

# *J. G. Droysen's didactics of history: constitution and currentness<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

The historical theory developed by Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) stands out partly due to its consistent orientation towards didactical issues. Besides investigating the principles governing the historical method and the reasons that lead us to attribute the quality of being “historical” to certain portions of the past, it also devised answers to the question: “why should one write, study, and learn history?”. In short, Droysen argues that the main goal of studying history should be neither the assimilation of practical examples nor the memorization of particular facts, but rather the learning of what he called “historical thinking.” I believe that Droysen’s argument set in motion a very significant redefinition of historiography’s didactical function. This article characterizes and contextualizes such redefinition, underlining some of its current potentials and limits.

**Keywords:** philosophy of history; historical education; German historiography – 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

## *A didática da história de J. G. Droysen: constituição e atualidade*

### **Resumo**

A teoria da história desenvolvida por Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) distingue-se, entre outros aspectos, pela sua consistente preocupação com temas didáticos. Além de investigar os princípios que regem o método de trabalho dos historiadores e de perscrutar os motivos que nos levam a considerar como “históricas” certas porções do passado, ela também fornece respostas à pergunta “por que escrever, estudar e aprender história?”. Em linhas gerais, Droysen propõe que a finalidade do estudo da história não deve ser nem a assimilação de exemplos práticos, nem a memorização de fatos particulares, mas o aprendizado do que designou “pensamento histórico”. Com esse argumento, Droysen contribuiu, penso eu, para uma redefinição importante da função didática da historiografia. O presente texto caracteriza e contextualiza tal redefinição, discutindo também seus potenciais e limites.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria da história; ensino de história; historiografia alemã – século XIX.

## *La didáctica de la historia de J. G. Droysen: constitución y actualidad*

### **Resumen**

La teoría histórica desarrollada por Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) se distingue, entre otras cosas, por su preocupación constante con temas didáticos. Además de investigar los principios que rigen el método de trabajo de los historiadores y examinar las razones que nos llevan a considerar como “históricos” ciertos pasados, ella también ofrece respuestas a la pregunta “¿por qué escribir, estudiar y aprender la historia?”. En resumen, Droysen sostiene que el objetivo principal del estudio de la historia no debe ser ni la asimilación de ejemplos prácticos ni la memorización de hechos particulares, sino el aprendizaje de lo que él llama “pensamiento histórico”. Con este argumento, Droysen contribuyó, creo, a una redefinición importante de la función didáctica de la escritura de la historia. Este trabajo caracteriza y contextualiza tal redefinición, discutiendo también su actualidad y límites.

**Palabras clave:** teoría de la historia; enseñanza de la historia; historiografía alemana – siglo XIX.

## *La didactique de l'histoire de J. G. Droysen: constitution et actualité*

### **Résumé**

La théorie de l'histoire développée par Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884) se distingue par sa inquiétude quant aux thèmes didactiques. En plus d'investiguer les principes régissant la méthode de travail des historiens et d'étudier les raisons qui nous fait considérer certaines parties du passé comme «historiques», elle fournit des réponses à la question «Pourquoi écrire, étudier et apprendre l'histoire?». Généralement, Droysen propose que l'étude de l'histoire ne doit être par assimilation des exemples pratiques ni par mémorisation de certains événements, mais plutôt par l'apprentissage de ce qui a désigné la «pensée historique». Sur la base de cet argument, Droysen a contribué à la redéfinition de la fonction didactique de l'historiographie. Le présent texte caractérise et replace cette redéfinition et indique ses éventuelles limites.

**Mots clés:** théorie de l'histoire; enseignement de l'histoire; historiographie allemande, XIXe siècle.

Article received on September 12, 2013 and approved for publication on October 30, 2013.

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Translated by Tatiane Centurion

<sup>1</sup>Almost all of the ideas contained in this paper were presented and discussed at a round table in the 7th Brazilian Seminar on the History of Historiography, in Mariana, Minas Gerais, on August 15th, 2013; in a lecture to the Research Group *Espaços, Poder e Práticas Sociais*, of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, on December 12th, 2012; and in a lecture to the Research Group in *Lógica e Filosofia da Ciência*, of the Universidade de Brasília, on December 3rd, 2010. I hereby give my thank you to the organizers and participants of these activities. I also thank Itamar Freitas de Oliveira and two anonymous reviewers of *Tempo* for the thorough readings of the manuscript and for the many and valuable suggestions for its improvement

## The didactic moment in the work of Droysen

In 1840, Droysen's academic path suffered a major turnaround right after his being hired as a professor at the University of Kiel. By then, he had already completed his studies in Berlin, translated and commented dramas from Aeschylus and Aristophanes, and written an important biography of Alexander, The Great — followed by the two volumes of *History of Hellenism*. However, after moving to Northern Germany he relegates to the background his interest in the ancient world and starts devoting most part of his investigative attention to rather recent periods of the past.

The main reason for this change was of a political nature. Droysen was born around two years after the final collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, and most of his life took place in a moment in which, in the German cultural space, there was no truly powerful political unit. The kind of historiography he started to cultivate since about 1845 mirrored his desire to contribute, by means of historical interpretation, with a Prussian-led nation and state building process in Germany. It is in this spirit that one may understand his two great works in the history of what was then the present, namely the *Lectures on the War of Liberation* (1846) and the biography of Count Yorck von Wartenburg (1851–1852) — a Prussian war hero at the resistance war against the Napoleonic domination. The same may be said of that work which Droysen himself considered to be his most important work, *The History of Prussian Politics*, whose 14 volumes were published between 1855 and 1886.<sup>2</sup>

It is not useless to wonder about which would be for us the relevance of Droysen's oeuvre if he had dedicated himself solely to Prussian political history. In this case, we would probably have of him a perception not far from the one we have of Heinrich von Treitschke, a historian who is associated to a complicated political ideology, to say the least, rather than to a research practice worthy of being praised.<sup>3</sup>

This, however, does not happen with Droysen, basically for two reasons. The first one relates to the fact of Droysen having, in his early work, given to the concept of "Hellenism" the meaning of a concept of an epoch, which is preserved

<sup>2</sup>The best critical study of Droysen's personal and academic life — even if hypercritical as regards his theory of history — is the biography written by Wilfried Nipel, *Johann Gustav Droysen. Ein Leben zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik*, München, C.H. Beck, 2008. Before the publication of the text by Nipel, the reference work on the subject was the (unfinished) biography prepared by Droysen's own son. See: Gustav Droysen, *Johann Gustav Droysen*, 1. Teil: Bis zum Beginn der Frankfurter Tätigkeit, Leipzig, B.G. Teubner, 1910. For other important biographical studies, see: Otto Hintze, "Johann Gustav Droysen". In: \_\_\_\_\_, *Zur Theorie der Geschichte*. Gesammelte Abhandlungen, Leipzig, Koehler & Amelang, 1942, p. 150-213; Werner Obermann, *Der Junge Johann Gustav Droysen: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Historismus*, PhD Thesis, Universität Bonn, Bonn, 1977; Stephan Paetrow, *Johann Gustav Droysen in Jena. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Droysens «Historik» und «Geschichte der preußischen Politik*, Saarbrücken, VDM, 2008; Jörn Rüsen, "Johann Gustav Droysen", In: Hans-Ulrich Wehler (org.), *Deutsche Historiker*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973, p. 115-131. For biographical abstracts in Portuguese, see: Arthur Alfaix Assis, "Johann Gustav Droysen", In: Estevão de Rezende Martins (org.), *A história pensada. Teoria e método na historiografia européia do século XIX*, São Paulo, Contexto, 2010, p. 31-36; Pedro Spinola Pereira Caldas, "Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884)", In: Maurício Parada (org.), *Os historiadores: clássicos da História*. Vol. 2: from Tocqueville to Thompson, Rio de Janeiro, PUC-Rio; Petrópolis, Vozes, 2013, p. 36-55.

<sup>3</sup>See: Andreas Dorpalen, "Heinrich von Treitschke", *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 7, n. 3-4, 1972, p. 21-35.

until today.<sup>4</sup> But it is the second reason that interests us the most here: Droysen remains an author worth reading especially because of the reflections on theory and methodology of history he systematized on courses offered at the Universities of Jena and Berlin, between 1857 and 1883. Indeed, it is because of his theoretical texts that Droysen is often remembered by as a classical author, both by philosophically minded historians and historically minded philosophers. Hannah Arendt, for example, remarked that he was “perhaps the most thoughtful of the nineteenth century historians”. Hans Georg Gadamer emphasized Droysen’s significance for the development of modern hermeneutics, qualifying him as an “astute methodologist”. For Thomas Nipperdey, historian and author of one of the most respected histories of nineteenth-century Germany, Droysen was the “great theoretician of historicism.”<sup>5</sup> The list of compliments may stop here, for the point we wish to illustrate is clear: according to the perception of several important analysts, in nineteenth-century Germany, Droysen was one of the authors who best dealt with the theoretical issues related to history and historiography.

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The main perspective structuring Droysen’s theory of history follows the purpose of explaining the principles that regulate the work of professional historians. Droysen used to open his lectures on historical theory stating that in his time, despite the many research accomplishments creditable to his fellow historians, the most fundamental questions regarding the constitution of historical knowledge remained lacking of clear answers.<sup>6</sup> He chose to think, teach and write about theoretical and methodological issues after having diagnosed the need of clarifying historians as to the nature and importance of the historical discipline. For this reason, it may be said that Droysen’s theory of history is, first and foremost, a theory of historical science (*Geschichtswissenschaft*).

It starts with a description of the specifics of the “historical method”, i.e., a demonstration that all research procedures used by the historians follow rules which are characteristic of the historical discipline.<sup>7</sup> Droysen, therefore, embraces

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Hans-Joachim Gehrke, *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, München, Oldenbourg, 2003, p. 1: “When we speak of Hellenism today as a historical era, we place ourselves within a tradition initiated by Johann Gustav Droysen”; Arnaldo Momigliano, “J.G. Droysen between Greeks and Jews”, *History and Theory*, vol. 9, n. 2, 1970, p. 139-153; “It was J. G. Droysen who introduced the word Hellenism to designate the civilization of the Greek-speaking world after Alexander” (p. 139-140). Before Droysen, the term “Hellenism” was already in use, but its semantic field was restricted. The term was commonly used as a reference to the Greek-speaking Jews of the ancient world. See Arnaldo Momigliano, “J.G. Droysen between Greeks and Jews”, *History and Theory*, vol. 9, n. 2, 1970, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Entre o passado e o futuro*, São Paulo, Perspectiva, 2001, p. 110; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verdade e método*. Vol. 1: traços fundamentais de uma hermenêutica filosófica, Petrópolis, Vozes, 2008, p. 285; Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, München, C.H. Beck, 1998, p. 517.

<sup>6</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 3-4; 417.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Beiser, *The German historicist tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 291; 298.

a scientific pluralism, and in line with this he works out a way of justifying history as an academic field of study located between philosophy and the natural sciences. In the most famous quote attributed to him, he states that the essence of the historical method is the act of “understanding by means of research” (*forschendes Verstehen*).<sup>8</sup> Such formulation conveys very well his argument that history occupies an intermediate position between philosophy and natural sciences. On the one hand, contrary to philosophy (and also to theology), history is an empirical science. On the other, it refers to its empirical material in a way different from that of other sciences, as historians usually do not deal with recurring natural phenomena, but with the singular products of human thinking and action instead.<sup>9</sup>

Droysen’s theory of history is, in fact, much more than a hermeneutic methodology devised to determine the specificity of history vis-à-vis other forms of knowledge. It is, as demonstrated by Michael MacLean, embedded in strong ethical and political motives.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it covers a series of microtheories, which I could list here only briefly: a theory of the stages of historical research, a theory of historicity, a typology of historical representation, a social ethic, a political theory, among others.<sup>11</sup> All this is tied together by an almost necessitarian religious vision of the historical process, based on which Droysen once suggested that “the most elevated task in historical science is, indeed, theodicy”,<sup>12</sup> i.e., the justification of the existence of evil in a world created by an all-mighty God of infinite kindness.<sup>13</sup>

However, Droysen believed that historical science was coated, at the same time, by a somewhat more prosaic utility. It would be useful not only for trying to cope with certain tensions inherent in the Christian religion, but also to other dimensions of human practical life. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that, for him, the historians’ activity is linked to the fulfillment of a good variety of functions of cultural orientation. To Droysen, historiography should not be practiced as an end in itself, as a kind of art for art’s sake moved by the pure desire to further understand a portion of the past. Instead, it should entail pragmatic interpretations of the present, interpretations capable of sponsoring the kind of self-awareness he deemed necessary to assure the continuity of history as the objective process of humankind’s development.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed interpretation of the hermeneutic conception of historical method developed by Droysen, see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*. Die Probleme des Historismus, Freiburg, Karl Alber, 1974, p. 101-111.

<sup>10</sup>Michael MacLean, “Johann Gustav Droysen and the development of historical hermeneutics”, *History and Theory*, vol. 21, n. 3, 1982, p. 347-365.

<sup>11</sup>For a more detailed panoramic view of Droysen’s theory of history, see Arthur Alfaix Assis, *What is history for?*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014, p. 190-210.

<sup>12</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 2: Texte im Umkreis der Historik (1826-1882), edited by Horst Walter Blanke, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 2007, p. 228.

<sup>13</sup>About the importance of religion in Droysen’s conception of history, see: Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion - Wissenschaft als Arbeit - Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, n. 252, 1991, p. 1-32; Dirk Fleischer, “Geschichtserkenntnis als Goterkenntnis. Das theologische Fundament der Geschichtstheorie Johann Gustav Droysens”, in: Horst Walter Blanke (ed.), *Historie und Historik*. 200 Jahre Johann Gustav Droysen, Köln, Böhlau, 2009, p. 73-89.

<sup>14</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 377-379.

According to Droysen, the active participation of people in historical life, that is, in the different levels of the “ethical world”, depends on the acquisition by them of a specific subjective competence that only historiography is capable of providing. This is the skill which allows one to attain the awareness that, in its current constitution, such world and its “spheres” (family, people, language, law, religion, economics, politics, among others) “are as they are because they have so become”.<sup>15</sup> In this way, a person can arrive at a de-naturalized view of the historical process — in which this ceases to be passively experienced as an irresistible destiny and starts to show itself as a large-scale development over which one may try to exercise some kind of active influence.

According to Droysen, the subjective awareness of the world’s historicity is one of the key safeguards to the continuity of the historical process. A noble objective he associates to the practice of historiography is precisely that of promoting the dissemination and the improvement of such consciousness. “The task of the historical studies”, says Droysen succinctly, is that one learn how to think historically”.<sup>16</sup> With this definition, he wanted to sensitize historians to practical impacts of historical knowledge which transcend the pure and simple understanding of the past. In fact, he wanted to strengthen the possibility that both readers and students of history, while acquiring knowledge of the past, would also be learning a certain reflexive competence: the capability of relating past and present in a historical way, that is, of enriching the current experience with the knowledge of the past experience. In other words: the most important thing to be learned from history is, for Droysen, a general way of thinking, and not specific factual contents. This argument summarizes a good part of his general view of historiography as a form of practical knowledge, pointing at the same time to the centrality of the didactic reflections in his theory of history.

### Rise and fall of the exemplary justification

In the long run, pragmatic definitions of the value of history, such as the one formulated by Droysen, were much more frequent than “autotelic” ones, i.e., than those ones which ascribe to historiography an end in itself. However, there is more than only one way to grant practical value to history. For a long time, in Western historical thought, the mainstream of historiographical pragmatism was formed by a set of arguments which George Nadel called “exemplar theory of history”.<sup>17</sup> Later on, Droysen would establish his didactics of historical thinking exactly in opposition to this exemplarist didactics, so that to better understand the former, it is essential to cast an eye over the latter.

<sup>15</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, edited by Rudolf Hübner, München, Oldenbourg, 1971, p. 301.

<sup>16</sup>*Idem*, *Historik*. Vol. 1: *Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*, edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>George H. Nadel, “Philosophy of history before historicism”, *History and Theory*, vol. 3, n. 3, 1964, p. 291-315 (esp. p. 292).

Within this framework, exemplar theory of history corresponds to the idea that there is a practical reason for writing and studying history. More specifically, it regards the notion that history texts communicate to people of a given present models and anti-models of actions whose effectiveness has been tested in past situations. Thus, the relevance of histories would rely on their ability to provide their audience with political and/or moral learning, by means of examples of past deeds.

The exemplary justification of historiography is no singularity of the Western tradition. In fact, it may be found in almost all of well-known historiographical cultures. Specialized literature comprises, thousands of references to its related themes.<sup>18</sup> Let us consider, for example, Ibn Khaldūn, the great classic of the Islamic historiography. His book on universal history was entitled *Kitab al-Ibar*, which may be translated as “*Book of the examples*”. In the introduction to the text, one reads the following:

History make us acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their (national) character. It makes us acquainted with the biographies of the prophets and with the dynasties and the policies of the rulers. Whoever so desires may thus achieve the useful result of being able to imitate historical examples in religious or worldly matters.<sup>19</sup>

The trajectory of the Western branch of the exemplar theory of history is multifaceted. Its earliest records are found in the work of rhetoricians and historians of the Hellenistic era.<sup>20</sup> Polybius is perhaps the most notable exponent of this initial phase, with his definition of history as a means of training for the political life. However, it is from the Roman rethorician, Cicero, the expression which best summarizes the argument: *historia magistra vitae*. Over the centuries that separate us from both authors, the exemplar theory of history has acquired the different contours and features, combining with the stoic tradition, being assimilated by different variations of the Christian world view and associating itself to the modern *raison d'état*. Countless ancient, medieval and modern intellectuals agreed (or would have agreed) to the old saying that stated that history is no different from “philosophy teaching through examples”.<sup>21</sup> A bit daring, one may say that, in the cultural universes of Western ancient, medieval and early modern times, despite the enormous transforma-

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Ying-shih Yü, “Reflections on Chinese historical thinking”, *In: Jörn Rüsen (org.), Western historical thinking: an intercultural debate*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2002, p. 152-172 (esp. p. 158); David Schaberg, “Chinese history and philosophy”, *In: Andrew Feldherr; Grant Hardy (eds.), The Oxford history of historical writing. Vol. 1: beginnings to AD 600*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 394-414; Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian social history. Some interpretations*, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2006, p. 253.

<sup>19</sup>Abū Zayd Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An introduction to history*, vol. 1, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 15 (translated by the author).

<sup>20</sup>For François Hartog, the histories written in the classical period, by Herodotus and Thucydides, for example, do not reveal the predominance of justifications and exemplary uses. See François Hartog, *Os antigos, o passado e o presente*, Brasília, Editora da UnB, 2003, p. 53-70.

<sup>21</sup>This passage has long been attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, important Greek historian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. He is a part, most likely, of the textual set written only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. See Malcolm Heath, “Pseudo-Dionysius Art of Rhetoric 8-11: figured speech, declamation and criticism”, *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 124, 2003, p. 81-105.

tions which mark the differences from one period to another, there was a relative cultural consensus regarding both history's exemplary usefulness for life and historical examples' pedagogical value.<sup>22</sup>

The exemplary justification of historiography matches a didactics of history, a general conception of what historiography may teach and how one may learn something from it. The story of the rise and the fall of both of them in the Western world was well told by Nadel himself and, later on, by Reinhart Koselleck, and it is fairly known already.<sup>23</sup> Based on the chronologies developed by those and by other authors, it may be stated that the exemplar theory of history remained as the predominant form of justification of historiography and of historical learning at least until the second half of the eighteenth century.

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*The relevance of the stories would rely on its ability to provide political and/or moral learning, mediated by examples of past deeds*

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As a work of fate, the most elaborated of the exemplary theories was prepared exactly in the last decades of hegemony of this old way of defining historiography's value and function. It is found in the *Letters on the study and use of history*, written by Bolingbroke in 1735. This philosopher of aristocratic provenance trailed a meteoric trajectory in the English political scene of the early eighteenth century, but fell in disgrace after the enthronement of George I. Exiled more than once, with his political rights rounded up, his noble titles

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<sup>22</sup>Charles Fornara, *The nature of history in ancient Greece and Rome*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 104-120; Christian Meier, "Antiguidade", In: Reinhart Koselleck *et al.*, *O conceito de história*, Belo Horizonte, Autêntica, 2013, p. 37-62 (esp. p. 49-50; 57); Gabrielle Spiegel, "Political utility in Medieval historiography: a sketch", *History and Theory*, vol. 14, n. 3, 1975, p. 314-325 (esp. p. 316-319); Odilo Engels, "Compreensão do conceito na Idade Média", In: Reinhart Koselleck *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 63-84 (esp. p. 80); Rommily Jenkins, "The Hellenistic origins of Byzantine literature", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 17, 1963, p. 37-52 (esp. p. 50); Horst Günther, "Pensamento histórico no início da Idade Moderna", In: Reinhart Koselleck *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 85-118 (esp. p. 90-93; 11-114); Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: politics and history in sixteenth century Florence*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 228; Anthony Grafton, *What was history? The art of history in early modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 31-32; Michel Jeanneret, "The vagaries of exemplarity: distortion or dismissal?", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 59, n. 4, 1998, p. 565-579 (esp. p. 578-579).

<sup>23</sup>George Nadel, "Philosophy of history before historicism", *History and Theory*, vol. 3, n. 3, 1964, p. 291-315; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futuro passado: contribuição à semântica dos tempos históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, Contraponto; Editora da PUC-Rio, 2006, p. 41-60. On the issue, see also: Arthur Alfaix Assis, "Por que se escrevia história? Sobre a justificação da historiografia no mundo ocidental pré-moderno", In: Marlon Salomon (org.), *História, verdade e tempo*, Chapecó, Argos, 2011, p. 105-132; Eckhard Keßler, "Geschichte: Menschliche Praxis oder kritische Wissenschaft? Zur Theorie der humanistischen Geschichtsschreibung", In: Eckhard Keßler (org.), *Theoretiker humanistischer Geschichtsschreibung*, Nachdruck exemplarischer Texte aus dem 16. Jahrhundert, München, Wilhelm Finck, 1971, p. 7-47; Hermann Lübbe, *Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse: Analytik und Pragmatik der Historie*, Basel, Schwabe, 1977, p. 204-224; Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung*, Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus, München, C.H. Beck, 1991, p. 44-66; Jörn Rüsen, *História viva. Teoria da história III: formas e funções do conhecimento histórico*, Brasília, Editora da UnB, 2007, p. 50-55.

canceled and his properties being threatened, he retreats, at the end of his life, to the studying of philosophy and history.<sup>24</sup>

The *Letters on the study and the use* are “one of the most important texts on the idea of history in England”<sup>25</sup> They testify to a stance on the value of historiography that is set in open opposition to the notion, developed among chronologists, antiquarians and other users of the critical method, that historical knowledge would have a purpose in itself.<sup>26</sup> Bolingbroke despises every and any factual research which is unrelated to genuine practical purposes and makes use of a quite expressive language in order to express his position. He says he prefers to slide into anachronism rather than to chase the “learned lumber that fills the head of an antiquary”. He compares grammarians and philologists to “drudges”, who find pleasure in getting themselves lost in the “dark mazes of Antiquity”. He considers that scholarship “that tends to make us neither better men and better citizens is at best but a specious and ingenious sort of idleness”<sup>27</sup> Following this line of incisive criticism to scholarship for scholarship’s sake, Bolingbroke strongly argues in favor of the convenience of a historical pedagogy based in examples and contrary to the use of theoretical precepts. “Such is the imperfection of human understanding [...]”, he argues, “that general and abstract propositions, though ever so true, appear obscure and doubtful to us very often, till they are explained by examples, and that the wisest lessons in favour of virtue go but a little way to convince the judgment, and determine the will, unless they are enforced by the same means”<sup>28</sup>

However, in the following decades, the combination between Enlightenment and historicism which fed philosophical and historical thought in the German speaking countries give rise to a new set of expectations in relation to historiography, and these would make the exemplary justification of historical learning seem more and more obsolete. I am referring here to the emergence of the modern concept of history, as analyzed by Koselleck. This concept summarizes a new way to make sense of time, in which this is perceived as a wide and progressive *continuum* connecting past and future with the intermediation of the present.

One of the most fundamental arguments underlying Koselleck’s analysis is that the notion of history as the macroprocess of the development of humankind evolved at the same time as the perception of the singularity and uniqueness of historical events advanced. In fact, the idea that one was living in a radically new epoch, in the modern times, spread over part of the Western world from the late eighteenth century on. This impelled several philosophers and historians, especially from the German cultural space, to adopt an unprecedented attitude that

<sup>24</sup>Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his circle: the politics of nostalgia in the age of Walpole*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 8-16. See also: Philip Hicks, “Bolingbroke, Clarendon, and the Role of Classical Historian”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 20, n. 4, 1987, p. 445-471.

<sup>25</sup>George Nadel, “New lights on Bolingbroke’s letters on History”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 23, n. 4, 1962, p. 550-557 (esp. p. 557). (translated by the author).

<sup>26</sup>Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung*. Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus, München, C.H. Beck, 1991, p. 391.

<sup>27</sup>Bolingbroke (Henry St. John), *Letters on the study and the use of history*, London, T. Cadell, 1779, p. 9; 13-14.

<sup>28</sup>*Idem*, *Ibidem*, p. 15.



favored the actual “temporalization” of past and present. The singularity of both past and present times started being emphasized. Proper historicization of past and present took on. Finally, the growing tendency to temporalize the relationship with the experience, made the past less directly relevant to the present.<sup>29</sup>

This transformation of the concept of history, along with all the new possibilities of temporalization of the experience encouraged by it, also produced consequences on the way of defining the value and the function of historiography. By presenting itself as the key resource for the cognitive apprehension of a unique and unrepeatable historical experience, historiography moves away from the old exemplariness.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, observed from a logical perspective, historical examples may only claim general validity in the context of a representation of time which neutralizes the difference between the present and the past. Historically, such neutralization was often accomplished with the aid of a supra-temporal concept of human nature, i.e., by means of a fixed and invariable representation of the essence of humanity.

The fact is that this modern emphasis in processuality, in the uniqueness of events, and in the historicity of human nature undermined one of the pillars of the exemplar theory of history, namely the idea that examples possess trans-historical validity, that they apply for different temporal contexts. Some authors from the early nineteenth century seem to have had clear awareness of such conceptual changes. Hegel, for example, in the beginning of his *Philosophy of history*, peremptorily states:

what experience and life teach is that the peoples and the governments never have learned anything from history and did not follow the teachings it could have inspired. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone.<sup>31</sup>

The same point reappears at the thought of one of the most versatile intellectuals of the golden era of the German idealism, Wilhelm von Humboldt. According to him, “[history does not provide a service to life] when providing examples which must be followed or avoided, as this often leads to error and rarely teaches.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The redefinition of history as a practical knowledge**

Despite these and other criticisms, very few were the authors who, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have worked on a consistent answer to the

<sup>29</sup>Reinhart Koselleck, “História: como conceito mestre moderno”, In: Reinhart Koselleck et al., *O conceito de história*, Belo Horizonte, Autêntica, 2013, p. 185-222 (esp. p. 202-203); *Idem*, *Futuro passado: contribuição à semântica dos tempos históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, Contraponto; Editora da PUC-Rio, 2006, p. 55-56.

<sup>30</sup>*Idem*, “A configuração do moderno conceito de história”, In: Reinhart Koselleck et al., *O conceito de história*, Belo Horizonte, Autêntica, 2013, p. 119-184 (esp. p. 160-164).

<sup>31</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Filosofia da história*, Brasília, Editora da UnB, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup>Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Sobre a tarefa do historiador”, In: Estevão de Rezende Martins (org.), *A história pensada. Teoria e método na historiografia europeia do século XIX*, São Paulo, Contexto, 2010, p. 82-100 (esp. p. 86).

question: what is the use of history if not that of a life's teacher? This is one of the circumstances which give particular importance to Droysen's theory of history.

Droysen was one of the first intellectuals to draw all the consequences of modern tendency to reprove the exemplary justifications of historiography. Acknowledging the ineffectiveness of historical examples, he decides to re-adjust the focus and reevaluate the goals of historical learning. For him, producers and receivers of historical knowledge should concentrate not on the transmission and learning of concrete maxims of practical conduct, but on the development of certain thinking skills. "Historical thinking" became then the label of a significant paradigm shift.

As I have just indicated, Droysen's definition is based on a decided rejection of the principles which provide support to the historical exemplarity. But it would be a great mistake to look upon this anti-exemplar attitude as a general disavowal of all possible pragmatic views of historiography. In fact, Droysen intended to rebuild, on new grounds, the old pragmatic bonds between history and life that were previously preserved in Cicero's famous definition. Therefore it can be said that, in his notion of historical thinking, there was a relatively moderate attempt to replace the exemplar theory of history.

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*Hegel, in the beginning of his Philosophy of history, peremptorily states: "what experience and life teach is that the people and the governments have never learned anything from history"*

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By giving such a centrality to "historical thinking", Droysen was emphasizing his perception that history is always produced in the connection between past and present (and future, obviously). One way of translating this insight is with a truism: to think historically is the same as being able to place past and present in historical perspective. Hence, the ability of thinking historically equals the ability to historicize the past and the present. For Droysen, historicizing the past necessarily implies a historical "perspectivation" of the subject of the historical thinking in the present. Droysen expresses here the hard core of the historicist theory of knowledge, according to which the objective pasts made known by historians resonate within the subjects of knowledge (the historians) themselves and their respective audiences.<sup>33</sup> To get to know the past with the help of a historical perspective is thus a way of self-knowledge.

A key element of this historicist theory of knowledge is the idealist and neo-humanist concept of *Bildung*. "That one learns how to think historically" is a term that points out to a formative, educative, claim —, in short, to *Bildung*. It is directly

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<sup>33</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 106.

associated with the project of de-particularizing or universalizing the human self. For Droysen's philosophical teacher, Hegel, *Bildung* is opposed to both "physical subsistence" and the "singular character" of the human being.<sup>34</sup> *Bildung* is, for him, that intellectual process which enables the individual to elevate her or himself towards what is generally human through a sacrifice of particularisms.<sup>35</sup> Droysen puts this general idea of *Bildung* to work together with a non-exemplary idea of history and with the practice of historiography. He states that the

purpose of history cannot be to provide models for imitation, or rules to be repeatedly applied. [...] What history leads to the soul, in order to form it, is a model of the essentials, of the decisive, the powerful; it is this strength of the great points of views. This way, the soul elevates itself over the little particularities, it learns how to feel great and to think from the *I* of the humankind.<sup>36</sup>

Translated in general lines: for Droysen, historical thinking is one of the means of *Bildung*, a de-particularized way of shaping the human self resulting from the subjective internalization of the cultural reserves accumulated over the course of history of humankind.

It is interesting that, in the framework of Droysen's universalist humanism, historical thinking is not only the foundation of a scientific method for arriving at knowledge of the human past. According to him, although historical knowledge is an obvious product of historical thinking, the latter, dialectically, also is the final goal of knowledge. This implies that historians have a task of not only thinking historically, but also of conveying to their readership the way of thinking that generally characterizes their work method. This way, the social transmission of historical thinking becomes the great educational function of historiography. Droysen approaches the issue of the transmission and acquisition of the ability of thinking historically by developing the parallel notion of "sense of reality", which he borrowed from Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>37</sup> In Humboldt's idealistic definition, the "sense of reality" corresponds to an elementary subjective competence that articulates historical perception. It is what allows a historian to cognitively capture the profound dynamics of historical reality and to see the forces at work behind the surface of the events. According to Humboldt, historians should not only apply such competences in order to represent past events, but also try to "awaken and enliven" the sense of reality of their addressees.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Georg Friedrich Hegel, *Nürnberg und Heidelberger Schriften: 1808-1817*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 258.

<sup>35</sup>Rudolf Vierhaus, "Bildung", In: Otto Brunner *et al.* (orgs.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1979, p. 508-551 (esp. p. 535); Gadamer, *Verdade e método*. Vol. 1: *traços fundamentais de uma hermenêutica filosófica*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 2008, p. 47-51.

<sup>36</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: *Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*, edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 251-252 (translated by the author).

<sup>37</sup>*Idem, Ibidem*, p. 5; 40.

<sup>38</sup>Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Sobre a tarefa do historiador", In: Estevão de Rezende Martins (org.), *A história pensada. Teoria e método na historiografia europeia do século XIX*, São Paulo, Contexto, 2010, p. 86.

As can be seen, Humboldt's methodological definition already includes a good amount of didactic features, and Droysen would later intensify and systematize them. For the latter, the sense of reality would be consolidated in readers and students of history, once they were able to apply the way of thinking learned from the histories to the understanding of their own present. In the non-exemplary didactic model projected by Droysen, history favors, first of all, the development of an ability which allows human subjects to realize the historicity of their own present; to put on scale the historical conditions structuring their own world. This goes together with his expectation that the development of the capacity to think historically would also reinforce in their subjects the judgment skills necessary for reasonable decision-making and action. On the basis of this argument one finds a multifaceted "historical reason", i.e., a kind of rationality which is cognitive and practical at the same time, and that historians not only put into practice, but would also be able to convey to their audience. Such bond between knowledge and praxis, sealed by a form of rationality common to both of them, would later be placed in the foreground by Jörn Rüsen — not by chance, the contemporary philosopher of history who was most strongly inspired by Droysen's historical theory.<sup>39</sup>

The contiguousness between the concepts of "historical thinking", "sense of reality" and "*Bildung*" is one of the decisive proofs of the distance between the didactics of the history developed by Droysen and the one embedded in the "exemplar theory of history". In his discussion of the "didactic narrative", Droysen expresses a very clear awareness of such detachment. "It was", he says, "the foundation of the falsely called pragmatic history that, from history, one should learn how to act in the future, in similar cases".<sup>40</sup> The expression "falsely called pragmatic history" refers here, of course, to the kind of historiography which corresponds to the exemplar theory of history. In the quote, Droysen suggests that histories conceived according to a pragmatism oriented towards historical examples were no longer plausible. The form of historiographical pragmatism that he accepted as valid was not the one which leads to the development of supratemporal catalogs of imitable or avoidable actions from the past. On the contrary, for him, a plausible historiographical pragmatism could only arise from the less direct form of orientation historical thinking provides to the human self. This form of orientation is summarized in the concept of *Bildung*, being to a good extent related to the enhancement of the subjective capacity of judgment. Droysen clarifies the difference between the exemplary and the *Bildung*-related ways of historical learning, referring to a historiographical field of paramount importance in his time, military history. To the officers of an army, he points out, it would be more than interesting to study how the great generals of the past behaved in certain cases. But what an

<sup>39</sup>Jörn Rüsen, *Razão histórica*. Teoria da história: os fundamentos da ciência histórica, Brasília, Editora da UnB, 2001, p. 11-15.

<sup>40</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 250.

officer can learn by reading factual war stories are no rules of conduct whose observance would ensure success on the battlefield. From histories he would, above all, learn how to gain “an understanding of what the human spirit has already undergone”. By reading them he would be performing a sort of “mental exercise”.<sup>41</sup> To Droysen, the *Bildung*, the historical self-formation, corresponds exactly to this kind of “mental exercise” the case of military history illustrates. It should be noted that the argument here concerns not only military history in particular, but history in general. Just as the readers from armed forces, all other professionals would not find in the histories concrete indications on how they should live their lives, or on what decision they should make. According to Droysen, the knowledge one may extract from reading and learning history is of a practical kind, but its practicality is neither exemplary nor immediate.

### The current and the obsolete

It is never too much to recall that the mode of historical education theorized by Droysen is the product of a political and cultural scenario which is quite different from ours. It went hand in hand with a view of politics and society that was antidemocratic and not entirely liberal, — even when judged by the standards of its own time.<sup>42</sup> Especially after the failed attempt to reunite the German countries launched by the National Assembly established in Frankfurt, in 1848, Droysen’s political texts start to indicate a downturn of interest in liberal themes, such as the basic individual rights and civil freedom, as well as an increasing concentration on *Realpolitik* matters. In the political theory he delinieted in lectures given in 1850, we may read, for example, that “the essence of the state is to constitute itself as power, power inwards, and power outwards”.<sup>43</sup> Later on, in his argument in favor of a strong state, Droysen even gets to the point of stating that the historical sciences should be located in the “realm of spiritual preparation for war”.<sup>44</sup>

It is also not difficult to see that Droysen took historical thinking and sense of reality as competences restricted to a mere fraction of the society. In fact, as almost all theorists of history in the nineteenth century, he assumes that the truly historical transformations depend directly only on a few individuals, who he called “the artificers of history”. These were exactly the social actors whose ability to think historically Droysen wanted to see fostered.<sup>45</sup> The social philosophy implied here admits that, in practice, the potential capacity of historical consciousness is restricted to, for instance, princes, statesmen, bureau-

<sup>41</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), editado por Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 250-251.

<sup>42</sup>Robert Henry Handy, *J.G. Droysen: the historian and German politics in the nineteenth century*, PhD Thesis, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1966, p. 87-99.

<sup>43</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 2: Texte im Umkreis der Historik (1826-1882), edited by Horst Walter Blanke, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 2007, p. 322.

<sup>44</sup>*Idem, Ibidem*, p. 455.

<sup>45</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *op. cit.*, p. 386-388.

crats, military commanders and, of course, intellectuals — all of them male. Moreover, Droysen's first concern was to promote the historical thinking of *German* statesmen, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and military personnel, and not necessarily that of people of other nationalities. And here it is still necessary to remember: he believed that political and social elites, once they became able to think historically, would automatically reach the conclusion — which he obviously endorsed — that Prussia was invested with the great historical mission of unifying the German states, and thereby of ensuring the continuity of the historical process itself.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, in theory, Droysen defined the historical thinking in an open and universalistic way, but this universalism is sometimes lost in the application, so to speak, as in the concrete circumstances under which he lived he often made political and historiographical choices that qualify as very particularistic.<sup>47</sup>

These imbalances between Droysen's theoretical didactics of the historical thinking and its concrete practical applications point to the complex question of whether and in which way the author's ideas might still be regarded as a good key to the issue of the function of historical knowledge today. I believe there are reasons to say that, essentially, Droysen's answer to the question "why", i.e., why should one research, teach and learn history, still holds up.<sup>48</sup> This is so, first of all, for the simple reason that the ability to think historically, which Droysen associates to historical learning, is not necessarily linked to any fixed canon of content. The contents of our historical thinking, the objects over which our ability to historicize may act, do not necessarily need to be the same ones privileged by Droysen. In fact, historical thinking, as theorized by Droysen, can be taken as a merely formal competence that fits in with any content of experience and is adaptable to several different sets of norms and values. Droysen's preference for dealing with political themes from a German, pro-Prussian, male, academic, bourgeois and anti-democratic point of view does not necessarily need to be ours. We might (and should) balance our own perspective differently, and keep thinking historically as well. Nothing prevents us, for example, of thinking historically about cultural phenomena from a female or a Marxist point of view; or about economic themes from a conservative point of view, and so on.

Secondly, it should be stressed that Droysen's theoretical work was already constituted within the same horizon of basic ideas that still characterizes a significant good part of the current reflection on historical learning.

Among contemporary experts in history education it is widely consensual that the aim of teaching history at schools and of historical learning in general should not be the simple transmission/acquisition of factual information.

<sup>46</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Politische Schriften*, edited by Felix Gilbert, München, R. Oldenbourg, 1933, p. 228-229.

<sup>47</sup>I myself tried elsewhere to explain this dissonance between theory and practice in Droysen's thinking. See Arthur Alfaix Assis, *What is history for?*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014, esp. p. 146-170.

<sup>48</sup>For a good overall picture of the work of Droysen (in addition to indications on the history of its reception), see Pedro Spinola Pereira Caldas, "A atualidade de Johann Gustav Droysen: uma pequena história de seu esquecimento e de suas interpretações", *Locus*, vol. 12, n. 1, 2006, p. 95-111.

For some decades this consensus on the inadequacy of a purely factualist conception of history teaching has been stimulating the circulation of positive definitions regarding the objectives of historical learning. Two concepts which summarize a good part of these definitions are widely coincident: “historical thinking” and “historical consciousness”.<sup>49</sup>

But it is also important to keep in mind that the line that goes from Droysen’s didactics of the history of to us is not so direct and that the references to his ideas in contemporary debates are, above all, scarce. Besides that, the generality of such didactic concepts predisposes their uses and meanings to vary quite a lot. The generic consensus on the need to stimulate the development of historical consciousness sometimes overlaps the cacophony of conflicting understandings as to what specifically would such an awareness be, but certainly does not muffle it. In any case, the history of the different mediations that led from Droysen’s justification for the study of history to the current didactic reflections is yet to be told.

Thirdly and lastly, the relative currentness of Droysen’s didactic definitions refers us back to the much more general issue of the legacy of historicism. Droysen’s arguments on the value and function of history are an important part

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*I advocate that the answer to Droysen’s question  
“why”, i.e., the reason why should one research,  
teach and learn history, still holds up*

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of the “spiritual revolution” promoted by the rise of historicism between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially (but not only) in Germany.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup>See, for example, Bodo von Borries, *Historisch Denken Lernen. Welterschließung statt Epochenüberblick. Geschichte als Unterrichtsfach und Bildungsaufgabe*, Opladen, Barbara Budrich, 2008; Ignacio Muñoz Delaunoy, “La historia y sus funciones”, In: Ignacio Muñoz Delaunoy; Luis Osandón Millavil (orgs.), *La didáctica de la historia y la formación de ciudadanos en el mundo actual*, Santiago, Ediciones de la Dirección de Bibliotecas Archivos y Museos, 2013, p. 25-43 (esp. p. 39-40); Karl-Ernst Jeismann, “Geschichtsbewußtsein – Theorie”, In: Klaus Bergmann et al. (orgs.), *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, Seelze-Velber, Kallmeyer, 1997, p. 42-45; Hans-Jürgen Pandel, *Geschichtsunterricht nach PISA. Kompetenzen, Bildungsstandards und Kerncurricula*, Schwalbach am Taunus, Wochenschau, 2007; Pieter van Veuren, “Does it make sense to teach history through thinking skills?”, *Koers*, vol. 60, n. 1, 1995, p. 29-39; Sam Wineburg, *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts. Charting the future of teaching the past*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001. The same is true for the Brazilian debate on the subject. See, for example, Oldimar Cardoso, “Para uma definição de didática da História”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, vol. 28, n. 55, 2008, p. 153-170; Luis Fernando Cerri, “Didática da História: uma leitura teórica sobre a História na prática”, *Revista de História Regional*, vol. 15, n. 2, 2010, p. 264-278; Estevão de Rezende Martins, “História: consciência, pensamento, cultura, ensino”, *Educar em revista*, n. 42, 2011, p. 43-58 (esp. p. 52-58); Rafael Saddi, “O parafuso da didática da História”, *Acta Scientiarum Education*, vol. 34, n. 2, 2012, p. 211-220.

<sup>50</sup>Friedrich Meinecke, “A formação do historicismo – considerações preliminares”, In: Jurandir Malerba (org.), *Lições de História. Da história científica à crítica da razão metódica no limiar do século XX*, Porto Alegre, EdiPUC-RS, 2013, p. 263-272 (esp. p. 263).

I am speaking of “historicism” here in a broad sense, in the meaning of a way to explain the world structured around the belief that certain phenomena can be well understood by means of their historicization.<sup>51</sup> “Historicization”, one should add, has actually two simultaneous meanings. It points both to the kind of cognition of things that focuses on the aspects that individualize them and to the perception of a given order of things as a (provisory) result in a temporally comprehensive process.<sup>52</sup> Historicism is, therefore, a way of looking at the world which emphasizes the individuality and the transience of things.<sup>53</sup> Its basic premise is that human phenomena are well understood only when one looks into what it is or was from the perspective of its own process of “becoming”.<sup>54</sup>

However, since the late nineteenth century the historicist world view was repeatedly challenged. The intensification of social processes such as the industrialization of Germany, democratization, and secularization, as well as the advent of the World War I, lowered the credibility of the way of justifying values and norms that was favored in the classic era of historicism.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the claim made by classical historicism that it consisted in the only legitimate way of approaching the human affairs was watered down after the consolidation of a- or anti-historical approaches developed in economics, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and other sciences.<sup>56</sup> Historicism’s reputation reached low level in the 1960s and the 1970s, when young historians aiming to refresh the German historiographical scene with concepts and approaches originated in the social sciences defined their project as an attempt to “overcome historicism”.<sup>57</sup> To make matters worse, the post-World War II unease with developmental categories, such as progress or social evolution, and later the post-modern critique of metanarratives, would lay ground to even speaking of the

<sup>51</sup>Hence, I am not talking about “historicism” in the meaning Karl Popper popularized. On the different meanings of the term, see Friedrich Jaeger, “Historismus”, In: Friedrich Jaeger (org.), *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*. Vol. 5, org., Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler, 2007, p. 532-539. In the translation of “*Historismus*”, I opted by the use of “historicism” over “historism”, because the first one is the terminology most commonly used among non-German scholars specializing in the subject.

<sup>52</sup>Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, man, & reason: a study in nineteenth-century thought*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971, p. 41-43.

<sup>53</sup>Beiser, *The German historicist tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 2-5.

<sup>54</sup>Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*. Vol. 1: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857-1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882), edited by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, p. 162; *Idem*, *Historik*. Vol. 2: Texte im Umkreis der Historik (1826-1882), edited by Horst Walter Blanke, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 2007, p. 508.

<sup>55</sup>Herman Paul, “A collapse of trust: reconceptualizing the crisis of historicism”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, vol. 2, n. 1, 2008, p. 63-82 (esp. p. 73-74).

<sup>56</sup>Reinhart Koselleck, “Wozu noch Historie?”, In: Wolfgang Hardtwig (org.), *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, München, DTV, p. 347-365 (esp. p. 348-351).

<sup>57</sup>René Gertz, “O historicismo e a moderna história social alemã”, In: Flávia Varella et al. (orgs.), *A dinâmica do historicismo. Revisitando a historiografia moderna*, Belo Horizonte, Argumentum, 2008, p. 149-168 (esp. p. 151 et seq.); Thomas Welskopp, “Limites e perspectivas da ciência social histórica”, *História da Historiografia*, n. 6, 2011, p. 14-41 (esp. p. 19).



expendability of the concept of history and the historiographical tradition itself.<sup>58</sup>

All this conflicts with Droysen's notion of historical thinking and with the historical didactics bound to it. But I do not believe this is enough of a motive in order for us to relegate to the limbo Droysen's theoretical legacy, and much less that of both historicism and the modern historiographical tradition. Most part of the literature on the "crisis of historicism" dramatizes too much on the impacts of such crisis, which seems to have been really traumatic only in the field of biblical philology and for the neo-Kantian reflection on the foundation of universal values.<sup>59</sup> In other fields the impact of historicization seems to have been less harsh, neutral or even positive. As an example it suffices to regard an interdisciplinary approach that is very well esteemed nowadays, the history of concepts. To a large extent, this approach emerged out of a tendency towards the historicization of philosophy that advanced in nineteenth-century Germany.<sup>60</sup>

Anyway, the many "crises" of historicism may have not been strong enough to invalidate the position according to which a privileged way of understanding the human worlds of the past and the present is to focus on sets of transformations which produced certain orders of individualizable things. It also does not seem to have led us to conclude that there would be something wrong in trying to enhance the understanding of the present with the understanding of the past and vice versa. After all, how many real historians seem to be seriously willing to give up the cognitive procedures united in the term "historicizing"? As was well observed by Sérgio da Mata, "a radically anti-historicist history ceases to be history".<sup>61</sup>

As it turns out, I particularly advocate that historicism and its related didactics of history remain relevant. Historicism composed, among other things, a general description of what is at stake in historiographical practice, which, in my opinion, is to the day one of the best offers available in the market of theories of history. Now, it is a description composed many decades ago, with the help of an idealist vocabulary that has long stoped being satisfactory.<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to associate the work of historians of today to the inquiry into "ethical forces", or "the becoming ideas", to the task of "theodicy", or to concepts such as "spirit", "self of the humankind", "national spirit", "artificers of history", to name only a few examples extracted from Droysen's work. And even the term *Bildung*, with its endless difficulties of translation and its intricate mystical,

<sup>58</sup>For a critical review on such general diagnoses, see Pietro Rossi, *Naufração sem espectador: a idéia de progresso*, São Paulo, Editora da Unesp, 2000, p. 122-132. For a radical critique of historiography, in which it is argued that nowadays both the concept of history and the knowledge produced by academic historians are dispensable, see Keith Jenkins, *Why history? Ethics and postmodernity*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup>Allan Megill, "Why was there a crisis of historicism?", *History and Theory*, vol. 36, n. 3, 1997, p. 416-429 (esp. p. 419-422); Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, truth, and reference in historical representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 5-7.

<sup>60</sup>Gunter Scholtz, "Begriffsgeschichte als historische Philosophie und philosophische Historie", In: Hans Joas; Peter Vogt (eds.), *Begriffene Geschichte. Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2011, p. 264-287.

<sup>61</sup>Sérgio da Mata, "Elogio do historicismo", In: Flávia Varella et al. (orgs.), *A dinâmica do historicismo. Revisitando a historiografia moderna*, Belo Horizonte, Argumentum, 2008, p. 49-62 (esp. p. 55).

<sup>62</sup>Ankersmit, *Meaning, truth, and reference in historical representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 256.

religious, psychological and philosophical connotations, may not be the best choice for the international reflection on historical learning. None of this interferes, however, in the central premises of historicism. They may and must, as Frank Ankersmit has recently suggested, be translated in a more contemporaneous vocabulary.<sup>63</sup> Such a translation that not only interprets, but also tries to update Droysen's historicist didactics, corresponds to a good part of what I have just attempted to do.

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<sup>63</sup>Ankersmit, *Meaning, truth, and reference in historical representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 1-2.