



## History of European Ideas

ISSN: 0191-6599 (Print) 1873-541X (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rhei20>

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To cite this article: Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (2019): Historicism and constructionism: rival ideas of historical change, History of European Ideas

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2019.1653351>



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Published online: 12 Aug 2019.



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# Historicism and constructionism: rival ideas of historical change

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## ABSTRACT

A seemingly unitary appeal to history might evoke today two incompatible operations of historicization that yield contradictory results. This article attempts to understand two co-existing senses of historicity as conflicting ideas of historical change and rival practices of temporal comparison: historicism and constructionism. At their respective births, both claimed to make sense of the world and ourselves as changing over time. Historicism, dominating nineteenth-century Western thought and overseeing the professionalization of historical studies, advocated an understanding of the present condition of the human world as developing out of past conditions. Constructionism, dominating the second half of the twentieth century, understood the present condition as the recent invention of certain 'historical' environments, without prior existence. As competing ideas of historical change, they both entail a comparison between past and present conditions of their investigated subjects, but their practices of temporal comparison are irreconcilable and represent two distinct ways of historicization.

## KEYWORDS

Historical change; historicism; constructionism; temporal comparison; historical time

## 1. Becoming the norm

No one fears social constructionism today. And no one is even surprised these days that no one fears constructionism. Insights which start out as rebellious (according to their self-description) simply tend to become norms in the humanities and social sciences. Not necessarily unchallenged and exclusive norms, but legitimate ones in a matrix of tenable academic practices. In the present climate, however, constructionism is somewhere at the middle of a hypothetical intellectual spectrum on which the two extremes are old-fashioned theories left untouched by constructionism and theories growing out of more recent experiential horizons which already encountered constructionism as the norm to be challenged.

As to constructionism becoming the norm, Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?* (1999) demonstrates this best in its opening pages by providing an illustrious list of things already claimed to be socially constructed. The ten first entries of the list, in alphabetical order, are: authorship, brotherhood, the child viewer of television, danger, emotions, facts, gender, homosexual culture, illness, and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> While two decades ago Hacking had to struggle with library catalogs to collect individual entries to the list, Google Scholar finds today an impressive amount of 11,400 titles (yes, only titles) including the phrase 'social construction of' in an instant. As to challenges to the norm, a variety of approaches either distance themselves from constructionism today in one sense or another, explore its limits, or simply aim at investigating that which they consider as

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

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falling out of the constructionist scope. As examples of such tendency, one can think of an ecologically oriented critical posthumanism, speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, the strongly related emergence of new materialism, or Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's efforts to balance an unquestioned focus of humanities research on questions of meaning with exploring 'presence'.<sup>2</sup> Although the plausibility of these and other endeavours is hotly debated, my intention by mentioning them is neither to align with nor to refute them. They are summoned here only to testify a trend in current scholarship that conceives of constructionism as a norm to be challenged.

Yet the fact that no one fears social constructionism does not mean that it is sufficiently explored and understood. Nor does its current reputation of being a domesticated view explain why constructionism was feared in the second half of the last century. At the same time, however, it is precisely its current reputation which calls for an investigation of the times when it was feared, in order to achieve a better grasp of constructionist thought. On the following pages, I will attempt such an understanding by exploring the relationship between constructionism and the question of history. But before properly introducing the approach, I have to say a few words about my use of constructionism throughout this essay. I will use the term in a rather loose sense, coupling together all lines of thought invested in explicating the 'social construction' of any subject. This includes approaches that label themselves as 'constructivism' instead of 'constructionism', and even approaches which talk about the 'cultural construction of' any subject instead of talking about a specifically 'social' construction. In fact, I will use the term in the loosest sense, that is, the sense in which practically anyone's departmental colleagues talk about the social construction of this and that during coffee breaks. This means that most of the time, unless I qualify, anyone is free to understand constructionism by whatever they see fit in such situations.

It is this common academic sense of constructionism that I will measure against the modern Western sense of the historicity of all things. I will have my point of departure in the following puzzlement: at the same time when constructionism conquered the humanities and the social sciences by claiming that its subjects of investigation are constructions of certain historical environments, the discipline of history as the scholarly guardian of historicity experienced a crisis. While constructionist theories and their appeal to historicity spread across disciplines, historians felt that their practice is being undermined by various brands of theories. This, I believe, is a truly perplexing situation. It poses the following question: how was it possible that a sense of historicity simultaneously appeared vigorous in the shape of constructionism and utterly wrecked in the shape of the practice of historical studies?

After setting the stage thereby, I will outline an answer by arguing that the crisis of history was due to the fact that constructionism harboured an alternative sense of historicity, that is, an alternative conception of historical change. Whereas historical studies, since their modern professionalization, have been relying on the idea of historicism in configuring change over time in developmental terms, constructionism offered a completely different scenario I call unprecedented change. Contrasting these competing ideas of historical change enables me then to consider the respective historicities underlying the idea of historicism and the idea of constructionism as rival practices of temporal comparison. Inasmuch as both offer scenarios of change over time, they necessarily invoke a comparison between past and present conditions of the subjects they study. The temporal comparison carried out by historicism considers the past condition of a certain subject as an earlier, underdeveloped version of the more developed present condition of the very same subject. Contrary to this, constructionism reveals the temporal incommensurability of present subjects of investigation to any preceding states of affairs, thereby implying that present subjects are not merely new versions of old subjects but truly novel and relatively recent inventions. To see what all this means exactly, let me return to the first step and elaborate on the initial conundrum.

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<sup>2</sup>See, respectively, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

## 2. Tendencies of existential anxiety

There is something deeply bewildering and confounding about the postwar career of history. And the bewilderment is not confined to historical studies. It concerns the modern historical sensibility of Western societies at its most general, that is, it concerns a specifically ‘historical’ way of making sense of ourselves and the world as changing over time. Professionalized and institutionalized historical studies is of course part of this larger picture as one particular practice among many others.

In fact, the source of the bewilderment is precisely a discrepancy between the ways in which historical studies and certain other practices have been engaged in historical sense-making in the second half of the last century. One of the most puzzling phenomena of the postwar scholarly and intellectual scene was that a large part of historical studies somehow missed the ‘event’ when other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences ‘went historical’. By ‘going historical’ I mean the introduction of the ‘historical’ dimension to various disciplines in the guise of social constructionism with the aim of deconstructing long-standing standards of essentialism, determinism, and universalism of the Western scholarly enterprise. Historical studies missed this ‘event’ in the sense that professional historians simply had different preoccupations at that time. They focused on another ‘event’, one that they conceived of as a multifarious theoretical attack targeting the core of the foundations of their profession. The ‘event’ historians perceived was simply the sheer opposite than other disciplines did: not the sudden emergence of an overwhelming historical sensibility but the threat of its nonetheless sudden decay.

Both perceived ‘events’ generated larger tendencies of existential anxiety spreading over, respectively, the wider scholarly world and the narrower world of professional historiography. These tendencies pointed towards seemingly opposite ends and seemingly irreconcilable directions, with historical sensibility playing a crucial but controversial role in both. In the shape of social constructionism, historical sensibility appeared in the role of the principal cause of all the supposed intellectual damage done in the past decades by pulling the ground off of all former certainties that could withstand time by remaining unchanged. Yet, in the shape of historical studies, such a historical sensibility seemed to play the role of the victim and was itself supposed to suffer all the damage under a theoretical attack.

The latter tendency is the so-called *crisis of history*, meaning the crisis of the discipline. Of course, it looks ‘so-called’ only in hindsight, and it looks ‘so-called’ only now that fewer historians are inclined to feel threatened by theories. But between the 1960s and 1990s, a large part of the profession (just like, to be fair, many practitioners of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences) sensed danger in the basic insights of various brands of theories. Whereas some historians feared the many kinds of poststructuralisms, others felt threatened by deconstruction, reader-oriented literary theory, the sociology of scientific knowledge, feminism, psychoanalysis, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language. Although the whole cluster of theories were oftentimes referenced as the ‘linguistic turn’,<sup>3</sup> the threatening aspect for the practice of history was not simply a theoretical focus on language but the pervasiveness of linguistic constructionism in theorizing the relationship between language and the world in general (between the historian’s language and the past in particular).

In this respect, the most reasonable concerns perhaps emerged from an encounter with the insights of narrativist philosophy of history and narrative constructionism. In its most clearly articulated form, narrativism appeared in the work of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit,<sup>4</sup> but in several diverging versions it got fused and mixed in all possible combinations with the various theoretical

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed account on the ‘linguistic turn’ in history see Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Frank R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983); Frank R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

approaches mentioned above.<sup>5</sup> All these theories seriously questioned the nature of historical knowledge and what they assumed to be the majority view of the profession on questions of objectivity and truth. They claimed that knowledge is constituted by historians who study past conditions and states of affairs, and that there is no way to measure this knowledge against past conditions and states of affairs themselves, independent of the mental and linguistic representations of historians. Within their respective scopes, these theories argued that historical writing betrays an outdated epistemological position and thus an outdated conception of the relationship between language and past reality,<sup>6</sup> that it falls within the genre of literary writing,<sup>7</sup> that it exercises an un-reflexive stance,<sup>8</sup> that it maintains the masculine standards of the profession created at the time of the institutionalization of the discipline,<sup>9</sup> or that the institutionalized discipline exhibits a colonial fixation and unavoidably retains 'Europe' as the master subject of all particular histories.<sup>10</sup>

Although the above claims could have stirred disciplinary emotions even as taken separately, they appeared even more powerful seen together. As a result, such criticism led to a general sense among historians that *a wholesale theoretical attack was launched on basically the entire historical enterprise* in the second half of the last century. The perception of suffering a wholesale attack gave way to a growing anxiety about the discipline of history and about the historical sensibility informing it. In the self-perception of historians, history as a discipline was challenged at best and even killed at worst, it had to be defended, and the truth about it had to be told (just to refer to four well-known titles of the recent past).<sup>11</sup>

As usual, the response to the challenge, the defense and the 'truth' about history came with considerable delay. By the time the engagement of historians with theories hit the mainstream in the 1990s, the theoretical field itself – the field that is best called the theory and philosophy of history – began to move to newer interests. By the early 2000s, postmodernist historical theory had already earned the adjective 'classic'. In a review of Keith Jenkins's *Refiguring History*, Michael Roth succinctly summarized the situation as follows: 'the theory wars are over. Jenkins's *Rethinking History* is Routledge classic, Hayden White is required reading, and subalterns speak from tenured positions'.<sup>12</sup> Today, when it comes to theories that retain the scope of examining historical studies, we witness a return to epistemological questions, even the aim of reviving analytical philosophy of history, or efforts aiming at postnarrativism within the analytical framework.<sup>13</sup> A large body of newer theories, however, broaden their scope and no longer conceive of themselves as second-order knowledge on the knowledge production of the first-order discipline of academic history. In this respect, among many other new developments that this essay does not wish to recount, the themes of historical time and temporality have become especially prominent lately,<sup>14</sup> while

<sup>5</sup>For a fair overview of all these and (even more) theoretical approaches related to history see Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory* (London: Sage, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>See especially the classics of what may be called British postmodern historical theory. Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>7</sup>Alongside the earlier White references, see Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); or, far later than the heyday of relevant debates, see Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History and Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. 243–83.

<sup>9</sup>Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?' *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26.

<sup>11</sup>Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2003); Keith Windshuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered By Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (Sidney: Mcleay Press, 1994); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).

<sup>12</sup>Michael S. Roth, 'Classic Postmodernism', *History and Theory* 43, no. 3 (2004): 378. For the reviewed book see Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>Krzysztof Brzechczyn, ed., *Towards a Revival of Analytical Philosophy of History: Around Paul A. Roth's Vision of Historical Sciences* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage, eds., *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Helge Jordheim, 'Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization', *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014): 498–518; Victoria Fareld, '(In) Between the Living and the Dead: New Perspectives on Time in History',

metadisciplinary or transdisciplinary questions raised by the Anthropocene, posthumanism and posthumanity signal completely new theoretical endeavours.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the fact that the theoretical field is changing and the fact that debates with historians about past theoretical concerns are themselves in the past, does not diminish the significance of a once-felt crisis within professional historical studies. This once-felt crisis, however, is only one side of the coin. The other side is a simultaneous tendency of existential anxiety: *the campaign of constructionism*. In the last half-century, everything – and literally everything – became a construction: social, cultural, linguistic. The best illustration of how common constructionism-talk had become by the end of the last century may be a remark of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty from the end of the 1990s. In his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty ironically notes that ‘there is not, in fact, much naïveté left these days. Tell a sophomore at an American college that something is only a social construct, and she is likely to reply, “Yeah, I know. So are you, Mac”’.<sup>16</sup>

Social constructionism quickly conquered academia, fused and mixed with all the various aforementioned brands of theories that historians also encountered in their own seemingly disciplinary-specific crisis. As it turned out that practically all subjects to which scholars sacrificed their whole lives previously were just another construction, existential anxiety spread over the entire scholarly world, dividing it rather sharply and deeply. Those resisting to adhere, typically associated constructionism with epistemic relativism and considered it a threat to the possibility of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, advocates had to make clear that describing something as constructed does not mean that it is ‘mere construction’ and does not entail the view that whatever is constructed is also not real.<sup>18</sup> Besides, it is also important to point out the diversity of constructionist claims. For, as André Kukla warns,

people who call themselves constructivists sometimes argue for a *metaphysical* thesis about some or all facts about the world we live in, sometimes for an *epistemological* thesis concerning what can be known about the world, and sometimes for a *semantic* thesis concerning what can be said about the world.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, regardless of what one meant by ‘construction’, the ‘constructionist’ label rapidly attained heavy evaluative connotations and created tribal senses of academic belongings. Hacking emphatically reports on this phenomenon by claiming that ‘the phrase has become a code. If you use it favorably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable’.<sup>20</sup>

Now, despite the spectacular career of constructionism, there is something rather odd in the second tendency of existential anxiety it sparked. The oddity derives from the fact that the entire constructionist-talk was based upon something which itself seemed to suffer from existential anxiety: historical sensibility. For constructionism was and is still based on an irrepressible sense of historicity. Constructionist thought, of course, has various tenets and features, but at the core of constructionism lies an appeal to history. Even if one hesitates to give definitions of the subjects of their study – as practically every academic book does lately by claiming that nothing is fixed and stable – there are at least some ‘key assumptions’ that can be identified. According to Vivien Burr, it is such a ‘key

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*History Compass* 14, no. 9 (2016), 430–40; Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, eds., *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>15</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222; Julia Adeney Thomas, ‘History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value’, *American Historical Review* 119, no. 5 (2014): 1587–607; Libby Robin, ‘Histories for Changing Times: Entering the Anthropocene?’ *Australian Historical Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 329–40; Ewa Domanska, ‘Posthumanist History’, in *Debating New Approaches to History*, ed. Marek Tamm and Peter Burke (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 327–38; Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, ‘Two Cultures of the Posthuman Future’, *History and Theory* 58, no. 2 (2019): 171–84.

<sup>16</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin, 1999), 217.

<sup>17</sup>See, for instance, Paul A. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. the autobiographical story of Latour about the adventures and rejected associations concerning the early use of ‘constructivism’ as self-description. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88–93.

<sup>19</sup>André Kukla, *Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>20</sup>Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* vii.

assumption' of social constructionism that 'the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific'.<sup>21</sup>

But the historicity informing constructionist thought is not merely about the temporal and spatial specificity of all things. Pointing at the 'historical' character of that which is considered to be socially constructed is intended to eliminate long-standing ideas about a certain type of changelessness. In Burr's field of study, psychology, this means the idea of 'human nature',<sup>22</sup> while at the most general level it refers to the idea of all and anything having a 'nature' or 'essence'. Hacking's analysis of social constructionist thought, or, more specifically, what Hacking calls the grades of constructionist commitment, even more wonderfully attests to this point. According to Hacking, 'the historical' is 'the least demanding grade of constructionism',<sup>23</sup> which does not mean that this is the weakest link that one could just safely remove and constructionism would stand still. Quite the contrary. It means that the historical grade provides the basis upon which all other grades of constructionist commitment are built (ironic, reformist, unmasking, rebellious, and revolutionary are the ones Hacking mentions). With the help of the historical grade, one can make the aforementioned fundamental claim that something is not inevitable, that it has no 'nature'.<sup>24</sup> All other grades are for additional claims about whether that which is socially constructed qualifies as a bad thing, and thus we should or should not get rid of it.<sup>25</sup> What one can claim without the additional claims, what one can claim by relying only on the historical grade is something seemingly more modest. It goes as follows: *there is no such thing as the 'nature' of things, there is only their history.*

### 3. Historicism vs. constructionism

The simultaneity of these seemingly contradictory tendencies qualifies as a scholarly mystery begging for explanation. On the one hand, there is history, the discipline, being devastated under a theoretical attack; on the other, there is history, as a wider historical sensibility or sense of historicity, on its victory march to devastate everything else in the guise of constructionism. How could this be? How could history – in the overall sense in which the discipline is an instance of historical sensibility – appear both terribly helpless and extremely powerful at the same time?

The most obvious answer springing to mind somewhat automatically goes like this: if practically everything is thought to be a social construction, then the discipline of history and the wider historical sensibility it relies on must be too. There is no apparent contradiction at all in supposing that the modern historical sensibility, disguised in its latest form as social constructionism, turned against its academic stronghold, the discipline of history. This explanation – according to which the modern historical sensibility eventually reveals its own contingency – is based on the assumption that the historicity of constructionist thought and professionalized historical studies as we know it may essentially be identical. Even Hacking implies identity when asking: 'how does historical "social" constructionism differ from history? Not much, a matter of attitude, perhaps'.<sup>26</sup>

Is this explanation plausible? Well, not really. For if the case was so, if constructionism was just like history as we know it, then historians likely would not have fancied a crisis of their discipline in the first place upon encountering such constructionist ideas (as they did). If history turned against itself, then it could be reasonably expected that historians would have had a clue about what was happening when encountering the very same historical sensibility that otherwise they themselves practice, nurse, and guard (but they had not). Besides, if constructionism was the same as history as we know it, then all those who eagerly turned to social constructionism because of its sense of historicity could have just turned to the discipline of history instead (which they did not).

<sup>21</sup>Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup>Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* 19.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

A feasible explanation of the situation, I think, must avoid the assumption that the historicity informing historical studies and constructionism are somehow identical. It seems much more plausible to assume that there are two distinct ideas of history at play here, which is precisely the claim that I wish to advance, namely, that the bitter and confusing situation described above is best understood as the rivalry of two distinct ideas of history. The ideas in question are the idea of historicism and the idea of constructionism, and the sense in which they are rivals is that they offer alternative scenarios for historical change, that is, alternative ways to conceive ourselves and the world as changing over time ‘historically’.

To begin with the former, the idea of historicism is the defining idea of history behind nineteenth century German Historicism, under whose aegis history as an academic discipline has become institutionalized. In the succinct rendering of Frank Ankersmit from the middle of the 1990s, this defining idea of historicism is that ‘the nature of a thing lies in its history’.<sup>27</sup> Ankersmit, however, only captures the essence of Maurice Mandelbaum’s definition from two and a half decades earlier. Mandelbaum’s definition, with which Ankersmit fully agrees, goes as follows: historicism is

the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development.<sup>28</sup>

Some forty years after Mandelbaum, this definition still stands. Frederick Beiser echoes it by claiming that historicism is the view which holds that ‘the *essence, identity or nature* of everything in the human world is made by history, so that it is *entirely* the product of the particular historical processes that brought it into being’.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, the defining idea of historicism claims that *the nature of a thing lies in its history*. In parallel and also contrary to this, remember the constructionist claim: *there is no such thing as the ‘nature’ of things, there is only their history*. The two claims look deceptively alike. No wonder that Hacking thinks that constructionism entails an appeal to the same old history. Yet there is, I think, a crucial difference between the two, which eventually boils down to the question of how change is conceived of. The difference between the two claims rather obviously revolves around the question of the ‘nature’ of a thing. In the case of historicism, the ‘nature’ of something is what can be revealed by studying how it has developed over time. Historicism does not do away the idea of things having a ‘nature’ but makes that ‘nature’ malleable in the course of unfolding. In the case of constructionism, however, the concept of the ‘nature’ of anything whatsoever is the thing itself that becomes suspicious. In other words, constructionism is skeptical about the idea that what goes through change over time is a self-identical ‘nature’ of a subject identifiable in all its stages of development, and that the existence of this subject can be traced back to its underdeveloped past. These different attitudes toward the nature of things imply different conceptions of what an appeal to history may be. For it is only insofar as historicism assumes a ‘nature’ of a thing that the history of that thing can take the shape of a developmental process. Without the assumption of the ‘nature’ of a thing, the constructionist appeal to history is supposed to prove the point that the presently investigated subject might not have existed in the past at all in any underdeveloped shape whatsoever.

As an example, consider what one could learn about democracy by invoking the respective senses of historicity. In the first case, by relying on the Historicist idea, knowing something about democracy in the here and now means an examination of the history of democracy, which is supposed to reveal what democracy is today in terms of what it has become so far, and – in light of its trajectory leading to the present moment – where this becoming may continue to lead in the future. In the second case, however, by relying on the constructionist idea, turning to the past will not reveal anything about what democracy is today. What it will reveal is only what democracy was at certain time

<sup>27</sup>See Frank R. Ankersmit, ‘Historicism: An Attempt at Synthesis’, *History and Theory* 34, no. 3 (1995): 144.

<sup>28</sup>Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man & Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 42.

<sup>29</sup>Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2 (emphasis in the original).



periods, at certain moments over a non-continuous temporal plane, without a ‘nature’ of democracy binding together those moments in a deep historical trajectory. It will reveal that at other time periods (notwithstanding the existence of the word ‘democracy’ – like in ancient Greece) there was no such thing as democracy at all because what we think we know as democracy today was just invented at a more recent time. It will try to testify that democracy today is not an improvement on Ancient Greek ideals but something completely other, and notwithstanding the retained name, there is no identity-connection between the two. Furthermore, it will suggest that democracy, at any given time, is what people make out of it, that it is not something we could know in the here and now, but something we are free to make out of it, regardless of what the word itself meant for previous eras.

At the most general level of identity association and dissociation, the same happens when substituting ‘democracy’ for ‘us’, ‘human beings’, or ‘human behavior’. The same happens when one wants to answer the identity question, trying to find out who ‘we’ are today. In the first case, by relying on the historicist idea, history appears to be a means of identity formation. It appears to be a means by which we try to understand and shape who ‘we’ are today by exploring how we got here and *who we are now in terms of who we cannot escape to be in light of developing out of past states of affairs*. Such historical sensibility clearly presupposes that we, in the here and now, are strongly associated and affiliated with the past, notwithstanding all changes. Contrary to this, the concept of history invoked in the constructionist claim denies such an association. What it offers instead and what explains its extraordinary appeal concerning the word of human affairs is *the prospect of liberation*. For that which is made sense of in terms of being invented as a socio-cultural artefact might just as well vanish; and if the case is so, then, in fact, it can even be facilitated to vanish.

As an example of liberating effects, consider Hacking’s discussion of motherhood, according to which

mothers who accept current canons of emotion and behavior may learn that the ways they are supposed to feel and act are not ordained by human nature or the biology of reproduction. They need not feel quite as guilty as they are supposed to, if they do not obey either old rules of family or whatever is the official psycho-pediatric rule of the day.<sup>30</sup>

Or, as a more politically explicit constructionist agenda with respect to liberation, consider Sally Haslanger’s aim to ‘provide accounts of race and gender that clarify the sites and forms of construction involved, and that can also be fruitfully employed in the quest for social justice’.<sup>31</sup> All in all, contrary to the contention of historicism that turning to the past reveals how present identities came to be and instructs towards what we are about to be, the ultimate contention of constructionism is that whatever we might be, *there is nothing that we cannot escape to be*.

#### 4. Two ideas of historical change

Although the difference between the claims of historicism and constructionism may not appear to be momentous at first blush, the above discussion already indicates a sharp contrast. And this contrast becomes even sharper when asking the question of how – as based on their respective assumptions about the nature of things (or the lack thereof) – historicism and constructionism part ways in accounting for change over time.

More emphatically phrased, I wish to argue that historicism and constructionism harbour conflicting conceptions of historical change. Historicism, as its aforementioned definitions already indicate, configures historical change by sketching a developmental process within which change in the condition of an otherwise self-identical subject takes place. In Mandelbaum’s analysis, such a developmental view means ‘processes in which there was an unfolding of that which was already at least

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Hacking, *The Social Construction of What? 2*.

<sup>31</sup>Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

implicitly present'.<sup>32</sup> Constructionism offers an alternative to this scenario by conceiving of historical change in terms of what I call 'unprecedented change'.<sup>33</sup> The notion intends to capture a kind of *perceived societal change*, which, instead of referring to a change *in* the condition of a subject, means the displacement of the subject itself and its replacement with a newly constituted subject, completely other than the one displaced. Unprecedented change is about the sudden coming-to-existence of previously inexistent subjects in an event-like manner instead of unfolding from past states of affairs. It also entails the nonetheless event-like disappearance of subjects which appear, expected to appear, or had appeared the same way. Such unprecedented change is most apparent in today's visions of the future concerning ecological and technological-scientific changes, both in the shape of human-induced existential threats to humanity (as the worst prospect of a climate apocalypse or a technological singularity) and in the shape of a promise of posthumanity and the promise of a posthuman subject (a promise which, of course, comes out again as a threat to others).<sup>34</sup>

Constructionism, I believe, complements these future prospects by exercising a retrospective stance and configuring the relation to the past along such unprecedented changes. In times when technological prospects promise to bring about a posthuman subject – dissociated and *disconnected* from the human subject of the present – constructionism shows how the past can already be seen as *disconnected* for present subjects. Attempting to picture present subjects as relatively recent inventions without prior existence is what Joan Scott advocates as poststructuralist kinds of history writing as critique. In fact, in Scott's approach 'critique' appears as a synonym for 'constructionism', or at least the definition Scott borrows from Barbara Johnson could just as well be the definition of a constructionist approach:

critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal in order to show that these things have their history [...] and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself.<sup>35</sup>

Critique as a constructionist approach implies for Scott an understanding of history that configures change along discontinuous breaks instead of developmental processes. True enough, Scott expresses herself in a vocabulary of discontinuity instead of *disconnection*, which is a term I would prefer to indicate the underlying historicity of constructionism. But my claim is not that constructionist historical practices deliberately configure change over time in terms of disconnective unprecedented changes. What I advocate is to understand constructionism as such an idea of historical change, regardless of the self-description of constructionist theories. Besides, even if in her own vocabulary, Scott already has one the most reflexive constructivist agendas in declaring that 'discontinuity, not continuity or linear development' is the 'operative principle of history', meaning that 'the present is understood to have resulted from its break with the past' and 'historical investigation locates the breaks, describes them as the deviations they are from established norms, and attempts to account for their emergence – not in terms of general principles of development, but in terms of the specificity of their occurrence'.<sup>36</sup>

There can hardly be a more explicit way to indicate that constructionism harbours an alternative sense of historicity. Except, of course, when one ventures into theorizing such a view of history with the intention to displace the modern idea of historical change as inherited from historicism. The most powerful instance of such an intention is the approach from which Scott draws inspiration:

<sup>32</sup>Mandelbaum, *History, Man & Reason*, 44.

<sup>33</sup>See, most recently, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, *History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>34</sup>See Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, '(The Impossibility of) Acting Upon a Story That We Can Believe', *Rethinking History* 22, no. 1 (2018): 105–25; and Simon, 'Two Cultures of the Posthuman Future'.

<sup>35</sup>Joan W. Scott, 'History-writing as Critique', in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007), 23. For Johnson's quoted words see Barbara Johnson, 'Translator's Introduction', in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), xv.

<sup>36</sup>Joan W. Scott, 'After History?' in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95.

that of Michel Foucault's. In a version inseparable from questions of domination and power, Foucault tried to achieve something akin to the above description of unprecedented change by conceptualizing 'genealogy' as a novel sense of historicity. Against the historicist configuration of change, Foucault maintained that 'nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition'; that 'the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled'; and that his alternative view 'introduces discontinuity into our very being'.<sup>37</sup>

In practice, however, even before his explicitly framed genealogical approach, Foucault already attempted to carry out such a break with the historicist account for change over time in his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, branded as archaeology. Without diving into the internal debates of Foucault scholarship about how the later genealogical approach relates to the earlier archaeological, what I wish to point out is only that Foucault's analysis of the invention of the human as the object of knowledge of the newly emerging human sciences in the nineteenth century is the best example of conceiving of the past in terms of unprecedented changes. In one rather over-complicated sentence of Foucault, the invention of the human (and the human sciences which study the human) took place as follows:

The epistemological field traversed by the human sciences was not laid down in advance: no philosophy, no political or moral option, no empirical science of any kind, no observation of the human body, no analysis of sensation, imagination, or the passions, had ever encountered, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, anything like man; for man did not exist (any more than life, or language, or labour); and the human sciences did not appear when, as a result of some pressing rationalism, some unresolved scientific problem, some practical concern, it was decided to include man (willy-nilly, and with a greater or lesser degree of success) among the objects of science – among which it has perhaps not been proved even yet that it is absolutely possible to class him; they appeared when man constituted himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known.<sup>38</sup>

But the constitution of the human (which Foucault consistently calls 'man') is only half of the story. The other half is the logical entailment accompanying any approach based on the non-inevitability of that which is constructed at a certain time in a certain cultural environment: the potential disappearance of the very construction in question. Accordingly, Foucault does not hesitate to predict the disappearance of the human as an object of knowledge as soon as the arrangements of knowledge that enabled its emergence disappear. Hence the iconic closing paragraph of *The Order of Things*:

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.<sup>39</sup>

As the discipline of history is one of the human sciences that came to exist to study the novel invention of the human in Foucault's account,<sup>40</sup> the above claim implies that one day it has to share the fate of disappearing together with the human as its object of knowledge. More specifically, if the conceptual shape in which history as the professionalized and institutionalized field of study emerged to study the human as changing over time is historicism, then Foucault's view implies its disappearance too.

As of today, however, this is not yet the case. The historicist idea of historical change seems to coexist with the constructionist one, instead of disappearing completely. Although its paradigmatic endeavours, such as classical philosophies of history or massive volumes of histories of nations which stretch back national stories to the deep past, are thoroughly discredited today, the developmental

<sup>37</sup>Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 87–8. What applies to Scott's use of discontinuity applies to Foucault too: I interpret it as an effort to express a disconnection from past states of affairs, even if it is phrased in another vocabulary.

<sup>38</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 375–6.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 422.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 400–7.

configuration of change over time survives in many historiographical practices. As of today, it remains an effective, useful, and important conceptual tool of societal self-understanding.

Every historiographical piece that intends to understand the present by answering the question of ‘How did we get here?’ is destined to tell a story in terms of development, process, and an unfolding course of events. The story can, of course, be sophisticated in being multilayered, multicausal, and even multitemporal in being attentive to the different pace of changes in different domains. But presenting the past as leading up to the present (and presenting it as being constitutive of the present condition) necessarily takes the shape of a story of unfolding processes. Again, such stories are not necessarily stories of successful fulfilments that play out along a straight linear temporality, but they are necessarily stories of deep continuity over time.

As a concrete example consider Dan Stone’s *Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe Since 1945*.<sup>41</sup> In short, Stone’s book recounts the rise and fall of ‘postwar consensus’ in two senses: in socio-economic terms and in terms of a broad antifascism on the ideological level. Although the consensus in the first sense results in two storylines with respect to the East and the West, the antifascist consensus represents a common ground. Whereas the rise of such consensus gave way to typically positively evaluated developments in Europe, its fall led to the more recent emergence of what Stone calls, alongside many political commentators and pundits lately, ‘right-wing populism’. The book is, of course, more complex in its larger imperatives (such as the study of the memory of the Second World War in order to grasp the present), in its treatment of socio-economic explanatory factors, and so forth. But its overall story arch perfectly exemplifies the point I wish to make concerning the survival of the historicist ideas of historical change and its retained instrumentality in societal self-understanding. And, needless to say, the persistence of the historicist idea is not confined to individual history books. Among other forms, it persists in popular histories of humanity,<sup>42</sup> in the approach of big history which encompass the entire story of the universe,<sup>43</sup> and, as recent criticism points out, even in a large variety of global histories.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Rival practices of temporal comparison

Connecting all this back to the initial conundrum of this essay, it seems to me that the perceived threat to the existence of historiography in the decades between the 1960s and the 1990s was the sudden appearance of an alternative way of conceiving of change over time in human affairs. Regardless of whether most historians were aware of it or not, in those decades they were fighting an alternative idea of historical change in the shape of constructionism. To gain a deeper understanding of what such alternative ways of conceiving historical change might mean, in the remaining pages I will interpret historicism and constructionism as rival practices of temporal comparison.

But what can the phrase ‘practices of comparison’ possibly mean? To begin with, studying practices of comparison does not mean venturing into the practice of comparative history as an approach or method *within* the discipline of history.<sup>45</sup> Historicism as a historical practice – and generally speaking the conceptual shape of the discipline of history at its institutionalization under the aegis of German Historicism – does not qualify as comparative history in such terms.<sup>46</sup> Yet, the

<sup>41</sup>Dan Stone, *Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>42</sup>Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014).

<sup>43</sup>David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup>Franz L. Fillafer, ‘A World Connecting? From the Unity of History to Global History’, *History and Theory*, 56, no. 1 (2017): 3–37; Helge Jordheim, ‘Synchronizing the World: Synchronism as Historiographical Practice, Then and Now’, *History of the Present* 7, no. 1 (2017): 64–8.

<sup>45</sup>For various ways to engage in the academic practice of comparative history see Chris Lorenz, ‘Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives’, *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 25–39; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity’, *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50; Thomas Welskopp, ‘Vergleichende Geschichte’, *Europäische Geschichte Online* (2010), <http://ieg-ego.eu/de/threads/theorien-und-methoden/vergleichende-geschichte>.

<sup>46</sup>Welskopp, ‘Vergleichende Geschichte’, 1.

discipline necessarily implies a specific comparative practice shared by all histories, regardless of their particular methodological take and commitment to particular historiographical schools. Historicism, like anything we call ‘historical’ in modern times, implies a *temporal* comparison between the changing states of affairs over time: between past, present, and future states. That which we call ‘historical’ in the Western world since the late Enlightenment is simply that which we conceive of as changing over time in human affairs, while that which we call ‘ahistorical’ is that which we conceive of as changeless. Comparative history is then a particular method within the discipline that at its largest is a practice of comparison in terms of comparing time-separated items in a changing course of affairs.

The interpretation of historicism and constructionism as rival practices of temporal comparison is affiliated with the endeavour of Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart, according to which Western modernity kicked off various practices of comparing – from travel writing to the birth of comparative sciences – which aimed at understanding the world by putting things into comparative relations with each other.<sup>47</sup> As Western modernity’s practices of seeking similarities and differences have been closely linked with the endeavour of measuring and unifying the world, they were hardly innocent. But comparison in general – the epistemology of comparison in the first place – is hardly innocent, of course. And if studies of comparative practices agree on the fact that comparison in general is a heavily political operation,<sup>48</sup> the same must be true of its subcase: a specifically temporal way of putting things of the world in relation to each other that we usually associate with history and historical thinking. As Epple and Erhart note, temporal comparability came about in the eighteenth and nineteenth century with the effect of making Western modernity look attractive by describing temporal relations in terms of backwardness and progressivity (among others).<sup>49</sup> The establishment of such temporal comparability is of course nothing other than the emergence of the historicist idea of history with its developmental scenario of change, that is, the idea of a historical trajectory within which certain states of affairs and certain subjects can appear as backwards and progressive as compared to others. Yet the temporal aspect does not seem to play a prominent role in the approach of Epple and Erhart, and their scope of investigating practices of comparison does not extend over more recent phenomena. Hence my intention to contribute to and enrich the endeavour of mapping practices of comparing with a focus on the temporal aspect and with respect to constructionism as a relatively novel practice as measured against historicism.

The thesis I wish to put forward is that historicism and constructionism, as ideas of historical change and as conceptual tools of academic practices, offer alternative ways of comparing temporally separated states of affairs and conditions of subjects. Whereas historicism established the very comparability of changing states of affairs and changing conditions over time in the condition of a self-identical subject, constructionism held up the incommensurability of different states of affairs and conditions in different times, thereby questioning the temporal survival of the self-identical subject as the common ground of temporal comparison. Seen this way, the otherwise deceptively similar historicist and constructionist ideas concerning the nature of things (or the lack thereof) look strikingly incompatible. It is no longer bewildering that historical studies as wardens of the historicist practice of temporal comparison felt existentially threatened by an encounter with the constructionist advocacy of temporal incommensurability.

To substantiate this claim, it makes sense to elaborate a bit on the notion of temporal incommensurability. First of all, note that I refer to incommensurability and not incomparability. Although the

<sup>47</sup>Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart, ‘Die Welt Beobachten – Praktiken des Vergleichens’, in *Die Welt Beobachten: Praktiken des Vergleichens*, ed. Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015), 7–31.

<sup>48</sup>See, for instance, R. Radhakrishnan, ‘Why Compare?’, *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): esp. 453–71; R. Radhakrishnan, *Theory in an Uneven World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 72–81; Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Why Not Compare?’, *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 753–62; Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>49</sup>Epple and Erhart, ‘Die Welt Beobachten’, 12–3.

two terms have much in common, they are not the same.<sup>50</sup> I will return to the question of incommensurability at a later stage and discuss it in a more detailed fashion. For now, what seems important to point out is that whereas incommensurability literally means the absence of common measures, incomparability refers to the impossibility of carrying out any sort of comparative operation whatsoever. Accordingly, incommensurability as the absence of measure does not mean the absence of comparison and does not refute the overall possibility of comparison. But it certainly refutes a particular practice of comparison: that which is based on the postulation of a common measure supposedly intrinsic to all items compared.

Along these considerations, my claim is that what temporal incommensurability refutes thereby is precisely the practice of historicist comparison. In order to make this and the previous claims intelligible, the first thing to do is to come to terms with the possibility of comparison in general and its historicist practice in particular. As Johannes Grave points out in a practice theory approach to practices of comparison, the basic constitution of comparative acts may appear as ‘trivial’ in its ‘elementary form’:<sup>51</sup> it consists of at least two but possibly more items put into comparative relation by means of a third item, known in scholarly Latin as *tertium comparationis*. Yet the triviality of the elementary form dissipates immediately with the introduction of the temporal aspect, that is, with the introduction of historicity and change over time. The reason for this is that the *tertium* in temporal comparison is one single self-identical subject which is considered to go through changes over time. Whenever one writes a history of subject X, the *tertium* is the subject X itself, and the compared items are different conditions of subject X over time. The relation between the different conditions of subject X, inasmuch as the subject remains self-identical, inasmuch as it has a ‘nature’ as in historicism, is a gradual developmental process, the unfolding of X. As an almost perfect example, consider national histories of nineteenth-century Europe standing for subject X. In the words of Stefan Berger, a national history narrative

might retrace a remote past of foreign domination to a period when the nation allegedly struggled against such oppression and for independence. Ultimately this fight was supposed to end in the creation of an independent state with a modernizing society.<sup>52</sup>

As a practice of temporal comparison, this means that the history of a nation as a self-identical subject begins in an underdeveloped condition of the subject and ends in its developed condition pointing toward the full realization of a long assumed potential. In between the two different temporal conditions, the gradual developmental process – directed toward its destined fulfilment – plays out in a scenario of change over time as the very becoming of the subject.

What this indicates is that the historicist practice of temporal comparison is not ‘merely’ a comparison. As its inherent feature, it entails a definite way that leads from one condition to another over time. Being configured as a developmental process, the way that establishes a connection between the different conditions of the subject over time necessarily upholds value judgments between underdeveloped, progressive, and fulfilled conditions.<sup>53</sup> Although these entailed values are intrinsic to the historicist practice of temporal comparison, the situation becomes even more complex and politically

<sup>50</sup>For discussions of the relationship between incommensurability and incomparability in value theory and in the philosophy of science (the latter being the context within which the term emerged) see Ruth Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thomas S. Kuhn, ‘Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability’, in *The Road Since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970–1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, ed. Thomas S. Kuhn, James Conant, and John Haugeland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 33–57.

<sup>51</sup>Johannes Grave, ‘Vergleichen als Praxis: Vorüberlegungen zu einer praxistheoretisch orientierten Untersuchung von Vergleichen’, in *Die Welt Beobachten: Praktiken des Vergleichens*, ed. Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015), 136.

<sup>52</sup>Stefan Berger with Christoph Conrad, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 2.

<sup>53</sup>The most prominent historian of the modern Western notion of history, Reinhart Koselleck, is of course aware of the inherent evaluative aspects of lived time as history. In discussing the dynamism and the movement of the course of human affairs brought about by the modern sense of historicity, Koselleck remarks on the conservative and progressive positions which, respectively, intended to hold back and speed up the movement of the historical process. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 246.

charged as soon as the subject – the *tertium comparationis* – gains a spatial dimension *as well*. As a practice of both temporal and spatial comparison, historicism compares the different temporal conditions of any supposedly same and self-identical subject as it is assumed to be spread across different parts of the world and different cultures.

This means that the scope of the historicist temporal comparison is necessarily global. But it does not mean that histories written on this premise necessarily step out of their national frameworks in practice. Nor does the global scope entail that such histories would qualify as global histories as understood today in historiography. It means only that the historicist way of temporal comparison implies a global appeal in spatial terms, a postulated global unity as an endpoint. The expected global realization of the potential inherent in the ‘nature’ of things is the background assumption of the practice of temporal comparison in historicism. Accordingly, when it investigates the ‘nature’ of such subjects as their history, historicism compares items both temporally and spatially with reference to this shared ‘nature’ as the *tertium* that is considered to be intrinsic to all items compared.

It is not much of a surprise that the politics of such comparison gained the most attention lately in postcolonial debates, having been challenged on the ground of its eurocentrism. To unpack the intertwinement of temporal and spatial comparison as the politics of the historicist practice of comparison through a question, let me recite the story with which R. Radhakrishnan opens his essay ‘Why Compare?’ According to the story, whenever Radhakrishnan – living and working in the United States – visits Chennai, India, he cannot but compare things of the world over the course of long conversations with his rickshaw driver. They simply cannot escape discussing their respective experiences in comparative terms, including traffic situations. When comparing the highly structured United States lane system to the absence of lanes and the arbitrariness of traffic in most of Chennai, Radhakrishnan is even tempted to argue that the former is what ‘any sane human being would choose’, despite the fact that he is able to see ‘the relative autonomy’ of the driver’s ‘rationale within his *Lebenswelt*’.<sup>54</sup> Given all this, Radhakrishnan asks: ‘is it possible to have that exchange without having to invoke the temporality of historicism that mandates that the state of traffic in a first-world situation is necessarily superior to the traffic in an underdeveloped third-world context?’<sup>55</sup>

Although Radhakrishnan does not consider this possibility, I think that constructionism answers his question at the most general level. It eliminates the possibility of interpreting a comparative situation in terms of backwardness and progressivity by claiming that different states of affairs and conditions over time are incommensurable. Inasmuch as the respective traffic situations are not different temporal states and conditions of one single subject as a *tertium*, the seemingly chaotic Chennai traffic is not reduced to be understood as one version of the United States lane system. Inasmuch as a traffic situation is not a temporal version of the other, they simply cannot appear as the underdeveloped and progressive counterparts of each other.

When constructionism claims that there is no such thing as the ‘nature’ of things, what it claims is that there is no self-identical subject as a *tertium comparationis* that could serve as a common measure intrinsic to all temporally dispersed and separated items of comparison. By embracing such temporal incommensurability, constructionism implies that the entire historicist practice of temporal comparison, including two centuries of scholarship as typically carried out by professional historical studies, is based on a misguided assumption. Needless to say, this is a huge claim. Yet it does not mean that this is an explicitly voiced claim of all constructionist approaches. I do not wish to argue that constructionism deliberately challenged historicism and most of historical studies by advocating a rival practice of temporal comparison based on the assumption of temporal incommensurability. What I wish to argue for is an interpretation of constructionism as such a rival practice, despite the fact that to a large extent neither constructionists nor historicists were aware of the fact of such rivalry (and despite the fact that they most certainly did not conceptualize their clash in terms of being competing ideas of historical change and rival practices of temporal comparison).

<sup>54</sup>Radhakrishnan, ‘Why Compare?’, 453.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 458.

The most obvious example of the constructionist practice of temporal comparison – carried out on the assumption of temporal incommensurability – is the book that kick-started the scholarly debate on the very term ‘incommensurability’: Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962.<sup>56</sup> The book argues that the history of science is characterized by rarely occurring revolutionary events that Kuhn calls paradigm shifts. These shifts come between long periods of normal science, during which scientists work within a shared framework of a scientific theory as an established paradigm. On the Kuhnian account, it is such a new period of normal science that is incommensurable with whatever was considered as normal science prior to the paradigm shift.

The incommensurability thesis is central to understanding the extent to which *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is an appeal to a sense of historicity. And this is no small extent. Already the opening sentence of the book’s first chapter – tellingly entitled as ‘Introduction: A Role for History’ – indicates the stakes by claiming that ‘history, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote of chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which are now possessed’.<sup>57</sup> Incommensurability, as seen from the viewpoint of Kuhn’s appeal to history, is nothing other than the conceptual instrument by which Kuhn attempted to achieve the intended transformation and abandon the reigning image of science as a cumulative and developmental process.

Yet, I think that Kuhn’s appeal to a sense of historicity has led to one of the greatest misunderstandings and confusions in the reception of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Philosophers of science, even today, tend to regard Kuhn as a cornerstone of initiating a historical turn or a historicist kind of philosophy of science, resulting in the establishment of the integrated field of study called history and philosophy of science (HPS).<sup>58</sup> Whereas the latter achievement may indeed be a new institutional occurrence, the former reference to a historical turn is largely misleading inasmuch as it mistakenly implies that the pre-Kuhn view of science was anything but historical. Is this a plausible claim? Was not already the reigning view of a *cumulative scientific progress* in Kuhn’s own time ‘historical’? Well, of course it was. The accumulation of knowledge over time, new theories building upon and adding to older theories over the course of a historical process conceived of as progressing onwards, is precisely the view of history as Western modernity invented it. The image of science as unfolding over time in successive stages of development was historical exactly in the way that historians have called ‘historicist’ throughout the modern period.<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, what Kuhn challenged by an appeal to history was not an ahistorical view of science, but the historicist view of science. Despite the fact that maybe even Kuhn did not understand his own evocation of history, it challenged the historicist idea of historical change and the historicist practice of temporal comparison as

<sup>56</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). As to putting the term into wider circulation and initiating the discussion about it, Kuhn is co-credited in the company of Paul Feyerabend, whose essay featuring the term came out in the very same year. See the essay reprinted as Paul Feyerabend, ‘Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism’, in *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method: Philosophical Papers, Vol. I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 44–96.

<sup>57</sup>Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 150.

<sup>58</sup>See, for instance, Alexander Bird, ‘Kuhn and the Historiography of Science’, in *Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions – 50 Years On*, ed. William J. Devlin and Alisa Bokulich (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 23–38; Thomas Nickles, ‘Philosophy of Science and History of Science’, *Osiris* 10, no. 1 (1995): 138–63; Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, ‘Historicism and the Failure of HPS’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 55 (2016): 3–11. The question of how and why philosophers of science considered Kuhn as a ‘historicist’ itself would deserve an article-length treatment. What I can indicate here is only that the source of the confusion lies in equating ‘historicism’ and the adjective ‘historicist’ with the idea of change over time, instead of reserving the term ‘historicism’ for a certain type of change over time, namely, that which is processual and developmental. For philosophers of science, Kuhn’s sheer act of sketching a pattern for change seems to constitute a ground firm enough to label him ‘historicist’. This, I believe, makes philosophers of science inattentive to the most significant innovation of Kuhn’s approach, which is not the fact that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* accounts for change over time, but that it does so by sketching a type of change that is anything but ‘historicist’ and in fact goes against two centuries of ‘historicist’ tradition.

<sup>59</sup>This has not much to do with what Karl Popper called ‘historicism’ as the effort to sketch general laws of historical evolution aiming at prediction, with which Anglo-American philosophers of science might have been more familiar at the time of the publication of Kuhn’s book. See Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002).



exercised on the subject called ‘science’ by means of introducing the incommensurability thesis as a rival sense of historicity.

The above interpretation of Kuhn may significantly depart from the most typical understandings of incommensurability. Philosophers of science tend to interpret Kuhnian incommensurability as a translation problem between the language of scientific theories.<sup>60</sup> To say a few words in defense of my interpretation, I would like to point to two key aspects in which the term clearly exceeds the confines of being a mere translation problem in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: first, incommensurability has a much broader scope when it appears throughout the book as a matter of worldviews; and second, it has a temporal focus as it concerns time-separated items.

As to the question of scope, Kuhnian incommensurability as a matter of worldviews means that ‘the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds’, so that they ‘see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction’.<sup>61</sup> Besides, the entire tenth chapter of the book is devoted to the topic of ‘Revolutions as Changes in World Views’.<sup>62</sup> As to the question of incommensurability being a matter of time-separated items, the first thing to concede that the case is not necessarily so, even according to Kuhn. The different ‘worlds’ of paradigms may occupy the same spatial and temporal environment. This is what happens at times when the old paradigm is not yet abandoned and the new paradigm, although already conceived and advocated, is not yet accepted, like in the metaphorical situation implied above, when proponents of alternative paradigms look from the same point in the same direction. This, however, should not prevent one from seeing that the central (and also the title) theme of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is the temporal succession of incommensurable paradigms in terms of new ones *replacing* and *superseding* old ones. Incommensurable paradigms can compete at the same time, but what makes such incommensurability ‘historical’ is precisely the invocation of the temporal dimension.<sup>63</sup>

Foucault’s *The Order of Things* – commonly considered as the most similar approach to Kuhn’s – is another major example of a practice of temporal comparison based on the incommensurability of time-separated items. As discussed earlier, Foucault makes the case for the constitution of the human as an object of knowledge in modern thought and claims that ‘before the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist’.<sup>64</sup> In the period prior to the modern one, what Foucault calls the Classical *episteme*, the human as the object of knowledge was simply unthinkable. It came to be conceivable only with the emergence of a new *episteme*, and as soon as a new shift in the *episteme* occurs, as soon as conditions of possibility change, it will vanish. Some crucial differences concerning conceptual and methodological framings aside, shifts in the *episteme* imply similarly radical and incommensurable changes over time as Kuhn’s paradigm shifts. Foucault’s scope is much broader though. A scientific paradigm, even when understood as a worldview, cannot match the breadth of a Foucauldian *episteme* as a condition of possibility and historical *a priori* of knowledge regimes. In Foucault’s case, temporal incommensurability is concerned with these very conditions that determine what can be asserted or what can count as true at certain times. Or, as Hacking phrases in a comparison of Foucault and Kuhn, incommensurability in Foucault concerns ‘systems of possibility’.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Of course, such debates take into account Kuhn’s later elaborations on the term. Those elaborations are, however, largely due to the criticism which already set the agenda of considering incommensurability as mainly a translation problem. For an account on the career of the Kuhnian notion of incommensurability see James A. Marcum, ‘The Evolving Notion and Role of Kuhn’s Incommensurability Thesis’, in *Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 115–34. On the shifting position of the late Kuhn see Howard Sankey, ‘Taxonomic Incommensurability’, *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 12, no. 1 (1998): 7–16.

<sup>61</sup>Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 150.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 111–35.

<sup>63</sup>In discussing scientific revolutions, Kuhn nevertheless refers to his main concern by the phrase ‘scientific development’. It occurs twenty-nine times throughout the book, most likely significantly contributing to Kuhn’s later description as ‘historicist’, as discussed in an earlier note. I would like to attribute Kuhn’s recourse to the notion of development (a central notion in a historicist vocabulary) to the unavailability of a new overall vocabulary that could sufficiently conceptualize an equally new sense of historicity entailed by the replacement of incommensurable paradigms. At the same time, however, the notions of paradigm and incommensurability themselves can be seen as conceptual efforts to create such a vocabulary.

<sup>64</sup>Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 336.

<sup>65</sup>Ian Hacking, ‘Michel Foucault’s Immature Science’, in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 97.

The reason to return to Foucault and *The Order of Things* is that the role played by the notion of *episteme* is crucial in understanding the question of comparability under the condition of incommensurability in a constructionist approach. Even though constructionism holds up the incommensurability of time-separated items, it is nevertheless a practice of temporal comparison. And Foucault's *episteme*, it seems to me, plays here the role of a *tertium* in a comparative situation. Not just any *tertium* though, but one that denies the existence of a common measure *intrinsic* to the compared items. As a practice of comparison, constructionism still necessitates a measure as a *tertium*, but this measure becomes *external* at least to one of the compared items. It invokes a measure devised by the scholar as a conceptual tool that enables comparison in the absence of a measure assumed to be common to all items compared.

In the case of Foucault, it can be reasonably pointed out that the *episteme* as a measure and conceptual tool is the product of Foucault's very *episteme*. It may very well be that a temporal comparison based on incommensurability, in its general outlook, is necessarily a product of the latest temporal item. This, however, would disqualify the comparative practice of temporal incommensurability as biased towards its own time only if not having a point of view at all was possible. It is among necessarily biased practices that the constructionist practice of temporal comparison conveys a sense of historicity with its own specific agenda: *constructionism attempts to understand its own time by showing how it is anything like whatever had been preceding it.*

## 6. Historicizing the new

Hopefully it is clear by now that it is not my intention to argue that constructionism has the potential to do away the politics of comparison. Avoiding the pitfalls of the politics of the historicist practice of temporal comparison does not mean a refutation of political agendas entailed by practices of comparing. Nor does this mean an overall refutation of any engagement in other comparative practices. Constructionism is simply another kind of temporal comparison with its own entailments and agendas. Not to mention that if not comparing at all was possible, it would be a position just as heavily loaded with questions of power and politics as is any practice of comparing.<sup>66</sup> It must be equally clear at this point that I do not wish to resolve any debate concerning the issue of incommensurability either. The discussion in philosophy of science on the question of whether scientific theories are incommensurable or not (and in what sense they are or are not so) is not particularly relevant to the take-away message of this essay. What I wanted to point out by touching upon such debates is only that there is a practice of temporal comparison which happens to have a lot to do with upholding a sense of incommensurability, regardless of the question of the philosophical plausibility of the term.

The moral of the story of the previous pages is something other. Arguing that Western societies exhibit today two competing senses of historicity which entail two distinct ideas of historical change and boil down to two incompatible practices of temporal comparison gains significance when it comes to the imperative of historicizing present-day phenomena. In the simplest terms, the message of this essay is that we better know what we are doing when we appeal to history, for such an appeal can evoke two incompatible operations that yield contradictory results. A seemingly unitary appeal to history either shows today that whatever is perceived as new developed out of past conditions (so that the present appears just as the past always have been), or it shows that whatever was in the past has nothing to do with today's perceived novelty (so that the present appears as unprecedented). Whereas the former is the result of an appeal to a historicist sense of historicity, the latter derives from an appeal to the constructionist one.

<sup>66</sup>In the view of Susan Stanford Friedman, 'to refuse comparison is also a political act, one that can potentially reinstate the existing hierarchies by not challenging them'. Friedman, 'Why Not Compare?', 755. Yet, given the fact that constructionism refuses only temporal comparison, this certainly does not apply to constructionism. What is more, its refusal to *temporally* compare, as discussed earlier, stems from a desire to politically liberate by not tying subjects to notions of essence and inherent nature.

Being aware of the contradictory operations that can be mobilized by a deceptively unique sense of historicity is, I believe, of crucial importance in times when perceived novelty looms just about everywhere.

## Acknowledgements

This article has been written within the framework of the Collaborative Research Center SFB 1288 ‘Practices of Comparing. Changing and Ordering the World’, Bielefeld University, Germany.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

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