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The Work of History

Constructivism and a Politics of the Past

Kalle Pihlainen

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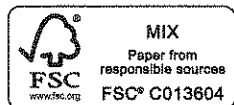
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2 Rereading Constructivism

Within historical studies, the debate concerning narrative constructivism *à la* Hayden White is too easily read as involving only epistemological issues. It is assumed that at stake are the limits and possibilities of representation: the question of how our stories of the world, and particularly of the now absent world of the past, can be “truthful,” “representative,” “authentic” and so on. From this perspective, the fact that broader debate often remains fixated on whether history writing is “true”—and to what extent—is understandable. Focus on the question of whether there is ultimately any difference between history writing and literature—whether history is fact or fiction—is, however, the sum total of a number of misunderstandings and generalizations, the most common of which I already outlined in the previous chapter.

The core claims of constructivism certainly relate to epistemology: To what extent can a *story* or *narrative* be true? Is it even possible to think that the organization of facts into story form could somehow be neutral or objective? The short and quite unequivocal answer is that however true particular facts (“singular existential statements”) may be, their presentation in historical stories cannot but introduce a content that does not belong to the past, but is created by the story form. That is, history writing (or any other referential and “truthful” narration, for that matter) cannot be produced without ideological valuation and assessment of the significance of the facts presented, or, indeed, without the introduction of added meanings belonging to the representational (literary) form.

Constructivist theorists of history like White present numerous examples of this process, ranging from simple (but inevitably arbitrary) choices regarding a story’s beginning or end points, for example, to detailed and intricate literary-theory-type analyses of narrativization.¹ Ultimately, all these deal, however, with the way that narrativization and narrative appropriate the truths of the past; the writing of history always constructs its stories (albeit from and around facts) simply because stories did not *exist* in past reality (and nor do they exist in present reality); they are not a part of any actual existence beyond a specific act of representation, as it were.

And thus, they cannot, of course, be *found*. The stories that historians purport to have found in the past are just as subjective as those we use to structure our own everyday experiences. The past, like the present, does not offer a single, linguistically appropriable “truth”; instead, explanations are the product of historians’ readings of it. Reality is ambiguous and always requires interpretation. (The reason that I want to rehearse part of this discussion from the previous chapter is that this rather straightforward but fundamental idea seems to be a continuous cause of difficulty even for some of the most theoretically aware historians.)

Despite all this, the discussion concerning history as fiction is often based on unnecessary overstatement: we generally do not view the explanations and interpretations of natural science, for example, as fictional in the sense of their being *only* imaginary creations. While the current either-or debate is to an extent perhaps the result of deliberate provocation on White’s part, he has also later attempted to correct the misconceptions associated with his argument regarding history’s fictionality.² The fact that the concept of fiction has remained at the centre of the debate is perhaps understandable despite subsequent attempts at clarification. It is quite hard to understand, however, why the more general debate still so often continues to simplistically equate fictionality with literature and literariness. Although it is clear that the text cannot *in itself* (by its language, shape, style or even its references, for example) demonstrate the truthfulness of its claims, it is unreasonable to argue that there is no difference between history writing and literary fiction. Here too, the fact-fiction debate seems to have focused only on a small part of White’s deliberately challenging argument. What has largely been neglected is its forward-looking part: in order to be meaningful in present-day social contexts, history should employ *contemporary* and *appealing* representational forms instead of continuing to rely on the realist stereotype.

A central aim in this has been to make historians aware of the opportunity of broadening their range of literary means by pointing out that—as a model for history writing in the representation of reality in all its diversity—the nineteenth-century realist novel deserves no privileged position over, say, modernist fragmentation or stream-of-consciousness. Its centrality to history today is only the result of representational traditions and conventions. What is more, and as White expressly tries to show, the model of the realistic novel too easily prevents evaluations of the significance of particular ideologies and uncritically affirms existing practices (see especially White’s “Burden of History” in White 1978b, 27–50; see also Pihlainen 2015a). The model only affords simple and straightforward stories about reality, stories that are additionally sanctioned by the institution of history, with the implication, of course, that, because the stories produced in this way are “history,” and because the sanctioned form leaves no room for either doubt or alternative readings, they cannot be anything but “true.”

History Writing as a Distinct Genre

A necessary starting point for any theory or philosophy of history is in some idea of the distinctness of history as a practice. With regard to the research side of things, this is relatively easy to establish. Historians study past phenomena and events, the activity of humans in the past. This research task involves various procedural issues and institutionally defined methods.³ Among historians, it has traditionally been held that this kind of methodological awareness is sufficient to ensure the scientific status of history writing. When past events have been satisfactorily elucidated, historians need “simply” to present them in written form, preferably in such a way that others can easily verify the facts on the basis of the references given.

The claim that the presentation of research results in narrative form is not quite so straightforward has naturally not been well received by all historians. Reactions have ranged from full denial (the still often heard: “That would make the study of history pointless!”), calls to define better acceptable representational methods, all the way to “theoretical” positions claiming that narrative forms are a natural consequence of the contents, the facts of the past; this last either in the sense that facts define the appropriate representational means or—even more incredibly—that stories exist in reality and can be discovered by means of careful research.

What should be clear, however, is that a constructivist position denies all such claims: narratives are always (at least to some extent) the result of subjective choices; and materials, facts, can never exhaustively determine interpretations and emplotments. In an interesting debate in the 1990s in *History and Theory*, Raymond Martin presented a tempting thought experiment intended to question this claim. He suggested that it would be possible to choose between different, competing interpretations once *enough* facts were available: if we could amass sufficient detailed information—if we had “enough access to the evidence”—a truthful interpretation could be achieved (Martin 1993, 30–32).

Despite at first appearing quite convincing, this idea fails at the exact point that constitutes a blind spot for so many historians: interpretations (like stories) are not something that can be found in the details of the past, hence the concept of truth does not apply to them as it does to factual information in the form of singular factual statements—and hence, since reality and representations are in this way of a radically different order, historical facts can never be sufficient for controlling the narrative and formal aspects of representing. The archetypal example of this was, of course, provided by *Metahistory* and its idea of the different tropological alternatives for structuring narratives. (At the same time, the formalizations offered in *Metahistory* are unnecessarily limiting if taken as a “model” of some sort, as White too has reminded [2000, 391]).⁴

This is not to say that the subjective choices effected in narrativizing could not be institutionally regulated (once more: *to some extent*) through

some set of fanciful and limiting practices, or that constructivism signifies relativism regarding the *existence* of past reality. Constructivism is decidedly not an antirealist position. Furthermore, the role of individual verifiable facts (as “singular existential statements”) in constructivist theory has been clearly defined (see, for example, White 1987, 45 and 1978b, 97; cf. Ankersmit 1990, 277–278), and its questioning of history writing begins only once these initial epistemological hurdles have been cleared. The question, therefore, is: What may legitimately be inferred from these individual facts? And the answer, again: Nothing, really. All stories that are constructed from these facts are equally propositional (see, for example, Ankersmit 1990, 282). From this, it is not a great stretch to the claim that no means remain for distinguishing between history texts and literary writing. Indeed, after the selection of material, the writing process can be thought to proceed in a very similar manner.

Yet the latter, more extreme interpretation completely ignores the institutional and generic commitments of history as well as the realities of the writing process. Despite having to construct their stories, historians remain restricted by the fact that they are historians, not literary authors. In Edith Wyschogrod’s (1998, 4) formulation, historians are bound by the “historian’s promise” of truthfulness. Where literary authors produce and shape their “materials” (the substance of the worlds presented by their texts) in accordance with the conditions and needs of their stories, historians attempt to fit their stories to all available facts. This is something that is often overlooked by populist adoptions of constructivist arguments even though it has a significant impact on form also. (For more on the restrictions to form, see Pihlainen 2002a.) In line with this very concrete observation, seeing historians as working on terms set by available materials is something that sets White’s thought apart from more radical views that take the stories produced by history writing as being imaginary in the same way as, for example, theoretical (philosophical) or literary texts.⁵ Thus, although stories are not “true” in the kind of constructivism represented by White—by virtue of their being *stories*—neither are they “untrue.” Epistemological criteria are simply not applicable to narratives. And the stories offered by history writing are only possible ways of formulating ideas regarding the significance of particular facts about the past.⁶

One conclusion to be drawn from the challenges history faces is the one defended by Keith Jenkins, for whom it is difficult to find justification for either historical research or writing any longer. If we accept that the past contains no stories or indeed even significantly determines the purposes for which it can be used—if, in other words, the past can offer us no “lessons”—there seems to be no point in tying the products of our imaginations to it in ways demanded by the current generic and institutional rules and conventions of history (for more on Jenkins’ turn away from history, see Pihlainen 2013a). On the other hand—and in spite of the impossibilities involved in representing the past—White’s goals, for example, have often

included the preservation and justification of history writing as a practice. This more pragmatic approach can be defended simply because the theoretical hopelessness of the practice has not deterred historians from continuing with their work (however one defines that work in relation to truth and to the past).

So, although it is clear that talking or writing about the past at the level of narrative involves both the formulation of subjective opinions and an attachment to various ideologies, the linking of history writing to reality holds significance for historians and readers alike: histories are *experienced* as meaningful in a very different way because they relate to past reality through the “historian’s promise” and on the basis of their genre. It should be understood, however, that this does not in any way alter the epistemological standing of historical representations but only reflects institutional and social attitudes toward them. And, in this way, it also reflects another common fancy or prejudice regarding history: because historical narratives stick to historical facts, as much as possible, the thoughts and attitudes they present are often ascribed added value in comparison to those appearing in “purely” imaginary texts. Through this perceived added value, history can more convincingly be used in contemporary society as a means of influencing public opinion, the attitudes it defends by default lending support to the *status quo*. Because, that is, the naive yet generally accepted view of history holds that historical accounts deserve added credit for not only being imaginable or even plausible but for also being “real” by virtue of the events described having “happened,” history is assumed to provide an understanding of reality not achieved through any other means.

On this view (which I think helps explain away some of the ostensible contradictions in constructivist theory), the motivation for maintaining the special status of “historical knowledge” derives from a more general phenomenon: although the imaginary or fictional character of stories is largely recognized, people still want historical stories to create some kind of *experience* of relating to the past. In other words, there is a broad desire that the facts we have about the past be significant, and, ultimately, any investment of significance is possible only through an active experiential relation. In the same way that we all strive to understand the present through bestowing meanings and significance on it, (historically minded) people also seem to hope to be able to meet the (distant) past on a level where it would be “present” and meaningful to them. While some theorists of history—with Keith Jenkins at the fore—quite rightly do not find this desire legitimate or indeed theoretically justifiable, it remains, despite its irrationality, an important explanatory factor in understanding historical research and theorizing.

The reason why so few history theorists are willing to follow the constructivist argument “to the end of the line,” as Jenkins does, needs to be sought in the same desire that brings so many readers as well as historians, one must assume, to history in the first place: they desire reality even when it is already experientially unavailable as in the case of the past. This longing

and the accompanying desire to understand, and (often) learn, something from the reality of the past can be seen to be implicated even in the tensions contained in White’s constructivist approach—most importantly in his long-standing attempt to rescue history despite full awareness of the fundamental problematics it faces.

The persistence of history and historical thinking can thus at least partly be explained by the way in which past reality is held to be significant as well as by the experiential (phenomenological) longing directed toward the past. Although this *phenomenological yearning*, felt by both historians and consumers of history, is often based on a confusion regarding the limits of the theoretical possibilities of history—although, that is, the idea of history’s truthfulness is mistakenly extended from the level of the facts studied to that of the stories constructed—their underlying experience of history’s “reality” needs to be taken seriously in terms of its *impact*. Despite theoretical objections, many people *do* take historical representations to be “real” and important, and that cannot be dismissed from the equation. (I will continue to elaborate on this idea of phenomenological yearning; see especially Chapters 4 and 5.)

At the same time, constructivist theorizing runs into problems: As mentioned, White’s original purpose in questioning the objectivity of historical study has involved an attempt to undermine the way in which institutional interpretations are automatically credited with authority. While the strategy of denying historical interpretations their status as “truth” purely on the basis of their institutional origins (of, that is, dispelling the naive view that stories are “true” because of history’s objectivity and scientific nature alone) has been effective in this questioning, it has also created parallel problems for so-called alternative interpretations. This leads to a choice: either accept that all stories are only interpretations to be freely chosen from—in which case “anything goes” in an admittedly inflated postmodern reading—or grant special status to institutions in exercising ideological power in the evaluation of interpretations. In both cases, the (poststructuralism-inspired) intention of making room for alternative readings runs into problems. Either anything goes, or nothing changes.

Alternative Representational Forms

In the more sensationalist interpretations of the fact–fiction debate, hardly any attention has been paid to White’s attempts to formulate a “politics of historical interpretation” (White 1987, 78) or indeed to the broader ideological and political aims guiding this social commitment. For this reason, the connection between these political ambitions and the demand for the renewal of narrative forms is not always clearly understood.

As I have already begun to discuss, White’s constructivist theorizing has increasingly focused on the discovery and adoption of new representational forms in order that the model provided by the nineteenth-century

realist novel might be replaced with less ideologically constraining narrative forms—forms that would be less likely to unreflectively reproduce existing values and beliefs. A further difficulty with employing the realist novel as a model is in the simplistic view of historical knowledge that realistic histories offer: such straightforward narratives leave no room for alternative points of view regarding events. But this is arguably only part of the reason for White's strong focus on alternative forms. These forms are interesting also for the way in which they facilitate alternative conceptualizations of history through the creation of a different kind of experientiality—something that they do, to oversimplify (yet remain, I think, fully in agreement with White's thought), by being more interesting and appealing than traditional stories. Partly, this simply reflects White's subjective preference for modernist modes of presentation, but partly—and more interestingly here—it also constitutes a claim that history writing should resonate with the tastes of readers in order to be meaningful. As he writes of the out-dated modes of historical study:

In sum, when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late-nineteenth-century* social science and *mid-nineteenth-century* art. That is to say, they seem to be aspiring to little more than a synthesis of modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to commend them. If this is the case, then artists and scientists alike are justified in criticizing historians, *not because they study the past*, but because they are studying it with *bad* science and *bad* art.

(White 1978b, 43)

The special feature (and added value) of modernist form is also, of course, in the way it allows for the presentation of subjective and provisional points of view and thus leaves readers/recipients the possibility of understanding or experiencing in their own ways; *differently*, as it were.

Connecting between the interest generated by the narrative form and the possibility of presenting alternative interpretations is thus complex. On the one hand, new forms permit the rejection of old ideological (and narrowly “empirical”) interests and attitudes. On the other hand—and more importantly for my purposes here—they also ensure the effectiveness of new interpretations in the kinds of conditions in which the (imagined) truthfulness of stories no longer helps make them more convincing than some other, alternative ones.

This ties in interestingly with the phenomenological yearning that arguably sustains history as a discipline: It seems to be rarely understood that the reasons why narrative constructivism emphasizes new forms are much less to do with persuading historians to turn to (or admit to) writing literature (as the fact–fiction debate so often suggests in its more trivial interpretations) and more with the kind of experiential relation to the events described with which these new forms could potentially provide readers. Even less

often, the debate seems to recognize how tapping into this phenomenological yearning and harnessing the experiential capacity of texts could lead to the acceptance of alternative history approaches and interpretation alongside traditional models. (And this is where “experimental history” enters the picture too; see especially Munslow and Rosenstone 2004; also Munslow 2007 and 2010; and Vann 2013).

Since, that is, historical stories can no longer be justified on epistemological grounds—as all stories and ways of structuring materials that account for existing factual knowledge are equally imaginary—they can only be compared in aesthetic terms and their value derives from their effectiveness. Importantly, this remains so as long as it is the stories themselves that we evaluate. When we expand the examination to involve history writing as a whole—with the question: “Why write about the past?”—attention shifts from the scientific foundations and the form of history also to its broader social function. Yet the issue is still one of how history writing could be defended as a practice. Although constructivist thought appears to lead to a prioritization of the entertainment value of history (and this is something I believe constructivism could rightly be criticized for), this should not by itself be taken as sufficient justification for the existence of a discourse about the past. Instead, any debate concerning the significance and presence of the past necessarily needs to extend to social issues too. And because the past can offer no meaning in itself, this meaning must be sought in the present (and even then, of course, only in our interactions with it).

To the extent to which it claims that justifications for all actions are to be sought for in their consequences, narrative constructivism is inevitably linked to poststructuralist thought.⁷ Here, the answer to the question “Why write about the past?” is to be found in the (possible) impact of history writing and thus differs markedly from earlier conceptions that lean on the ideal of objectivity, grounding themselves in views according to which history repeats itself, we can learn from history, history helps us understand the present and so forth. A presentism explicitly oriented toward consequences is in itself enough of a challenge for many historians simply because it necessitates abandoning those last illusions of history as somehow objective. A further difficulty with regard to such presentist thinking is contained in the anti-authoritarian stance common to poststructuralist approaches. After all, a view that assumes justification to reside in consequences and demands an awareness of choices and responsibility prevents the drafting of any kind of methodological rules. Instead, things must always be assessed on a case-by-case basis. So, although “postmodern” thought has often been criticized as leading to relativism with its refusal of authoritarian definitions (as well as for its own ostensible reliance on such a definition in presenting its “rule” of constant questioning and awareness),⁸ this kind of case-by-case evaluation provides the only sustainable ethical-political basis for representation.

Since dispensing with the ideal of objectivity—or, at the very least, the clear articulation of that dispensing—still so easily returns attention to

questions of truthfulness, however, it is important to take care with this point. Emphasizing the importance or consequences of history writing is not the reason why objectivity should be abandoned and “fictionality” endorsed, even if this is how the matter is sometimes (mis)represented. Objectivity as it has traditionally been understood within history is simply not an option even to begin with. The added content brought by narratives and narrativization (“the content of the form”), the evaluation, attitudes and demarcations that are part of narrative emplotments, cannot be random or unreflected if representation is to serve any deliberate purpose. (Or, indeed, if it is not intended to reassert existing value structures and power relationships.)⁹ Otherwise—even though history writing inevitably has some consequences in the present and thus also impacts the future—the author has not consciously assumed responsibility for the representation.

To question presentism only because it would somehow lead to the “use” of history for ideological purposes is, from this perspective, thus equally based on misunderstanding. For historians to hide behind the illusion of objectivity and refuse to see the consequences of their (epistemic beliefs and) actions in a broader context, beyond the boundaries of “research” and institutionalized history, is even more suspect. Whether historians wish it or not, their stories about the past hold significance for people in the present and that responsibility should be kept in mind at the writing stage. Presentism is thus not seen as an alternative to objective history writing but rather a corrective, and understanding the inevitability of consequences and responsibility is a crucial step in the formulation of a constructivist theory of history. This understanding need not lead to the kind of nihilism and aimless relativism opponents of constructivism fear, however. As White writes: “I conceive relativism to be the basis of social tolerance, not a license to ‘do as you please’ . . . the socially responsible interpreter can do two things: (1) expose the fictitious nature of any political program based on an appeal to what ‘history’ supposedly teaches and (2) remain adamantly ‘utopian’ in any criticism of political ‘realism’” (White 1987, 227).

The phenomenological yearning that feeds into historical thinking is quite significant here too. As already noted, it reinforces the need to see historical study as providing real, true or objective stories. At the same time, it creates an attitude by which the past is in a somehow meaningful relation to the present; we may, for example, identify with historical details more intensely as a result of drawing parallels to our present. The choice for historians is not, however, one between a belief in objective representation and a complete disavowal of the past (involving quite extreme positions of epistemological relativism, antireferentialism or even antirealism). And it seems this point cannot be overstated. Neither does the fact that the past has taken place and is in that sense real lead to it ever being experientially attainable (it is not epistemologically available either, after all). When historians engage with their materials and the past “speaks” to them, the phenomenological yearning they feel easily causes them to overlook this,

however. A good example of this kind of emotional attachment and consequent obfuscation can be found in the recent debates concerning the presence of the past (see, for example, Runia 2006; Gumbrecht 2004 and 2014; cf. Pihlainen 2014a).¹⁰ Here, it is hoped that historians might somehow encounter that past “directly.”¹¹ Furthermore, the idea of this encounter appears to be more strongly formulated than in the metaphors offered by traditional hermeneutics, as well as additionally haunted by a naive view of the past as somehow unproblematically meaningful, irrespective of interpretation and narrativization.

As long as the past is assumed to offer historians ideas and understandings that are somehow independent of them, as, for example, in the form of a “horizon” of the past or related metaphors suggesting possibilities for a merging of temporally distinct horizons, the underlying assumption is the existence of some kind of “truth” of the past that can first be understood and then presented as a story. Because constructivism rejects such ultimately essentialist thinking, there is little sense in attempting to reintroduce these kinds of more complex (and inherently problematic) metaphors to that discussion. Moreover, if constructivist premises are accepted, there is no justification for thinking of the traces or factual knowledge of the past as “speaking” to the researcher in a way that might yield *historical* understanding. The experiences and insights gained in the formation of stories are all products of the imagination in equal measure and romanticizing the use of that imagination in this way does not alter the epistemological base onto which this new debate hopes to be transplanted. (For a concise formulation of this argument, see Pihlainen 2014b.)

A viable defence of ideas involving directly or immediately experiencing the past would entail a very large-scale shift in our theoretical thinking—a shift that proponents of these views have so far failed to provide tools for. (For more on this, see, for example, Runia 2010; Jenkins 2010; and Icke 2012.) Yet, even though some of the theories relating to memory and presence are inherently and internally contradictory and out of place from the point of view of a theory or philosophy of *history*, they do seem to gain popularity among historians from time to time. I have already tried to suggest how this kind of thinking wells up from a particular kind of desire for reality felt by historians, but it is still worth stressing at this point that, however strong that desire becomes, no “historical phenomenology” that might satisfy it can be entertained within the framework of a constructivist theory of history.¹²

The Experiential Presence of the Past

The desire to construct an experiential relation to the past has found more room in White’s later work, as has the idea of *using* the past. Intensifying experientiality through means of the representational form is a central theme already in *Figural Realism* (1999), perhaps indicating optimism on

White's part regarding the broader acceptance of constructivism's epistemological arguments.¹³ In these later deliberations too, attention seems to focus primarily on the presence of history in people's daily lives, on how interpretations about the past also thrive outside the bounds of institutionalized historical study.¹⁴ In this, White seems for his part to have left the discussion concerning the accuracy and authority of interpretations behind. Yet the issue is never about the past "speaking" to us in some mystical "direct," "true" or "pure" fashion, but about the role that historical thinking has and could have in the lives of people today. Neither is it about any experience of or contact with the past. Accordingly, White's interest is in the use and popular interpretations of history. In part at least, then, he attempts to redefine the role and significance of historical study now, after the challenges brought by the linguistic turn and constructivist theory.

Any answer to these challenges naturally moves in both of the spheres that remain even after the end of the epistemological debate: the aesthetic and the ethical-political. In these, White continues to focus on the form of presentations, particularly on such forms as might bring together historical thinking and experientiality. He names such forms "parahistorical" (White 1999, 68–69), indicating that quarrelling about their truthfulness is in no way relevant; their purpose is to affect people's thinking, not shed light on the past.¹⁵ Thus, although such a parahistorical work may make use of historical materials, its primary purpose is to facilitate the re-evaluation of existing and codified ways of thinking and believing. It aims at general conceptions, not at the results of academic research.

White's more recent attention on "the practical past" (a concept he adopts from Michael Oakeshott) is similarly aimed at providing alternatives to institutional history, to, that is, the professional writing of history. Yet his interest appears to be in defending thinking about the past in spite of the crisis faced by "official" historical study (the same crisis that he has been so instrumental in bringing about). Where historical films, for instance, may be seen to disseminate "history" on a popular level, the presence of the practical past also more directly affects the ways in which people think and act in their everyday lives. The past does not communicate with us, yet its traces direct actions both materially as well as on a cultural and ideological level.¹⁶ Of course, institutional history can also be used to examine these influences, but it always offers only one (quite limited) approach, functioning primarily as a means of verifying facts and rarely even attempting to shed light on the practical, present-day consequences and significance of such broader forms of (para)historical thought. In other words, the institutional study of history largely disregards the practical past because contemporary conditions, as well as any actions regarding them, are seen as being beyond its mandate or, indeed, interest.¹⁷

Taken to an extreme level of generality, the idea of the presence of "history" does not seem to lead anywhere. Indeed, the attention of theory would do well to return to this narrower definition of history as institutional history

writing—at least as long as we are dealing with some kind of constructivist theory of history and its possibilities. Indeed, most talk of the presence of the past can be seen as leading thinking astray. And the only conceivable way of talking about experientiality in relating to the past—or about the past's potential to intervene in understanding the present—seems, within a constructivist framework, to be to focus on the interruptions in textual (or, more broadly speaking, representational) coherence and a narrative's diegesis caused by the interplay and tension between form and the facts that history's genre commitment entails.

In this sense, the past (in the form of factual statements) can function as a corrective to narrative, or, more precisely, as a partial remedy to the over-determining, glossing and colonizing impact of narrativization, as a kind of defamiliarizing content or subject in its own right. (One of my favourite examples of such a use of material continues to be Natalie Zemon Davis' *Fiction in the Archives* [1988].) Because an increase in fragmentarity in itself already allows for the disruption of narration and its control of meaning, simply pointing out the ambiguity of historical facts and the breadth of possible interpretations could provide excellent possibilities for the type of rethinking that constructivism aims at with respect to representational form. This kind of form—in which the author's role as the creator of significance is diminished and more responsibility is shifted to the reader—would also permit the realization of a reality-like experientiality (a kind of evocation or deployment of the dynamics of "lived experience") much better than traditional literary forms. (For more on alternative representational forms, see, for example, Munslow 2007.) Even though such experimental forms have appeared in literature and film, for instance, they largely remain foreign to history and historians—even if their audiences might well be ready for them now.

Overall, then, the debate concerning constructivism remains somewhat limited, often concentrating unduly on the search for alternative forms of representation in literature and film. As a result, the disruptive potential of historical sources (in their aspect of being rather uncontrollable textual elements) for questioning the oppressive effects of narrativization, for example, still remains largely unexplored. More importantly, focusing on the creation of experientiality and emotional impact, as well as on the ways in which artistic representations might help in bringing these about, has led (in addition to the squabble over the fact-fiction issue) those historians who are sensitive to these kinds of theoretical questions in the first place to overemphasize the entertainment function of history instead of the social and oppositional aims of constructivism. This is based, to some extent at least, on a confusion between experience (actual and lived) and the kind of heightened experientiality and emotional impact provided by conventional and closely controlling aesthetic forms.

A central aim of the constructivist focus on artistic forms of representation has been to bring to history writing forms of representation that might

affect readers experientially, in this latter sense of producing an emotional impact (cf. White 1978b, 43–45). The goal has been to return to historical narratives the significance stripped from them by constructivism's questioning of epistemology and of the authority assumed to come with it. By creating an aesthetic experience for readers, that is, *affecting* readers with a representation's force or, for example, poignancy, (another kind of) meaning is achieved. The greater the experiential impact of a story, the more likely it is to create changes in its readers' worldviews. Thus, the authority history loses following the collapse of its epistemological or institutional self-evidence might be returned through emphasizing its artistic and creative aspects, and the significance of history as a genre might thus be justified. Of course, such a strategy can easily lead historians back to defending the factuality of history and only serve to feed the now dead in the water fact-fiction debate. As it indeed so often has. Yet what should be recognized is that the fact-fiction question only haunts these debates so readily and persistently because so many historians continue to take truthfulness and effectiveness as somehow mutually exclusive; and this simply because they fail to sufficiently distinguish between the form and factual contents of narratives.

Although the distinction between lived experience and a heightened experientiality or impact is subtle, it should not be overlooked: Emphasizing the simulation of lived experience over the more conventional aesthetic creation of emotional impact could lead historians toward presentational forms that seek to emulate the fragmentariness of reality; here experience is born of interaction with reality, and the work an agent performs in constructing meanings is a defining feature of it. Where a text that is experiential in terms of its capacity to create emotional impact can offer the reader enlightenment within a framework of meanings determined by the text, a text that aims at lived experience permits the forming of a particular reader's own insights and understanding.¹⁸ A text aimed at experientiality through aesthetic impact largely determines, then, the meaning that a reader will find in it, whereas a text that emphasizes the creation of lived experience would leave a great deal more room for the reader's own meaning-making processes. Although the terms I use here differ somewhat from White's, it should be obvious that texts aiming at creating (or at least emulating) such lived experience would better support his desire for history writing that would encourage alternative and oppositional views than would texts whose signifiatory systems are quite determined or even "closed." The more responsibility for meanings is shifted from the author to the reader, the more feasible this kind of change in the social significance and role of history becomes. It can be argued that this kind of form would also best create the feeling (illusion) of the presence of the past. In part for the very simple reason that when readers encounter such texts they are forced to engage in a process resembling the one by which they also construct their relations to reality, in part because the "raw data" that readers encounter is the best substitute for the past that

a text can ever offer. This, to me, establishes the theoretical limits of the debate concerning presence—unless currently existing philosophical presuppositions about reality, meaning and representation are first replaced with radically different ones.

White and narrative constructivism have sometimes been criticized because the theory offers only formal but no substantive guidance as to what should be done, in spite of the importance of social responsibility being so forcefully foregrounded. It is, in other words, experienced as being too speculative and abstract, and not sufficiently prescriptive. This same criticism is often also directed, of course, at poststructuralist philosophies more broadly, and that observation might be explanation enough for the narrative constructivist stand. The values advanced by poststructuralist thinking focus on the undesirability of speaking for others as well as the exhortation to constantly question.¹⁹ Hence, any conceivable assumption of responsibility is always based on continuous choice; and prescriptive theorizing makes no sense. Understandably, then, White—like the other thinkers who have accepted the kind of scepticism underlying the linguistic turn—wants to avoid setting hard and fast rules that might prevent people from actively assuming responsibility for their actions.

White *is*, however, resolute about the kinds of practical goals he sets for a politics of historical interpretation: any enlightened historical representation aims at questioning oppressive power structures, ideologies and philosophies, and at emancipation and general well-being. Moreover, White has—in a number of talks—called attention to the reduction of hunger, poverty and inequality. Indeed, his own political convictions clearly reveal affinities with existentialism, poststructuralism and Marxism, even though he most often refuses to employ such labels in his texts.²⁰ Within this kind of ideological frame, attention to the consequences of one's actions and the ideal of continuously choosing are quite appropriate. Which makes it all the more surprising that so little attention has been given to the ethical-political content of White's thought or of constructivist theorizing more generally. It seems to me that the main reason for this neglect lies in a lack of understanding: because constructivism does not offer prescriptive rules, its underlying ideology is not taken to involve an ethical stand.²¹ Even though the reverse would be closer to the truth.

The Scope for Historical Thinking

It must be admitted that, despite great potential and decades of debate, constructivist theory has done little to transform mainstream historical research. Yet, to the extent that this results from misguided interpretations regarding its epistemological position, things should be easy enough to fix. The case could just be explained once more in depth: The existence of the past is not in question. Neither is the issue of whether we can have knowledge about that past at the level of factual statements, and so on. The only

serious point of contention seems to involve the idea that stories cannot be “found” in the past because the past does not consist of stories but of numerous unarticulated interlinkings and coincidences. Thus, stories and the evaluation they perform are always impositions, a narrative surplus of history writing that is always inevitably also ideological. And, since this is so, the responsibility of history writing cannot (beyond the verification of singular facts) be in any way to a past, only to the present and the future. More importantly, and because the writing of these stories is an area of historical work that is not institutionally regulated, this responsibility is also the aspect that theoretical attention needs to primarily be directed on. The function of historians’ commitments and history’s prevailing generic agreements is to ensure the reliability of historical *research*. The responsibility for interpretations is broader and thus also rests with a broader community or, from the quite existentialist viewpoint of narrative constructivism, with each and every one of us. Thus, historical thinking extends from referring to historical research to include all talk about the past, while the focus of all that talk shifts from truthfulness to the consequences of interpretations.

The greatest threat in all this involves, of course, a decline in the power that the institution of history wields. Even then, it seems that historians’ widespread resistance to constructivist theory is not based only on this fear: after all, the threat of loss of power could be countered by their simply insisting on the authority of empirical research; and then (at least a large portion of) competing stories would not need to be tolerated in this arena and popular or vernacular history or historical conceptions would still have no impact on this kind of history. Historians’ disregard of constructivist theory is also in part consequence of its refusal to offer a clear alternative: historians are expected to trade an institutionally legitimated methodology that maintains their myth of objective research for the admittedly vague idea of assuming social responsibility. What is more, this methodology-free demand for taking responsibility and making a difference is so far from traditional views about what history is and what it should be that it is most often simplistically interpreted as a demand for doing away with history, for the end of (doing) history altogether. No wonder that the question of how constructivism might permit historical thinking at all is such a difficult one for so many historians.

I have already noted that constructivist theory has trouble justifying the contemporary practice of history and, further, that even White—whose goal for so long has seemed to be that of rescuing history as a social practice in its own right—finds it difficult to assign the institution of historical study any significant role in its preservation. A worthwhile question to ask might be: Is the role of fact-finder and producer of *justified* (but not *authorized*) interpretations sufficient for institutionalized historical study? And another: Can more general forms for dealing with the past be accepted as the kind of *historical* thinking that institutional history could also make use of? At

least within history education, popular interpretations do not seem to be a problem, and in that sense, White’s idea of parahistorical representations as well as his focus on the practical past appear to suit the current situation and its demands. From the point of view of fostering an interest in history (albeit that what is at stake in many cases is, rather, an interest in the past itself, not history as such), encouraging popular discussion about it is imperative. The significance of the past seems, at this level, however, to be primarily in the kinds of understandings it can create in the present as well as—particularly in the case of popular interpretations—in the undeniable entertainment value to be derived.

Seen from within the prevailing institutional understanding and definition of the genre of history, neither such more engaged understandings nor the goal of entertainment appear as legitimate purposes or motivations, however, and both fail in justifying history as a reasonable pursuit. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine historians contenting themselves simply with the production of factual knowledge in a situation where history as story (especially in popular forms) continues to be avidly consumed. In this situation also written, “conventional” or “academic” history is called on to provide readers with interesting stories. In fact, this aptly describes the direction taken by historical research after the linguistic turn: where constructivist attitudes have become accepted within theory, many initially oppositional ideologies and approaches have achieved similar recognition within history proper. Feminist history, cultural history and microhistory, for example, all have clearly oppositional origins, whether through their political objectives, their choice of subject matter or their particular way of dealing with that subject matter. Yet all have found a place in the “official” history canon following their popularity, and choice of subject matter or perspective alone can hardly be said to provide means for any substantial questioning of dominant ideologies today.

With the acceptance and co-option of such approaches as part of academic and institutionally legitimate historical studies, history’s traditional genre definition has been maintained. (Needless to say that if viewed in terms of acceptance of their original theoretical underpinnings, these approaches would constitute a very marginal part of institutionally legitimate history indeed.) Yet, with this same co-option, history is also presented as having become a little more “engaged” and “entertaining,” and this new, now fashionably not-entirely-objective form is taken as representative of the “interpretive” and “narrative” history writing described and advocated by constructivist theory. By muddying the theoretical waters in this way, research that is more transparent about its positioning can thus be classed as “ideological” and susceptible to postmodern, scepticist or relativist thinking, whereas “serious” and “scientific” history then appears to have been somehow distinguished from its entertaining counterpart and can still—through this same obfuscation—be presented as immune to constructivist critiques.

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Notes

1. For an example of White's detailed "tropology," see *Metahistory* (1973) and White (1978b); on Frank Ankersmit's idea of "narrative substances," see his *Narrative Logic* (1983) and Ankersmit (1990, 279–280).
2. In what has perhaps been his most controversial essay, "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact" (1978), White presented the idea of history writing as a translation of "'fact' into 'fiction'"; here "fiction" was placed in scare quotes, and in another version of the essay published in the same year, it was presented as "fictions" (see White 1978a, 53; 1978b, 92). Despite this care with formulations, many historians appear to think that White takes history texts to be fictions that are "not subject to truth controls" (Iggers 2000, 383); in the exchange with Iggers, White once again systematically answered and refuted such accusations (White 2000, 398).
Interestingly, in *The Practical Past*, he has chosen to present this original provocative formulation as a "mistake," saying he should have made the point differently in order for it to be better received: "I now recognize that I made a mistake by once suggesting that the problem consisted of the relationship between two *substances*, 'fact' on the one hand, 'fiction' on the other. I might well have said that the problem had to do with a discourse (history) that wished to be faithful to its referent but which had inherited conventions of representation that produced meaning in excess of what it literally asserted of a kind that were identifiably literary if not fictionalizing in their effects" (White 2014b, 20).
3. It should be noted that more recent constructivist theory hardly ever problematizes the *research* carried out by historians. See, for example, White (1999, 7–8; 2014a, *passim*) and Jenkins (1999b, 94), both of whom distinguish and set aside from discussion the "research phase" in order to better focus on the process of narrativization.
4. For a thorough account of the context and reception of White's early work, including *Metahistory*, see Herman Paul's *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (2011); specifically on the idea of tropological "models," see Paul (2011, 82–91).
5. White often emphasizes that history (in order for it to be history) cannot be written freely; instead, historians need to consider the demands and limits set by the materials as well as by the institution (see, for example, White 1978b, 97). This is part of what I take to be White's defence of history, despite all critique to the contrary by historians. Compare this with Jenkins, who suggests that we simply decide to live "amidst the ample and agreeable imaginaries provided by postmodern-type theorists . . . theorists who can generate enough by way of emancipatory rhetorics such that we no longer need any kind of foundational—or non-foundational—past" (Jenkins 1999a, 10). Hence the difference between White's and Jenkins' positions is not in the theoretical stand they adopt *per se* but is rather based on their having quite different aims: until his shift to focus

- on the practical past, White has largely aimed at refiguring and thus possibly rescuing history as a form of discourse, whereas Jenkins has long hoped that it might be forgotten altogether. For a comment on Jenkins' position on "new imaginaries" by White, see White's foreword to Jenkins (2009).
6. Hence, it makes good sense to say, with White, that the best way to refute an unwelcome interpretation is to offer a better one: "The best counter to a narrative that is supposed to have misused historical memory is a better narrative, by which I mean a narrative, not with *more* historical facts, but a narrative with greater artistic integrity and poetic force of meaning" (White 2005b, 336). As long as we are speaking of history, however, as opposed to representations belonging to what he now terms the practical past, White has from the beginning tempered this aesthetic interest with a pragmatism regarding the purpose of historical representations. This is what he wrote already in the 1960s in "The Burden of History": "We should ask only that the historian show some tact in the use of his governing metaphors; that he neither overburden them with data nor fail to use them to their limit; that he respect the logic implicit in the mode of discourse he has decided upon; and that, when his metaphor begins to show itself unable to accommodate certain kinds of data, he abandon that metaphor and seek another, richer, and more inclusive metaphor than that with which he began" (White 1978b, 47).
7. For more on the argument for consequentialism, see May (1995, *passim*, especially 71). Where poststructuralism liberates people from traditional ideologies, it also on this view binds them to personal responsibility regarding the consequences of their choices in an existentialist fashion.
8. A typical example of this kind of (careless) interpretation of postmodernism can be found in, for example, Zagorin (1999, especially 7). For a thorough response and clarification of the misunderstandings involved, see Jenkins (2000).
9. To rehearse White's core claim concerning the perpetuation of dominant values and structures: "Nothing is better suited to lead to a repetition of the past than a study of it that is either reverential or convincingly objective in the way that conventional historical studies tend to be" (White 1987, 82).
10. It is instructive to compare this more recent discussion about presence with the debate concerning memory in the 1980s and 1990s. See Klein (2000) for an excellent overview of that debate.
11. Ankersmit spoke of this already in 1997. As he then explained: "I've lately become interested in the notion of experience but that's a different problem from the problem of historical writing. It has to do with the problem of whether a direct access to the past is possible. And I have committed the folly—and I persist in committing this folly—of saying that such a direct access to the past is under certain circumstances indeed possible. But everybody says that I'm completely mad to argue for this. . . . My interest began with Huizinga who has the notion of 'historische sensatie'—historical sensation—which he describes as a direct and immediate contact with the historical past" (Pihlainen 1997, 368). In *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), Ankersmit engages with this controversial idea in much greater detail. See also Domanska (2009), Icke (2012) and Pihlainen (2015b).
12. The usefulness of speaking about phenomenology in historical research might be questioned, however. As noted above, the past is not and cannot be present in any real way. Hence, our relationship to it cannot be based on its being a

- perceivable phenomenon, and “historical phenomenology” needs to be something quite different. An “encounter” with the past through its traces does not strictly speaking constitute contact with the past, then, but only with the present. Any historical phenomenology thus always only means an imagining of the past, not a picture formed on the basis of any real interaction. The nature of imagining in this case is thus quite different from our encounters with the present where meanings are constructed in relation to pragmatic needs and with recourse to interaction and experimentation. Speaking of phenomenology in history is thus only an extension of our everyday approach: that specific “phenomenology” has taught us something fundamental about the way the world is, and we use this understanding in describing events in the past. So how does this really differ from constructivism as presented by White, for instance?
13. At the start of *Figural Realism*, White rehearses the constructivist challenges facing history one-by-one, including historians’ most common responses as well as his own reasons for why these miss their target (White 1999, 1–26).
 14. This kind of more general “historical” thinking appears to have priority in White’s recent writings—particularly in the essays in *The Practical Past* (White 2014b). This is perhaps so because these other discourses now appear to hold more potential for promoting social change than does contemporary academic history. Yet, despite his long-time focus on social consequences, White’s move to opposing the historical (institutionally established) past to the practical past has been a gradual one. For some recent examinations of this separation between the historical and the practical past, see Lorenz (2014), Tozzi (2014), Ahlskog (2016), La Greca (2016) and Pihlainen (2016).
 15. White uses Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK* as an example of parahistorical representation. By choosing the example of *JFK* and initially focusing on its factual aspects, he unfortunately also opens the door to the fact–fiction debate again, however (White 1999, 68–69). If he had instead chosen a work that agreed more clearly with known facts, this issue would not have come up as forcefully, and the example might have been seen as offering an alternative interpretation while better staying “true” to the facts. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Chapter 5.
 16. In *Historics* (2006), Martin Davies comes to very similar conclusions about the overall pervasiveness of historical thinking and the inevitable historicity of actions. In contrast to Davies’ position, White’s turn to the practical past is at the same time a disavowal of the social significance of professional history. For a most insightful comparison of White’s and Oakeshott’s investments in the idea, see Ahlskog (2016).
 17. On the other hand, it seems to me that White’s attachment to the example of modernist literature at times prevents him from fully recognizing the inherent strengths that history possesses with regard to representational form precisely as a result of its referential commitment. For an elaboration of this argument, see Pihlainen (2002b), as well as the chapters that follow in the present volume.
 18. This may be read as echoing Roland Barthes’ well-known idea of “readerly” and “writerly” texts. See, for example, Barthes (1975). My argument is not, however, the same as Barthes’ in that both of the (admittedly caricatured) textual dynamics I describe here mark texts that he would characterize as “writerly.” The difference between the kinds of texts I describe (both of them fundamentally “writerly”) is more interestingly viewed as one between a modernist and a postmodern aesthetics.
 19. On the refusal of representation in Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, see May (1995); on Jacques Derrida and the aporetic moment of “undecidability” required for a choice to be properly ethical, see Derrida (1988) and Jenkins (especially 1999b and 2003).
 20. On White’s existentialism, see Paul (2006; 2011). White seldom classifies his theory in any way; he has, however, explained his motives regarding postmodernism thus: “the anti-postmodernist handwringers are wrong when they say that the postmodernists are ‘against’ history, objectivity, rules, methods, and so on. What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity” (White 2005a, 152). As I see it, this position seems to encompass the political aims of both existentialism and poststructuralism quite well. White has been more outspoken about his existentialism as well as his political position and commitments in Rogne (2009).
 21. In an analysis of White’s early writings, Herman Paul emphasizes the way in which White’s epistemological relativism/irony is aimed at responsibility and ethical commitment. (Paul 2006, especially 43) This again relates to White’s existentialism; in addition to Rogne (2009) and Paul (2011), see, for example, Spiegel (2013) and Doran (2013a) on that. For a discussion of some of the affinities between White and Sartre specifically, see also Pihlainen (2005).

3 An End to Oppositional History?

The idea of an “end” to oppositional history could be taken to suggest that we no longer have a dominant, over-riding institutionalized way of thinking among historians and hence need no antihegemonic, “oppositional” or “alternative” history writing. Sadly, this does not appear to be the case, as evidenced by the continuing (though never mainstream-history) interest in “experimental,” “unconventional” and “alternative” histories, as well as by the persistent, quite factional, oppositional political motivations behind many of the attempts at recreating or, rather, reinventing the forms of history writing. The terminology of “oppositional history” itself could also be misinterpreted; it is, after all, a curious term, especially for those in the Anglo-American tradition. Although the motif of opposition has seldom been employed within recent theory of history, I introduce it here to cut through the difficulties that more form-centred ways of labelling hegemonically or institutionally disruptive histories have created: Speaking of “unconventional” histories, for example, invokes a dominant way of doing history that defines itself in terms of established, even unquestionable, practices—and then “unconventionality” is often merely something innovative or surprising in presentation. What is more, the “oppositional” is not as easily interpreted as intending something that is simply unexpected in terms of subject matter. Thus, while the more familiar terms could also be used in deconstructing existing hierarchies, “opposition” better introduces the issue of ethical-political motivation and ensures that the discussion does not remain focused only on forms of presentation or choices of innovative subject matter—both easily subsumed by the institution into its “methodology” for history. Reunited with this idea of opposition and oppositional politics, it is my hope that the once-radical theories and practices present in contemporary debates will thus also be reminded of their original motivations.

My attempt to explain the loss of oppositional purpose in historical practice in relation to only a few movements within the field will inescapably lead to a simplified (and impressionistic) account. That, however, is something that I choose to do here for reasons of scope and economy. Because, that is, I want to sketch the outlines of a broader development that concerns

me more than its details: namely the threat posed to the oppositional (to, that is, “leftist” as well as more disciplinarily driven varieties of opposition) by both recent theorizing about history and “new,” now-institutionalized practices. I will, however, refrain from discussing threats from empiricist, “proper” history, since these have been so widely discussed—which is something that, as will be seen, in fact forms part of the problem.

Although contemporary practices of history have become more “radical” in the sense of having taken on previously ignored subject matter as well as challenging inherited forms, it seems fair to say that they are in no way oppositional in the present-day context. Admittedly, some acceptance of the forms and openness of earlier anti-establishment history is present. Yet there also appears to be a clear absence of political purpose. (Think of the innocuousness of most titles involving “cultural history,” for instance; an arena where experimentation with form has been most evident. Or, indeed, of the way the majority of more traditional histories still attempt to distance themselves from the present, to ignore or cover up their inevitable presentist concerns.) So, instead of simply cheering on our current practices for superficially continuing to question history as an oppressive institution, it may be useful to look at this situation more closely.

What Could “Oppositional History” Mean Today?

Constructivism or narrative constructivism has, as I hope to have made clear in the preceding chapters, provided the main contemporary impetus for exploring issues of epistemological scepticism and of representational forms in history writing. It has been instrumental in propagating a view of history as a particular case of fictionalizing, as well as in familiarizing historians with the argument that form and “narrative” always bring ideological commitments that are too often uncritically accepted. These views have paved the way for the general idea that history writing cannot become free of its ideological complicity with hegemonic history except by adopting alternative, unconventional or experimental, forms of representation from literary modernism and, more recently, from innovations in contemporary media. For Hayden White, quite categorically it would seem, “the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of ‘unnatural’ events . . . that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before it” (White 1999, 81). Hence, even though we might question the idea of an absolute distinction between historical eras, the means by which these “antinarrative nonstories” might facilitate acceptably ethical-political representations need to be investigated.

A central theoretical goal of any such “adequate” representations can be assumed to be the avoidance of closure and all its concomitant dangers. The oppressive nature of closure has been foregrounded in White’s earlier work and, on occasion, this recognition has appeared to provide narrative

constructivist theorizing with enough theoretical awareness in and by itself; it might arguably often be sufficient that readers and historians just give up on the idea that history had to be a story, that it needed to hold the kind of basic “narrative” interest and meaning for us that formal closure effects. (Taken to the extreme and not allowing for changes in current practices, we might then, in fact, be obliged to give up on the discipline of history completely, simply through this recognition of the dangers of closure.)

As White has famously emphasized with reference to the annals and chronicles, the historicized past is a product of our historical sensibilities, of our conception of what history is for. He further suggests that the need or desire to narrativize events is proportional to the need to justify a particular ideological position—to provide authority for a particular view of reality. Through this process—a (verbal) sleight-of-hand one might say—the historian invokes “the authority of reality itself” in order to present a particular interpretation as “true,” or at least, as “more true” than others. (Cf. White 1987, 19–20.) As White writes:

The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?

(White 1987, 21)

In this way, speaking about the past always also appropriates and *presents* it (in the sense of making it present or “presentifying” it). If historians were, however, to give up on the idea that their work has an explanatory intention—if *they renounced the claim to reality that specifically historical narration makes*—a simple avoidance of closure might provide sufficient theoretical sensitivity.¹ Historians would carefully collect, conserve and catalogue in a properly scientific and detached spirit and—perhaps, as a consequence—the traces or texts of the past would retain a greater aspect or reflection of the subjectivities with which they originated. At the very least, readers would be able to make judgements about them with less interference. In other words, no representation or naming would reduce them to being objects for our subjectivities as either historians or readers, and representations might preserve (and materially convey) part of the temporal distinctness involved *in terms of experience* rather than as detached knowledge. Such a focus on experientiality through form would, then, parallel many views about poetry, for example, and the idea of how it can provide the reader with a sense of facing (some kind of) otherness or alterity. A general claim that can indeed be made is that the goal of “postist” representation is not so much to communicate ideas as it is to evoke emotional responses in the reader or viewer; these representations would not be involved with information as much as with experientiality and emotional effect. And the

result of such an approach would no longer, of course, be “history” in the sense in which we currently employ the term.

If representations are also expected to hold *interest* for readers, however, the challenge would be to come up with effective alternative ways of representing—with, that is, forms that contain a minimum of inherited assumptions and yet would be so novel that the ideological content they still inevitably impose on “material” cannot and will not pass unnoticed or go unchallenged. The rationale for employing “antinarrative nonstories” in historical representation would, from this perspective, thus largely be based on their capacity to produce alienation, to disrupt any narratively solicited suspension of disbelief and of the critical faculties: these “nonstories” would provide ways of communicating that cannot—in their unfamiliarity or indigestibility—be automatically or unreflectively consumed and subordinated to our accustomed interpretations of the world. To state this in terms more metaphoric: these new types of (anti)narrative could place us beside ourselves, and, ideally, through them, we could come to see our habitual ways of thinking more critically, as if from the “outside,” and would be forced to at least re-evaluate and confront them. And if we were to dogmatically refuse this demand for re-evaluation, we would be left beside ourselves emotionally, upset by the claims that such presentations place on us and our normative beliefs. Such an appeal to individual conscience and choice also already partially addresses the common objection of moral relativism: if history can lead to critical self-reflection regarding particular issues and even, in part, guide evaluations, it appears to be on the right track.

Against this ideal, the contemporary historical field is still often described as clearly divided: although some historians have admitted scepticism at least with respect to epistemology, many remain staunchly objectivist—those that the more radical, textually oriented historians and theorists sometimes refer to as “empiricist” or “conventional.” A number of history workers do, however, appear attentive to theory—and the more radical dimension of this awareness is demonstrated by the existence (and in some quarters, even the popularity) of so-called unconventional or experimental histories.² So, whatever the level of understanding and acceptance of post-linguistic-turn theoretical insights may be, it seems that the ideological weight of narrative constructivism and an awareness of “the content of the form” have led to a significant number of historians at least claiming to agree. Given such a state of affairs, it might appear unnecessary to argue the case of “oppositional history” at all. Yet this theoretical awareness is in many cases based on quite popularizing readings, and there is a manifest lack of understanding of specifics as well as of the underlying motives.

Despite their knowledge of recent theory, many historians still quite naively persist in thinking, that—in the end—truth will somehow triumph (and also ensure ethical and “good” histories). A supporting and equally persistent conviction is that historians are involved in a practice that is in some way emancipatory and that offers—perhaps as a result of its interest

in contexts and community—some inherent corrective to relativism. Even when they are not quite so empiricist or ideologically trusting, historians' acceptance is often still mediated by some vague belief that the "historical method" and "professional consensus" can weed out unwanted interpretations, like those of the much-debated revisionist histories of the 1990s, for example.³ And why should it not be, from a purely theoretical point of view? As long, that is, as historians continue to identify themselves as committed to writing in a particular context and genre and in a fairly uniform way? When it is focused on the discipline, such belief does not even need to be based on illusions of epistemological certainty; the question of what kind of interpretations are desirable or undesirable does not involve epistemology or even theories of representation *per se*, but is a matter of purpose and consequences. Yet this is precisely the point that is largely missed.

For all those historians who still subscribe to an idea of—in some way—unproblematic representations of the past (*whatever their epistemological beliefs*), "oppositional history" might belong to the class of propaganda or revisionism, or, at best, could be taken for some strange form of counterfactual history or theorizing. It would be a pastime focused on presenting alternative accounts of the past, which these historians would give very little value to *as (their kind of) history*. This does not, unfortunately, apply only to the objectivist, epistemologically non-sceptical camp, but to all those who find institutional justification for a particular kind of history.

Even beyond this neglect of purpose and consequences, there lies a further challenge to the oppositional, however: it is disregarded also by many of the historians—or at least theorists—who are willing to accept that histories have (and emplotments and impositions of form introduce) unwanted ideological content. With their focus on epistemological scepticism, they have largely been swept away in a celebration of the *opportunities* for political and social responsibility that this (however well delimited and curtailed) relativism affords and have forgotten that, whatever opportunities we have, no difference can be made without pointing to *concrete* instances of injustice and suffering or presenting attitudes and positions that we would (and would see others) espouse and occupy in the world *beyond* theory of history. They are, in other words, radical in terms of their theories and representational practices but not in terms of their political commitment. The problem, then, is that for many of these—for lack of a better term—"postmodern" historians, "oppositional history" has equally become a misnomer, given their understanding of the current situation and practices within the historical field. To what, after all, should we be opposed if there is unlimited openness and opportunities for all to present their views in ways that are already institutionally accepted?

Despite the "anything goes" attitude attributed to a popularized "postmodernism," the terminology of opposition and the concept of oppositional history seem to be best approached in terms of the intellectual trends and

political ideologies that can be grouped together under the label "post-1968." (Certainly, the spirit of radical politics sometimes attached to contemporary formal innovation and the *avant garde* largely belongs there.) Appealing to the post-1968 may not be an immediately obvious strategy since many of the movements involved have been described as overtly anti-historical (and often also apolitical). Admittedly, neither postmodernism nor poststructuralism appear to lend themselves to historical study in the sense that it is conceived of by most historians. In spite of critical interpretations, however, the political positions they established and the ethical-political demands they presented still have potential resonance for what we do and how we see our purpose as historians today.

As seen with respect to narrative constructivism, debate within the discipline of history concerning the linguistic or textualist turn (and its relation to post-1968 thought) has largely centred on the apparent relativism it introduces to historians' theories and practices. Yet, in order to fully understand the textualist position, it is important to first recognize that epistemological relativism is not the final target of most post-1968 philosophy. To be sure, the post-1968 is antirepresentational (in Richard Rorty's use of the word in relation to the contingency of all knowledge), but scepticism regarding reference and epistemology is only one issue among other (more) important ones. To better understand the debate, and perhaps to better move the discussion along, also the issue of *différance* and the irreducibility and ultimate unattainability of (complete or totalizing) truth and meaning need to be revisited. Arguably, *poststructuralists*⁴ (whom I deploy as the chief representatives of the post-1968) would see historians who continue to be preoccupied with the issue of an objective truth that is not only "out there" but to be captured by traditional historical methods (or any other methods for that matter) as confused. Similarly, the persistence with which debate concerning "postmodernism" focuses on questions of truth and reference appears misguided. What should be at stake, instead, is the problem of ideological and moral commitments. And this is a problem that can in no way be solved with recourse to epistemology.

Thus understood, this issue of *moral relativism* defines the difference between poststructuralism and "postmodernism."⁵ But the potential consequences of this (admittedly contested) distinction have been almost completely overlooked within theory of history. With this in mind, I will focus on the role of oppositional politics in these ways of thinking and on the distinctions that turning attention to the ethical-political might permit making between various kinds of history. In order to do so, it will be best to set aside the question of epistemology for once (since, apparently, it cannot be done for once and for all). "*Bracketing*" *controversy concerning epistemology in this way, the first thing that becomes evident is that most postmodernism is not critical in any (other) way*. Instead, postmodernism (as a political position) can be (and has been) argued to lead to a universalization of difference and consequently to the loss of political effectiveness (see, for example,

Haber 1994). In addition, it has often—through the aestheticization and relativism that more extreme interpretations advocate—been associated with even less inspiring phenomena, such as the tremendous emphasis on consumer culture and a related growth of narcissism. Despite such problems, appropriations of “post-1968” theories have been carried out in history too, especially in various “supplementary” fields.⁶ Feminism’s reliance on poststructuralism is perhaps the most obvious example, and I will come to that in a moment.

To make all this clearer, it may be useful to revisit some principles of poststructuralist thought, albeit in summary form. Where postmodernism has often been invoked loosely and fast, there is less confusion about poststructuralism, and some principles are relatively unambiguous and hopefully familiar—although not necessarily supportive of historical practice.

Firstly, *the refusal to represent*. In a famous conversation with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze emphasized Foucault’s role in formulating what has become a core belief of poststructuralist theory. Deleuze admits: “We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this ‘theoretical’ conversion—to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf” (Deleuze 1977, 209). Foucault was, however, says Deleuze, the one who first taught them “*the indignity of speaking for others*.” Although such a refusing to speak for others would patently be too limiting a demand on historians (if they choose to continue with history), it is central to formulations of post-1968 theory and is sometimes even presented in terms of an “ethic” of poststructuralism. (See, for example, May 1994, 97) At the very least, this principle implies that if history is to have a social function—if it is to be a legitimate pursuit in an ethical-political sense—historians and theorists of history will need to look for means of subverting or curtailing representation, at least in its aspect of coherence, closure, clarity and so on. (See also White 1999, 99–100) (Again, rethinking history in this way is necessary only as long as we attempt to hold on to history within a poststructuralist framework—a framework which, to me, seems to be the only one that we can acceptably have. Theoretically, it would be more coherent to follow Keith Jenkins’ lead here and let go of history and the contradictions that engaging with it in this way involve both in the epistemological and in the ethical.)

Secondly, this refusal to represent has also been presented slightly less radically as *the refusal of “grand narratives” and the foregrounding of petits récits*. Quite understandably, Jean-François Lyotard’s celebrated call for an “incredulity toward metanarratives” in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) has been more readily welcomed and adopted by historians than the full-scale refusal to participate in representational practices. In fact, many historians at least claim to subscribe to this general way of thinking, even though uncritical talk of “grand narratives” well beyond the specific major Western beliefs intended by Lyotard sometimes suggests a popular adaption

rather than explicit theoretical awareness. Whatever the usage, and despite a difference in the degree of applicability, the objectives of these first two tenets at least seem to be the same: the questioning of hegemonic ideology and valuation of particularity and detail. (Feel free to think microhistory here already; I will come to that, too.)

Thirdly, there is a relatively undisputed principle that is similarly focused on avoiding oppressive representations, *an emphasis on new forms of expression*. This emphasis is especially on forms embracing incoherence, paralogy, parataxis, fragmentarity, complexity, ambiguity, confusion and so on. These kinds of strategies are seen to provide the only route to representation that is (at least roughly) in agreement with the overall objective of subverting oppressive descriptive practices. As Jean Baudrillard reminds:

The reconciliation of all antagonistic forms in the name of consensus or conviviality is the worst thing we can do. We must reconcile nothing. We must keep open the otherness of forms, the disparity between terms; we must keep alive the forms of the irreducible.

(Baudrillard 2002, 123)⁷

As I have already discussed in connection with narrative constructivism, such emphasis on (what is also) more contemporary and effective form in the ways argued for by White does not only help to subvert the harmful effects of conventional representation but also *to create stronger, more meaningful readings*. In other words, to provide an “experience” of reality with all its indeterminacy—although this can only ever be “narratively” simulated, since historians, of course, have no access to any ultimate reality, and texts could not convey it anyway. Importantly, this is an ethical-political and not only an epistemological strategy (even if it might easily be interpreted differently in terms of “postmodernism” as compared to poststructuralism)—hence, I do not want to overemphasize the aspect of inaccessibility but will instead continue to bracket epistemology. (It is worth keeping in mind here also the way in which the idea of experiential presentations ties in with a general desire for elusive “presence,” or, in the specific instance of history writing, the historian’s phenomenological yearning, the desire to experience the past as present and real, which I already introduced in the previous chapter.)

A Slide from Opposition to Innocuous Histories

The 1970s saw an increased interest in social history, and histories of women, workers and minorities flourished. Despite the rapid spread of these “new histories,” they began as oppositional within the context of the academic history of the time. With the *en masse* turn to social history this oppositional intention was, however, soon seen to have been lost. As Tony

Judt objected as early as 1979: “there is no place for political ideology in most modern social history” (Judt 1979, 87; cited in Sharpe 2001, 34).⁸ This is the difficulty following the abandonment of “grand” or overarching narratives: political ideology must mean something private and individual, too. And the increased foregrounding of the private had a clear political, antihegemonic goal in some movements. It seems, however, difficult to keep such focus on the private distinct from the kind of “postmodern” narcissism that undermines political efforts, especially as institutional recognition is gained—and, of course, as general social sentiment tends towards this kind of “postmodernism.” In *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (also first published in 1979), Christopher Lasch notes:

After the turmoil of the sixties, [North] Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate,” overcoming the “fear of pleasure.” Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past.

(Lasch 1991, 4–5)

Though I certainly have nothing against such pastimes (quite the opposite, in fact), they do not belong to history as a public discourse—something that history by generic definition is and should be. It appears, however, that at the time, the emphasis on private, narcissistic interests did in fact converge with the more politically engaged change in subject matter to radically transform history. While there must undoubtedly have been a great deal of diversity involving the extent to which political engagement was felt to be desirable, there seems also to have been broad agreement among these oppositional groupings that the form of history writing and not only its objects needed to be changed. Given their emphatic linking of ideology to the type of “conventional” objectivist and (“grand”) narratively constructed history that was being objected to, this was, of course, quite natural.

In the same year in which Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* appeared, when Tony Judt decried the apolitical nature of social history and when Lasch’s book on narcissism was published, Lawrence Stone gave an illuminating albeit, as some critics have later pointed out, somewhat narrow account of the “narrative turn” that he felt was taking place in the field of historical research. (For a critique of the limited nature of this account, see, for example, Peltonen 1999.) Importantly, while neither Stone’s analysis nor the turn he speaks of preceded the theoretical introduction of narrative

constructivist positions, the changes he points to in practices of historical research and writing can still be taken as relatively independent of that theoretical debate. In this account, Stone’s focus was on “new history,” by which he referred to a broad practice of microhistory and the history of mentalities.⁹ He argued that there were two parallel developments to consider: for him, changes in methods or methodology could be distinguished (at least to some extent) from changes in the content or focus of the studies. Where the representational means carried ideological content, choice of subject seemed most often to be a much more direct political statement. As Stone writes:

One of the most striking recent changes in the content of history has been a quite sudden growth of interest in feelings, emotions, behaviour patterns, values, and states of mind . . . This change in the nature of the questions being asked is also probably related to the contemporary scene in the 1970s. This has been a decade in which more personalized ideals and interests have taken priority over public issues, as a result of a widespread disillusionment with the prospects of change by political action. It is therefore plausible to connect the sudden upsurge in interest in these matters in the past with similar preoccupations in the present.

(Stone 1979, 14)

Although “method” (both in research and presentation) can be separated from content, there is (and Stone clearly states this too) an obvious link between an increased interest in private lives and the recovered emphasis on narrative. As White’s constructivist position underlines, modernist literary means can perhaps provide the best way we have of portraying the actuality of the internal lives of others (albeit with nothing more than imaginary access to these internal lives, of course).¹⁰ Speaking of Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* and the way it “rambles around inside people’s heads,” Stone alludes to the same: “It is no accident that this is precisely one of the ways in which the modern novel differs from those of earlier times” (Stone 1979, 17–18). Further, these “new historians”—in addition to presenting or creating rambling internal dialogue—“aspire to stylistic elegance, wit and aphorism. They are not content to throw words down on a page and let them lie there, with the view that, since history is a science, it needs no art to help it along” (Stone 1979, 4; cf. White [1978b, 43] on conventional history writing as “bad art”). Stone also links this interest with new forms to a general privatization and aestheticization of historical research. Yet he—like the other “new” historians, it would seem—was not overly interested in articulating the reasons or politics behind this revival and interest in literary means. (Further, and as his interest was in defending these histories, Stone also fails to see them as particularly narcissistic, as opposed to Lasch.)

It was not only the privilege of new historians, however, to take this turn to narrative. Stone argues that more traditional historians had also adapted “their descriptive mode to ask new questions.” According to him:

Some of them are no longer so preoccupied with issues of power and therefore with kings and prime ministers, wars and diplomacy, but are, like the “new historians,” turning their attention to the private lives of quite obscure people. The cause of this trend, if trend it be, is not clear but the inspiration seems to be the desire to tell a good story, and in so doing to reveal the quirks of personality and the inwardness of things in a different time and culture.

(Stone 1979, 20)

Stone’s view of the narrative turn is thus quite far removed from the politics of poststructuralism, or from any “radical” or oppositional intentions, for that matter. Yet it appears to be quite an accurate description of the changes that were taking place in actual practices. It was not the desire to subvert representation, but the desire to tell good (and finished) stories that seems to have been the prime motivation for many of these (“new”) historians.¹¹ *In this aspect, the interest in the private lives of common people has surely indeed—to respond to Stone’s qualifier—been a trend, and popular “post-modern” interpretations of theory and of the point of historical practice seem only to have further converged; as I see it, to the detriment of both.* It needs to be remembered, however, that, at the time, much of the content of these histories was still radical and revolutionary in itself, and hence lent them some ethical-political justification.

In defining microhistory, Giovanni Levi notes that—at the time of its inception—“[i]t was . . . important to refute relativism, irrationalism and the reduction of the historian’s work to a purely rhetorical activity which interprets texts and not events themselves” (Levi 2001, 99). It may seem—following popular interpretations—that such refusals make microhistory diametrically (as well as quite deliberately) opposed to the kind of narrative constructivism associated with White. After all, the “fictionalization” of history in extreme form is the central object of Levi’s critique here. Understanding of the goals of narrative theory of history or narrative constructivism *à la* White has improved greatly since the early 1990s when Levi wrote these words, however. And, during that time, White has made efforts to distance his theoretical position from the antireferentialism invoked in the accusations he has faced from historians. As he quite explicitly states: “it is absurd to suppose that, *because* a historical discourse is cast in the mode of a narrative, it must be mythical, fictional, substantially imaginary, or otherwise ‘unrealistic’ in what it tells us about the world” (White 1989, 39).

Thus, and in spite of the differences in political emphasis, I want to suggest that microhistory might in fact provide the closest widely employed—and now institutionally established—model of history writing approximating

narrative constructivist goals regarding form. Apart from the obvious refusal by microhistory, as by any history, to accept extreme versions of textualism (which are often simplified and represented as being equivalent to “poststructuralism”), there is a close relation between the origins of Italian microhistory and some of Foucault’s work in the 1970s, for example. If microhistory is indeed committed to questioning the generalization performed and cohesiveness and continuity imposed by ideological and (conventionally formulated) narrative histories, there is at least an affinity with the political aims of narrative constructivism: this kind of microhistory also hopes to somehow circumvent or at least control the content introduced by unreflective adoptions of form—reiterating, in turn, the broad poststructuralist strategy of refusing representation or, at minimum, of attempting to avoid its ideologically colonizing aspects. In this way, at least, the politics of microhistory would appear to commit historians to experimental writing in order to provide marginalized groups and individuals with a voice. (Cf. Peltonen 1999, 66.) The only real objection to the narrative constructivist position thus seems to involve what microhistorians have interpreted as its antireferentialism—their perception that narrative constructivism is not sufficiently reliant on or respectful of the empirical. But this view is largely based on a conflation of White’s position with more radical interpretations of it. To cite White once more to defend his attachment to historical evidence; as he adamantly reminds: “The reality of the past is a given, it is an enabling presupposition of historical enquiry” (White 2005a, 148). In other words, we can, for the purposes of the present discussion, continue to forget the problems raised in debates on antireferentialism.¹²

Wary of the kind of methodological own-sakism that he sees the rhetoric of microhistory as potentially leading to, Peter Burke observed: “Fascinating as it is, this outpouring of microhistorical studies raises the question whether the law of diminishing intellectual returns has not set in. . . . now, more than a quarter of a century after the pioneers, might it be time to stop?” (Burke 2001, 115). Today, 40 years in, the question is even more pressing. As I suggested, however, as long as we continue to bracket epistemology in order to reveal motivations elsewhere, microhistory’s empirical emphasis can be seen as making good political and representational sense. Indeed, this focus on the empirical and on abundance of detail also mimics (perhaps unintentionally) the explosion of representational entities called for in poststructuralism (cf. May 1994, 83), as would, in fact, any attempt to convey reality “in full.” In Levi’s definition: “Microhistory as a practice is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material” (Levi 2001, 99). For him, “[t]he unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved” (Levi 2001, 101). (Again, continue thinking of the poststructuralist subversion of representation here, particularly, for instance, of the quote from Baudrillard above: “We must keep open the otherness of forms, the disparity between

terms.”) Moreover, Levi writes: “Microhistory tries not to sacrifice knowledge of individual elements to wider generalization, and in fact it accentuates individual lives and events. But, at the same time, it tries not to reject all forms of abstraction since minimal facts and individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomena” (Levi 2001, 112–113).

Further continuing to align microhistory with poststructuralist theories emphasizing changes in the literary form, Levi advocates making the research process visible in the narrative: “incorporating into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretive constructions. . . . In microhistory . . . the researcher’s point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the accounts” (Levi 2001, 110). (At the same time, this strategy also reflects the self-reflexivity demanded of history writing by narrative constructivism. But that is really an epistemological issue . . .) Overall there seems, then, to be very little argument between the goals of narrative constructivism and the practices of microhistory, at least according to the kind of popular interpretations invoked here. Instead, both aim to create an *experience* of dealing with reality by emphasizing radical alterity; how better, after all, to understand Jacques Revel’s slogan for microhistory: “Why make things simple when one can make them complicated?” (quoted in Levi 2001, 114) than in terms of the poststructuralist ethical-political call for complexity? This connection between (complex) form and political consequence is something that mainstream practitioners of microhistory seem to have little understanding of, however.

Another important arena for developing critical historiography has been feminist history. Obviously, like microhistory, feminist and women’s history is (or at least has been) opposed to hegemonic, event-oriented historical study and also contributed markedly to the 1970s shift from political history to social history. What is more, the emphasis on linguistic figuration, even specifically on the constructivist position that all meaning is constructed in the present and in language by the historian, has been central to feminist history’s political agenda. Indeed, summing up the contemporary popular view,¹³ Joan Scott sees women’s history as based on deconstructing the opposition between “history” and “ideology” (Scott 2001, 50 ff.). In addition to emphasizing that history cannot be free of ideology, Scott also makes a point of questioning what she sees as a common opposition of “professionalism” to “politics” (Scott 2001, 45 ff.). For her, any writing is always positioned politically (Scott 2001, 59–60). This, of course, is very much the same position as that occupied by poststructuralism and—within theory of history—by narrative constructivism: history (like any representation) is, by definition, political in the broad sense of the word, in that it is always informed by ideology. In what are surprisingly simplistic terms considering she is writing to historians and theorists in the 1990s—perhaps in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding in reception, since those have not been hard to come by in the past—Scott reminds us that: “In the

end there is no way to detach politics—relations of power, systems of belief and practice—from knowledge and the processes that produce it; women’s history is for this reason an inevitably political field” (Scott 2001, 61).

Although a necessary component of action, such theoretical awareness does not automatically lead—and nor has it led—the historians involved to assuming political *responsibility* in women’s history any more than it does—or has—in other areas. Rather, responsibility is tied to the ideology of opposition, which, in turn, is largely a matter of benefits and status *yet to be achieved*. In other words, where responsibility is of necessity to the future, established historians can already be happy with their present. And feminism in history has without a doubt established itself; confirming this, Scott writes: “With changes in the conception and practice of history, relationships of power and terms of debate have altered. Historians of women have come into a share of disciplinary power” (Scott 2001, 62). Thus, arguably, the debate within women’s history regarding an ideology of resistance has become more a methodological one, much like I claim has the narrative constructivist debate as it is popularly now engaged in between “the historians” on one side and “the theorists” on the other.

In this way, women’s history too has been co-opted by professionally established history. This is, however, not only (or even primarily) a bad thing. Women’s history has led—to an extent, at least—to the kind of redefinition of the terms employed within the historical field at large that (at least some) feminist historians intended. At the same time, numerous valuable historical studies have been completed that might not have been possible without the institutional acceptance and respect achieved—admittedly hard-earned and well-deserved, one might add. Yet—and this is not in any way to belittle the significance of these accomplishments—there is a danger of oversaturation in women’s history too, of over-use of (now) established forms of critique employed in cases where their relevance is unclear; the fear that simply focusing on women will obscure particular, less obvious yet equally political problems involved is certainly justified. This is, of course, not a novel critique. Yet it seems that, much like contemporary microhistorians’ (sometimes blind) reliance on scale alone, the choice of the gender of the subjects of research is too often and too easily seen as a sufficient curtsy to a politics of the past and of historical representation.

Rediscovering Resistance

The “new” historians linked with the changing landscape of historical study can be seen as representing the best existing fit to the theoretical position elaborated by narrative constructivists. Since the focus of these historians is so strongly on privileging representational form, this is not surprising. But, in addition to the fact that this focus can lead to a lack of thought to consequences when purely “methodological” thinking takes over, when, that is, innovative examples are simply replicated without attention to their

ethical-political significance, attention to form can also result in a loss of control regarding talk about the past when combined with postmodern, “anything goes” attitudes. (Once again, this kind of nihilism is not only an epistemological but also, and more importantly, a political or consequentialist issue.)

In an essay entitled “Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions,” Nancy Partner notes how the popular understanding of linguistic constructivism (and especially, I assume, of the “turn to narrative” that Stone speaks of) was widespread also outside the academe in the mid-1990s. History was being used (and abused) to construct irresponsible and self-interested identity positions. At the same time, a similar—grossly simplified—view of theories claiming the fictional nature of history had found purchase in the imaginations of many more conventional historians, and, of course, these historians were adamantly opposed to the idea of history as being anything but “scientific” (Partner 1995, 21–24; see also Toews 1997, 238–240 and Jenkins 1999b, 111–112). Setting aside for now Partner’s equally astute observations about the different uses of “fiction” employed in this debate, I want to foreground her claim that academic history and popular appropriations of the past needed to come together and reconnect in this situation; academics needed to assume their social responsibilities. Admirable in her insistence that historians should become more involved with the world, Partner pointed to a central problem with history and theory of history: in order to be experientially “true,” history must have resonance for us here and now. (This conclusion is nicely expressed in one of her section headings to the essay: “‘Truth’ and Actuality: Which do People Want When?” [1995, 35].)

Viewed in this context, the persistent attraction of mixing fact with fiction in popular culture (or, to be more specific, the attraction of intentionally confusing the two and thus of “distorting” reality) results, it seems, from much the same aspiration that has led many more conservative historians to vilify the whole fact–fiction debate: most people would surely want representations to have meaning for their present. But strategies for gaining meaning from the past are different. For many professional historians, meaning has been achieved through a rather elaborate, professionally determined, route.¹⁴ Therefore (despite my here bracketing the issue of reference and epistemology in order to emphasize the ethical), an empirically sensitive strategy for use of the past should inform theorizing as long as the intention is to involve and engage historians; after all, safeguarding the “purity” of the past and distinguishing history from explicitly ideological writing continues to be the objective that informs the genre. Although this should not give historians an excuse to ignore responsibility for the uses of history, they do still appear to see themselves as insulated from (at least popular) prejudices and hence capable of speaking authoritatively on the basis of their empirical and methodological expertise. And this experienced insularity has on occasion arguably been strengthened by the adoption, *as a “system,”* of

narrative constructivism as well as other, apparently reflexive “methodologies” and “historical approaches” by those who have rejected appeals to the “truth” of history as insufficient. Hence, the rethinking of this current complex of seemingly oppositional theory and practice is essential for any recovery of social and ethical-political responsibility.

On the surface, all may appear to be well today, however, even from the point of view of a politics of historical representation. We have various kinds of histories that are formally acceptable to narrative constructivism—if not always themselves in sympathy with its theoretical claims. (Indeed, we have many more than I have space or expertise to discuss; one could, for example, also look at the German *Alltagsgeschichte* in this context.) Yet there is a problem that is common to all of these apparently critical or at least self-reflexive historiographies: *they have become the norm rather than the exception*. In other words, the areas of history writing that they represent are no longer today seen as radical or even “supplementary,” but are instead unreservedly embraced and integrated; in fact, in numerous history departments, they present the most obvious and justified ways for studying the past.

While the gaining of institutional acceptance has in many ways been a victory for these once-oppositional histories, it can also be viewed with suspicion, as part of what is sometimes described as postmodernism’s strategy of depoliticization: with the universalization of difference and the consequent emphasis of the private and the non-political, alternative positionings have become acceptable but have also been disempowered in terms of their capacity for questioning the institution. (For more on this dynamic, see, for example, Haber 1994 and Fraser 1995.) They are simply alternative viewpoints among so many others. Historians working in women’s history and microhistory, for instance, have very diverse and quite particular social and political goals, but the wholesale embracing of *all* different viewpoints as equally valid relegates most of them to a powerless minority.

The way such a continuous battle for difference can lead to privatization is perhaps simplest to illustrate by continuing to look at feminism. Clearly, contemporary “third-wave” or “postfeminism” is often today presented as apolitical and pleasure-seeking. Concentrating as it does on private rather than overtly public issues, it is understandable why this trend is taken to reject the explicit political commitments of its predecessors. Yet, one might also see here a very similar dynamic to that evidenced by the “oppositional” in other arenas. Following a period of strong demand for conformity within oppositional movements, their contemporary representatives are now—one might argue—attempting to oppose both the repressive definitions internal to these movements as well as the broader social and political challenges faced. (See, for example, Braithwaite 2002, 338–339.) Many feminists are thus now intent “on examining [their] personal li[ves], on exploring its many contradictions, desires, pleasures and fun.”¹⁵ The aim of such reframing is, to quote Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford, to “re-present rather

than reject conventional ideas about ‘femininity’ in order to create models of contradiction and conflict” (Gillis and Munford 2004, 171).

Again, however, it seems the radical edge of this kind of action has been blunted. Although emphasis on consumption, desire and hedonism (and the juxtaposition of a related lifestyle with a politically principled and oppositional standpoint) has provided feminists with a means to deconstruct received categories, it is no longer as complex an identity positioning as it once was and hence no longer bears the same intellectual shock value. And this, perhaps regrettably, replicates the fate of similar shock tactics in more traditional historical inquiry. For example, although once disruptive and radical, the academic study of comic books or rock music no longer has any particular oppositional content. Rather, the study of even the most trivial forms of popular culture has become daily fare for cultural history. Similarly, for feminisms today, immersion in contemporary consumer culture has led to what some commentators have termed a “feminist narcissism.”¹⁶ While this narcissism can occasionally be put to emancipatory use, its effectiveness is largely gone, swallowed up by numerous other parallel phenomena in popular culture.

A part of the present argument that I particularly want to emphasize is that, due to the centrality and tremendous success (read: controversy) of narrative constructivism in theorizing antihegemonic history, the focus of debate has remained primarily on the *forms* that opposition could utilize in order to be successful; not on the *content* of those forms. For this reason (or at least, as a parallel development informed by the narrative constructivist debate), interest in the purpose and contents of opposition itself has lessened, and talk of alternatives in historical research tends to focus more on a resistance of the traditional historical narrative and ideals of historical objectivism, on a resistance of “grand narratives” or—although seldom—on a resistance of representation itself, but rarely on a resistance of *particular* forms of oppression or even on a defence of presentist, locally or subjectively motivated positions. We are, in a way, then, witnessing what could be described as a return of the opposition between “theory” and “politics” that post-1968 thinking has attempted to deconstruct.

Unfortunately, satisfaction with the *status quo*—or possibly simple complacency regarding contemporary social needs—is in this way reintroduced by more conservative (and ironically at the same time popularly “postmodernist”) readings of narrative constructivism. For those working on the basis of a prescriptive understanding of the narrative constructivist call for alternative forms of historical representation, the crucial issue of transgression and contestation can become clouded. Rather than actively seek new forms of representation (*for political ends*), such historians might contentedly adhere to the definitions and examples given of these forms by theory (some dating back as far as the 1960s, it should be emphasized) under the rubrics of literary modernism, “antihistory,” “antinarrative nonstories,” or “post-modern parahistorical representations.” In this way, these now apparently

theoretically aware historians would continue to be as dependent on institutionalized practices and conventional wisdom as their objectivist predecessors. Their faith in what they do would hinge on the political commitments and struggles engaged in by theorists and role-models of a previous generation. So, at best, only the practices of validation will have changed from empiricist history. Yet the goal today should not be to use once-radical subject matter and once-radical forms as a *methodology* for writing history. That would only lead to new, equally oppressive and hegemonic histories. Thus, instead of accepting a purely methodological interpretation (the usefulness of which has been tied to a specific historical moment or, more accurately, a particular readership), White’s examples could better be read in terms of their original political motivation. In this way, it would also be natural to proceed beyond the forms he suggests, if and when those now fail to serve in emancipatory representational projects. For this to become feasible, historians’ (ethical-political) intentions need to first be rescued from restrictive debates regarding the choice of particular forms, however. The lesson to be immediately learned from this is that, although the debate concerning narrative constructivism has perhaps tailed off, we cannot simply ignore the issues that it has raised but, rather, need to remain constantly vigilant concerning received beliefs. Without such vigilance, our theoretical grip on the past *as it relates to what is (to us personally) present* slackens. Since, that is, the present continues to change, so should theories relating the past to its demands.

Centrally, what should not be forgotten is that *narrative constructivism has its roots in the same spirit of resistance as so much other post-1968 thought*. That is to say, its ideals and objectives have been vested with an oppositional politics. Furthermore, the questioning and critique of the ideological element in historical research and especially writing that it performs cannot be comprehensively understood in separation from this politics. One problem, however, is that White, as so many like-minded thinkers, is often far from specific about the substance of such a politics, noting instead quite generally that a constructivist understanding is essential to any “visionary politics” aimed at revealing oppressive ideologies (White 1987, 73). Yet, and despite stating that he has no use for revolution (see White 1987, 63; I cite him on this in Chapter 5, n3), he is concerned with the alleviation of suffering and his programme for historians clearly involves a strong (if not always explicitly spelled-out or prescriptive) commitment to society at large.¹⁷

In recent discussions concerning narrative constructivism, focus has unfortunately remained largely on the issue of epistemological scepticism and the way in which this is dealt with in the fact-fiction debate. Thus, one of its core concerns has been overlooked. The point of prolonging the discussion now is only to provide a politics of historical representation to be used in offsetting the moral relativism introduced. As part of this undertaking, salvaging either narrative constructivism or oppositional

histories requires freeing them from their currently widespread and popularized “postmodern” readings and placing them more securely in a properly fleshed out poststructuralist context (reading the meaning of these terms as I have set them out here). This means we would need to stop making the comparison to popular forms of popular culture (the too-easily digestible) and instead aim to devalue the oppositional currency of entertainment. To say this more precisely in terms of the usual narrative constructivist debate, the near-exclusive focus on representational means and strategies (on what we *can do* with form) has led to losing sight of the goals and substance of historical research (on what we *do* with form). (Again, epistemology does not figure in this argument for the sake of simplicity, and also because it does nothing to resolve the problems of ideology, as already noted.)

The danger, then, is that constructivism in its popular form-centred (largely “postmodern”) guise too easily draws historians away from *politics* (in the sense not of political history but of *engagement*) and urges them toward what might simply be termed the anecdotal. Thus, feminist history abandons feminist politics and concentrates on “women’s history.” Similarly, the theoretical tool of a “postmodernist constructivism” encourages authors of microhistories to pursue their narratives of exceptionality as a good in itself. After all, if the past is a matter of representation, the only “reality” to be found in it is antiquarian. And if it is experiential effect that marks such reality, entertainment seems to be the way to go.

Of course, as I have tried to suggest, this kind of depoliticization is not so much a result of constructivist theory *per se* as it is of the co-option of these subject areas by the historical institution as well as of the general culture in which narrative constructivism also partakes. This focus on consumption and entertainment—that particular “postmodernism”—has passed the point where it is useful as a transgressive or oppositional tool. “Interesting” has now become a value in and of itself—in fact it appears to have become the only value by which to justify the work of historians without (once again) adopting the empty ideal of “knowledge for its own sake.” Moreover, much too often, even this “being interesting” is only a case of selecting subject matter and presentational means that have once been—but increasingly today no longer are—radical. In fact, while the selection of subject matter is largely interesting or entertaining only in being exceptional and particular, and hence “cute” or anecdotal at best, the entertainment value of form comes from being contemporary and—it needs to be emphasized—*familiar*: the kind of representational form demanded by constructivism (be it “antinarrative nonstories” or “parahistorical representations”) is the form we as consumers are already used to through our immersion in contemporary media. White’s oft-repeated comparison of traditional histories to nineteenth-century realist novels (history as “bad art”) illustrates this well: the sense of excitement and interest to be derived from such texts is slight compared to that of contemporary representational

forms—whether these are in literature, film or performance, for example.¹⁸ We have changed as readers and viewers.

It might be said that we continue, as history consumers, to be hypnotized by the (idea of) form mainly for the comfort it brings: the stories provided by contemporary representational forms are the ones we like to receive, and they present the world as once again familiar, yet sufficiently new and exciting. Despite this happy feeling, the ideology of entertainment and being entertained is something that historians, *as historians*, might wish to resist; not primarily because they are professionally committed to “true representations,” but because these entertaining forms dissipate responsibility. It is the ease of access and familiarity of such forms that seem particularly worrying. In light of the preceding discussion, the first thing to become aware of is that these entertaining forms that history seeks to emulate are sometimes too simple and obvious. Readers and viewers are already accustomed to parahistorical representations in the manner of Oliver Stone’s *JFK* and numerous, more recent films, like *Good Night, and Good Luck* by George Clooney, for instance. The simple mixing of “truth” and “fiction” fails to present a challenge any longer, and a focus on the contents of consciousness and internal dialogue are similarly—representationally—part of our staple diet (even if such strategies still remain quite problematic for any strictly historical methodology). Hence, the strategies any would-be poststructuralist historians should want to lift from contemporary representations are continuously shifting in sync with the sensibilities of the readership. And we might thus choose to not be content even with copying existing representational means, but instead strive towards producing ones that are specifically historical—that are, in other words, based on the referential commitments that working with specifically historical intentions (and—obviously, although secondarily—with historical materials) brings. Why, given very different social as well as referential needs and conventions, should history look to literature or film alone for guidance? Especially if it is to be *avant garde* in itself, in the way an undiluted narrative constructivism and any effectively oppositional commitments necessarily must envision. Surely historians would be capable of producing challenging representational means of their own once aware of the desirability of doing so.

Whatever forms are developed cannot be employed in all situations; hence our having institutionally accepted certain ways of doing history—and thus having denied others—will always remain problematic. New challenges will demand new forms if they are to be approached as properly “other.” Therefore, while history (the meanings that historians attribute to the past) is always a site of struggle, it is not only its meanings but also the means for engaging in that struggle that would need to be constantly contested. What I want to underscore with all this is that no all-embracing yet purely theoretical (that is, non-prescriptive) representational theory such as narrative constructivism can be translated into historical practice without compromise. It is too easily codified into an “anything goes” position by cruder

interpretations of the postmodern. Thus, at least some ethical-political commitments need to be spelled out even at risk of imminent redundancy.

Without this kind of clarity and continuous repositioning, the turn to entertainment will simply offer another way to undermine the “openness of form” and the availability of (re)description to all. Even before most people (even most students of history) have been convinced of the acceptance of the undetermined nature of the past, we already have another way for control within the institution of history. In this new paradigm—where “objectivity” and “realism” no longer provide the institution with the same leverage—history becomes that which conforms to the kinds of storylines consumers take for granted. It might thus be time for historians as well as theorists to strive once again to find ways of becoming politically committed and, with that, also challenge their audiences to do the same.¹⁹

Disillusionment with government and leadership and the lack of interest in political activism through traditional channels clearly continues today. It could even be suggested—as Lawrence Stone already did in 1979—that the (re)turn to narrative has been a result of that disillusionment.²⁰ In providing a distraction from political events and “serious” history, interest in narrative has, however, also provided a distraction from social commitment and from political life on the individual level.²¹ In this way, history and historians too have promoted complacency concerning injustices and have dulled (ethical-political) senses with entertaining stories. Stories that keep us—those of us who are privileged enough to enjoy spending time with stories—preoccupied and content. To remedy this, we should be wary of reading narrative constructivism or any other theory of opposition in terms of system or systematicity and of thereby turning it into a methodology. We need, rather, to embrace insecurity regarding what history can be.

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Notes

1. Let me make it clear that I am not suggesting the kind of “presentification” argued for by Gumbrecht (2004, 124), in which historians can somehow imagine things in their historical contexts without attributing meaning to them. My claim here is the much more basic and practical one that he wishes to transcend, relating to the imposition of meaning taking place in presentation: for a representation of the past to be more than a list of details, an annals, a chronicle or a catalogue of material traces, for example, requires commentary on the part of the representer that is temporally removed from the object it comments upon. This commentary or re-presentation in turn inevitably involves a reframing of

- the past in terms and in the language of the historian and his or her context, bringing temporally distinct values to bear on the material. Thus, although my overall intentions regarding *experientiality* run in parallel with Gumbrecht’s, it is not clear to me how “conjuring up the past,” as he would have it, could ever bypass this basic dynamic of representation. I develop an argument defending material presence toward the end of the book, but for me, this involves the *resistance* of any such “conjuring” activity; see especially Chapter 6.
2. For a description of this division of the field as well as an extended effort to find a compromise between textualism and empiricism, see Ankersmit (2001). On “unconventional history,” see especially the December 2002 theme issue of *History and Theory* of that name, as well as the discussion surrounding it. Finally, for an account of “experimental history,” see Munslow (2007, 103–110) and Munslow and Rosenstone (2004).
 3. As already discussed in the preceding chapters, White, of course, partially allows for this appeal to historical method in introducing his idea of the ideological baggage brought by narrativizing. He stresses that he does not intend “to say that a historical discourse is not properly assessed in terms of the truth value of its factual (singular existential) statements taken individually and the logical conjunction of the whole set of such statements taken distributively. For unless a historical discourse acceded to assessment in these terms, it would lose all justification for its claim to represent and provide explanations of specifically real historical events” (White 1987, 45).
 4. Although any attempt to pin down poststructuralism will always be a controversial one, that made by Todd May (1994; 1995) in terms of a “poststructuralist ethic”—focusing attention on a recognition and resistance of representational closures—is to me a most convincing one and aligns with other arguments relating to poststructuralist political attitudes. For more on how this ethic and the related “subversion of representation” might play out in history, see Chapter 6.
 5. Almost without exception, discussions of “postmodernism” in history revolve around the issue of epistemological scepticism that, as I argue here, is only a preliminary one with respect to the broader political and ideological aims of “postist” thought. This confusion is quite persistent and leads to rejections of “postmodernism” (including poststructuralism) by thinkers who are clearly in agreement with the political and social aims involved and really object only to the moral relativist or antireferential views imposed on “postist” thought in popular readings. Even some quite sophisticated readings fail to see the distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism; see, for example, Davies (2006, 13–18). Although Beverley Southgate, for example, has presented a more understanding reading of postmodernism, importantly noting that it is not only a philosophy but also a pragmatics for living, he too focuses largely on the epistemological side of the issues (truth and aporia, incredulity toward meta-narratives, undecidability) and neglects their ethical-political consequences. See Southgate 2003, 5–6. As he writes, though: “Postmodernism is not, then, simply a ‘philosophy,’ or a part of a subject that everyone knows has little or nothing to do with ‘real life’; it’s not just a ‘theory’ that impinges on nothing more substantial than the abstract metaphysical constructions of ‘intellectuals.’” Hence, it is not enough to say that postmodernism is not *necessarily* apolitical. Instead, room needs to be made for this political aspect by abandoning the unnecessary drama surrounding the debate about epistemology and reference, at least the

ever-popular question of whether history is fact or fiction. Otherwise, this kind of rhetoric will continue to define the general understanding of postmodernism and of the post-1968 more broadly. For more on this, see also Munslow 2007; Jenkins 1999b, 62 ff. and Breisach 2003, 72 ff. Breisach's classification of narrative constructivism as "poststructuralist postmodernism" partakes, to me, in this more popularizing reading and presents non-referentialism as an integral part of this position.

6. The term "supplementary" has been proposed by Joan Scott. She claims that women's history is supplementary in the sense of being both "superfluous and indispensable"—hence, it underscores a lack in existing historiography. (Scott 2001, 50–51) For a discussion of Scott alongside White, see La Greca (2016).
7. Also cited in Jenkins (2003, 9). The translation given by Jenkins is more elegant but also puts less emphasis on the issue of forms. Note how White's defence of relativism as a basis for tolerance and social responsibility provides an important practical correlative to this argument with respect to history: "the socially responsible interpreter can do two things: (1) expose the fictitious nature of any political program based on an appeal to what 'history' supposedly teaches and (2) remain adamantly 'utopian' in any criticism of political 'realism'" (White 1987, 227).
8. In *Ill Fares the Land* (2010), Judt makes a very compelling case for the need to return consideration of social consequences to contemporary political discourse.
9. Some of the exemplars that Stone mentions as representative of this "new history" are the same that have been often referred to in the constructivism/postmodernism debate in history even up to and including recent years: the most prominent of these being Simon Schama and Natalie Zemon Davis. See also, for example, Southgate (2003, 51–52).
10. As Robert Rosenstone (2004, 3) notes, literary innovations allow the historian to write in experiential terms. For him, traditional realist writing: "Did not let me get close enough to my characters. Did not let me see the world through their eyes, smell it through their noses." On the flip side, there is always the danger of forgetting the fictionality involved in this kind of imaginary identification.
11. As Stone continues: "Another obvious danger is that the revival of narrative may lead to a return to pure antiquarianism, to story-telling for its own sake. Yet another is that it will focus attention upon the sensational and so obscure the dullness and drabness of the lives of the vast majority" (Stone 1979, 22–23).
12. For more on the arguments for the incompatibility of microhistory and White's constructivism, see the Ginzburg–White debate in, for example, Ginzburg (1991). It is worth noting, however, that the commitments of narrative constructivism to reality have simply been ignored in this and in other similar critiques. One parallel in which these commitments are obvious is to be found in the fact that, like microhistory, narrative constructivism also takes inspiration from social and cultural anthropology, especially from the work of Clifford Geertz and the concept of "thick description."
13. Feminism's interest is, of course, first in practical social criticism, not theory. Hence, these positions have been theorized on pragmatic terms. For a discussion of feminism's relation to postmodernism, see, for example, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1988). For studies of women's history, see, naturally, Joan Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988) and Bonnie Smith's *The Gender of History* (1998). Also see Scott's "Feminism's History" (Scott [2004]; reprinted in Morgan [2006]) as well as La Greca (2016).
14. Another, more recent development relating to the fact–fiction debate should be mentioned here too, namely the return to or increased interest in empiricism. See, for example, Spiegel (2005) and (2009). While this tendency has generally been seen as a "re-turn" from linguistic emphases, it needs to also—following the bracketing of the epistemological dimension in this chapter—be examined in ethical-political terms. In this context, focus on empiricism in an antiepistemological intellectual climate must be related to the present, not the past; it can be viewed in terms of a representational strategy of soliciting emotional involvement through appeal to the "real" on the one hand, and in terms of (re)gaining some control over interpretations on the other. Emphasis of the empirical attachment of history does not, after all, necessarily intend some unachievable objectivity.
15. As Ann Braithwaite writes: "This insistence on examining one's personal life, on exploring its many contradictions, desires, pleasures and fun marks one especially salient example of the overlaps and similarities between third-wave and postfeminisms. For many third-wave feminists . . . a defining feature of their self-identified brand of third-wave feminism is precisely its refusal of the second wave's politics of rejection of signifiers and practices of traditional femininity in favor of a politics of contradiction, incorporation and negotiation" (Braithwaite 2002, 339).
16. Compare this with Imogen Tyler's critique of such a narcissist label and its subversive effect on feminist political ambitions: "Women's anxiety about being identified as feminist is a direct consequence of the coercive efforts of the social elite to delegitimize feminism by naming it narcissistic" (Tyler 2005, 39).
17. This avoidance of overt or at least contentually specific political positions appears to be more evident in American debate. I suggest that this has much to do with the fact that the United States is more committed to and more engrossed in the "entertainment age" than perhaps any other nation. This relates, of course, also to the more extreme interpretation often given to textualism in theory debates there.
18. The range of contemporary representational forms goes well beyond those mentioned here. Particularly interesting and timely areas for developing the arguments that I relate here to performance art include various interactive and social media. For more on these, see Kansteiner (2007), Fogu (2009) and Lähteenmäki and Virta (2016).
19. Asking historians for this kind of political commitment is admittedly an exacting requirement. As Munslow and Rosenstone (2004, 14) note, successful formal experimentation and political activism are demanding tasks that also carry a professional risk.
20. Stone's comment brings an interesting issue to the fore: if the 1970s were indeed a period of disillusionment with regard to the efficacy of political action, how accurate is it, in fact, to assume it was also a time when opinions and emphases concerning what history is for actually aimed at political engagement?
21. Compare this with feminism, where private life was by many made into a political strategy much in the same manner as it has been used as an oppositional tool in contemporary performance art, for instance.

The Work of History

Since the appearance of Hayden White's seminal work *Metahistory* in 1973, constructivist thought has been a key force within theory of history and has at times even provided inspiration for historians more generally. Despite the radical theoretical shift marked by constructivism and elaborated in detail by its proponents, confusion regarding many of its practical and ethical consequences persists, however, and its position on truth and meaning is routinely misconstrued. To remedy this situation, *The Work of History* seeks to mediate between constructivist theory and history practitioners' intuitions about the nature of their work, especially as these relate to the so-called fact-fiction debate and to the literary challenges involved in the production of historical accounts. In doing so, the book also offers much-needed insight into debates about our experiential relations with the past, the political use of history and the role of facts in the contestation of power.

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