

Parahistory and the Popular Past

Acts of Historical Production

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1 Introduction

The Challenge of Changing Histories

For a discipline so ostensibly attuned to change over time, academic history has proven remarkably resistant to transformations in its own forms of expression. This paradox sits at the heart of this book. Theoretical and philosophical debates about history are typically framed in terms of questions regarding the nature and purpose of the discipline such as ‘What is history?’ or ‘What is history for?’ Or, perhaps even more importantly for a present-day disciplinary self-understanding, through exclusion: ‘What should *not* count as history?’ ‘What is history *not* legitimately for?’ Settled answers are lacking, however, or at best vaguely defined, and vary from one disciplinary history community to another. This apparent intractability may simply be the result of a mistaken identification of history as a unified discipline rather than a group of diverse ways of ‘doing’ or producing history in relation to particular periods, subject matter, ideological positionings and so on – even when focusing only on history practices residing securely within the academe. But it remains the operative assumption when approaching academic history.

To illustrate the challenge: Think of the stylistic, formal or even generic gulf between undeniable classics like George Rudé’s *The Crowd in History* (1964), Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) or Charles Feinstein’s *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United Kingdom, 1855–1965* (1972), for instance. Pointing to commonalities beyond their referring to past phenomena, being based on careful research as well as equally exacting – if radically diverse and dissimilar – expertise is hard. Indeed, as this book will argue, this surface diversity largely operates within a broader, often unacknowledged, consensus regarding the *forms* historical knowledge should take.

Today, once again, even suggesting that most histories share the fact that they present their results in narrative form is contested. Where these commonalities appear to provide only vague and rather banal criteria for defining the nature of a scientific practice, genre or discipline, further accord – even with a simple-sounding indicator such as acceptance by the

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historians' community – has in some cases been hard-won (when and if ultimately won across the board at all, even in many, arguably, less-than-extreme cases). And extending the term 'history' to popular practices of representing or deploying the past only makes any identification of clear, shared standards that much more difficult.

Granted, change is a challenge in any field, and discussion about limits and boundaries connects with innovation. But the tendency to take, say, 'psychology' or 'sociology' as natural in the same way as 'history' seems less common. Somehow, 'history' is simply assumed unproblematically and – a point often made by Keith Jenkins, for example – even the name of the discipline and its object are strangely conflated. No wonder confusions about its character arise. Understandable, then, that one result of history's apparently self-evident existence and unproblematic standing may be to limit interest in experimentation; if history is viewed as somehow obvious and fundamental to the way humans engage with the world, then work aimed at questioning *how* it is practised easily appears redundant. Why innovate, after all, if the way we engage the past 'historically' is seen as the natural, evident one? Further: although abstract, all such intuitions about history are supported by the underlying conservatism attributed to history by many commentators; the argument that history inevitably serves the status quo (see, for example, Sande Cohen 1986, Jenkins 2003, Davies 2006, Samuel 2012 [1994]) is a recurring theme in critical approaches and a central concern for this book.

At the same time, the fact that the *content* of history changes is hopefully uncontroversial and to be viewed as a basis for the existence of the discipline as a scholarly pursuit. Such change manifests in the discovery of new facts and the abandonment or revision of previously accepted ones – the specifics we know – as well as in the framing of new questions and objects of study, and through our changing interpretations and explanations relating to these. Up to and including all associated controversies.

While the impact of these disciplinary controversies should certainly not be discounted – including the marked disruptions wrought by radical interventions in women's history, postcolonialism, queer studies and so on – change of this kind produces little long-lasting distress in terms of foundational disciplinary identities. It is, rather, a core feature of history as a practice. Even the most radical interrogations regarding what subject matter is appropriate seem to have been, over time, largely incorporated into the historical canon (often, as will be discussed, without fundamentally altering the underlying forms of historical representation). What is more, the applicability of novel interpretations or colligatory concepts, for instance, is routinely debated and assessed within this disciplinary framework.

There is, however, a component of change relating to historical interpretations and explanations that is less straightforward – one where a complex problem presents. This is an issue that has, of course, been elaborated in detail particularly in so-called *narrativist* (or better, *narrative constructivist*) and linguistic-turn debates within theory and philosophy of history: At some point, even in scholarly and disciplined presentations of the past, content and form become intertwined – whatever one's personal feelings about the relation of reality to representation may be. Even if one were to take the extreme position of viewing language as transparent, there should be no denying that language-use (at the very least *also*) introduces meaning not bound to reference alone.¹ Acknowledging this inherent 'fictionedness' – history's constructed nature – is by no means to declare it false, but rather to highlight the responsibilities that accompany the historian's act of imposing *meaning*.

Regardless of the clarity with which this key philosophical point has been argued, controversy about history's literary or 'fictioned' nature continues – and, despite so much expert investigation, the issue is poorly understood and often badly represented in broader 'fact-fiction' debates. Far too frequently the basic claim that language produces meaning is described by its critics as some bizarre 'anything goes' sentiment. This caricature suggests that acknowledging history's constructed nature makes it no different to literary fiction and, through a somewhat strange follow-up, further implies the denial of the existence and actuality of past reality. And although some of these critics more moderately attribute the difficulty with representation to the fact that the past is no longer present (the epistemological problem of absence, often hugely inflated), it should be noted that the problems of language and reference pose similar difficulties at every turn; historians are not alone in lacking foundational access to objective reality or some transcendent meaning.

From the opposing side – particularly during the 1990s and 2000s – these representational dilemmas were sometimes exaggerated by proponents of radical change. Appeals were made for history to learn from other genres and for historians to broaden their range of expression to encompass 'alternative,' 'unconventional' or 'experimental' and, most often, artistic means, with attention thus more explicitly on the form of the representation. In all these efforts, however, the sphere of academic history was still mostly viewed as autonomous, and the discipline assumed to be relatively clearly demarcated. This general situation conspired to define calls for alternative forms primarily as a threat to history's disciplinary standing and its perceived scientific commitments and ideals. Consequently, exhortations for change regarding form were largely received as attacks on the integrity of historical research and history writing generally. Looking back, the opposition in these debates between history and parahistory – the latter intended here, in essence, as all other 'past-talk' existing alongside

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academic history – appears somewhat contrived. This is particularly so since the challenge of changes to historical form has confronted the discipline throughout its existence, even if not always argued for as explicitly.

Recognizing instead that while history's representational paradigms have mostly remained the same, its favoured stylistic conventions and thematic foci within those established forms have needed to adapt to radically changing contents and, to some extent, shifting presentational preferences, my aim here is to better differentiate several aspects of this challenge to history 'proper' – to, that is, academic history. By unpacking the confections present in a number of the more polemic positions, the hope is to better articulate academic history as a moving target, even if constrained by its traditions. This involves improving our understanding of it in terms of changing communication strategies and audience sensibilities, and, through this analysis, also shedding further light on the (likewise shifting and porous) boundary between history 'proper' and all kinds of parahistory.²

Some qualifications must be articulated at the outset of this endeavour. This book focuses on addressing questions of historical form without questioning the importance of (and once again returning attention to) the discipline's core scientific commitments – that is, its commitments to rigorous research, critical source analysis and evidentiary reasoning. For interest to remain solely on epistemological issues and discussions about the factuality of history, as it so often does, history's purpose also needs to be configured in correspondingly narrow ways – ways that have on the whole precluded viewing form as independent of the 'reality' of the past. The reverse of this is not the case: attending to form is not the same as claiming the 'fictionality' of history (implying it to be untrue or fabricated in its factual claims), only its 'fictionedness' (acknowledging its inevitable construction through language, narrative and representational choices). Which is to say that the *purpose* of historical inquiry to continue to speak truthfully of the past is not in question here; truthfulness is rather viewed in a more complex sense, not essentially committed to realistic-seeming forms.

What is not always sufficiently recognized in this connection is that our understanding of history as a genre remains open to change on other fronts. In large part, this oversight is simply a result of everyday conceptions about history and the way that, with its insistent focus on epistemology, methodology and professional ethics, the discipline appears to actively resist change. In part, it is also for reasons of professional passions and primary focus: because historians are largely interested in 'content,' the disciplinary practice is likewise predominantly content-driven and relatively stable in its dominant presentational forms. But this very stability poses a significant challenge for the discipline. Regardless of the exacting disciplinary demands

placed on its practitioners, our collective storytelling sensibilities evolve; and this is perhaps particularly so for the wider audience, which is not subject to disciplinary formation in the same way as historian-authors. Furthermore, the fact that representations of the past are now created so widely across various media for different audiences and in diverse contexts underscores the potential desirability – perhaps even a pressing need – for changes in how academic history is presented if it is to maintain its relevance and broaden its communicative reach.

In these ways, an emphasis on form turns attention to the fundamental commitments of historical work, precisely by highlighting the limitations these commitments impose on expression and the variety of presentational means available. However, the manner in which these considerations are often articulated in current theoretical and philosophical debates about history can easily obscure the key ethical component. This ethical dimension – one particularly forcefully presented by existentialism and post-structuralism in the philosophical tradition – concerns the inevitable attribution of meaning and significance *through* and *in* every act of representation. (Which is to remind that a robust understanding of ‘the ethical turn’ in history must go beyond simply focusing on the historian’s direct ethical responsibilities to their subjects or promoting an understanding of diversity, for example – as crucial as these aspects are – especially when such notions are presented in watered-down iterations that sidestep the deeper philosophical implications of representation itself.) The analytical separation of form from content is never only an issue of truth or epistemology; rather, focus on form forces a recognition that the act of representation itself marks a transition from narrowly defined epistemological concerns to the sphere of the ethical and the aesthetic. And hence the issue should not be approached in the usual fashion of returning to debate ‘fact’ versus ‘fiction.’ The essential insight to remember and take away from the extensive discussions surrounding the linguistic turn and narrative constructivism is that *some* meaning is *always* created and imposed in the representational act itself (on a general level this is most apparent in philosophical discussions of ethics but, as noted, it naturally permeates all language use).

Armed with this powerful insight regarding the inevitable imposition of meaning in representation and its profound ethical and political implications, Sande Cohen presents his provocation to historians thus:

Critical theory of history tries to change the rules of writing history or even to ask whether any game of writing about history is *worth it*. That is a harsh thing to say, but the French theorists discussed below were in agreement that after 2,500 years of *misrepresentation* by historians, by

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the sheer hit and miss of historical representation, by the transformation of *after the factness* into a *resource* for control of the future, that [*sic*] it was time to consider not playing that game.

(Cohen 2001, 192, also cited in Jenkins 2003, 1)

Although the 2,500 years of history that Cohen appeals to here could, arguably, more usefully be limited to the roughly two centuries of professionalized academic history, particularly as it developed in service of the bourgeoisie and the nation state – depending, once again, on one’s specific definition of history – his fundamental point about the critical function of theory in relation to entrenched historical practices holds true. If history as a discipline affirms the status quo to the extent that Cohen and like-minded critics have claimed – and as its prominent societal functions appear to confirm (consider, for example, its traditional role in school curricula or the priorities often reflected in government funding for history education, research and public dissemination) – then it seems obvious that those seeking to marshal forces for change should stop playing along.

Early in his career, Hayden White articulated this same challenge by further historicizing the discipline (in terms of its narrower definition and context) and suggesting that this ‘game’ of history may now well be passé:

Historians of this generation [...] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline.

(White 1978, 29)

Given that White initially made this point almost six decades ago and so little has changed since, it may be overly optimistic to think that any radical shift will occur with the current generation of historians either. The discipline has proven more resistant to such transformation than expected and the faith he expressed in the critical capacities of historians and the public in the 1960s was manifestly misplaced. At a minimum, as is evident in this statement, however, White urged historians to acknowledge the historical nature of their discipline and, if not abolish history, then to fundamentally transform it – much as in the critical theory of history championed by Cohen.

What is clear, though, even if a radical transformation of the discipline has yet to occur, is that the conditions that produced the need for history

in its modern professional form are no longer the same, history thus proven, indeed, to be a ‘historical accident.’ The reasons for its utility have changed, and what may not have been as obvious before is that the present-day form of capitalism has a specific need for history too, even if its functions now are less about the establishment and legitimation of changing societal forms (as in earlier eras of nation-building) and more about maintaining and naturalizing present-day power structures. But, be that as it may, the call to expose the various uses and instrumentalizations of history should be at least as pressing today as it was for White. Hand in hand with this awareness of history’s pliability goes the understanding that there is no self-evident or fixed form that historical representation must take; rather, its forms are, and always have been, based on generic agreements, prevailing cultural assumptions and some perceived kind of utility.

Both Cohen’s and White’s views on the state and functions of history align with those of Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously queried the usefulness of ‘doing’ history. (In fact, Cohen’s point of departure in some of his work is to show how heavily Nietzsche’s influence weighs on French post-structuralist debates.) Like White in his later writing, Nietzsche articulated an alternative, more pragmatic stance, admitting history as a practice provided that we engage in it for compelling reasons. This pragmatic acceptance is powerfully captured in his exhortation, from ‘On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life’: ‘May our estimation of the historical be but an occidental prejudice; as long as, within these prejudices, we make progress and do not stand still! As long as we constantly learn to improve our ability to do history for the sake of *life*.’ (Nietzsche 1980 [1874], 14)³

This intellectual legacy leads to an inevitable presentism – or, perhaps more appropriately, ‘consequentialism’ – which values the impact of historical narratives, especially in terms of potential emancipation or, conversely, for reinforcing oppressive structures. In this way, it also underscores the importance of continuously interrogating and rethinking habitual approaches to historical practice.

So, what – from this critical standpoint – are the main difficulties with ‘conventional’ history?

Firstly, there are the underlying ideals of objectivity and realist representation, which can lead to overlooking history’s ‘fictioned’ nature and consequently to ignoring the broader responsibilities involved in the writing practice – most importantly, its ethical-political consequences. Arguably, the issues here are not as clear-cut or extreme as sometimes presented in critiques. Instead, it seems that the straw-figure of the ‘objective’ historian toiling away in the archives, blissfully unaware of the complexities involved in representation, is seriously exaggerated. Which is not to dismiss the professional *ideals* of objectivity that inform their thinking, but simply to

soften the sometimes-caricatured depictions of their naïveté regarding these matters. Likewise, this qualification should not be read as a denial or defence of the overall paucity of explicit discussions or teaching of *writing* as a distinct, non-intuitive part of the work of history – an aspect of professional formation that still leaves much room for improvement.

Then, secondly, there is the critical problem of history's attachment to power, manifesting as an impetus to maintain the status quo and bolster conventional values – in Cohen's words, to provide for 'control of the future.'

Following Nietzsche's seminal essay, two quite distinct historical mindsets can be seen as particularly conducive to this conservative function, each resorting to different strategies (see Nietzsche 1980 [1874]). The more obviously conservative mindset – that of 'monumental' history – strives for control and closure by canonizing 'significant' events and key figures, often as symbols of progress or achievement, effectively solidifying a dominant narrative that privileges existing interpretations. By crafting a cohesive – and sometimes even a purportedly 'inevitable' – historical account, monumental history thus serves prevailing interests by delineating a trajectory that validates existing political and societal arrangements.

Conversely (and continuing to lean on Nietzsche), what can be aptly termed an 'antiquarian' mindset actively ignores the question of broader significance and views the knowledge and details about the past it uncovers as somehow valuable *in themselves*. By concentrating on minutiae, the antiquarian approach thus likewise leaves the status quo unchallenged, eschewing critical engagement with larger questions of historical interpretation and meaning, thereby diverting attention from the potential of historical narratives for interrogating and disrupting prevailing ideologies.

Despite their distinct emphases, both the monumental and the antiquarian approaches ultimately serve to reinforce existing power structures and values. But, realizing that they can converge in their function as instruments of power, historians might be inspired to exercise vigilance against these tendencies and advocate for a more nuanced and sceptical approach to history instead. Such advocacy would then pave the way for what Nietzsche termed 'critical' history, an approach that Cohen and White subsequently champion as 'radical' history; that is, an approach to history that – paralleling ideas of 'radical democracy' as envisaged by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, for instance (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Jenkins 2003, 4; for more on what this might mean for historical practice, see also Jenkins 2009, 255 ff., Norton and Donnelly 2019) – recognizes conflict and controversy stemming from different social and economic positionings and interests as integral to our societal make-up.

Radical history would, then, promote the idea that historians should not only acknowledge but also actively engage with concrete, present-day considerations, thereby contributing to potentially more inclusive, dynamic and

even disturbing understandings of the past. And – if academic history is to be *for* anything at all – it seems historical practice would be ideal for supporting just that: for elucidating complex situations, networks, webs of influence and so on in detailed and sensitive but also *meaningful* ways. After all, being able to map such dynamics is precisely where historians' expertise lies.

Outstanding explications of complex contexts and intricately intertwined events and processes abound in historical classics; think, for example, of Lucien Febvre's *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (1942), Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981) or Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919). In addition to being 'historically' interesting and providing insight into people's thinking and behaviour in different times, such works offer illuminating theoretical explanations of circumstances and radical shifts otherwise hard to understand. Yet, too often, the form of conventional histories disempowers or at least tames potential radical insight. To some extent, the discipline's emphasis on 'distance' is likewise subduing, and ideas that could have powerful transformative effects are incorporated into 'history' – into, that is, a seemingly settled narrative of 'the way things are' – and thus normalized (as with the possibility of non-religiosity, the near-endless potential of capitalism to adapt and devour, or the end of a particular way of life, for instance). Alternatively, such potentially transformative 'otherness' is presented as being so alien and detached from contemporary understanding as to exist primarily as a curiosity. (Note the echoes of the monumental and antiquarian mindsets here; hence the argument for a radical history.)

Now, none of this should be news to practising historians, of course, since, ideally at least, all who deal with history are aware of the challenges involved. To better acknowledge this awareness, a look back may be helpful. As a reminder of how clear-eyed some of the more pioneering figures within the history establishment have been on these matters, it serves to refer to Arlette Farge and her book, *The Allure of the Archives* (1989), for a delightful description of the 'writing work.' In the final chapter entitled, simply, 'Writing,' she exhorts:

historical writing should retain the hint of the unfinished, giving rein to freedoms even after they were scorned, refusing to seal off or conclude anything, and always avoiding received wisdom. It should be possible to find new ways of bending our words to the rhythm of the surprises experienced when in dialogue with the archives, forcing them to partner with intellectual hesitation so that we can see both crimes and desires for emancipation as they appeared in the moment, holding on to the possibility that each would be wedded later on to other dreams and other visions.

(Farge 2013 [1989], 123)

Farge was on the cutting edge of the profession at the time, and well aware of the theoretical considerations, but she was also without doubt a ‘proper’ historian. This point is crucial because the assumed lack of sophistication among historians on these matters has been a strong, recurring motif in theoretical debates about historical representation since at least the 1970s and needs to be qualified. (For a host of general claims about historians’ resistance to theoretical reflection and at times alleged unsophistication one need only look to some of the key handbooks in theory and philosophy of history; for example, Partner and Foot 2013, Kuukkanen 2021, van den Akker 2022).

Given the demonstrable innovation and upheaval within the discipline, particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s, it seems wrong-headed to attribute the surge of theoretical and philosophical reflection on history primarily to theorists, often positioned on the margins of actual history work. A more accurate account must also recognize the significant theoretical engagement and innovation in the practices of many historians during this period. Having said that, it is fair to note that even a thinker as notorious as White appears not to have been closely read within the historical profession at large, but rather rejected by reputation. Meanwhile, conventional history goes on, largely co-opting radical efforts by including their subject content and thus at least partially neutralizing the formal or methodological challenges (for more on this co-option, see especially Wilder 2012, Pihlainen 2017, 38 ff.).

In addition to her call for ‘new ways of bending our words’ to better accord with contemporary sensibilities, centrally worth noting here is Farge’s emphasis on the element of surprise. She exhorts us to focus on the possibilities that appear to have been open to the historical subjects *in their present* and thus, to some extent at least, to avoid assuming retrospectively ‘obvious’ knowledge, imposing our own expectations and ‘received wisdom,’ *or*, indeed, seeking formal and argumentative closures. Instead of striving to provide rationalistic, encompassing explanations, the goal she advocates is thus to demonstrate one’s doubt and ‘intellectual hesitation’ within the historical account itself. This is a goal that is particularly salient since, in practice, conventional history writing easily hides such hesitation because of disciplinary expectations regarding its explanatory aims and scope, as well as because of the ensuing, seemingly realist form it typically adopts (an issue I discuss in detail in Chapter 2).

Important, too, that Farge’s own writing as a historian at this time – including *The Vanishing Children of Paris* (1988), a study of the 1750 rebellion in Paris co-authored with Jacques Revel – utilizes carefully crafted prose narrative while, admittedly, taking into account multiple perspectives and interpretations. In this study, Farge and Revel aim to make sense of several themes and address straightforward-seeming questions such as ‘What was behind the influx of people to the city?’ or ‘What

created the opposition and hostility between the people and the police?,’ for example. Yet, despite the clear questions and a fairly conventional form, they provide intricate answers and demonstrate awareness of the inherent difficulties in constructing any coherent or comprehensive accounts:

Here then is an account of the Paris uprising of 1750 to add to those accounts already in existence. The story can be simplified or embellished with fresh detail at will. This account is honest and *verifiable against the sources*; yet *it is necessarily deceptive* since the very nature of such an account introduces an element of order and coherence to the fragmented events of the actual revolt.

(Farge and Revel 1991 [1988], 18, my emphasis)

The majority of historians, as well as many theorists and philosophers of history, are likely to agree with this view expressed by Farge and Revel to some extent at least, but not, perhaps, all for the same reasons. Crucially, understanding the statement only (or even primarily) as a reminder of the epistemological problematic associated with historical knowledge would be a mistake. Although emphasis is clearly *also* on the ‘verifiability’ of an account ‘against the sources,’ key attention goes to the imposition of ‘order and coherence’ and the elective, interpretive nature of that move. With every account being ‘necessarily deceptive,’ and – when considered in connection with Farge’s more extensive theoretical reflections – necessarily ‘unfinished’ too, their unavoidably constructed nature should be obvious. Which leads back to my main concern here regarding current debates in theory and philosophy of history: historians – even the ‘conventional’ ones – are expert at what they do and largely aware of the representational complexities involved, yet they often get little or no credit for this sophistication in theoretical and philosophical discussion. More worryingly, some recent interventions appear to be moving against the current of this relatively evident understanding of the historian’s work.

What remains absent from these discussions is a sustained consideration of the *form* that history assumes in its functions of serving the status quo, along with a critical analysis of the associated practices involved in the imposition of meaning – that very imposition of ‘order and coherence’ highlighted by Farge and Revel. This lack pertains particularly to the assumed transparency and ease with which conventional history is deployed; further, discussions of alternatives that would moderate the near-exclusive attention to epistemic concerns are limited by these very same problematic beliefs and assumptions about history’s supposedly easy relationship with the past. To bridge this gap, I sketch three ways in which ‘alternative’ efforts at historical representation can be tackled when trying

to theorize them. These approaches have, in part, involved distinct debates with different protagonists and audiences, but the overlap between them should be evident. In exploring them, the discussion seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what constitutes, and what is at stake in, ‘alternative’ history.

The first approach might be characterized as explicitly playing with ‘truth,’ or more precisely, deliberately crossing and blurring the line between fact and fiction. Here, it is important to note that – as any historian of historiography would likely remind – this is in no way a new phenomenon. This is something that is evidenced by intense discussions surrounding the reliability already of the ‘first historians’ within the canon (for excellent readings of the complexities in Herodotus and Thucydides, among others, see especially Dewald 2005, Grethlein 2013), with expectations or at least standards of historical fidelity then seemingly remaining a relatively voluntary consideration for long after. In fact, many generically ‘historical’ texts up until the seventeenth century took ‘fiction’ even further, blending the historically plausible with the fantastic; importantly, this involved not only employing narrative strategies relying on the representation of inaccessible and unknowable thoughts, motivations and so on, but also featured fantastical elements such as dragons and giants occupying the same narrative space as more conventional historical figures and events, all apparently allotted equal value and a comparable degree of credibility. This more fluid approach came to an end largely only with the surprisingly late professionalization of history in the nineteenth century, which established the now-familiar dichotomy in place of a more fluid demarcation between history, fiction and myth. This historical trajectory, even in the form of such a bare-bones account, should be read as further evidence for White’s insistence that ‘history, as currently conceived, is a historical accident.’

But the pervious, arguably artificial nature of this disciplinary boundary between history and fiction does not diminish its operative importance in currently defining the discipline. Indeed, its very constructedness offers an easy possibility for resistance, which – often taking the form of a deliberate transgression of the fact–fiction divide – has been utilized in many well-known and now-classic works, ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Family Idiot* (1981–1993 [1971–1972]), characterized by Sartre variously as presenting Flaubert ‘as he really was,’ or as ‘a true novel’ but also as ‘fiction,’ through Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1966), which Foucault famously described as ‘a pure and simple fiction,’ to Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties* (1991), with, for instance, its use of ‘speakers’ in a manner reminiscent of Thucydides. All of these works, at the very least, prompt readers to reconsider the line between ‘truth’ and ‘speculation.’ In addition to running counter to the received wisdom regarding the nature of historical

knowledge and representation, such endeavours highlight the potential for ‘alternative’ forms of history to challenge and expand our understanding of possible ways of relating to the past, including an interrogation of the epistemological and narrative underpinnings of the discipline. Yet many of these efforts have faced significant resistance and attempts from within the profession to ‘save’ the discipline from what has been perceived as unwarranted tampering with its foundations.

Particularly illustrative of a knee-jerk reaction to all such efforts was Keith Windschuttle’s reaction to Schama’s *Dead Certainties* at the height of the fact–fiction debate, crystallized in the idea that ‘history’ is being ‘murdered’ (interestingly, this is the same extreme response reported by Foucault as a typical one to the reception of *The Order of Things*). For Windschuttle:

once some of a book of history is discovered to be fabricated, the reader can never be sure that it is not *all* made up. Under these conditions, how could we have any confidence that the composite version itself is at all accurate or authentic? [...] Once the writer admits that some of what he or she has written is fiction, the reader [...] is bound to suspend judgement about the credibility of everything the writer has written.

(Windschuttle 1996, 230)

This seems, on the face of it, in many ways an overreaction and an especially blunt response – albeit, to be clear, one that is by no means Windschuttle’s alone. To better place such a reaction in the context of other professional, reflective history work, all one has to do is recall Farge and Revel’s direct if moderate formulation of what the historian does: whatever else it is, their work ‘is necessarily deceptive since the very nature of [...] an account introduces an element of order and coherence to the fragmented events.’ Which, of course, should be recognized as the core theoretical insight regarding historical representation – something eminently obvious to so many practising historians, yet an issue that critics like Windschuttle have repeatedly failed to accept. (And it seems, disappointingly, that this pivotal understanding of representation is likewise forgotten now in some theory and philosophy of history debates by those choosing to ignore the complexities of language.) So, when framed in this rather naïve vein, the debate about fact versus fiction reveals itself to be less about epistemology and more fundamentally a discussion about professionalization – about the boundaries of academic history versus vernacular histories, historical novels, historical film and so on. Which is to say that it is a debate about disciplinary *authority* more than anything else; about ‘control of the future’ à la Cohen (cf. de Groot 2015, Norton and Donnelly 2019).

Closely linked to the option of playing with the fact–fiction boundary is another way of conceptualizing ‘alternative’ histories. This second approach relies on a different, though often equally unreflected expectation: that of somehow ‘doing justice’ to the past. On a general level, the notion of ‘doing justice’ may intend respect toward the *spirit* of past events, to people’s integrity and so on, as in the imaginary conversation in the prologue to Natalie Zemon Davis’ landmark *Women on the Margins* (1995), for instance (which study, tellingly, attributes significant influence to the work of Arlette Farge). This ideal, while seemingly straightforward, encompasses a myriad of interpretative dilemmas and ethical considerations (for an excellent treatment of the complexities inherent in ‘doing justice,’ see Calder 2008). And, as in Davis’ prologue, this approach can manifest in the form of a relatively minor fact–fiction transgression – much as with Schama’s ‘speakers’ – involving an imaginary setting, figure or other fabricated representational element while still remaining substantially faithful to existing research and available ‘key’ knowledge. Yet, with the explicit aim of ‘doing justice,’ particularly to historical subjects, the tug of war between opposing forces appears slightly different to the polarity presented between fact and fiction, even if it replicates much of that debate and awakens many of the same prejudices and desires.

Crucially, the aspiration to ‘do justice’ to history’s subjects demands a careful negotiation between being overly literal on the one hand and aestheticizing excessively through narrative or logical forms on the other.

Regarding the first, an unduly literal approach risks obscuring the profound complexity of historical situations and events, potentially attributing to them a finality and necessity devoid of the interpretive power that comes with more nuanced representation, including consideration of the opportunities and constraints as perceived by the historical actors themselves. At the extreme, this is exemplified by chronicles and source books, many of which, while valuable for their material, would appear as ‘bad histories’ if approached in those terms. Such texts often lack emplotments conferring interpretive meaning or even room for the consideration of the lived experiences and emotional realities of historical subjects. From the point of view of any ‘radical history,’ an adherence to this kind of literalism means that resulting presentations can too readily ignore the question of significance. But, perhaps needless to say, work that fails to engage with such more complex issues seldom reaches any ‘classic’ status and thus typically remains relatively unknown.

Regarding the second, excessive aestheticization or formalization can likewise distance the narrative from our available knowledge of the past, rendering it a more emphatically artistic, theoretical or scientific interpretation. Common arguments for why aestheticization can be a problem claim that it can set us apart from the uniqueness and realities of the

represented event, leading to the domestication of disruptive and radical potential – of the ‘alterity’ and reality of the subjects or, in this connection perhaps more appropriately, historical agents. Here too, it is hard to identify extreme examples within academic history, as works seeking excessive coherence are more likely to appear as ‘bad’ or ‘failed’ histories against the background of current disciplinary expectations. However, works like Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History* (1934) or Christopher Dawson’s *Progress and Religion* (1929) can be pointed to as useful instances of, respectively, an overreliance on identifying grand, deterministic patterns and a desire to produce overarching explanations that smooth over historical contingency and complexity. For examples of more extreme aestheticization, cinematic engagements may be more obvious – an issue particularly visible in criticism levelled at many films depicting the Holocaust. (Discussions of the valuation of various historical accounts naturally beg the question of the historical ‘classic’; for more on that, see Jaume Aurell’s recent *What Is a Classic in History?* [2024].)

Understandably, the problems with both literal takes and excessive aestheticization become even more pronounced in the context of parahistorical debates, perhaps nowhere more so than in those involving statues and monuments. Think, for example, of the discussions surrounding the planning and experience of memorials (see, particularly, Young 1993, 2016). These debates best highlight the limitations of realistic representation. While such representation can be initially impactful, its capacity to evoke experiential resonance can diminish over time, not only because it becomes commonplace but also because it often fails to disrupt or confound our everyday perceptions. At the other end of the spectrum, sites like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington exemplify alternative strategies that prioritize affect, scale, visitor experience and embodiment over literal depiction. Such approaches underscore the importance of engaging participants and readers in an interpretive process, offering something that diverges from and confronts their lived experience, thus inviting them to grapple with the complexities and emotional weight of the past. Other theoretically and philosophically helpful examples depart from history ‘proper’ here too: for an excellent example of the deployment of embodied experience in narrative form, think, for example, of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000); or, for a classic example of more metaphorically charged representation, of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–1991), the recent critical debate regarding which has also further revealed the absurd and deeply conservative nature of some objections to such forms.⁴

What should then be evident is that the core of the contention centres not on the specifics of content but on the modalities of language and representation. That is, focus often shifts to the ‘writing’ or representing and is

less on the ‘facts’ and research – or so it seems most of the time. This realization underscores the ongoing tension in historical practice when considering the portrayal of the past: a perceived need to navigate between what might be seen as overly literal and excessively aestheticized forms, particularly when attempting to ‘do justice’ to complex historical issues. The discussion thus often implicitly argues against extreme stances at both ends of this spectrum, at least for much of what is considered mainstream history writing. While there are good arguments for critiquing both strict adherence to factual representation and unchecked aestheticization, the critique of ‘fictionalization’ per se commonly boils down to concerns over maintaining institutional authority and control over historical narratives.

Given that some degree of ‘fictioning’ – that is, the shaping and constructing inherent in any representational act – is unavoidable, what becomes essential is not necessarily some timid ‘balanced approach’ but rather an ethically reflective and critical engagement with the constructive process. This engagement with history’s inherent ‘fictionedness’ enables a more nuanced grasp of both the limits and the potentials of representation. It means that striving to ‘do justice’ to the complex nature of historical subjects and events can proceed through an honest acknowledgement of the epistemological and ethical intricacies involved, without precluding – and perhaps by even inviting – more radical formal experimentation where appropriate.

Important to realize, the first two approaches – focusing on the dichotomy of fact versus fiction and on the ethical imperative of ‘doing justice’ to the past – both come with inherent limitations and arguably prove inadequate for two critical reasons. The primary problem is with their intense focus on the relation of representation to reality, which leads them to engage with representational efforts primarily on epistemic grounds – that is to say, in relation to the known details and the extent to which the past can be represented ‘adequately’ and ‘realistically.’ Furthermore, and stemming from this first, epistemic expectation – by virtue of their being ‘alternative’ largely only through their dealing with the relation of representation to reality – they tend to appear as prescriptive in their strategies. These strategies, while perhaps initially innovative, then risk becoming rapidly outdated. This danger can be seen, for example, in Hayden White’s advocacy of films such as Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (White 1999, 66 ff.) or, later, his championing of historical novels like W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (White 2014) as ideal, generalizable models for representing the past. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, for example, with its blend of genres and haunting imagery, clearly gestures beyond the confines of the first two approaches. Its power lies in its specific artistry, not in offering a replicable strategy. The seeming prescriptiveness of these suggestions, even with such sophisticated examples, renders them susceptible to changes in discursive practices and evolving reading sensibilities (for more on this, see Pihlainen 2017, 82 ff.).

Overall, thinking in terms of epistemological commitments in easy ways leads to viewing the complexities of historical representation as primarily relating to fidelity to factual information, even though that aspect is already hardwired into history's generic commitments at the outset and should not need to be endlessly debated. As a consequence, such a narrow focus keeps discussions on a level where achieving historical accuracy is mistakenly seen as a panacea also for the ethical and political consequences of historical work. This recurring emphasis on foundational epistemology, even after more than half a century of intense and at times highly sophisticated debates about representation, highlights a persistent urge within the field to return to grapple with these same, rather basic considerations, even at the expense of engaging with more nuanced questions of form, meaning and impact.

The third alternative – and the one this book ultimately advocates for – is that of suggesting novel, 'experimental' forms as something for historians to actively seek and utilize. This approach is embraced by many of the theorists in the narrative constructivist camp of the debates but often misunderstood or dismissed by its critics (who, as noted, mostly carry out their critique on the level of epistemological fidelity, rather than engaging with questions of communicative efficacy or ethical-political impact). The appeal of experimentation is clear: Unfamiliar form can potentially incorporate the benefits of both of the first two alternatives. It involves fact–fiction transgressions (again: every history is 'deceptive' or, perhaps better, 'fictioned' to some extent) and, through offering the unexpected, it can evoke some level of experientiality and consequently prompt a rethinking, creating a potential for 'doing justice' in a more profound way. The core point of experimentation as conceived here lies elsewhere, however: The aim is to make history relevant ('for life,' remember), to revitalize it as a societal force. Highlighting its constructedness is only one possible strategy among many. This follows from the understanding that history can offer quite brilliant societal insights if not unduly controlled and domesticated, and as long as it speaks to audiences in appropriately accessible and appealing ways. (Admittedly, White's examples for innovative forms are intended in this same way – a fact perhaps better visible in his defence of a modernist style à la Gertrude Stein [White 1999, 82 ff.], albeit that particular suggestion, too, appears prescriptive and now perhaps already outdated.)

While there is much overlap between these different emphases regarding alternative approaches, I advocate that the debate would benefit from moving beyond the fact–fiction binary as its dominant focus. For, while the insistence that history is 'not fiction' offers *an* answer to the recurring question 'Why History?', such a basic definition is confining and, ultimately, insufficient. It limits history's purpose primarily to an epistemological search, thereby discouraging further engagement with why it matters