Towards a Revival of Analytical Philosophy of History: Around Paul A. Roth's Vision of Historical Sciences

Krzysztof Brzechczyn ed.
Leiden and Boston Brill-Rodopi 2018
(Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities, 110)
[ISBN 9789004356870]

TULLIO VIOLA
Max-Weber-Kolleg, Universität Erfurt

Paul A. Roth is one of the most authoritative figures in current philosophical debates about historiography.[1] The contributions that make up the volume under review discuss his work from a plurality of perspectives. In particular, two main issues are the centre of focus. The first is the scope and purport of the philosophy of history; the second is the explanatory function of historical narratives.

The collection of essays originates from a symposium on "Naturalizing the Humanities. A View from the Analytical Philosophy of History," which took place in Poznań in 2015. After a short introduction, the book begins with Roth's keynote address from the Poznań meeting, entitled "Reviving Philosophy of History." Twelve contributions follow, which can be diveded into three groups. The first group (Herman Paul, Piotr Kowalewski, Chris Lorenz, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen) locate Roth's work within the discipline to which it belongs, namely the philosophy of history. The second group (Serge Grigoriev, Eugen Zeleňák, Stephen Turner, Krzysztof Brzechczyn) discuss some of his most significative theses. Finally, the third group (Rafał Paweł Wierzchosławski, Géza Kállay, Nancy D. Campbell and Laura Stark, Dawid Rogacz) bring these theses to bear on new fields of inquiries. Roth's "Comments and Replies" close the volume.

Krzysztof Brzechczyn's "Introduction" begins by recalling the recent growth of interest in the philosophy of history, as witnessed by the current blossoming of journals, research centres and discussion fora worldwide. However, the very title of the book reminds us that this is not the whole story. One of the theses put forth by Paul Roth is, indeed, that the tradition he calls "analytical philosophy of history" is not taking part in this upsurge of interest and, thus, needs to be "revived."

As becomes clear when reading the first group of papers, however, the very meaning of 'analytical philosophy of history' is open to debate. While there is an obvious connection to analytical philosophy at large, its precise definition is quite hard

[1] His last book is *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography), ISSN 1123-7023, 22/2019
© Firenze University Press
DOI: 10.13128/cromohs-11710

to pin down. In general terms, one may take the 'analytical' approach to the philosophy of history to stand for an investigation centred on the epistemological problem of explanation and on an analysis of historiographic language, rather than on the detection of general patterns of historical development. In this sense, it dates back to logical positivism, and in particular to Carl G. Hempel's epoch-making paper from 1942, "The Function of General Laws in History." However, the phrase only became fully established two decades later, when Arthur Danto published his *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965). This introduces an interesting ambiguity, because Danto's book – like the almost contemporary work of Thomas Kuhn – was aimed at casting doubt on precisely the kind of ahistorical, deductive-nomothetical model of explanation that resulted from Hempel's work. It was only after the reception of Danto started to fade that a real "decline" (Herman Paul) of the analytical philosophy of history began. This decline proceeded in parallel with the rise of narrativist positions, such as Hayden White's. The latter emphasised the role of historical narrative without paying equal attention to the problem of explanation.

The work of Paul A. Roth is best understood as coming out of this background. Roth wishes to reconcile the analytical interest in explanation with some narrativist insights, by asking in what sense a historical narrative may fulfil irreducibly explanatory functions. To do so, he retains a willingness to look at historiography as cognate with the natural sciences, but is very careful not to underestimate its specificities.

In particular, Roth places much emphasis on one specific idea of Arthur Danto's, later expanded upon by Louis Mink: the concept of *narrative sentences*.[2] These sentences describe an event of the past in terms of information that could not have been accessible at the time that event took place. For instance, the statement «'The Thirty Years War began in 1618' […] is true of 1618, but not knowable in 1618» (14). Roth claims that the kind of explanation produced by historical narratives can only be understood once this specific feature of narrative sentences is fully taken into account.

One major implication of this argument is the following. As time goes by, new historical accounts emerge, which were not foreseeable at a previous time. As a consequence, there cannot be any ultimate standard description of historical events. In other words, one should break with the dream of a "Universal Chronicle," or with the hope of reaching full consensus among historians, and be content with the idea that there will always be a plurality of equally valid historical accounts. This pluralistic insight is expanded upon by many contributors to the volume. Wierzchosławski, for instance, remarks that yet another reason why we cannot hope to reach universal consensus in historiography is the existence of conflicting "extra cognitive interests" of historians (173).

[2] A.C. DANTO, "Narrative Sentences," in *History and Theory* 2, no. 2 (1962): 146–79; later in *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965): L.O. MINK, *Historical Understanding*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987

Even more importantly, Roth's pluralism results in a decidedly constructivist position. Historical events, like the Thirty Years War of the example above, are not given but *constituted* by historical narratives. That is, historians do not describe, but create the very events that they wish to explain by means of narrative tools. This, to be sure, is not tantamount to saying that historians are free to construct their object of inquiry as they wish. Not all constructions are equally good or acceptable. It is true that some of the book's contributors (most notably Gera Kállay) seize on Roth's philosophy as a means to weaken the distinction between history and fiction. However, it seems to me that Roth's emphasis on the explanatory function of narratives should protect him against such a form of historical scepticism. For to talk about narratives as explanatory means that they are "part of a justification of a claim to know" (13). Hence, it means that we have to grant the existence of normative criteria according to which a given narrative may be accepted or refuted.

However, the reader is left wondering what exactly these normative criteria of acceptability are. Roth's lecture does not say much on this topic. In fact, the lecture closes with an example that only makes the problem more evident, namely the example of the Holocaust. This has been a classical stumbling-block of debates about historiography at least since the important volume edited by Saul Friedländer in 1992.[3] And indeed, it is the best example to make clear that sticking to a robust conception of historical objectivity and rejecting any confusion between history and fiction has not only epistemological but also moral and political motives. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen puts the matter very clearly, in his reply to Roth: "I take it that a description through a racist theory, for example, would not do (either morally or epistemologically). There must be something that limits acceptability but at the moment we are left in the dark as to what this may be" (88).

Kuukkanen tries to fill this gap by articulating an approach that he has elsewhere called "postnarrativist": although books of history "contain narratives," the *practices* of historians cannot exhaustively be described as the "production of narratives" (82).[4] If this is true, then the assessment of historical objectivity has to focus on the holistic web of *reasons* given by historians to defend their own reconstruction. To go back to Roth's example: the account of the Holocaust given in Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jews* is closer to the truth than any Holocaust denial because of the better reasons it gives, both at the level of facts and at the level of value.

On a different path, Stephen Turner explores a Weberian solution to the problem of objectivity and truth. Namely, he posits the existence of "sub-units of historical explanation that are true independently of the narrative as a whole." These

[3] S. FRIEDLÄNDER (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Roth's essay, "Hearts of darkness: 'perpetrator history' and why there is no why," *History of the Human Sciences* 17, no. 2/3 (2004): 211–51.
[4] See JOUNI-MATTI KUUKKANEN, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

sub-units are true because of their ability to depict with probabilistic approximation the causal connections that led to a given event. When these causal connections are absent, narratives become fictional (137). Turner's paper also has the merit of reminding us that large-scale historical events such as "the Holocaust" or the "Great War" are often "constituted by the wider culture, and not a construction of historians" (130). Thus, the constructive operations that Roth deals with are not limited to historiographical activity.

Finally, yet another way to reconcile objectivity and constructivism might be reached by discussing the precise meaning of the word "event," as used by Roth. This is indeed a point where another disagreement with Kuukkanen emerges. Although the two philosophers share similar constructivist assumptions, Kuukkanen remarks that "what is constructed is not an event in the past itself, but in the writing of history" (82). It is probably for this reason that Kuukkanen is more willing than Roth to talk about "concepts" (or "colligatory concepts"), rather than "events," when referring to such complex units of historical explanation as the Holocaust or the Thirty Years War. But what about the less complex, more atomic units of our historical narratives? Kuukkanen observes: "If we consider this meeting here today (in Poznan, 13 October 2015), it is not trivially clear that this is an 'event'." There need to be some specifications that give "a unity and boundaries" to an otherwise unconnected "series of practices" (81-82).

This remark invites a further observation. The kind of constructive operation that historians perform when they talk about large-scale events that "could *not* have been known prospectively" (Roth, 20) is not necessarily equivalent to their identification of smaller-scale events, such as a meeting occurring at a specific time and place. To be sure, to say exactly what this difference consists in is a very difficult task, because in doing so it is easy to relapse into a rather untenable dualism between 'pure facts' versus 'interpretations.' Still, while historians can variously construe those smaller-scale events when they embed them into their narratives, their narratives are in turn powerfully constrained by the need to take those events into account. This point can be defended without denying that our knowledge of historical facts is never direct, but always filtered through interpretation, mediated by sources, and open to corrections.

Some contributors, such as Kuukkanen, Grigoriev and Zeleňák, voice the important advice to reflect on the methodology of history only in connection to an analysis of actual historical practices. In this spirit, I will end by signalling one particularly noteworthy paper from the book's third part: Nancy D. Campbell's and Laura Stark's essay on "Making up 'Vulnerable' People: Human Subjects and the Subjective Experience of Medical Experiment" (reprinted from *Social History of Medicine*). This essay deals with how people who were subject to medical experiments in the past recollect their experiences at a later moment. Dealing in particular with LSD-studies that were conducted in the United States during the 1950s, the authors

argue that the vocabulary of the civil rights movement made retrospectively possible to some of those people – specifically, Afro-American people who had been recruited from inmates – to describe their participation in the trials as a violent act of coercion. The authors use the theories of Roth and Ian Hacking to argue that our retrospective articulation of past experiences can change the experience itself. It is a remarkable insight, which, however, raises some new questions. First, what is the boundary between «experienc[ing] one's own past in a different way» (Hacking, as quoted on p. 229) and putting forth a *new* account of the *same* experience? Second, what changes should be made to Roth's theory when we move from a description of historiographical practice to acts of individual recollection?

The book will be of much interest not only to specialists in the field, but also to philosophers of science who are interested in historiography, as well as to historians interested in methodological discussions.