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Abstract

This is an exchange between Herman Paul and Ethan Kleinberg on Kleinberg’s book, Haunting History. The exchange revolves around the question: Are historians ‘ontological realists’? That is, do historians generally take the past to be a fixed and immutable object – ‘definitive, knowable, and stable’? Paul argues that historians do not necessarily hold consistent ontological beliefs. When facing the specter of Derridean deconstructivism, they may well invoke the image of a fixed, immutable past. But this does not imply that historians are ontological realists on all occasions: it is well possible that they respond quite differently to old-fashioned positivists than to Foucault- or Derrida-inspired theorists of history. In his rejoinder to Paul, Kleinberg argues that the ontological realist position historians hold is more stable than their context-specific commitments might suggest. This can be seen in response to the perceived threat of French theory in general and deconstruction in particular but also in the published works of most academic history. He contends that if Swidler’s concept of ‘cultural vocabularies’ is apt in regard to these specific commitments, as Paul suggests, it demonstrates the inadequacy of the ontological realist approach to the past and precisely why historians should look to a deconstructive one.

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Ontological realism; deconstruction; praxeology; cultural repertoires; theory of history

Part I: Herman Paul reading Ethan Kleinberg

Introduction

When Hayden White was still alive and teaching at Stanford in the early 2000s, I once heard a graduate student chatting with White after class, trying to distill out of his teacher some thoughts about originality in the humanities. White’s recipe turned out to be simple: ‘Read two books at the same time and see what happens’. Following this advice, I have read Ethan Kleinberg’s Haunting History in tandem with a book that covers quite different ground: Ann Swidler’s Talk of Love. One is a treatise on deconstruction in history, the other a book on what Americans understand love
to mean. It remains to be seen whether my combined reading of these studies will yield any original insight, as White seemed to promise. But at least the exercise allows for some reflection on a question that becomes more urgent now that White, unfortunately, is no longer among us: How long and in what way do we historical theorists want to continue the ‘metahistorical’ paradigm exemplified by *Metahistory* (White 1973)?

Consequently, the comments that follow should not be mistaken for a book review. They rather seek to start a conversation between two authors whom I greatly admire: a historical theorist working broadly within the Whitean paradigm and a cultural sociologist best known for her contributions to cultural repertoire theory. I would propose their conversation to zoom in on a particular claim made in Kleinberg’s book: the claim that most historians are ‘ontological realists’ in the sense that they believe the past to be a fixed and immutable object – ‘definitive, knowable, and stable’ (Kleinberg 2017, 1, 128).

My question is: When and under what circumstances do historians describe the past as ‘definitive, knowable, and stable’? If they do so in response to a perceived threat known as ‘deconstruction’, ‘Foucault’ or ‘Derrida’, as Kleinberg shows in his chapter on American historians’ reception of French theory, what, if anything, do such context-specific invocations of an ontologically stable past tell us about historians’ ontological commitments in other professional contexts, such as teaching undergraduate classes, supervising PhD research, writing interdisciplinary grant applications and explaining the value of historical studies in a newspaper op-ed? Do such ontological statements reveal ‘assumptions in the current practice of history’ that are stable across contexts, as Kleinberg seems to suggest (Kleinberg 2017, 72), or should they be interpreted in more contextual terms, as claims that ‘work’ in specific rhetorical or discursive situations, but don’t necessarily fare well in other contexts?

**Cultural vocabularies**

Swidler’s *Talk of Love* is a sociological study of what love means to Americans from various age groups and social backgrounds. One of the book’s most fascinating passages revolves around an interview held with an engineer named Donald Nelson. During the first full hour of the interview, the man defines love consistently in terms of mutual respect, that is, in terms of mutual acceptance of differences – ‘not trying, for example, to convert one’s spouse to one’s religious beliefs or interfere with the other person’s activities’ (Swidler 2001, 31). ‘The greatest virtue in marriage is giving the other person freedom to do what he or she wants, and the cardinal sin is denying that freedom’ (32). But when the interviewer asks what Donald would do if Nora, his wife, would become seriously ill, he suddenly adopts a very different tone: ‘Nora is the most important thing in my life’, ‘I love her’. And that means: sacrificing freedom, interests and hobbies for the sake of helping Nora. ‘If you love [someone] . . . it is just something you do
for them. It’s something you want to do’ (32). This clearly draws on a different understanding of love, focused not on freedom and respect but on help and self-sacrifice. How do these two go together?

Swidler is interested in such shifts between frames or ‘cultural vocabularies’, as she calls them, not because she thinks they reveal inconsistencies in people’s beliefs about love, but because she thinks different vocabularies serve different purposes. I quote:

The frame that worked very well to describe what [Donald] values most about his marriage – the mutual respect of two autonomous individuals – broke down, or perhaps we should say it fell silent, before the problem of desperate dependence. His language of ‘respect’ . . . was never meant to handle a situation of decisive choice. When the vocabulary of respect failed him, an entirely different moral vision was available in reserve. (Swidler 2001, 33)

According to Swidler, this shows something more general about what culture is and how it works. Arguing against a dominant Weberian tradition in twentieth-century sociology that defines culture in terms of values or ideologies – what people do is dictated by their values – Swidler thinks that culture is more like a toolkit, on which people draw selectively as the situation requires. Following this line of reasoning, Donald’s talk of love should not be understood as expressing stable commitments to values like freedom, loyalty and care. Rather, Donald draws on a variety of culturally available resources, thereby suggesting that some situations require different sorts of conduct than others.

Talk of history

I don’t know of a historiographical equivalent to Talk of Love – a volume entitled Talk of History, for instance. But the case of Donald Nelson reminds me of John Pocock, whom Kleinberg invokes in his first chapter as a spokesman for ontological realism. Based on a 1986 article of Pocock, directed against historians trying to become French- or German-style intellectuals (Pocock 1986), Kleinberg argues that Pocock sought to exorcise such ‘evil spirits’ as Foucault and Derrida from the house of history in order to preserve that house for ‘working historians’ with ontological realist conceptions of a stable past (Kleinberg 2017, 27). What Kleinberg does not mention is that Pocock on other occasions chose to say quite different things. In dialogue with political theorists, for instance, Pocock could be heard saying that the past is never ‘over and done with’, that ancient texts have a surplus of meaning, allowing them to reemerge with sometimes unexpected force in the here and now, ‘reminding us that there is always more going on than we can comprehend at any one moment and convert into their theory or practice’. Here, the past appears as anything but stable:
what is past or present about, say, Machiavelli cannot, in Pocock’s words, ‘be defined with finality’ – a term that almost seems borrowed from deconstructivist discourse (Pocock 2008, 172).

I’m not sure how Kleinberg would make sense of this apparent inconsistency in Pocock’s ontological statements. Yet I think I know what Swidler would say. She would welcome it as another illustration of the central idea of her book: culture is not a matter of holding consistent views about the world. Culture rather consists of attitudes and skills that enable people to draw on multiple repertoires, depending on the situations in which they find themselves. Although it is true that many key words or phrases in historians’ vocabularies are charged with ontological meaning – think of ‘facts’ or ‘reconstruction of the past’ – historians resemble other human beings in using different idioms, with different ontological connotations, often without much worry about philosophical consistency. If they read and, most likely, fail to understand Derrida, they respond differently, in terms of other vocabularies or repertoires, than they do to Ranke’s wie es eigentlich gewesen (with all the Idealist metaphysics implied in that phrase).

So, if Kleinberg examines how historians respond to Foucault, Derrida and their apostles in the US, he is studying historians’ discourse in a setting where, indeed, ontological realist assumptions are frequently invoked. Faced with intellectuals perceived as embodying the specter of ‘relativism’, historians take recourse to ontological realism. However, if Swidler is right about the context-specificity of such discourse, this analysis does not tell us very much about how those same historians would respond to, for example, Langlois’s and Seignobos’s Introduction aux études historiques (1898) – a late nineteenth-century textbook now generally conceived as very old fashioned in its positivist fetishism of sources. Indeed, following Swidler, it is not inconceivable that historians commenting on this textbook would adopt stances much closer to Foucault, stressing that historians make their ‘facts of the past’ at least as much as they find them.

**Ontological realism**

Although I expect Kleinberg to be sympathetic to this line of reasoning, I can imagine him raising an objection. While it seems plausible that historians adopt different idioms in teaching a first-year course on historical method, in delivering a conference paper at the Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference and in explaining at a cocktail party why society needs historical studies, some cultural vocabularies circulating among historians seem more context-specific than others. Arguably, methodological language is most likely to vary across situations, if only because the jargon employed in articles on ‘emotional regimes’ in postcolonial India is often as unintelligible to first-year history students as it is to colleagues outside of the
humanities. Epistemological repertoires may vary, too. In order to make sense of their ‘epistemological uncertainty’ (Kleinberg 2017, 2), historians metaphorically explain their work through images as different as a ‘puzzle’, a ‘story’ and a ‘dialogue’. Ontological repertoires, on the other hand, do not seem to come in great numbers. Isn’t ontological realism ‘the position that most conventional historians hold’ (2), simply because the historical profession has traditionally positioned itself as a guardian of the ‘real’ over and against neighboring fields perceived as indulging in ‘hypothesizing’, ‘theorizing’ and ‘speculating’ (I am exaggerating only slightly)?

In my imagination, I see Swidler nodding enthusiastically, but also eagerly waiting to add two further complications. One is that ‘ontological realism’ might be a bit too broad a term to describe historians’ ontological commitments with sufficient precision. Perhaps ‘ontological realism’ seems to reign supreme only because it is an umbrella category that lumps together a variety of ways in which historians perceive ‘real’ and ‘stable’ as meaningful attributes of their pasts – especially if ‘realism’, like ‘relativism’, is employed for polemical purposes. Second, even if it is the case that most historians, when pressed, would admit that the past is ‘fixed’ or ‘stable’, what difference would that make to their actual work in the various contexts mentioned above? Doesn’t Kleinberg’s opening chapter – an interesting, but methodologically quite conventional piece of intellectual history – add credence to the view that historical competence is primarily a matter of skillfully applying certain hermeneutical tools, irrespective of their original ontological connotations and the metaphysical ‘positions’ held by their users (if these have any ‘positions’ at all)?

**Conclusion**

At this point, the conversation seems to reach a certain impasse, mainly because of all the hypothetical adverbs (‘perhaps’) and conditional clauses (‘if’) that begin to dominate both Swidler’s and Kleinberg’s language. It is one thing to assume that historians say different things in different contexts, but quite another to substantiate this claim with empirical evidence. Embarrassing as it may sound, such empirical studies are nearly absent: there are hardly any studies telling us how academic historians teach, how they write grant proposals or even how they conduct archival research. If a surprised Swidler were to inquire into what kind of research historical theorists typically engage, the honest answer would be that most of them don’t do much empirical research. Insofar as historians and their work are subjected to empirical analysis, it is only their published work that receives attention, usually from historical theorists who follow White in asking ‘metahistorical’ questions about ontological and epistemological ‘assumptions’ or ‘commitments’ to political and aesthetic values.
Analogous to the story of Weber’s legacy in American sociology, then, Swidler might ask Kleinberg whether some kind of Weberian ghost is haunting historical theory – partly perhaps through Hayden White’s far-reaching influence. As I have argued elsewhere, the kind of historiographical analysis practiced in *Metahistory* drew heavily on White’s historical work from the 1950s, central to which were Weberian categories of analysis (Paul 2011). Ever since White, historical theorists have favored ‘views’ and ‘positions’ over practices and performances. They have privileged questions of ideology, value and Weltanschauung over those of habit, routine and practice. The dominance of this metahistorical paradigm (in which Kleinberg also inscribes himself) may help explain why a praxeological alternative has never really taken off.

So, by way of conclusion, I can imagine a theme issue of, say, *Rethinking History*, co-edited by Kleinberg and Swidler, devoted to exploring the pros and cons of a praxeological paradigm in historical theory, focused on the demands that different types of practices make upon historians in terms of their methodology, their language, their virtues (if I may throw in that one) and their ontology. I can imagine Swidler writing an opening piece on Weber’s legacy in twentieth-century historical theory. I can imagine several case study articles, exploring how historians in different circumstances draw on different repertoires and how, *vice versa*, different ontological commitments are seldom a barrier for fruitful collaboration. Yet I’m still curious about the title of Kleinberg’s concluding remarks. ‘The Praxeological Fallacy’, perhaps? Or will he join the praxeological turn and write an article as fresh and stimulating as his newest book, entitled ‘How Realism Resembles Love: Ontological Repertoires in Historical Studies?’

*Part II: Ethan Kleinberg responding to Herman Paul*

**Introduction**

Thinking about Herman Paul’s evocation of Hayden White and the radical contingency of reading ‘two books at the same time’ to see what happens, I began to wonder what would have happened had Paul chosen Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* or Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus*. Something quite different I suspect. But I also suspect that Paul’s decision to pair *Haunting History* with Swidler’s *Talk of Love* was more calculated and deliberate than the reference to White suggests. At least the finished product appears that way as Paul is able to marshal the work of Swidler to raise some important questions about my book and the theory of history. In this sense, the conversation is really between three authors not two and it is a pleasure to engage with Swidler, an author I too greatly admire, and a scholar as erudite, precise and intellectually generous as Paul. I plan to approach this ‘conversation’ from two directions. The first to answer the more
specific questions about ontological realism, the metahistorical paradigm and the Weberian approach. The second to argue that if Swidler’s concept of ‘cultural vocabularies’ is apt, as Paul suggests, it demonstrates the inadequacy of the ontological realist approach to the past and precisely why historians should look to a deconstructive one.

I will bracket the overarching question Paul asks as to ‘how long and in what way do we historical theorists want to continue the “metahistorical” paradigm exemplified by Metahistory?’ and instead begin with the more particular one regarding ontological realism: ‘When and under what circumstances do historians describe the past as “definite, knowable, and stable”? Paul uses Swidler’s ‘cultural vocabularies’ to argue that the positions historians hold are context-specific invocations, such that a historian confronting the philosophy of Derrida or Foucault may well invoke an ontologically stable past but that same historian confronting Langois and Seignobos could take the contradictory position that the past lacks such stability. Following this logic, Paul speaking as Swidler suggests that ontological realism might be ‘too broad a term to describe historian’s ontological commitments with sufficient precision’. This is the concern with what Paul sees as a Weberian approach where the focus on ideas and ideal types loses track of the practices at play in particular contexts. Such practices lack the consistency of the ideal type. Perhaps this is so, but let us take a moment to answer the question as to when and under what circumstances historians describe the past as definite, knownable and stable? One instance is surely in response to the perceived threat of French theory in general and deconstruction in particular as I demonstrate in the book. But another place one can see these commitments is in the published works of most academic history. For the most part, actually existing academic history promotes a disciplinary essentialism founded upon a methodological fetishism which treats reified appearances (i.e. immediately observable, preferably archival, evidence) as embodying the real and containing the truth of social relations. Evaluation of scholarship is based on whether this empiricist method has been capably employed and in this way the commitment to ontological realism permeates all the practices of the discipline suggested by Paul. Thus, I would like to flip the question about when and under what circumstances historians hold the ontological realist position to instead ask when and under what circumstances they do not?

**Ontological realism: weak, strong, enduring**

In the book, I distinguish between a weaker and stronger variant of ontological realism. The stronger variant adheres to the position that there is a past and we can have full access to it; but, to my mind, this is a position that no, or very few, working historians currently hold, even though it seems to be the variant Paul targets. Instead, it is the weaker variant that interests me, wherein the past is said to have an ontological
reality but it is one we can only approach perspectively and incompletely from our position in the present, and thus with epistemological uncertainty about that which is ontologically certain. This latter weaker variant is the position that most conventional historians hold and allows for the contradictions at work in the sorts of cultural vocabularies Paul describes. In the book, I reference Alun Munslow’s observation that historians beholden to a rather Rankean view of the past manage to maintain it while simultaneously making concessions to philosophers or theorists of history. Most historians are perfectly comfortable ceding points about the accessibility or stability of the past to thinkers such as White, Dominick LaCapra, or Joan Scott but then proceed with their historical work as though this doesn’t matter. This might be the sort of contradiction at work in cultural vocabularies as articulated by Swidler via Paul but I think it also important to point out that such contradictions manage to maintain continuity insofar as the concession to an unstable past is then followed by a narrative of stability that effaces the prior concession canceling out the contradiction as it were. This is why I argue that the stronger version of ontological realism is always at work unannounced in the weaker one. Historians are particularly adept at offering paradigms they know are unattainable and then effacing those aspects that expose the instability or limitations of their model.

Paul provides a series of quotes by Pocock that provide an excellent example of why cultural vocabularies should not be seen as expressing stable commitments but rather as a variety of culturally available resources that are deployed differently depending on context and situation. Paul juxtaposes a quote by Pocock that I use in the book to demonstrate his unease and discomfort about deconstruction with another quote by Pocock, responding to political theorists, that coincides with an understanding of the past as radically unstable. Paul asks how I would make sense of the apparent ‘inconsistency in Pocock’s ontological statements’. He then opines that Swidler would take it as an illustration that culture is not a matter of holding consistent views about the world but about the attitudes and skills that enable people to draw on multiple repertoires depending on the situation in which they find themselves. I think this is likely correct, although there does seem to be a way in which the contradictory positions Pocock holds still manage to serve a larger ideal that likely would not be seen by examining practices and instead requires a metahistorical view. Nevertheless, for me, the issue in play was never really about whether Pocock held consistent views but instead about why and how, for someone like Pocock who does hold sophisticated views about the nature of the past, deconstruction is a strategy that simply goes too far? Why, in the context of confronting deconstruction, does Pocock take up the vocabulary of ontological realism? Paul could have also used the even more striking example of Hayden White of whom I ask the same question in regard to White’s
article from 1976 where he presents deconstruction as the point of no return, where ‘the ballet turns ghostly and all judgment, discrimination, and perspective is lost’ (White 1978, 281).

So, on the one hand, I believe that most historians actually hold a more consistent view of what the past is and how they approach it, even given the inconsistencies in their distinct cultural vocabularies about it. And, on the other hand, even those historians whose general approach would seem to welcome deconstruction may be unable to do so, instead taking on positions and commitments aligned with ontological realism. I can see how Paul would see this as evidence of the context-driven switching that Swidler argues is at work in our everyday practices, but I believe it is worth asking whether there is something more at play in the relation between deconstruction and history. I will come back to this in the final section.

**Metahistory of praxeology**

Paul next asks whether, even if it is the case that most historians, when pressed, ‘would be prepared to admit that the past is “fixed” or “stable,” how much of a difference would that make for their actual work in the various contexts mentioned above?’ In other words, so what? This is a question I hear often and my response is that it does matter a lot because of the ways that the ontological realist approach closes off the possibilities of alternative logics of history, alternative voices and alternative pasts. This is to argue that the sorts of practices that interest Paul are restricted when it comes to the discipline of history and discriminatory in terms of which types of practice are actually allowed into the discipline. Indeed, they are sufficiently discriminatory that I intentionally wrote the opening chapter of *Haunting History* as a conventional intellectual history to ‘credential’ myself in order to cut off one line of dismissal. When Paul asks: ‘Doesn’t Kleinberg’s opening chapter – an interesting, but methodologically quite conventional piece of intellectual history – add credence to the view that historical competence is primarily a matter of skillfully applying certain hermeneutical tools, irrespective of their original ontological connotations and the metaphysical “positions” held by their users (if these have any “positions” at all)?’, I would say no. ‘Historical competence’ invoked in this specific context is a means of disciplining the author into a narrow bandwidth of narrative, interpretative and rhetorical choices. Into choices that are easily parroted to subversive ends in my case, as I think becomes apparent in the discussion of presence and absence in the chapter under consideration, and made explicit in the final chapter on ‘The Past that Is’. By now, it may be clear that I don’t see ontological realism as resembling love at all. At least not Swidler’s account of it. But this does not lead me to dismiss Swidler or Paul as some sort of ‘Praxeological Fallacy’. If I were to
follow Paul’s praxeological turn, it would be to investigate the practices of disciplinary discrimination and the cultural vocabularies at work in this sort of boundary building, although my sense is that this too would require the retention of a metahistorical vantage as well as a praxeological one.

This leads me to my second approach to the ‘different contexts, different repertoires’ at work in Paul’s comment. One question I have for Paul is whether his invocation of the praxeological approach attuned to cultural vocabularies is one he thinks applicable to historians for the practice of history or solely to theorists and philosophers of history in their diagnosis of what historians do? I ask this because if Paul, following Swidler, is right in asserting that humans generally operate by means of context-specific invocations that are routinely contradictory, then the ontological realist approach employed in most conventional historical accounts would turn out to be a particularly bad and misleading one. This is because the internal logic of such an approach strives to paper over inconsistencies and contradictions to produce a consistent and cohesive nature of the ‘past “as it really was”, even if the full and complete truth about the past will always remain beyond their grasp’ (Wood 2008, 60). By contrast, the deconstructive approach is one that actively searches for such contradictions without the compulsion to either reconcile or dismiss one in favor of another. In this way, it is likely, by looking to the deconstructive approach to the past in chapter five of my book (‘The Past that Is’) rather than the diagnosis of ontological realism in chapter one, that Paul can find a means of doing history that accounts for the contradictory commitments and ensuing cultural vocabularies he finds so attractive in the work of Swidler.

Conclusion

At this point, however, the conversation does indeed seem to reach an impasse. Partly because of the reasons Paul suggests involving some kind of Weberian ghost haunting historical theory through Hayden White’s far-reaching influence and the emphasis on ‘views’ and ‘positions’ over practices and performances. But also, I would argue, because of Paul’s own overture to empirical studies which implies a search for ‘solid answers’ as to how academic historians teach, how they write grant proposals or even how they conduct archival research. I certainly don’t think of Paul as a crude ontological realist and I welcome his position because of his strong commitment to working out issues in a complex and self-reflective way. But within the context of this exchange and his argument about cultural vocabularies, I consider it likely that readers of the exchange will see the call for empirical research as a response to the instability of the past offered in my own argument. This is to say that just as my position is presented as linked to Weberian idealism, his will
be taken as the language of ontological realism where, to my mind, the commitment to empirical data serves as a false floor to hold up the assertion that such events are objectively and neutrally available for discovery, description and interpretation. Here, we reach the impasse or aporia in our exchange which is the stopping point for the ontological realist but the opening for the deconstructivist. I would embrace Paul’s praxeological turn precisely because of the ways it places the underlying assumptions of the metahistorical approach in question. But I’m loathe to do so if it simply means inverting the hierarchy and advancing practice theory as the sole interpretative lens for theory of history. Especially given the ways that under-examined practices are often taken as simple and neutral instantiations of a given cultural context without reflection on how they serve to form that context or restrict other practices that are then taken to be unnatural. In this regard, I remain committed to the metahistorical paradigm and the critical force it maintains. Thus, the sort of deconstruction I would like to see in our imaginary theme issue is one that places these two approaches in conversation so that we are forced to confront and examine the contradictory cultural vocabularies at work in each of them and what each exposes about the assumptions at work in the other. Perhaps I would call my contribution ‘The practice of deconstruction: a labor of love’.

Notes

1. My imaginary conversation is indebted to a real one at the American Sociological Association annual meeting in Montreal, on 15 August 2017. In a panel discussion of Abend (2014), Swidler made a case for interpreting ethical language in praxeological instead of philosophical terms, that is, with an eye to the purposes such language serves in actual practice rather than with a focus on their philosophical presuppositions or genealogies.

2. Ironically, the only exception that comes to mind – a sociological analysis of how historians in grant committees define scholarly ‘excellence’ – has been written by a former student of Swidler: Lamont (2010).

3. This formulation is taken from thesis I.2 of the Theses on Theory and History (Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder 2017).

Acknowledgments

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Disclosure statement

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