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Multidisciplinary History – Forms of Historical Engagement

Notes on "Industry and Modernism"

What is history about?

To mark the fortieth anniversary of Edward Hallett Carr’s book ”What is History?” in 2001, the Institute of Historical Research in London organized a symposium entitled ”What is History Now?”. The topics discussed were social history, political history, religious history, cultural history, gender history, intellectual history, and imperial history.  

Conspicuously absent from the list was, however, economic history as well as a number of other forms of history. The final chord of the symposium was that history now, contrary to history in the past, is permeated by the notion of interdisciplinarity, of "pursuing one’s specialism in the conviction that it is permeable, and that it overlaps others, and that it is very much the richer for it." This suggests that history now, as a discipline (or specialism, if the formulation presented at the symposium is used), does not contain a clear demarcation line against other disciplines, but may, at times, resemble anthropology, linguistics, or psychology. In other words, history itself is seen as interdisciplinary, losing its character as a coherent field of study. By encompassing everything, the idea of history is sacrificed.

With my main title, Multidisciplinary History, I would like to challenge this interpretation of history. As I see it, history is simultaneously ”one” and ”many”. Even if this represents a simplified model of reality, the notion of the double character of history opens important issues for discussion. History understood as one implies the
existence of a shared frame of reference, of a shared understanding of the acceptable problems to be studied, theoretical references, documentation to be used as sources, methods to be applied, and research results to be expected. It also implies differences in relation to "Other", non-historical disciplines. One of the foremost differences is, of course, the special relation of history to temporality, time and change, and the traditions of historical research in this respect. History understood as many implies the existence of differences: of the existence of more than one way of formulating problems to be studied, of a multitude of acceptable problems, theories, documentation, methodology, and results, but all within the frame of reference related to time.

In more concrete terms, the study of history refers to institutions that have been established to practice the various activities related to the field. This includes professorships, departments at universities, research institutions, academic societies, journals, and the traditions where the different institutions are intertwined. The role of the institutions has been fundamental in solidifying practices. The crucial times include the grand moment of the ideology of the nation-state that supported the growth of universities in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, and the founding of the new universities in a different political context in the 1960s and 1970s. In both phases, the discipline of history – or its absence – was significant in the new institutions. The history of history, then, is what history is about.

My own field in terms of disciplinary boundaries is architectural history, normally located within art history. Art history has been seen as marginal in relation to "real" histories, and at times has not necessarily been identified as history at all, a characteristic which some historians have been quick to emphasize. According to some, art history is focused on the qualitative hierarchies within art and other visual material, and is "largely and legitimately ahistorical." My approach to architectural history and to urban history, however, has been strongly influenced by the philosophy of hermeneutics and the notion of the economic, cultural, political and social history as an essential element in the approach. In this sense, it is deeply historical.
**Interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity**

The issue of interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinarity can be defined as a particular relationship between existing disciplines. At minimum, it could mean the collaboration of a few disciplines around a joint theme. The French philosopher Roland Barthes criticized this view in 1972, claiming that already constituted disciplines are not willing to surrender their position for the benefit on an undefined “interdisciplinarity”. He maintained that interdisciplinarity means the creation of a new object of study that no existing discipline owns. His topic was research in literature, but his words may equally be connected to history. Barthes indicated a clear demarcation between subjects located inside the boundaries of any existing discipline and subjects outside them, the latter being the potential candidates for interdisciplinary approaches. For Barthes, then, interdisciplinarity was not about finding common ground for “two or three” existing disciplines, but about making a clearing – a *tabula rasa* – external to them; not “inter”-disciplinarity but “extra”-disciplinarity. If we accept Barthes’ notion, we need to discard the whole historically evolved network of research practices which form each of the disciplines. This would involve elements such as philosophical presuppositions, theoretical approaches, legitimate objects of study, valid methods of analysis and the like. Whether this is possible, is still open to question.

Put in its historical frame, the idea of interdisciplinarity that gained support in the events of May 1968 in Paris, was very much about taking a position against institutions and against the institutional force they had given to the “mandarins” within each discipline. The strong centralization of academic power into specific universities was particularly typical to France. In this context, interdisciplinarity could offer new frontiers of history, ultimately resulting in the establishment of new institutional posts and departments, similarly to the processes of founding the now traditional historical professorships and departments in the late nineteenth century. Since Barthes wrote his lines, the idea of interdisciplinarity has gained foothold in many, if not most disciplines, including the natural sciences which were long seen as fortresses of the so-called pure research, untouched by other disciplines. However, the contents of the notion of interdisciplinarity are usually not discussed. The word is employed almost as a form of
rhetoric: to illustrate informedness about current research trends. The consequences of interdisciplinarity on the fields involved rarely seem to be problematized, although they clearly must and do alter research practices.

**Industry and Modernism – economic history in disguise?**

In many ways, the Industry and Modernism Research Project, connecting researchers from the Nordic and Baltic countries for three and a half years, has been a typical multidisciplinary project. Economic historians, historians of technology, architectural historians, and urban historians have joined forces with researchers in industrial heritage studies. The roots of the project were in industrial preservation projects of the 1990s in which several project members had participated. The focus of study has been the significance of industrial companies in making modern postwar societies in northern Europe, a significance that extended beyond the normal activities of companies. We wanted to understand the complex relationships between industrial companies, professions, states, and municipalities in the processes of modernization during the high-industrial period from 1945 to c. 1980.

The notion of industrial production and industrial companies as motors of society as the point of departure is, of course, an approach typical to economic history, particularly in the postwar period. After 1945, European societies were intent on recovering from the devastations of the Second World War. Reconstruction processes – both material ones that were related to the development of industries, cities and infrastructure, and immaterial ones such as the generation of new values, ways of life, and identities by the different communities – were oriented toward the future. In this context, economic progress became a major force, and industrial production was one of the most important elements in the equation, since it held the promise of a better life for all groups in society, the social-welfare state in the Nordic countries and the socialist state in the Baltic countries. For the different disciplines in the research group, this was the common base.
We can, of course, discuss whether the approach of economic history has absorbed the approaches of the other disciplines in the project. For example, when a historian writes about the concept and history of rationalization and how it expanded from industrial production methods to the physical planning of industrial plants and to urban planning, can the study be positioned strictly within the boundaries of a single discipline such as economic history, business history, history of technology, architectural history, or urban history? Although it is possible to see the concept of rationalization as part of any of these, I would like to argue that its content is displayed in its full historical complexity when it is seen as one of the core concepts in a multidisciplinary context.

Essentially, the concept of industry itself (used as the condensed version of industrial companies and their activities) is multidisciplinary, located at the intersection of the economic and the technological. Moreover, processes of industrial production and industrialization involve a wide range of aspects, not only economic and technological, but also social, scientific, and cultural, even visual. Similarly, the other concept in the title of the research project, modernism, and its close relations, modernity and modernization, are also connected to multiple fields.

In all its ambiguity, the concept of modernism is based on presuppositions related to the philosophy of modernity, central in the development of scientific and technological thinking, and its precedent, the philosophy of Enlightenment. These presuppositions have included the belief in the fundamental unity of the world, in the notion that all phenomena of reality are united within the same universal structure and goals, and the belief that true values cannot conflict with each other. They have also contained the belief in the capacity of human beings to attain correct, objective, and reliable knowledge of reality through observation and experimentation, and the belief in "natural" and inevitable progress, possible to direct rationally with science and technology, including technological, economic, and administrative systems of experts. The shared assumptions about rationality have been emphasized as the basis of modernity. The concept of modernization has been used parallel to the concepts of progress, evolution, development, and growth, each with a slightly different emphasis.
In postwar Europe, the concept of modernization has also carried the idea of westernization, of adopting models developed for societies in Western Europe and North America as universal models of a modern society. This has produced different political goals for the Nordic and the Baltic countries, although the means and particularly the end results of the processes have sometimes resembled each other surprisingly strongly, as the comparison of examples from housing areas from both clearly illustrate.

While the concept of modernity has been connected to the ideological or philosophical level, the concept of modernism has been related to its technological practice. Conventionally, as modern or modernistic architecture or the Modern Movement, it has been used to refer particularly to aspects related to architectural history and the study of visual cultures. It has been described as a break with the past, the need for a completely fresh beginning based not on traditions, but on rational thinking, a new way of conceiving form that would correspond to the technical progress of the contemporary era. More theoretically, the ideal pursued was of universal, timeless principles, relevant for all cultural and geographic contexts, both in terms of physical, geometric forms, and in terms of the social systems to which they related. In very concrete terms in architecture, modernism was associated with large scale, standardization, emphasis on function entailing a restraint from ornaments, and reproduction beyond national boundaries. The close connections with technological innovation and mass production had strong economic implications. In the construction of the modern social-welfare state, they have also had a deeply political significance in the Nordic countries; this approach can, to some extent, also be applied to the situation in the Baltic countries.

In the research project, then, the perspective of economic history – despite its central significance to understanding the period of time studied – has not dominated but been integrated with the perspectives of technological history, business history, architectural history, urban history, and the study of industrial heritage, partly even political history.
Politics in history

Histories are written to deepen our understanding of the past. But history is also about
the present as the historian experiences it, as R.G. Collingwood maintained in the
1930s:

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparative recent past, but in the stricter sense: the consciousness of one’s own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. […] For history is not contained in books or documents; it lives only, as a present interest and pursuit, in the mind of the historian when he criticizes and interprets those documents, and by so doing relives for himself the states of mind into which he inquires.\textsuperscript{12}

With "Forms of historical engagement" – the second part of the title – I wish to emphasize the active and important role of history and historians in contemporary society. It is not a question merely of the results of historical studies benefiting society in undefined ways, but of the complete research process as an active agent in interpreting and transforming societies. By interpreting traces of the past, their sources, historians give the past meanings in their own contemporary context\textsuperscript{13}. Questions that we as historians pose to documents of the past arise from our understanding of today. In this sense, history is politics.

In the historical narrative, two aspects are seamlessly united. The historical interpretation is simultaneously the historian’s account of the past and an argument for the historian’s point of view to it.\textsuperscript{14} The historian chooses the point of view on the basis of values, it is not nor can it be extracted from documents or traces of the past. The choice indicates the form of historical engagement. If politics is understood as the articulation of alternatives among which choices can be made, the point of view carries a political dimension.
An opening for the multidisciplinary approach is exposed in situations where the traditions within existing disciplinary boundaries do not seem to offer satisfactory methods for investigating new research issues. In relation to the established disciplines, it could be described as a position of criticism and analysis. This can be compared to the experiences of those who have lost a battle and therefore face a greater burden to explain the process and the reasons of not having attained their goals than the winners for whom the act of winning is sufficient also an explanation, as Reinhard Koselleck has indicated. For the vanquished, the need to rewrite their own history from an unexpected point of view is fundamental in their reorientation to the future.\textsuperscript{15} This does not, however, suggest that multidisciplinary approaches would be in positions of resistance against the established disciplines, only that the absence of existing theories or methods to resolve new kinds of experiences arising from particular historical situations holds a good potential to generate theoretical and methodological innovations in historical studies. Multidisciplinarity can be seen as an opportunity for developing these innovations.

As such, an approach that can be described as multidisciplinary is void of content until its object of study, sources, and point of view are precisely defined, unlike approaches that are clearly located within the boundaries of an existing discipline and rely on its traditions. Since no institutional structures pre-exist to suggest immediately the scope of the multidisciplinary research, its frame of understanding has to be constructed by the historian, determined by the issues to be investigated. In this, the historian’s incentive is crucial. Multidisciplinary history, therefore, is possible only if there is a special point of view, a perspective different from earlier ones, that directs the interests of the historians. These perspectives arise from the contemporary context of the historians, articulating their focuses of commitment, essentially, their politics of history.

\textbf{Practicing multidisciplinary history}

Within history, urban history can be used as an example of a multidisciplinary approach. It has not conformed to stay within the boundaries of established disciplines
but can be perceived as intellectually multidisciplinary and autonomous. At best, it has produced syntheses where the general historical processes of change and the history of a specific city are presented intertwined in a way that generates a wider understanding of both. In this, urban history resembles a dialogue consisting of different views of which none dominates. Which views the researcher wishes to include in the discussion depends on the object of study, i.e., the city chosen and its particular processes of change. Urban history clarifies the presupposition presented by Roland Barthes of multidisciplinarity as a the creation of a new object that belongs to no one. As an object of study, the city has inspired new problematizations and united disciplines. Essential in the process has been the diversity of the object, the multiple layers of history of the city, not possible to capture by any one discipline. Interest in multidisciplinarity seems to grow with the increase in the complexity of the problems studied.

When disciplines develop towards narrower specializations the danger is fragmentation, the distance between close fields of study growing. Institutional practices such as posts and departments founded for specializations have strengthened this trend. Parallel to the increase in fragmentation, however, movement in the opposite direction also seems evident, gathering scholars from different disciplines to join forces in finding answers to complicated issues. This has been particularly manifest within history and the social sciences. When Thomas S. Kuhn in the early 1960s described the reorientation of a discipline with the concept of paradigm, he was interested in the progress within a discipline from the so-called normal science through a scientific revolution into a new state of normalcy. However, the concept of paradigm can also be used to describe the complete field of the sciences. In the totality of the sciences, the progress of the natural sciences and the technological sciences based on them as part of the western industrialization that began latest in the nineteenth century, has also meant the increasing specialization of disciplines. In that particular historical situation, specialized sciences were the most successful ones in solving the new problems.

In the "post-industrial” and increasingly globalizing reality of our own time, however, the theories and methodologies offered by the specialized disciplines do not seem sufficient. Research teams that transcend disciplinary boundaries, established both in
the fields of history and social sciences, and in natural sciences and technological sciences, can offer problematizations and research methods that differ from the earlier ones, that offer new views into new problems. In the totality of the sciences, multidisciplinarity represents a change in paradigms. According to Kuhn, the change of the paradigm within a discipline meant its fundamental transformation, the change of its philosophical presuppositions, world views, and values. I see similar transformations developing in multidisciplinary approaches; their time is near. Multidisciplinary approaches open possibilities for new points of departure and for studies based on truly multicultural values.

Engagements

Disciplines within the shared frame of history – from economic history and social science history to political history and architectural history – can be perceived as communities of historians, as cultures of history. In this context, the practice of multidisciplinarity could be compared to an encounter with a member from another culture that suddenly illuminates not only the "otherness" of the others, but also the identity of oneself as an "other" among others. The conception of the plurality of histories opens the possibility of otherness. The notion of different cultures of history makes the self-understanding of a historian an essential element in the practice of history. To identify the self-evident and normally undiscussed frame of understanding of one’s own community of history is also to perceive it more articulately in the context of comparisons with other communities. This is the contribution of multidisciplinarity to the field of history.

Multidisciplinarity involves not only an understanding of the other cultures of history perceived as others, but also a language to express the otherness. The concepts used to describe the reality of one discipline may not be expressive of the notions of the other disciplines. To bridge the variety of conceptual worlds, it is not sufficient to resort into concepts seen as universal. The alternative is the development of new concepts, adopted by all the involved communities of history. Understanding otherness implies a particular
language, a "language of perspicuous contrast," that is, one which does not suppress the
differences between the disciplines that participate in the research project, but indicates
and even emphasizes the contrasts. When the notion of multidisciplinarity is adopted
as the approach to a particular topic, it promotes an understanding not only among the
disciplines of history, but also within each discipline, as a contribution to the self-
understanding of the historian. Through this, multidisciplinarity holds a promise of
intellectual commitment. Multidisciplinary history, then, has the potential to integrate
the political, intellectual and cultural commitment. The synergy of the different kinds of
commitment, generated at the borderlands of disciplines, to quote Geoff Eley,
"invariably incites the best historical work."  

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5 For a more extensive discussion of the theoretical aspects, see AKN, Interpreting Nairobi, The Cultural
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8 Raymond Boudon & François Bourricaud, Société industrielle, Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie,
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11 On modernism in architecture, see, e.g., Walter Gropius, Scope of Total Architecture, (orig. 1943) New


