



How to write about history?

Picture the scenario. A lecturer is teaching a group of third year PhD students. The subject is the methodology of social sciences. The lecturer starts the class with a sentence composed of words taken almost entirely from a dictionary of foreign expressions. After forty-five minutes it dawns on him that the majority of his listeners have no idea what he is talking about, so he ends the class. The same scenario has been repeated over and over for the entire semester. Almost no-one seems to mind. The lecturer's conscience is clear. By not burdening these students (and prospective academics) with unnecessary problems, they can devote their precious time to other activities. The question, though, is how to write about history, and is it really worth trying to write about the past? What is the relation between the past and the present?

In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” our Research Fellow Tomasz Ceran analyses how to write about history. “Historiography’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon essay writing’ are two models, or two ways, of writing and thinking about the past. It is nothing other than the age-old argument between narrative history and the problem-solving history, between traditional history and modern history. It is an argument which brings a range of practical consequences. For many decades sociologists and political scientists have accused historians of not really thinking, but merely creating chronicles. Whereas historians are convinced that sociologists and political scientists are guilty of being unwilling to put in any work, of generalizing too easily, and subjecting dynamic social life and people to rigid theories.”

We encourage you to read the new issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”!

Editorial Staff of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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One should remember the words of Henryk Grynberg who wrote that 'understanding is not a weakness of either poetry or prose – hermetic thinking is'. In a similar way, sooner or later, questions will arise in the minds of numerous PhD students and young scientists, and they will keep on searching for answers with their older counterparts: historians and other experts, who have committed their lives to the muse Clio. However, those who have never asked themselves these questions and remain blindly faithful to their scheme of writing about history (the scheme which is 'timeless' and 'unchangeable') are in a much worse situation. Their unconscious historical 'I' does not develop with them. Paraphrasing the words of Witold Gombrowicz, their form is not brought to life together with them, it is only created for them. Edward Hallet Carr pointed out ironically that three generations of German, British and even French historians went to battle against the past with a song on their lips, a song that begins with the magic words 'wie es eigentlich gewesen', and which protected them against self-reflection. It seems that several divisions of Polish historians have followed this pattern, but are they aware of it?

Two models of writing (and thinking) about history

'Historiography' and 'Anglo-Saxon essay writing' are two models, or two ways, of writing and thinking about the past. It is nothing other than the age-old argument between narrative history and the problem-solving history, between traditional history and modern history. It is an argument which brings a range of practical consequences. For many decades sociologists and political scientists have accused historians of not really thinking, but merely creating chronicles. Whereas historians are convinced that sociologists and political scientists are guilty of being unwilling to put in any work, of generalizing too easily, and subjecting dynamic social life and people to rigid theories.

While such a division is obviously something of a simplification, it can still say a lot about how history is being written in Poland nowadays. It shouldn't need pointing out that the adjectives 'German' and 'Anglo-Saxon' are purely arbitrary. Not every historian on the river Thames is a brilliant essayist, and not every historian on the river Rhine is faithful to Leopold von Ranke's methodology. The division can still be empirically fruitful, and it does provide a historical explanation. Edward Alfred Mierzwa describing 'History of England' by David Hume noticed that the 'lively narrative of Hume became a model for numerous historians (and not only British ones). One of his many merits was the development of the essayistic style of British historical writing – writing for a reader, so different from the heaviness of the German style overloaded with scientific apparatus.'

German historiography

In the world of German historiography there has almost never been a problem with the choice of a topic for a historical dissertation. Something has happened; therefore, we should write about it. The author tends not to consider the significance of a given event. Instead episodes of marginal

significance are described over hundreds of pages without being placed within a wider context and 'the spirit of the age'. The purpose of a historian faithful to this tradition is to describe 'what actually happened' as precisely as possible.' 'The chronicler who gives an account of events, without differentiating between greater and smaller ones, does justice to the truth that nothing that has ever happened should ever be written off.' This kind of thinking about history does not involve any problems to be solved; there are only events to be written down. German historiography is characterized by precision, conscientiousness, literality; without such qualities it is difficult to imagine the work of a reliable historian.

In these types of works, everything that is known about a certain event is written down. One of the consequences of such an approach might be the publication of a 'selection' of documents which comprise thousands of pages describing a certain event of minor significance. 'A historian, asked what the main purpose of his research is, will most frequently say: facts. He conducts research, hunting down facts for the purpose of collection and comparison. The dates, the names, the names of towns, kinship, the arrangements, the weights and measures, the documents, the sequences of events. A historian would say: I am interested in facts and facts alone. Meanwhile, a man who lived and experienced history the hard way is going to doubt whether the subject of the research of our historian can be limited to facts. This man knows that a fact torn from the whole context of imponderables, taken out of the whole theatrum where it occurred, deprived of its climate and mood – such a fact does not say much and means little. Frequently, it even acquires an opaque meaning and incorrect significance.'

Apologists for German historiography believe that they have a direct access to the past and are able to write about a certain event objectively without any subjective interpretation. There is only one condition determining that history is a science, and that is the archive. If documents exist, history can be written. If they do not, there is no history. The more documents from the most plentiful number of archives are cited, the better a piece of work is (obviously literal citations are preferred; footnotes – the more extended, the better; and bibliography – obviously, the bigger, the better).

In scientific research on history such an approach leaves no room for interpretation, hypothesis, searches for analogies between chronologically distant events and predictions. German historiography does not want anything to do with literature, since there is no place for it in research; history as an academic discipline should operate with a precise language and terminology.

Anglo-Saxon essay writing

An Anglo-Saxon essayist usually has a lot of problems with choosing a subject. There has to be an 'idea' for writing a book. It is not also easy to hit upon a subject heretofore unexplained or, according to him, explained insufficiently or inadequately. The very fact that an event has occurred is not sufficient for it to be recorded. Such a way of thinking about history is not afraid of evaluations and subjective opinions. Terms such as 'imagination', 'interpretation' and 'evaluation' are not prohibited. The Anglo-Saxon essayist is aware that only a historian can decide whether a fact becomes a historical fact, and it is up to him to assign it a role in recreating and understanding a historic process. Having made a selection of the key facts, the historian does not write down everything he knows about a certain event, but instead concentrates only on matters which are really important. He knows that writing is claiming a right to a reader's attention. The historian respects the reader's time spent on reading his work, and writes only about things which are of interest to him, and only when he has something of interest to say. Richard Pipes, when describing his writing technique, assumed that only that which interested him as an author, and that which remained in his heart and mind, could also interest his readers.

This type of a historian attempts to become erudite, ever aware that in order to come up with an idea for writing a book, he will have to commit a lot of time to reading books first rather than documents. A historian cannot appear in archive 'without an idea for an explanation, without an interpretative hypothesis. It is not possible to take up an attempt to explain a course of events without reaching for

a literary form of narration, either rhetorical or imaginative. Every historical research assumes that starting from the very first steps every search must have a definite direction. There must first be a thought'. They never foresaw a situation whereby a historian might visit the archive only in order to create a chronicle of a certain event. The Anglo-Saxon essayist before going to the archives poses a series of questions. This type of historian, after having asked himself what has happened, will go one step further, and will ask why it happened. The problem-solving historian, while examining a certain issue, will not limit himself to his own field of study, but will make use of all the social sciences if they can propose a different explanation of the issue troubling him. He feels like he is a member of a large family of social humanistic sciences. He is also convinced that the quality of works he is to write will not only depend on whether he is able to manage to read all the documents in the archive but also on his general humanistic erudition.

The goal of an Anglo-Saxon historian is to write an interesting book, thanks to which he may be lucky enough to gain an academic degree. The goal of a German historian is to create an exhaustive, hermetic academic dissertation for a narrow circle of experts and defend it within the walls of a university.

Historical imagination

The German historian will subscribe to the words: 'a historian has got the right to express as much as he can prove'. While the British essayist is convinced that he can do a bit more. He can suggest the most probable hypothesis for solving problems he is currently investigating, but only when he has a strong reliable source. He also needs to specify in his text where he should clearly differentiate between 'firm' facts and 'soft' hypotheses. Albert Einstein (a physicist, not a humanist!) was not correct to say that imagination is more important than knowledge. The kind of historical imagination which allows us to view things from various angles and become empathic might not be more important than knowledge, but it is equally important. Otherwise history would be exclusively concerned with facts. Likewise problem-solving history can only develop our historical imagination if it is based on reliable factual material. Factual history is possible without problem-solving history (there are plenty of examples in Polish historiography) but problem-solving history cannot exist without factual history, otherwise there would be no difference between history and fairytale writing. For German history the word imagination is a 'non-scientific' one. Meanwhile the historic imagination allows us to connect individual events and facts in a chain of cause-and-effect, and therefore understand historical processes. It is worth remembering that in our mental constitution the will to understand is much stronger than the will to possess knowledge.

Conclusions, or an Anglo-Saxon essayist living in Berlin

1. We ought to practice problem-solving humanities, not only factual humanities, noticing problems and using factual material when trying to solve them.
2. We should try to defend ourselves from thinking that interpretations are all we need, and facts mean nothing. Facts without thinking are useless and vice versa. Therefore, we should take advantage of the accomplishments of other social sciences, and try to avoid creating 'academic ghettos'.
3. We should not be wary of dealing with important matters, which are of vast significance. Even when we describe local episodes we should think globally.
4. We should write interesting books for readers and not hermetic academic dissertations.
5. What should count is not the number of publications, but on the quality and variety
6. We should be original, and not copy certain schemes and patterns but create new ones. We should write only when there really is something new to say.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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