

Interview – Jörn Rüsen

Some ideas on the intersection of metahistory and history didactics

Marília Gago*

Interview conducted by email on March 1, 2, and 28, 2016.

Jörn Rüsen, Senior Fellow at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities) at Essen, Germany, and Honorary doctorate of Universidade de Brasília (Brazil) and University of Lund (Sweden). Professor emeritus at the University of Witten/Herdecke (Germany) and Order of Merit, State of Northrhine-Westfalia, Federal Republic of Germany. He was Visiting Chair Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences National Taiwan University, head of the research project on “Humanism in the era of globalization – an intercultural dialogue on humanity, culture, and values” at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut at Essen, Germany, and President/director of that Institute.

Academic History and School History – two different worlds or two worlds that could/should dialogue?

Academic history and history in school are different discourses, but very much entangled. Both belong to the historical culture of a society. Historical culture is the place of cultural orientation of human life in the course of time. It represents the past for the sake of understanding the present and expecting the future. In modern societies some differentiations and specializations have taken place. One is the establishment of *historical studies* as an academic discipline. The main issue here is to gain solid knowledge by methodically ruled research. Another one is the establishment of *historical education* in school. The main issue here is to teach history in such a way that the students become competent

* Doutora em Educação, área de metodologia do ensino de História e Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho (UM). Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar “Cultura, Espaço e Memória”, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (CITCEM-FLUP). Porto, Portugal. gago.marilia@gmail.com

for the historical culture of their society. Both discourses are realized by specialists: scholars and teachers. Both discourses have established reflections about the practical work of the professionals: theory of history (*Historik* in German, *meta-history* in English) on the one hand and history didactics on the other.

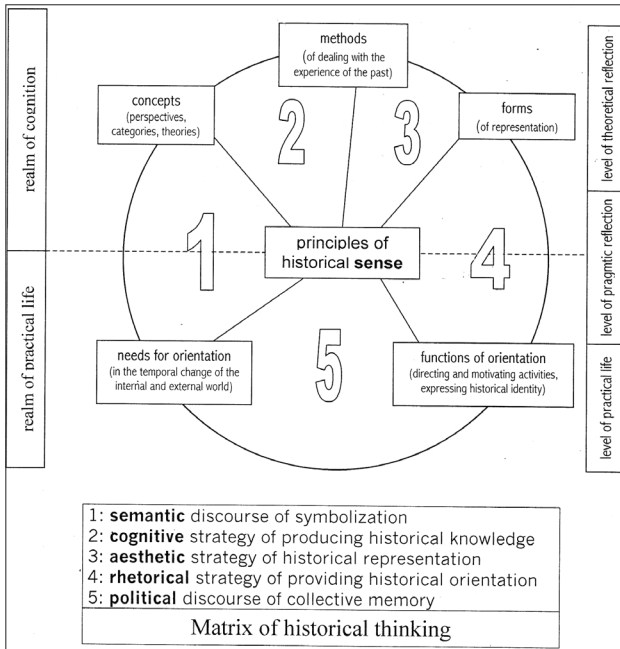
Both discourses and disciplines share basic issues:

- 1) first of all, of course, ‘history’ as a synthesis of events of the past and their representation in the present, furthermore;
- 2) historical consciousness as the mental procedure to interpret the past as history;
- 3) learning history as an organized process of developing historical consciousness (in academia by teaching the students research competences; in school by teaching the basic modes of historical thinking);
- 4) historical orientation as the practical function of historical knowledge; and
- 5) rational argumentation as the mode of communication.

But both discourses follow different intentions as well: the discourse of and about historical studies is dealing with the procedures of gaining and representing solid historical knowledge, whereas the discourse of history didactics is interested in the procedures of historical learning and teaching.

The first discourse, *metahistory*, answers the question what history is about. Here it refers either to philosophy of history or to epistemology of historical thinking. In order to confirm and stabilize the scholarly character of historical studies since its establishment as an academic discipline *metahistory* thematizes the rules of research. Here we find a long tradition of research methodology. Additionally, it thematizes historical representation by historiography. In a schematic order the main issues of *metahistory* can be characterized as the disciplinary matrix of *historical studies* in Rösen (2015, p. 72):

History didactics shares the interest in presenting its audience a clear idea of what history is about. It takes this idea from *metahistory*. But its issue is not the procedure of producing knowledge by research and presenting it in historiography, but it is targeting the procedure of learning history in an organized way (mainly by history instruction in school). Historical learning is a mental process within which the necessary competences are gained to orient one’s

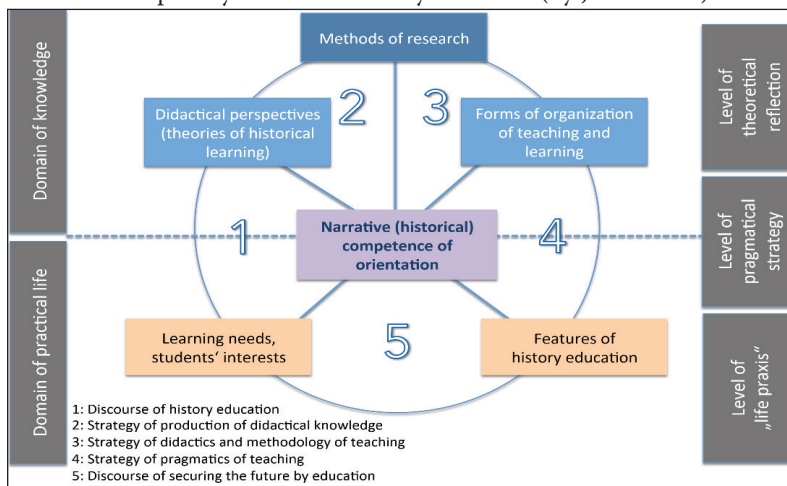


own life by historical consciousness in the pre-given historical culture of one's society. It consists of four different capacities (abilities), which are systematically interrelated and interdependent:

- the ability of making historical experience;
- the ability of interpreting historical experience;
- the ability of using interpreted historical experience (historical knowledge) in orienting one's own life in the framework of an empirically corroborated idea of the course of time in human lives – this orientation includes a concept of historical identity;
- the ability of motivating one's own activities according to the idea of one's own place in the changes of time.

Thus the main intention of *history didactics* is education, or more elaborated and ambitious: *Bildung*, i.e. gaining the competence in historical orientation and the ability to share the public discourses in historical culture of (their) the respective societies. In analogy to the disciplinary matrix of *historical studies* a matrix of *history didactics* can be schematized as well.

Disciplinary Matrix of History Didactics (by Jörn Rüsen)



(Source: Demantowsky, 2016)

As I have already said, metahistory and history didactics are closely inter-related and dependent from each other. From metahistory *history didactics* takes over the idea of history and historical thinking (and their peculiarity and function in the context of cultural life). Special importance has the explication of the cognitive structure and narrative form of historical thinking.

The other way around *history didactics* is insofar important for *metahistory*, as it grants insight into the mental structure of historical consciousness, into the importance of non-cognitive elements (e.g. emotions) during the process of forming meaning of the past as history, into a basic educational function in the logic of historical thinking, and into the basic idea of *Bildung* (cultivation of subjectivity) by history in human life.

History didactics and Epistemology – inter-contributions, what kind of relationships?

Epistemology gives insight into the logic of historical thinking. It was developed as formal *philosophy of history*, when the professional historians refused it as contradicting their way of getting solid historical knowledge out of the methodical treatment of the sources. It aimed at analyzing the peculiarity of historical knowledge by explicating a fundamental difference from the

knowledge brought about by the natural sciences. In this tradition historical thinking was understood as guided by the principle of understanding and individualizing; in contrast, the natural sciences were understood as guided by the principle of explanation and generalization.

The latest version of this peculiarity of historical thinking is *narrativism*. It emphasizes the fact that history is always presented in the form of a narration. Therefore, its logic is that of telling a story. But stories are told outside the realm of historical culture as well. Therefore, the question has to be answered what makes a narrative historical? For me the most convincing answer to this question is its reference to the *experience* of the past. This reference is brought about in a highly elaborated way by historical research. Out of the relicts of the past (sources) it gains solid knowledge of what happened in the past and where, when, and why this took place. In order to bring about this knowledge, the events of the past have to be brought into a temporal order; and this order has to be structured by an idea of a meaningful interrelationship between past and present (with an outlook at the future). In the perspective, which is shaped by this idea, the events of the past get their historical meaning in the form of a narrative.

Narration produces a history for the present out of the occurrences and events of the past. This can be done in fundamentally different ways, dependent upon different principles of historical meaning. In an ideal-typological conceptualization four types of historical meaning, of forming meaning of the experience of the past can be distinguished: A *traditional*, an *exemplary*, a *genetic* and a *critical* one.

Schema: Four Types of Historical Sense Generation (Rüsen, 2005, p. 12)

type of historical narration	reference to the past	course of time	mode of communication	forming of identity by	sense of time
traditional	origins and continuity of life-order	duration in change	based on agreement about non-disputable concepts	taking over pre-given ('natural') patterns of belonging	time gets sense by eternity in change
exemplary	events as cases demonstrating general rules	pragmatical sequence of events	argumentation by discernment and judgment	by competence of rules (prudence)	time gets sense by supertemporal morality
genetic	change of life-forms	development	by temporal contextualization	by individualization	time gets sense by temporalization
critical	events negating the validity of pre-given orders	rupture, discontinuity	partiality against established orientations	by pushing back demands of commitment	time gets sense by judgment

This typology (and with it its epistemology) is very important for *history didactics*, since the students have to learn the basic structures of historical thinking, their different logical forms, their interrelationship, and their developmental order. This is rather easy, since the types occur in everyday life as well as in more elaborated ways of doing history. This learning should go along with ‘normal’ historical instruction in school: while treating historical events the way they get meaning for the present and its future perspective should (and could) be reflected, see Rösen (2012).

How could History make sense for students today in line with time orientation (present and future)?

For teaching history, it is necessary to ground it on a connection between the present and its future and the past. This relation can be conceptualized (in metahistory) by a historical anthropology. It renders the past understandable by putting its events and their temporal sequences into a framework of interpretation, which is shaped by anthropological universals (like domination, work, social communication, forming meaning of the world, interrelationship between humankind and nature). Additionally to these universals an idea of temporal change has to be used in order to understand the peculiarity of human lifeforms in the course of time. Historical anthropology is a synthesis of universal features of human life and the idea of change and development. Both are thematized in *metahistory*. Teaching history in school has to emphasize this synthesis in such a way that the students find basic sameness in human life forms and basic differences due to varying and changing circumstances. Temporal change has to be interpreted by an idea of development, which relates the past to the present (“not yet”) and the present to the past (“no longer”). The issue of historical identity has to be placed into this interrelationship. The question of “Who are we?” will aim at a complex answer: ‘identity’ as a product of past developments and a projection of the future mediating experience and norms, conditions and hopes at the same time.

Metahistory delivers a concept of historical identity, and *history didactics* transforms it into a concept of the development of historical consciousness by learning.

History education and Humanism: Humanism is the goal of History education or must to be present on history education?

Humanism is a basic frame of creating historical meaning. It is based on real historical developments (in different cultures) and it has been shaped by fundamental norms of human self-understanding (like the idea of human dignity). There is no either/or of humanism in history and in education. Enlightenment has developed the idea of history as a universal process of educating humankind (Lessing, Schiller). This idea has to be applied to our historical experience of inhumanity. By this application the feature of humanism will not vanish, but it will change by acquiring features of a high ambiguity and serve as an urgent push in culture by the idea of history as a process of humanizing humankind. This ambivalent feature of humankind and the demand for humanizing mankind should be realized in teaching and learning history. *History didactics* should give itself a humanistic shape. With this it can meet the challenge of intercultural communication in our age of globalization (Rüsen; Laass, 2009; Rechmuth; Rüsen; Sarhan, 2012; Kozlarek; Rüsen; Wolff, 2012; Rüsen; Spariosu, 2012; Rüsen, 2013).

Tolerance and regret is the face of Memory or of History?

For me ‘history’ and ‘memory’ are no alternatives. Both terms are key terms of different discourses, the *academic* one, in which historical studies is reflected in respect of its importance and effect in the cultural orientation of human life, and a *critical* one emerging after the ‘cultural turn’ in the humanities. Here history is characterized as being distant from practical life, as a shelter of knowledge about the past without an inherent relationship to orientation-problems of topical social life. This juxtaposition is misleading. It completely ignores the discourse on *historical consciousness* in *history didactics* and the inbuilt tendencies of *historical cognition* brought about by academic research to contribute to the historical culture of its time.

The *memory discourse* emphasizes the enormous power of collective memory in historical culture. Thus it has an important impact on teaching and learning history. But it has not developed this impact towards a specific didactical theory. Furthermore, it has not realized the importance of future

perspectives in present-day references to the past, and it is missing a fundamental criterion of historical meaning, namely *criticism*.

So I would like to place the themes “tolerance” and “regret” into a theory of historical culture which encompasses *history* and *memory* and analyzes *historical consciousness*.

What is historical culture? It is the epitome of those orientations of human life, in which the past plays an essential role. These orientations were brought about by human historical consciousness. Its activities constitute historical culture and its highly different realizations, e.g. in monuments, memorials, museums, historical studies, historical movies, public commemorations, national holidays, historical instruction in school, historical literature, professional and popular historiography. Historical culture also includes private relationships to the past, e.g. personal memories, family narratives about intergenerational correlations between presence and past (Seixas, 2004; Karlsson, 2011; 2011a).

There is no human life without historical memories. They are present in all realms of culture. Historical culture therefore is manifest in different dimensions. The most important ones are the political, the esthetical, and the cognitive ones. In a more complex argumentation seven dimension can be distinguished: esthetical, rhetorical, political, cognitive, moral, didactical, religious, and the dimension of world view and ideology. The dimensions are connected in different ways, and different points of view and of validity are effective within them. Such criteria of validity can be:

- formal coherence in the esthetic dimension,
- power of conviction in the rhetorical dimension,
- legitimacy in the political dimension,
- truth in the cognitive dimension,
- values in the moral dimension,
- gaining historical competence in the didactical dimension,
- redemption in the religious dimension,
- ideological coherence in the world view.

Tolerance as an attitude of human behaviour is deeply rooted in historical culture. Here it is an issue of historical experience. It can be seen as an important outcome of modern history of ideas and belongs to the basic norms of modern civil society. As such, it is a normative factor in creating *historical meaning*, and therefore it decidedly is an issue in *metahistory* and *history didactics*. It is used to criticize ethnocentrism in historical thinking. It confronts cultural difference with the idea of equality and promotes the normative attitude to recognize cultural differences in historical thinking. It belongs to the value system of humanism, ascribing to every human being the dignity of being a purpose of itself and not only a means for the purpose of others (Kant, 1785, p. 65), now I say: man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end. Therefore, it demands criticism as inherent in its idea of recognition. Violation of human dignity is (a barring intercultural recognition of cultural differences). In *history didactics* tolerance is one of the most important aims of learning. It has to be treated in the context of forming *historical identity* and of taming or civilizing ethnocentric attitudes of the human mind.

Regretting or mourning has been established in historical culture mainly in the form of public memory and not so much of cognitive activity. It has not yet become an established principle of forming historical meaning. But I think it is necessary to introduce such a principle in most, if not all, realms of historical thinking (including historical studies). I see the reason for this desirable development in the necessity to meet the traumatic experiences of inhumanity and crimes against humanity and genocide in contemporary history.

All these experiences are experiences of forfeiting humanity. As long as the historians assume a common humanity with the people of the past and don't place themselves outside humankind as we have hitherto known it (Braidotti, 2013), they have to address this loss of humanity to themselves. If they should lose this approach with the post-human turn in the humanities, we will have to deal with a loss in the minds of the historians themselves. Here their fundamental identity as being human is tackled. We might diagnose a loss of ourselves in dealing with inhumanity in history.

In order to come to terms with such a loss human culture has developed the mental process of mourning. Mourning therefore should become an effective element of historical culture (Rüsen, 2004; 2008).

History didactics has not yet addressed this issue. But it is high time to confront the students with the experience of losing one's humanity. By realizing and commemorating events of radical destruction of humanity when teaching and learning history the students have to experience and to acquire the ability of mourning in the realm of their historical consciousness. Days of common mourning belong to the historical culture of many peoples and nations. This mourning should become an element in *historical consciousness* across and beyond the change of generations.

REFERENCES

- BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- DEMANTOWSKY, Marko. A History/Memory Matrix for History Education. 2016. Available at: <http://public-history-weekly.olderbourg-verlag.de/4-2016-6/a-historymemory-matrix-for-history-education/#comment-5789>; Accessed on: May 30, 2016.
- KANT, Immanuel. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. 1.ed. Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1785.
- KARLSSON, Klas-Göran. Historical Consciousness – the fundament of Historical thinking and History teaching. In: NORDGREN, Kenneth; ELIASSON, Per; RÖNNQVIST, Carina. *The Process of History Teaching*. 1.ed. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press, 2011.
- _____. Processing Time – on the manifestation and activation of historical consciousness. In: BJERK, Helle; LEZ, Claudia; THORSTENSEN, Eric. *Historizing the using of the past: Scandinavian perspectives on History Culture, Historical Consciousness and Didactics of History related to World War II*. 1.ed. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011a.
- KOZLAREK, Oliver; RÜSEN, Jörn; WOLFF, Ernst (Eds.) *Shaping a Humane World: Civilizations, Axial Times, Modernities, Humanisms*. 1.ed. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012.
- REICHMUTH, Stefan; RÜSEN, Jörn; SARHAN, Aladdin (Eds.) *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*. 1.ed. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2012.
- RÜSEN, Jörn. Emotional Forces un Historical Thinking: Some Metahistorical Reflec-

- tions and the Case of Mourning. *Historiein – A Review of the past and other stories*, n.8, pp. 41-53, 2008.
- RÜSEN, Jörn. Forming Historical Consciousness – Towards a Humanistic History Didactics. In: NORDGREN, Kenneth; ELIASSON, Per; RÖNNQVIST, Carina. *The Process of History Teaching*. 1.ed. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press, 2011.
- _____. *History, narrations, interpretation, orientation*. 1.ed. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005.
- _____. *Humanismo e Didática da História*. 1.ed. Curitiba: W.A. Editores, 2015.
- _____. *Teoria da história: uma teoria da história como ciência*. 1.ed. Curitiba: Ed. UFPR, 2015.
- _____. Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense Generation and its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture. *History and Theory – Theme Issue: Tradition*, Middletown: Wesleyan University, v.51, n.4, pp. 45-59, 2012.
- _____. Trauma and Mourning in Historical Thinking. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archeology*, New York: New York University, v.1, n.1, pp. 10-21, 2004.
- _____. (Ed.) *Approaching Humankind: Towards an Intercultural Humanism*. 1.ed. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013.
- RÜSEN, Jörn; LAASS, Henner (Eds.) *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations*. 1.ed. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009.
- RÜSEN, Jörn; SPARIOSU, Michai (Eds.) *Exploring Humanity: Intercultural Perspectives on Humanism*. 1.ed. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2012.
- SEIXAS, Peter. *Theorising historical consciousness*. 1.ed. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004.

Entrevista recebida em 1 de abril de 2016. Aprovada em 30 de maio de 2016.