

HISTORY WRITING WITHOUT CLOSURE

THE WORK OF HISTORY: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND A POLITICS OF THE PAST. By Kalle Pihlainen. New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 144.

ABSTRACT

In *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past*, Kalle Pihlainen pays tribute to Hayden White's work on narrative constructivism through a comprehensive and critical evaluation of his work. The book's seven chapters are based on previously published and reworked essays, starting with Pihlainen's 2013 essay on narrative truth and ending with his 2006 essay on the confines of the form. *The Work of History* is timely in light of some world political leaders' apparent immunity to facts, their use of history, and the role of power, as Pihlainen also discusses the ethics and politics of historical constructivism (xiii). At the same time, the book is "a meta-critical enterprise," as White states in his foreword (x): it scrutinizes and explains White's work and its reception, including the debates on the production of knowledge, the ontological status of historiography, the various representations of history, and the kinds of audiences historians envision. Although narrative constructivism seems a bit passé, Pihlainen wants to further elaborate this theoretical approach to disentangle and explain some fundamental misconceptions about it that still exist among historians. One misconception is that constructivism inherently neglects the ethical impulse and supposedly lacks the potential for political engagement. Pihlainen urges historians and theorists to find ways of becoming politically committed in their writings and to challenge their readers to do the same.

Keywords: Hayden White, constructivism, narrative truth, meaning, critical historiography, ethical-political responsibility, refusal of closure

In 2000 at the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo, I attended a session titled "The Historical Sublime," which featured presentations by Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, and others. It was a marvelous and inspiring session attended by some seventy people. White and Ankersmit in particular stimulated the audience to ask questions and to comment on their essays. Referring to Kant's concept of the sublime, White explained that the *historical* sublime is the unexpected moment in which one faces the unrepresentable and vast chaos of the past while at the same time feeling the limits of understanding. White's statements reminded me of the bewilderment I once experienced while reading some of Franz Kafka's stories. Indeed, one experiences the historical sublime when a previously familiar past is suddenly disrupted, revealing its complete strangeness. For White,

encountering the strangeness and unknowability of the past can—in the words of Amy J. Elias—“only be comprehended through narrative but . . . can never be reduced to narrative, which is always shaped by rhetoric and ideology.”¹ Preventing the historiographical habit of attempting to master a supposedly complete past requires an ambiguous way of historical writing and a refusal to provide closure.

In *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past*, Kalle Pihlainen pays tribute to White’s work on narrative constructivism through a comprehensive and critical evaluation of his work. The book, however, only briefly discusses the historical sublime even though—at least in my view—this topic was very important to White. Throughout the book, Pihlainen addresses three core aspects of the term “history” and the historical discipline: the artefact, the practice, and the effects and consequences of that practice (xiv). *The Work of History* is timely in light of some world political leaders’ apparent immunity to facts, their use of history, and the role of power, as Pihlainen also discusses the ethics and politics of historical construction—more particularly, “narrative constructivism” (xiii). At the same time, the book is “a meta-critical enterprise,” as White states in his foreword (x): it scrutinizes and explains White’s work and its reception, including debates on the production of knowledge, the ontological status of historiography, the various representations of history, and the kinds of audiences historians envision. Although narrative constructivism is a bit passé, Pihlainen wants to further elaborate this theoretical approach in order to counteract some fundamental misconceptions about it that he believes have not been adequately recognized. In fact, the general aims of his book are to clarify the practical and ethical consequences of this radical theoretical shift in the historical discipline and to disentangle misconceptions about truth and meaning, particularly in the fact-fiction debate.

The first misconception about narrative constructivism, according to Pihlainen, results from a superficial misreading of narrativism in the academic field of history that leads scholars to neglect constructivism’s and poststructuralism’s ethical impulses (xx). I wonder, though, if this is not an exaggerated view, especially given the many profound studies in historical research that include terms such as “invented” or “constructed” in their titles. Second, Pihlainen notices that the “excessive” focus on narrative, representation, and language (xv) has stimulated in the philosophy of history a longing for experience, presence, and direct access to the past, or attempts to bring “the real” back into discussions about the theory of history. He emphasizes that the constructivist debate is not “only” about language or reality (xv). He considers these views as caricatures of constructivist theory, which he prefers to call “narrative theory of history,” “narrative constructivism,” or just “constructivism” (xvi). A third concern is the idea of history as fiction, which many historians attribute to White and other experts in narrative theory of history and which Pihlainen describes as “equating history writing with literary fiction even on an epistemological level” (xviii). Pihlainen gives the example of how historian David Carr wrongly framed White as a “‘discontinuity view’ theorist” (xviii), suggesting that White would have argued that there is no continuity between reality

1. Amy J. Elias, “The Voices of Hayden White,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 22, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-voices-of-hayden-white/>.

and narratives. The fundamental claim of constructivism, however, is that sense or meaning is a construction and that meaning is not “out there” to be discovered as some kind of truth (xxi). Moreover, attributing meaning is a process that always takes place in a wider discursive context. Pihlainen also stresses that, epistemologically, constructivism does not imply an antirealist position and that historians are bound to reference and make clear arguments in their writings. Equally important is the fact that constructivism reveals the ultimate political and ethical character of history writing. Historians’ awareness of history writing’s constructedness directs them to acknowledge the ethical-political character of their history practice. This observation is crucial for facing the current challenges in the globalizing historical culture and corresponds with what Hans-Georg Gadamer has called *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, or “historically effected consciousness”—a consciousness that is aware of both the historicity of the past and the historicity of the conceptual and interpretive framework of the subject.² Historically effected consciousness includes a metahistorical dimension, or an awareness of the relativity and limitations of one’s own historicity.³

The Work of History consists of seven chapters that are based on previously published and reworked essays, all of which were inspired by White’s work. The book starts with Pihlainen’s 2013 essay on narrative truth and ends with his 2006 essay on the confines of the form. Probably one of the reasons for this composition is that the first chapter, “Narrative Truth,” functions as a kind of umbrella text that discusses three key issues related to truth: realism and representation, falsification, and the position of the readers. Pihlainen considers narrative truth as the core of White’s constructivism. Taking this concept as his starting point, Pihlainen rejects ontological realism and the notion of a truth that is somehow unproblematically “out there.” A related misunderstanding of this notion, according to Pihlainen, is that narratives themselves are “real,” as if they exist independent of meaning-construction (5). Following White, Pihlainen suggests that creating narratives, or representations as form and process, is a way of making sense of the world as well as an ongoing meaning-making practice. Hence, he has hesitations about Ankersmit’s recent work on unmediated access to reality in terms of phenomenological experience. According to Pihlainen, Ankersmit assumes that the world reveals representational truth about itself; truth can be found in the world and even announces itself (5). For Ankersmit, however, the condition is such that the “self-revelation of reality always needs to be ‘triggered’ by representation, . . . for if left to itself reality will remain under the veil hiding it from us.”⁴

Although narrative forms can be viewed as essential cognitive tools, Pihlainen claims it is a “curious mistake to extend this same centrality to *historical* narratives” because we cannot have direct historical experience (6). Thus, narrative as a sense-making strategy does not hold for *historical* narratives. This statement

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed., rev. ed. (1975; repr. London: Continuum, 2006), 336.

3. Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Consciousness: The Enigma of Different Paradigms,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 51, no. 6 (2019), 814–830.

4. Frank Ankersmit, “Representation as a Cognitive Instrument,” *History and Theory* 52, no. 2 (2013), 184.

remains a bit unelaborate and vague until later in the book, particularly in chapters 4 and 5, when it becomes clear that Pihlainen refers not to fictional creation but rather to the tension between truth and reference. Because of historians' commitment to representing a past reality by means of referentiality, Pihlainen claims, “[h]istorical narratives—as narratives—are fundamentally disturbed” (63). So, there are two competing and conflicting positions in contemporary historiography: on the one hand, the writing of history always involves the use of a narrative form, transcending the level of separate propositions; on the other hand, the narrative is incompatible with epistemological evaluation. It is curious that at this point in his book Pihlainen does not refer to Paul Ricoeur. The making of historical narratives is a process of what Ricoeur has called “productive imagination,” or the configuration of scattered past events, persons, intentions, goals, and causes into a synthetic whole by means of emplotment.⁵ The overarching thesis of his three-volume *Time and Narrative* is that the temporality of human experience unfolds by narrative. Moreover, Ricoeur also includes the role of the reader, which is an important element of Pihlainen’s book. Narrating history is a process of *configuring* time—that is, the shaping of temporal aspects that are *prefigured* in acting. The temporal configuration occurs in plots that give coherence to a diversity of individual events from the past.⁶ This configurable dimension, Ricoeur explains, makes the story intelligible and traceable. Yet for the audience to be able to follow a story, there has to be an endpoint from which the story can be seen as a whole, a kind of conclusion where expectation in the beginning finds its fulfillment.⁷ Following the narrative (such as through reading or hearing) implies a *refiguration* of temporal experiences. In the act of reading, the receiver plays with the narrative constraints and makes the plot work.

However it may be, the aforementioned tension that Pihlainen invokes is the often discussed and unresolved dilemma, as mentioned by Paul A. Roth, “between either epistemic standards inapplicable to histories or nonepistemic narrative theorizing.”⁸ Interestingly enough, Pihlainen does not dwell on this dilemma but rather, referring to White, suggests that the constructed nature of meaning makes all participants in “the work of history” ethically and politically involved (10). Historians, publishers, and readers have to take responsibility for the making, consequences, and reception of the narrative. There is no escape: meaning cannot be distilled from facts or reality “out there,” and historians cannot rely on some objective or acknowledged method. This ethical and political issue also touches the presence of history in people’s daily lives and the ways that interpretations of the past thrive outside of the academic field of history. Pihlainen explains that this public practice of history has nothing to do with the “presence” of the past or any mystical appeal of historical traces, nor does it have

5. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), ix. See also Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 20-33.

6. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:65-68.

7. *Ibid.*, 1:56. This actually implies the diachronic character of every narrated story.

8. See Paul A. Roth, “Back to the Future: Postnarrative Historiography and Analytic Philosophy of History,” *History and Theory* 55, no. 2 (2016), 271.

anything to do with experiences of—or direct contact with—the past (28).⁹ He obviously dislikes the presence paradigm, especially considering his statement that “the idea of the presence of ‘history’ does not seem to lead anywhere” (28). But it is possible, Pihlainen continues, that encounters with historical sources in the archives or experiences in popular genres (such as literature, theater, and film) might generate corrections on the level of factual statements, consequently undermining the coherence of a narrative. In that case, “the disruptive potential” defamiliarizes the “glossing and colonizing impact of narrativization.” The resulting increased fragmentation can stimulate “the disruption of narration and its control of meaning” (29).

In line with this argument, and inspired by Nancy Partner’s work, Pihlainen advocates in chapters 3 and 6 that historians should become more involved with the world and should pay serious attention to “popular appropriations of the past” (52).¹⁰ Indeed, academic historians increasingly acknowledge—although sometimes reluctantly—the importance of popular media and public memory in building representations of the past (99). Popular media and genres also include performative articulations like historical reenactments, museum exhibitions, street views with augmented reality, and interactive media.¹¹ Telling examples of this are digital games about the Second World War, which have become a prominent method of cultural expression reaching millions of people all over the world. By allowing players to engage actively with the Second World War, this body of commercial digital entertainment games can significantly co-configure how the history of this war is understood. These video games often create immersive experiences, but they can also stimulate informal historical learning.¹² Digital games and augmented reality are current trends that can fundamentally change how we think and write about the past, hence even influencing historical scholarship.

In chapter 5, Pihlainen explicitly argues for historiography that avoids non-committal attitudes toward the past (50). It is time, he urges, that historians and theorists find ways to become politically committed in their writings and to challenge their readers to do the same (58). Based on this reasoning, the social responsibility of those involved in the work of history also applies to the current global protests of the Black Lives Matter movement and the fierce conflicts about the content and form of narratives and other representations of the history

9. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Eelco Runia, “Presence,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006), 1-29.

10. See Nancy Partner, “Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions,” in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 21-39.

11. See Maria Grever and Karel van Nieuwenhuyse, “Popular Uses of Violent Pasts and Enhancing Historical Thinking,” in “Popular Uses of Violent Pasts in Educational Settings,” ed. Maria Grever and Karel van Nieuwenhuyse, special issue, *Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020, forthcoming).

12. See, for instance, Pieter van den Heede, “Experience the Second World War Like Never Before! Game Paratextuality between Transnational Branding and Informal Learning,” in eds. Grever and van Nieuwenhuyse, “Popular Uses of Violent Past,” special issue, *Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020, forthcoming).

of slavery, colonialism, and racism. Just like engaged citizens, educators, and policy makers, academic historians cannot remain aloof in public debates. The current removal of statues that deliberately represent white supremacy is understandable, as is the call for rewriting history. But there is also the understandable fear of cleansing the past, of destroying culture and denying that “[a]ll societies are palimpsests.”¹³ What we need is an open conversation about the history of these representations so that opposing parties can learn. But we also need more.

No less crucial is avoiding the closure of a narrative and the judgments inevitably involved (96), including—in my view—counter-narratives such as gender history, the history of black slavery, or colonial history. White particularly warned that the realist closure tends to domesticate and normalize the presentation of past events. The absence of closure reveals a narrative’s constructive and ideological nature, but it also provides room for reflection and discussion. That is why, Pihlainen explains, White can suggest that the goal of historical representation should be “to create perplexity in the face of the real” (11); it is also why, in his later works, he appreciated modernist and experimental representational forms that “refuse the kinds of closures attributed to more conventionalist realist as well as propagandic representations” (12). In the case of material representations, a closure—in the sense of a fixed representation—can be avoided by “counter-monuments,” a term coined by James E. Young.¹⁴ Counter-monuments represent a shift from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons that were erected mainly in the nineteenth century to the antiheroic, often-ironic, and self-effacing postmodern conceptual installations of the late twentieth century. These often-abstract monuments are dialogical and interactive by nature. Examples include the Holocaust monument in Berlin and the bronze sculpture by Zadkine in Rotterdam, which commemorates the bombing of the city on May 14, 1940. Counter-monuments deal in various ways with “the unimaginable, the unspeakable and unrepresentable horror” of the Holocaust or other genocides.¹⁵ They can create feelings of perplexity, functioning as Kafka’s ax in literature, “for the frozen sea within us.”¹⁶

Pihlainen argues in chapter 5 that complexity creates a space where the text is not simply a given but becomes a space for communication in which readers and other participants are involved (91). For White, this complexity provides a way to make the past present—that is, to actualize it for readers. His view on the historical sublime, Pihlainen continues, “aimed at an experience that makes ‘real’ without imposing closure” and at the same time saves history from domestication (91). Although the demand for complexity and open-ended representations seems

13. Jonathan Lis, “Colston Row: It’s about Discussing History, Not Rewriting It,” *Politics.co.uk*, June 10, 2020, www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2020/06/10/colston-row-it-s-about-discussing-history-not-rewriting-it.

14. James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992), 267–292. See also Andreas Huyssen, “Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age,” in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. James E. Young (New York: Prestel, 1994), 9–18.

15. Huyssen, “Monument and Memory,” 16. On this subject, see also Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

16. *Ibid.*, 17.

incompatible with the historian's responsibility and commitment, it is exactly the responsibility of historians, White emphasized, to resist the inclination to make a closure, particularly given all its implicated judgments. This responsibility includes the world around us, the impact of presenting ourselves as historians, and our interpretations and actions as readers (94). Yet Pihlainen is not happy with the way that White deals with the consequences of this complexity (108). These narratives and other representations, he suggests, risk becoming unreadable and unapproachable. Readers expect coherent and appealing historical narratives. Complex histories are more difficult to understand and might lack the emotional impact that audiences expect.

In his book, Pihlainen refutes the equation of "constructivism with unconstrained relativism" (66). He makes a strong and convincing argument for the political character of history writing from a constructivist point of view, and he encourages historians to challenge their readers to question received interpretations and to recognize historiography's ideological elements (87). His emphasis on the role of readers and the communicative aspects of the work of history is most important. But Pihlainen's constructivist perspective implies that historiography is not only political but also normative, often in relation to the political dimension. Contemporary discussions about the past do not just incite historians to put different historical narratives in perspective; they also require historians to distinguish which narratives are *better* than others, be it in terms of accuracy or morality. What, then, are the criteria for these choices? Which answers can constructivism provide to this question without resorting to realist ontologies or moral realism? Pihlainen does not pose such questions. I regret that the book sometimes reads too much like an exegesis of White's work, in turn limiting Pihlainen's voice a bit. Another disturbing element is that many of Pihlainen's arguments are repeated. But it is beyond dispute that this book is worthwhile reading and that it truly encourages critical thinking about the "work of history."

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