

## In the footsteps of a father

The handling of a legacy in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Danish debates on method and theory

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When one sets out from the vantage point of the year 2000 to survey the thoughts and debates that Danish academic historians have pursued in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the method and theory of their discipline,<sup>1</sup> it soon becomes evident that there is more than one way to structure such a story.

It could for instance be structured in such a way that the main point of the story was that there was not really a story to be told. There would moreover be a point to such a framing of the story. It could be a way of conveying to the reader that there has not been any continuous or cumulative debate about historical method and theory in a Danish setting, and that the debates which have taken place appear in retrospect to have been a fairly fragmented and itchy-bitsy affair. Some readers might think that this is not a very nice or flattering portrait to give of Danish academic history, but if that is the case I would want to point out that there are actually a fair number of Danish academic historians - past as well as present ones - who take quite a bit of pride in not being interested in questions concerning historical method and theory.<sup>2</sup> As they see it, the

<sup>1</sup> Reflections on historical method and theory can be of different kinds. They may be conceived in such a way that they form a continuum or scale, at the one end of which are more general reflections - i.e. those that one typically finds in the so called 'what is history' books - and at the other end of which are more specific and concrete reflections - i.e. those that one typically finds in articles in history journals or in history monographs. I am making this distinction in order to indicate that in the present context I will only be treating some of the more general kinds of reflections on method and theory.

<sup>2</sup> The Aarhus professor of history Troels Dahlerup (b. 1925) has drawn attention to this feature on several occasions. In 1968 when he reviewed the new method and theory book by the Norwegian historian Ottar Dahl (*Grunntrekk i historieforskningens metodelære*, 1967) he pointed to "the lack of interest among Danish academic historians in questions pertaining to the theory of history" (*Information* 9.2.1968). Again in 1979, when he reviewed a new book on method and theory - entitled *Tradition, opbrud og formidling* (1979) - he started off by making the following point: "Now it is quite obvious that, until very recently, the established tradition among Danish academic historians was not

important thing is to get down to the practical task of doing research and writing history, and they therefore try - almost at any cost - to avoid getting involved in any more general discussion of problems concerning method and theory.

I have decided however to emplot my story in a somewhat different way. Its starting point will be the fact that Danish academic history for many years has had a father figure, although I am not certain about the extent to which this still is the case. One of the ways in which one might attempt to discover something interesting about the Danish debates on method and theory is by looking at the ways in which Danish historians over the years have sought to define their own positions with reference to the views of this father figure: either by endorsing his views, or by modifying or opposing them. At this stage, no Danish historian would need to be told who I am referring to, but non-Danish readers might still need enlightening. The person in question is Kristian Erslev, who was born in 1852 and died in 1930. From 1883 until 1916 he held one of the three chairs of history at Copenhagen University, which at that time was the only university in Denmark.

Before proceeding to tell my version of the story about the Erslev legacy, it might be fitting to let the reader know that I will not be trying to tell it from the position of a neutral and outside observer. Rather it is seen and written from the perspective of an engaged observer of and an active participant in the Danish debates on historical method and theory. So, now that you have been told, you might as well keep this in mind while you are reading.

### A truncated and ambiguous legacy

As far as historical method and theory were concerned, the situation in Denmark appeared to be rather bright and rosy around year 1900. Two of the three professors of history were not only interested in such topics, they were also reasonably well-informed about the ongoing European debates regarding these themes and both of them wrote a fair amount about such questions. One of these professors was of course Kristian Erslev, the other, his slightly older colleague Johannes Steenstrup (1844-1935), who mainly made his views on such issues known in conjunction with the books he was writing on the history of history writing.

only marked by a significant lack of interest in theory [Danish: "teorilos", German: "Theorielos"], but it was moreover almost proud of the fact", *Information* 5.3.1979 (my translation). As I see it, Dahlerup's formulation neatly captures not only his own position but also that of many of his contemporaries.

Erslev and Steenstrup differed on many important points, Steenstrup remaining much more faithful to the guiding notions of the historicist traditions of the 19th century,<sup>3</sup> whereas on crucial points Erslev was influenced by the new and emergent forms of positivism. Neither Steenstrup nor Erslev were, however, in any doubt whatsoever as to which of them was setting the agenda of Danish academic history at that time. That Erslev was fully aware of his special position transpired clearly in an address that he gave as rector of Copenhagen University in 1911. In that context he surveyed the many contributions which his own generation had made to the study of Danish history, and he especially singled out the development and systematic use of historical criticism<sup>4</sup> as the field in which his own generation had most clearly distinguished itself as compared with the achievements of former generations of historians. It was moreover in this very field that Erslev himself had been making his main contribution to the development of Danish historical scholarship, and his legacy has therefore also centred on the systematic use of historical criticism.

Erslev had gone to Berlin in the late 1870s to learn more of how German historians thought about and taught historical method, and one way to characterise the legacy that Erslev handed down to Danish academic history is to compare the contents of Erslev's main textbook with that of Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-84).<sup>5</sup> There are some points of overlap between Erslev's book *Historisk Teknik. Den historiske Undersøgelse fremstillet i sine Grundlinier* [The Technique of Historical Inquiry. A Systematic Exposé] (1911/1926) and Droysen's *Grundriß der Historik* (1882), but what chiefly comes to light from a comparison of the two tables of contents are some notable differences between these two texts. Erslev gave much more detailed attention than Droysen had done to the actual operations which historians must try to perform when working with historical source-material. There were, on the other hand, two important themes which Droysen had considered in fair detail, but which are completely absent in Erslev's text, and there is one theme which Droysen attended to in some detail, but to which Erslev only gave scant attention.

<sup>3</sup> I will here be using the term 'historicism' as a translation of the German term 'Historismus', and it should therefore not be understood as referring to the position that Karl R. Popper opposed in *The Poverty of Historicism*, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> I will in the main be using the term 'historical criticism' when referring to what in Danish is called 'kildekritik' and in German "Quellenkritik". It is the translation which Herbert Butterfield used in *Man on His Past*, 1955. But also the term 'source criticism' is sometimes used as the English equivalent.

<sup>5</sup> The two tables of contents are used as illustrations in this contribution.

Let me start with the last of these differences. Droysen gave more attention to the hermeneutic dimensions of historical method than Erslev did, and he therefore also distinguished between different kinds of interpretations which a historian may have to perform when working with texts. The two other differences are even more significant. One of the parts of Droysen's book was devoted to what he termed 'systematics' (German: "die Systematik"), in which he outlined his understanding of (i) what distinguishes the natural from the social world, (ii) anthropology, and (iii) social theory, there being no functional equivalent of this in Erslev's textbook. Another part of Droysen's book was devoted to what he termed 'topics' (German: "die Topik"), in which he outlined the different modes of history writing, and here again there is no functional equivalent of this to be found in Erslev's book.

Thus, the point that I am attempting to make evident is that the framework of Erslev's textbook was a truncated one in comparison with the framework found in the otherwise similar book by Droysen. However, it is worth noting that the narrower approach employed in *Historisk Teknik* was not due to any lack of knowledge on Erslev's part. He was - as noted earlier - fairly well-informed about the ongoing European debates on historical method and theory. He had not only read the standard textbooks on historical method and theory of his day - e.g. Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (1889), Langlois & Seignobos' *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898) and Ed. Meyer's *Zur Theorie und Methodik der Geschichte* (1902) - he was also familiar with the relevant writings of neo-Kantians such as Heinrich Rickert and with works such as Friedrich Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Geschichte für das Leben* (1874).

The legacy that Erslev left behind not only appears thematically truncated when compared with that of Droysen, it was also an ambiguous legacy on two rather crucial points. The first ambiguity was due to the fact that over the years Erslev changed his mind about what constituted the basic axioms and principles of historical criticism. His thoughts on historical method were first presented in a more systematic form in the booklet *Grundsatninger for historisk Kildekritik* [Basic Axioms of Historical Criticism] (1892). But after reflecting for some time on this set of issues, he began to revise his ideas, as became apparent when he published *Historikeren i sit Værksted* [The Historian in his Workshop] in 1907, and even more so in the aforementioned *Historisk Teknik* (1911). To complicate matters still further the latter text was re-issued in 1926 in a revised edition. Thus, the point that I want to make is that even within the field of historical criticism - i.e. the technique of historical inquiry - the Erslev legacy became an ambiguous one, and there was therefore plenty of scope for ongoing discussions about just how complicated and ambiguous

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this legacy in fact was. The ambiguity that was built into the Erslev legacy gave rise to debates about such questions as: (i) how many different positions did Erslev actually hold with regard to the basic axioms and principles of historical criticism? and (ii) did the change in his thinking consist in some minor revisions or in one or more major changes?

The other ambiguity concerned the question about the role that method and theory were to play in historical scholarship. In *Historisk Teknik* (1911/1926) Erslev distinguished between three kinds of problems to be handled in history as an academic discipline, calling these three fields the technique, the method and the theory of history respectively. The technique of history should concern itself with those critical procedures which historians have to use in order to establish a set of observations or facts about the past, and in Erslev's thinking the technique of historical inquiry was more or less the same as historical criticism. The method of history should concern itself with those procedures which historians have to use when they want to piece together different observations or facts and thereby attempt to represent what happened in the past. The theory of history should concern itself with questions such as whether or not historians should seek to discover the laws of historical development and what were the driving forces behind historical change.

It followed from Erslev's own exposition in *Historisk Teknik* that it would not be possible to write history in a qualified way without attending at least to what he called the method of history, yet he never took upon himself the task of publishing a textbook giving an exposition of either the method or the theory of history. Some of these issues were taken up for discussion in his essay *Historieskrivning: Grundlinier til nogle Kapitler af Historiens Theori* [History Writing. An Exposition of Some Aspects of the Theory of History] (1911), but his overarching aim in that essay was in fact to show that one ought to distinguish between history as science or scholarship on the one hand (Danish: "Historievidenskab" and "Historieforskning", German: "Geschichtswissenschaft" and "Geschichtsforschung") and history as narrative on the other (Danish: "Historieskrivning", German: "Geschichtsschreibung"). This essay also forms a part of Erslev's legacy to Danish academic history, and this part could be interpreted as implying that professional historians need not concern themselves with narrative history if their main interest is in the field of scientific history. Moreover, the fact that Erslev never got around to giving an exposition of the problems of historical method could be interpreted as implying that it was in fact possible to write history in a qualified way solely by mastering the canons of historical criticism.

### Managing the Erslev legacy

It is an indisputable fact about socio-historical processes that a person may well try to control the way in which his or her successors will administer and use a legacy at hand, but in the long run they have no possibility of actually controlling either how their legacy will be managed or whether their legacy will be more or less discarded. On the other hand, a bequest from a person only begins to function as a legacy when others think it sufficiently important to start treasuring it and sufficiently worthwhile to want to keep it alive and functioning. That is of course also true in the case of the Erslev legacy.

I am not in any serious doubt that Erslev thought he had discovered something worthwhile about the technique, method and theory of history which he wanted to bequeath to future generations of Danish historians, and I think it likely that - had he known - he would have been very happy indeed to see that he had in fact succeeded in becoming not only a father figure, but actually the father figure of Danish academic history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, there is ample evidence to show that Erslev also wanted to share his insights concerning the technique, method and theory of history with his colleagues abroad. Thus, he presented a paper on historical method at the 1908 international congress of historians in Berlin, and he had the 1926 edition of *Historisk Teknik* translated to German and published in Germany in 1928.

To explain how Erslev could become the father figure of Danish academic history, different factors will have to be taken into account. Erslev's extraordinary standing may partly be explained by the fact that he seems to have been the right man at the right place at the right time - and this includes of course such factors as that he was not only a very talented historian, but also one who had the talent and wit to exploit the opportunities at hand. However, this can obviously not be the whole explanation, since the fact that he became a father figure must also be explained by reference to the needs and interests of later generations of historians.

It is, I believe, in this context that the facts that Erslev was a multi-talented historian and that his legacy was ambiguous may well have played a rather decisive role. Erslev was not only good at doing historical research and teaching others how to do it, he was also able to conceptualise different methodological operations, to present these operations in a nice and orderly way and to understand the ways in which the problems of historical method fitted in with competing contemporary philosophies of science. He was not a great or a popular history writer, although he certainly tried his hand at that as well. The reason why I am drawing attention to Erslev's multi-faceted and ambiguous profile as a historian is because this fact may help to explain why very different types of Danish

historians have been interested in and fascinated by one and the same person.

When looking into how different generations of Danish historians have treated the Erslev legacy<sup>6</sup>, I shall first describe in broad outline how the different generations have treated this legacy. I will then proceed to discuss how the core of that legacy has been interpreted and used over the years, before considering what has happened to those aspects of historical method and theory that were either placed on the periphery or wholly outside the framework of that legacy. My final section will attempt to answer the question: is there a moral to be drawn from this story about the Erslev legacy? Thus, my interest throughout this paper is focussed on the extent to which and the ways in which Danish academic historians have attempted to follow in the footsteps of their father figure.

It attests to Erslev's general standing in Danish academic history that such different historians from the succeeding generation as the radical materialist Erik Arup (1876-1951) and the conservative nationalist Vilhelm la Cour (1883-1974) both saw themselves as Erslev's heirs. Thus both sought to present themselves as scholars who remained faithful to what they took to be the essential core of his understanding of the principles of historical criticism. There were many conflicts and clashes between the historians of that generation, the most spectacular no doubt being the clashes unleashed by the publication of Arup's *Danmarks Historie* [History of Denmark] in 1925 and 1932. It was, however, wholly typical of that generation that they wrote no articles or books discussing historical method and theory in more general terms. This was moreover the generation that had had Erslev as one of its teachers, and these historians were almost exclusively concerned with the part of the legacy that pertained to the systematic use of historical criticism. But from the 1930s onwards it became apparent that there were different interpretations of this part of the Erslev legacy. This is a point I shall return to later.

When we move on to the next generation of Danish historians, it should be noted that we are now moving into a generation where none of them had had Erslev as teacher, Povl Bagge (1902-91) and Aksel E. Christensen (1906-81) serving here as my examples. Christensen taught historical criticism at Copenhagen University as Erslev had done before him, and he presented himself as an upholder of the Erslev legacy - mainly, however, as it had been interpreted by Arup and, like Arup, he wrote virtually nothing about historical method and theory. On this latter point

<sup>6</sup> As the history of the reception and use of the Erslev legacy has not as yet been fully researched, it will only be possible for me to present a set of rather tentative generalisations about this aspect of 20<sup>th</sup> century Danish academic history.

Christensen was far more typical of his generation than was Bagge. From early on, Bagge had shown a keen interest in questions pertaining to historical method and theory, and he regularly taught courses on the theory of history at Copenhagen University, but he never became involved in basic method teaching. Moreover, he had made a name for himself in the 1940s by setting out to question the distinction between history as science and history as narrative, which Erslev had tried to uphold, and it should be noted that Bagge's intervention in fact amounted to a rather decisive attack on the positivist or empiricist aspects of the Erslev legacy.

An interest in questions pertaining to method and theory was definitely on the rise during the 1950s and 1960s, an indicator of this being the establishment of the Nordic conferences for historical method and theory in 1965. To illustrate the thinking of the first of the post-war generations I shall take as examples Niels Skyum-Nielsen (1921-82) from Copenhagen University and H. P. Clausen (1928-98) from the University of Aarhus. Both were involved at some point of their career in basic method teaching, both of them wrote books about method and theory, and both wanted to try to develop and 'up-date' the Erslev legacy, but they did so in very different ways. Skyum-Nielsen interpreted this legacy in a distinctly empiricist or positivist way, and he set out to 'up-date' the heritage mainly by bringing it to bear on kinds of source-material that Erslev had not attended to. Thus - half in jest and half seriously - he entitled his own essay on how critically to approach audio-visual source-material: *Film-Erslev* [Erslev for the Movies] (1972). H. P. Clausen set out to 'modernize' the Erslev legacy in *Hvad er historie?* [What is History?] (1963), and this was done by re-interpreting it through the lens of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of science. He was thus the first to bring the thinking of Karl R. Popper to bear on the theory and method discussion in a Danish context, and this also implied that Clausen began to treat a whole series of questions concerning theory and method of history that Erslev had never considered or discussed.

Neither before nor since have Danish historians been so intensively engaged in coming to terms with the Erslev legacy as they were in the 1970s. This booming interest was critical as well as historical. A host of articles as well as several books were written which set out critically to assess Erslev's approach to historical method and theory. In addition a whole series of articles and books were published which attempted to set Erslev's achievements in their appropriate historical context. This collective attempt to come to terms with the Erslev legacy was mainly carried forward by historians born in 1930s and 1940s.

There were those who sought to discuss the established approach to historical criticism from a position within the tradition itself - this was for instance the case with the contributions of Inge Skovgaard-Petersen (b.



1932), Henrik Nissen (b. 1933), Henning Poulsen (b. 1934) and Helge Paludan (b. 1935). There were also those who set out to scrutinize the Erslev legacy from materialist/Marxist positions - this was done by, among others, Steen Busck (b. 1939), Uffe Østergård (b. 1945) and Ib Thiersen (b. 1944). Some set out to criticize the empiricist or positivist elements in the Erslev legacy from a realist and constructivist position, while at the same time trying to incorporate a more hermeneutic approach into the axioms and principles of historical method - this was done by Karsten Thorborg (b. 1942) and Bernard Eric Jensen (b. 1943). The different attempts to place Erslev's achievement in context also occasioned many heated debates. The main contributions concerning the historical context of the legacy were: *Erslev - Arup - Christensen* (1978) by Jens Henrik Tiemroth (b. 1943), the biography entitled *Ravn. Kristian Erslev* [The Raven. Kristian Erslev] (1979) by Leo Tandrup (b. 1935), and *Den radikale historikertradition* [The Radical Tradition within Danish Academic History] (1981) by Jens Chr. Manniche (b. 1942).

Following the intense debates of the 70s the interest in discussing the Erslev legacy began - as one might expect - to wane in the course of the 80s, but without disappearing completely. When Benito Scocozza (b. 1935) published his method and theory book *Om historie* [On History] in 1982, it served to renew the debate because Scocozza had set out to endorse the more empiricist or positivist elements in the Erslev legacy. It was likewise the empiricist and positivist aspects of Erslev's position that interested Gunnar Viby Mogensen (b. 1934), when in *Historie og økonomi* [History and Economics] (1987) he set out to compare the methodological and theoretical approach of Danish academic history with that of contemporary Danish social science. In 1987 a 10th impression of the 2nd edition of Erslev's *Historisk Teknik* was published, and for the first time it was published with a postscript, in which the nature and relevance of the Erslev legacy was discussed. Kai Hørby (1935-93) and Hans Vammen (b. 1940) wrote the postscript, and they used it to explain to the up-coming generations of Danish historians why they thought it was the humanistic and hermeneutical dimensions - rather than his more empiricist-positivist leanings - which constituted the part of the Erslev legacy which it was worth holding on to.

During the 1990s the Erslev legacy was taken up for critical scrutiny in conjunction with the fact that the linguistic and narrative turn had begun to re-shuffle the agendas of the ongoing debates about the method and theory of history. This debate started when a book with the provocative title *Findes historien - virkelig?* [History - does it actually exist?] was published in 1990, and this was also the first time that the approach of Hayden White began to have a notable impact on the Danish debates concerning method and theory. In this issue of the journal *Den jyske*

Historiker the literary historian Hans Hauge used White's *Metahistory* (1973) to challenge what he saw as a rather widespread assumption among professional historians, namely that their history texts in some way could be said to be a more realist representation of the past than those found, for instance, in historical novels. Hauge's analysis was in turn challenged by, among others, Helge Paludan who argued that Danish academic historians could not be said to be proponents of naive representational realism. Paludan, in other words, was arguing that the picture outlined by Hauge was nothing less than a gross misrepresentation of the thinking found among Danish academic historians. Attempts to explore the consequences of the linguistic turn have continued to crop up fairly regularly since that time.

When Uffe Østergård set out to survey what he called the rise and fall of scientific history in 1991, he started off by making a frontal attack on Erslev's distinction between history as science and history as narrative. In 1993 John Christensen (b. 1948) and Henrik Stevnsborg (b. 1948) more or less rejected the entire Erslev legacy in their attempt to present an apologia for a more postmodern approach to history. Erslev also played a rather central role when Carsten Madsen (b. 1966) set out to compare how traditional and postmodern academic historians thought about history. But although the Erslev legacy came under serious attack in the course of the 1990s, it should also be noted that a number of Danish historians have continued to legitimate their own approach by direct reference to this heritage. A notable representative of such an approach is Claus Bjørn (b. 1944) who, in *Dansk faghistorie mellem Apollo og Minerva* [Danish Academic History between Apollo and Minerva] (1997), described Danish history as an academic discipline in which the basic tenets had not been decisively changed since the time of Erslev.

The latest instalments in this story about the reception and use of the Erslev legacy are from 1999 and 2000. The second edition of *Kildekritisk tekstsamling* - a collection of source-materials for use in method courses - was published in the autumn of 1999, and included a new introduction entitled *Forskningsproces og kildekritik* [Process of Research and Source Criticism] written by Helge Paludan. Paludan surveys here the different phases in the thinking about historical method from the time of Erslev to the present day. He makes the point that reflections on historical method and theory appear to be entering a new phase in which scholarly interest is becoming more focussed on the role played by historians in the making and shaping of historical texts. Then, in the spring of 2000, a Nordic seminar was held in Denmark on *Fortidens spor, nutidens øjne - kildebegrebet til debat* [Traces of the Past, Eyes of the Present - Opening a Debate on the Concept of Historical Sources] at which papers were presented by historians from abroad (Hayden White, Barbara Duden) as

well as from Denmark (e.g. Helge Paludan, Jan Ifversen (b. 1955), Dorthe Gert Simonsen (b. 1968)). Especially Ifversen and Simonsen took upon themselves the task of trying to confront traditional Danish thinking on historical method with the new approaches to textual analysis developed within the framework of poststructuralist and discourse theory, and they both used the opportunity to make the point that Danish historians ought to be taking the linguistic turn much more seriously than had hitherto been the norm.

### Competing approaches to historical criticism

It attests to Erslev's special standing in Danish academic history that none of his fellow historians initiated any public discussion of, or published any critical comments on, his understanding of the axioms and principles of historical scholarship while he was still alive. There is only one exception to this, and it is indeed a minor one. In 1915 Erslev's colleague Johannes Steenstrup published his book *Historieskrivningen. Dens Udvikling gennem Tiderne, dens Væsen og Formaal* [History Writing. Its Development, Nature and Purpose] (1915) in which he gave a detailed exposition of his understanding of the axioms and principles of historical scholarship. There are several references to the methodological and theoretical writings of Erslev in Steenstrup's text, but only in one instance - in a footnote - did Steenstrup actually indicate that he disagreed with Erslev. The point on which Steenstrup openly dissented from Erslev's views concerned the distinction which Erslev had wanted to draw between history as science or scholarship on the one hand and history as narrative on the other. However, any comparative reading of the texts of Steenstrup and Erslev must have made it apparent to all that they were in fact poles apart in their understanding of axioms and principles of historical scholarship, yet this was apparently not an issue that could be discussed publicly in Danish academic history at the time.

However, as soon as Erslev died in 1930, the critical comments immediately began to crop up, thus indicating that some of his colleagues and pupils had been deliberately holding back on this point until he was so to speak off the scene. In an obituary published at the end of 1930 Arup made it blatantly clear that he disagreed with the 'older' Erslev when it came to questions concerning historical method and theory. Thus, the fight about how to interpret and handle the Erslev legacy began in the early 1930s and it has - in one sense or another - been going on ever since.

At this point it becomes pertinent to ask: What has all the fuss been about? It is when one begins to interpret what all these conflicts are about that it is important to bear in mind that there is no such thing as a 'neutral' position from which such conflicts may be described and analysed. They

will be defined very differently if one views them, for instance, from an empiricist/positivist position or from a realist/constructivist position as regards an understanding of the nature of human knowing.<sup>7</sup> Empiricists tend to employ a picture or mirror theory of knowing, thus understand human cognition to be an activity analogous to looking, and they therefore tend to see the knowing subject only as a source of error in cognitional process. People who favour a realist/constructivist position, on the other hand, tend to understand human knowing as a dynamic, constructive and critical process of inquiry, as a question of generating insight into data of different kinds and as the passing of judgements about the sufficiency/insufficiency of the available evidence. They therefore tend to understand the knowing subject not only as a source of error, but also as the actual generator of cognition - i.e. they understand cognition as a product of questioning, obtaining insights and passing judgements. What follows is a brief analysis of the conflicts within Danish academic history as seen from a realist/constructivist position.

The 'younger' Erslev based his whole methodology on an 'ontological' distinction between what he took to be two very different kinds of source-material. There were on the one hand the actual remains or relics of past persons or events (Danish: "Levninger", German: "Überreste") and on the other the narrative accounts of past persons or events (Danish: "Beretninger", German: "Tradition/Denkmäler"). He described these two kinds of source-material as the 'objective' and the 'subjective' sources of history respectively, because a human subject has played a decisive role in the shaping of narrative accounts, whereas this is not the case with remains and relics. It followed from such a distinction that academic historians ought to base their accounts as far as possible on the available 'objective' source-material and avoid using the 'subjective' kind as much as possible. It should be noted here that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were Danish historians who probably would have preferred it if Erslev had never decided to move beyond this way of understanding the basic axioms and principles of historical criticism, and they have thus tended to prefer Erslev's *Grundsætninger* (1892) to his later *Historisk Teknik* (1911/1926). It was, for instance, the position that Knud Fabricius (1875-1967) favoured and defended in the late 1930s, and it formed the core of Niels

<sup>7</sup> I am here using the term 'realist/constructivist' to describe that understanding of human knowing that I put forward in B. E. Jensen, *Et bidrag til revisionen af metodelærens grundlag* (1976). It is called 'realist' because it asserts that humans can - under certain circumstances - come to know the world of which they are a part, and its called 'constructivist' because it asserts that human knowing is an active and dynamic as well as a constructive and critical process.

Skyum-Nielsen's thinking about historical method in the 60s and 70s and of Gunnar Viby Mogensen's in the 80s.

Erik Arup also wanted to uphold the 'younger' Erslev's 'ontological' distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' kinds of source-material, since such a distinction fitted very well with his own decidedly empiricist or positivist approach to science. On another pivotal point, however, he tended to follow the 'older' Erslev. In his later writings Erslev introduced - as noted earlier - a crucial distinction between the different phases of historical inquiry. He distinguished the operations used to establish historical facts from those used when combining such facts. He called the first set of operations the technique and the second the method of historical research. Arup took over this distinction and used it to classify those of his fellow historians who did not employ a clear-cut distinction between the technique and the method of history, they were termed proponents of a 'German approach', whereas those who employed such a distinction were said to be proponents of a 'French approach'. The German approach referred to the one put forward by Bernheim in *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (1889), whereas the French referred to the one advocated by Langlois and Seignobos in *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898). As Arup judged the state of affairs in Danish history in the 1930s, most of his colleagues were adherents of the more conservative German approach, whereas it was only Arup himself and a few Swedish colleagues - especially Laurits Weibull - who had sought to further the more radical French approach. Moreover, it was this interpretation by Arup of the Erslev legacy that later was taken over by Benito Scocozza when he wrote his book *Om historie* in 1982.

There was one extremely crucial insight of the 'older' Erslev which none of his contemporaries liked and therefore did not want to adopt, and it is also this very insight which neither Skyum-Nielsen nor Scocozza nor Viby Mogensen have wanted to incorporate into their thinking about the method and theory of history. Over the years it became increasingly clear to Erslev that his early attempt to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' kinds of source-material was in itself deeply problematic. He had got the insight that what appears to be rather 'good' and 'solid' source-material in one setting, may very well be 'bad' and 'unreliable' in another setting. Thus, he had grasped that one cannot in any very meaningful way discuss the quality of source-material without having first defined what is the question or issue at stake. This insight not only implied that a definition of what is relevant and adequate source-material will always be dependent on and thus a function of the question/problem which the historian is trying to answer/solve. It also implied that source-material is to be treated as evidence which is used to ground human judgements. It was this set of insights that made Erslev begin to re-shuffle his thinking about the

technique, method and theory of history - without however being able or willing to incorporate these insights fully into his thinking. The most straightforward way of explaining Erslev's hesitancy to do so is by assuming that he had in fact also glimpsed or grasped the fact that these new insights of his would topple the very foundations of an empiricist or positivist understanding of human knowing.

Erslev's later and more functional way of thinking about source-material received an increasingly better press as the 20th century progressed. Whereas all contemporaries had been very baffled by his thinking on this rather crucial point, it was this part of the Erslev legacy which caught the interest of many Danish historians in the 60s and 70s. Since then, most historians writing on method and theory have tended to endorse the view that historical inquiry is to be understood as a question and answer process or problem-solving activity, and that it therefore only makes sense to discuss the relevance and quality of source-material in light of a given set of questions or problems. But there were some notable differences when it came to drawing the consequences this insight. It was Bernard Eric Jensen and Karsten Thorborg who in the 70s and 80s went furthest in promoting a more realist/constructionist conception of historical inquiry, and they thus openly acknowledged that knowing is a human activity structured by raising questions, by generating insights and by passing judgement about the sufficiency or insufficiency of the available evidence.

In the course of the 1990s, Danish approaches to historical method and theory were confronted with the linguistic turn within the human sciences on several occasions - the most recent being two articles by Dorthe Gert Simonsen, one of which is entitled *Tegn og iagttagelse. At læse Erslev efter den sproglige vending* [Sign and observation. Reading Erslev after the linguistic turn] (2000). The attempts to introduce the linguistic turn into the Danish debate show that the overarching implications of this turn are interpreted differently by different scholars. There are those who use Hayden White in order to challenge the established assumption that academic history writing is a kind of text which differs radically from historical novels. And there are those who use Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in order to place questions concerning the role of signs in and consequently the textuality of human culture at the very centre of the ongoing debate about the axioms and canons of historical inquiry. However, as I interpret this debate, the contributions of the adherents of a linguistic turn do not make clear whether or not it still makes much sense to concern oneself with the traditional tasks of historical criticism when one in fact opts fully to endorse the linguistic turn.



### Hermeneutics, social theory and narrative history

There is another question that crops up when you begin to survey the Danish debates on method and theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What has happened to those aspects of historical method and theory which Erslev placed on the periphery or wholly outside the framework of his legacy? I am thinking partly of the two fields of inquiry which Droysen treated under the headings of 'systematics' and 'topics' in *Grundriß der Historik* (1882) and for which there were no functional equivalents in Erslev's *Historisk Teknik* (1911/26), and partly of the field of hermeneutics which had been at the centre of Droysen's method book but to which Erslev did not pay much attention in his exposition of the canons of historical inquiry. I will start with the latter field.

One of the crucial points on which Erslev and Steenstrup differed concerned their understanding of the place of hermeneutics within a theory and methodology of history. Whereas Erslev only gave scant attention to the question of how one is to go about interpreting texts in *Historisk Teknik* (1911/1926), Steenstrup gave a detailed treatment of this question in his book *Historieskrivning* (1915). Almost fifty years were to pass before the field of hermeneutics was touched upon again by a Danish historian.<sup>8</sup>

The renewed interest in a hermeneutic approach - which became apparent in the course of the 1960s, it should be noted - was mainly due to the fact that a number of Danish historians began to read three particular books: Henri-Irénée Marrou's *De la connaissance historique* (1959), Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) and Jürgen Habermas' *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (1968). Starting in the 1970s the hermeneutic tradition began to be treated in new introductory textbooks on history as well as at academic conferences. Thus, the 12<sup>th</sup> Nordic conference on the method and theory of history held in 1976 was devoted to the theme *Förtolkningsproblem i historia* [The Problem of Interpretation in History]. However, from the vantage point of the year 2000 it also becomes obvious that a vast amount of energy was used during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on re-discovering a series of insights which were already available among German historians and theoreticians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but which were not taken over by Danish historians due to the fact that Erslev had aligned himself mainly with the positivist thinking of his day.

The approach of 'older' Erslev was based - as noted earlier - on a distinction between the technique of historical inquiry and the method and theory of history, and within such a framework questions pertaining to an understanding of the natural and social world respectively belonged to the

<sup>8</sup> An exposition of the reception of the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey in a Danish context can be found in B. E. Jensen, *Hermeneutik und Historik*, (1986).

latter field. It was however a field which Erslev left almost completely untouched. The 'bracketing off' of such questions exerted a notable influence on Danish academic history for at least half a century. Although many Danish academic historians differed in their understanding of the nature of the natural and social world, for many years they did not engage in an open discussion of the kind of social theory which was exerting a structuring influence upon their historical research. Thus, the Erslev legacy has had the effect of preventing a rather crucial question about historical method and theory from being raised and discussed, namely: should the actual choice of methods in historical inquiry be seen as dependent on the nature of the phenomena to be studied? If so, then one would also have to acknowledge that a methodology of historical inquiry will depend on a social theory/ontology, and vice versa of course.

It was not until the 1960s that Danish historians began openly to discuss the question of what kind of social theory was to be employed in ongoing historical research, and this was mainly taken up when the question of the relationship of history to the social sciences came up for discussion. Povl Bagge treated this set of issues in *Historien og de andre samfundsvidenskaber* [History and the Other Social Sciences] (1969). The prevailing view at that time was that there existed an academic division of labour between history and the (other) social sciences: the former sets out to study concrete and unique processes and may in the process choose to employ concepts borrowed from the other social sciences, whereas the latter mainly aim at establishing generalisations and theories of different kinds. It was such an approach which Viby Mogensen sought to further through his book *Historie og økonomi* (1987), and in the 1990s Niels Thomsen (b. 1930) argued in favour of such a position in *Historiens Janushoved* [The Janus-Face of History] (1994).

However, such an understanding of history was challenged in the course of 1970s, especially by Danish Marxist historians who argued that pursuing historical research and developing social theory are to be seen as two interdependent enterprises, and a fair number of Danish historians began to employ Marxist theory in setting out to structure their own research and writing of history.<sup>9</sup> In the course of the 1980s Marxist theory lost most of its former influence on Danish history writing, but the question about whether or not a methodology of historical inquiry is dependent on a social theory/ontology has begun to crop up again in some different settings.

When many Danish historians started to focus their interests on cultural history, the history of mentalities and micro-history, one

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of this see B.E. Jensen, *Teoriens årti. 70'erne revisited*, (1997).

consequence was that they became interested in the methods and theories which anthropologists and ethnologists had developed.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the conception of history and social science more or less as two sides of the same coin has been growing in conjunction with the growing interest in the field known as historical sociology.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, when during the 1990s Danish historians started to view the social world as being - partly - a discursively constituted reality, it also affected their thinking about the method of history. During the past decade there was thus a growing interest among Danish historians for forms of linguistic, literary and discourse analysis.<sup>12</sup> However, it should also be noted that there are still many academic historians in Denmark who remain relatively untouched by such questions and issues.

There was also another theme that Erslev had bracketed off in *Historisk Teknik* as compared with the ones taken up in Droysen's *Grundriß der Historik*. It was the set of questions concerning the different modes of writing history. As in the case of hermeneutics, such questions were given fairly detailed treatment by Steenstrup in his book *Historieskrivning* (1915), whereas Erslev felt justified in leaving such questions out of consideration because he conceived of them as relevant mainly in relation to narrative history (Danish: "Historieskrivning", German: "Geschichtsschreibung") and not of great significance in relation to scientific history (Danish: "Historievidenskab", German: "Geschichtswissenschaft"). Some Danish historians have wanted to hold on to Erslev's distinction. Thus Niels Thomsen - in *Historiens Janushoved* (1994) - has argued in favour of upholding such a way of thinking and has at the same time tried to banish narrative history as far as possible from the premises of Danish academic history. Yet, there have also been Danish historians who have, over the years, sought to question the validity of such a distinction.

When Povl Bagge questioned Erslev's distinction in *Om historieforskningens videnskabelig karakter* [On the Scientific Nature of Historical Inquiry] (1940), it constituted a direct and frontal attack on the positivist elements in Erslev's conception of science, but it was not conceived as an attempt to initiate a debate about the narrative character of history. Similarly, when Inga Floto (b. 1937) set out critically to scrutinize Erslev's *Historieskrivning* (1911) in *Problematiseringen af objektiviteten* [Questioning Objectivity] (1978), her overarching aim was not to make a

plea for the development of a more narrative approach to history, but rather to make a contribution to the debate about whether or not historians were to play an active and thus constructive role in the pursuit of historical research and in the writing of history.

It was only after the journal *Den jyske Historiker* had brought Hayden White and his *Metahistory* (1973) into the Danish debate in 1990, that questions concerning history as text began to be discussed in a serious way. Two very different sets of questions came up for treatment in the course of the 1990s. The first concerns the question as to whether or not academic history writing is different from other forms of historical writing - for instance, the writing of historical novels. A few academic historians - most notably John Christensen and Henrik Stevnsborg - have argued in favour of giving up the whole distinction between academic history writing and other kinds of literature, but so far they have not rallied much support for such a position among their historian colleagues.

The other theme that has cropped up concerns the question: how do academic historians actually emplot the stories they write? By using the set of concepts that White developed in *Metahistory* Jan Pedersen (b. 1955) has in *Historiens form* [The Form of History] (1998) made a detailed analysis of how three contemporary historians have emplotted their treatments of 18th century Danish history. Similarly, Bernard Eric Jensen in *Den faghistoriske biografi* [Biography as a Form of Academic History] (1999) has made a detailed study of how six biographies - written by academic historians in the 1990s - attempt to handle the inter-relationship between the history writer, the history reader and the story being told. Thus, although Erslev's decision to bracket off the question of how history can and should be written in *Historisk Teknik* led to the theme being more or less completely bypassed by Danish academic historians for very many years, the situation changed radically in the course of the 1990s - such that there is today a growing interest in questions concerning history as text.

### Is there a moral to be drawn from this story?

Just as there are very different positions from which one may seek to survey the Danish debates on historical method and theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so different Danish historians will probably draw different lessons from the history of their discipline. It cannot be otherwise since to draw a moral is an attempt to answer a rather crucial question: what may I/you/we learn from the past in this instance? And it may thus be seen as a way of upholding the classical topos about history as a *magistra vitae*.<sup>13</sup> To draw a moral from a story may moreover be a way of furthering one's historical

<sup>10</sup> For the most recent manifestation of this interest see Mikrohistorie (1999).

<sup>11</sup> For the most recent manifestation of this interest see *Historisk sociologi. Modernitet, forandring, komparation* (1998).

<sup>12</sup> This is clear from a publication such as *Historiefaget efter Postmodernismen* (2000).

<sup>13</sup> See B. E. Jensen, *Historiografi: historikernes læremester?* (1987).

consciousness - and this in the dual sense of the term: it can be an attempt to link one's interpretation of past events to one's understanding of the present in the hope of being able to shape the future, but it may also be a way of trying to generate insight into one's own historicity. So, what follows is the moral I would want to draw from the preceding story about how Danish academic historians have tended to handle the Erslev legacy in the course of the 20th century.

In light of the preceding survey of the Danish debates on the method and theory of history it becomes pertinent to try to explain how a single person could come to exert such an influence for such a long time. I think that an adequate explanation of this pattern must combine three very different kinds of facts. First, part of the explanation has to found in the fact that Danish academic history was - in quantitative terms - a rather small world during the first two thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, all Danish historians were in fact trained at the same place during the first half of that century, namely, at Copenhagen University. When it comes down to the question of who was actually training the up-coming generations of Danish historians, the number of people involved was very small indeed for many years. Second, the next part of the explanation concerns the fact that Erslev's legacy was a rather ambiguous one, and it was thus possible for historians with very different inclinations to find something worthwhile in his writings and other achievements. This aspect of Erslev's *Wirkungsgeschichte* has to be seen as a more or less unintended consequence of a particular human project. Third, the final part of the explanation concerns the fact that Erslev was a multi-talented historian - thus he was good at practising history and at analysing and reflecting upon this practice. However, it seems that no Danish historian has wanted to follow in the footsteps of this father figure in the sense of trying to develop the same multi-faceted competence that Erslev had as a historian. This is a fact which I think is worth pondering on.

When it comes to the task of trying to generate insight into how scholarly disciplines actually develop and change, it is interesting to note that many 20<sup>th</sup> century Danish academic historians were seemingly of the opinion that it would be possible to go on generating interesting research and writing worthwhile history without using much time or energy on more general reflections about the method, theory and the purpose of their discipline. They have, in other words, tended to take Erslev the practising historian rather than Erslev the reflective theoretician as their role model.

It was certainly the dominant way of thinking during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and although it no longer seems to be the prevailing one, there are still many Danish historians who tend to think along such lines. This way of thinking had its heyday among the generation of historians that had Erslev as their teacher, and it was also this generation which had

to pay a fairly high price for its non-reflective approach to their own professional pursuits. The most striking example of this is the career of Erik Arup. He seemingly never used much time on trying to generate insight into his own way of doing research and writing history, and he was therefore largely unable to put forward a reasonably convincing legitimization of his own approach when the publication of his *Danmarks Historie* unleashed some very heated controversies in 1925 and 1932. The lack of theoretical reflexivity among Danish historians has contributed to making this and other controversies much more abortive and futile than they might otherwise have been.

When the interest in the Erslev legacy began to flourish among Danish historians in the 1970s, it was Erslev the reflective theoretician rather than Erslev the practising historian who mainly caught their interest. Initially this no doubt helped to further the dissemination of more reflective approaches within the Danish history profession, but there was at the same time a tendency towards making the study of the method and theory of history into a specialised field of study. Such a development has no doubt furthered the development of professional competence among those working within this sub-discipline of academic history. But it has also had a rather obvious cost, namely, that a gap has begun to grow between experts on method and theory on the one hand and other sections of the history profession on the other. For many working historians the debates about method and theory became a little too abstract and remote for their liking, and this may in part explain why the interest in method and theory began to wane in the Danish setting in the course of the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, to my mind, the way in which the Erslev legacy has been handled in Denmark indicates not only that it has been difficult to strike the right balance between Erslev the practising historian and Erslev the reflective theoretician, but also that such a balance may in fact turn out to be a rather delicate one. However, to regain such a balance may turn out to be very difficult today with the mounting fragmentation and specialisation within the history profession.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is the achievement of this balance that constitutes the challenge at the present time.

<sup>14</sup> See B. E. Jensen, *Selvrefleksion i dansk faghistorie: et status*, (1996).

<sup>15</sup> The fragmentation of Danish academic history has been explored in *Mangfoldighedens pris. Dansk faghistorie - et status* (1997).

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## Nordic Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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