



Reprint of “Theory in (forest) history – A success story?”☆☆☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2014

Accepted 11 November 2014

Available online 2 May 2016

Keywords:

Forest history

Scientificity

Analytical-hermeneutical antagonism

Theory use

ABSTRACT

The following attempt at a short essay is based on observations predominantly made in Germany and personal experiences respectively. Its aim is to portray how the author reached ‘the theory’ and how history in general as well as the historiography of forestry in particular approaches theory and its underlying assumptions. As a result, the diverse historical sub-disciplines are endeavoring with varying ‘success’ to employ and develop theoretical approaches (theory turn). However, as there is no consensus on an operational definition of theory to the present day, this dialog focuses on epistemological reflections rather than theoretical models.

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1. Fallen between two stools

The question above is at least misleading or needs to be put differently, precisely because there does not exist any generally accepted scientific definition of theory. Theory terms are closely connected to the respective academic discipline. The experience to be discussed is based upon Karl Popper’s definition of theory which is used throughout this article unless otherwise specified. To quote Popper (1972, pp. 54, 56), a theory is a “system of assumptions” that allows an explanation of events “in a rational way”. The historian Kocka stated in 1984 (p. 170): “By theory I mean an *explicit and consistent set of related concepts that can be used to structure and explain historical data but*

cannot be derived from the study of the source of materials alone.” (Quotation in italics is from the original manuscript). Popper’s term was taken as a basis of a forest-historical policy analysis carried out by the author. It allows one to derive hypotheses on the formation of policies and enables to evaluate them empirically. Thus, theory and methodology conflate into a theory-based process of historical policy analysis.¹

The so-called cultural turn has introduced several epistemological approaches to historical science (see below). The perception, interpretation, and construction of language, iconography, space, gender, mentality or emotions, for example, are thought to depend on social relations and vice versa. These approaches are also called theories by the exponents of new cultural history (Neue Kulturgeschichte).

* This article is a reprint of a previously published article. For citation purposes, please use the original publication details; Forest Policy and Economics, vol.51, pp. 57–61.

☆☆ This article is part of a special issue entitled “Analytical Forest Policy Analysis: Advancing the empirical-analytical approach to forest policy analysis”.

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2014.11.003>.

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¹ Policy analysis “deals with specific contents, determinants and effects of political acts” (Schubert and Bandelow, 2009, p. 3). Using the above method the attempt is made to describe and explain which preconditions determine the success or failure of policy implementation. This approach is similar to the one proposed by Uwe E. Schmidt (Freiburg) around the same time in the field of forest history (description and explanation of the public’s use of scarce forest resources in Germany at the beginning of the modern age; see Schmidt, 2002; Warde’s “Ecology, Economy and State Formation in Early Modern Germany”, 2006, contains a huge number of relevant bibliographical references, including those which refer to the debates on wood shortage (‘Holznotdebatte’) in 18th and 19th Century Germany; another example can be found in a dissertation by Bader, 2011, dealing with “Forest and War” [“Wald und Krieg”]). The underlying Policy Cycle model, however, has also been criticized. It is objected that political processes rarely follow a fixed ‘schedule’ among other things. Furthermore, that the interaction between different political arenas is neglected as well as the suggested phase sequence is interrupted. Other researchers stress that “preferences, problem-solving philosophies and the capacity to act” of central agents play an important role in the perception of problems. Consequently, these authors emphasize that these elements should be regarded as important for political processes, requiring further analysis (Schubert and Bandelow, 2009, p. 87) and criticism of the ideal Policy Cycle including alternatives, can still be found in Sabatier (1993). Alternatives to the phase model are the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Multiple-Stream Framework, Institutional Rational Choice, Policy Diffusion, Punctuated Equilibrium and others (see Jann and Wegrich, 2009, p. 103). The research project carried out by the author had to reveal the main factors and political mechanisms leading to sustainability in pre-modern forestry (Steinsiek, 1999). However, the question is raised of how far modern political theories can be applied to the analysis of traditional, pre-modern societies. The phase model presented here is based on a democratic understanding of politics. Consequently, democratically conditioned political arenas are assumed as the basis for political problem solving. The key question, however, is how power and dominion are organized and how “political decisions are actually made” (Schubert, written notification, 01.07.2012). In other words: Even in a traditional corporative society, where we find the relations between the reigning class and the various social classes defined by the population’s service obligation on the one hand and the (sanctioned) claim for care by the territorial lord on the other, we might, in principle, find the same elements of the Policy Cycle that we expect to see in a democratic one. This is regardless of the fact that the claim to power and political participation in a democracy is organized entirely differently to that of a corporative society (Schubert, written notification, 01.07.2012).

Popper's definition of theory is an operational one. Since theoretical models should be verifiable in order to refine them, operational procedures are required, too. This approach does not match with those used in the field of new cultural history.

2. Risk more theory

For over a hundred years, historians have been fighting over theories and methodology in historiography. The finest brains in this field are regularly drawn to educated, but nevertheless hefty skirmishes on the battlefield of scientific honor without any clear victor having appeared thus far. It has, however, become rare to find a historian willing to commit to only strictly following Ranke's postulate to recount 'what has actually happened'. Historians too are interested in the explicit identification of the driving forces of historical developments. In doing so, they are inspired by manifold philosophical (epistemological) and sociological movements (paradigms, discourses). This has led to the creation of specific traditions in the various historical sub-disciplines. These traditions, as well as the sub-disciplines themselves, are in competition with each other to find the 'best' and 'most fitting' pathway to historical knowledge, but this is not the place to recount the numerous approaches and discussions that followed.² Neither is this the space to describe which preconditions have to be met in order to facilitate a change of theory or paradigms in history. However, this is to highlight some examples by which characteristics describing the 'change' (theory turn) are illustrated.

3. The formation of schools of thought and history turns

The Bielefeld School of Historical Social Sciences,³ of which the historians Jürgen Kocka, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Winfried Schulze are prominent exponents, has promoted the inclusion of social-scientific theory and methodology in historical analysis since the 1970s.⁴ The school has, however, been constantly criticized by representatives of more traditional schools of thought in history whose interests lie more in historical figures and events than historical structures and processes (for a summary see Haas, 2012). On the other hand, there are older schools of thought following the same idea as the Bielefeld School. The French Annales School for example, founded approximately a hundred years ago, focuses on the structures and regularities in history. It is as such open to quantifying methodology and also stresses the inclusion of environmental factors as driving forces in the historical analysis. Earlier still, Max Weber developed his pioneering discoveries in the field of sociology on the grounds of the theory-based analysis of historical processes. Along with Werner Sombart he is considered one of the most prominent representatives to advocate a combination of social-scientific theory and historical methodology. In addition to these figures, other well-known representatives in the field of economic and agricultural history (in particular, Abel, 1935) cannot deny having utilized theoretical assumptions, e.g. analyzing the creation and progression of the trade cycle or consumer behavior.

Norbert Elias sought to explain the "Process of Civilization" (1939) through an ongoing rise in emotional regulation. Michel Foucault abstracted from subjects and ideas being the vessel of (historical) changes

² But nevertheless: Scientific essays on 'theory in history' are given for example by Klein (2011), though mainly with respect to North America's tradition; he argues that "earlier changes in the ways we talk about language, history, and culture" had a significant influence on the ways "we think about history and theory today" (Klein, 2011, p. 16). Clark's impressive study on "History, Theory, Text" (2004) aims, among others, at rejecting the lament of (American) historians for "the end of history" (p. 2) (claiming that the "overwhelming majority of America's historians still strive to uphold the standards of Rankian methodological objectivity in their works"; see Henry Ashby Turner Jr., cited by Clark, 2004, p. 1). "Problems of Context and Narrative" in history are discussed by Pocock (2006). An introduction can be found in Jordan (2009) and Kolmer (2008). I am grateful to Dr. Wilfried Enderle, field librarian for History, University Library Göttingen, for the literature suggestions and important information concerning the present state of the discussion.

³ For more details, see Rürup (1977).

⁴ The relationship between history and social science had already been critically discussed in the 19th Century.

and identified the discourse as a driving force.⁵ To name another example, the political scientist Volker von Prittwitz (see, for example, 2011), repeatedly explained social behavior in ecological disasters and similar hazardous situations on a historical basis. The field of so-called microhistory regards precise case studies in relation to the analysis of everyday life experiences as a precondition to investigate and depict 'large-scale history'.

Recently one of the most inspiring examples for the historical relation between mentality and 'survival risks' is the study concerning society's dealing with catastrophes presented by Martin Voss (2006). Voss postulates that the (subtle) secularization of life together with the loss of the assurance of salvation and the disappearance of religious fear of the unknown has led man to lose the capability to think in context. On the pathway to a 'risk society' (see Beck, 1986), rationalization, technical progress and the demographical process have gradually raised man's susceptibility to catastrophes.

The examples above are a more or less random selection to illustrate the variety of opposing opinions regarding the core features of methodology in history and the role that theory plays in this connection.

The demand for more theory in history is in part based on the struggle for society's appreciation as well as to defend history itself against accusations of being unscientific. Although universities have created professorships for theory and methodology in history, it is doubtful whether theory – as defined by Popper – has already found its place. It could be argued for instance that a thorough change towards more analytical precision in history has not yet been accomplished as a whole. Conversely, theory has undergone a definitional diversification. Theory is no longer simply seen as a system of (preliminary) assumptions to explain a specific excerpt of reality and consequently to predict analogous events and processes. Rather, it has been equated to a *methodology in the search for cognition*.

History has experienced a series of turns in recent years. In the wake of these turns, researchers have tried to develop concepts in order to give a source function (in terms of an inventory of knowledge) or historical significance to certain human circumstances and manifestations. These comprise everything from the human environment (e.g. space), the human psyche (e.g. mentality, feelings) and corporality (e.g. illness, grief, death) to various forms of expression (e.g. language, visual art). They are subsumed under the umbrella term cultural turn, forming the essence of modern cultural history. Among other things, a recent approach based on system theory to describe and explain society's converse with nature has been initiated by a group of researchers led by the Austrian environmental historian Verena Winiwarter (Steinsiek and Laufer, 2012, p. 24). In addition, constructivist perspectives are competing with those approaches, to put it crudely, that take something representative (materiality) as being equally perceivable information by everyone.

The periodic shifting of research perspectives is easily observed in the projects and publications in the emerging area of environmental history,⁶ as well as the (much older) area of historical geography.⁷ The historiography of forestry,⁸ considered to be a basic discipline of

⁵ For the historical analysis of discourse, see Landwehr (2008), and Stuber (2008) for a forest historical case study on sustainability from Switzerland.

⁶ For an international perspective on the matter, see the website of the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) (URL <http://eseh.org>).

⁷ Consider also the website of the working group 'Arbeitskreis für historische Kulturlandschaftsforschung in Mitteleuropa (ARKUM)' (URL <http://www.kulturlandschaft.org>).

⁸ With reference to Karl Hasel (1985, p. 11), the historiography of forestry as a historical sub-discipline focuses on relations between the forest and human society throughout the ages. The historiography of the forest prior to the appearance of man is thus by this definition not of interest.

The relationship is seen as interactive and dynamic. Man affects the forest by utilizing its resources, such as plants, animals, soil and waters or by clearing and recreating parts of it. Man changes the forest's structure and its composition of trees by introducing substances, potentially nutritional or even damaging. These anthropogenic changes to the forest in turn affect neighboring ecosystems, the landscape balance, and human society as a whole. In addition to the anthropogenic changes to forest ecosystems, there are those caused by ongoing physical, chemical and biological processes but not by man's influence.

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