Narrative History and Theory

Eileen H. Tamura

I am a narrative historian. By narrative, I mean the telling of a story to explain and analyze events and human agency in order to increase understanding. As a narrative historian, I have not made extensive use of theory in my analysis of past events. In fact, in the past I consistently rejected theory, considering it more of a hindrance than a help.

The historian Geoffrey Roberts stated, "History is frequently labelled an *idiographical* discipline as opposed to a nomothetic one, that is, a discipline whose knowledge objects are particular, individual, and specific rather than classes of phenomena which are abstracted and subsumed in generalisations about trends, patterns and causal determinations." In this vein, it was my view—as Peter Burke noted—that history examines particulars and "attend to concrete detail," while theory attends to "general rules and screen[s] out the exceptions."[1]

To be sure, the line separating historians and social theorists—a name used by Peter Burke to include sociology, social and cultural anthropology, social and cultural geography, sociolinguistics, social psychology, and other such areas of study—has been blurred over the past fifty years, and there is greater overlap between the two groups. For example, social anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins also emphasize the historical dimension, and historians have become more receptive to using theory, such as those of Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, and other theorists. Nevertheless, there remains a disjuncture between many historians and social theorists. For instance, narrative historians tend to distance themselves from postmodernists by the belief that it is possible to approach the "truth" of the past. This belief can be seen in debates among historians in the adequacy of competing narratives. These debates involve issues of documentation, the accuracy of evidence, and the quality of interpretation.[2]

Eileen H. Tamura is professor of education at the University of Hawai'i. She is a former president of the History of Education Society.

[1]Geoffrey Roberts, "History, Theory, and the Narrative Turn in IR," *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006): 703–14; Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 3.

[2]Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 16–19, ix–x; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 620–21. See, for example, Clifford Geertz, *The Social History of*

 Copyright © 2011 by the History of Education Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recently I have moved away from my earlier perspective and have warmed to theory because of the insights that it can bring to our understanding of the past. For example, I used the writings of Bakhtin to help develop the framework for a conference panel that I organized for a history session at a recent meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and for the paper that I presented there. I also drew from his thinking to help me conceptualize a book that I recently edited.[3]

What set me thinking about the role of theory in educational history was a statement made by a distinguished historian of education who, after reading an essay of mutual interest stated, "This is not history." To be sure, the essay differed markedly with most histories of education. For one thing, it had a style that was unlike most educational histories. The scholar used the first person forcefully; that is, she put her "I" right at the beginning of the essay and continued to use it well into the essay. Even more evident was her strong use of critical theory, which was foregrounded throughout the essay. As a narrative historian, I was well aware that the author did not approach historical events in the "normal" way of historians. Yet I liked this essay and thought that it should be considered as a historical piece. The comment made by the seasoned educational historian, however, led me to this question: What methodologies should be embraced or at least accepted by educational historians? While narrative history has been the prevailing mode in historical scholarship, its preeminence has not gone unquestioned. In the 1980s, the role of narrative in historical writing was "the subject of extraordinarily intense debate." The historical backdrop of this debate can be traced to the preceding two decades, when four groups of thinkers became discernable: (1) social-scientifically oriented historians, in particular the Annales group, among them Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, who saw narrative history as nonscientific; (2) analytical philosophers, among them Hayden White and Louis Mink, who "sought to establish the epistemic status of narrativity"; (3) semiologically oriented theorists, among them Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who saw narrative as "one discursive 'code' among

---

an Indonesian Town (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965); Patrick V. Kirch and Marshall Sahlins, *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. from the French by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[3]Eileen H. Tamura, ed., *The History of Discrimination in U.S. Education: Marginality, Agency, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

others"; and (4) hermeneutically oriented philosophers, among them Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, who viewed narrative as the "manifestation in discourse of a specific kind of time-consciousness."[4] In this essay I discuss the first two of the major challenges to narrative history.

In the 1960s the dominance of narrative history and its focus on political history, with its emphasis on individual actions, was challenged by the Annales school. With the publication of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, Fernand Braudel was recognized as a leader of this school, which became influential in the 1960s and achieved world prominence in the 1970s.[5] Braudel criticized the preoccupation of traditional history in its concern with individual events. Of greater significance, he said, was a second level of "slower-moving currents of social history, those of peoples and groups and their economic and cultural forces." Below this was the "longue durée," a third, deeper level of "'almost immobile history' of the relations of humans with their environment, the 'geographical time' of climate, sea, soil, and agriculture." The outcome of Braudel's perspective was the growth of social history and its use of demographics and statistics in historical inquiry.[6]

The goal was to establish a "science of human action," which storytelling did not purport to do. Science, on the other hand, was said to be based on observable events. Using this line of thinking, advocates of this view sought "to find in human events the same relation between observations and laws found in non-human events."[7]

As a result, for a time there was among historians a strong attraction to quantitative history and its focus on population growth and decline, birth and death records, food supply, price fluctuations, harvest yields, and other quantifiable items. Decades later, however, Lawrence Stone, who had played a major role in the rise of social history, concluded that quantification did not fulfill the expectations of the 1970s.[8]

---

[4]Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (August 1984): 1–33. In my literature search, I found that most of the articles discussing the value of narrative in history were published in the 1980s.

[5]Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972; French edition 1949); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 83.

[6]Fernand Braudel, *Ecrits sur l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 11f, 21, quoted in David Carr, "Narrative Explanation and Its Malcontents," *History and Theory* 47 (February 2008): 25–26; Appleby, Jacob, and Hunt, *Telling the Truth about History*, 82–84; White, "The Question of Narrative," 8–10.

[7]Carr, "Narrative Explanation and Its Malcontents," 23.

[8]Carr, "Narrative Explanation and Its Malcontents," 26; Appleby, Jacob, and Hunt, *Telling the Truth about History*, 83; Lawrence Stone, "Reflections on a New and Old

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Meanwhile, in the 1970s another challenge emerged, centered on the relationship between narrative history and the real world. Critics argued that there was a disconnection between narration, which has a beginning, middle, and end—and life itself, which is chaotic. In this vein, Louis Mink noted "(1) that the world is not given to us in the form of well-made stories; (2) that we make such stories; (3) that we give them referentiality by imagining that in them the world speaks itself."[9] Thus the historical narrative poses a dilemma. While it claims to inform us of the past, as narrative, it is the result of the narrator's creation.

According to Hayden White, central to this "impositionalist" view, there is a deep structural, linguistic basis underlying historical writing. He argued that historical works are literary creations, and that historical explanations differed, not because of factual differences, but because of differences in their emplotment modes—romance, comedy, tragedy, satire—as well as in their "tropological mode[s]"—the figurative representations of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.[10] As Paul Roth explains, "There is no truth-value, for example, to the statement that such and such a happening is tragic; there is only a telling which so presents it." White said it this way: "Does the world really present itself ... in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends ...? Or does it present itself ... as a *mere sequence without* beginning or end ...?"[11]

Narrativists did not let this critique go unchallenged. They understood that what was at stake in this debate was the "epistemic legitimacy of the historical narrative."[12] According to David Carr, what his opponents meant by reality was the physical world. But what is portrayed in histories is human reality. He referred to Edmund Husserl's

---

History," in *The Narrative and History Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London: Routledge, 2001), 283.

[9]Louis O. Mink, "Everyman His Own Annalist," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 238–39; David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," *History and Theory* 25 (May 1986): 119–20.

[10]Andrew P. Norman, "Telling It Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms," *History and Theory* 30 (May 1991): 119–35, uses the word "impositionalists" as a contrast to the narrativists; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 81–100, quote from p. 95; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1–42, explains his ideas of three levels of historical explanation: emplotment, argument, and ideological implication; his notion of historiographical styles, which combines modes within these three levels; and his theory of tropes.

[11]Paul A. Roth, "Narrative Explanations: The Case of History," *History and Theory* 27 (February 1988): 1–13; Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23, emphasis mine.

[12]Norman, "Telling It Like It Was," 119.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion "that we cannot even experience anything as happening, as present, except against the background of what it *succeeds* and what we anticipate will *succeed* it." While such a structure may not be narrative structure, Carr argued, there is a relationship between action, which is related to the past and future, and narrative, which has a beginning, middle, and end. Unlike Mink, who stated "that we first live and act and then afterward ... tell about what we have done," Carr argued that historical narratives are extensions of actual events. At the same time, he recognized that these narratives do not reproduce but instead create new structures of the events that they discuss.[13]

Also writing in defense of narrative history, Chris Lorenz noted that what distinguishes history is its empirical nature. The evidence that historians use is available for others to examine; accordingly, the works of historians cannot be judged by their narrative forms alone. History is, after all, based on historical research. White and his supporters failed to fully examine "the *relationship* between research and narrative." And that, according to Lorenz, is a major flaw in their theory.[14]

Most American educational historians—as distinguished from European educational historians, who seem to be more comfortable with theory—would agree with Carr and Lorenz, because despite the critique of narrative history, it continues to dominate their writing. Why? As Carr suggests, narrative history is satisfying because of its proximity to ordinary discourse. Furthermore, it has logic in its "flow of actions through time."[15]

To be sure, narrative history has been enlightened by the challenges to it. More recent narrative historians have avoided the assumptions of earlier historians, and have used the challenges of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to craft histories that have as much analysis as they do narrative.

Given the strengths of the narrative, this essay does not hope to displace the prominence of narrative history. It does not propose an either-or choice, but a both-and inclusion. As Bruce Mazlish noted, narrative history provides causal account and allows us to relive the events. Theory allows us to analyze more effectively the forces that are beneath the surface.[16] That is, theory provides the scholar with a base from which to inquire and analyze.

This discussion of a larger role for theory in educational history may seem ironic, given what has been happening in the social sciences—

---

[13]Carr, "Narrative and the Real World," 121–22, 126, 131, emphasis mine.

[14]Chris Lorenz, "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn,'" *History and Theory* 37 (August 1998): 326–27, italics in original.

[15]Carr, "Narrative Explanation and Its Malcontents," 21–22, 25.

[16]Bruce Mazlish, "The Question of *The Question of Hu*," *History and Theory* 31 (May 1992): 143–52. Mazlish uses "analysis" instead of "theory."

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

that of a turn to narrative. According to Roberts, this turn to narrative comes from "the crisis of confidence in positivist social science; the post-structuralist rediscovery of the power of agency; the growth of individualism and the appeal of emancipatory storytelling to identity-based movements; and, perhaps most important, the postmodernist exposure of the meta-narratives underpinning much theory construction."[17] I view this turn to narrative in the social sciences as a positive development, for it reinforces my view that theory and narrative can work together successfully.

In a recent article in the *History of Education Quarterly*, John Rury points out that most historians in history departments are unlike educational historians in that most of the latter reside in schools or colleges of education and therefore need to engage in research that "speaks to current educational concerns."[18] While his conclusion is not a subject of discussion in this paper, his *distinction* between educational historians in schools or colleges of education on the one hand, and most other historians on the other, speaks to my inquiry on the place of theory in educational history. I would add to his distinction by stating that even educational historians who reside in history departments may have more in common with educational historians in schools and colleges of education than they do with colleagues in their history departments. This is due to their relationship to the wider community of nonhistorian educational researchers, and their membership in educational research associations such as the AERA, whose members are predominantly nonhistorians.

Educational historians are situated between, on the one side, historians who are unconnected with professional schools and who may have little interest in theory—and on the other side, nonhistorian educational researchers who embrace theory. Educational historians stand between these two groups and can take advantage of their position. In other words, historians of education should take the opportunity of their in-between-ness to draw from both theoretical perspectives as well as the more traditional historical methodology.

I recognize that a growing number of historians are using theory in their analyses, perhaps more so than educational historians. At the same time, educational historians have a greater need than other historians to communicate with theoretically minded but nonhistorically minded scholars, namely, nonhistory educational researchers, because of their shared concerns about educational issues.

---

[17]Roberts, "History, Theory, and the Narrative Turn," 703.

[18]John L. Rury, "The Curious Status of the History of Education: A Parallel Perspective," *History of Education Quarterly* 46 (Winter 2006): 592.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Historical *inquiry* seeks to provide an *understanding* of events. The goal is to find the best ways to achieve this understanding. In integrating narrative and theory, educational historians can bring to bear new, different, and helpful perspectives to an understanding of the past. Moreover, while not the primary aim, this facility of educational historians to speak to both narrative and theory would serve as a bridge connecting historian and nonhistorian educational researchers. Such a bridge would encourage better communication between the two groups, with the result that educational historians would be less isolated from their nonhistorian colleagues, who may, at the same time, gain greater appreciation of the relevance of educational history.

Even historians of education who reject theory—which I confess included me for a long time—have, I submit, been influenced in their thinking by theorists such as Gramsci, Marx, Bakhtin, Foucault, and White. Perhaps the first step for those in this group would be to use concepts and perspectives from theorists to help frame their analysis. Theory may thus be there, if only in the background of the study. Others may want to use theoretical models to help "crack a particular problem." Still others may want to "discuss theoretical issues with vigour" as they examine particular historical episodes.[19]

Some may argue that I am presenting a false dichotomy between narrative and theory because, they would say, narrative is a theoretical approach. To be sure, narrativists have a framework that they bring to their studies. In this case, what is at work is an implicit theory of their methodology.

However, what we—the author of this essay and the authors of the next two essays—are referring to when we use the word theory is the explicit use of nonnarrative methods in analyzing historical events. To quote from the introduction of this special issue,

> By theory, we mean an interpretive framework that emerges from primary sources and serves as a lens to analyze evidence and experience in order to explain identities, actions, events, realities, rationalities, and other human phenomena. More specifically, when we refer to the use of theory in educational history, we mean the engagement and mobilization of Marxist, feminist, critical race, queer, and social-constructivist theories as well as "post" approaches to historical interpretation, including postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theories.

[19]Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 1; Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 26, defines "model" as "an intellectual construct which simplifies reality in order to emphasize the recurrent, the general and the typical, which it presents in the form of clusters of traits or attributes."

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Because the narrative has dominated the works of American educational historians, my distinction between narrative and theory is an attempt to encourage educational historians who are narrativists to open themselves to theoretical works.

This essay does not argue that all educational historians should use theory. What I am saying is that there exists a canon of narrativity that should be challenged. In other words, there should be a prominent seat at the educational history table for such scholarship that marries theory with narrative and/or foregrounds theory in examining historical issues in education.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press