

Historical Consciousness

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

Historical consciousness (German *Geschichtsbewusstsein*, also *historisches Bewusstsein*; French *conscience historique*) refers to the ways in which people orient themselves in time. More than being just an understanding of or interest in history, historical consciousness comprises basic aspects of human life: the general consciousness that every human individual, every culture, every institution is embedded in time, has a past and future, and is prone to change (Jeismann 1979). This consciousness is connected to the epistemological position that knowledge is also bound to culturally and historically specific frameworks of interpretation that differ fundamentally from those in the past and those to come. Because historical consciousness reflects this general historicist axiom, it is often, but not exclusively, understood normatively as a requirement for an advanced understanding of history.

Historical consciousness is generally studied in two ways: as the subject matter of studies that analyze temporal and historical awareness in past and present on a societal level, and on an individual level as a cognitive-epistemological category related to a specific skillset for the understanding of history (Grever and Adriaansen 2019). The first approach features in the work of theorists such as Reinhart Koselleck (2004a) and François Hartog (2015) and in various empirical studies, and concerns the development of historical consciousness over time. These works historicize historical consciousness as they specify when, how, and under which conditions a specific modern historical consciousness has emerged and developed. The second approach is prominent in history education studies and history didactics, treats historical consciousness as an individual competence, and studies how the cognitive capacities of historical understanding can be trained.

The Concept Over Time

Historically, the concept “historical consciousness” saw its origins in German idealism, notably in nineteenth-century Hegelian discourse where philosophers used the concept to characterize Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770–1831) philosophy of history (von Renthe-Fink 1971). Although historical consciousness does not feature in Hegel’s work as an analytical concept, his philosophy brings together consciousness and history, as he claims that history was characterized by the growing self-consciousness of spirit. Historical consciousness therefore relates to the self-awareness of spirit that itself is the constituting force of history. Translated to human subjective consciousness this means that historical consciousness does not denote a consciousness of the existence and character of an objective past, but the consciousness that history is itself the product of spirit (Hüffer 2002).

It was the hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) who carried the notion historical consciousness beyond Hegelian discourse. With Hegel, he agreed that historical consciousness was a constitutive element of the historical worldview of Western modernity, but contrary to Hegel, Dilthey situated the possibilities of knowing the past in a notion of life experience (*Erlebnis*), rather than an abstract notion of spirit. Spirit to Dilthey is merely human spirit rather than a metaphysical concept. Dilthey claimed that “The historical consciousness of the finitude of every historical phenomenon, of

every human or social condition and of the relativity of every kind of faith, is the last step towards the liberation of man" (Dilthey 2002: 310). Liberation here means the liberation of the dogmatism of Hegelian thought; historical consciousness is now no longer an insight in the workings of a metaphysical system that constitutes history, but an awareness of the finitude of all historical phenomena—a consciousness that allows for the exploration of new perspectives and the acceptance that all that is evil and ugly is also part of history. Yet Dilthey's liberation of historical consciousness from Hegelian metaphysics also opened up the problem of historical relativity.

This problem was also one of the issues raised in the crisis of historicism, and also impacted the position of historical consciousness in German discourse, which increasingly challenged the "finitude" of the past and stressed that the relevance of the past relied on its meaning for life in the present. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) (1997) strongly criticized the historical consciousness of his age, which had resulted in an oversaturation of history in life, a surfeit of historical knowledge that weighted upon the present and hampered human creativity and vitality. Karl Jaspers (1956: 118) distinguished "historisches Bewusstsein"—the concept Dilthey used when he spoke about historical consciousness—from "geschichtliches Bewusstsein," and aligned the first with historicist knowledge about a past that is remote, in itself unique, and is causally related to the present. This is the scientific way in which historiography understands the past. Jaspers relates more favorably to the second: geschichtliches Bewusstsein, in which an individual relates to the past existentially, not just epistemologically.

A similar distinction was made by Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose *Time and Method* (2013) is seminal for the theory of historical consciousness, as his theory starts from the position that historical consciousness cannot escape its own historicity (Grever and Adriaansen 2019: 821). This is a reaction to Dilthey's position that historical consciousness relates to the finitude of historical phenomena (De Mul 2004). If historical consciousness can meaningfully understand finite pasts, it cannot be historical itself, which inadvertently introduces the necessity to fall back to metaphysics for justification. Rather, Gadamer contends, historical consciousness is bound to the specific historical context from which we interpret the past. This is not problematic for Gadamer, because historical understanding is ultimately not about understanding the past objectively in itself—which is impossible. Rather it is about enlarging one's own horizon of interpretation.

The study of historical consciousness has gained impetus since the 1970s through its conceptualization in German history didactics where authors such as Karl-Ernst Jeismann (1979), Jörn Rüsen (1989), and Hans-Jürgen Pandel (1987) conceptualized historical consciousness as an individual competence that links historical understanding to temporal orientation in the present. As a competence, historical consciousness could be attained or improved through history education. Rüsen (2004: 79), for example, developed a theoretical model that could reveal four types or stages of historical consciousness—"each the precondition for the next"—that lead to an increasingly critical understanding of history: (1) a traditional stage that relies on the continuity of tradition; (2) an exemplary stage in which the past is used for the instruction of the present; (3) a critical stage that deconstructs notions of the continuity of tradition; and (4) a genetic stage that recognizes temporal change and historicizes change over time as a process of dynamic development. The didactic approach to historical consciousness served as an impetus for the internationalization of the concept, which is now widely used in history education and history education scholarship throughout the Western world (Barca and Schmidt 2013; Clark and Grever 2018; Clark and Peck 2019; Metzger and Harris 2018; Miguel-Revilla and Sánchez-Augusti 2018).

Interpretations

As mentioned in the introduction, contemporary research on historical consciousness is not limited to education, another tradition studies historical consciousness as a collective phenomenon in history that is concerned with changing perceptions of the relationship between past, present, and future. It studies how historical consciousness, understood as the modern sense of history, developed through the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of an increasingly accelerating sense of change in Western societies. According to Reinhart Koselleck (1972) the transition from a premodern historical consciousness in which histories serve as exempla that guide future actions to a modern historical consciousness that thinks of history as one singular process of development occurred between 1750 and 1850 (Koselleck 2004b).

In the philosophy of history Koselleck's widely acknowledged theory incited the discussion what comes after this modern historical consciousness. According to François Hartog (2015) contemporary historical consciousness is governed by a "regime of historicity" that is different from those in the past as it is "presentist," and does not conceptualize history out of past experience or future expectation, but out of contemporary questions and issues. He connects presentism to the bankruptcy of metanarratives in the postmodern condition, and the loss of a belief in a larger meaning in history after 1989. Consequently, historical consciousness is considered as a defining feature of modern self-understanding. The question then raises what the relationship between historical consciousness and its cultural expressions in historical culture is.

In the 1990s, German scholars in the field of history education research investigated international or intercultural comparisons of historical consciousness (Angvik, Von Borries, and Körber 1997; von Borries and Rüsen 1994). These scholars argued that historical consciousness and historical culture are intrinsically related. They conceptualized historical consciousness as an individual and mental process, which is expressed in the construction of a shared, collective historical culture. Historical culture and historical consciousness then appear as two sides of the same coin (Rüsen 1997; Schönemann 2000; Triepke 2011). But if one interprets historical culture as an expression of historical consciousness, one assumes historical consciousness to exist outside of historical culture, providing it with an essentialist and a-historical meaning (Grever and Adriaansen 2017).

Today the general equation of historical consciousness with modern historical consciousness has become increasingly problematic as an effect of globalization and multicultural classes, which resulted in scholars questioning the Eurocentric bias of the concept in history education studies (Körber 2016; Rüsen 2002). In some countries, such as Canada and New Zealand, educators call for the incorporation of oral traditions and cyclical conceptions of history in the curriculum, and argue for "indigenous epistemologies" as valid alternatives to modern historical consciousness as the epistemological framework of interpreting the past (Seixas 2012). An increasing emphasis on multiperspectivity (Wansink et al. 2018) makes the question of how to bridge different epistemological frameworks of historical understanding even more urgent. Hence the issue is to historicize and dynamize the concept of historical consciousness, and to deconstruct its Eurocentric assumptions.

Postcolonial discourse in particular challenges the idea of modern historical consciousness for its Hegelian legacy of reserving history for those who are conscious of the past, as history in the modern sense—a logic that casts large parts of the globe as "people without history" (Wolf 2010). This led authors such as Ranajit Guha (1988, 2012) to rally against the very principle of historicization to salvage subaltern pasts from the colonizing clutches of modern historical consciousness. Dipesh Chakrabarty, who himself deconstructed historical consciousness as part of the constituting myth of European modernity, acknowledged that such attempts ironically require "for its own decipherment a subject with historical consciousness" (1992: 55). Alternatively, Chakrabarty (2008: 112) emphasizes that subaltern pasts and historicist pasts are supplementary rather than mutually exclusive, as they both put each other in perspective as different meaning-making strategies of a generally diverse ontological experience of history.

Finally, climate change poses a challenge for the theory of historical consciousness. Karl Löwith (1983: 422) has already remarked that the apparent assumption of modern historical consciousness is one of "two worlds": the spiritual world of history versus the unselfconscious, unspiritual, and therefore unhistorical world of nature. The self-evidence of this distinction is lost in a world where climate change

and a global pandemic spur scholars to reimagine humans as geologic agents, captured in the notion of the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002; Grever 2021). This implies a recalibration of historical consciousness on the level of historical imagination, as happens with research on “big history” (Christian 1991), as well as concerning the theory of historical consciousness. Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes that the radical reimagination of humans as a species contrasts the ways historical consciousness is understood since Dilthey, namely, as a resource to expand and extend an individual’s private experience of the world through reflecting upon experiences from the past. However, a human self-understanding as a species does “does not correspond to any historical way of understanding and connecting pasts with futures through the assumption of there being an element of continuity to human experience” (Chakrabarty 2021: 43).

Conclusion

Historical consciousness is widely used in historiography, the theory of history, and history didactics, but in different ways. In historiography and the theory of history scholars study the rise of a specific modern understanding of history that sees the past as part of a causal process of progress tied to the present and projected into the future. They study the rise of historical consciousness in modernity and raise the question what comes after this modern historical consciousness. In history education studies and history didactics historical consciousness is theorized as a competency that allows individuals to make sense of the past through meaningfully connecting it to the present and the future—an operation that generally invokes the historicist idea of the essential alterity of the past, which in turn also raises the question of the limits of historical consciousness. These limits confront an urgent and interesting challenge for contemporary scholarship, which has been exemplified by two discussions concerning historical consciousness and intercultural historical understanding, and historical consciousness and ecological consciousness.

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