

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY AND ITS ETHICAL DIMENSION

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The author of the article introduces Hayden White's, Frank Ankersmit's, and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's constructivist understanding of history. He contrasts their understandings of history with the traditional understanding, which supposes direct correspondence of historical work to the past. In his presentations of constructivist thought, he points out their emphasis on legitimate possibilities of different methods of construction and ways of presentation, which result in different historical representations of historical events. Differences among historical representations of the past can also be related to the historian's choice of different constructive methods and also the involvement of his/her preferred moral and political values. These constructivist understandings of history, with the deeper analysis of process writing, incite the historian to deeper ethical self awareness of his/her work.

Key words: Constructivism. Plurality. Values. Historical work. Past.

We also encounter polemics and discussions of the character of historical work and historical knowledge after the process of formation of history as a scientific discipline in the 19th century. The source of these polemics is the contrast between the continual creation of different historical ideas of the past and the one unrepeatable and "inaccessible" past. The search for a satisfying explanation of the constant plurality of depictions of the past is one of the main stimuli for deeper consideration of the nature of the work of the historian and its results. In connection with the views on the plurality of historical approaches to the past and the various reflections on the nature of history, we should distinguish two view currents: the *realistic* or traditional and the *constructivist*. In our paper, we mainly use the example of selected constructivist conceptions from writers using English (Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen), and point to the ways they considered the ethical aspects of the creative work of historians.

The traditional understanding of history

The constructivist understanding of history developed from criticism of the realistic or traditional understanding of history. The *traditional understanding of history* starts from Ranke's well known statement that historians should write history "as it really was". Conceptions representing the traditional understanding of history are dominated by the conviction of the exclusive importance of a particular transforming principle or selected principles, which should be used by the historian to achieve knowledge and to transform the structures of the past into their "true", objective historical form. This transforming principle, methodological approach or recommendation is expected to solve the

problem of the historian's selection and evaluation of the significance of individual pieces of information. It is assumed that application of the "correct" transforming principle or principles will lead to the narrative approaches to the past supplementing each other and crystallizing one "true" objective picture of the past.

Geoffrey Elton is one of the most important representatives of the traditional understanding of history from the English speaking countries. In his book, *The Practice of History* (1967), he critically reacted to the views of Edward H. Carr in the book *What is History?* (1961), and justified the idea of uncovering a true picture of the past based on autonomous and professional research into the sources.¹ In his view, achievement of this aim was enabled by the historian using the so-called historical method, which "is not anything more than a recognized and verified way of extracting what remains of the past, namely the true facts and events of the past, and if possible their significance and connections, with all of this directed by the first principle of historical understanding, namely that the past must be studied from its own perspective, its own aims, its own connections".² Elton's definition of the so-called historical method can be regarded only as a very general recommendation, which does not provide the historians any concrete instructions or guarantees that they will uncover the true perspective of the historic figures. His rejection of the historian using theories, which could be a source of a distorted interpretation of the sources, is similarly unconvincing and arguable.³

According to Elton, autonomous and professional uncovering of the truth hidden in the sources is accompanied by discussions between historians. From this point of view, these discussions lead to the constant growth of correct historical knowledge and certain confirmation of "the existence of the real truth and not the predominance of individual and arbitrary views".⁴ Elton's assumption about the convergence or harmonization of different historical approaches to the past start only from his conviction of the unconflicting nature of unambiguously determined facts supplementing each other from the accessible sources. On this basis, the historians only have to fill in the missing pieces in the "mosaic picture" of the past. Deepening of the plurality of historical ideas about the past has cast doubt on this assumption about the direction of discussion among historians. This plurality demonstrates the predominance of "individual positions", rather than clearly identifying the "real truth".

The assumption of the professional and autonomous approach of the historian to research and presentation of the past emphasized by the traditional understanding of history marginalized the relevance of consideration of the ethical dimensions of the work of the historian. From the point of view of the traditional understanding of history, the his-

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- 1 The trustworthiness of his view on the autonomous and independent research of the historian is made problematic by his tendency to give priority to conservative views. In ELTON, Geoffrey R. *The Practice of History*. Sydney : University Press, 1967, p. 103. We also encounter the recommendation to adopt a conservative position in his work *Return to Essentials*. ELTON, Geoffrey R. *Return to Essentials*. Cambridge : Gambridge University Press, 1991, p. 24, ISBN 9780521524377.
 - 2 ELTON, *The Practice of History*, ref. 1, p. 65.
 - 3 ELTON, *The Practice of History*, ref. 1, p. 29-38. In connection with the constantly emphasized need for historians to be autonomous when researching the sources, Elton also expressed fear of historians applying theory in the work *Return to Essentials*, ref. 1, p. 15, 28-29.
 - 4 ELTON, *The Practice of History*, ref. 1, p. 61.

torian's work was supposed to be only an "invisible" mediator of historical reality. With such an understanding of history, he did not have to concern himself with ethical questions when doing research or presenting his results. There was an exception when critics thought that a historian had consciously or unconsciously given up his autonomous position, which inevitably led to claims of a "distorted" picture of the past. Undistorted pictures of the past had to provide unambiguous definition of the actions of historic figures. This information could be a firm basis for the process of their moral assessment. The gradually deepening plurality of historical depictions of the past, which reduced the clarity of ideas about the course of events in the past, could also increase the problems of assessing the actions of historic figures. In contrast to the traditional understanding of history, the conception of the representatives of the constructivist understanding of history had a different view of the development of historiography in the last decades of the 20th century.

Hayden White's constructivist understanding of history

Conceptions representing *historical constructivism* cast doubt on the privileged nature of certain transforming rules, although they recognize the use of various transforming rules by means of which the creation of differing ideas or pictures of the past are justified. From the point of view of the supporters of this current, the possibility of using various transforming rules leads historians to different meanings of facts or events, so that various depictions of historical reality arise. The plurality of historical pictures makes unclear the idea of one firm and "obvious" structure of the past. By making problematic the possibility of "uncovering" the content or meaning of historical pictures of the past, the constructivist view of history emphasizes the problem of the relativity of historical knowledge.

Hayden White's tropological understanding of history is one of the most important constructivist conceptions. In the introduction to his most important book, *Metahistory* from 1973, he pointed to the historical construction and fictional dimension of the process of historical depiction of the past, which is associated with the distinguishing and shaping of events or facts into a story. From his point of view, historical narratives not only put known facts or descriptions of events into a single whole in some way, they also explained them. Using the example of the works of 19th century historians and philosophers, he tried to illustrate the use of a selection of explanatory types from the "quadruple tetrads" of superficial and deep types. According to White, it was possible to identify on the superficial level of historical narratives the application of one of the *subject* types: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire, *explanatory* types: formistic, organicistic, mechanical and contextual, and types of *ideological implication*: anarchist, conservative, radical and liberal.⁵ The individual superficial types had to be coordinated with one of the deep tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synekdoche and irony, which had to connect with the historian's imagination.⁶

5 WHITE, Hayden. *Metahistory*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973, p. 7-38. ISBN 0801817617.

6 WHITE, ref. 5, p. 52-54. For more details on critical reactions to *Metahistory* see ŠUCH, Juraj. *Narativny konstruktivizmus Haydena Whitea a Franka Ankersmita. (The narrative constructivism of Hayden White*

White's constructivist idea of the possibilities for historical application of various explanatory, superficial types, when depicting the past, explains different, even contradictory historical depictions of the same events. In his view, differentiation between narrative forms of the past is connected with different shaping of the meaning of individual events in the framework of narrative units. According to White, when creating a narrative unit, events are "processed into a story by suppressing or subordinating some of them, while emphasizing others, by characterizing, repetition of motifs, variation of tone and perspective".⁷ In the process of shaping a historical narrative, the meanings of individual events are harmonized by the historian into the narrative form he has chosen. White pointed to the role and significance of the narrative form as an important part of securing understanding of historians' ideas of past events. A precondition for attributing different meanings to events in historical narratives is White's idea of an amorphous past, in which "historical events and situations are not inherently tragic, comic or romantic".⁸ According to his point of view, historians have not discovered one fixed and value neutral model of reality, but a plurality of different depictions of a "plastic" past shapable by values.

White's identification of the inevitability of the historian applying figurative language when producing a narrative depiction of reality also contributed to increasing awareness of the unclear nature of the past. White compared the historical narrative to the metaphor as a symbolic structure, which "does not reproduce the events it describes, but tells us how we should regard these events. [...] It evokes in our minds pictures of things in the same way as a metaphor does".⁹ White's identification of the literary character of the attribution of meaning to individual events in narrative is associated with legitimization of the value content of the narrative picture of the past, and so also the relevance of the aesthetic and ethical evaluation of the starting points for choosing between competing ideas about the past.¹⁰ In relation to the identifiable value orientation of the historical narrative, as well as the process of endowing events with different meaning in historical narratives with the help of figurative elements or tropes, White regarded the narrative

and Frank Ankersmit.). Ostrava : Ostravská univerzita, 2010, p. 53-76, ISBN 9788073689353; ČORNEJ, Petr. White nezměnil dějiny, ale pohled na ně. (White did not change history, but our view of it.). In WHITE, Hayden. *Metahistórie*. Brno : Host, 2011, p. 575-600. ISBN 9788072943760. The results of helpful approaches to the application of White's tropological model to various historical narratives pointed to the emergence of various subject events in the narrative representations of the past. Among Slovak historians, Martin Vašš recently attempted this. VAŠŠ, Martin. Možné aplikácie naratívneho konštruktivizmu Haydena Whitea pri historiografickej analýze vybraných diel Milana Stanislava Ďuricu a Františka Vnuka. (Possible applications of the narrative constructivism of Hayden White to historiographic analysis of selected works by Milan Stanislav Ďurica and František Vnuk.). In *Historica Olomucensia*, 2015, vol. 48, no. 1, p. 193-206.

7 WHITE, Hayden. The Historical Text as a Literary Artefact. In *Tropics of Discourse : Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore : The John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 84. ISBN 0801827418.

8 WHITE, ref. 7, p. 85.

9 WHITE, ref. 7, p. 91.

10 For example, in the conclusion to *Metahistory*, White stated that stated that "placed before the alternative visions that history's interpreters offer for our consideration, and without any apodictically provided theoretical grounds for preferring one over another; we are driven back to moral and aesthetic reasons for the choice of one vision over another". (WHITE, ref. 5, 1973, p. 443).

account as a “figurative account, an allegory”.¹¹ At the same time, his conceptual emphasis on the application of various constructs or “literary” approaches and narrative forms, he emphasized not only the problem of definition of the real form of the past, but especially the problem of an appropriate narrative approach to historical events.¹²

In comparison with the traditional understanding of history, White’s idea of the creation of historical narratives uncovers in more detail the relevance of the historical construction processes, which emphasize the possibility of shaping different forms of the past. At the same time, White’s identification of the complexity of historians’ construction processes drew attention to the “indirect” correspondence of historical narratives to the past, while offering the recipients a figural truth about the past. On one side, White’s identification of the constructivist character of history writing leads to “fictional” constructive sujet’s elements, schemes or value aspects and to emphasis on the need for radical awareness of the relativity of historical narrative or interpretation. At the same time, White’s emphasis on the naturalness of different narrative approaches to the same events evoked not only questions about limitation of the trustworthiness of historical knowledge of the contours of the past, but also of the position and task of the historian. In his constructivist understanding, the historian is not the “passive mediator of historical knowledge” but an active creator, who should be aware of the moral and social meaning of his choice of a particular form of narrative depiction of the past.¹³

Frank Ankersmit’s constructivist understanding of history

Like Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit already rejected the traditional understanding of history with its pre-condition of the truthful correspondence of the historical narrative with historical reality in his first book *Narrative logic* (1983). Ankersmit admitted the correspondence and assessment of the truth of individual sentences, but not of narrative wholes, which could only be subjective or objective.¹⁴ In comparison with the traditional realist understanding of history, he was convinced of his view that “whatever concrete content we may give to the translation rules, they will never be more than arbitrary selection rules, acceptable to some historians but to be rejected by others. [...] Nor is the

11 WHITE, Narrative in Contemporary historical Theory In *The Content of the Form*. Baltimore : The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 48.

12 While White’s conception offers an acceptable explanation for the origin of different historical narrative depictions of events such as the coming of the Magyars to the Carpathian Basin or the Slovak National Uprising, in the case of discovery of a similar interpretative spectrum serious fears were evoked. Although White did not assume the strict universal applicability of his model of the quadruple tetrads explaining the types and tropes presented in *Metahistory*, in the 1990s, he considered modernist events and their depiction by means of intransitive writing in connection with the Holocaust. For further details see ŠUCH, ref. 6, p. 112-118.

13 In his article *The historical subject and the problem of truth in historical representation*, White pointed to the example of the book by Andreas Hillgruber: *Two kinds of Ruin: the Fall of the German Reich and the End of European Jewry* (1986) on the complexity of the historian’s complicated search for an appropriate depiction or interpretation of a historic event, which should also consider its ethical dimension.

14 ANKERSMIT, Frank. *Narrative Logic. A semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*. The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Library, 1983, p. 77. ISBN 9789024727315

*past like a landscape that has to be projected onto the linguistic level with the help of projection or translation rules. For the "historical landscape" is not given to the historian; he has to construct it".*¹⁵

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According to Ankersmit, the narrative substance, which in some way constituted individual statements in the historical text, had key importance for understanding the nature of historical narrative. In his view, narrative substance represents the "image" or unifying "concept" such as the Renaissance or the Cold War, which "*organize our knowledge of the past without reference to it or its description*".¹⁶ On the basis of selection of particular methods, historians have constructed narrative interpretations, which, like metaphors, indicate a particular view of the past to their recipients. In spite of the fact that the truthfulness of historical narratives as a whole cannot be determined, Ankersmit pointed to the possibility of assessing their objectivity. In relation to the impossibility of comparing the historical narrative to historical reality, Ankersmit admitted considerations of their relative objectivity on the basis of comparison of their originality and scope. The most objective historical narrative should be the most original, and "*its scope reaching beyond its descriptive content was maximized (other indicators being equal)*".¹⁷ Surprisingly, he supposed value neutrality of the assessors of historical narratives in the process of comparison.¹⁸

In Ankersmit's shift to an understanding of historical narrative as representation, we encounter his explanation of their special nature. In connection with the relationship of representation and description to reality, he stated "*that description and representation relate to reality. We say that description refers to reality with the help of the subject term, while we say that representation as a whole is about reality*", while the reference is "*intended objectively, that is to objects from reality, which is designated by the subject term description, but to be about is essentially unstable and indefinite, since descriptions contained in text offer representations or in this case a different definition*".¹⁹ In his view, the process of evaluating historical representations is associated with comparing them, as well as with a particular social and political reality.²⁰ According to him, precise distinction between fact and evaluation in historical narrative is not possible, because true statements can also be arranged so that "*they clearly propose a particular political course of action*".²¹ Ankersmit came to the conclusion that the historical narrative is a

15 ANKERSMIT, ref. 13, p. 86

16 ANKERSMIT, ref. 13, p. 97.

17 ANKERSMIT, ref. 13, p. 238.

18 S. Crowell looked critically at the problem of applying value neutrality when assessing historical narratives in connection with Ankersmit's conception. CROWELL, Steven G. The Heterogeneity of Historical Discourse. In *History and Theory*. 1998, year 37, no. 3, p. 234-236. ISSN 0018-2656.

19 ANKERSMIT, Frank. The Linguistic Turn : Literary Theory and Historical theory. In *Historical Representation*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 41. ISBN 0804739803.

20 ANKERSMIT, Frank. *Historical Representation*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 91-93. ISBN 9780804739801.

21 ANKERSMIT, ref. 19, p. 94.

representation of the past containing true statements, which embody its cognitive claims, as well as *ethical rules and values*.²² In relation to the fact that historical representation cannot be evaluated only on the basis of normative and cognitive discourse but of their comparison, he proposed to determine the representation success of particular historical representations on the basis of their fulfilment of aesthetic criteria.²³ Ankersmit advised historians only to experiment in the “*garden of writing about history*”, where they should gradually make visible the advantages and disadvantages of the ethical and political values of historians by means of fulfilling the aesthetic criteria for successful representation.

In contrast to White, Ankersmit did not give priority to any construction processes, and so the creative work of historians applying various translation rules naturally leads to a plurality of different narrative interpretations of the past. In his view, the influence of aesthetic and moral values can be connected with various arrangements of the individual statements in a historical narrative, which represents a particular view of historical reality. In relation to the assumption of a free space for the creative work of historians, in which they attempt to construct the “most relevant idea of the past” in various legitimate ways, it is possible to consider the priority of fulfilling the relevant aesthetic criteria rather than the moral or political criteria. This leads to the justified question of the degree to which the aesthetic criterion for the success of historical representation can really be divided from “external” value influences. Perhaps precisely the close connection of the aesthetic and ethical aspects could more convincingly explain the way historians continue to depict selected events in accordance with a prevailing and persisting value orientation.

The constructivist understanding of history of Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen has taken up a critical position on White and Ankersmit’s understanding of history. He has described their position as *representationalist* because in their view historians should in some way represent the past, and his own understanding of history as *non-representationalist*. In his view: “*historiography is about justifying a view and the main contribution of historical work should be to provide evidence for and against the view*”.²⁴ In connection with the construction of historical works, Kuukkanen pointed to the importance of formulating *colligatory concepts*, which connect or unite empirical data into a unified whole. Since in his view colligatory concepts are not directly and automatically derivable from the empirical data, their selection by historians should fulfil criteria in the form of supporting data, coherence, richness of content and originality.²⁵ Kuukkanen refused to accept the intuitive assumption of the correspondence

22 ANKERSMIT, ref. 19, p. 95.

23 In this context Ankersmit emphasizes that the representation success of historical narratives is not dependent on their comparison with the actual past, but on their comparison with each other, which is decided by their range, associated with the risk as well as their resistance to falsification in connection with existing historical knowledge. ANKERSMIT, ref. 19, p. 96-97.

24 KUUKKANEN, Jouni-Matti. *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*. London; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 23. ISBN 9781137409867.

25 KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 123-127.

of historical works and their views with the actual past because of the absence of an independently existing object that would confirm it. Therefore, he proposes in connection with historical works to consider “*the justification of historiographic views without the pre-condition of their truthfulness*”.²⁶ He gives as an example of a historiographic view the expression “*Khrushchev’s thaw*”, which could be appropriate in connection with a large amount of data and phenomena from the period of Khrushchev’s rule

When assessing these historiographic views and synthesizing historical knowledge, Kuukkanen distinguishes between epistemic, rhetorical and discursive dimensions.²⁷ These three dimensions “*together amount to the cognitive justification of historical works and specifically of the arguments that they contain*”.²⁸ Although Kuukkanen is aware of the political and social context of historiographic discourse, he is convinced of its rational starting points. He considers that rationality itself is a universal principle, but its specific application always depends on the situation. Precisely the situational character of the creative work of historians together with prejudice is one of the reasons for the construction of different interpretations of the same theme. He also states that if historians’ interpretation is more rational and acceptable, then it is more objective.²⁹ In this context, Kuukkanen states that the historian should direct his attention to the creation of an argument, which “*had to be rationally convincing as far as possible*”.³⁰ In relation to his definition of history understood as the rational activity of historians, who try to construct arguments with rationally justifiable conclusions, he places it between objectivism and subjectivism, or simultaneously both objective and subjective.³¹ In his view, the degree of subjectivity or objectivity depends on the evaluation of individual historical works.

In contrast to the traditional understanding of history, the constructivist conception of H. White, F. Ankersmit and J.-M. Kuukkanen rejects direct correspondence of the content of historical works with the past. Casting doubt on the direct correspondence between historical work and the past emphasizes the relevance of the construction processes when creating a more complete picture or narrative of the past on the basis of the accessible data. The qualitative difference between the more comprehensive depictions stimulated their considerations of the key importance of the determining roles of the

26 KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 143.

27 While, in his view, the epistemic dimension connects with the epistemic values (coherence, content, richness of content and originality), the rhetorical is associated with the actual text, which addresses the readers. The discursive dimension is connected with the intellectual context in which the historical work appears. KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 156-158.

28 KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 166.

29 KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 196.

30 KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 197.

31 Although according to Kuukkanen there are various views on the objectivity of historical works as presented, he considers it most realistic to eliminate the subjective by means of inter-subjective criticism. He associates the source of the subjectivity of historical works (1) with the absence of reference of colligatory and metaphorical concepts, (2) postulating the nominal categorizing principle, (3) by constituting a narrative of connecting causal relationships, and (4) the meaning of history. KUUKKANEN, ref. 24, p. 170-175.

colligatory concepts, namely tropes, narrative substance, historiographic views, in determining the historical shape of the past. In connection with the process of the historian formulating colligatory concepts, narrative substance or historiographic views, they emphasize the constructive space in which he is placed not only before the unavoidability of choice between various known possibilities, but also the creation of his own alternative. By searching for appropriate alternatives to the well known narrative pictures of the past, historians not only widen but also “deepen” the space for construction. In relation to the social and so the value position of this space, it is clear that a particular value or ethical orientation is naturally associated with the historian’s choice of how to depict the past. In discussions between historians, more comprehensive representations of the past become the subject of criticism not only because of different ideas of the past, but also because of the value or ethical consequences recipients associate with them. The value aspects of historical work are made more clearly visible to the recipients in connection with the method of correlation of individual events in developmental processes.

The constructivist conceptions with more detailed research into the methods of constructing historical texts offer various explanations of the processes of creating different ideas of the past. Like the views of the supporters of the “traditional” understanding of history, the constructivist conceptions considered here also provoke responses, which will cast doubt on the relevance of their observations or conclusions for the everyday work of historians. On the other hand, the attempts of the constructivist conceptions to explain the origin and persistence of the confrontation of different historical ideas about the past can become one of the stimuli pushing historians not only towards deeper methodological reflection on their work, but also towards awareness of its ethical dimension.

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KONSTRUKTIVISTISCHES VERSTÄNDNIS DER GESCHICHTE UND IHRER ETHISCHEN DIMENSION

JURAJ ŠUCH

Der Autor des Artikels stellt ein konstruktivistisches Verständnis der Geschichte von Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit und Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen dar. Er stellt dem traditionalem Verständnis der Geschichte ein traditionelles Verständnis gegenüber, das eine direkte Korrespondenz der Arbeit des Historiker mit der Vergangenheit, voraussetzt.

In seiner Annäherung des konstruktivistischen Verständnisses weist er auf ihre Andeutung der Anwendung legitimer Möglichkeiten der unterschiedlichen Methoden und Vorstellungsarten hin, die in unterschiedlichen Representationen der historischen Ereignisse mündet.

Die Unterschiede zwischen historischen Representationen/ Abbildungen der Vergangenheit können auch mit der Auswahl der Historiker aus unterschiedlichen konstruktivistischen Methoden und der Aufnahme seiner moralischen und politischen Werte zusammenhängen.

Das konstruktivistische Verständnis der Geschichte mit einer tieferen Analyse des Schreibprozesses regt ein tieferes Selbstbewusstsein der ethischen Dimension ihrer Arbeit an.

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