

The Sense of the Past

Matters of Historical Time in the Modern Human and Social Sciences, ca. 1780-1980

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Abstract

The project investigates the character of historical knowledge in the human and social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) in the period of ca. 1780-1980. Other than existing scholarship on the history of historicism it goes beyond the paradigm of the formation of the nation state and instead focuses on foundational problematics of historical knowledge in the making. Emphasis is on matters of historical time and the emergence and transformation of a specific sense of the past, i.e. how experience figures in intellectual practice. It combines methods and approaches from the history of science, historiography, and a cultural and institutional history of intellectual practice in order to provide an historical inquiry into the historical epistemology of the human and social sciences.

Project's objective

More than twenty years ago Jacques Le Goff contemplated the destruction of a linear notion of historical time. It had become an epistemic obstacle. On the other side of the river Rhine Reinhart Koselleck pursued a similar ambition. Besides such programmatic propositions, some historians found original ways of dealing with this issue and proposed solutions to the problematic. In short, occasionally historiographical practice anticipates analytical perspectives. However an adequate history and theory of historical times remains a desideratum.

Very much like the age of automobiles used a language of horseback-riding, the language of historians to this day is entwined in the age of historicism, that is to say history in the singular. Yet a moment when an extended present is separated from deep history and the explanatory power of a collective singular of history is about to vanish calls for a contemporary history and theory of our relation to the past. We are not only dealing with a crisis of relevance of historical model of explanation in the human and social sciences but have to admit that a alleged lack of understanding and disinterest might be evidence of an outdated understanding of history. It is only recently that humanists and social scientist alike came to understand the revision of this notion of history as an urgent matter.

Main fields of inquiry

The project proposes a *histoire-problème* arranged around five core problematics. Therefore its main fields of interest are: 1. the historical semantics of the notion of *Geisteswissenschaften* in international context; 2. the cultural and intellectual history of historical work; 3. the analysis of

different epistemic surroundings of intellectual work in the humanities; 3. the relations between history and timelessness; and 5. the historical aporia involved in the cultural model of “time travel.” The overall goal of the project is to provide a contemporary history and theory of historical time based on an historical analysis of matters of historical time in intellectual and cultural practice of the human and social sciences since the late eighteenth century.

Methodology

The project makes use of methods and theories from different fields, mainly historiography, history of science and scientific knowledge, historical semantics, and anthropology in order to provide a cultural and institutional history of historical knowledge in practice. It further will demonstrate the value of a model of knowledge production, which highlights how everyday experiences can serve as vehicles for conceptual innovation in the human and social sciences. Prolonging my research on “epistemic surroundings” in the emerging field of the history of the humanities, the project studies knowledge-production across the human and social sciences since the eighteenth century in local and global contexts. Proposing a conceptual framework the project will develop a historical epistemology of the human and social sciences. Its main focus will be on notions of historical time as they emerge in intellectual and cultural practice. Therefore the project engages with a history and theory of historical times, in particular the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Johannes Fabian, Francois Hartog, and Reinhart Koselleck. Emphasis will be on the study of intellectual practice across different disciplines and the notions of historical time that allow engaging with the past. One of the main assumptions is that both intellectual practice and western notions of historical time entail forms of epistemic violence that the project seeks to analyze.

Ultimately, the goal of the Sense of the Past-project is a history and theory of historical times across the human and social sciences and thus to rethink universalist assumptions about the nature of historical time and humanistic knowledge in the global age.