RESEARCH ARTICLE

Historiographic Positionality and the Role of the Social Scientist: An Application of Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Phenomenology to the Study of History-Writing in Turkey

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Abstract:

In this paper, I reflect on the discipline of historiography and its application to conflict resolution. I start from concepts found in the phenomenological writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I expand upon these to discuss the concept of positionality within time and space to uncover the context-specificity of nationalist historical tropes. I provide a brief overview of other applications of phenomenology to other branches of the social sciences. In order to illustrate these concepts, I use examples of temporal and spatial positionality from Turkish historiography. I thereby explore the manner in which an understanding of the individual’s location and perspective vis-à-vis the State can be employed to grasp the changes that the writing of Turkish has undergone over the last century. I conclude with suggestions on a method to transcend the positional fixity contained within national meta-narratives, and to refocus history on individuals and their stories rather than the agenda of the state.

Keywords: Historiography, Phenomenology, Conflict resolution, Balkans, Turkey, Nationalism

Introduction

During my training for the Canadian Foreign Service, my colleagues and I took part in a two-day course on negotiation. The facilitator of the course was an experienced and well-respected negotiator for the Government of Canada. He had taken part in numerous bilateral and multilateral discussions on a variety of issues: free trade agreements; labour disputes; accession to international organizations. After his introductory lecture, we asked him which engagement had been the most difficult for him. He thought for a moment and then provided us with an answer: treaty negotiations on land rights between the federal government and indigenous peoples. His response was a surprise for many of us,
as we had assumed that his most challenging task would have related to trade negotiations or high-stakes talks on accession to a major international organization. He explained, however, that the true blockage to a successful outcome was not the potential gains and losses that each party faced, but rather the world view of participants; their understandings of legitimacy and right; and their acceptance of the system in which they operated. Indigenous peoples and Canadians had radically different interpretations of history and historically-contingent systems of property, rights and representation. An agreement, therefore, depended not on reconciling the needs and desires of the two parties, but in bridging the gaping chasm between the two visions of the past and its impact on the present.

While the above example might appear to be a peculiarity of colonial and semi-colonial countries, Europeans are no strangers to competing historical narratives. Since the 18th century, many European philosophers and historians have accepted the practical impossibility of discovering absolute historical truth (1). This has left practitioners of the historical sciences with only the ability to rely on subjective interpretation of documentary and material evidence to uncover the mysteries of the past (2). Even Soviet Marxist historians, who fetishized objective and mechanical explanations of historical change, effectively relied on the highly subjective act of interpreting independent human actions as historically irrelevant components of the superstructure (3). Today, when the post-modern turn has allowed for an explicit recognition of the historian’s subjectivity, interpretation as an epistemological tool is understood to be an intensely personal one. History-writing is the product of source analysis, anthropological and archaeological evidence and accumulated documentary support, but it also reflects the experiences and emotions of the historian as a person (4).

Personal histories, however, are not quite as personal as they might seem. Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of a divided Europe, national boundaries have not disappeared, and national historical narratives continue to exert powerful influences on the writing of histories across the continent (5). The collapse of socialist régimes in the eastern half of Europe allowed for national characteristics – previously backgrounded in the interests of establishing a Marxist historical science – to come to the fore (6). Every nation has its own myths: about foundation, character, inclusion, ethics. These myths are necessarily part of national histories (5). National curricula and generally accepted paradigms of interpretation and writing result in most histories being written either according to the national framework, or in reaction to it (7). Few histories are written in a manner completely neutral to the concept of the nation, because of the ways in which national symbols and tropes fill our everyday lives. Nationalism has become a banality, to paraphrase Michael Billig (8).

**Perception and National History**

National myths permeate historical narratives, affecting both the content of the narratives and their construction. History contains both an ontology (a knowledge of being) and an epistemology (a knowledge of knowing). The manner
in which individuals or groups are perceived of as belonging to or excluded from a larger collective; the relationship between land, people and the state; the location and source of historical continuity: these and other aspects of the writing of history are all shaped and developed through the lens of the national ideal. Moreover, they operate covertly, influencing historians’ explanation and interpretation of past events without being made explicit (9). What, then, is the role of the historian in understanding these frameworks, particularly in the context of intra- and international conflict? Broadly speaking, her role is that of deconstructing them and making them explicit to both domestic and foreign audiences. In a narrower vein, two particularly important aspects of this task are the spatial and temporal dissection of the locational specificities of national historical epistemologies.

This argument stems from the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His writings in the field of phenomenology, most famously La Phénoménologie de la perception (The Phenomenology of Perception), published in 1945, took up the work of Husserl, infusing it with Saussure’s discoveries in the disciplines of semiotics and linguistics (10). Merleau-Ponty was concerned with intersubjectivity: the interplay of the individual and her environment – including other individuals – in the synthesis of consciousness (11). In his Résumés de cours, Collège de France 1952-1960 (Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960), he specifically refutes the idea that history is a search for ultimate truth. Instead, Merleau-Ponty identifies it as the task of extracting meaning from “sediments” of past culture; “the call of one thought to another” in a dynamic and organic process connecting individuals in time and across it (10). Individuals construct a bond with one another through an exchange of ideas and link themselves to tradition by continually reinterpreting and reinvigorating the collected intellectual production of previous generations. Nevertheless, their place within the world cannot be argued away, as existence in time and space are the true characteristics of reality, from which theory and science to be distilled, and not vice versa (11).

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective rejects both instantaneity and the tyranny of consciousness, which is also to say the supreme independence of the individual in assigning meaning to the world around her. His view, however, is far from a sort of deterministic resignation regarding the ability of the subject to influence her world, or to make sense of it. Rather, it is precisely within a web of people, objects, states and conditions that meaning and truth become available, explicit to the understanding of those of us who make up a given society (12). The views of others, including the Significant Other, intrude upon our own view of the world, both inhibiting us from constructing a fantasy environment reliant on our own consciousness, and enriching our perception with outside information about our Selves (11). These collections of our own thoughts and sensations, and the input of others, build up in us and provide us with some means of access to past states: “To live, for a man, is not simply to impose meanings perpetually, but to continue a whirlpool of experience that is formed, with our birth, at the point of contact of the ‘outside’ and of he who is called to live it” (12).

We and the world around us are the residual products of past occurrences. Thus our reality, and the truth and consciousness contained therein, are influenced through the dialogue between the present, the latent future, and the
remains of this past. In the most basic biological sense, we are the residuals of past sexual relations between two individuals who still form part of our world (12). More pertinently, the knowledge to which we have access and the truths that we now hold are not the result of nomothetic operations, but of a long and messy search over a plane of truth. They are the residuals of a variety of formulae, methods and epistemologies, the mass of which enrich our present and prepare our future:

“There is a simultaneous decentration and recentration of the elements of our own life, a movement of us towards the past and of the past reanimated towards us. This labour of the past against the present does not result in a closed universal history, in a complete system of all of the possible human combinations with respect to an institution such as kinship, for example, but to a table of the complex diverse possibilities, always linked to local circumstances, accompanied by a coefficient of facticity, and about which we cannot say that the one is truer than the other, although we might say that the one is falser, more artful, and has less of an opening onto a future that is less rich.” (12)

The important aspect here is that the philosopher envisions an open system of knowledge, being and truth, one in which personal experience, rather than any sort of rational deduction, is key.

Added to this re-articulation of truth and its discovery is Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of time, or rather his distinction between scientific time and experienced time. The latter, the time to which we most often refer, is not so much on the temporal plane as on the spatial one. We sense time through the passage from one state, from one position, to another, thereby intuiting time through the change of landscape or the flowing of a river. What we often express as time is actually our movement through space, accompanied by scientific time, marked not by the hands of a watch so much as the alteration of one’s own position within the world (11).

The past is neither a distant object completely unrelated to the present and future, nor is it encapsulated in the being and consciousness of an individual, to be extracted and analyzed without reference to the “whirlpool” within which it came about. Indeed, in Phénoménoologie de la Perception, the author writes that all memories of the past are coloured by the events that preceded and followed them. They are not referred to as absolute moments in time, but rather in relation to other states, events and positions that, in turn, create a new lens through which we view our pasts:

“When a new moment arrives, the preceding moment undergoes a modification: I still have it in hand, it is still there, and yet it is already darkening, it falls under the line of presents; in order to retain it, I must slip my hand through the thin film of time…” (11)

Thus our memories of the past are not of the past as it was, but rather of how we view it now through the various layers of presents, the “film” of following events that change our perception and understanding of what was. This implies that our spatial time, mentioned above, is not actually a collection of finite positions that can be recalled or retrieved easily. Rather, it is a series of
sensations of positions woven together in a causal narrative so that we can move from the sentient understanding of our past towards a rational analysis of our arrival in the present (11).

What, however, do we actually remember of the past? For Merleau-Ponty, there is a distinction between “memory as preservation and memory as construction.” Consciousness will only ever be able to access copies of the objects that have been stored there. The states that we remember surrounding these are entirely constructed, as we do not notice all that goes on about us, and thus we selectively archive elements of the present. The key to reconciling this mismatch between the incompleteness of what we remember and the complexity of the past can only be achieved through a rephrasing of the entire operation of memorialization. The present is to be seen as “a certain unique position of the index of the being in the world”. Our memory of the past is then a memory of this positionality in the present that has passed, a recording of the body’s location and identity at any given time. At this point, we transcend the distinction between preservation and construction, with memory becoming the “intersection” of remembering and forgetting. “The real memory is found ... at the point where the forgotten memory, kept by forgetting, returns, where explicit memory and forgetting are two modes of our oblique relationship with a past that is not present to us except through the emptiness that it leaves within us” (12). Memory and its opposite are both essential to our recalling of the past; not because they bring us hard evidence of what was and what was not, but because they reconstruct our position within a wider world, the totality of which was never ours, and never will be ours.

Language is another construction of reality. While memory is the reconstitution of the subject’s position within a past reality, language is her insertion into a public present inhabited by other subjects. It is, as Besmer calls it, “a public institution in which the speaking subject participates with others” (13). Similar to memory, language can be broken into two different parts. One is “sedimented” language, a sort of passive accumulation of language possessed by all those who participate in a given culture with a given language. This residue of expression is silent, yet part of the individual, and it provides the basis for the connection between the Self and the Other – the members of a public intersubjectivity – when it moves into its second state, that of being speech. The open space of language and culture is anonymous and intersubjective, but its sedimentation within the Self means that its usage by the individual becomes influenced by her being and her experience. Thus the sedimented language within us all both permits mutual comprehension and communication with others, and also impedes the creation of a universal experience expressed through speech. Complete understanding requires, to some degree, following the “intention” of the speaker and attempting to enter his positionality (13).

That true communication requires some sort of shared experience or residual is put into relief by Besmer:

“Genuine communication is a movement of thought in mutual engagement between interlocutors who already share a common intellectual heritage. It is not the thought of a cogito or a monadic transcendental subject but the thought of a speaking subject engaged with others in a concrete historical
world. That is, such a movement is itself a continuation of a thought already underway before the other or I come to it.” (13)

True communication, then, does not occur when a universal truth is enunciated and understood by two or more interlocutors, as if their placement in time and space were irrelevant. It relies on what has come before, what lies inside the Self and the Other which facilitates, but does not guarantee, mutual comprehension.

Three-quarters of what occurs in the world goes unnoticed by individuals. Despite this, we believe that we are capable of describing and relating the truth of reality through the usage of stock words and phrases. It is a language that is nothing more than a mechanism by which the true nature of objects, ideas and concepts may be communicated. For this reason, we perceive objects and states as more real than ideas, as the former rely on their being, rather than our doing, for their existence (14). This ideal universal language is perfected by the sciences, in which all ambiguity is removed from words. Language does not contain anything more than what is intended, and nothing more is intended than what is said. Meaning is fixed entirely through pre-definition, and any attempt to express something using words or phrases not intended for it requires a return to the drawing board and the drafting of new definitions (14). Taken to its extreme, this desire for universal language eliminates the possibility of subversive speech or thought through the rigid correspondences it establishes between word and concept.

In this understanding, the “virtue of language” is its perfect substitutability for the object to which it refers. One does not notice the words with which a novelist describes a landscape any more than one would notice the measurement of a man at a distance. One remembers only the landscape or the man; the symbols themselves fall into the gutters of our memories (14). In terms of positionality, this universal language, drained of nuances and fuzzy outlines, makes the placement of the recipient of a message irrelevant. Whether she is in a classroom in Istanbul in 2016 or on the shores of Gallipoli in 1915, the scene is the same: universal language conveys precisely the events and emotions of reality to all those who stand too late in the future to live through the actual experience. This, of course, is only an ideal; the goal of those who seek to impose a scientific, monolithic truth upon the world. In actual fact, language is infinitely malleable, and rather than objects and concepts lending meaning to language, it is language which bestows meaning upon them. The author, the poet, the historian all repurpose the words and phrases that compose the common communicative ground of a linguistic group in order to lead the recipient of a message to a particular point (14). In this way, positionality is, in fact, of extreme importance, as a particular reality is only accessible for she who stands at the starting point of an interlocutor’s expression.

As Merleau-Ponty states, “the highest point of truth is still no more than perspective”. Moreover, “Writing speaks to men and reaches, through them, the truth” (14). This is not a mere exchange of ideas, whereby truth is achieved through the collective efforts of a society. Rather, it is through dialogue between the Self and the Other, who is a near-mirror image of the Self projected onto another being, that the illusion of universality is breached and that the ambiguity
and incompleteness of language may be tackled (14). The philosopher explains it most eloquently in the following lines:

“Each person is, in one sense, the totality of the world for himself and, by an act of State, it is when he is convinced of it that it becomes true: because when he speaks, others understand, and the private totality fraternizes with the social totality. In the word the impossible agreement between two rival totalities is achieved, not so that it forces us to retreat within ourselves and discover some unique spirit in which we participate, but because it implicates us, reaches us on a slant, seduces us, transforms us into the other and he into us, because it abolishes the limits of the mine and the non-mine and forces the cessation of the opposition between what has sense for me and what has non-sense for me; between me as subject and the other as subject” (14).

The existence of a variety of realities all based on a common background – an innumerable collection of personal experiences of the world – is neither a confirmation of the futility of the search for truth, nor a blow at its ultimate existence. Rather, it is an articulation of what – to be folksy – common sense tells us. This spectrum of other worlds and the attempt by the individual to access and understand them allow her to transcend partially her single position and to grasp more completely, although not entirely, a common experience of reality. The totality of existence at a specific time-place juncture is not really important for us here, at least not as much as what the common space articulated through these countless images creates. For at least part of his life as a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty saw this as culture. It is a shared tradition and intellectual space in which individuals speaking the same language can interact and approach one another: the intermonde.

The intermonde, the place in which our intersubjectivity is realized, shares some characteristics with the world of the Self. It has a sedimentary layer of meaning and significance on which relations between individuals is based: the residue of past social experiences and interactions. However, unlike the layer of linguistic sediment contained within the individual, the cultural sediment can be accepted or rejected by the subjective Self. Moreover, the “ideal objects” against which we measure our experiences and interpret them are culturally determined, as they are part of the cultural sediment upon which we build a reality of our interrelations with those around us (13). Expressed in a more Marxian frame, ideal objects are historically contingent. There is no essential, transcendental authenticity against which one might measure a found object, as the benchmark is fluid and malleable, shaped by the experiences and active participation of those who participate in a given culture.

When we bring these various components together – Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of time, memory, language, intersubjectivity and the intermonde – we come to a more nuanced understanding of how we might approach history. History is not circular; it does not repeat itself, as the old adage would have us believe. This is not an objective statement of fact so much as an admission of our inability to recognize history as repeating itself. If our memories are constructions, viewed through the film of successive events and lacking in three-quarters of the information actually incorporated in past events, there is no possible means by which we might be able to evaluate the congruency between an
immediate situation and one distant from us on the temporal spectrum. Moreover, no single interpretation of the sensation of a past event can be seen as being objective truth. The *intermonde* might be an aggregation of our individual expressions and creations, but it is not homogenous, and can always be rejected. In this case, who is to say which past reality is being relived in the present?

History might be linear, but it is certainly not teleological, at least not history in the sense of a succession of past events, rather than a historical narrative. There is no certainty inherent in the sequence of events, as causality is nothing more than a lie that we construct to keep track of the placement of our memories within time. If this is the case, our memories are then a line of retained intentionalities from the past and our hopes a series of present intentionalities projected into the future. Their realization is never certain, and if it seems that way, it is only because we cannot help but tell ourselves so after the fact.

But where, exactly, does this discussion leave us? Phenomenology might shake the foundations of our understanding of history as an abstract concept, but can it enrich our practice of historical writing, and assist us in interpreting the views and narratives of others?

**Phenomenology and Social Science**

The extension of the concept of phenomenology to contemporary social sciences is far from a novel idea. Apart from its usage in text-based history (15–17), the philosophy has been applied to social geography (18) and oral history (19). In this process, both Jackson and Kirby have identified a variety of concerns and benefits in the use of phenomenology in the search for historical (or other) truth. Jackson in particular has discussed the tension, if not paradox, that exists between the inherently individual essence of phenomenology with the commitment to social formations contained within the Durkheimian social sciences (18). There are, of course, important distinctions between history and the social sciences. Apart from some strains of Soviet Marxist praxis, the writing of narratives about the past has focused on the individuality of events, while the social sciences have largely been nomothetic (20). Whereas the former accords primacy of place to lived experience and empiricism, the latter employs the individual in the weaving of theory and abstracts away from the lived to the imagined and patterned. Nevertheless, history shares with social geography, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines an interest in the study of cohesive groups of individuals. The focus of phenomenology on the experiential process of the individual discovering and making sense of her world – in its original Husserlian understanding – would appear to be at considerable odds with the desire of the historian to understand the dynamic workings of groups and societies. The solution to this is a migration away from the pure subjectivity of lived experience towards intersubjectivity. Here, what is important is the individual’s interaction with her own surroundings, including the other individuals who make up that world (18). History can then be rescued from sinking into mere (auto-)biography, and agency can be assigned to the members of a society in their efforts to make sense of their environment, including its animate components.
The problems arising from subjectivity, however, go deeper than simply avoiding a Thatcherite view that there is no society (21). Part of the concern of the positivist social sciences is the establishment of an objective benchmark against which to measure the veracity of statements and conclusions. The concept is sacrosanct in the physical sciences, and although it has been questioned periodically within the social sciences, measurable accuracy continues to be an issue of prime importance in the writing of history. It came under sustained attack in the late 19th century, particularly in Germany, with Dilthey and his followers arguing for historical enquiry based on *verstehen*. This was an understanding of the conditions and context of the past that would allow the researcher to approach, but never achieve, a fully contextualized comprehension of historical events (22). Eventually, however, the subjectivity of Dilthey’s approach was swept away, with historians taking a greater interest in the objective conditions embodied in official Marxist historiography or the grand narratives of the *Annales* school (3,22). It was really the end of structuralism that put the focus back on the individual as an agent, and made a phenomenological approach more palatable. Palatability, however, was not enough to liquidate the nagging anxiety about accuracy and congruency. If each individual’s lived experience is equally valid as a means of discovering truth, and if the *intermonde* implies a culturally-contingent benchmark, how then is the historian to evaluate the distance between what has actually happened and the explanations or memories of various individuals, each of them imbued with their own subjective interpretations of fact? (18,20) The answer, or rather counter-argument, to this question can be found in the discipline of oral history.

In the 19th century, two of the great theorists of objective history writing, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, popularized the idea that history was synonymous with the collection and study of documentation: “no documents, no history.” As Peter Novick has explained, this implied that “the beginnings of human history, for which there were no written records, could never be historically known.” (20) A lack of written documentation, however, is not just a characteristic of pre-historic periods. It also plagues the everyday, including in societies in which near total literacy has been achieved. The discipline of pre-history has overcome this through the use of archaeology, which combines material remains with hypotheses, the investigative tool most anathema to the objectivist creed. Artefacts, although not written, are still analogous to documentation: once preserved, they are immutable, permanent and sensitive to changes in interpretation, but not composition. While these methods are indeed available to historians of the contemporary period, so too is a special source of knowledge about past events: human memory. Human memory can, of course, be turned into documentary evidence through recording and transcription, but at its inception it is collected as oral history.

The compilation of oral history relies greatly on the interaction of individuals. Humans, as repositories of information about the past, are inherently different from textual or archaeological data. Apart from the obvious physical characteristics, human memory and expression are both highly responsive to the environment within which an individual is asked to recount a historical event. The mood and ambiance of an interview setting, as well as the questions posed by the interviewer, can colour considerably the responses elicited as part of the historical research project. Oral historians have therefore become acutely aware of
the difficulty posed by demands for objectivity within their projects. In response, they have sought to problematize their own background and preconceptions – their *positionality* – and that of their subjects. Without making explicit mention of the fact, they have been using phenomenological methods and techniques in order to identify the intrinsic biases of human cognition and to make their results meaningful (19). While phenomenology cannot neutralize entirely such preconceptions, it can help us, to some extent, become aware of them and allow us to take them into account when formulating and testing hypotheses regarding historical data.

Thus we see that the more abstract elements of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of phenomenology are indeed amenable to integration into historiographical praxis. Far from diverting us on our quest for historical truth, positionality, intersubjectivity and the *intermonde* provide us with powerful tools in understanding the construction and change of historical narratives over time. Moreover, they help us to escape the subtle workings of nationalist ideologies, which reframe history in such a way as to make the present appear as the sole possible outcome of the past. To accomplish this, the historian and historiographer must reverse the work of previous generations. Instead of seeking to reconcile numerous accounts with one, true event, they must now unpack one single event into a myriad of perceptions and experiences as recorded by the participants. They must revalorize dissenting opinions and outlying memories, and seek to correlate them, as far as possible, to the positionality of the subject in relation to the subject’s fellow participants and her society as a whole. The complexities involved in such an operation should not be underestimated. In order to demonstrate the depth at which perspective and position are buried in contemporary nationalist historical narratives, I will utilize Turkish historiography as a case study along the axes of both time and place.

**Parallax, or the Many Faces of History**

Historical events, similar to works of art, are subject to parallax: their appearances change depending on the position of the spectator. This position can be a physical one (the country, region, city or neighbourhood of residence of an individual), or it can be a social one (class, race, power, gender). During the last half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, a new social and political order based on nation-states emerged in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. National movements sought to build their world views and tokens of self-identification through the selection of particular positionalities and the elevation of these locations to pan-social, national identities. As cities were often multi-confessional, multiethnic centres of power, nationalist leaders of Christian groupings in the Ottoman Empire, for example, tied their national characteristics to those of the Slavic-, Greek- or Romanian-speaking, Christian peasantry. When the nationalist movements acceded to power and began to form states, the view of the peasantry was made into the view of the nation-state, capturing its historical narrative and its understanding of the events to which it was party (23–25). As the nationalists sought to cleanse their territories of Muslim minorities, the views of Muslim urbanites were transferred to what would become
the Republic of Turkey in 1923, influencing its view of its neighbours and its Imperial past (26,27).

Here, then, the historiographer of the Balkan states and Turkey is tasked with the arduous feat of untangling national historical narratives and reconstituting shared memories of formerly multiethnic territories. She is forced to confront the various means by which the state’s writers of history have interpreted source materials, including official reports, court documents, church records, and oral histories and folktales. In this way, she may begin to elucidate how two different stories of the past — one of colonial oppression and willful impoverishment; another of stability, social mobility and economic development — could both be justifiable yet partial reflections of Balkan history. The historian is called upon to reconstruct the now-inexistent *intermonde* that once gathered the peoples of the Ottoman lands and held them to a common, culturally-contingent benchmark. In this way, she reconciles the contradiction represented by the concurrent celebration of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish soap operas and Bulgarian demands for reparations (28). The scholar’s work bridges the divide between a narrative from the political, economic and social periphery to one at the core, and aids in the repurposing of historical enquiry from a tool of enmity to one of cooperation and mutual comprehension.

Location can also be determined on the temporal spectrum, an idea in which historiography has traditionally been implicated. Both the interpretation of history and the means by which historical truth is sought have changed over time, influenced by other social sciences, the physical sciences and philosophy. Advances in the dating of archaeological findings have provided greater precision in assigning dates and eras to material remains. Genetics have permitted scientists to distinguish between biological and cultural influences. Finally, a better understanding of anthropological, ethnographic and linguistic processes has made the social scientist’s approach to complex and often ill-documented historical events more sophisticated. In addition to these, diachronic shifts in government and state ideology have influenced both the content and the method of historical investigation over the course of the 20th century.

The values and goals of régimes permeate the writing and presentation of history, and indeed narratives change with the change of régimes. In the Ottoman Empire, the shift from Ottomanism in the late 19th century to Turkism in 1913 sparked a migration away from dynastic histories to national ones (29). A subtler, yet perhaps also more powerful, change in narrative occurred with the coup of 12 September 1980. In order to understand the manner in which it operated, we must return to Merleau-Ponty’s comments on language and creativity, and explore their application to forced temporal positionality within Turkish historiography. The political changes of the 1920s and 1930s are frequently referred to in Turkish as “revolutions”. The institution of new forms of governance, a new script, and new restrictions on the freedom of dress were all described as being so fundamental, so profound that they amounted to complete destructions of what had come before. They were thus labelled as *inkilâp*, from the Arabic word for coup d’état, used in Turkish instead as “revolution”; this was eventually replaced with the more Turkicized *devrim* (30). Consequently, those who opposed these changes were part of the *irtica* or “reaction”, from the Arabic root *rajaʿa* “to return”. The term is common shorthand for Islamic fundamentalism, and was used with frequency during periods of political turmoil.
especially as a justification for the intervention of the armed forces – guardians of the Kemalist order – into civilian affairs.

The labeling of Islamists as “reactionaries” or “counter-revolutionaries” (irticacılar) is a convenient means for the hegemonic classes of the state to repurpose the public arena from a field of political choices to a battleground between progress and regression (30). Support for or opposition to given policies at particular junctures in national history, such as the banning of the hijab in public institutions or the change from Perso-Arabic script to the Latin alphabet, can no longer be seen as opting between different alternatives feasible at a given point in time and space, but as an existential choice between moving forward as a nation or retreating to an inaccessible past. It forces the citizen to conceive of the society produced by these radical changes as being the result of an in-or-out ballot. It brings all supporters of the legislative process and reforms into one grouping, opposed to all those who refused them: proponents of advancement against its enemies. It paints the nation, therefore, as a momentous journey on which citizens find themselves (31). It refuses the more complex vision of reality by which two individuals might support a particular decision based on radically different interests, taking part actively in shaping the polity’s public life based on their own convictions and experiences.

In short, the rephrasing of modern Turkish history as a battle between Atatürkçüler (those with the Kemalist revolution) and irticacılar made the image of a class-less, nearly homogenous nation painted by the Generals after the 1980 coup seem the most plausible and acceptable to the broader population. By imagining society as a mass of individuals united in a common fight, rather than a web of interrelations motived by differing interests and needs, citizens were not free to opt out from the common cultural sediment of the intermonde without opting out of Turkey entirely. It eliminated leftist narratives of Turkish history not by banning them, but by depriving them of the necessary resonance within the intermonde to gain traction amongst a significant portion of the population. National unity, the slogan of the junta, was the natural desire of the population, who were denied the right to dissociate from one another in their choices for differing paths into the future. Everyone was brought onto the same vector, the entire length of which was under the watchful eye of General Kenan Evren and his fellow coup plotters. 1980 was therefore more than a watershed; it was the point at which narratives became narrative, and history was forced into a straightjacket.

A Step towards Transcendence

The durability of these narratives, or other ones employed in Turkey or outside of it, does not imply that they are impervious to challenge on anything but their own terms. An understanding of the production process of meta-narratives is indeed the first step to overcoming their lasting effects on our perception of society and its history. Merleau-Ponty explains to us the tool for doing this in his writings on temporality in La Phénoménologie de la Perception, thereby providing the historiographer with a key to transcending the biases of her era. Each change that occurs and each action that we take are indelibly marked
upon our person. These states, even when erroneous, cannot be expunged from personal histories: they form the bedrock of our identity and remain as artefacts of our subjectivity. Far from imprisoning the individual in the mistakes of the past, this fact creates a rich tapestry, as each step towards truth and understanding, however wayward, is still aimed at uncovering the universal (11). For the historian, then, the result is that her own production and the tradition to which she belongs is inextricably linked to the history-writing of previous eras and régimes. Far from being useful, willful ignorance of historiography in a society’s past manifestations is a denial of the essence of the present, and a specious attempt at expunging the nefarious effects of past régimes from the fabric of the future.

Historiographical work is an important aspect of exposing this nexus between power and history, to use the title of the study conducted by the Turkish historian Büşra Behar Ersanlı (32). It explains to citizens how the state has shaped their views of themselves through historical narratives. To foreigners, it charts the path that identity and belonging have taken over the course of the state’s existence. It helps to combat the vilification and essentialization of groups of people by both demonstrating the fluidity and malleability of the historical Self over time, and highlighting the dialogue that exists between writers and readers of history. At times, the state has been exceptionally active in applying its ideological narratives through history, as occurred in Turkey in the 1930s (30). Even in the most extreme cases, however, public perception has altered the course of the state’s application of its historical narratives. Through highlighting grassroots changes brought to bear on state apparati, historiographers replace the concept of a primordial enemy, genetically programmed for aggression and opposition, with a more human picture of an individual simultaneously shaped by and shaping her environment, capable and ready to learn about and engage with the Other.

In times of conflict, the role of the historian and the historiographer is truly an important one. Through an investigation of differing historical epistemologies, they introduce humanity into the discussion and debate about the legacy of the past. Their examination and explanation of positionality in both space and time shift history from a battle of truth and falsehood to an understanding of experience and perception. History and the historian cannot right the wrongs of the past, but they can help to reinfuse zones of conflict and suffering with empathy and compassion.

References

21. Interview for Woman’s Own (“no such thing as society”) | Margaret Thatcher Foundation [Internet]. [cited 2016 Jan 24]. Available from: http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689