

Historicism, Enlightenment, and ‘the Two Eyes of Wisdom’

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Modern Historiography in the Making. The German Sense of the Past, 1700–1900, by Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, London, Bloomsbury, 2023, 186 pp., £28.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781350271487

Historical thinking is fraught with oppositions, asymmetries, and imbalances that cannot be simply dispelled. Although this admission implies a surrender to complexity, it need not be framed as a defeatist resignation to ambiguity, nor as a nihilistic celebration of it. In fact, the ‘unresolving tensions’ (to borrow Allan Megill’s appropriate term) that characterise cognitively responsible historical thinking can function as a source of propulsion instead of paralysis.¹ Duly respected and managed, they become solid supports for originality, openness, and other properties we cannot fail to associate with good histories and historians.

Among such unsolvable yet possibly productive tensions, we may count the strained relations between theory and history. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen’s recent book on German historiography between 1700 and 1900 reads as an exploration of a significant moment in the unfolding of this centuries-old conflict. It features an openly pro-history, slightly anti-theoretical interpretation, full of originality and insight, and based on extensive study of intellectual works and documentary sources. As a history book, its primary aim is to contribute to the understanding of the past, in this case that of historical scholarship. Yet, as so often in historical studies, such is an interpretive project that cannot but resonate in the present, more specifically the very present of our historical theories and practices. The tense but productive relations between theory and history, one could say, are more than the central theme of Eskildsen’s work, for in a sense they are themselves alive in it. Not only are they at the main subject matter level of the analysis; they also reside in the conceptual framework underpinning the analytical enterprise itself.

Eskildsen, who is an associate professor at Roskilde University in Denmark, has long been publishing on the modern German historical humanities. He reworked some of this material into the book published in 2022 (2023 in paperback), for which he devised an ingenious structure: seven chapters, each one centred on a representative scholar and, at the same time, on ‘places of practice’, i.e. venues such as the archive, the study, the lecture hall, or the seminar that were especially relevant for the production of knowledge