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Historiography between
Events and Structures

Arthur Alfaix Assis

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PLURAL PASTS

*Historiography between Events
and Structures*

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Elements in Historical Theory and Practice

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Abstract: What is history about? This Element shows that answers centred on the keyword 'past events' are incomplete, even if they are not simply wrong. Interweaving theoretical and historical perspectives, it provides an abstract overview of the thematic plurality that characterizes contemporary academic historiography. The reflection on different sorts of pasts that can be the focus in historical research and writing encompasses events as well as non-events, especially recursive social structures and cultural webs. Some consequences of such plurality for discussions concerning historical methodology, explanation, exemplification, and representation are also outlined. The basic message, reinforced throughout, is that the great relevance of non-event-centred approaches should prompt us to talk more about 'histories' in the plural and less about 'history' in the singular.

Keywords: historical methods, historicity, history of events, social history, cultural history

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Introduction

History as a form of knowledge has long been regarded as a more homogeneous business than it actually is. We hear, think, and speak too much of history in the singular and too little of histories in the plural. This has continued long after the modern belief in history as a unidirectional, teleological, totalizing process was called into question. It keeps going, even when the sponsorship of cultural diversity and non-essentialized identities is embraced as a key function of historical knowledge. And it has also survived the erosion of an overarching notion of historical method, which by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functioned as the cornerstone of the unity and distinctiveness of historical research. In connection with political, social, and cultural changes, waves of epistemic innovation have since originated some dissimilar, often clashing approaches to the past within academic historiography. Yet key consequences of such plurality have not been fully assimilated into theoretical debates on historiography and historicity.

Concepts in analytical frameworks will always be invested with a high degree of generality – ultimately, the latter is an essential aspect of what makes them concepts. It would hence be foolish to demonize sweeping notions such as ‘the past’, ‘the historian’, ‘historical explanation’, or ‘historiography’, and it is easy to notice that I myself cannot do without them. But general terms such as these can also be adjusted to better respond to the real diversity of ways of researching and writing history. What follows is, in this sense, more an attempt to fine-tune than to undo some basic ideas underpinning our understanding of historical thinking.

One of the most enduring and effective abstractions about historiography has been the assumption that the pasts addressed by historians amount essentially to unique events that either happened to people unwillingly or were enacted by them through individual action. This is a widespread assumption, shared not only outside the academic world, but also by many historians and philosophers of history. ‘History is an account of events: all else flows from that’, Paul Veyne once said,¹ elaborating on a very old opinion disseminated by Aristotle that still echoes in different contemporary metahistorical traditions and lines of thought. History as knowledge of particulars, as an idiographic science, as an essentially narrative mode of discourse or cognition, as a cultural mechanism for dealing with contingency – all these and other proposals tend to take *events* to be a key notion that encapsulates the empirical side of historical knowledge: an abstract summary of what it is that historians write histories about.

¹ Veyne, *Writing History*, 4.

Such views, I claim, are not sufficiently congruent with what history writing turned out to be in the intellectual worlds within which we have been living for quite some time. For it is easy to see that the historiographical landscape is marked by more than histories of events. Whereas historians, in general, still tend to take events much more seriously than the average social scientist, some consequential controversies surrounding historical research in the twentieth century spun around the quest for subjects and objects permeated by different temporalities and locatable below or beyond the metaphorical surface where events are assumed to take place. Among such elements, there are, for instance, institutions, ideas, environmental and material conditions, and symbolic patterns, all of which cannot be addressed in terms of simple sums of particular, ephemeral events – and whose geneses and transformations cannot be conceived in the same way as the particular changes that lower-scale events bring about.

In analytical or self-reflective assessments of historians' practice, it is therefore fitting to avoid looking upon the infinity of contents that we can take as constitutive of historical reality as if they all could be subsumed under a singular logic. From a metaphysical point of view, the pasts that historians address can be very heterogeneous. To be sure, many of the issues historians may choose to thematize easily qualify as events, but others do not. Historians' disagreements regarding methodological procedures and explanatory resources can often be traced back to differences over the kind of subject matter that is privileged in historical research. A brief glance at such disputes can show that while the *event* is an essential metahistorical category, it does not stand for all kinds of content on which historians usually focus their inquiries. After all, to assume that historiography is fundamentally about events is to condemn social and cultural historians to something many of their predecessors perceived as a methodological prison: *histoire événementielle*. That in real life historians have frequently managed to escape this is perhaps the best reason to admit that the pasts addressable through historical interpretation are plural. This is a key condition that we need to pay more attention to in our attempts to understand what academic historians do when they research and write.

In the following I intend to offer an overview of the plurality of academic historiography, in which the significance of events as a category for historiographical analysis and self-reflection is reassessed and recalibrated (though definitely not denied). With reference to historians' key practices and self-representations, I will attempt to chart content-related asymmetries that have constituted the historiographical field in the last century or so. Section I establishes a minimal metaphysical framework for the analysis, presenting a taxonomy of content categories, which includes events while also extending

beyond them. This will provide a shorthand illustration of the assertion that events enjoy no monopoly over historians' attentions. Taken together, Sections 2, 3, and 4 comprise an attempt to ground that assertion with the aid of historical reasoning, in other words, by drawing on condensed historical surveys of contemporary historiography. They delve into events, social structures, and symbolic webs (or cultures) respectively, those elements from the taxonomy that stand for the prototypical subjects of political, social, and cultural history. Section 5 then takes a more decidedly theoretical approach and explores some of the consequences that thinking through the heterogeneity of content types in historiography may entail on discussions concerning methodology, explanation, exemplification, and representation.

I will speak a little more about my own methodological and meta-theoretical grounds in Section 1 and later at the beginning of Section 5. For now, let me just note that this is a historically informed theoretical survey about what it is that historiography is about. Unlike a great deal of the literature I have read while developing it, it is not primarily a text on epistemology or methodology, even if it is not disconnected from these realms and intersects some important methodological and epistemological issues (especially in Section 5). It is also not a text in what is often derogatorily called 'speculative philosophy of history', although the central issues discussed in it would by no means be alien to a material historical theory. As it zeros in on what can be called historiography's contents, themes, subject matters, subjects, or objects, it would be admissible to claim for it a label like that of a 'metaphysics of historiography'. But neither is this Element sufficiently systematic, nor can it go deep enough into its topics, to justify such a philosophically solemn designation.

An important measure for preventing semantic confusion is to clarify the sense in which the word 'historiography' will be used, for this is a notoriously tricky concept. Literally meaning the writing of history, the term can also be used as a label for theoretical analyses of historical methods or, especially, for histories of historical writing.² When I speak of historiography, nonetheless, I am not aiming at these or other forms of second-order study of historians' thoughts and doings. I am closer to the more literal meaning of the term, while extending it somewhat to include not only written epistemic products but also research operations connected with them. This use of 'historiography' allows us to narrow the semantic range of 'history', and to reserve this concept mainly for references to what was or what happened in the past. In the ensuing conceptual

² See Woolf, *A Global History of History*, 4–7.

division of labour, the relationship between history and historiography is placed in parallel with that between nature and (natural) science.³

My focus on academic historiography is another scope-related choice that should be spelled out. We all live in historical cultures – cultures within which connections to the past not only subsist spontaneously but are also purposefully cultivated through countless memory practices. Academic historiography is one among such practices, one that can claim to be a particularly rationalized and institutionalized mode of dealing with collective experiences.⁴ It should not, however, be understood as synonymous with the discipline of history, for it encompasses a number of traditions of inquiry that are not exclusive to history departments at universities, as well as scholars who may not identify themselves professionally as historians. As a field or aggregate of fields, historical theory often goes far beyond the analysis of scholarly based histories,⁵ but this Element will not. At its core are metaphysical nuances, methodological self-understandings, and research practices that can optimally be traced in the works of academic historians.

1 A Minimal Metaphysics

What has just been outlined suggests that the types of content addressable in histories are many and that the relationship between historiography and events should therefore be theoretically rescaled. For many practicing historians, such propositions sound rather obvious, but they become less so when they refer to those various and influential philosophical analyses of historical knowledge that take for granted that historiography is fundamentally about past events. The very existence of such disparity is an indication of how estranged historical theory and history of historiography have remained from each other, and I do not think we should be satisfied with such a state of affairs. Keeping this in mind, I will often resort to explorations into the history of historical research and methodology, as well as to mini-analyses of texts by historians. These procedures confer on some of the sections that follow a strongly descriptive character, which in itself should not be a problem. But they can occasionally eclipse the overall message that the sections, taken together, are designed to convey. To make up for the shuttling back and forth between history and theory,

³ See Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, 1–2. Tucker’s basic definitions of history as ‘past events’ and historiography as ‘representations of past events’ are, however, at odds with the main message of this Element.

⁴ Rösen, *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit*, 9–15; Rösen, *Historik*, 221–52; Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History*, 11–13, 137–47, 192–7.

⁵ Ohara, *The Theory and Philosophy of History*, 1, 40–2.

I shall begin by laying down a set of minimal metaphysical or ontological coordinates, which can be taken as a guide to the evolving argument.

Ontology and history have a long track record of not getting along well with each other. As a branch of philosophy centred on the study of the nature of being, ontology can be easily pitted against ‘history’, no matter whether this term is understood as referring to the becoming of entities, the transience of all things, or modes of knowledge dedicated to the explanation or representation of change.⁶ But historiography, and this is one of my main claims, is not only about events but also about ‘non-events’;⁷ it is not only about becoming but also about *being*. It is therefore in no way absurd to ponder on the possibility of something like an ontology of historiography – for instance, in the sense of a discussion of the relevant entities usually referred to in historical interpretations.

Here, and further on, I follow that spirit but deviate somewhat from its letter. The term ‘ontology’ applies well to several of the content-related coordinates that are about to be mentioned, but not to all of them. Historiography – the statement must now be reversed – is not only about being but also about *becoming*. If we are to work out a minimal chart of what features thematically in histories, we have to make room not only for entities but also for events. ‘Ontology’, in that regard, may project an unhelpful emphasis. This is why I am resorting to the more generic and event-friendlier term ‘metaphysics’ and its derivatives to point to the field of phenomena usually foregrounded in histories, understood in a typological way.

It is important to underscore that this terminological option is not indicative of a speculative concern with history ‘as a whole’, comprehending not only the past but also the present and the future, no matter how much reflections of this sort are legitimate, and probably even necessary, for sustaining and renewing the cultural relevance of historical studies.⁸ Also, it must be clear that I do not intend to develop a fully fledged theory of historical reality, but just a minimal set of categories drawn from the history of historical research and methodology, and then analytically polished and complemented to some extent. What I am trying to get at, hence, is no pure metaphysics, and not just because the subject matter is not primarily philosophy or because I am not a philosopher myself. In a sense, it is an impure one, for it projects metaphysical problematics onto a knowledge practice – that is, onto historiography – thus intermingling with questions more often deemed epistemological.

⁶ An inspiring attempt at mediation is Ian Hacking’s idea of a ‘historical ontology’, which he, drawing on Foucault, advances as a retrospective characterization of some of his own philosophical investigations. See Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 1–26.

⁷ Pomian, ‘Evento’, 218–19.

⁸ Fillion, ‘The Continuing Relevance of Speculative Philosophy of History’; Munz, *The Shapes of Time*, 7–9.

**Figure 1** Events and existents

In the literature on history and historiography it is unusual to find discussions about the basic constituents of historical reality, let alone discussions of the kind that would take into account the diversity of contemporary historiographical practice. A rare and useful resource is a typology by Allan Megill, based precisely on the distinction between becoming and being. Accordingly, actions and sufferings *occur*, whereas characters and settings *exist*. Historical texts convey ever-different ways of seeing these four elements in interaction. Megill proposes that we treat actions (carried out by characters) and sufferings (impinged on them) as *events*, while reserving the term *existents* to designate both characters and settings.⁹ What is appealing in this typology is that it gives us a basic metaphysical framework within which it becomes very clear that histories are not only about events unfolding in time, but also about entities exhibiting a temporal dynamic quite distinct from that characteristic of *événementiel* phenomena.¹⁰ ‘Existents’ is an adequate tag for grouping them together, albeit one that is strange to historians’ methodological language.¹¹

It has sufficiently been said that historiography should not be conceived as being fundamentally about events. But now we can add that phenomena which cannot be conceived as events can be clustered as existents. This basic distinction is schematized in Figure 1.

To unfold the idea that histories are not only about events but also about existents, it is useful to weave these two categories into some synoptic insights drawn from the history of contemporary historiography. Political history is the

⁹ Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 95.

¹⁰ For a similar framework, based on the distinction between events, lives, and societies as types of subject matter in historical descriptions and interpretations, see McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 88–111. See also Little, *New Contributions*, 52–3 and Scholz, ‘Philosophy of History’, 248–51. I will often use the adjective ‘*événementiel*’ in its original French form, as there is no good English equivalent to it. Anglicized alternatives such as ‘evenemential’, ‘evental’, or ‘evential’ sound too artificial and have not yet found their ways into standard dictionaries.

¹¹ It is, nonetheless, a term that has been used by ontologists for centuries as a generic designation for ‘what exists’. In recent years, the word has been increasingly adopted by anthropologists, especially those inclined towards what is often called the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. But neither general ontologists nor ontologically oriented anthropologists tend to stress the existent–event distinction that is essential to my argument. Megill, whom I following here, borrowed it from Seymour Chatman’s comprehensive theory of narrative. See Chatman, *Story and Discourse*.

first label that comes to mind when one speaks of histories centred on events, but it is easy to see that the latter concept also applies to domains outside the political. An earthquake, a marriage, a gang fight, the signing of a business contract, a technical invention, the conclusion of an artwork: all these and many more could be historical events, but their political meanings or impacts would not necessarily be what mattered most about them. Even so, in the history of twentieth-century historiography attempts to shift the focus of historical knowledge from the political doings of relatively small elites to new subjects tended to go hand in hand with a repudiation of event-centred epistemics.

I will defer a more detailed discussion on events for the moment, but it is important to anticipate that the word is used here as a blanket term covering *individual* actions, sufferings, thoughts, and processes, no matter whether they are intentional, or how intentional they can be shown to be.¹² It could also indicate *collective* actions, sufferings, and thoughts, of which I shall not speak much. In addition, the word ‘events’ encompasses larger-scale processes and slow-motivated social or cultural changes. This is a wide scope of application that a more throughgoing approach to the metaphysics of historical events would need to revise and rebuild. We will, nevertheless, remain close to the generic uses of historians, who tend to unproblematically mix events and actions, or attribute actor qualities to collective entities. In a sense, though, we will also follow the inflationary use of the term by most philosophers of history, for whom ‘event’ designates a variety of occurrences ranging from short-term individual actions to socially transformative processes of very large scale.

‘Existents’ encompasses an equally vast range of asymmetrical phenomena. Under this category we could first place the human *persons* who initiate, help shape, and experience events. They are the most obvious and concrete *characters* featuring in history texts, but they are not the only ones. *Social individuals* are sometimes equally, if not more, important. Historians do speak of family relations, military units, corporations, political and juridical bodies such as assemblies and courts, as well as many other kinds of social groups, which are assumed to act, suffer, change, have some sort of consciousness and certainly individuality, even if they are collective phenomena very distinct from the individual persons constituting them.

¹² Megill does not mention thoughts and processes in his brief discussion of events. Furthermore, he uses ‘happenings’ instead of ‘sufferings’. The use of the latter category was advocated by Rösen, *Historik*, 32–49, 114–28.

Characters, especially human persons, are essential. Historiography is not only thematically related to them, but it is, of course, generated by and for human beings. This apparently trivial circumstance encapsulates much of the hermeneutical depth of historical knowledge. We will not, however, focus on this connection, just as we will also not be able to pay close attention to characters. Yet in addition to characters, Megill also includes *settings* in the list of historiographically relevant existents, and these will indeed be more extensively examined in the following pages. Borrowed from narratology, the settings metaphor may well cover various kinds of structures of repetition that frame or constrain individual actions, sufferings, and thoughts, and which resist downward reduction to the individualistic level.

We can now understand much of the appeal of the ‘new histories’ envisaged or brought into being in international waves since the early twentieth century as stemming from novel ways of addressing settings. While agreeing that a history devoid of events would barely be thinkable, several of the twentieth century’s most innovative historians insisted on searching for deeper levels of historical reality below or beyond the eventful ‘surface’ with which earlier generations seemed to be content. In a given spatial-temporal configuration, they sensed, events are not only connected to contingencies and disruptions. From a certain distance, most of them could be perceived as markers of regularities and continuities, of general patterns somehow resembling what the sociologist Émile Durkheim conceived of as ‘social facts’. Inspired by different branches of the social sciences, leading historians took such patterns as key historical themes and gave them great explanatory weight. Accordingly, they started to write histories focused on the social, economic, or geographic conditions under which characters acted and interacted in a given time and place. A good part of such conditions remains largely outside the scope of people’s awareness. Histories that emphasize the framing of past social life by such consciousness-distant structures often introduced themselves or were introduced as social histories.

Although I concentrate on human-made *social structures*, one might note that less-human-related or non-human-related conditions, such as those directly linked to cosmological, physical, geological, chemical, biological, or geographical factors, can also be of great historiographical import – as several environmental, geo-historical, big-historical, or global-historical approaches nowadays attest. However, another type of setting can be prioritized in histories intending to go beyond events. Because they are general, durable, and entail repetitions, immaterial, *symbolic webs* should also be accounted as structural phenomena. Languages, myths, religions, the arts, the sciences, and all sorts of scholarly traditions rely on such semiotic structures, as well as everything pertaining to

the realm of the social imaginary or of collective representations. The concept of culture works as a synthesis of the broad array of shared symbolic forms and goods that enable and constrain social experience in a certain time, place, or group. The boundaries between symbolic and non-symbolic structures are hard to fix, posing an open problem for social theorists. But historians often traced them in practice, for instance when they contrasted sub- and super-structural conditions, or when approaches oriented towards geography, demography, and econometrics were challenged in the context of the ‘cultural turn’. In a rough synthesis, we can say that a distinctive mark of cultural webs is that they are proximate to subjective experience. Cultural historians specialize in studying this kind of subject matter, and a good part of their work could be described as that of decoding past practices and representations so as to shed light on patterns of meaning that gave cultures their main shapes.

These brief references to the history of historiography underscore the plausibility of differentiating between events and existents and of connecting both to some additional subtypes of historiographically relevant phenomena. The obtained set of metaphysical categories can be enlarged, problematized, and refined, but in the current form they already provide enough of a toolbox for us to map out abstractly what histories are about. The categories discussed, their rankings and interrelationships are brought together in Figure 2.

As indicated, the items and levels in this rudimentary taxonomy will not receive equal treatment in the following sections. We will only zoom in on events, social structures, and symbolic webs. The main reason for doing so is

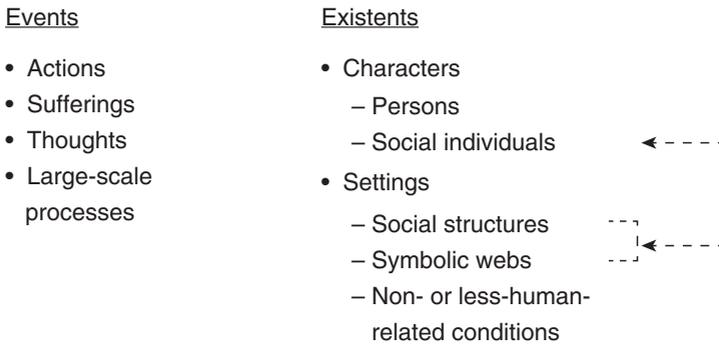


Figure 2 Historiography’s basic content categories

that the set composed by the selected categories affords us a means to bridge historiography's metaphysics and history. Indeed, as already previewed, we can relate events, social structures, and symbolic networks in fairly straightforward ways to political history, social history, and cultural history, respectively; that is, to three major labels connectable to historians' methodological practices, self-perceptions, and debates. The selected categorial frame echoes, therefore, a usual distinction between alternative paradigms of historical research that have coexisted, sometimes peacefully, as complementary knowledge resources, but perhaps more often tensely as rivals in a historicity contest presumed to be a one-winner game.

The three methodological possibilities to be surveyed do not, by any means, represent all that can be done under the name of history; not even within the subdisciplines of political history, social history, or cultural history. Besides, the taxonomy composed to make sense of them could most certainly be either enlarged with new categories, or redesigned to accommodate important matters that do not fit well within it. Where do we draw the line between a sequence of individual actions and a long-term process? Can we put in the same bag events that are perceivable by contemporaries and 'invisible', long-term events that can only be conceptualized retrospectively by a later historian? Should we have had 'objects' or 'resources', 'meanings' or 'symbols' complementing the list of basic types of *existents*, alongside *characters* and *settings*? Where would be the proper place of ideas, and if they were to be classified as existents, how could the ensuing distinction between thoughts and ideas be tenable? What about those entities such as social classes or institutions that in some contexts can qualify as both characters and settings at the same time?¹³ Can we speak of structures without raising questions as to their knowledgeability by actors who think symbolically? And if we cannot, how could symbolic webs, which indeed have an essentially structural character, be distinguished from other kinds of social structures?¹⁴ Can the cultural be opposed to the social in such a way? Could it, moreover, be opposed to the natural? We will delve into some of these questions later on, but it is important to caution in advance that none of them can be satisfactorily settled here. This is no 'theory of everything', and we soon realize that the taxonomy just introduced not only casts a brighter light on some neglected issues, but also generates collateral problems it cannot fully solve.

¹³ To allow for that possibility, Figure 2 includes a two-pronged line connecting 'social individuals' and 'settings'. See Section 3.2.

¹⁴ In Figure 2, the rectangles representing 'social structures' and 'symbolic webs' are juxtaposed to indicate that tracing the borderline between them in an unambiguous way is no simple task. See Section 4.1.