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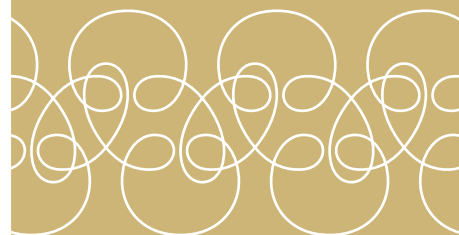
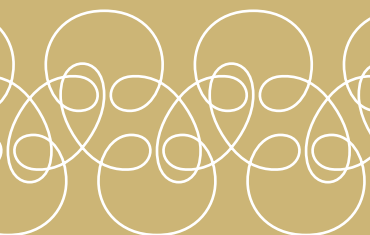
# Hungarian Historical Review

NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA  
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

*Contemporary History*

VOLUME **6** NUMBER **4**  
**2017**

Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities,  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences



THE  
Hungarian  
Historical  
Review

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ



Supported by the HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (HAS) and  
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INDEXED/ABSTRACTED IN: CEEOL, EBSCO, EPA, JSTOR, MATARKA, Recensio.net.



Institute of History,  
Research Centre for the Humanities,  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences  
H-1097 Budapest, Tóth Kálmán utca 4.  
[www.hunghist.org](http://www.hunghist.org)  
HU ISSN 2063-8647



# The Hungarian Historical Review

New Series of Acta Historica  
Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae

Volume 6 No. 4 2017

## *Boundaries of Contemporary History*

Zsombor Bódy, András Keszei  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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## Social Demand and the Social Purpose of History:

### What is Missing from Alun Munslow's Classification of Historiography?<sup>1</sup>

László Vörös

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Alun Munslow proposed a threefold classification of historians' approaches to the writing of history. According to Munslow, every historian is either a reconstructionist, constructionist, or deconstructionist, depending on his/her fundamental epistemological/ontological beliefs concerning the possibilities of studying and representing the "past" in the form of narrative. I suggest that the category of constructionism as defined by Munslow is based on a priori presumptions about historians' alleged beliefs in the ontic nature of the "before now" and its knowability. The actual practice of scholarly history writing allows for a more nuanced typology. I argue for a looser association of formal and methodological criteria with the basic ontological/epistemological positions of historians. I also argue that Munslow's category of constructionism should be split into two ideal-typical categories: constructionism-proper and constructionism-improper. His deep insight into the formal aspects of history representation notwithstanding, Munslow's theory fails to explain why there are such diverse and completely contradictory epistemologies within a single discipline. Neither does it explain the seemingly paradoxical continued domination of (in Munslow's view) two fallacious epistemologies: the reconstructionist and the constructionist. Why has reconstructionism, the most obsolete of the three epistemological positions, not vanished after many decades of intense criticism? I suggest that we should look for answers in the extra-disciplinary domain of the social functions of history. I argue that the social purpose of the knowledge produced by historians and the interaction between historians and the public have a decisive formative influence on both the theory and the practice of the discipline. Historians who fit into the epistemological categories of reconstructionism and constructionism-improper are able to provide accounts that legitimize social institutions, political regimes, economical systems, social orders, etc. Even more importantly, the histories constructed by this kind of historian often serve to anchor narratives (of self-identification) connected to referential social

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1 The research and writing of this paper were supported by the *Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-14-0644 – Continuities and discontinuities of political and social elites in Slovakia in 19th and 20th centuries*; this paper is in part a product of the project *Methods of investigation of the phenomena of nationalism in historical research (Interdisciplinary inspirations)*, which enjoys the support of the Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, P. O. Box 198, Klemensova 19, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovakia.

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groups and categories. I suggest that reconstructionist and constructionist-improper historians can serve these societal functions because their accounts are based on realist-empiricist epistemologies congruent with naïve perceptions of the “past.” Furthermore, the constructionist-proper and deconstructionist historians not only do not offer legitimizing or identification narratives, their narratives of history are based on counterintuitive epistemology informed by constructivist social scientific theory. Their analyses often deconstruct the very notions upon which legitimizing and anchoring discourses are based. I suggest that the social functions of historical knowledge are thus an aspect that must be incorporated into epistemological studies of history and historiography.

Keywords: Social functions of history, Alun Munslow, epistemology, reconstructionism, constructionism, deconstructionism, self-identification, anchoring

In his works,<sup>3</sup> philosopher of history and historian Alun Munslow has masterfully introduced the main themes of the philosophy of history in the past half-century. Taking first and foremost the ideas of postmodernist and narrativist philosophers of history as his point of departure, he argues coherently against the tenets of traditional historiography concerning the object of historical studies, the practice of historical research, and the results of the scientific practices of historians. He proposes a threefold classification of epistemological approaches which should be applicable everywhere where the European model of history writing functions in an institutionalized form. In Munslow’s view, each and every historian follows either the *reconstructionist*, *constructionist*, or *deconstructionist* approach to the study of the past and the writing of history.

Like any classification or typology, Munslow’s has been subjected to various critical assessments. Munslow’s classification does indeed have weak points. However, the gravity of these weaknesses depends on the perspective from which we approach his typology of historiographical epistemologies and the purposes to which we wish to use it. Several authors, approaching it from the perspective of the philosophy of history, ontology, and epistemology, have expressed objections. I will briefly mention one of them. These objections concern definitional problems with the category of *constructionism*, and they in no way belittle Munslow’s work. They merely amend it.

However, Munslow aspires to do more than merely contribute to the philosophy of history. His main goal is to promote the deconstructionist approach

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3 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*; idem, *The Routledge Companion*; idem, *The New History*; Jenkins and Munslow, *The Nature of History*.

to pursuing research on the past and the writing of history. The reconstructionist/constructionist epistemology in his view has fundamental problems. Historians falling into these categories are, according to Munslow, living in an illusion according to which they (and historiography in general) are producing truthful scholarly knowledge. Munslow (and he is far from being alone) thinks that the writers of history and history writing in general need to disabuse themselves of this delusion.<sup>4</sup> Thus, his threefold classification is meant to be more than a mere disinterested taxonomy; it is supposed to be used as an analytical tool to help achieve this goal. From this perspective, I think his classification suffers from several deficiencies and omissions which are much weightier. Though I agree with major parts of his reasoning, I am skeptical about the analytical strength and potential of his threefold classification. The first weak point in this respect is the same as the shortcoming mentioned above: the category of constructionism is based on mistaken definitional premises. Moreover, to speak only about *constructionism* is an oversimplification. One can conceptualize at least two ideal-typical versions of constructionism, both on epistemological and on practical bases. The second weak point is that Munslow uses a rather narrow conception of epistemology. He makes the central reference point of his classification the question of the ontic status of the past and historians' presumed belief in or skepticism concerning its objective form.

From philosophical point of view, this might be legitimate and unobjectionable, but if the goal is to study and understand the professional (scholarly) history writing in its complexity, some other aspects need to be taken into consideration. For instance, Munslow's classification cannot explain why there are within one discipline such diverse and completely contradictory epistemologies—a rather unique occurrence even within the humanities, let alone the social sciences. Nor can it explain the seemingly paradoxical continued domination of (in Munslow's view) two fallacious epistemologies: the reconstructionist and the constructionist. And particularly, it fails to explain why reconstructionism, the most obsolete of the three epistemological positions, did not vanish after many decades of intense and plausible criticism

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4 It has been half a century since Hayden White gave historians the following warning in one of his famous early studies: “[One] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought.” White, “The Burden of History,” 29. Reader edited by Keith Jenkins offers a useful overview of similar positions: Jenkins, *The Postmodern History*.

coming not only from philosophers of history, but also from historians themselves.

In the case of the humanities and particularly historiography, the social purpose of the knowledge produced by scholars and the interaction between scholars and the public have a decisive formative influence on both the theory and the practice of the discipline. The purpose and social functioning of historical knowledge is thus an aspect that must be incorporated into the epistemological studies of history and historiography. Munslow's classification is useful because, even if with some flaws, it comprehensively identifies what we are dealing with when we speak about the fundamentals of history writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Munslow reveals the problems and offers remedies, but he is not paying adequate attention to the question "why?" Munslow's classification fails to offer any explanation (nor does it attempt to offer any explanation) of why the "problematic epistemology" (i.e. reconstructionism) remains dominant, despite decades of persuasive critiques of the premises on which it rests. Thus, it remains little more than an inspiring but imaginative and exceedingly ideal-typical typology with a rather limited potential as an instrument in the analyses of historiographical practice past and present.

The most elementary question of the epistemology of history is ontological: What is the object of historical study and how does it exist? If the object of historians' interest is the "past," or, more specifically, "the connections between events and human intention or agency in the past," how does this past exist in the present?<sup>5</sup> There is a consensus that the "past" (what happened "before now") is non-existent in any present, however, there are material remnants in the form of sources. This consensus, nevertheless, begins to show fissures when the following questions are raised: is the past in any way objectively structured? Are historians really studying the "past," or are they "merely" studying people's ideas about what happened? What about chronological ordering, historical fact, and historical event? Are these natural "building blocks" of the "past," i.e. manifestations through which one can shed light on its otherwise hidden structuring? Or they are rather the constructs of historians? Are the sources repositories of truth about the past? Is there an objective, i.e. observer-independent truth which can be discovered by historians and told (narrated) to others? Is there a direct correspondence between the events of the past and the narratives (i.e. history) about them? Is the language used by historians a

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5 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 4.

transparent tool for conveying information, or does it have a formative influence, whether historians are conscious of it or not? Does the way the narrative is told have any formative impact on its meaning? Does the subjectivity of historians (the social, cultural, educational, and psychological determinants) influence their narratives of the past? If so, is it possible (or necessary, or desirable) to eliminate or at least regulate these determinants and influences?

These are some of the questions that have preoccupied philosophers of history over the course of the past half-century. The answers historians have given to these questions place them into one of Munslow's three categories (or genres) of history writing. In the following, I will offer a brief outline of Munslow's threefold classification and some of his main points.

Reconstructionist historians presume (usually implicitly) that what happened in the past had a given form which is discoverable and can be truthfully represented through narratives. In principle, if the conditions are right (i.e. if there are sufficient sources and the researchers are skilled and adequately trained), historians should be able to uncover and reconstruct the course of events and narrate them objectively "as they actually happened." Munslow characterizes the reconstructionists as hard-core empiricists and (naïve) realists. The former means that reconstructionist historians consider the sources remnants and specimens of the past which contain self-evident facts about the past. Historians merely use their talents and abilities to extract and process these facts, putting them into the correct order and thus arriving at a disinterested and truthful interpretation of what actually happened. The absolute primacy of the study of sources is informed by a realist vision of the past: "Realists ... [are saying that] ... the past must exist regardless of whether there are any historians just as mountains exist regardless of whether there are mountaineers or geographers."<sup>6</sup> In other words, reconstructionist historians, whether consciously or unconsciously, are objectifying/reifying the "past." They tend to think about "historical events" as if they were objective entities, unique and fixed, observable and describable. It should come as no surprise, then, that reconstructionists endorse a concept of truth that is congruent with the correspondence theories of truth, meaning, and knowledge. Reconstructionist historians also look with suspicion on interdisciplinary imports into the workings of historiography. Social theories used in historical research are viewed as deviations which artificially try to force "structures," "regularities," or "laws" upon the past. The use of theories leads to

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6 Munslow, *The New History*, 9.



violation of the past “reality,” deformations of heuristics and interpretation, and eventually the ideologization of history.<sup>7</sup>

Theory, or no theory? The answer given to this question is what differentiates the constructionist historians from reconstructionist historians the most. According to constructionists, human acts and behavior in the past are too complex to be interpreted correctly without a proper conceptual apparatus and theoretical background. The Annalists, the Marxist/neo-Marxist schools, and the various schools inspired by theories of modernization are, according to Munslow, constructionists.<sup>8</sup> Constructionist historians, in contrast with reconstructionists, do not endorse the correspondence theory a-critically: “Constructionists generally are aware that their narratives do not automatically mirror the reality of the past and that objectivity (at least as understood by reconstructionists) is impossible.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, there is a crucial point on which constructionists are in agreement with their reconstructionist “cousins,” as Munslow labels them,<sup>10</sup> and that is the belief in the objectivity of the past. In other words, even if constructionists admit that we might never know “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” they insist there is one ultimate truth about the past. According to Munslow constructionists believe in the existence of objective structures and patterns which can be studied and revealed with the help of social theories and models. This very much reminds one of the reconstructionist objectification/reification of the “historical facts” and “historical events.” Similarly, the constructionist understanding of the ontology and epistemic value of the sources resembles the reconstructionist views. In fact, Munslow often treats both categories as fundamentally one: “reconstructionist/constructionist.”<sup>11</sup>

Deconstructionists pay much more attention to the person of the historian and the factors which determine him/her. There is no inherent meaning hidden in the sources, nor is there a truth about the past. Historians do not observe and reconstruct the events of the past. On the contrary, they construct narratives about events or aspects of events which took place in the past. The writing

7 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 39–60.

8 Munslow categorizes several well-known historians (sociologist-historians and anthropologist-historians) as constructionists: Norbert Elias, Robert Darnton, Marshal Sahlins, Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, and even Anthony Giddens. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 21. For exemplification of reconstructionist, constructionist, and deconstructionist historians see also Jenkins and Munslow, *The Nature of History Reader*.

9 Munslow, *The New History*, 15.

10 Idem, *Deconstructing History*, 25; idem, *The New History*, 6.

11 Idem, *Deconstructing History*, 39–60.

of history is essentially a process of literary representation, not an unbiased objective description of how things actually happened. This does not mean that the deconstructionists would deny that there is information in the sources. The deconstructionist “argument is that knowing what happened does not tell you what it means.”<sup>12</sup> And it is in the process of giving meaning, i.e. representing, that the subjective, contingent, ideological, and fictive elements enter the narrative of history. “The point of deconstructionist history is the challenge it throws down to the idea, which reaches its ultimate expression in hard-core constructionism, especially of the statistical variety, that there are essential (true) patterns ‘out there’ to be discovered in the past.”<sup>13</sup> According to this view, the past can be best understood as an inherently meaningless unbounded heterogeneous stream of happening within which human action unfolded.

The historical facts are far from having an inherent true meaning decipherable on the basis of the sources. Nor are “historical events” the natural constituents of the past, as the reconstructionists and partly constructionists prefer to see them. Both facts and events are constructions, parts of the history discourse, not real and observer-independent entities. However, the most significant argument of deconstructionists and the one that is still provoking bitter responses from practicing historians concerns the language and the form in which history is represented. With the exception of very traditional reconstructionists, most of the actors in the discipline to some extent acknowledge the subjectivity (i.e. bias stemming from social, cultural, ideological, and other determinations) of the historian as a formative factor in the writing of history. The deconstructionists go further in their claim that, in addition to the preconceptions, prejudices, and biases as influences which can never be entirely eliminated, the language and the particular rhetorical mode predominantly used by historians to represent the past (the narrative) exerts its own influence on the meanings of these representations, an influence which is beyond the control of historians. At this point Munslow, draws heavily on the works of philosophers of history Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, Hans Kellner, Jörn Rüsen, Keith Jenkins, Louis Mink, Paul Ricoeur, and their followers. The way in which historians arrange the facts and thus create an emplotment for the story (the historical representation) bestows the narrative with meanings at a very fundamental level. According to Hayden White there

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12 Ibid., *Deconstructing History*, 83.

13 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 70.

are four elementary kinds of emplotment: romantic, comic, tragic, and satiric.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the histories written by historians are, as far as the form of the narrative is concerned, either romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire. In theory, every past event can be emplotted (narrated) in each of the four ways. The question of which is used is most often not the conscious choice of the historian, but rather the outcome of other discursive determinants.<sup>15</sup>

This is one of the strongest arguments of the deconstructionists in favor of the relativist, non-objectivist, non-empiricist epistemology of history, yet it is also one of the most misunderstood and ignored by historians. The human act is in itself valueless. It is neither tragic nor comic. It can be viewed as such only from a certain perspective. Every historian speaking about past events is doing so from a particular position which is determined and influenced by many discursive and non-discursive factors.<sup>16</sup> The truthfulness of various interpretations is relative to the “regimes of truth” within which they come into being. Thus, it is not merely correspondence with the facts in the first place that serves as the basis for deciding whether a narrative is true, but the ideological background, preconceptions, and, as I will argue, the purpose the narrative of history is intended to serve.

In his *Deconstructing History* (first published in 1997), Munslow did not offer any concrete examples of deconstructionist historical writings. He did so seven years later in the reader *The Nature of History*, which he co-edited with Keith Jenkins.<sup>17</sup> There are excerpts from the works of ten authors. Two selections are from the writings of philosophers (Hayden White and Jacques Derrida), while the remaining eight examples (from works by Greg Dening, Walter Benjamin, Richard Price, Robert A. Rosenstone, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Sven Lindquist, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Iain Chambers) differ in style and form, but they are similar in the conspicuous absence of fluent linear narrative (this does not mean, however, that they are non-narrative) and stylistic experimentation. As the editors put it, the chosen excerpts are “texts which undercut the idea of the

14 White, *Metahistory*. The narrativist argument was further developed (partially independently, partially following White) by other authors as well, most notably Paul Ricoeur, Hans Kellner, and Frank Ankersmit.

15 In White's view, the mode of emplotment the form of the historians' explanation (formist, organicist, mechanistic, and contextualist), and the *ideological dimension* of a historical account (anarchist, conservative, radical, and liberal) are predetermined by the tropological prefiguration of the text (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony). White, *Metahistory*, 7–38. For an accessible introduction into White's thinking see Paul, *Hayden White*.

16 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 61–81.

17 Jenkins and Munslow, *The Nature of History*, 115–239.

narrator as nobody and stress the author's creative role. Dispensing with linear narratives in favor of multi-voiced, multi-perspectival, multi-levelled, fragmented arrangements... [these authors play] ...with the possibility of creating new ways of representing and figuring 'the before now'.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, Munslow's "reconstructionists," "constructionists," and "deconstructionists" should be perceived as ideal-typical categories. As such, they are utopias, and they can hardly be found in their pristine form in reality.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, if ideal types are to be properly operable in the work of analyses, they need to be plausibly constructed. In the following, I argue that Munslow makes several assumptions which render his threefold classification problematic, especially for analytical use in the study of historiographical practice. I draw attention to some of the weak points of Munslow's definitional approach, and I then suggest a redefinition and split of his category of constructionism into two subcategories.

Munslow places considerable emphasis on the ontic status of the past as perceived by historians, making it a sort of primary epistemological reference point of his classification. This is his most decisive criterion, through which he defines the two opposing camps: reconstructionist/constructionist vs. deconstructionist. At the same time, he downplays the importance of other factors and categorical attributes (such as research practice, methods, and approaches), reducing them to mere secondary features. For Munslow, the methods of research and the ways of acquiring knowledge serve merely as secondary "markers" with which to identify the primary epistemological feature. This is particularly noticeable in his definition of constructionism. Munslow simply assumes that historians working with theories and concepts from the social sciences believe in the objective past, much as reconstructionists do. The

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18 Ibid., 115. Despite what has been said, the narrative form is dominantly present in the cited writings of the authors listed above. The use of figurative language, the tendency to quote primary (i.e. archival, iconographical etc.) sources, and the relative lack of systematic analyses resembling analyses in the social sciences make them appear at first sight closer to the reconstructionist "style" as characterized by Munslow. On the other hand, most of the authors characterized in Jenkins and Munslow's reader as deconstructionist are evidently well-acquainted with critical social and culture theories and accept works by social theorists and consider constructionist historians as plausible (quotable) sources of knowledge, which draws them much closer to the constructionist "camp" (e.g. compare with the articles and books by Greg Denning, Richard Price, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Sven Lindqvist, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Iain Chambers cited in the reader; Jenkins and Munslow, *The Nature of History*, 117–34, 142–55, 171–81, 182–90, 191–97, 214–24 respectively).

19 I borrow the designation of ideal-types as utopias from the creator of the concept himself; see Weber, "Objectivity' in Social Science," 90.

only easily identifiable attribute that distinguishes Munslow's constructionists from the reconstructionists is the former's use of social theories. At the same time, the principal feature which differentiates the constructionists from the deconstructionists is the constructionists' alleged belief in the existence of objective (i.e. discoverable) social, economic, cultural, political, etc. patterns in the past.

For Munslow, the fact that someone conceptualizes of him or herself as a social historian who works with sociological, anthropological, psychological, and other theories to gain knowledge about various aspects of human life in the past, simply in itself serves as a decisive defining marker of the historian's epistemological/ontological belief about the nature of the past and its knowability. The definitional tying together of these features, making one the indicator of the other, is aprioristic and exceedingly reductionist.

Another problematic aspect of Munslow's strict classificatory approach concerns the manner in which he singles out and overemphasizes a narrowly defined criterion. Historians' ideas regarding the ontic status of the past (past events, social phenomena etc.) often cannot be conclusively identified. Undoubtedly there are cases in which an author's epistemological position can be safely inferred from his/her textual output. But in many cases, unless a historian makes an explicit statement about his/her standing as far as the knowability of past events is concerned, an inference will remain just a guess. Thus, it is not at all surprising that most of the authors whose writings Munslow (and Jenkins) uses as examples of reconstructionist, constructionist, and deconstructionist historical accounts made their epistemological stance explicitly clear either in the texts quoted or somewhere else.<sup>20</sup> Only few practicing historians make an explicit statement about their epistemological points of departure, particularly concerning the very issues Munslow make a decisive definitional factor. The search for answers to such elementary ontological/epistemological questions still does not belong to the mainstream theoretical and methodological principles of the discipline. Most practicing historians do not consider raising and answering these questions a necessary prerequisite of good historical scholarship.

One might therefore have doubts about the general validity of Munslow's three epistemological positions (genres), since their construction is based on limited and specific empirical material: the writings of historians who, by the very virtue of the fact that they have made their claims about the ontic status of

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20 See the reader Jenkins and Munslow, *The Nature of History*.

the past and its knowability explicit, represent a rather rare kind. One might ask whether the validity of Munslow's threefold classification isn't indeed limited to the historians whose writings he analyzes. Though in the same breath I must add that my skepticism does not go that far.

Arguably it is safe to presume that most of the traditional style historical accounts which indeed are narrative (or at least largely narrative) and which deal with national histories, important figures of national history, and so on can be safely categorized as reconstructionist. The same cannot be said, however, about the histories which are informed by social theories, even if they are partly or even in large part narrative. For Munslow, such histories are constructionist and thus based on objectivist epistemological premises, very much like the histories of reconstructionists. But many historians who fit into Munslow's category of constructionism simply because they use social theory, adopt with the theoretical body they borrow from sociologists, anthropologists, social psychologists, and colleagues from other disciplines, very strong social constructivist epistemological propositions which are in stark opposition to naïve realism and acritical empiricism of the sort that Munslow ascribes to reconstructionists and constructionists. Philosopher of history Eugen Zelenák makes a similar point and proposes an elegant solution to the contradictions stemming from Munslow's rigorous definitional approach.

Zelenák<sup>21</sup> considers Munslow's a priori judgement about constructionism as "essentially a subspecies of reconstructionism"<sup>22</sup> untenable, since he finds it difficult to justify such a close association of constructionists who use social scientific concepts, theories, and hypotheses with a-theoretical reconstructionism. He points out that many historians working with critical social theories and an analytical conceptual apparatus are aware that they are working with constructions which are not derived from the past but, on the contrary, are *applied to* (or in Munslow's words, *imposed on*) the evidence.<sup>23</sup> Following Munslow's own argumentation and examples, Zelenák suggests that Munslow is in fact speaking about at least two types of constructionism, one which indeed is close to reconstructionism (constructionism-I) and another which is much closer to the deconstructionist ideas about the ontic status of the past and the possibilities of knowing about the past (constructionism-

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21 Zelenák, "Modifying."

22 Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 24.

23 Zelenák, "Modifying," 529.

II).<sup>24</sup> Were the classification strictly based on general epistemological and ontological assumptions, Zelenák claims, it would be more adequate to reduce the three categories to two basic epistemological types which he labels *direct realism* and *impositionalism*. Reconstructionists and *constructionists-I* are direct realists, since their epistemological fundamentals are based on the idea that they are discovering the objective (i.e. observer independent) knowledge about past events. Deconstructionists and *constructionists-II* are impositionalists because they deliberately and, in accordance with the rules of scholarly conduct, impose concepts, theories and models on the information about past happenings which they are able to derive from sources, thus creating knowledge about particular aspects of past phenomena. Impositionalists do not consider this knowledge a mirror image of past events “as they actually happened.” They are aware that what they write is in many ways contingent and dependent on perspective.<sup>25</sup>

Though Zelenák’s reduced epistemological classification might seem too general, simplicity is its advantage. If we keep the secondary “markers” of Munslow’s classification,<sup>26</sup> strip it of its unsubstantiated assumptive aprioristic ontological/epistemological primary definitional criteria, and replace it with Zelenák’s basic twofold categorization, we get the skeleton of a much more workable ideal-type classification.

Consequently, a readjustment of Munslow’s classification in this vein must include a reassessment of his category of constructionism/constructionist historians. If this category is to be salvaged as an analytical concept which also refers to the scholarly practices of historians, it needs to be split into at least two types, as has been already suggested. Not every historian working with social scientific concepts and theories does so in a competent way. To infer the epistemic position of a historian on the basis of a simple presence of sociological, psychological, etc. terminology or references and allusions to grand theories of social sciences in his/her writing would merely be another aprioristic mistake. In other words, some of the historians who use social scientific terminology have not adequately mastered the theory itself, let alone the episteme upon which the given theory rests. I label this category of historian *constructionist-improper*

24 Ibid., 527–30. The labels *constructionism I* and *constructionism II* are mine. I introduce them here for the sake of the clarity of the later argumentation.

25 Ibid., 530–35.

26 These secondary markers are the following: (1.) the form (whether a historical writing is narrative, partially narrative, or non-narrative, descriptive, or analytical, etc.); and (2.) the research practice and methodology adopted by the authors (whether the historian’s interpretations are informed by social theory or are a-theoretical, etc.).



*historians*. I will return to this category later. First, let us examine the second type of constructionism, which I label *constructionism-proper*, in greater detail.

As already stated, *constructionist-proper historians* are full-fledged *social constructivists*. These historians usually recognize the difference between ontological and epistemological objectivity and the subjectivity of facts and observations, and they are aware of the constructed nature of social reality and the specific ontic status of social and institutional facts. They reject the Rankean “wie es eigentlich gewesen” kind of (direct realist) creed and are aware that their accounts are but contingent representations constructed from a certain perspective. At the same time, however, this kind of historian accepts the reality of cause and effect, the reality of human action and institutional agency, and the reality of social relations in the past. These things may not exist now, but they existed once. And even if it is nonsensical to think that there can be a “true reconstruction” of these events, this does not mean we cannot attain valid knowledge about social phenomena in the past by studying sources. In fact, accounts of this kind by constructionist historians are not histories in the traditional sense anymore. It is more appropriate to look at them as forms of historical sociology, historical anthropology, historical economy, historical political science, etc., as is reflected in the names of some of the historical schools and subdisciplines.

When I propose the adoption of the term *constructionist-improper historians* to denote a category of historians one of whose defining features is a relative inability (in no way permanent or inherent) to work properly with social constructivist theories and to grasp fully the epistemic bases of such theories, I do not mean to suggest any lack of intellectual capacity. Historians themselves never independently developed theories of social life that would become transdisciplinary because they never had to. Professional institutionalized scholarly history writing started in the nineteenth century as a discipline the primary function of which was to “discover” and “describe” the past of “nations” and the deeds of the great men, leaders, representatives of nations, etc. It was not the goal of historians to study psychological, social psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, or other general human-related phenomena. Thus, historiography did not manage to evolve into discipline that would inspire sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, etc. in their research strategies and agenda. It was, rather, the other way around. Some historians adopted or were inspired by concepts, theories, and methods used in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. However, this process of drawing inspiration from and/or adopting approaches, theories, concepts, and research strategies from



other disciplines never became a general feature of historians' training. Often, a historian develops an ability to work properly with theories and concepts from other disciplines only because of his or her determination and study. In many cases, historians who accept (or have been socialized into) the constructionist idea according to which past human phenomena are too complex to be correctly interpreted without a proper conceptual apparatus and theoretical background are for various reasons not able to work properly with social theories.

Perhaps surprisingly, this phenomenon is not unique to historiography. In the early 2000s, sociologist Rogers Brubaker critically remarked that the social scientific discourse about ethnicity, race, nationalism, and identity is plagued with an "intellectual slackness" which he labels "complacent and clichéd constructivism."<sup>27</sup> The most characteristic feature of clichéd constructivism is intuitive and superficial use of complex concepts and theories (e.g. that of "social identity"),<sup>28</sup> which very often leads to serious fallacies, notably essentialism and reification. In historiography, in particular the concepts of ethnicity, ethnic and national identity, ethnic group, nation and nationalism, race and racism, social group and collective action, and collective memory (to mention only a few) often fall prey to clichéd constructivism. Naturally, one can distinguish various degrees of inadequate and uninformed use of scholarly (social scientific) concepts, from the most vulgar, when historians blatantly essentialize for instance "ethnic" or "national identity" (i.e. either explicitly or implicitly they treat "identity" as an inherent feature of a historical actor or entire aggregates of the population) and/or reify social groups, categories, or classes (i.e. they endow them with ontological objectivity, speak about them as acting entities, and treat them as natural, not social, phenomena) to more sophisticated cases, when analyses which are informed by essentialist and reifying presumptions and misconceptions are concealed behind a constructivist rhetoric. I label this practice of pretended constructivism "constructionism-improper."<sup>29</sup>

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27 Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 3 and 38. Ian Hacking voiced similar criticism of the devaluation of the concept of social construction in his: Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*.

28 Brubaker, "Beyond 'Identity'."

29 Obviously even this split of Munslow's homogeneous category of constructionism might seem insufficient. Several other subcategories could be delineated. For instance, there are historians whose use of critical social theory concepts is not flawed, incompetent, or "clichéd," but also is not consequential or thorough. To put it metaphorically, for various reasons these historians merely scratch the surface and do not fully realize the potential (at least from social scientific point of view) of their data, sources, and hypotheses in the context of the theoretical background from which they depart or to which they refer. Certainly, a handful of subcategories of this sort could be (and as a result of empirical research should be)

As I implied above, from an ontological/epistemological point of view each of the two categories of constructionism suggested by me is congruent with Zelenák's dichotomy of direct realism and impositionalism. Constructionist-improper historians will probably though certainly not exclusively be direct realists, while constructionist-proper historians will probably be impositionalists.<sup>30</sup>

So far, I have argued that if Munslow had merely typified various epistemological positions currently prevailing in historiography, his classification would count as (perhaps with some amendments, such as the one made by Zelenák) a valuable contribution to the epistemology of history. However, since Munslow's ambition has been to propose a general classification of the historiographical practice with special regard to elementary epistemological positions of historians, he included and aprioristically tied together features such as the use of theory in the works of historical interpretation and methods of research. I pointed to the problematic aspects of this approach, and I deconstructed the category of constructionism, splitting it into two ideal-type subcategories. Now I turn to the last question I have asked in the introduction of this paper: why did the direct realist (reconstructionist/constructionist-improper) epistemological position not vanish after many decades of intense and justified criticism, and indeed why does it arguably remain, this criticism notwithstanding, the mainstream episteme within history writing globally?

Well-known historians from renowned schools such as the *Annales*, *Begriffsgeschichte*, the Cambridge school of the history of political ideas, Marxist/neo-Marxist schools in Great Britain, France and elsewhere, Microhistory, and New cultural history, to mention only a few, are perceived as the elite of the discipline, at least within the European and transatlantic Anglophone historiographies. These historians are cited and referred to far more

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pinned down. I propose splitting Munslow's original concept of constructionism into "merely" two types (based not so much on Munslow's primary epistemological/ontological criterion as on the methods of attaining knowledge) to make Munslow's classification more concrete, yet at the same time general enough for broader analytical application.

30 Though here I would like to repeat the point I made earlier about the complexity of determining the epistemological positions of historians concerning the ontic status of the "past" and "history." There are cases in which even Zelenák's general dichotomy (direct realist vs. impositionalist) needs to be applied cautiously. Presumably, every historian departs, whether intuitively or consciously, from a certain epistemological/ontological position, but this theoretical stance is not always identifiable beyond all doubt in his or her written or spoken output. In some cases, it is not possible to decide conclusively without further focused investigation (e.g. by interviewing the historian) whether the author believes in the objectivity of the "past" and the existence of an ultimate truth about past events or not.

frequently than most.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, though they have existed for decades and have undergone a process of progressive development, the schools represented by these historians (and some other schools) remain in the position of an avant-garde. The ways of thinking and working adopted by these historians, i.e. their impositionist epistemological points of departure have not been incorporated into the discipline's general theoretical and methodological framework, and this is also true of their methods, theories, and the themes of their research. Why have respected authors, whose scholarship and work is highly esteemed, petrified in the position of a special elite sub-genre? Why did the constructionist-proper and deconstructionist approaches to research and history writing not become (or became only to a limited extent) integral parts of the standard training of history students?

Obviously, there is no simple answer to these questions. Several closely related determinants—of a cognitive, social-psychological and social, political, cultural (ideological), economic, and institutional nature—are at play. But factors such as the outdated history education system, structural peculiarities of personal reproduction within the academic sphere, lack of resources, political/ideological influence and limitations on freedom of research etc. are secondary (not in importance, but in effect) to cognitive, social-psychological/social, and power-related (political/ideological) determinants, or to put it in other words, to the social functions and purposes of professional history writing (historiography). I contend that we should start to look for new understandings of and explanations for epistemic positions in historiography in the domain of the functionality of historical knowledge in society.

So far, following Munslow's threefold categorization, I have been paying attention to professional historians: their ideas about the past and its knowability, their scholarly practice, and the outcomes of this practice in the form of written histories. Now, we need to turn our attention to the consumers of history, in particular the non-professional public. I believe it is relevant to ask why people need history, why it makes sense to read and remember history, why is important to teach histories in an institutionalized and controlled manner. In the following, I consider the functions of history in modern societies. I argue that it is important

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31 At this point, I would like to emphasize that I am speaking strictly about the intra-disciplinary status of the leading historians of the schools listed. It is important to distinguish between the image of influence based on scientometric data (which might have relevance in an intra-disciplinary context) and the actual social impact (which is very difficult to quantify in objective terms and for which the data provided by scientometrics has little or no relevance).

to consider both the epistemological/ontological positions of historians and the intuitive (pre-theoretical) epistemological/ontological assumptions of lay readers, listeners, and viewers of history when studying the practice of history writing. Both the social purpose of historiographies and to a considerable extent the practice of the discipline as such is determined by the social functioning of the socially relevant narratives about the past, which is in turn largely determined by the cognitive modalities of perception of the “before now” by human beings, at least in modern societies.

There are many conceptualizations and typologies of the functions of history in everyday social life. For instance, G. E. R. Lloyd identifies eleven aims or agendas which historians set for themselves: (1) entertainment, (2) memorializing or commemorating, (3) glorification/vilification or celebration/denigration, (4) legitimization of regimes, (5) justifying past actions and policies, (6) explaining why things happened as they did, (7) offering instruction on the basis of past experience, (8) providing records for administrative use, (9) warning, admonishing on moral or prudential grounds, (10) criticizing others’ interpretations, and (11) “just” recording the past, saying how it was.<sup>32</sup> John Tosh or Enrique Florescano propose similar lists of the “uses” and social functions of history.<sup>33</sup>

I reduce Lloyd’s points to three general functionalities.<sup>34</sup>

The first of these is the *Historia magistra vitae est* function (which, I admit, is perhaps not the most fortunate label to use in this context). History, or more precisely, knowledge about some aspects of past human phenomena serves as a source of learning for present practical purposes. Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* might be mentioned as one of the early prototypical examples. Machiavelli referred to particular deeds and strategies of past rulers, conquerors, commanders, and

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32 Lloyd, *Disciplines in the Making*, 60.

33 Tosh, “The Uses of History,” 29–57; Florescano, “The Social Function of History,” 41–49; Florescano, *La función social de la historia*.

Also see older but still relevant studies by Hobsbawm, “The Social Function of the Past”; Mommsen, “Social Conditioning”; Schieder, “The Role of Historical Consciousness”; Faber, “The Use of History”; Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*. Also see an inspiring article by A. Dirk Moses on the possible implications of Hayden White’s views on the purpose of history for the study of nationalist conflicts and the utilization of history in them. Moses, “Hayden White.”

34 I have no ambition to propose an exhausting overview of the public uses of history. I omit some of Lloyd’s points—particularly (8), (10), and (11)—that primarily do not refer to the social functions of knowledge about the past. Also, given the spatial limitations of this inquiry, I am not paying particular attention to phenomena like “public history,” “living history,” or history reenactments, which, however, can be considered via the three general categories of history’s social functionality that I am proposing.

politicians to provide examples in support of his own observations regarding the nature of domination and power. Machiavelli's approach was purely utilitarian; he analyzed past events and actors (causes and factors) in order to suggest the best course of action or a strategy for the present and future. On the other end of the spectrum are the modern scholarly works, which study past social, political, economic, etc. phenomena in order to gain critical knowledge for a better understanding of present processes and developments. Very often, these kinds of historical accounts are also intended to serve as an admonishment or warning. Not surprisingly, this tendency is most apparent in the contemporary history writings dealing with non-democratic regimes, power and domination, stereotyping and discrimination, war and genocide, crisis and collapses, etc. However, any kind of practical learning from accounts of past events and the deeds of historical actors fit under this deliberately broadly defined category, including learning about ethics and morality, social norms, etc.

The second general functionality is the *legitimizing* function. When speaking about legitimization through history, most informed people think first and foremost of political ideologies and the historiographies of non-democratic regimes in the first place. Marxist-Leninist, national socialist, fascist, or traditional nationalist historiographies are but the overtly explicit forms of history writing with the purpose of legitimizing. A great deal has been written about the entanglement of historiographies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and even in earlier periods) with ideologies, regimes, and social and political movements.<sup>35</sup> However, legitimization is not necessarily (even if it is frequently) ideological in the traditional political sense of the word. There are much subtler forms through which historical accounts legitimize or delegitimize ideas, ways of thinking and living, political regimes, economic systems, policies, reforms, wars, borders, claims for individual or collective rights, claims for territories, and so on.<sup>36</sup> Theological modes of narration, reification of social concepts and

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35 Berger and Lorenz, *Nationalizing the Past*; Berger, *Writing the Nation*; Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History*; Davison, *The use and Abuse of Australian History*; for premodern periods see an inspiring volume Hen and Innes, *The Uses of the Past*; and Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*. Recent social psychological research also offers crucial insights into this functionality of discourses on the past. See a very useful introductory study to the thematic issue of the journal *Culture & Psychology* by de Saint-Laurent et al., "Collective Memory and Social Sciences"; Obradović, "Whose Memory and Why."

36 I am referring to Hayden White's concept of the "ideological implication" of historical narratives White, *Metahistory*, 5–7, 22–29, passim. For a lucid overview introducing the wider context of White's thinking concerning ideology and history see Paul, *Hayden White*, 22–24, 69–74, 116–127. Also see Stråth, "Ideology and History."

categories, essentialist social stereotypes and naïve theories about motivations and conditions, common sense assertions concerning necessity, inevitability, the beneficial or deleterious effects of an act, an event, or an actor or groups or entire categories and aggregates of population (to mention just a few) are semantic constituents which serve in historical narratives as vehicles of justificatory and legitimizing meanings.

The third functionality is the *anchoring* function. Most people, including historians, have a tendency to “anchor” themselves in (identify with) historical narratives (usually reduced to simplified stories or bits of stories) about referential groups of which they consider themselves members. Obviously, most often the historicized referential group is a “nation” or “ethnic” or “racial” group. However, this should be considered a universal cognitive phenomenon that forms an important part of the process of an individual’s practices of identification with social or categorical groups in general.<sup>37</sup> This social function of history was heavily institutionalized in the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, and it became an important factor in the processes of secondary socialization. Most of the fallacies and misconceptions (which the constructionist-proper and deconstructionist historians try so hard to deconstruct) occur in writings which serve this function, whether intentionally or not.

The legitimizing and anchoring functionalities of history (knowledge about past) seem to be indispensable and permanently present in social life. Both functions are best viewed as epiphenomena of the political and social organization of modern societies. Studies on collective memory and remembrance and studies on the politics of memory deal primarily with these two social functions of history.

An important specification needs to be added concerning the three point typology of social functionality of history proposed above. Not all the writings of historians and probably not even the majority of them actually function in the sphere of social life in one or more of the above outlined ways. There are history studies and books which will probably never have a readership larger than a few dozen or perhaps a few hundred readers. And there are studies and even books

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, not only social groups but any social entities in the most general meaning of the word (i.e. also communities, towns and cities, institutions, and organizations, including firms and companies). Histories of towns, companies etc., are often not written by historians out of scholarly interest, but rather in response to an initiative or a call issued by the representatives of the “entity” which desires “a history” as an indispensable part of its “identity.” Linde, *Working the Past*; also see Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

that most probably will be read exclusively by fellow scholars. Several factors determine what kinds of histories and historians will reach a larger public. Formal criteria are obvious: an accessible narrative form and socially relevant or in some other way appealing topic are probably necessary attributes of a text if it is going to reach a wider readership and audience. Other factors (closely related to the aforementioned) include institutional backing and market determinants. There is, however, another indispensable precondition to the writing of a historian ever reaching a large readership: in order to reach “the masses,” a history (whether in form of written text or vocal or visual performance or artifact) must be at least on a basic level compatible with the epistemological and ontological preconceptions of (non-professional) consumers.

In the Introduction to his *The New History* (2003), Munslow remarks that it is widely assumed that the reconstructionist direct realist epistemology is in fact congruent with the “common sense” approach to understandings of reality: “it is seen in the popular imagination as the only way to re-animate the past and, therefore, know what it means.”<sup>38</sup> However, Munslow is dismissive of this idea. In his view, there is nothing natural or inevitable in the realist-empiricist epistemology. He might be right; nevertheless there seems to be strong evidence suggesting that, at least in Western cultures, people’s thinking about the past is naïvely realist, acritically empiricist, and formally narrative.<sup>39</sup> Individual memory and remembering and the processes of construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of biographical self-narratives are based on an objectifying/reifying realist perception of past: “Memories may be the result of many retranscriptions over time, but at any given time the rememberer typically experiences them as unproblematic structures or as facts, and as external to the rememberer.”<sup>40</sup> Individuals acquire and process semantic memories (or “reported events,” of which histories are a form) through the same cognitive operations and following

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38 Munslow, *The New History*, 5.

39 On the narrative structure of autobiographical and narrative (i.e. collective) memory and the cognitive and cultural aspects of their construction see Brunner, “Life as Narrative”; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 51–75 and 87–143; Nelson, “Narrative and Self, Myth and Memory”, 3–28; McAdams, “Identity and the Life Story”; Fleisher Feldman, “Narratives of National Identity”; also see the recent research by de Saint-Laurent, “Personal Trajectories, Collective Memories.”

40 Quote from Prager, *Presenting the Past*, 215; for further elaboration of this point also see King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 2–7 and Chapters 1 and 2; and Gergen, “Mind, Text, and Society.”



the same epistemological and ontological presumptions through which they acquire and process episodic memories (or “experienced events”).<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, what Munslow calls hard-core realism-empiricism (i.e. a position characteristic of reconstructionist historians) is in my understanding nothing but an intuitive commonsense approach to thinking about “before now.” Thus, put in a somewhat simplified manner, probably most future historians begin their study of history at a university as direct realists (reconstructionists). They bring to their studies an intuitive commonsense “epistemology.” Whether in their future careers they tend towards an impositionalist position and become constructionists-proper or deconstructionist historians or remain reconstructionists or constructionists-improper depends on many factors.

At this point, we need to keep in mind that cognitive fallacies and specifically cognitive fallacies typical of the reconstructionist and constructionist-improper type of history writing are indispensable features of everyday social practice. It is a well-documented phenomenon that the human mind has an intuitive capacity to reify (i.e. objectify) particular (socially important) abstractions, social relations, and institutions. Nations, races, classes, religious denominations, and other categorically defined aggregates of people are among the most reified social entities. In the realm of the scholarly (social scientific) production of knowledge, reification and other cognitive modalities of dealing with the complexities of human societies and everyday social practice, such as essentialism, stereotyping, and entitativism, are regarded as serious mistakes and methodological failures. However, as cognitive and social psychological research suggests, these cognitive biases are practically inevitable in and indispensable to everyday social practice.<sup>42</sup>

The idea of nation as a deep historical egalitarian community of shared language, territory, customs, and culture and of a common fate would be impossible without the capacity for essentialist and reifying thought. A reifying concept of nation as an objective historical entity, an essentialist concept of nationality/ethnicity/race, and what Munslow calls a hard-core empiricist-realist

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41 There are differences in how well this information is remembered and operationalized in social life. Larsen, “Remembering without Experiencing”; Neisser, “What is Ordinary Memory the Memory of?”

42 For basic information about reification see Fenichel Pitkin, “Rethinking Reification”; also see the classic Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 88–92. On essentialism see: Gelman, *The Essential Child*; Gelman, Coley and Gottfried, “Essentialist Beliefs in Children”; Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*.

On stereotyping and entitativity see: Lickel et al., “Varieties of Groups”; Yzerbyt, Corneille and Estrada, “The Interplay of Subjective Essentialism and Entitativity”; Crump et al. “Group Entitativity and Similarity”; Sherman and Percy, “The Psychology of Collective Responsibility.”



vision of the past and history are all necessary components of national histories which enable them to function effectively and “naturally” as referential frames of self-identification. In other words, both cognitive fallacy and the propensity to think about the past in the same way (in the same terms and categories) as the present are necessary to bring about a sense of the fundamental realness of the historically represented past.

Constructionist-proper historians design their methodological measures and adopt critical social theories to eliminate reifying and essentialist conceptions and stereotypical notions and naïve theories from their history writing. In other words, they deconstruct the cognitive fallacies that are indispensable to the legitimizing and anchoring functionality of history. This renders the writings of many impositionist historians difficult to read and understand to the non-professional or uninformed consumer of history. Constructionist-proper and deconstructionist historiographies are (unlike reconstructionist history writing) quite counterintuitive, and they require prior familiarity with philosophical and social scientific theoretical knowledge if one seeks to understand them fully. This usually also means that the histories written by constructionist-proper and deconstructionist historians operate outside and even in opposition to the historical discourses that fulfil (or at least have the potential to fulfil) the legitimization and anchoring functions of history.<sup>43</sup> Reconstructionist and to a varying extent inadvertently also constructionist-improper historians serve a purpose that constructionist-proper and deconstructionist historians cannot.<sup>44</sup>

In this paper, I have argued that Munslow’s threefold classification suffers from a priori presumptions about the elementary ontological/epistemological positions of historians. This is most evident in his category of constructionism. Munslow defines each of his three historical epistemologies or genres very narrowly on the basis of historians’ alleged beliefs about the ontic nature of

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43 It is not hard to see the correlations between the functionalities outlined above and the epistemological positions of historians. Presumably, the legitimizing and anchoring function is dominantly fulfilled by the output of reconstructionist/constructionist-improper historians. The constructionist-proper/deconstructionist histories dominantly fit into the category of *Historia magistra vitae est* functionality of history.

44 For instance the monumental *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (vols. 1–8, 1972–1997) by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck and their colleagues, like Quentin Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism* (1998), Lynn Hunt’s *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984), or the classic by Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1977), not only do not offer legitimizing or identification narratives, but on the contrary analyze the contingent nature of social concepts and categories, the functionings of power, identity politics and construction of identity discourses, and legitimizing discourses.

the “before now” and its knowability. He proposes several secondary criteria (most notably the use of critical social theories by constructionist historians) that would indicate the belonging of a historical text and its author to one of the three epistemological types. I argue for a looser association of formal and methodological criteria with basic ontological/epistemological positions of historians. Furthermore, I argue for a more flexible approach to defining those positions, in which respect I find the solution proposed by Eugen Zelenák (two rather general categories: direct realism vs. impositionism) more workable.

It is necessary to differentiate between historians whose accounts are almost entirely narrative or partially narrative and analytic or entirely non-narrative or narrative, but in an atypical, experimental way; between historians whose interpretations are a-theoretical and historians who use social theories. However, it is also important to draw distinctions between the ways in which historians operate with theories. The depth to which historians acquaint themselves with social theories (and their epistemic background) and the degree of adequate operationalization of theoretical and conceptual apparatuses in the writing of history are, in my assessment, relatively robust epistemological definitional criteria that cannot be ignored. Following this line of reasoning, I propose split Munslow’s category of constructionism into two types. Constructionism-improper is characterized by an inadequate mastering of theories and the “contamination” of these theories through cognitive fallacies such as reification, essentialism, entitativism, stereotyping, misleading generalizing, etc. This usually goes hand in hand with a failure to adopt social constructivist epistemological points of departure that inform most of the current critical social theory. Presumably, most of the constructionist-improper historians will be direct realists. Constructionism-proper is in fact formally congruent with the category of constructionism as Munslow originally defined it, but with an important distinction as far as the elementary ontological/epistemological position of historians falling into this category is concerned. The successful adoption of critical social theory alongside social constructivist epistemological presuppositions would indicate an impositionist epistemological position. To put it metaphorically, a constructionist-improper historian is someone who abandons the reconstructionist positions and sets out to become a constructionist-proper type of historian, but who for some reason gets stuck somewhere on the road.

I realize that this seems an arbitrary split, and perhaps several other subcategories of constructionism could be delineated. I also admit that, like

Munslow's categories, at first sight my categories might also seem too ideal-typical for analytical purposes. Their full potential reveals itself when another important factor, which Munslow omitted altogether, is considered: the social functions of history. I argue that particular functionalities of knowledge about the past (of which historians are the primary producers and, in principle, the guarantors of its truthfulness) in the social lives of modern societies are dependent on naïve realist and acritical empiricist (direct realist in Zelenák's terms) thinking. Moreover, I argue that national histories in the traditional sense necessarily must be narrative, since narrative is the "natural" form through which people are inclined to make sense of their being in the past, present, and future. Furthermore, to function as natural frames of self-identification, national histories need to be based on (among other things) a reifying concept of nation and an essentialist concept of nationality, ethnicity, race, and other related social categorizations. I suggest that there is a direct connection between the social functionalities of history and the continued prevalence of the direct realist, i.e. reconstructionist and constructionist-improper modes of history writing. By including in our studies of epistemology in historiography in connection with the practice of scholarly history writing the non-professional person as a consumer of history and the social functionalities of history (and the institutionalized modes of realizing these functionalities), we can potentially gain entirely new perspectives on certain intra-disciplinary phenomena, such as the continued thriving of an obsolete epistemology despite decades of intense and plausible criticism.

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The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European history in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

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(Formerly *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*)

4 Tóth Kálmán utca, Budapest H – 1097 Hungary

Postal address: H-1453 Budapest, P.O. Box 33. Hungary

E-mail: [hunghist@btk.mta.hu](mailto:hunghist@btk.mta.hu)

Homepage: <http://www.hunghist.org>

Published quarterly by the Institute of History,  
Research Centre for the Humanities (RCH), Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS).

Responsible Editor: Pál Fodor (Director General).

Prepress preparation by the Institute of History, RCH, HAS Research Assistance Team; Leader: Éva Kovács. Page layout: Imre Horváth; Cover design: Gergely Böhm.

Printed in Hungary, by Prime Rate Kft, Budapest.

Translators/proofreaders: Alan Campbell, Matthew W. Caples, Thomas Cooper, Sean Lambert.

Annual subscriptions: \$80/€60 (\$100/€75 for institutions), postage excluded.

For Hungarian institutions HUF7900 per year, postage included.

Single copy \$25/€20. For Hungarian institutions HUF2000.

Send orders to *The Hungarian Historical Review*, H-1453 Budapest, P.O. Box 33. Hungary; e-mail: [hunghist@btk.mta.hu](mailto:hunghist@btk.mta.hu).

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HU ISSN  
2063-8647