

There's just no talking with the past

Kalle Pihlainen*

Academy of Finland/Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

This brief piece, based on a paper delivered at the 2012 UK Social Science History Conference, questions the merits of the common metaphor of communicating as a theorization of 'doing history'. It claims that, following the rejection of the idea of objectivity in its most radical forms, the idea of conversing or communicating with the past has become increasingly important to explanations of what goes on in historical research, interpretation, and writing. The idea is not without problems of its own, however. Where it positions the past as if indeed somehow an active agent, able to converse with the historian in meaningful ways, the particularity of the past as past seems to deny that possibility. In order to understand the persistence of the communicative metaphor (even in the face of the obvious contradictions involved), the piece relates it to mistaken assumptions in historical thinking that continue to sustain it – namely that of conflating the past with history and that of confusing negotiations of personal memory with 'experience' of a historical past. In attempting to deal with these conflicting intuitions, it draws, among others, on a distinction between the creative imagination and any real access to the 'otherness' of the past. Ultimately – it will be shown – at stake in this debate is the capacity of the past to intervene on our understandings in any (disruptive) way.

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The ontological distinctness of the past

Historians sometimes suggest that their work involves a 'conversation' with the past: they ask questions of their sources and the sources tell them something about the past that was not otherwise available – something, this metaphor seems to imply, that goes beyond the merely factual (but is not only a product of the historian's subjective interpretation either). The more that history has moved away from extreme ideals of objectivity, the more significant – I would argue – this metaphor has become in defending it as a legitimate pursuit. Where it would be quite reactionary today to cite objective truths for justification, for example, striving for understanding through dialogue appears to be an acceptable camouflage by which historical interpretations can still be 'naturalized', as it were.¹

*Email: kalle.pihlainen@abo.fi

As I see it, there are at least two problematics that trouble this communicative metaphor, however. First, if historians were to converse with the past in any understandable sense of the idea, they would need to have some kind of access to it. After all, for a conversation, an exchange, the participants need to find some overlapping space, time, medium, and so on. There needs to be a back-and-forth. Hence, the idea of a medium in a mystical rather than technical sense might in fact be the only one that could provide a solution to the issue of distance – to the past's being ontologically distinct from the present. This idea of the historian as (mystical) medium is one that is almost – it feels – invoked by some arguments for the 'presence' of the past. Certainly some such mystification is often implicit.

The second problematic is similarly a result of the distinct ontological status of the past: regardless of accessibility, the past is not something that could sensibly partake in a conversation. Or, to say this a little differently, the idea of conversation entails – at the very least – an essentializing of the past. *There are two reasons for this*: by presenting the past as a partner in conversation, some kind of identity (if not necessarily agency) is attributed to it. Furthermore, because this 'the past' (now a construct) is seen as being able to somehow answer 'historical' questions, at issue is not only identity but also the general problematic of reducing complex relations and networks to the particular desires and language of the historian. There is an assumption that history is somehow the natural and proper way of dealing with the past – or, as Jenkins (2009, 14) has nicely formulated this sentiment, historians 'all too often seem to think that they and the past were just made for each other'.²

Focusing on the 'listening' component of communication seems to help tackle this set of complications best: conceiving historians' work as one of communicating or conversing with the past involves a fundamental (ideological) difficulty regarding the possibility of listening. Given that the task of listening – 'really' listening – is difficult enough with a real partner in a real conversation, the impossibility of listening to something that (1) does not constitute a coherent entity, (2) does not address you, (3) does not speak your language (or indeed any language), and (4) is not directly available but only 'present' in traces, or perhaps *echoes*, to avoid mixing metaphors, should be fairly obvious. I'll come to the reason why I refer to this difficulty with listening as an ideological one later. Let me first tackle these particular four points in order – in order to get them out of the way.

- (1) *The past does not constitute a coherent entity*. That is to say, there is no 'the past'. Of course there is a past, but as a phenomenon it is indistinct and difficult to delineate in any other way than in its being 'before now'. Furthermore, we have no way of exhaustively capturing (or indeed even of thinking) it. And since the past does not constitute a definite entity or subject in any discernible sense, points (2)–(4) (and this whole piece) actually follow. But, to spell them out anyway:
- (2) *The past does not address us*. It's not in any way 'for us'. Not even in an existentialist sense, since it's not here.

- (3) *The past does not use language.* It is best to underline this, since the idea that the past simply speaks a foreign language or is a foreign country is another equally misleading metaphor.³
- (4) *What we have of the past are only traces or signs.* To be very clear, historical representations are not *of* or *from* the past but only *about* quite limited parts of the past.

So what needs to first be realized is that when speaking of ‘the past’ historians do not always in fact mean the ‘before-now’ at all, but history (‘the past as history’) – institutionally accepted and validated representations of some aspects of the past.

Thinking ‘historical’

So what makes it so hard to think history in terms of this ontological break between the past and representations of it? Or, why is the metaphor of conversing or communicating with the past so persistent, despite the rather obvious objections to it? Simple terminological confusion between history (or ‘the past as history’) and the past is undoubtedly partly to blame. As long as these are seen as synonymous, history’s nature as representation and construct is blurred and the radical break between historical representation and the past is forgotten. Typical discussions about what the past is do not lead to conclusions recognizing ontological distance, unavailability, radical alterity, and so on. Instead, everything is historicized, made ‘historical’, and hence also seemingly coexistent in ontological terms.

It seems to me that commonsense intuitions regarding memory and history are the cause of a lot of this confusion too. The everyday experience by which we are all tied to the past (albeit precisely each only to our subjective past) is so crucial in negotiating the world around us – it so centrally informs our experience of the world – that having a past equals having an identity. And that experience comes into play in the case of our ‘historical’ intuitions too. By unwarranted conflation personal memory and historical knowledge become indistinguishable and personal identity and representations of the past are assumed to operate according to similar logics. So, much as we communicate with our contemporaries, we are also seen to converse with our own past selves within our imaginations. The further step from this assumption to saying that we might engage in ‘conversations’ with others in the past (and then with the past somehow *in toto* in even less specific terms) appears to be a short one too. *Yet the crucial difference is forgotten:* there is no real pastness to these constructs where there is no (personal) memory involved. When we ‘source’ these ‘historical’ others, they have no integral place in the stories we form; they constitute, for example, no necessary (by which I here also mean lived/experienced) aspects of our present identities.

That is to say that while the traces of important events in collective histories may certainly impact on our constructions significantly, they – unlike the vestiges of our subjective experiences – have no meaning independent of our

ascriptions in making sense of them. They are, thus – arguably at least – not of the same kind on a personal, cumulative, and visceral/experiential level. At least they carry no kind of residual meanings in them as – again, arguably – do our own memories and lived experiences. (This is not intended as some valorization of memories as more ‘truthful’, and so forth, but only as an indication that they might appeal to different kinds of ‘rules’ in the processes by which we construct meanings of them than do ‘facts’, for instance. Subjective memories, experiences, and so on, might thus be seen to lead to meaning constructions that are legitimated on levels ‘below’ the purely cognitive, so to speak. Such an ‘embodied’ argument appeals to me at least.)

Reading ‘the past’?

Given what I’ve said so far, the parallel of reading – along with all its constructivist connotations and the now hopefully established recognition of the death of the author – seems more suited to describing what goes on in our dealings with the past. We read the fragmented ‘text(s)’ of the past, we recognize and perhaps even accept *some* of the obvious contents and judgments it presents, and we attribute significance to it on the basis of our needs. There is no need for pretence at ‘listening’ or ‘communicating’. This is especially so, as it is really the historians who are at fault in all this as long as we continue to think in terms of ‘conversation’: they seem to hear what they will and talk only of what matters to them (or, even worse, only of what they happen to be fixated on at a particular moment). (Why would ‘the past’ speak with them even if ‘it’ could, one wonders?) Now, all this is not primarily intended as an accusation or, indeed, as criticism of what historians do. Rather, my idea is to point out the basic fallacy of any of these communicative ideals and to note their consequences. Indeed, in the context of these misleading conceptions of what it is that historians do, such ideals position them as quite insensitive people and really only serves to foreground a very frustrating breakdown in their would-be communications. So perhaps these metaphors should simply be abandoned.

But where would that leave treasured and popular ideas such as reenactment, empathy, presence, and even materiality? After all, they seem to suggest that historians are somehow capable of accessing the past by virtue of being sensitive listeners. Yet, these are simply instances of the same illusion-making. Let me briefly signal the reasons why.

Reenactment: despite all the methodological trappings, this is a fundamentally constructivist notion (albeit Collingwood’s constructivism is not as focused on language as are contemporary manifestations). The upshot is that historians invest history with meaning. *Empathy*: it can be (and convincingly has been) argued that, even as an emotion, let alone as any kind of formula or methodology, empathy performs a violent appropriation, it colonizes the other’s subject position by constructing it in foreign terms. *Presence*: This would seem to involve the confusion of sense-experience and personal memories of an

experienced past with the past that existed beyond our domain of experience. In these theorizations, material traces often also seem to receive somewhat mystical and romanticized attributes, chiefly the capacity to somehow ‘speak’ to us.⁴

Materiality: I leave materiality until last here, as it is the one area that always speaks to me personally too, despite the inevitability of impositions of representation (that is, ‘interpretations’) in relation to objects also. There is just something so counterintuitive to the idea that when one picks up a hammer, for example (and this is the classic example in phenomenological philosophy due to its obviousness as an object as well as Heidegger’s famous mention of it), one would not also – feeling its strategically placed weight, the way it so clearly directs and extends the reach for a hard, precise blow – somehow ‘know’ (or even: ‘grasp’) the intentions behind its making.

Conceivably, yet stretching the idea of conversation beyond reasonable limits, I think, we might then ask what else we could do with the hammer and (through some kind of ghost of intentionality residing in its form – now really stretching the idea!) it might ‘show’ us opportunities for more precise, controlled movements too. Even on this extremely concrete level, of course, there is no ‘question’ going back to the maker or previous user of the hammer; we ask *ourselves*, and the answer we provide is part of our pragmatic orientation in the world, our interpretation of things. On a purely rational level anything else is just wishful thinking. (But, again, the role of embodied understandings makes a haunting appearance...⁵)

Appropriating the past

Such more pragmatic and material ways of thinking present desirable options for many historians because – as far as I can figure out – they appeal to general experiences of the world and involve reliance on common sense. Another reason for why they are so much more in mode now, I think, has to do with the way the discipline has increasingly been moving away from the old focus on ‘events’. After all, it’s quite tempting to think that people are people and certain things are ‘natural’ to them as people, and so on. Yet, historians’ conversations are always ultimately internal: they ask themselves what they would do in particular circumstances and project that commonsense idea onto agents in the past. From this, and from their everyday ‘phenomenology’, they also may go on to similarly postulate causal linkages, possible psychological workings, and so forth.

Since this kind of practical ‘phenomenological’ approach to the world is essential to everyday coping it easily carries over into more theoretical thinking about what the world is or was like. This is a result of what I would label *the historian’s phenomenological yearning*. Even though the past is not present or accessible, many historians (want to) think of it so in order to cope with it with their practical and commonsense strategies. And, to facilitate this, the past also needs to be seen as somehow making sense. (As mentioned already, there is of course the other underlying confusion too: the parallel so easily drawn between the

commonsense idea of personal memories providing access to subjectively experienced pasts and the belief that records or traces might give similar privilege to historians.)

Here the question of ideology becomes foregrounded: experiencing anything as making sense means imposing rules by which it is made sense of. So, when historians interpret things in a way that ‘makes sense’, they impose their rules (their myths, norms, and values) on the material. And in that process the material and interpretation (fact and myth) fuses into a history (ideology). I won’t belabor the point; suffice it to say that this is the core of the constructivist argument. The chief reason I bring it up here is to emphasize how ‘making sense’ is also in fact easily opposed to any ‘listening’ (and hence to the idea of conversation) in the case of history. Which perhaps goes a long way toward explaining the parallel idea of ‘*interrogating*’ the sources; a metaphor that I take in an almost violent sense, certainly not simply a case of ‘listening’, let alone of any hermeneutic ‘letting be’.

The crucial question: can the past intervene on our understandings in any (disruptive) way?

If one attempts to treat these kinds of metaphors more sympathetically – first recognizing that they are indeed ‘only’ metaphors (metaphors should not be read too literally after all) – there is an aspect of historians’ experience of ‘conversation’ that might be valorized. What is centrally at stake in metaphors of ‘dialogue’, ‘conversation’, ‘interrogation’, and so on, is the capacity of the past to influence present understandings in some significant way. So merely (albeit quite correctly) pointing out that such metaphors fail because the past cannot hear our questions, for instance, would be a letdown. (Having said that, it needs to remain clear that the only part of communicating that traces, sources, and even historical texts can be involved in is *toward* ‘readers’: the direction of any messages is strictly one way.)

To see what underlies historians’ claims of *experiencing* their work as one of engaging in conversation, also the idea of ‘reading’ the past should be taken in the broadest possible sense. Depending on the context and on how one interprets it, reading need certainly not be only a passive experience. In the context of reading complex and literary texts, this is quite clear; such texts can be understood as ‘writerly’ in the sense made famous by Roland Barthes. That is, they constitute a ‘perpetual present’, engaging the reader actively in the creation of meaning outside of (and constantly disrupting) received systems of signification, thus sometimes giving birth to wholly unexpected ideas and attitudes (see Barthes 1974, 5). Since the idea of ‘communicating’ or ‘conversing’ with a text – already a definite entity – is a great deal more straightforward than that of doing so with some vague and formless ‘past’, this kind of more limited reading should be much easier to accept. Importantly, the crucial difficulty of ontological distance is also absent. The text is here now.

For theorists like Hayden White or Alun Munslow, there is similarly – as I read them – a space opened up by the aesthetic form that permits an avoidance of

closure and foregrounds indeterminacy to the extent that such new understanding and awareness can be reached (though strictly speaking these are still *formed*) (see especially White 1999; Munslow 2010; see also Pihlainen 2010.) This is to say that participants/readers/viewers come away with something they would not have had without that particular engagement with the text.

Behind historians' ideas of conversing with the past lies then, I think, the attribution of an analogous capacity to sources. And hence, by unwarranted extension, I would say, to the reality of the past. The problem with this is, again, the question of accessibility: while it might be feasible to claim that the complexity of reality as a whole and *as experienced* might also create the sense of a 'perpetual present' that resists domestication, the reality of the past has no such presence for us. Furthermore, since the function of historical research and writing is ultimately to domesticate complexities to our everyday understandings, even the overwhelming uncertainty often presented by sources as a whole is not treated as 'writerly'.

Yet, awareness of indeterminacy is exactly what historians would do best to pass on to their readers. So, while the past cannot be a partner in any dialogue, history (or at least individual history books) perhaps could – in the less literal sense of dialogue as simply meaning an active and continuing resistance by the 'text' to being incorporated into existing systems. Similarly, while the past cannot provide us with new understanding (just like reality cannot even if our practical engagements in it can), representations (artistic and linguistic, our only possible 'engagements' with the past) might. What historians especially should realize, however, is that the more realistic a representation strives to be, the less potential it seems to exhibit for this. The more complex and artistic a text is, the more space it leaves for the creative imagination to focus on significance (always a creation 'for me') rather than only on content and straightforward, purportedly objective, meanings.

Epilogue

It seems to me that there is a funny paradox involved in the idea of history as a conversation. The still widespread belief in historians' ideals of objectivity and method seems to be what lends the idea any credence at all: we cannot converse with something that isn't accessible in a relatively unproblematic way. Yet, with the renouncing of this more hard-core objectivist dream, the idea of conversation curiously seems to have become even more important. In some sense, it is precisely the mystification history needs in order to retain at least some semblance of history-as-science against linguistic and skepticist critiques. And even though this involves a turn toward what might be seen as a more a social-science approach as opposed to jettisoned natural-science parallels, it allows historians to hang on to the myth of carrying out somehow 'scientific' work.

Notes

1. For a recent and thorough discussion of a hermeneutic approach to the past, see Gardner (2010).

2. Rather surprisingly, reader-reception theory has so far really only been touched upon in historical theory; for some insights, see Thompson (1993).
3. As Icke (2012, 52–53) notes, the metaphor of ‘translation’ is also troubling.
4. Admittedly I oversimplify to the extreme here, and arguments presented by Ankersmit (2005), for instance, are much more complex. Yet the ‘past’ that we can experience through our surroundings is only ever an (often collective and culturally ingrained) historical imaginary, even if it is evoked in us by concrete objects in specific situations. Much of the confusion in this debate is again, I think, terminological.
5. There are related arguments to be made for extending the discussion of materiality to language, to linguistic and cognitive structures (spatial, temporal, etc.), for instance. These connections are even more difficult to demonstrate, however, and can only account for rather marginal mechanisms and ways of meaning making when applied to something as complex as history writing. For more on such general structures, see Lakoff and Johnson (1999).

Notes on contributor

Kalle Pihlainen is an Academy of Finland Research Fellow, based at the Department of Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University, and Adjunct Professor in Philosophy of History at the Department of Contemporary History, University of Turku, Finland. He has published articles on narrative theory and the philosophy of history in various anthologies and in journals including *Clio*, *Historiein*, *New Literary History*, *Rethinking History*, and *Storia della Storiografia*. His research interests are in cultural history, narrative theory, historical theory, embodiment, and existential phenomenology.

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