

A történelmi tudás [Historical knowledge]. By Gábor Gyáni. Budapest: Osiris, 2020. 460 pp.

Two decades ago, when I was a university student, one of my professors said that it is not the historians' job to think and write about the theory or philosophy of history. Let's leave that to philosophers, he said, since our task is only to study what happened in the past and write down the historical reality. I think, or at least hope, that few historians today consider their task this simple or have any faith in the notion of studying and writing history without some philosophically, sociologically, and ideologically determined viewpoints. And yet, historians often write their narratives with few if any reflections on their theoretical framework, and theorists or philosophers of history usually only read and criticize historiographical works without actually practicing this science themselves.

Gábor Gyáni is one of the few historians who has been doing a lot to introduce the Hungarian readership to recent Western theories of history, interpreting them from the perspective of a researcher with broad interdisciplinary knowledge. In *Történelmi tudás*, he offers a comprehensive survey of central questions and viewpoints of some current philosophical and methodological trends in the study of history. Thus, this book can be seen not only as a reference work on some theoretical problems concerning history but also as Gyáni's interpretation of his own practice and an inquiry into the main components of the type of knowledge we call "historical."

Ten chapters of the book focus on specific problems or aspects of the concept of historical knowledge from varying perspectives. The first chapter touches on the very notion of historical fact and different interpretations concerning the notion of "being factual". The following essays analyze the debates in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history in the 1960s and 1970s, which broached questions concerning historical explanation and the role of narrative language. Some of the chapters are more oriented around questions discussed in the French and German theoretical literature, such as concepts of structure oriented historical inquiries and long-durée, while others consider approaches that have appeared more recently, like historical experience and role of (personal and social) memory in historical writing. It seems natural to start with the concept of "fact," since professional historians and "outsiders" tend to view facts as the elementary components of history. Facts, however, do not speak for themselves, or more precisely, there are no pure facts. Rather, the viewpoint and interests

of the historian determine the kinds of past events that need to be considered as facts. Moreover, following Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, Gyáni points out that one can even consider facts as elementary units, not of the actual happenings but rather of the narrative construction created by the historian about these happenings. Thus, as the second chapter convincingly demonstrates, the notion of historical knowledge has been changed fundamentally by the approach introduced in the 1960s, when some theorists wanted to merge the explanatory method of analytical philosophy with a narrative model, and radicalized some years later with the application of structuralist narrative theory to historiography. Perhaps the narrative and linguistically determined character of historical writing are the central components of Gyáni's standpoint, signified by the fact that essays in his first theoretical book concentrated on problems of the narrative philosophy of history and its connection with collective memory theories.¹ He returned to the narrative construction of the past in the study of history in each of his books, or, more precisely, to the issue that the past can be mediated via narrative language.

The next chapter analyzes the relations between historical event and structure. According to Gyáni, a past occurrence is usually interpreted as an event due to its perceived or alleged consequences, which caused some change within a given structural system. His two examples are the siege of Bastille and the Hungarian revolution on March 15, 1848, since neither was understood as historically significant for the contemporary agents, but both became meaningful soon, because they set in motion another chain of events to transform the given structure. Thus, like facts, events are not given entities which the historian simply finds. They are, rather, construed later by culturally and socially defined actors.

The subsequent chapters study issues that are perhaps only rarely of interest to historians in their everyday work but which are nevertheless central to the historical approach as hidden preconceptions. Analyzing these themes, e. g. historical determination, the possibility of prediction, the various functions of time (for instance, the question of periodization, the use of grammatical verb tenses in writing about the past, and the temporality of any given viewpoint), and changes of scale in historiography, Gyáni not only summarizes the most influential recent theoretical debates but also specifies some significant factors with which historians have often been confronted (at times perhaps without

¹ *Emlékezés, emlékezet és a történelem elbeszélése* [Remembrance, memory, and the narration of history], (Budapest: Napvilág, 2000).

realizing it) in their research and, more importantly, in the writing process. Perhaps the topics of the following two chapters are more familiar and seem of more immediate relevance, at least for contemporary theory: the problem of historical experience and the relations between historiography and social memory. It is not easy to summarize the numerous questions raised in these chapters due to the diversity of approaches connected with the problem of historical experience, from the hermeneutic-oriented viewpoint of Wilhelm Dilthey through theory of historical experience according to the contemporary Dutch philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit to some current problems, including the viewpoints (or specific experiences) of women and postcolonial experiences. Here and in the entire book, Gyáni's main aim was not to analyze each topic exhaustively but to give a comprehensive synthesis with a synoptic presentation of some major problems. On some questions, Gyáni has already written more essays or a whole book. For example, almost parallel with *Történelmi tudás*, he published a volume about women's perspectives and experiences in history.²

Another aspect of historical experience discussed by Gyáni connects this chapter with the next one, underlining some oft-returning questions in his theoretical studies. The problem of collective historical traumas, memories of these traumas, and adequate ways of transforming trauma into any representation (whether historical or otherwise) appeared in the field of historical theory in the mid-1980s and has become one of the subjects where the practice of professional historians can touch public interests and ideological debates most visibly. In Gyáni's view, there are three interconnected factors of collective trauma: a historical factor, touching upon the genealogy of trauma as a modern phenomenon; an aesthetic or poetic factor, focusing on the possibilities of its representation; and a cultural factor, reflecting on the aspect of collective memory of trauma and strategies of memorialization. Gyáni argues that the traumatic historical event is essentially modern not because catastrophic happenings of the distant past would not have been similarly terrible for a given community but since people in the distant past had some (mostly ritual and religion-based) methods of working through these events as soon as possible, and they found appropriate (or at least usefully applicable) interpretational patterns with which to understand them. The prototype of modern historical trauma is the Holocaust. However, as sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander has pointed out, it was

2 *A nő élete – történelmi perspektívában* [The lives of women in historical perspective], (Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2021).

not a par excellence traumatic event from the beginning, or, more precisely, it could be traumatic only for individual victim survivors, whereas the Holocaust as a collective trauma was constructed later as a consequence of historical processes.³ That drives us to the next question, the problems which inevitably arise when experience or “past” is transformed into narrative and, connected closely with these problems, the social and cultural roles of historical writing.

As the theoretical works which Gyáni has written over the course of the past two decades reveal, the roles and responsibilities of historians have been among his central topics since the 2010s, undoubtedly due to the present-day historical situation. One of the main goals of his theoretical approach seems to have been to make the profession more self-reflexive and to dislodge it from the naïve, positivistic kind of approach based on the optimistic notion that facts and sources speak for themselves, and the historian’s task is to present what happened in the past. In his earlier essays and books, Gyáni analyzes the history and genealogy of this viewpoint and the connections between the rise of the nation state and modern professional historiography. He argues convincingly that this nineteenth-century style history of writing is anachronistic, and he exhorts historians to reflect on the assumptions, methods, and roles of their discipline.⁴ Nowadays, however, the increasingly pressing problem is to clarify the relationship between the alleged relativism of postmodern theory and the new contemporary phenomena that emerged not from but in opposition to the science of history. From his earliest theoretical studies, Gyáni has constantly analyzed academic history in parallel with the structure and functioning of collective memory. Later, in his collections of essays,⁵ he added another central topic, the phenomenon of public history. The emergence and increasing popularity of this historical tendency can be challenging for the discipline, because public history mediates historical knowledge in more consumable and necessarily simplified ways. There are many forms and modes of public history, including historical documentaries and non-fictional books written by authors outside the academic sphere, historical reenactments, and semi-historical webpages and blogs. According to Gyáni, because public history is closely related to collective

3 Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Holocaust and Trauma: Moral Universalism in the West,” in *Trauma: A Social Theory*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 31–96.

4 See, for example, essays in *Nép, nemzet, zsidó* [People, nation, Jew] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2013) and *Nemzeti vagy transznacionális történelem* [National or transnational history] (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2018).

5 *Az elveszített múlt* [The past that could be lost] (Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2010); *A történelem mint emléke(mű)* [History as memory (and memorial)] (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2016).

memory, its topics, attitudes to the past, and narratives serve the interests of the larger society and its need to construct an identity for itself.

In an essay about the connections between history and memory, Peter Burke called the historian a kind of “remembrancer,” a term which was used as a euphemism for debt collectors. The task of historians as remembrancers is “to remind people of what they would like to forget”: to find and present the metaphorical skeletons in closets and to establish and meet scientific standards for the revision of myths and legends on which collective memory often rests.⁶ From Gyáni’s viewpoint, the main problem is that it is more difficult for contemporary historians to be “remembrancers,” because the borders between scientific discourse and other kinds of discourses have been blurred in the eyes of the public. Some tendencies present at the moment, such as the idea of alternative facts and post-truth or populist political trends (which use their interpretations of history to underpin nationalist myths and legends), challenge the social role of history and historiography by giving simplified explanations which fit smoothly into the identity construction of a given community. According to Gyáni, the role of the historian is not just to correct the false narratives like a kind of “myth-buster” and to point out “what actually happened in the past.” This approach, after all, remains anchored in the notion of a clear opposition between fact versus fiction, which seems anachronistic now that philosophical studies have pointed out the narrative, rhetorical, and ideological implications of historical writing. Gyáni is not a radical constructivist propagating a postmodernist “anything goes” interpretation of history, as some of his conservative critics have claimed. As a historian, he wants to be a “remembrancer” of the historical discipline itself by detecting some preconceptions in the historiography, studying their roots and genealogy, and raising awareness of the significance of self-reflectiveness in the making of history.

This concept is expressed most spectacularly in the appendix of the book, which focuses on how the personality of the historian influences research. This should not be mistaken for some kind of psychological explanation of the historian’s persona. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the relevance, in the construction of any narrative of history, of the individual and social conditions that affected a given scholar and influenced his or her viewpoint. In the case studies, examining the careers of György Szabad and Iván T. Berend (two

6 Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” In: Burke: *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 59.

leading Hungarian historians in the second half of the twentieth century), Gyáni interprets their social backgrounds and ventures claims concerning the ways in which their personal historical experiences influenced their approaches to the past. Thus, to sum up again one of Gyáni's cardinal thesis statements, there is no objective historiography because the historical knowledge (or the historian's knowledge) is necessarily affected by personal aspects (the background, the life story, and experiences of the historian), the social and cultural circumstances surrounding the actual production of history as textual narrative, and, more generally, the poetic and rhetorical conventions of the given language. The impossibility of total objectivity does not mean that discipline of history would inevitably be subjective, of course, and nor does it imply that all historical interpretations are equally legitimate. Gyáni stands for a kind of history which openly addresses the circumstances of its own production as affected by the factors noted above but which still aims to give an original, verifiable, and authentic interpretation of the past.

It would be very interesting to read a detailed ego history of Gyáni's professional career and personal background, on which he touched in his answer to the question "How did I become a historian?" in the journal *Korall*.⁷ Perhaps another historian will someday write about the history of Hungarian historiography in the 2000s. This narrative would have to feature a chapter on the start of a more reflexive, philosophically well-informed trend in the discipline, in which Gyáni will be a central character. Drawing on his account of his career, so far, as a historian and on his oeuvre, one perhaps could venture a kind of commentary similar to the commentary he offered on the careers of Szabad and Berend. And, if this historical inquiry were to be written, *Történeti tudás* could be interpreted not just as a handbook reviewing theoretical and methodological questions in the recent historical science and as a summary of more than two decades of Gyáni's theoretical thinking but as an overview by a historian on how he himself has detected and diagnosed some disciplinary questions and challenges in his profession.

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7 Gyáni Gábor, "Utam a társadalomtörténehez" [My path to social history], *Korall* 21–22 (2005), 193–96.