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The Making and Persisting of Modern German Humanities

Balancing Acts between Autonomy and Social Relevance

Vincent Gengnagel and Julian Hamann

Introduction

The history of the humanities shows a constant struggle for constituting and maintaining their particular logic in relative autonomy from social influences. Understanding their emergence in the nineteenth century requires a sociological examination of how the humanities managed to maintain academic autonomy while at the same time demonstrating social relevance.

The foundation for the autonomy of the modern humanities' disciplines was formulated by Kant. He claimed that liberal arts constitute the very core of academic purity precisely because of their autonomy from any societal purpose. Declaring that 'our age is the age of criticism,' Kant at the same time wants critique to be restricted by nothing but pure reason — i.e., all knowledge has to be subjected to an academically autonomous critique. He states that

the power to judge autonomously — that is, freely (according to principles of thought in general) — is called reason. So the philosophy faculty, because it must answer for the truth of the teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by the government."

Two hundred years later, our sociological analysis of the making of the humanities after Kant takes the idea of academic autonomy into account as the ideological groundwork that helped to form a conceptual idea of a Gelehrtenrepublik still called the humanities. The emphasis is put on the notion of the humanities having a self-concept in which they conceive of themselves as free. In order to sketch out two centuries of development, the narrative of an overall pattern that underlies this ongoing constitution of the humanities helps to structure and understand the characteristics of the said process more precisely: following the claim of
academic purity, each discipline defends its impartiality and objectivity while at the same time being dependent on societal constraints. With complete purity unattainable, a successful construction of any discipline within the humanities has to develop legitimate relations with its embedding society without compromising its claim for autonomy and disinterestedness. Since societies as well as academia are changing, the way a discipline produces knowledge and recognition thereof is problematized constantly. During this ongoing process, humanities are structured by orthodox defenders and heterodox challengers competing for legitimacy, thus shaping the potential orthodox position for future debates in symbolic struggles. We argue that this dynamic in itself is a constitutive element in what is conceived as free, that is, in the academic sphere of the humanities. Applying this idea to history, a discipline traditionally in a state of precarious balance between its own academic autonomy and both societal relevance and academic relevance as defined by other disciplines, this paper contributes to a constructivist understanding of the humanities and the symbolic practices discursively establishing their autonomy.

With this groundwork in mind, we describe the subsequent balancing acts between 'pure' autonomy and 'impure' social relevance as discursive practices. We analyze two historical cases of emergence and contestation of orthodoxies within history as a German academic discipline: the orthodox positions of historicism (1871-1945) and historical social science (1960-1979). For both cases, societal influence and academic influence are assessed as two forms of social influence, while the precarious balance is illustrated by shifts in debates about epistemological grounds of legitimate humanistic knowledge and by transformations of the ideal-typical subject position legitimately representing autonomy: the professor of history.

Objectifying partiality (1871-1945)

In the period from Germany's unification to the end of World War II, German historians, as humanists, orient themselves along the academic distinction between humanities and natural sciences, while societally being influenced by the 'belated nation's' desire for national (or nationalistic) constructions of its collective identity. These influences favor balancing acts whose outcomes can be indicated in terms of attempts to define legitimate humanistic knowledge and in terms of the characteristics of the ideal-typical subject position in this period of time.
Especially for the humanities, the relationship between state and university was crucial at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As state and university interests begin to coincide toward the end of the century, autonomy from the state is no longer seen as a pressing issue. After 1871, the demand for an interpretation of national identity calls for cultural leadership, a duty that is most eagerly accepted by historians who become advocates of a national ideology. Not only is their objective to provide canonical knowledge for civil education, but also to offer political orientation for Germany's seemingly threatened political position in Europe. But crucially, historians are anxious not to jeopardize their rigorous stance of academic autonomy. Reluctant to get involved in party politics, they prefer to address issues concerning the state or the nation on an abstract level and derive their political contributions from historical facts.

While this reluctance is dismissed during World War I, the belief in non-partisan and disinterested interpretation of the weal of the nation and the state is still widespread in the Weimar Republic. Academics perceive a lack of intellectual leadership, combined with a climate of massification and industrialization of society. Historians are searching for a way of coming to terms with a German past that neither witnessed a successful bourgeois revolution nor the establishment of a parliamentary constitution, but instead is dominated by the Prussian authoritarian state and traditional elites. Historians deliver the interpretative tools to derive from this a unique German national heritage that assures identity while historically explaining and rationalizing Germany's role in global politics.

With this in mind, it is not particularly surprising that historians and their works did not form a noteworthy resistance against National Socialism. But even after 1933, when the societal influence on history is most notable, a remainder of autonomy is retained as the discipline is split. Openly political propaganda, conducted by quasi-official National Socialist historians, stays away from academic research foundations like the Ethnic German Research Societies (Volkdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaften) and thus contributes to maintaining autonomy at least as a self-conception of the academic National Socialist research taking place in these very research foundations. This is not to say that university history does not play an important role in at least intellectually legitimizing the regime. On the contrary, it is its relative academic autonomy that serves as a rational supplement.

Summing up, even if it was minimized during war time, historians maintained their (discipline's) relative autonomy by translating the belated nation's desire for national (or nationalistic) identity and constructions of history into a humanistic logic, combining societal engagement in terms of abstract political contributions with displays of academic disinterestedness. Joined to the societal influence
sketched so far, an *academic influence on history* posed another challenge for the discipline's autonomy: the last third of the nineteenth century saw notable institutional expansion and a growing self-confidence of the natural sciences, displayed exemplarily by Von Siemens's (1886) and Virchow's (1893) announcement of the 'age of natural sciences'.

This development has a twofold impact on the humanities in general and on history in particular: On the one hand, natural sciences become competitors for the prerogative of interpretation of the world that was firmly in the hand of humanistic disciplines like philosophy and history since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This becomes apparent when Max Lenz denies the 'claim for sole reign' of the natural sciences, stating 'that the historical sciences in no way have to fear the competition with those of nature, neither regarding their scope nor their impact.' On the other hand, the broad success of neo-Rankean historicism is at least partly facilitated by the rise of natural sciences that shapes an academic climate legitimating the orthodoxy's focus on objectivistic empirical research and elaborated methods. This is why Lenz's defense also conveys an acknowledgement of the legitimate research logic defined by the natural sciences. The background against which he claims the significance of history is, in fact, its disinterested research practice being similar to that of the natural sciences: 'We face the past like the natural scientist faces a plant or the history of the earth. [...] We have [...] little interest in a system and dogmatic values [...] We want nothing but to examine and discover.' Against this backdrop, the *academic influence on history* exerted by the natural sciences is promise and threat at the same time.

Strategies like Lenz's are exactly what ensures the persistence of the autonomy of history - and, on a broader scale, of the humanities. Representatives of the discipline, rather than subordinating themselves to the academic influences, present their own adapted research logic and even position it in contrast with the natural sciences. In this light, historicism serves as a transmitter of the influence of the research logic of the natural sciences into history. Historicism's role as a balancing act serving the persistence of humanities and history in particular is highlighted in the following section.

**Balancing acts of legitimate historical knowledge and ideal-typical subject positions**

The growing influence of the natural sciences enables historicism to shape a new orthodox position of *legitimate humanistic knowledge*. Since part of establishing a new orthodoxy is to challenge and overcome the former, historicists deny that the historiography of the Enlightenment has produced genuine historical thinking and degrade it to a mere preliminary stage. Many historicists do not fully reject...
the former orthodoxy: instead, its way of interpreting and judging is seen as a discardable subjective residue of what now is perceived as a diversity of moral, religious or legal orientations. In the eyes of its main representatives, it is historicism that promoted historiography to the status of a science (Wissenschaft). Rediscovering Ranke, they define scientificity (Wissenschaftlichkeit) as source-based empirical research using intersubjectively reliable methods. This, and the researcher pushing back any subjectivity when conducting his research, is to ensure a seemingly disinterested objectivity.

But the recourse to Ranke, constituting legitimate humanist knowledge in the period investigated, means more than just striving for objectivity. It also implies the adoption of Ranke's idea of a primacy of foreign affairs, perceiving historical events from a state perspective interested in bellicose or diplomatic relations between nation-states. Despite disputes about methodological as well as epistemological issues, there is a rather broad agreement on basic assumptions and axioms. Among them are the conviction that history is national, entrenching the newly found national unity and argumentatively backing up the further development of the empire (Reich), and the belief that history is scientific (wissenschaftlich) in an objective, disinterested and nonpartisan way. Following Ranke, historians like Lenz and Marcks are convinced that we can only exert a genuine influence on the present age when we abstain from it for the time being and raise ourselves to free objective science (Wissenschaft).

Ranke's quote suggests that the ideal-typical subject position of the professor of history is that of a mediator between party political factions on the one hand, and the greater gain of the state or Kultunnation on the other hand. This does not raise concerns about autonomy because the subject position unites the role of a 'critical researcher' who 'has the duty to force back his subjective moods' and of a 'political expert [Sachverständiger]', whose 'perception of the spiritual substance of the events will always be exercised by the subjective standpoint of the beholder'. Their different (but mostly conservative) political stances notwithstanding, historians look down on practical politics, although their engagement at the same time legitimizes political day-to-day business.

The particular social position of the historian is related to a specific self-perception. Firstly, the ideal-typical subject position is occupied by an especially homogeneous group that is reproduced through a remarkable degree of self-recruitment in comparison to other professors. Secondly, historians do not only enjoy a high socio-structural status, their profession also has a high social prestige ensuring 'almost a monopoly on political resonance with the public'. Unsurprisingly, the social prestige historians enjoy in the eyes of their contemporaries is, thirdly, matched by their self-conception and their general habitus. The feeling of dominance state-centered historicist display is partially fed by their position
as state officials at state institutions of higher education. They see themselves not only as a meritocratic but also as a value elite, distinguished by certain moral and political norms that need to be championed and proclaimed to supervise the national unification.44

Recapitulating the balancing on the level of ideal-typical subject positions, it is striking that it is exactly the objectivity of their empirical research that enables historians to take a political stance. They introduce the claim for objectivity through source-based empirical research into the humanities via historicism, and at the same time benefit from the scientific (wissenschaftlich) prestige of the orthodoxy and the social prestige of their position when engaging for the greater good of nation and state. In the subject position, empirical research striving for objectivity, political engagement striving for national unity and the public reception of these stances are heavily intertwined.

As has been illustrated up to this point, the belated nation's demand for statist and nationalist interpretations of history and the rise of the natural sciences exert strong influences on history. However, they are not compromising the discipline's claim for autonomy. Firstly, historicism articulates a research logic that allows combining academic purity via objectivistic research with political engagement. Secondly, the social position, prestige and self-conception of the historian allow taking a political stance not only without losing, but exactly because of his academic credibility.

Reflecting partiality (1960-1979)

Conservative orientations toward the nation remain largely unchanged and constitute a great deal of continuity from 1945 up until the 1960s. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, societal demands for democratization, the expansion of universities as well as a relative loss of reputation of subject positions in history change the conditions for humanistic practice, while the expansion of the social sciences provides an academic influence on the discipline.44 The two-level balancing acts these influences require in history are again illustrated by the indicators legitimate humanistic knowledge and ideal-typical subject positions.

Societal and academic influences

The general political changes embracing (West) German society since the 1960s translate the topic of democratization into an academic field whose structure is shaped by newly founded universities and student protests. This societal influence on history causes an 'unprecedented atmosphere of departure'.44

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Associated with this is the need for a discussion about purpose and relevance of history for a modern society, prompting a number of contributions about the relationship between history and society. The domestic climate of political reforms is advantageous for heterodox positions in the disciplinary discourse, conducing to an open controversy between conflicting heterodoxies. Novel positions developed in the course of these conflicts are deemed relevant to the present as they seem equipped to satisfy the demand for explanations of current problems. The effect the climate of democratization has on history becomes apparent in a declaration of the Association of German Historians (Verband der Historiker Deutschlands), calling for historiography to provide a ‘practical service to democracy’ by encouraging citizens to develop a critical understanding of the liberal-democratic constitution they are living in. Against the backdrop of political and societal changes like democratization and social opening of the universities, historians realize that they can only push their claim of relevance for society if they are prepared to enter the scientific-political and socio-political ring.

Academically, the humanities are confronted with the growing influence of the social sciences. Similar to the way the natural sciences were acknowledged but at the same time opposed, historians try to integrate social-scientific methods and theories without losing their autonomy or even merging the discipline with the social sciences. The strategic pattern used in dealing with this academic influence on history is twofold in a way resembling the preservation of autonomy toward the natural sciences.

On the one hand, many historians oppose the pressure the social sciences are exerting. If Lenz announced in 1967 that history would not have to fear the competition of the natural sciences, Wehler’s argumentation about the deficiency of sociology and economy is reminiscent of that. On the other hand, the newly established dominance of the social sciences makes it difficult to ignore the potential their theories, methodologies and methods have. Too big seems history’s need for a renewal during the 1960s and 1970s, too persuasive the success of the social sciences and too wide-ranging the overlap regarding subject matter and method. Hence, the second part of the strategic pattern toward this academic influence is to acknowledge the social sciences by interdisciplinary cooperation or at least inspiration. This is why many historians, more or less programmatically, call for a sociologization of history.

Although German historians defend their autonomy against the social sciences, they are still willingly acknowledging their legitimate influence. This balancing act becomes not least apparent in the name that is established for the new orthodoxy proving most suitable to deal with the influences sketched up to here: historical social science. While ‘social science’ is meant to symbolize the affinity
to systematic social sciences, the adjective 'historical' emphasizes the aspiration of historical autonomy.39

**Balancing acts of legitimate historical knowledge and ideal-typical subject positions**

From the 1960s onwards, *societal influences* as well as the growing *academic influence* of the social sciences challenge the *legitimate humanistic knowledge* of both idealist and historicist orthodoxy. Opposed by defenders of the historicist tradition who see the danger of an 'instrumentalization of historical knowledge in the political discussion'40 and try to fend off a widespread and fundamental subjectivistic wave that has carried away history, [...] threatening to lead to a decay of thinking,41 there are heterodox attempts to provide a new foundation for objectivity.42

However, with historicism losing ground, soon enough historical social science becomes the main program of the new orthodoxy of *legitimate humanistic knowledge* in history. In contrast to the political historiography of neo-Rankean historicism, it focuses on all areas of social and cultural life. Wehler, one of its main representatives, insists on history's practical relevance and emancipating mission by characterizing the discipline as a 'lively, political, critical social science'.43 Unsurprisingly, the critical ambition toward overcome traditions is above all criticism of historicism.44 By way of example, Wehler states that 'only a historiography that is freed from an antiquarian-esoteric self-sufficiency, inhabiting the ivory tower of allegedly purposeless, presuppositionless human science' would deny the practical relevance of the discipline.45

Just as historicism replaced the historiography of the Enlightenment as the orthodox tradition, this time it is the heterodox challenge of historical social science that delegitimizes historicism, either by tradition criticism or by reintegrating those historians that were excluded as outsiders by historicism.46 While source critique still forms a core aspect of historical research, historicism's assertion that it deducts objectivity from it is now seen as a deficient antecedent.47 The new orthodoxy aims to achieve objectivity through its critical intentions and the disclosure of its own epistemological premises, allowing for an open discourse about axioms and presuppositions.48

Therefore, for historical social science, 'the principle of objectivity of historical research is in no way obsolete.'49 In Mommsen's case, it is reconciled with his moderate relativism by distinguishing illegitimate partiality and legitimate value considerations or theoretical insights. Similarly, Kocka distinguishes between legitimate practical engagement and illegitimate political instrumentalization.50 These reconciliations of objectivity and partiality – in the eyes of historicism

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a sure sign of the discipline's loss of purity – can be seen as a major feature of historical social science becoming the main approach of the new orthodoxy that is balanced by a decidedly critical and emancipative stance and by the pointedly societal involvement of its representatives.

It is not a coincidence that the success of the new orthodoxy takes place during the social opening of the university and the subsequent increase in recruitment of university personnel. The result is not only a changed age pattern of the ideal-typical subject position, but also a crisis of succession, critically observed by established professors, who bemoan unforeseen dangers because of personnel mal-investment in a partially rash and politicized phase of expansion and founding. A new generation of historians can introduce heterodoxies due to the opened up personnel hierarchy. The crisis of succession also waters down the once distinctive degree of self-recruitment. Historians still enjoy a high socio-structural status, but as a group they are less homogeneous and less exclusively composed. This is fitting with more mundane working conditions the ideal-typical subject position of the professor is facing due to rising student numbers and the subsequent need for vocational education.

While a good deal of the historians working in the period from 1871 to 1945 can safely be described as conservative, the new generation, whose 'moral profession' is characterized as 'political-societal pedagogy with emancipative intentions', is mostly left-liberal. Attempts at democratizing the university further contribute to the politicization of the subject position. Similar to their predecessors described above, the historians of the 1960s and 1970s can still utilize their expertise for historical-political advice, but in contrast have to actively legitimate their stance in disciplinary discourse. In summary, the ideal-typical subject position is occupied by historians mostly younger and less exclusively recruited than their counterparts described above. Their societal and political engagement is assuming critical and emancipative forms rather than nationalist and conservative ones, while their political stance tends to be left rather than conservative.

In the second period investigated, influences on history are exerted by democratization and expansive reforms and by the rise of the social sciences. But again, they are not compromising the discipline's claim for autonomy. Historical social science not only integrates the influence of the social sciences but also allows emancipative and critical societal engagement while preserving objectivity through an explicitly theoretical ambition and a critical-rational discourse. From a subject position that itself is a product of the social opening of the field, historians can claim autonomy by openly legitimizing their political engagement and reflecting their societal embeddedness as well as their interestedness in terms of contemporary politics.
Conclusion

In the two cases discussed above, rules of legitimate historical knowledge are discursively established, contested or altered and broadened while historians aim for academic purity. Accordingly, subject positions allow the bearers of legitimate knowledge to orient themselves toward academic and societal relevance and toward the 'pure' academic core of their discipline at the same time. During this balancing act, former challenges can later become part of what is considered the proper discipline of history: The source critique of historicism reacts to an academic influence in order not to lose ground to the positivist natural sciences. Even for a discipline that is shaped by new orthodoxies, source critique still forms a core means to claim academic advances in historical knowledge. Societal influences such as the given form of government and its approach toward national history represent particular external needs that demand historical sense from scholars at a particular time, for example, a sense for the ideological needs of the belated nation (historicism) or postwar reeducation (historical social science). Although the social production of historical knowledge and corresponding subject positions is always subject to academic constraints and follows internal rules of cognition, a successful adaptation to such new societal needs establishes an autonomy that is always precarious. The balancing acts analyzed here involve two narratives or discursive strategies: the first as means of substantiating purity and the second as means of legitimizing societal and academic relevance.

According to the narrative of academic purity, societal and academic influences lead to history developing and broadening the concept of historical knowledge through an ongoing process in which more and more aspects of the discipline become subject to reasonable critique: initially, historicism derives abstract political stances from historical facts and rejects the knowledge produced by the historiography of the Enlightenment. Only an empirical stance toward history relying on research conducted with original sources ensures the discipline's academic autonomy from philosophy. Hence, the kind of critique historicism makes possible is focused on historical sources. While source critique forms a constitutive criterion of legitimate historical knowledge until today, its claim for objectivity and societal aloofness is questioned by a new generation of historians from the 1960s onwards. Adding the critique of socially constructed axioms, purity of historical research now also has to be criticizable in terms of social embeddedness of the researcher himself. By including critical-rational discourse as means of mutual persuasion, the production of historical knowledge becomes more transparent, open to scrutiny and therefore more societally relevant in a democratic way. This way, the democratization of postwar Germany is integrated in the discipline by being subjected to an academic critique ensuring that the
societal demand will be met within the condition of scientific purity. The first discursive strategy depicts this balancing act as incrementally broadening the horizon of critique. While this is the narrative constituting purity as advances in knowledge, i.e., 'the power to judge autonomously through critique of reason,' a narrative of societal and academic impurity focuses on different aspects.

Analysis of the two historical cases reveals how, as a second narrative, the balancing acts do not only follow internal rules, but occur in different societal and academic settings. In the case of historicism, historians obediently emphasize statist and national (or nationalist) perspectives on foreign affairs and national heritage. While not involved in day-to-day politics, they are certainly committed to a national culture. At the same time, the influence of the natural sciences is absorbed and academic legitimacy is gained by a quasi-positivistic orientation on methods and sources. In reeducated Germany, the discipline once more finds an appropriate stance toward societal and academic demands. For a more democratic society, it docilely orients toward questions of civil society and educational tasks, while academic influences favor the emergence of theoretical and methodological imports from the social sciences. In contrast to substantiating purity, the second narrative is a discursive strategy paying tribute to societal and academic influences. As we have shown, both narratives, that of substantiating purity and that of legitimizing societal and academic relevance, have been balanced out under certain historical circumstances.

In both cases – historicism and historical social sciences – historians take part in a process of relatively autonomous translation of societal and academic demands into the logic of their discipline. As shown in this paper, the internalization of these challenges takes place in conflicts between orthodox stakeholders of the discipline and their heterodox counterparts. Such confrontational processes of negotiation are not conclusively solved at any given point. Instead, they are part of the permanent process of the humanities situating themselves within society and academia according to changing dominant societal and academic influences.

Notes

1 Preface, in I. Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (Basingstoke, 2003 [orig. 1787]).
2 I. Kant, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', in A.W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (eds.), Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology (Cambridge, 1986, orig. 1796), 225. Apart from this quote, all following quotes are translated by the authors.

Friedrich Jaeger, and Jörn Rüsen, Geschichte des Historismus (Munich, 1992), 92-93.


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25 Cf. J. Hamann, 'Bildung in German Human Sciences: The Discursive Transformation of a Concept', *History of the Human Sciences* 24:5 (2001), 48-72, esp. 58-60; R. Vierhaus, 'Zur Lage der historischen Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland', in Arbeitsgemeinschaft Historischer Forschungseinrichtungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ed.), *Jahrbuch der historischen Forschung* (Stuttgart, 1974), 17, esp. 11-12, summarizes the situation as follows: 'The coincidence of a crisis of reputation, the expansion of the social sciences, a structural change of the epistemological interest in society and the necessity of a new theoretical foundation' has brought history in the 1960s in a 'difficult position'.
30 K.-D. Erdmann, 'Der Deutsche Historikerbetrag in Mannheim', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 28 (1977), 129-130, esp. 129.
36 Programmatically: Koselleck, 'Wozu noch Historiet',
38 Koch, 'Theorien in der Sozial- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte', 11. [Image]
39 Wehler, Historische Sozialwissenschaft, 9.
42 Blanke, Historiographiegeschichte, 673-712.
45 In 1973, 45% of all full professors were younger than 44. See W. Conze, ‘Die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft seit 1945: Bedingungen und Ergebnisse’, Historische Zeitschrift 225-1 (1977), 1-28, esp. 19.
46 Bourdieu, Homo Academicus, 143-147.
50 Blanke, Historiographiegeschichte, 708.
52 Blanke, Historiographiegeschichte, 693.
53 The generational aspect is covered in D. Moses, German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past (Cambridge, 2007), 55-73.
54 Kant, ‘Conflict of the Faculties’, 225.
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