

1 Introduction

Philosophy of history, theory of history, and historical theory are three existing labels that are sometimes, but not always, treated as synonyms.¹ Each of these has been used by both historians and philosophers to define a specific field of inquiry, which entailed its own approaches, methods, concepts, and problems, as well as specific venues and audiences, though these often overlap each other. As such, it is difficult to state clearly which label has been used by which community for what ends. Furthermore, a quick look into the massive bibliography compiled by the *International Network for Theory of History* will demonstrate the wide variety of themes and authors that, in different intellectual traditions, have come to be considered part of the theory or philosophy of history. But despite a somewhat shared intuition that these activities are linked by some sort of family resemblance, recent attempts at formulating a general definition to a unified field have yet to show any evidence of success in articulating these diverse agendas.

I believe that discussing such articulations can help us foster a rich and diverse intellectual community dedicated to questions of the utmost importance for our ways of dealing with a thoroughly historicized world. Therefore, this Element is dedicated to just this task: arguing for a broad and inclusive understanding of the theory and philosophy of history. I will begin with an exploration of the various ways that different intellectual traditions have understood the phrases “philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” and “historical theory,” and then consider whether and how we could achieve a broad and inclusive understanding of those terms, an understanding I believe can be covered by the phrase “theory and philosophy of history.” Of course, there is a limit as to how detailed my exposition can be in this format, but I will make sure to point readers to the relevant contemporary literature where they can find further interesting material.

Section 2 is dedicated to surveying the most familiar understandings of “philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” and “historical theory” for Anglophone readers. First, I will deal with the pretty conservative story that starts with what became known as “substantive” or “speculative” or “material” philosophies of history (up to the early twentieth century), goes through the “analytical” or “critical” or “formal” phase (from early to mid-twentieth century), and culminates in “narrativist” philosophy of history (in late-twentieth century).

¹ Not to mention some cases where the idea of “theoretical reflection” about history is joined with the history of historiography. In this Element, however, I will cover only partially this approximation, when we get to the senses in which some historians understand the label of “theory of history.”

I will then point to how this traditional story depends on a specific definition of “philosophy of history,” one which has persisted even after it was allegedly superseded by a new one, that of the narrativists. The persistence of this definition explains why this story ignores or pays only cursory attention to then-contemporary developments in France and Germany, to earlier neo-Kantian philosophy of culture and other late historicists, or to the whole lineage of epistemological and methodological reflection by historians themselves. I will then deal with what historians mean by “historical theory” or “theory of history.” As we will see in due time, these labels have come to mean either the study of the many different facets of history or the discussion of concepts and ideas borrowed from neighboring disciplines, such as social theory, literary theory, and so forth. Discussions of “theory of history” have also inherited some of the contents of “methodology” and “historiography” manuals, which often began with nineteenth-century “positivist” or “traditional” historiography (i.e., Ranke in Germany, Langlois and Seignobos in France), went through the successive generations of the *Annales*, the British Marxist historians, and ended with twentieth-century New Cultural History. In this sense, the relationship between historians and theoretical reflection is one characterized by some instrumental, operative interest, and a great deal of suspicion of “epistemology.”

In Section 3, I will explore how Latin American intellectuals have dealt with theoretical and philosophical reflections on history. There, the traditional categories of “philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” and “historical theory” reach their limits, not because of any kind of intrinsic inadequacy, but precisely because of important local developments in former colonial spaces whereby subjects tried to understand their (post)colonial condition and their place in the modern world. The “universal history” of modern Europeans often had no place (or only a marginal one) for these (post)colonial subjects, and this situation endowed (post)colonial thought with an inherent historical dimension to it, an awareness of their (and of others’) historicity. Though I will point to the fundamentally historical aspect of postcolonial critiques of modernity, my focus will be on the works that Latin American intellectuals have explicitly related to labels like “philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” or “historical theory.” Even such a limited exploration will already be relevant for my claim that any effort toward a wide and inclusive field of “theory and philosophy of history” should take into account the challenges that have been presented by traditions outside North America and Western Europe and in languages other than English.

Finally, in Section 4, I will consider whether and how a broad understanding of the “theory and philosophy of history” could be achieved. After exploring the different kinds of questions that have been posed under the umbrella terms of

“philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” and “historical theory,” a clear and rigorous definition of the field becomes either impossible or institutionally undesirable: There is no one set of necessary and sufficient conditions that ultimately characterizes “theory and philosophy of history,” and the limited definitions that are possible fail to account for large portions of the work that is currently being done under the relevant labels. These limited definitions also make it unlikely that such narrow enterprises have any chance of institutional survival and growth. Nevertheless, I will argue that we can put forward a broad understanding of “theory and philosophy of history” that covers a wide range of areas of inquiry loosely connected in virtue of being interested in our varied modes of relations to the past(s), with the price being that of abandoning the search for common agendas and vocabularies and instead embracing the idea of a common space of exchange.

2 The Traditional (Hi)stories of the Theory and Philosophy of History

By the first half of the twentieth century, the label “philosophy of history” had come to designate works dedicated to discovering the purpose, meaning, direction, or the general laws of history as a whole (understood here as the course of past events). Though the phrase had been coined by Voltaire in the eighteenth century, works from other authors were soon fit into that category: from Augustine to Bossuet and Vico, from Condorcet to Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Of course, the methods by which one could find the ultimate purpose, meaning, direction, or laws of history were varied, and they sometimes involved at least some empirical material. But in the context of postwar Anglophone philosophy, dominated as it was by analytic philosophy and, perhaps most importantly, logical empiricism, such philosophical task was rather seen with suspicion – to say the least. It is telling that R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*, a posthumous edition of his lectures published in 1946, began with a distinction between Collingwood’s use of the term and those of previous philosophers. As W. H. Walsh later stated, “a writer on philosophy of history, in Great Britain at least, must begin by justifying the very existence of his subject” (Walsh 1960: 9). But that seemed to be the case even across the Atlantic: In his 1938 book *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, Maurice Mandelbaum too had thought it necessary to state clearly what was the nature of his philosophical inquiry. The fundamental distinction then was between the philosophy of the whole course of past events and the philosophy of our knowledge of those events – or, as these postwar philosophers formulated it, between speculative and critical, substantive and analytical, or material and formal philosophies of history.

This distinction was usually expressed by an analogy with that between the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of science. As Walsh stated, “the first is concerned to study the actual course of natural events, with a view to the construction of a cosmology or account of nature as a whole. The second has as its business reflection on the whole process of scientific thinking, examination of the basic concepts used by scientists, and matters of that sort” (Walsh 1960: 14). Much as nature was the legitimate object of science, so was history the legitimate object of historiography. Were philosophers to study nature or history, they would be doing either science/historiography (instead of philosophy) or metaphysics. On the other hand, were they to study the concepts and reasoning of scientific/historiographical inquiry, then they would be closer to logic and epistemology.

But most importantly, this distinction was not merely about differentiating areas of philosophical interest. Rather, it differentiated between what those philosophers considered to be *legitimate* philosophical interests (logic, epistemology) and illegitimate ones (metaphysics) (see Ahlskog 2018: 87–88). As Jonathan Gorman noted, philosophers trained in the analytic tradition considered that “the whole speculative approach had been successfully squashed by the Vienna Circle in the 1930s and, with particular respect to the philosophy of history, squashed later by Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin” (Gorman 2018: 62). Therefore, it should come as no surprise if, by the 1950s and 1960s, important books in analytical philosophy of history contained at most passing, quick references if any to the “speculative” branch – see, for instance, Dray (1957, 1966), or White (1965), or collective volumes such as Hook (1963) and Gardiner (1974).² To be sure, Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History* sparked lively debates over whether or not one could empirically determine the general pattern of past events (see Mandelbaum 1948 and Geyl, Toynbee, and Sorokin 1949). Meanwhile, Karl Jaspers’ *The Origin and Goal of History* was translated and published in 1953 – only four years after its original publication in Germany. But by the time Karl Popper published *The Poverty of Historicism*, in 1957, “speculative” philosophy of history was indeed a disappearing genre in the Anglophone world – at least as far as (analytical) philosophers were concerned.³

² Kerwin Lee Klein offered an alternative reading: For him, it was the broad editorial success of *speculative* philosophy of history that made it possible for *analytical* philosophy of history to exist after World War 2. (Klein 2011: 42–47).

³ The ambition of finding large, all-encompassing patterns in history remained present in other forms. Francis Fukuyama and the whole discussion around the “End of History” in the 1990s are usually mentioned as examples (see Paul 2015a, Ahlskog 2018). We could extend things even further by considering the allure of Deep or Big History, such as with Yuval Noah Harari’s 2011 bestseller *Sapiens*, and the wide resonance of David Graeber and David Wengrow’s 2021 book

2.1 From Analytical to Narrativist Philosophy of History

In contrast to the perceived decline of the “speculative” philosophy of history, the “critical” or “analytical” branch flourished due to the debate around historical explanations – that is, whether historical explanations have the same logical structure as scientific explanations. It is rather usual to claim that Carl Hempel’s 1942 paper, *The Function of General Laws in History*, marks the beginning of the critical philosophy of history (see, for instance, Kuukkanen 2021: 2, Ahlskog 2018: 88, Gorman 2018: 67, and many of the chapters in Brzechczyn 2018, just to mention some of the most recent accounts). In his paper, Hempel claimed that contrary to the belief that history “is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search for general laws which might govern those events ... general laws have quite analogous functions in history and in the natural sciences” (Hempel 1942: 35). According to this model, scientific explanations took the form of a deductive argument where the initial conditions and the relevant general laws acted as premises from which one could deduce the conclusion (or final state) – hence its name, deductive-nomological or “covering-law” model. For Hempel, then, “in history as anywhere else in empirical science, the explanation of a phenomenon consists in subsuming it under general empirical laws” (Hempel 1942: 45).

In the following two or three decades, the questions of whether history followed (even partially) the general model of scientific explanation conceived by Hempel and the logical empiricists and whether there were aspects specific to historical explanations fueled a debate in which historians were mostly absent and one which they mostly ignored (see Klein 2011: 52–53). Whether historians thought the model was a good representation of their practices was irrelevant. The main issue at stake was one about the logical structure of historical explanations: Was there something about them that deviated from general scientific explanations? Despite some philosophers having expressed thoughts about the importance of studying explanations that historians actually offered, the debate remained highly abstract and mostly confined to philosophers themselves (e.g., Gardiner 1952, Dray 1957, Goldstein 1976). In turn, historians either ignored the debate altogether or complained that the deductive-nomological model did not fit the way practicing historians explained things – both reactions had little importance for philosophers.⁴ However, by the late 1960s

The Dawn of Everything. But then again, the name, philosophy of history, is still gone – not the least because these more contemporary grand-pattern-finding enterprises claim to be empirically based (is any resemblance to Spengler and Toynbee mere coincidence?).

⁴ See the great account by Jonathan Gorman (2018: 69–70 and 2021: 27–28) of J. H. Hexter’s review of Danto’s book *Analytical Philosophy of History* and Morton White’s *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* and the authors’ reaction to it.

and early 1970s, these discussions had lost steam. For Gorman, by then, “those few analytical philosophers who had taken a special interest in historical understanding seemed to have drawn all they could from their brief excursion into thinking about historiography” (Gorman 2021: 26).

To be sure, the philosophy of history was not the only (and certainly not the most important) front where logical empiricism and the covering-law model faced challenges. For instance, Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* seemed to challenge some of the core assumptions of the kind of philosophy of science championed by Popper, Hempel, and the logical empiricists, and many historical and sociological approaches to the sciences claimed to be heavily influenced by it.⁵ But most importantly, the whole problem of historical explanation faded out of interest for analytic philosophers: The explanation/understanding debate “had found a new home in a freshly established branch of philosophy,” the philosophy of action, where historiography ceased to be the source of relevant cases (D’Oro 2008: 412), and the project of the unity of science as envisioned by the logical empiricists was mostly abandoned, rendering obsolete the discussion over whether historical explanations followed the covering-law model or not. Meanwhile, an interest in the narrative structure of historical writing gradually occupied the space that the analytic philosophers had left vacant.

The story of when and how the main debate in the philosophy of history turned from historical explanation to the narrative structure of historical writing, or we could also say from analytical to narrativist philosophy of history, usually reserves a prominent place for Hayden White’s 1973 book *Metahistory* – and not without reasons (White 1973). Though other authors have contributed to this general shift, such as Louis Mink (1987) and Frank Ankersmit (1983), *Metahistory* had a profound impact beyond the narrow limits of the philosophy of history as analytic philosophers understood it. White’s positions elicited responses from historians and literary critics from many different countries and intellectual traditions in a way that none of the analytical philosophers of history had until then.⁶ By 1986, Ankersmit was able to write, boldly, that

if philosophy of history is content to become an odd positivist fossil in the contemporary intellectual world within the next few years, by all means let it remain epistemologist. If, on the other hand, philosophers of history have the

⁵ Though it is common to include Kuhn’s *Structure* among the possible factors in the decline of logical empiricism, the issue is, as usual, more nuanced. For some of the different interpretations, see Larvor (2000), Rorty (2000), and Salmon (2000) as well as Bird (2015) and Richardson (2015).

⁶ For the reception of Hayden White, see Vann (1998), Avelar (2018), and Domańska and La Greca (2019). Franzini (2017) covers the reception of White in Brazil, and Carrard (2018) in France.

courage to shake off their own past and entertain a sincere wish to contribute to a better understanding not only of historiography but also of the problems that are currently under debate in other philosophical disciplines, it cannot avoid becoming narrativist (Ankersmit 1986: 27).

The interest in “narratives” was not exactly new when *Metahistory* was published. For a while then some of those involved in the analytical philosophy of history were exploring the idea that historical explanations frequently assumed the form of a narrative, or that at least some components of historical explanations had to be understood by their narrative qualities. Arthur Danto’s famous article “Narrative Sentences” had been published in 1962. W. B. Gallie’s own intervention appeared a year later, arguing that historical understanding was “the exercise of the capacity to follow a story” (Danto 1962; Gallie 1963: 193).⁷ However, *Metahistory* changed the main object of the philosophy of history. Rather than considering these narrative elements in a general epistemology of history, White pushed for “a linguistically inspired theory about historical writing” (Paul 2011: 81).⁸ This, along with Ankersmit’s (1983) book *Narrative Logic* and Mink’s important essays later collected in the 1987 volume *Historical Understanding*, paved the way for a new agenda for the philosophy of history – that of *narrativism*⁹ (see also Klein 2011).

Though “narrativism” itself can be a quite contested label, commentators have usually referred to Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit as the proponents of its two main variants.¹⁰ Finding common denominators among those classified as narrativists is a challenging ordeal,¹¹ but a fair starting point might be their focus on the fundamental and constitutive role of language in historical writing (and later thinking). In the case of White, this involved a particular theory of our historical imagination, that is, of the processes by which we transform raw materials of our present experience into data about the past and

⁷ Vann (1995) offers a detailed account of this transition to narrativism, one which benefits from his long experience as editor of *History and Theory*.

⁸ On the same page, Herman Paul states that this new approach was a “turning point in postwar philosophy of history” and that it “would definitely change the agenda of (especially English-language) philosophy of history.”

⁹ It is worth mentioning that, for Richard Vann, Mink’s 1966 essay, rather than White’s *Metahistory*, seems to mark the beginning of narrativism, or at least of the linguistic turn in the philosophy of history. Paul (2011) and other studies of White’s work are usually clear about the close intellectual relationship between White and Mink. It is also worth mentioning Hans Kellner and Frank Ankersmit’s 1995 edited volume *The New Philosophy of History*.

¹⁰ Sometimes, others have been included in this classification, such as Louis Mink, Paul Ricoeur, and even David Carr – these last two sometimes being further characterized as “phenomenological narrativists.” Importantly, Herman Paul (2011: 109) and Kalle Pihlainen (2017: xvi et seq.) have raised concerns over the merits and problems of the label.

¹¹ See, for instance, Paul Roth’s (2016) assessment of Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen’s (2015) definition of the narrativist position.

then organize (or “emplot”) the relevant parts into a followable story – a theory that has important consequences, as we shall see next. Meanwhile, for Ankersmit, narrativism involved understanding the representational aspect of historiography, that is, its ability to represent (at least aspects of) the past through a narrative text – a task that compelled him to turn to the philosophy of language and an aesthetical account of historiography.¹²

In *Metahistory*, White proposed to “consider the historical work as what it most manifestly is – that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (White 1973: 2, emphasis in the original; see also White 1986: 81–83). His general analysis dealt with the poetic procedures by which historians prefigured the “historical field,” that is, turned the chaos of experience into an ordered space populated by discrete and defined objects, and then transformed this “data” into a followable story, one “emplotted” in one of four general tropes (White 1973: 30 et seq.; see also White 1999: 8–9). But most importantly, White insisted that this emplotment was a moral or aesthetic, rather than epistemological matter. Plots were features of stories, not events, and, at least in principle, historians could choose between different modes of emplotment depending on what kind of story they were telling (see White 1973: 6, note 5, and 427; see also White 1987: 43–44 et seq.).

For Ankersmit, however, literary theory cannot account for what he sees as the most fundamental problem, that of the relation between language and reality. In his view, this problem should rather be dealt with through an engagement with the “linguistic turn” as brought forth by philosophers such as Richard Rorty and W. V. O. Quine, that is, with the rejection of the empiricist distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, and with the idea that “in history truth may have its origins in the compulsions of language no less than in those of experience” (Ankersmit 2001: 37). As such, Ankersmit dedicated many of his writings to the problem of historical representation, whereby aesthetics rather than epistemology seemed to provide the best tools for those philosophers of history interested in understanding how historians could possibly represent aspects of the past in their writings (see, for instance, Ankersmit 1994, 2001, and 2012).

The problems of historical representation, the metahistorical prefigurative structures of historical imagination, and the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetical implications of these theses stimulated a rich and diverse body of

¹² For more detailed analyses of White’s work, see Tozzi (2009), Paul (2011), La Greca (2013). For Ankersmit, see Bos (2018), Paul and van Veldhuizen (2018), Menezes (2019, 2021). For a good introduction to narrativism, see Tozzi (2022).

responses. For some historians, White and other narrativists had downplayed much of what distinguished the writing of history from the writing of fiction and, as such, misrepresented the cognitive labor involved in searching for, organizing, and making sense of a wide range of documents. They thought that narrativism entailed blurring the line between real historiography and fiction, which was either unacceptable, misleading, or just plain wrong (e.g., Kramer 1989, Chartier 1997, Lorenz 1998, Evans 1999, Breisach 2003). Perhaps the most famous challenges came from those who worried about what narrativism might entail to the history of the horrors of the twentieth century, particularly those of the Holocaust (see Friedländer 1992, Kansteiner 1993).¹³ White, Ankersmit, and other narrativists responded to some of these criticisms, but whether their responses were successful or not is still a contested issue. Nevertheless, the narrativist insight inspired a great number of articles, monographs, and edited volumes exploring both its theoretical workings and how they fared against the history of historiography.¹⁴

Many philosophers remained skeptical that narrativism had any *philosophical* relevance. For them, it remained unclear what the connection was between the narrative structures of historical texts and the logic of historical explanations or the epistemology of historical understanding (see, for instance, Roth 2016 or even Ankersmit himself on the literary theory-inspired variation of narrativism, Ankersmit 2001: 64 et seq.). Others thought it important to deal more directly with the skeptical conclusions or interpretations of the narrativist theses (e.g., Carr 1991, McCullagh 1998 and 2004, Tucker 2004). It is important to remember that many of the analytic philosophers that were engaged in the debate of historical explanations had simply abandoned the field. Anecdotally, Danto mentioned that, as editor of the *Journal of Philosophy*, he estimated that only “one per thousand submissions” to the journal were related to the philosophy of history (Danto 1995: 72).¹⁵ Despite Ankersmit’s continued engagement with certain groups within analytic philosophy, it did not take long before philosophers were not the dominant group on the pages of *History and Theory* anymore.

¹³ Though Kansteiner later found White’s narrativism useful to understand Saul Friedländer’s widely acclaimed *The Years of Extermination*. See Kansteiner (2009).

¹⁴ It would be impossible to give an exhaustive list, but some suggestions are Bann (1984), Kellner (1989), Rigney (1990), Ankersmit (1994), Kellner and Ankersmit (1995), Harlan (1997), Megill (2007), Ankersmit, Domańska and Kellner (2009).

¹⁵ Aviezer Tucker objected to the idea of there being a crisis in the philosophy of history during the 1980s and 1990s (Tucker 2001). Also, the main group of researchers behind the INTH has found that the absolute number of publications indicate “an overall growth of publications over the last seventy years” (Bevernage et al. 2019: 413). However, because by now we lack a clear definition of “philosophy of history,” “theory of history,” and “historical theory,” any such assessment is bound to be of limited use. Bevernage et al. explicitly declare that they join all these together.

And this is where our traditional story ends. Not because narrativism represents the culmination of our philosophical progress, but rather because at least from the 1990s onward, debates in the philosophy of history simply lack a clear central focus. Some authors have tried to give an overview of this rather diverse situation. For example, Chris Lorenz has argued that these new themes and problems are related to the decade's memory boom (Lorenz 2012: 26 et seq.). As such, questions about the metaphysics, ethics, and politics of our relations to the past have reentered the agenda amidst calls for decolonization, reparations, intergenerational justice, environmental catastrophe, and so on. Though Lorenz's assessment seems fair, I have doubts as to whether this new moment can still be easily labeled under the "philosophy of history" label – at least as analytical philosophers of history and narrativists understood it.

Other authors have preferred to differentiate between those works by philosophers, which deal with traditional philosophical questions, and those by "theorists of history," whose inquiries are not "self-evidently philosophy of history." Contrary to other optimistic views on the current state and future of the former group, in Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's view, it is the latter that is experiencing a boom in recent years. For him, "theory of history" includes themes like "trauma, memory, experience, new forms of history-writing, use of history, etc., which have not been traditional topics in explicit philosophical studies. And it is fair to say that these investigations are not either the kinds of explicit conceptual explorations that many associate with philosophy" (Kuukkanen 2018: 73–74; see Klein 2011: 53–58 for an alternative view). Though I tend to agree with Kuukkanen's assessment and with his general perception of a difference to be had between these different kinds of work, I will also argue later that this distinction is semantic rather than substantive. For now, let us turn to what I believe to be some of the limitations of the traditional story we tell about the philosophy of history.

2.2 Demarcating the Philosophy of History

As we have seen, the traditional story of the philosophy of history usually starts with Anglophone philosophers distinguishing their work from what was then condemned as "substantive" or "speculative" philosophy of history. It often refers to authors like Maurice Mandelbaum or R. G. Collingwood but fails to mention that both were engaged in a debate that stemmed from late nineteenth-century neo-Kantianism, one that was still alive by the early twentieth century. Mandelbaum's *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* was entirely about what the author saw as the historical relativism of Croce, Dilthey, and Mannheim, and the insufficient responses to such relativism given by Simmel, Rickert, Scheler,