

**NCH-2017**

**Panel session**

**HISTORIANS ON HISTORIANS**

**List of contributors:**

- Jaume Aurell, University of Navarra, Spain
- Ben Dorfman, Aalborg University, Denmark
- Susanna Fellman, University of Gothenburg, Sweden & Andrew Popp, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom
- Mikko Kainulainen, University of Turku, Finland; Marjaana Puurtinen, University of Turku, Finland & Clark Chinn, Rutgers University, USA

**Session organizers and chairs:**

- Kalle Pihlainen, Tallinn University, Estonia
- Marjaana Puurtinen, University of Turku, Finland

**Keywords:**

Autobiography; Expertise in history; Historiography; Philosophy of history; Research methodology

**Panel session abstract:**

The panel tackles the question of the nature of historians' work by examining the contemporary pressures directed at them, their self-understandings as expressed in research and in autobiographies, and their self-awareness as articulated in interviews. Our contributors approach this question from a number of different disciplines and backgrounds ranging from the philosophy of history through historiography and business history to educational sciences. The idea behind this lies in the observation that although the theory and philosophy of history have established research traditions that reflect on the characteristics of the domain, these theories have very rarely been put to test in empirical settings. Thus, there is a limit to how much can be said about historians' professional expertise from historical perspectives alone. The methodological practices developed in educational sciences, however, could provide tools for gradually bridging the gap between so-far-detached theoretical studies and the empirical testing of learning and development in the domain of history. By investigating how historians see their practices, we hope to initiate a broader discussion and lay the ground for reaching a more cross-disciplinary, comprehensive understanding of professional historical research.

**ABSTRACTS (IN PRESENTATION ORDER)****Thinking History Today: Return to a Particular Historicist Charge?***Ben Dorfman*

Our times involve enormous cultural and political torsion. Senses of global culturo-political crisis may have nonetheless inaugurated the “end” of the “end of history.” By “end of history,” I mean less Fukuyama-esque senses of the end of ideological conflicts between liberalism and socialism than the end of the end of historical consciousness suggested by a range of critics having accompanied the post-Cold War years. Crisis – broad global crisis – may have reinvigorated an interest historical knowledge and genealogical investigations of culturo-political situations in which we find ourselves. Publics have begun to ask for understandings of the conflicted lifeworld in which we find ourselves. In this setting, the conventional role of historians as academically isolated is being questioned, and we are called to investigate our role as public intellectuals.

Concepts of “historicism” must be treated with care – postmodern critiques of objectivity and unembodied historical narratives have been decisive. Still, the kind of historical knowledge publics appear to ask for in today’s uncertain times may be of a *gestalt* nature. Specifically, there may be a thirst for what historicist Heinrich Rickert termed the historical “nexus”: contextualizing individualized events – economic crises, terrorist attacks, specific regional conflicts (e.g., Syria) – against larger *gestalt* understandings of not only our times, but global historical narratives explaining how things became how they “are.” I.e., specific events may have resurrected public interests in “grand” historical thinking. The conceptualization of such thought might be best represented in sets of historical theories (hermeneuticist and phenomenological historicisms) no longer oft-referenced, yet perhaps with high relevance nonetheless. This presentation will examine such phenomena in an attempt to grapple with the demands on historical thought placed on historians in the contemporary age.

**Historians on Historians***Jaume Aurell*

Thomas Kuhn provided scholars from all the scientific disciplines with the concept of “paradigm”, a very useful concept which may help us to analyze the everlasting process of reformation of the historical discipline. A paradigm is a distinct set of concepts or thought patterns, including theories, methodologies and tenets hegemonic in a discipline in a given moment, based on a general consent of their members. Historians are particularly prone to revise their epistemic principles, so the analysis of their functioning as scientific collective may be particularly useful for this Conference’s aims. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians have known three successive paradigms: humanistic in the between-wars period, scientific in the postwar period, and postmodern during the last third of the century. This paper tries to examine the main motivations of this continued shifting in what seems to be an unstable basis of the discipline, but what finally provides it with the necessary dynamism and vitality. The most reliable and expressive source to understand this process is the texts of “historians on

historians". Historians talk of historians mainly in two ways: when they criticize their colleagues' works and when they write their autobiographies. This paper explores the last, trying to select some particular examples of what we call "interventional autobiography", that is, historians trying to "intervene" in the historiographical debates using their own vital experience. Some of the examples explored will be Geoff Eley, Natalie Davis, Gabrielle Spiegel and Peter Burke.

### **Talking to Historians: Interviews as a Source for Methodological Reflections in Business History**

*Susanna Fellman & Andrew Popp*

Historians often seem reluctant to talk about their methodological approaches beyond brief descriptions of their sources. This applies to their work in the archive and the processing of the empirical material, but the work of constructing the historical narrative also frequently remains concealed. This act of concealment has implications for how others receive our work, hindering dialogue with non-historians. In previous work, we interviewed business historians about their practices. Our interviews followed the entire process of conducting historical research, from the work in the archive to the production of the written text. We found that historians practice a range of systematic collection techniques whilst in the archive, which also extends to their writing practices. However, practices are to a great extent also based on intuition and tacit knowledge. We observed the significance of the act of writing as a process of reflection and sense-making. These discussions provided us with insights into the "historians' craft", about business historians' professional practices, their relation to the archive, about the key role of the writing in the scholarly process, and about business historians' epistemological positions. We noted how interviewees welcomed the opportunity to engage in dialogue about their practices, though they grappled with explaining what it is they do.

In this paper we reflect on what kind of knowledge can be acquired by using oral sources in methodological explorations in historical scholarship. Can greater understanding of the historian's craft be gained through such dialogue or are the insights generated likely to remain idiosyncratic and specific to the individual respondent? Is the historian's craft robust enough to withstand exposure to discussion? How can insights gained through an oral research method be incorporated into the texts we write?

### **Historians' Epistemic Cognition**

*Mikko Kainulainen, Marjaana Puurtinen & Clark Chinn*

During the past few decades there have been some pursuits in spotlighting historians' views on both their intellectual development as well as their writing and thinking about history, such as the work reported by Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke and in *Rethinking History*. Although they provide crucial insights about how eminent historians reflect on their general practices, these reports have been unable to systematically access the daily epistemic processes of "doing history" by a significant sample of working historians. It is therefore crucial to approach historians' work not only through their general beliefs about the nature and importance of

historical research, but also through more detailed reflections on their everyday practices: How are specific methods chosen for research projects? What happens when one comes upon an unexpected research finding? To approach this issue, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with 24 Finnish academic historians about their work practices, understanding of historical research and historiography, and their own perceptions of their personal development towards expertise in the discipline. Applying the AIR model of epistemic cognition, we analyze the historians' narrations through a content analysis focusing on three components: epistemic Aims and values, epistemic Ideals, and Reliable processes for producing epistemic products. Preliminary results show considerable variation between historians on all these components. At the end, we aim to demonstrate what a more cognitive-oriented approach could add to the current understanding on professional historians' epistemic views on their discipline.