

BOOK REVIEW

Lucian Hölscher 2009. *Semantik der Leere. Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft*.
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Lucian Hölscher's collection of articles is a contribution to historical theory, to the conceptual presuppositions of the historian's work, or more broadly, of historical understanding in general. The central objective of the articles is to make us aware of things we take for granted. We are, for example, accustomed to giving the dates and places of historical events, and we regard the use of these technical tools as self-evident. According to Hölscher, giving events dates and places is in itself an historical phenomenon. At issue here is not just the technical, or instrumental dimension, that of using chronological and geographical instruments. This is the outer side of the creation of spatial and temporal connections. The inner side consists of the construction of the spatial and temporal connections of the phenomena and events themselves, themes certainly worth careful analysis.

With the exception of the first article, all these contributions were published during the years 1989–2008. The themes addressed are grouped into four sections, 1) history of the conceptions of space and time (*Vorstellungen von Raum und Zeit*), 2) the limits of memory and the role of forgetting in history (*die Grenzen historischer Erinnerung und*

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die Rolle des Vergessens in der Geschichte), 3) the future of the past (*vergangene Zukunft*), and 4) historical ruptures (*Geschichtsbrüchen*).

According to Hölscher, there are many *Leerstellen* which historiography utilizes in both theory and practice. One of these is zero, the symbol or sign for *das Nichts, die Leere*, introduced into Europe from the Arab world and India in the 13th century. This enabled a more exact and neutral chronology, making it possible to abandon dating according to the creation and end of the world. Besides zero, Hölscher discovers other "hidden voids" (*verborgene Leerstellen*) which historiography utilizes and takes for granted. The concept of coincidence or chance (*Zufall*) presupposes that events do not follow each other inevitably, and allows, indeed compels us to analyse why something happened, or happened to happen. "Systematic forgetting" (*systematisches Vergessen*) is a *Leerstelle* or an indispensable presupposition of historiography because history is not exhausted in what contemporaries happen to remember. The same goes for future (*Zukunft*), which reminds historians (and not only historians!) that there were (and are!) more or less realistic alternatives: the future is open.

Hölscher stresses that there is a difference in kind between historical research and memory. Recently, Allan Megill has likewise argued that the memory boom has blurred the distinction between history and memory. Megill emphasizes that

memory is an image of the past constructed by a subjectivity in the present. It is thus by definition subjective; it may also be irrational and inconsistent. On the other hand, history as a discipline has the obligation to be objective, unified, orderly, justified. Yet it cannot entirely be so, for there is always a residue of incomprehensibility behind what is known, and an engagement with subjectivity that cannot be eliminated. (Megill 2007, 57)

According to Megill, "memory-oriented historiography" may be detrimental to history because of its affirmativeness: "Its fundamental aim is to praise the particular tradition or group whose history and experiences it is recounting" (Megill 2007, 21). Hölscher argues that memory itself implies that something is always omitted. Only what is deemed important will be remembered. Reminiscences may be erroneous, or facts may be correctly remembered but incorrectly interpreted, for instance, when Germany attacked Poland in 1939 or Russia

in 1941, they can be “remembered” as they were presented at the time in Germany, as defensive.

A central theme of the fourth section deals with the fragmentation of historical research, a trend that forces historians (and perhaps their readers) to consider what they might still have in common. Historically *einzigartig* or unique is that nowadays, in our own present, we are faced with numerous competing histories. Nevertheless, even in our case, history may contribute to the understanding of the present. History opens up a comparative perspective for reflection on our present concerns by helping us to recognise the difference between concerns past and present. All historical events are past events but not all past events are historical events. The historical problems, and accordingly, historical knowledge, change with the transformation of present concerns or matters considered significant, that is to say, matters worth studying. Historical writing has been a means to address specific contemporary problems and concerns. This notion is the lesson of the history of historical writing, especially if viewed from the perspective of the history of the meaning of history. In civil society the fragmentation of historical studies must be allowed and we can only trust, or simply hope, that different, sometimes competing histories, are an instance of *Dialektik des Streits*: only what is considered important is worth fighting about; in this case it is history as such, or the view that history is an indispensable tool for understanding the peculiarities of the present.

Hölscher’s contribution to the “semantics of emptiness” manifests itself in the treatment of the history of space and time and of the concept of history. Hölscher also touches upon these themes in analysing memory and historical discrepancy. This would imply that the title of the book is indeed appropriate.

It is not quite clear, however, how literally we should understand the concept of *Leere*. The most appropriate interpretation, or so it seems, is to treat it as a metaphor: something is not empty, it only appears empty. During the Middle Ages, Hölscher argues,

things and events were immediately surrounded by space and time, space and time were devoid of an existence of their own (p. 23).

Conceptually related to these *Raum- und Zeitvorstellungen* was the concept of future: it was possible to imagine or speculate coming events

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(*Zukünfte*) but not the future (*Zukunft*) as such. In the Middle Ages, there was as yet no concept of future as a place in time (*Zeitraum*). The most characteristic aspect of the history of space and time has been that after the Middle Ages more space and time were “added” around things and events, with the consequence that the

future became a space for plans and hope, of trepidation as well as utopias, it became capable of extension as long as desired and filled with an arbitrary number of ideas or conceptions (p. 155).

It does not seem reasonable to assume that before history can be given new content, it (or the past) was of necessity empty, before the refilling, nor yet that, in order to give “time” new content, or construct a new interpretation of history, or create another vision of the future, the previous content (interpretations and visions) must first be removed before the refilling, or else the new content would not fit in.

But why use the concept of *Leere*, such a catch-all concept? Would it not be more exact and productive to exploit the concepts of distance, of “abstract spatial and temporal distances” (*abstrakte räumliche und zeitliche Distanzen*); this formulation is Hölscher’s rendering of the expression “empty spaces of history and historical time” (*leere Geschichtsräume und -zeiten*). Appropriate and productive concepts might also be contingency, coincidence and chance. *Leere* is in constant danger of becoming an empty concept. But let us not become hung up on concepts. Let us instead consider what Hölscher pursues with his all-embracing concept. The objective of Hölscher’s historical theory is to make historians aware of the presuppositions of their work, to make them reflect on what they are actually doing.

Hölscher defines *Zukunftsvorstellung* as a “mental concept” (mentales Konzept) or as “conceptual spectacles” (begriffliche Brille), as a dimension of thought which determines – and accordingly, if carefully explicated – explains action. Knowing what historical agents expected to happen in the future, what they hoped for or dreaded, help to understand why they acted as they did. Hölscher emphasizes that it makes a difference to study future expectations whether realized or not. Even when not realized, they, like motives and intentions, directed action, i.e. made history (cf. pp.138–39). Future

conceptions are part of the mental equipment (*outillage mental* or *Innenausstattung*) of human beings, past, present and future. Treating the concepts of future and those of space and time as mental tools means conceiving of them as an unreflected dimension of thought, as the presuppositions of intentions that determine what may be intended, and accordingly, to act (cf. pp. 151–54). Of course, treating future conceptions (realized or not) as the motivations or intentions of actions and thus as means of understanding actions, for the understanding of history it is also necessary to consider why some future conceptions were not realized and some happened to be realized. Looking at future conceptions this way helps to remind us that there were alternatives, and to successfully explain why a certain alternative materialized entails explaining why certain other alternatives failed to materialize.

Hölscher is a disciple of Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) (cf. Hölscher 2011). He has contributed to conceptual history notably with his book on the history of the concept of future (Hölscher 1999). Hölscher and Koselleck shared the view that it is essential to consider how historical agents conceived of things. The Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte* deals with concepts in the sense that experiences and expectations are stored in concepts. Thus the history of concepts could be appropriately defined as conceptual history, i.e. as a subdiscipline contributing to understanding how people have perceived and conceived of concepts and ideas as well as their social world. Conceptual history, or more broadly, intellectual history, is not a social history of thought, because thoughts or ideas are not merely reflections of the social world. Nor is conceptual history the history of autonomous concepts; concepts, or more generally, ideas, do not make history. The true historical agents are human beings, who conceive of concepts, ideas and circumstances in their own peculiar way. Therefore, the dichotomous question of whether concepts, or more generally, thoughts are indicators or factors of reality and social change deserves to be answered in the affirmative only. Human beings are not particles of nature whose deeds and actions can simply be classified as types of actions, and subsumed under laws or covered by them. Human beings are, essentially, peculiar in that they can think, and this is why it is necessary to consider what they had in mind in order to explain and understand their actions or “behaviour”. Thought is what makes human action human, and the history of thought an

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indispensable dimension of all history. Thought, and accordingly its comprehension, is an essential intellectual operation in that if it is ignored, the history ceases to be the history of human beings. Indeed, to use the central concept of Hölscher's historical theory, *Wahrnehmung* makes a difference.

Hölscher has not updated the articles in the collection. He wanted to let the traces of the time of writing to remain visible, and thus, more generally, to show how historiography is a reflection of its time. True as this generally is, in the case of Hölscher (or any historian) the traces of the time of writing are also present in a personal or subjective manner, reflecting the individual scholarly interests of the historian concerned. Of this personal context of the articles Hölscher tells his readers very little, thus the traces of the time of the writing of the articles remain largely invisible. This criticism is, of course, legitimate only if Hölscher has, by omitting to revise the articles, intended to demonstrate the *Zeitgebundenheit* of his articles. If so, he has failed. But I do not think he expected his readers merely by reading the articles, to discern and consider the traces of the time of their writing, the more or less changing historiographic concerns of Hölscher.

It is characteristic of the genre, of article collections that the articles do not actually serve as systematic research of the intertwined dimensions of the phenomena, in this case of *Semantik der Leere*. Hölscher's argumentation is at times highly abstract, rendering his message elusive. The reader not infrequently expects more illustrations or examples - i.e. more, and more detailed, illustrations than Hölscher provides - to explicate and underpin the argumentation. Hölscher makes frequent reference to his books considering in more detail the issues touched upon in the articles. Thus the messages of the articles will sit best with readers familiar with his other works. A way to lighten the occasionally laborious reading might thus be to consult Hölscher's books. I might also suggest that he should write a book on the conceptual and cultural history of space and time, of these semantic instruments of *Wahrnehmung* and *Weltdeutung*. The opening article of the book, "Semantik der Leere. Zur kulturellen Konstitution von Raum und Zeit in Europa seit dem Hochmittelalter" (pp. 13-32), would serve as an outline of the book. Graphic illustrations, paintings, are available to the analyst, as indicated in the article "Bildraum und sozialer Raum" (pp.

33–67), where Hölscher analyses how the social world was depicted in early modern paintings. A more extensive treatment might also afford more space for the justification of the conceptual tools of the writer, especially of the use of the concept of *Leere*, or perhaps, for the search and consideration of more fruitful and productive conceptual tools. A further useful contribution to conceptual history – and along with it, to historical studies in general – would be an illustrative and a detailed analysis of how the concepts of space and time were both factors and reflection of historical change, how they have made history.

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