability. It also utilises constellative concepts, categories, and rules, but not only in a reflected form in order to perform within them, but rather also (!) in order to identify the individuality of a given situation and its specific (non-constellative) requirements, thus consciously transgressing them where deemed

⁵ Here, a terminological problem arises. Rosa seems to use "situativ(e)" (in German without the "e") and "situational" quite indistinctively, for the somewhat superior form of transgressing the constellative logic of "executing". In contrast, I propose to differentiate along the following rationale: "Situative" denotes a form of acting fully within a logic only determined by immediate perceptions, without any use or fallback to trans-situative, abstract concepts, forms, scripts, etc., as on the a-conventional level. "Situational", on the other hand, means the ability to perceive and address in true *acting* the specific characteristics of individual situations, not by lack of mastery of constellative conventions, rules, scripts, etc., but by being able to transgress these mastered conventional forms, marking the elaborate level.

necessary, underpinning acting instead of mere performing. Reflexive acting thus does require mastery of the constellative, but also the ability to qualify and (where necessary) partially dispense with them where the situation and /or perspective requires.

Finally, distinguishing between reflective and reflexive forms (or levels) of historical thinking can also help us rethink the educational goals of history learning and the characteristics of the tasks used in it. The differentiation between reflectivity and reflexivity can thus give room to a historical thinking and a history education which helps students not only to apply given knowledge to their own questions, but to become aware (and conscious) of the sometimes slightly, sometimes drastically differing and changing conditions and concepts used in our societies for dealing with the past.

Ultimately, these considerations may also help to counteract certain trends that have been observed on several occasions – or at least feared – and which are often criticised as the result of an overly narrow, mechanistic understanding of competence-based education. Drawing on a distinction developed in Germany, in particular by Josef Leisen (2017), it could be argued that tasks frequently set in the classroom are perceived by pupils as performance-based tasks because they signal the existence of pre-determined ‘correct’ solutions and/or, at the very least, terms, concepts, etc. to be used in solving them. They thus reinforce forms of constellative (post-)‘execution’ of the engagement with the subject matter. However, particularly when it comes to acquiring and developing insights, knowledge, attitudes and competences, what is required is not merely successful execution, but rather open-ended forms of engaging with problems – often initially based on conjecture, then on discussion and deliberation – and tasks that signal and facilitate precisely this (‘learning tasks’). In such phases and when working on such tasks, the focus will not be solely on identifying and practising the constellative forms of historical thinking. Rather, the aim would also be to discuss both the further insights made possible by approaches that are no longer merely situational but abstract-constellative (such as formalised methods, overarching concepts, etc.), as well as the concomitant obscuring of situational specifics.

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ORCID iD

Andreas Körber  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9142-4014>

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