

LEIDEN SERIES IN
COMPARATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Editors

AXEL SCHNEIDER
SUSANNE WEIGELIN-SCHWIEDRZIK

VOLUME 1



HISTORICAL TRUTH
HISTORICAL CRITICISM
AND IDEOLOGY

*Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture
from a New Comparative Perspective*

EDITED BY

HELWIG SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, ACHIM MITTAG
AND JÖRN RÜSEN



BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON
2005

CRITERIA OF HISTORICAL JUDGMENT

Jörn Rüsen

1. Two Perspectives

Criteria of historical judgment occur in a comparative work of historiography in two perspectives. First of all they are effective in historiographical texts and in other manifestations of historical culture of the material compared. There is no historical thinking without normative elements or values which are used to make sense of the experience of the past. The past is not in itself already history, but it becomes history by an interpretation, and every historical interpretation uses criteria of judgment to develop a perspective of significance in which the experience of the past has to be moulded into the narrative feature of history.

These criteria stem from the cultural context of the historians and their addressees. One can speak of a normative input into the empirical evidence of the past in order to transform it into history.

This, however, is a one-sided perception. The historians do not simply invent these normative criteria, they take them from the cultural context of their lives and in this context the sense-generating principles are not only a matter of subjective work but a matter of pre-given contexts as well, contexts within which this work is pursued.

History is a mirror of time in which the present can perceive its features. It is a medium of self-reflection by which people obtain an idea of themselves in a temporal perspective which combines memory with expectation; it is a synthesis of facts and norms, unified by the mental procedure of historical narration. There are no mere norms to be distinguished from mere facts in the field of historical culture, but a pre-given synthesis of both; in a reflective perspective, however, they become artificially divided to obtain an epistemological insight into the very specific mode of historical thinking.

The second perspective is that of analyzing and interpreting historical works in a comparative perspective. Here criteria of judgment play a role as well. But are they equivalent to the works compared? As long as the comparison itself is done in a historical way one cannot deny that there are at least similarities. The question

therefore has to address the very criteria of historical judgment that are specific for this similarity and differ from others.

In the discussion below I will not follow the epistemological path of my initial argument, but will explicate different kinds of normative criteria which have been used to judge the past to give it an historical meaning and to characterize the effect of these criteria in the work of historians. In a second step I will analyze the criteria of judgment which are used for the purpose of historiographical comparison.

The argumentation is done in a very abstract and generalizing way, since I want to propose basic and comprehensive normative points of view for intercultural comparison which meet the present day situation.¹ This situation is characterized by the necessity of global perspectives in the theory of history and historiography, which enable the historians to meet the challenges of historical orientation in the globalization process. This necessity gives rise to ponder on global concepts in historical thinking on the one hand, and ideas and concepts of cultural difference and individuality on the other hand. By discussing the tension between generalization and individualization the comparative work in historiography becomes an element of practical historical orientation today; thus criteria of judgment are used for its own purpose. By doing so the discussion of criteria of judgment itself becomes an effective element in the cultural practice of historical judgment today.²

2. *Criteria of Judgment in Doing History*

To compare criteria of judgment in an intercultural convincing way, one has to start with the inbuilt criteria of pre-given manifestations of historical thinking in different countries and at different times. There is no way of doing history without using criteria of success and failure, which always have a normative dimension. Historical judgment means confronting the experiences of the past—"what actually happened" ("wie es eigentlich gewesen")—with the norms of present-day life in order to give this experiences a meaning which enables people to gain a perspective of their lives. The value system of present-day life has to

¹ Rüsen 1996: 5-22.

² Rüsen 1999.

be filled with historical experience to make it plausible in coming to terms with the topical experience of temporal change and to obtain a realistic perspective of the future. History brings normative elements of human life down to earth, into the shape of time filled by the experience of the past. It mediates norms and experiences through the means of narration. It realizes its synthesis of values and experience in the mental procedure of telling a story.

In their historical manifestation values and moral elements can be identified and described in both a functional and a structural perspective. Criteria of judgment play a decisive role in the success and failure of historical consciousness when orienting its subjects in the temporal dimension of their lives. Here they have a *practical* function. In a *structural* perspective, the criteria decide about the way the past is presented as history and receives its specific shape as a historical narrative which can fulfil its functions of orientation. Both modes of criteria interfere when historical consciousness is thematized as *communicative* process. There is no communication without regulating rules. The communication about and through history, and the functional criteria of judgment, require structural criteria to render this communication effective.

a) *Function*

Looking at the function of historical thinking in human life one can identify and distinguish the following criteria of historical judgment:

Criteria which relate one's own life-experience and expectations to the experience of the past. It is through this relationship that the past acquires significance and meaning for the practical use of those standards in the cultural practice by which *ideas of temporal change* influence human activity. The past is presented as a mirror in which both the life-situation of the present and its future perspective become visible and understandable.

Criteria of judgment which endow people with solid *self-esteem*. In this respect history functions as a means to be used in the power game which people have to play in order to become recognized by others. Here the criteria of judgment become essential elements of solid concepts of belonging with others to the same people (group, region,

religion, nation, culture, gender etc.). This concept mediates the different members into a solid collective identity.

Such a concept shaped by criteria of judgment draws a line between the realm of the life of one's own people and the life of others and serves as a means of regulating communication among them.

b) *Structure*

Structural criteria of judgment are essential for the narrative coherence of historical thinking, its explanatory plausibility, its claims for truth and its integration of experience and empirical evidence. They allow judgment to become an element of the narrative interconnection between the events of the past which posit historical judgment. The best example of this 'functioning within the narrative logic of historical sense-generation' is the slogan that "World history is Doomsday" ("Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht").³ In medieval historiography one finds examples where the historical report prefigures the Last Judgment (according to the medieval concept of the fourfold meaning of events). I do not think that all the principles which constitute the narrative structure of history can be explained as criteria of judgment, but we cannot even think of these criteria without an essential relationship to the mental procedures and principles of normative and value-guided judgment.

The best example of judgment as a constitutive factor of narrative coherence on the basis of the logic of historical thinking is the concept of *historia vitae magistra*. Here normative judgment is the essence of the meaning of history. "History is philosophy told by examples"—Lord Bolingbroke's slogan illustrates the constitutive and comprehensive role of judgment in this kind of historical thinking, since 'philosophy' means pragmatic philosophy, philosophy which presents rules of human conduct.

³ Literally in Friedrich Schiller's Poem "Resignation" from 1784, verse 85; elaborated more philosophically in Hegel 1830: § 548.

c) *Communication*

This is communication by history where functional and structural criteria of historical judgment meet. This communication is the way in which history is brought about in the life of a society in the very specific form of cultural practices. By communicating in the realm of historical culture, the parties to this communication confirm and debate or criticize and change their value system. They use normative principles of human conduct to pursue this communication and while doing so they apply or critically relate them to the values and norms within the subject matter of the history communicated. The German historians' debate ("Historikerstreit"), for instance, reflected topical issues of the political culture of Germany in the 1980s by discussing the concepts of interpretation to be applied to the history of the Third Reich.

This essential relationship between a reflection of normative elements of practical life on the one hand and the content of the narratives which dominate historical culture on the other hand can be easily exemplified with respect to the *principles of legitimacy of political domination*. Every political system of domination needs legitimacy, the willingness of the dominated to accept it, or—in Max Weber's words—to be ready to follow commands. This legitimacy, naturally, always is a matter of confirmation and critique. There is no legitimacy without legitimating master narratives. Historical culture is the place where this confirmation and critique always occur. Here the criteria of legitimacy become elements of historical narration as well as elements of shaping these narrations, of rhetoric, morality or basic religious beliefs. The archetypal position of the historian in Chinese historical culture indicates this communicative role of historical thinking: to the left and to the right of the emperor, with the task of recording his actions, his speeches and conversations. Both are done within the framework of an established political and moral value system. This communicative role of historical thinking makes historians simultaneously important and dangerous for politicians: they may be rewarded or thrown into prison.

3. *Criteria of Judgment in Comparing Historical Cultures*

Since comparative work in historiography is committed to the same principles as any work in the field of history, it follows the same criteria of judgment that I have described above. Nevertheless, there is a specific problem in the comparative approach. Since cultural difference is a matter of historical culture, cultural difference has its effects on comparative work. What does this mean?

First of all one has to be aware of any hidden criteria of judgment, which may exist if the whole issue of historical sense generation is not thoroughly reflected with respect to its roots in the context of present-day life. One cannot assume that history is the same in all different cultures of the world. Indeed, we are aware of the contrary. The character of historiography and historical thinking has not only changed in general but also has history of one's own culture changed substantially; this is the case with different cultural traditions all over the world. Comparison then raises the question of its *parameters*. Western historiographical tradition takes these parameters for granted in modern historical studies, especially in its modern version as academic discipline. If this character of modern academic thinking is seen as essential for history, it is possible to look at different cultures and come to the conclusion that there has not been a remarkable development of historiography and historical thinking. This has been the case in India.

But this presupposition is, of course, highly problematic as it follows a thoroughly ethnocentric logic of practising history: The paradigm of one's own culture is valid, and any deviating paradigm is judged according to its similarity or difference to one's own. This easily leads to historical judgment which ascribes to the culture of non-Western societies an 'a-historical' quality.⁴ The same is the case with respect to very old ways of making sense of the experience of time.

In order to avoid this misleading conceptual prejudice one has to reflect the criteria of judgment in intercultural comparison in such way that the paradigm of one's own culture is not awarded paradigmatic status, but appears as one case beside others in a comprehensive framework of interpretation and understanding. This framework recognizes differences even with regard to the logic of

⁴ Wolf 1986.

sense generation of the experience of time which can be called 'historical' with a cross-culturally valid meaning. Is this possible?

If the possibility of this kind of thinking is bound to a neutral standpoint beyond culturally different contexts, the answer to this question is clearly no. But what kind of alternative does there exist? I think that one has to look for an inbuilt universality in historical thinking, wherever it occurs,—a universality which is substantially interconnected with the question of truth. Every historical narrative makes claims for truth. The logic of these claims is universal. If it is possible to pick up this universalism of truth and give it a form in which it is valid for all modes of history, then there is a chance of developing a conceptual framework for intercultural comparison which brings culturally different criteria of judgment into view without subrogating them under one culturally specific criterion.

It would be going too far to elaborate the whole issue of anthropological universals in historical thinking and the question of truth in history. But it can be shown that both elements of historical thinking, the inbuilt universalism and the claim for truth, can lead to a historical comparative approach which recognizes cultural difference in such a way that it is neither negated in favor of an abstract universalism (which normally is a generalized peculiarity, mainly of the West) nor favors one cultural peculiarity at the expense of others. The main points of this argument are the following:

Intercultural comparison should be conceptualized and practiced as an element of communication which is ruled by the *regulative idea of mutual recognition of differences*.

The work of comparison has to be put into a dynamic of argumentation of which the result cannot be described in advance (according to the validity of its criteria of judgment).

At the same time this communication has to be conceptualized into a hypothetical perspective of cross-cultural development. Such a perspective has to be shaped by this principle of mutual recognition of differences and its logical presupposition, the idea of equality applied to human subjectivity where historical judgment, the 'source' of its criteria, is grounded.

These arguments are very abstract because they are about principles. One may doubt whether they will achieve anything with respect to the concrete work of comparison in historical studies.

In order to avoid this distance between principles and concrete historical work the reflection of the criteria of judgment in historical comparison should go back to the working criteria in the conventional work of historians and make clear how these criteria can be conceptualized, so that they correspond to the very abstract regulative rules of equality and mutual recognition of differences. The starting point here is the *truth claims of historical thinking* as elaborated in the course of modernizing rationalization of history into historical studies as an academic discipline as rules of historical research.

Here truth has become a matter of empirical evidence, of methodical rationality and of theoretical and practical coherence of narrative argumentation.⁵ The essence of criteria of judgment is the functional criteria of solid historical identity and the related criteria of sound narrative coherence. Here judgment is a matter of conceptualizing historical identity in its double relationship: to one's own self and togetherness and at the same time to the otherness of the others. For me, the only valid criterion of judgment in this double respect is the regulative idea of mutual recognition of differences (which includes the regulative idea of equality).

Doing comparative work in historiography implies first of all a reflection of the guiding concepts. This reflection should be committed to the regulative idea of equality and mutual recognition and has to apply this idea to the methodical procedures of historical interpretation.

To fulfil this demand, it is befitting to combine meta-historical with empirical research. The best approach is to make it an element of this research itself. In this case theoretical and methodological reflection can become a stimulus to comparative historical work, and can be compared to the spices in a soup, which make it edible and tasty.

REFERENCES CITED

- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1830, 1817), *Encyclopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Zum Gebrauch seiner Vorlesungen* (Encyclopedia on the Philosophical Sciences). Heidelberg: Oßwald; Berlin: Normann.
- Rüsen, Jörn (2000), "Historical Objectivity as a Matter of Social Values", in Leerssen, Joep and Ann Rigney (eds.) (2000), *Historians and Social Values*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 57-66.
- (1999), "Kua Wenhua Bijiaoshixue de Yixie Lilun Quxiang 跨文化比較史學的一些理論趨向 (Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography)", in Wei Gelin 魏格林 (Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik) and Shi Naide 施耐德 (Axel Schneider) (eds.) (1999), *Zhongguo Shixueshi Yantaohui: Cong Bijiao Guandian Chufa Lunwenji 中國史學研討會：從比較觀點出發論文集* (Chinese Historiography Conference: A Collection of Essays from a Comparative Perspective). Taipei: Daoxiang Chubanshe, 151-176.
- (ed.) (1999), *Westliches Geschichtsdenken. Eine interkulturelle Debatte* (Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- (1996), "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparison of Historiography", in *History and Theory* 35 (1996), 5-22.
- Schiller, Friedrich (1784), "Resignation (Resignation)", in Hegel (1830), § 548.
- Wolf, Eric R. (1986), *Die Völker ohne Geschichte. Europa und die andere Welt seit 1400* (Peoples Without History. Europe and the Other World since 1400). Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer-Verlag.

⁵ Rüsen 2000: 57-66.