

Kari Väyrynen

History Culture of Living Experience (*Erlebnis*): Dangers and Possibilities for Historiography in the Era of 'Experience Society' (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*)

Background: challenges of experience society for historiography

The German discussion on history culture (*Geschichtskultur*) is interesting with respect to the recent state of western culture and its relationship to our view of history. Today, the new everyday aesthetics and popular culture are strongly oriented to living experiences and their commercial use. This puts pressure on the popular use and presentations of history. It can also effect the choice of research subjects: affective and spectacular topics can become dominant.

The German discussion on history culture began in the field of didactics of history in the 1980s (for example Bernd Schönemann) and expanded to other fields of history in the 1990s especially through the work of Jörn Rüsen. According to Rüsen, history culture analyses institutions and organizational forms in which historical meaning is collectively created. History culture can be analysed especially in its cognitive, political and aesthetic aspects.¹ In my paper, the aesthetic aspect is dominant, although with some connections with the other two.

The relationship between historiography and the cultural meaning of living experience (*Erlebnis*) and experience society (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) has had no special significance in this discussion. For example, one symposium concerning this relationship was arranged in 2013, but there is at present no extensive discussion concerning this topic in Germany. This *Tagung* in Potsdam concentrated on 'historical re-enactments', 'living history', authenticity and immediate experience in 'corporeal experience of history' (*körperliche Aneignung von Geschichte*). The symposium had many interesting case studies but included no extensive discussion on theoretical questions regarding the definition of the living experience or the cultural meaning of experience society.²

¹ Rüsen has loaded numerous texts (in German) on his homepage.

² *Geschichte als Erlebnis: Performative Praktiken in der Geschichtskultur* (In English: *History as living experience: performative practices in the history culture*). Potsdam 2014. See the symposium webpage zzf-potsdam.de/de/veranstaltungen/geschichte-als-erlebnis-performative-praktiken-der-geschichtskultur.

In this paper, I try to show that this topic is also interesting for the history and theory of historiography. Two questions in particular are important: (1) *Erlebnis*, living experience,³ is a specific type of experience which in some cases effects the basic construction of historical narratives. Living experience is a relatively new concept and it is important to sketch its conceptual history in order to understand its specific meaning. On the other hand, (2) many cultural theorists have asserted that we live in an ‘experience society’, or even in a society of ‘spectacle’ (Guy Debord),⁴ in which living experiences are increasingly produced and consumed. This leads to the second research question in my paper: how do the cultural trends of ‘experience society’ possibly effect the form of writing and consuming of historical narratives?

History of experiences is a popular topic in recent historiography, but in the English literature of the field there has not been much discussion on ‘experience society’ and its influence on historiography. Living experience, or in German *Erlebnis*, means not experience in general, which recent history of experiences tries to track from history, but only existentially important experiences, and today especially affective, ‘high’ experiences, through which our feeling of life is strongly present. The research agenda of the historiography of experiences has stressed some new aspects which have been neglected in previous historiography, for example history of the senses like sounds or smells, or history of some emotions like intimacy, but generally it has not brought much new to the methodological ‘tool kit’ of historiography.⁵

As is readily apparent, there is a need for a more exact definition of the experience which historiography is working with. What is central in the historiographical analysis of experience? Experience is always theory-bound or theory-laden; experience is interpreted through different conceptual frames of thinking and main fields of cultural heritage. The concept of culture is closely connected to values, for example religious, ethical and aesthetical values. Therefore, we interpret historical experiences in this complex net of cultural meanings. There is no pure ‘objective’ and value-neutral experience in history.

³ I translate *Erlebnis* here as living experience. This translation has a clear vitalistic nuance, rooted in its origin in German Romanticism. In its later use, especially in phenomenological tradition and Dilthey, this term is translated as ‘lived experience’. In my interpretation and translation *Erlebnis* refers to existentially important and affectively intensive experiences, in phenomenology and Dilthey to all experiences. I return to this question later in my sketch of the conceptual history of this term.

⁴ See Guy Debord, *Spektaakkelin yhteiskunta*. Summa, Helsinki 2005.

⁵ I agree in this respect with Georg Gangl’s recent critique of historiography of experiences as presented in the HEX-project of Tampere University. Georg Gangl, “The History of Experience: a history like anything else?”. oulu.fi/blogs/HEX 2020, University of Oulu 2020. On the other hand, the concept of historical experience as such is theoretically very interesting, if its subjective and intellectual moments are deeper scrutinized. For example, Frank Ankersmit’s analysis of sublime experience of history is one step in this direction, although not fully satisfactory. Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime historical experience*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005.

In order to understand the main subject of this paper, it is necessary to shortly analyse the interesting conceptual history of our key concept of living experience, *Erlebnis*. For a theoretical concept, it has a surprisingly short history, originating in early German Romanticism at the beginning of nineteenth century. But it has also hidden, almost sub-conscious, connections to other concepts, especially in the history of theology from late Antiquity. In the twentieth century context, it will be critically analysed *via* its political and cultural connections, leading to the concept of experience society (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*). And finally, we are perhaps witnessing its approach as a trend in current historiography and the popular use of history in museums, games, documents and so on. I try to address this in the final section of the paper.

A short conceptual history of living experience

The German concept *Erlebnis* is difficult to translate into English. The nearest equivalent is *experience*, but this is a far too general translation. *Erlebnis* is derived from *das Leben*, ‘life’, and originally – at the end of the nineteenth century, when the concept became a popular philosophical concept in German philosophy – it referred to an existentially important experience. We should, therefore, translate it as ‘lived experience’ (as in Dilthey translations) or ‘existentially important experience’. In the context of this article, I prefer ‘living experience’ for the reasons I explained at the beginning of this paper.

Geographically, the concept has spread in its original meaning in Germanic languages (German, Swedish) and through the cultural impact of Germany or Sweden to Finland (in Finnish *elämys* – also connected to ‘life’). In Romance languages like French or Italian, the nearest equivalent terms (*experience*, *esperienza*) lack this more specific vitalistic meaning. Similarly, in Classical Greek – which is especially relevant in this context because *Erlebnis* is originally a philosophical concept – there is no equivalent term, just one corresponding to experience (*empeiria*).

The history of this concept is short but especially interesting. Originally a philosophical concept in the German *Lebensphilosophie* at the end of the nineteenth century, it has become one of the key concepts of our modern society, economy and popular culture. Today, we even speak of an ‘experience society’ (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*)⁶ and ‘experience industry’ – we want and seek new, strong and, if possible, unique experiences and adventures, which generates big business. The representation of history has also changed in this direction: for example, the game industry uses history in this way. Traditional forms of historical presentations

⁶ See the fundamental research of Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Campus, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

like museums increasingly try to create living experiences of history because of the pressing competition with other medias.

Clarification of the conceptual history of *Erlebnis* can make us more critically aware of the related commercial talk. We should ask ourselves what is ultimately important for us existentially – do we need more adventures, game simulations of history, or other commercial applications? Could we instead learn to find existentially important experiences in various intellectual (often quite non-commercial) activities such as philosophy, art, study and photography of nature or ‘simple’ everyday activities like walking, being with family or friends and value them even higher? In the interpretation of history should we stress theoretical, conceptual and institutional analysis which cannot be translated into the language of immediate experiences?

People probably have always had and given names to existentially important experiences. But theorising about them is a much later phenomenon. In our own culture, the religious experiences in Antiquity and the Christian religion are especially important in this respect. As already Nietzsche stressed, the ‘dionysian’ aspect of Ancient culture was central for this feeling of life. For the Christian heritage, in contrast, the Neoplatonic cosmology and theology was an important source of inspiration. The concept of *ecstasy* (from greek *ekstasis*, literally *ek-stasis*, *ek* meaning ‘out’ and *stasis* ‘state’) meant a removal outside oneself, throwing the mind out of its normal state by some sudden emotion or intuition. For Plotinus, *ecstasy* is a culmination of human possibilities. He contrasted emanation (*prohodos*) from the One with ecstasy or reversion (*epistrophe*) back to the One. *Ecstasy* is here a vision or union with some otherworldly entity, later in Christianity with God.⁷

The Neoplatonic metaphysics was especially important for Christian mysticism. Plotinus stresses that the One can be reached in a sudden (*exaifnes*) moment of a pure vision. A complete pure vision could not be reached through discursive thinking. The experience of the One is therefore a mystical gift and it presupposes an ecstatic transcending human dispositions. Both physical and intellectual preparation is an important precondition for this *ecstasis*.⁸

In later Christian mysticism, ecstatic experiences no longer presuppose higher intellectual development: common, uneducated people too can have authentic religious experiences about God. In the later Middle Ages (1200–1500) especially women were important representants of this expressive Christianity, in which ecstatic experiences played an important role. In German research one has even named this form of mysticism as a mysticism of women” (*Frauenmystik*) and also “mysticism of living experience” (*Erlebnismystik*).⁹ Especially important was the concept of love: for example, the thirteenth-century poet and mystic Hadewijch of Antwerpen

⁷ Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Kristillinen mystikka. Läntinen perinne antiikista uudelle ajalle*. Kirjapaja, Helsinki 2007, 54–55.

⁸ Lehmijoki-Gardner 2007, 54–55.

⁹ Lehmijoki-Gardner 2007, 281–285.

stressed the fierce experience of love for God and Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1208–1282) connected to God himself the feminine element of love, calling God a noble *Dame Amour*. In love, the human soul loses its individuality and identifies totally with God. This means a sublating of all contrarities (lat. *coincidentia oppositorum*) in the highest identity with God through *unio mystica*.¹⁰ Mechthild was also theoretically educated and it is especially interesting that this view of the identity of the contrarities through mystical union with God or love of God is important for later dialectical thinkers, especially for Nicolaus Cusanus and the young Hegel.

Religious mysticism was for German Romanticism an important source of inspiration and generally influenced the specific formation of the concept of living experience. On the other hand, the aesthetical tradition of sublimity (in German *das Erhabene*) can be seen as an important source for this concept. Immanuel Kant was in this respect a key figure. Both his mathematical and dynamical sublimity describe such aesthetical experiences in which strong emotions of wonder and fear build an immediate experiential base on which intellectual and ethical conceptualisation lean. Kant's famous statement that he has admired and wondered most about two things during his life, the unlimited sky above him and the categorical imperative inside him, is an intellectual formulation of the basic sublime experience.¹¹ Kant did not analyse sublime historical events or personalities, but his concept of the 'sign of history' (for him, the French Revolution) could be an interesting example of it. On a more banal level, all examples of 'great' men or women are a typical example of sublime personalities in history. I return to this question of "sublime historical experience" (Ankersmit) later in my paper.

The theoretical background of the *Erlebnis* is clearly in German Romanticism, in which the 'life' (*das Leben*) and creative powers of nature (*schaffende Natur, natura naturans* – originating from Spinoza) became a new paradigmatic starting point for the concept of man as nature.¹² On the practical level, wild nature became a place of escape from early capitalistic development, and aesthetical experiences in nature became increasingly important. For example, English tourism to the sublime Alps developed in the nineteenth century. The wealthy nobility and bourgeoisie began to seek out authentic existential experiences – *Erlebnises* – which the bourgeois life could not provide. Mountain climbing represented an especially extreme example of this need for authentic experiences – bordering on the question of life or death. The tragic climb of the Matterhorn by Edward Whymper in 1864 was a typical case in this respect: five people fell to their death.

¹⁰ Lehmijoki-Gardner 2007, 290–293.

¹¹ I have stressed the meaning of sublimity for the experience of nature in Kant and German Romanticism, see Kari Väyrynen, *Ympäristöfilosofian historia maaäitimyytistä Marxiin*. Eurooppalaisen filosofian seura, Tampere 2006, 261–290.

¹² Väyrynen 2006.

In Early Romanticism, however, the concept of *Erlebnis* is not yet theoretically significant. It occurs in Goethe and Fichte, but is not mentioned by many other thinkers. Fichte is obviously the first thinker who clearly connects *Erlebnis* theoretically to the concept of life. His *Wissenschaftslehre* (1795) is a reflexion on life (*Abbildung des Lebens*) and *Erlebnis* has for him an important theoretical meaning. He writes: “Everything what (science) says concerning wisdom, virtue and religion, must first of all have been really lively experienced in order to become real wisdom, virtue and religiosity” (“Was sie (die Wissenschaft) über Weisheit, Tugend, Religion sagt, muss erst wirklich erlebt und gelebt werden, um in wirkliche Weisheit, Tugend und Religiösität überzugehen”).¹³ Living experience is a kind of emotional base for higher intellectual and moral wisdom.

The concept of *Erlebnis* became a popular philosophical concept in Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Especially in the work of Hermann Lotze (1817–1881) it became an existential concept: it referred to existentially important experiences of absolute reality, building originally on our experience of the world and ourselves. At the turn of the century, *Erlebnis* became a fundament of experience in general. It was accepted in this sense by Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl and the philosophers of life – *Lebensphilosophie* – in the early twentieth century (Bergson, Simmel, Scheler).¹⁴ In Dilthey especially, *Erlebnis* became a key concept: hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*) connects cultural objectivations (*Ausdruck*) to lived – conscious or unconscious – experiences (*Erlebnis*), which are a key for the understanding of cultural meanings.¹⁵ For Dilthey, lived experience is essentially a basic methodological concept for hermeneutical understanding in human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). As I noted at the beginning of this paper, phenomenology accepted this use and saw ‘lived experience’ as a basic psychical phenomenon without special existential pronouncing.

A more critical attitude to the philosophical significance of this concept was taken by Martin Heidegger and Nicolai Hartmann before the Second World War. Heidegger criticised the philosophy of life in general and saw the analysis of *Dasein* as the more fundamental task. Historicity, for example, is not a “free moving flow of living experiences of a ‘subject’” (“freischwebende Erlebnisfolge der ‘Subjekte’”) – on the contrary, the subject is already in the world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) and therefore the immediate stream of its lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) is not real history, only its

¹³ Giuseppe Cacciatore, “Erlebnis”. *Enzyklopädie Philosophie. Band 1*. Edited by Hans Jörg Sandkühler. Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 2010.

¹⁴ Konrad Cramer, “Erleben, Erlebnis”. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Band 2*. Edited by Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer. Basel 1976.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1981, 89–93, 98–99.

subjective effect.¹⁶ In this respect, a true historicity of the world can be reached rather by critical thinking than immediate experience.

Nicolai Hartmann, the other great German ontologist, saw in his *Grundlegung der Ontologie* (1935) *Erlebnis* alongside other ‘emotional-transcendent acts’ (like experience and will) as an important proof for a fundamentally realistic world view.¹⁷ *Erleiden* (sustain, tolerate), *Erleben* and *Erfahren* (experience) are central forms of ‘emotional-receptive acts’ (which is a subcategory of the former). The most passive moment is *Erleiden*; *Erleben* is already more mind-dependent and therefore ‘much richer in content’ (“inhaltlich unendlich reicher”). *Erfahren* is the most objective moment, intellectually the highest. *Erleben* remains basically as in Heidegger subjective.¹⁸ Hartmann says: “In the ‘living experience’ the mind-dependence is still more important. ‘Experience’ is more objective ... it is closer to knowledge ... (living experience) comes close to sustaining.” (“Im ‘Erleben’ ist die Ichbetontheit noch mehr im Vordergrund. Das ‘Erfahren’ ist objektiver, es zeigt bewusstere Gegenstellung zum Widerfahrnis, steht der Erkenntnis näher... (Erlebnis) steht ... Erleiden näher.”)¹⁹ All these receptive acts represent the mind-independent reality, which basically acts against our will and hopes – Hartmann speaks therefore about ‘resistance’ (*Widerfahrnis*) and ‘hardness of reality’ (“Härte des Realen”),²⁰ which are important proofs for a realistic ontology. But clearly *Erlebnis* is for Hartmann not the most important aspect, as it was for the earlier philosophers of life. He is a critical realist and does not accept the immediate naivety of living experiences if left alone.

Heidegger also sees remarkably clearly the new socio-cultural connections behind the concept of *Erlebnis*. He seems to anticipate the birth of ‘experience society’ (*Erlebnissesellschaft*) in his later major work, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, which was originally written ca. 1936–1938. He describes modern society as increasingly speedy, desiring everything that is new and affective. This greed for new affective experiences leads to equally speedy forgetting. This greed is a symptom of a shallow culture that forgets all deeper questions about Being (*Seinsverlassenheit*, *-vergessenheit*). The concept of *Erlebnis* fits very well with this cultural change. This new culture favours a shallow sentimentality in which everything seems to be full of existentially important experiences (*Erlebnis*). But this is illusionary: it actually means losing our authentic being. We have become “the

¹⁶ Cacciatore 2010.

¹⁷ Martin Morgenstern, *Nicolai Hartmann zur Einführung*. Junius Verlag, Hamburg 1997, 40.

¹⁸ In Germany, Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetical Theory* (1970) also sees this as a central problem of the aesthetical lived experience (ästhetische Erlebnisse). See Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Vastapaino, Tampere 2006, 466–470.

¹⁹ Nicolai Hartmann, *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin und Leipzig 1935, 178–179.

²⁰ Hartmann 1935, 181.

victims of our own hunt for living experiences”.²¹ Heidegger is clearly critical of the economic and cultural optimism of the Roaring Twenties and the new American style of life with jazz, automobiles and movies. He never understood the positive aspects of this cultural dynamism because of his extreme conservative aesthetical and political views.

Nevertheless, through his analysis Heidegger reveals for the first time important political and cultural aspects of the concept. Besides this general cultural context, *Erlebnis* had at the same time important pedagogical aspects for example. In Germany Kurt Hahn (1886–1974) had established a pedagogical school of *Erlebnispädagogik* (a kind of outdoor/environmental education) already in the 1920s. This school stressed the pedagogical importance of sailing, mountaineering and so on. Because of his Jewish background and active attacks on the Nazi regime, he had to escape to England in 1933.²² Ironically, same kind of pedagogical elements were later adopted by the Nazis. Also, Nazi aesthetics – for instance the movies of Leni Riefenstahl and the earlier mountaineering films of Arnold Frank, in which Riefenstahl acted – stresses the importance of sublime living experiences.

The Heidegger’s vision has been realised remarkably well in our modern *Erlebnis*-society and *Erlebnis*-industry. The new forms have been analysed especially by German sociologist Gerhardt Schulze in his work *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Experience society) 1997.²³ Schulze connects the birth of *Erlebnisgesellschaft* to the disappearance of class society. This leads to the individualisation of society: everyone now looks for her own happiness as a subjective experience. Everyday aesthetics and the goal of a ‘beautiful life’ now become important. Schulze uses the concept of a new rationality, *Erlebnisrationalität*, to describe the systematic ways of orientation in this way of life.²⁴ Alongside everyday aesthetics (ways to dress, eat etc.), living experience becomes an important criterion even regarding the choice of a partner or job. Living experiences are produced and consumed in the markets: the content of the experiences depends on the agreement between consumer and producer. This notwithstanding, it is highly dubious whether the consuming of lived experiences really increases our possibilities for happiness. The project of a ‘wonderful life’ is in reality difficult to realise: living experiences can become boring and lose their effect over time. Extreme individualisation can lead to solitude, to the loss of meaningful identity and orientation in life.²⁵

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*. Gesamtausgabe, Band 65. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1989, 121–124.

²² Cramer 1976.

²³ Interesting for this analysis is also Guy Debord’s work *La Société du spectacle* 1967. See Debord 2005.

²⁴ Clearly a modification of Max Weber’s concept of value-rationality (*Wertrationalität*).

²⁵ Schulze 1997.

The concept of postmodern society has also been connected to this turn. Rolf Jensen's work *The Dream Society* (1999) asserts that we are moving from an information society to a dream-, experience- and story society in which our thoughts and dreams become more important than (physical) reality. We are moving from a world of materiality to a 'postmaterial' time. This postmodern conception describes well the commercial aspects of living experience.²⁶

On the other hand, living experience refers to the realistic connections of the human mind to our environment. It is true that today everyday aesthetics increasingly uses narratives: for example, we buy the eggs of 'free chickens', identify with certain product brands and so on. But this is only half of the truth: *Erlebnis* always has a strong immediately affective facet, which makes an active connection with corporeal reality central: acting with our own body, interaction with a real community, the feeling of the resistance of natural elements and the like are essential aspects of living experience. As we saw, Nicolai Hartmann stressed the meaning of this aspect. Our greed for living experiences can be seen in this sense as an emotionally and intellectually positive phenomenon: we want to transcend the anthropocentric and constructivistic illusions of our culture and feel the connection to something independent and relatively permanent, which awakens our deeper feelings and thoughts. Not only nature but also history is an independent and positively challenging entity in this respect. The concept of living experience thus appears as a complex conception just as open to commercial (mis)use as it is to intellectually important uses, to which already Fichte referred. Pondering different phenomena through living experience can motivate and generate important intellectual achievements.

These analyses clearly show that *Erlebnis* has become an important cultural concept. The modern commercial use of this concept has made it partly inflatory and dubious - like many other, originally critical concepts (ecological, 'green', sustainable etc.). On the other hand, the concept can be used in critical ways, if used in its original meaning as 'existentially important' experience. In the last section of my paper, I will evaluate both of these aspects in the case of historiography. It should be noted, however, that there certainly are important cases in which living experience seems to have no significant role for important historical research. My examples in this short article are contingent, partly even trivial, and there clearly is a need for a more systematic study of emotional and existential motivations of historiography in this respect.

²⁶ Kari Väyrynen, "Elämyksestä elämisyhteiskuntaan – käsitehistoriaa ja kritiikin lähtökohtia". *Seikkailien elämyksiä II. Elämyksen käsitehistoriaa ja käytäntöä*. Edited by Timo Latomaa and Seppo Karppinen. Lapland University Press, Rovaniemi 2010, 30–31.

Living experience in historiography: some typical cases

Conceptual history has taught us that our recent ways of using concepts are relative and that we can learn much if we know the history of our concepts. We must also try to see the full interpretative potentialities of our concepts – the history of the concept has only partly realised these potentialities. This is of course more the task of systematic philosophy than history. Nonetheless, it is important to stress the fruitful relationship of historical and systematic reflections.

To my mind, conceptual history can in many cases help us to become critically aware of the shortcomings of our present thinking and use of concepts. In the case of living experience, this is especially important. Recent ways to use this concept testify to the general case that (a) many theoretical concepts have become common sense concepts or even concepts of ordinary life, and therefore have partly lost their theoretical potentialities. On the other side, (b) many theoretical concepts have become commercially or politically (mis)appropriated, like for example ecology and sustainability in environmental science and politics. They have been modified as useful concepts for advertising, or even politically perverted, as the talk about ‘sustainable growth’ testifies. The recent history of living experience exemplifies both aspects, maybe more the second one. It is commercially very effective to talk about how new products or ways of living can provide existentially important experiences.

Here I try to sketch some cases concerning the role of living experiences in historiography. I take typical examples from the history of historical writing as well as from recent historiography and its new trends. I think generally that current history culture is strongly susceptible to commercial pressures to highlight those aspects of history that can offer affectively impressive living experiences. For example, museums try to produce affective experiences that can compete with historical movies or games. In similar vein, history documentary films often choose subjects that appeal strongly to our imagination and curiosity like Stonehenge or Druids.²⁷

We must first ask, what kind of living experiences are typical in traditional historiography?²⁸ Already in Antiquity, historical writing concentrated on the history of powerful dynasties, wars between Greeks and barbaric nations, competition and war between Athens and Sparta. Military and political heroes, almost all men, were the objects of interest. Abnormal heroes like Cleopatra were morally doomed. On the other hand, cultural heroes might later become important: philosophers like Socrates or Epicurus became archetypical heroes who influenced later historiography of philosophy and science. Women philosophers or poets were marginalised.

²⁷ These documents have recently (2021) been presented in YLE (Finnish Broadcasting Company), see yle.fi/areena.

²⁸ I have analysed most of the cases mentioned here in my articles in our book *Historianfilosofia*. Edited by Jarmo Pulkkinen and Kari Väyrynen. Vastapaino, Tampere 2015.

A brief glance at modern history writing reveals that great periodical turning points became a new form of spectacular narrative. Christian eschatology paved the way towards this more structural view of history. The French Revolution became a paradigmatic model of spectacular turning points in history. Immanuel Kant's view of this revolution as a 'sign of history' highlighted the sentiments of a new era, which Hegel later called a "wonderful sunrise". Some thinkers also considered natural 'revolutions' as candidates for important turning points in history: in particular, the Lisbon earthquake of 1756 was interpreted as a sign of the approaching end of humankind by some thinkers. This marks the first time the Christian eschatological tradition was applied to a materialistic, cosmic catastrophe as an end of (human) history. In recent environmental history, this kind of view has become an almost dominating narrative (for example Jared Diamond's *Collapse*).

Recent historiography is full of impressive, even scandalous cases of living experiences. Histories of criminality and violence, marginal groups, madness, suicide, psychopathology, drugs and sex – typical examples of historiography that breaks the limits of normality and at the same time, as Michael Foucault has shown, give us a deeper view of this normality itself. Popular culture and historiography seem to have closer relationship to each other than before as a result of these scandalous subjects. Traditional forms of heroism in history are also still strong, because war history and great men/women seem to be enduring trends in our violent and individualistic culture. For the wider audience, a history of the 'peace and love' hippie movement is not so interesting as the Second World War. In Finland, for example, the 'victorious'²⁹ Winter War of 1939/40 is still a hot subject for new interpretations, drowning out subjects like the birth of the welfare state or the great immigration to Sweden ca. 1960–1970.

Living experience comes in many of those cases near the aesthetical experience of sublimity, especially in the Kantian sense of both mathematical and dynamic sublimity. This is something different from Ankersmit's "sublime historical experience", which sees experiences of rupture between past and present and efforts to overcome it in terms of historical knowledge as a sublime experience. For him, the sublime experience unites feelings of loss and pain with those of love and satisfaction. Ankersmit's conception is a variant of the Lockean and Burkean psychology of sublimity connected to the big ruptures in history.³⁰

In my view, this is a very limited way to see sublime objects in history. I would prefer the most eminent conception of sublimity in the history of aesthetics, the Kantian sublimity (*das Erhabene*). Especially his conception of dynamic sublimity is closely connected to the living experience of history. For Kant, sublimity is either

²⁹ Actually, Finland lost the war. It was a victory only in the sense that we could keep our independence as a nation.

³⁰ Ankersmit 2005.

mathematical or dynamical. Mathematical sublimity is unlimited and therefore transcends the limits of experience. For example, the unlimited sky above us is mathematically sublime. Dynamic sublimity is an experience of the power of nature. For example, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, waterfalls on rivers and so on exemplify dynamic sublimity. For Kant, sublimity as an aesthetical experience sets limits to human power, but at the same time highlights our intellectual and moral capacities. Sublime experiences are in this way an essential part of higher aesthetical and moral cultivation.³¹

Connected to the experience of history, mathematical sublimity could refer to the overwhelmingly unlimited diversity of historical ‘facts’, or even better, to the impossibility to comprehend the unlimited multitude of what actually happened (Ranke) in history. This perhaps comes near the experience of rupture between past and present which Ankersmit underlined. All things considered, the more important aspect of historical experience is dynamic sublimity. It refers to the different powerful actors in history, be they humans, classes, animals, earthquakes – or whatever in an eminent way effects the course of history. According to the general definition of sublimity, free moral activity in particular is a sublime historical phenomenon. Freely chosen virtuous and lawful acts in difficult circumstances exemplify *par excellence* the highest level of dynamic sublimity in history.

This does not mean that the Kantian concept of history would repeat the moral story of ‘great men’s history’. If we think that moral sublimity in difficult circumstances is especially virtuous, we should underscore the importance of the history of subdued minorities like women, refugees, animals and so on. Kant does not explicitly refer to these groups, but for example his critiques of the European culture of violence and colonialism³² opens up a possibility to this radical interpretation.

Concluding critical remarks

The current trend of historiography towards strong affective experiences is as such a limited view of historical research. Nietzsche’s diktat “human, all too human” summarises well these limits: strong immediate experiences rely on human affectivity, for example fear, horror and sexual desire. These kinds of affects must be discerned from higher emotions, which involve an intellectual element or reason. Love, for example, is such a ‘reasonable emotion’. It is also morally important.

³¹ Väyrynen 2006, 263–265.

³² Kari Väyrynen, “Weltbürgerrecht und Kolonialismuskritik bei Kant”. *Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung. Akten des IX Internationalen Kant-Kongresses. Band 4*. Edited by Gerhardt Volker et al. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2001.

Immediate affects like fear lack the intellectual openness demanded for a morally relevant emotion.³³

If the motivation behind history writing is rather affective than emotional in this sense, we can doubt its value as humanistic research. Stressing living experiences can lead to a commercialisation of history, to overly affective narratives, to Heidegger's "shallow sentimentality". This kind of history writing can marginalise deeper and difficult questions. It does not analyse the structural aspects of history, for example the history of economics, technology and environmental history, in which the emphasis is on a more theoretical level. Furthermore, intellectual history and history of concepts are difficult to make spectacular for the wider audience. The history of mentalities could be an interesting alternative if it combines affective aspects with a rigorous intellectual analysis. And finally, we must ask, following Aristotle, how to "save this phenomenon", what is the positive significance of living experience for the historiography?

On the other hand, I would stress the importance of living experiences, especially when they express deeper philosophical, scientific or aesthetic experiences. Like in philosophy, history has an important starting point in wondering – history offers a lot of material for our intellectual curiosity, helping us to widen our current patterns of thought. Also, new synthesising views concerning history, like Eric Hobsbawm's work *The Age of Extremes* summarising the essence of the twentieth century, are both emotionally and intellectually impressive. In history, as an important branch of humanities, the basic interest of knowledge is to promote human understanding through an openness to 'otherness', through sympathy and love for the objects of our studies. We can transcend our current patterns of thought and affectivity through our sympathetic and loving openness to the past. Strong aesthetic, moral and intellectual emotions, which are also typical living experiences, can motivate and help to develop our historical knowledge.

Last but not least, we should question the inherent anthropocentrism involved. Especially environmental history, big history and material history have criticised traditional anthropocentric history from an ontological basis. In environmental history, for example, climate and animals are as important subjects in history as humans. In material history, for example, a history of the refrigerator could be an important topic for the whole of modern history – not only for social history but also for environmental history. The history of writing and printing skills has surprisingly wide effects in intellectual history.³⁴ We can expand the scope of historical explanations through these new brands of history.

³³ See Martha Nussbaum's seminal work *Upheavals of Thought. On the Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, New York 2001.

³⁴ There is an excellent documentary film on this in Finnish Broadcasting Company 2021, yle.fi/areena.

In these new fields of historical research, we must partly relinquish our human interest. We cannot have living experience of viruses or refrigerators as subjects of history. But this is history nevertheless, history constructed by non-human subjects, material or living actors of history. In these cases we must expand our 'human interest' to a more comprehensive scientific picture of what history really is.

Abstract

History culture (broadly, the use of history) always reflects changing culture. We now live in a kind of aftermath of the twentieth century, which Eric Hobsbawm called "the age of extremes". This characterisation describes very well the state of western culture today as well: rapidly changing information technology, postmodern relativisation of traditional values and optimistic belief in progressive modernisation, new global problems with nature (climate change, species extinction, Covid) are all signs of extreme times. So far as history always reflects the present, this current state of the world brings many new challenges for historians. New trends like environmental history try to answer these challenges from a historical perspective.

In this paper, I take only one specific aspect of this state of culture into consideration: how does 'experience society', in which people seek strong affective experiences, effect our view of history? I approach this question conceptually, taking the concept of 'living experience' (originally in German: *Erlebnis*) into consideration. Through its analysis, I sketch a kind of present-state anthropology of historical knowledge. Especially the commercial pressures of experience society, competition with other brands of popular culture, effects the use of history in the present culture.

The German word *Erlebnis* is difficult to translate into English. It refers to existentially important experiences and I'll translate it here as 'living experience'. This relatively young concept was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Fichte) and later in German philosophy of life at the end of the century signified existentially important experiences. I analyse in my article the conceptual history of this concept in German philosophy until Heidegger, who connected it critically to modern, in his mind shallow, culture. 'Experience society' was later analysed by German sociologist Gerhard Schulze in his book *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (1997). Experience society expresses the extensive aestheticization of our life: how we present ourselves in Twitter, Facebook and so on has created new fields of everyday aesthetics. Our identities are shallow and changing. My hypothesis in this paper is that our concept of history is changing accordingly: when not totally forgotten, history must become more affective and interesting, full of curiosities which appeal to our senses. There is also a danger that historical research increasingly picks up such subjects that respond to this shallow culture.