# Action and Testimony: The Historical Fact between Truth and Representation

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## Abstract

*History is a broad and comprehensive scientific enterprise that is deeply connected to other disciplines, in particular the social sciences. An intertwined study of action, experience, and memory in their dialectic relation to social facts on one side and the study of human action in an analytical-critical and hermeneutical perspective on the other can shed light on the methodological issues concerning the structural explanatory and interpretative dimensions of the historical past. In this context, the notion of action can be seen as the contact point between history as an event and history as a (personal) experience. The modern formulations of action theory oriented toward the conceptual the matisation of strategies and models in empirical sciences seem to underlie a reconfiguration of the role of testimony in history according to scientific methodology.*

**Key Words:** explanation, understanding, historical past, fact, action, testimony

### *Introduction*

One of the most recent issues regarding history as a human science concerns the role of testimony as a cardinal source of information and one of the most important ways of displaying the alleged content of any historical research, i.e. a 'reconstruction of the past.' For different reasons, the question of testimony is crucial to the epistemology of history. Indeed, one cannot explicitly determine what the 'reconstruction of the past' amounts to – whether it is an explanation and understanding of an historical fact or a reinterpretation and re-narration of human life and its condition – without answering the question of *testimony primacy*.

At its foundation, its depends on the final meaning, which a historian may have in some sense, of history as a human enterprise and as a part of the human constitution. At the same time, it directly impacts the problematic of the epistemic consistency of historical knowledge, even if, by introducing the use of testimony, the faithfulness of memory becomes of primary importance when compared to the aspect of truth by history (see Ricœur 2004, p. 229).

From one perspective, the entire problematic could be approached both (1) epistemologically, starting with Carlo Ginzburg's position that 'the word *historia* stems at one and the same time from medical language, from the rhetorical argumentation of the juridical setting, and from the art of persuasion practiced before the court' (*Ib.*, p. 317), or (2) methodologically, moving from an historical fact that occurred in a unique space-time context to a 'declarative memory' externalised in testimony from spoken transmission first followed by written documents. Actually, 'passing through the door of archives, testimony enters the critical zone where it is not only submitted to the harsh confrontation among competing testimonies, but absorbed into a mass of documents that are not all testimonies' (*Ib.*, pp. 146-147). Testimony – oral testimony, in particular – supposedly has pre-eminence among sources of historical knowledge in that it eliminates distance from the past, actualising it and somehow offering the possibility to 're-experience' it through the narrative medium (oral or written).

Beyond the specific, ontological and epistemological problematic gap between the absence of the past and its representation in the present (which has not always been the matised, for example, by historians such as Krzyst of Pomian [1998]), testimony certainly may change the way we represent history. In fact, by focusing attention on the feelings and the inner world of the actors and witnesses of past events rather than on the succession of actions and events tends to significantly affect the historical matter itself and the manner through which the historians understand, explain, and write about it. From another point of view, 'history is vaster than memory' and 'its time is layered differently' (Ricœur 2004, p. 498). However, on one side, 'history can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past' (*Ib*.), never abolishing it. From the other side, through its constant work to enrich, integrate, revise, re-modulate, and so on, the community of historians create a historisation of memory as part of historical knowledge, where the *re-presentation of the past* becomes a concrete and available scientific medium between memory and historical past.

For certain historians, 'reliving the past' is seen as a task that history must fulfil as a better way to understand the past itself or to re-actualise it for different reasons. This view has a strong link to ancient historians' approach to history. This is the case of Plutarch, for example. In his work entitled *Lives*, he does not simply attempt to reconstruct each life using a narrative strategy to organise the significant amount of varied materials he collected. Instead, he selects them following the line of collecting edifying information on each character for pedagogical or moral reasons (see Pownall 2004, p. 117).

The ideal procedural line for contemporary promoters of the so-called oral history is particular because it can focus on the narration of people who are the 'hidden from history' such as generally forgotten victims, minorities, and 'common people.' An ideal or moral function of testimony (conceived in connection with unofficial or informal history) is an essential part of doing history in this manner. Oral history is part of the 'public history' (surveys worked for a wide dissemination through media: documentaries, films, and reports). This is in contrast to 'academic history,' which was blamed for being too closely tied to positivist and empiricist approaches. We are thus pushed beyond the dilemma of the practical-procedural use(s) of testimony for moral or non-moral reasons or ends in writing history. The reference to and the use of testimony in historical knowledge readdresses the epistemological and methodological dilemma to what is an objective historical knowledge of the past. Is it essentially a detached explanation of the past facts and events or is it an inevitably (and variously) involved and comprehensive approach because it is structurally disposed between memory, identity, and time?

The aim of this paper is to challenge the Manichean thesis that history is either trustworthy in memory or unfaithful in explanation; either a lively, integrating, and trustworthy (re-) experience in which the past is 'relived,' or a unilaterally descriptive, formal, reductive, and anti-democratic re-construction. History is a broad and comprehensive scientific enterprise that is deeply connected to other disciplines, particularly the social sciences. An intertwined study between action, experience and memory in their dialectic relation to social facts on one side, and the study of human action (and interaction) from an analytical-critical and hermeneutical perspective on the other can shed light on the methodological issues concerning the *structural explanatory and interpretative dimensions of historical past*.

The question is complex, and its basic points of departure significantly depend on both the conception (i.e. mission) of history as a discipline and the work of the historian who is both a scholar and a person at the same time. If the basic tenet of history as a human science is to understand our past, then the primary research subjects should be the individual and collective actions of people who are moved to act and interact by their passions and reasons, feelings and experiences, ideals and values, and their beliefs and convictions. Actions are conditioned and are capable to condition events that take place in our internal and external worlds. We argue that a causal explanation of the events related to historical actions is relevant at various levels in order to understand those actions and that it is relevant to reconstruct the dynamics of historical events by individuating the effective reasons that motivated those actions.

The support of a general understanding of human nature, as studied in various forms by the entire human and social sciences (including history), is of tremendous importance here. However, the same is true for the support of quantitative, statistic, probabilistic, and simulative approaches that help to indicate, evaluate, and recognise which elements, causes, or reasons from among countless events has actually been relevant and determinant that occur within a certain historical moment and context.

At this stage, memories and, specifically, testimony can play specific roles in both (1) helping the historian to reconstruct a well-balanced explanation and comprehensive concatenation of arguments concerning an historical fact, or reversely (2) increasing the degree of complexity and difficulty in reconstructing a likely past.

This relatively perpetual dialectic between the suspicion of a false testimony and an ideological reconstruction of history reflects the mobile ontological constitution of human actions and purpose, which are never mathematically intelligible from the moment of their first appearance or expression. At the same time, however, it mirrors the dualistic dimension of human action as (1) a descriptive object or explanation because it is connected to natural dispositions, mechanisms, instincts, needs, or a certain constancy due to character, tradition, culture, and so on; and (2) as an object of interpretation because it is connected to specific reasons, values, evaluations, and so on.
It is evident that the relationship between aspects, components, and elements of understanding and the explanation of historical knowledge consists of a multilevel problematic that is not simply epistemological and methodological. However, even if it involves the philosophy of history or even anthropological philosophy, the most balanced way to approach this historical knowledge problematic does not seem to have a fully speculative or hermeneutics approach. Essentially, it is a problematic involving historical knowledge; Therefore, it is a problematic whose key solution lies between its object of study and its method of knowledge. It is first and foremost an epistemological and methodological problematic.

This link has been debated since the explanation was first generally considered to imply causality and laws (whether causal or not). History, however, can be considered a science without laws. This was the basic meaning of Wonderland's famous account of history and human sciences as *idiographic*, in contrast to the *nomothetic* character ascribed to the natural sciences. Yet sciences such as economics, (social) psychology, anthropology, and sociology have attempted to use mathematical tools and/or theories, originally developed in the natural sciences, in the hope of discovering law like regularities in their study subjects. Indeed, laws would provide reliable predictions or at least better explanatory frameworks (for instance, through dynamical models of social processes) that are the long-time desiderata of all human sciences.

Thus far, history tends not to share such aims with the other sciences. Its aim is generally not to search for law like regularities in human actions (individual and collective) over time but to delve into the meanings of singular, unique successions of actions for the times in which they were carried out. Such an aim does not actually mean that history cannot refer to laws coming from other sciences in order to build its interpretations of the past. Moreover, the idiographic character of history does not necessarily impede the use of conceptual and methodological instruments and techniques employed by other sciences. Taking input from recent developments in action theory as well as from scientifically directed studies on testimony, we will show how the potential linkages to different sciences can be insightful of the study of history.

## *The epistemology of testimony*

Epistemology – or, at least, Western epistemology – is typically less interested in testimony as a source of knowledge than perception or inference. The reason lies in the fact that the natural sciences, which form the centre of interests for (Anglo-American) epistemology, rely almost totally on the perception or inference, while testimony (even documentary testimony) is generally taken into consideration only in very specific cases. The underestimation of the importance of testimony in the sciences may be debatable but it is certainly a crucial source of information or of knowledge in general for certain disciplines.

In history, the epistemological debate, which has assumed a complex and specific configuration, fully recognises the central function of testimony. In fact, historical knowledge shows a puzzling epistemological structure: firstly, because knowledge is placed between explanation and understanding, according to von Wright and Ricœur (among others); and secondly, because historical knowledge exists between scientific knowledge and common sense, using materials such as documents, objects, and historical remains, *and* using mental (subjective) contents such as personal experience, and testimony, and subjective reconstruction through a (personal) story of one's own past. History seems unable to dispense with input from testimony for a very simple reason. When describes history's ultimate goal, it has to do with the past (past events or actions), and the past is, by principle, inaccessible by direct, present experience. Additionally, setting aside solipsistic arguments, a significant part of the past is also beyond one's remembered experiences, beyond one's own memories, and even beyond any reasonable inference from those experiences and memories.

But if history is about events beyond the reach of our personal experience, lying in a more distant past, then disallowing the accounts of other people would undermine its possibility. History depends in an essential way on testimony. Claims about the past that are beyond the reach of individual experience and that do not depend on testimony are merely archaeological. If claims about the human past are, to the contrary, based on our own experiences and memories, then they are no more than reportage or journalism. Another way of putting this is to say that history is, in some large sense of the word, 'documentary' (or 'testimonial') history (Brittan 1994, p. 273).

Therefore, for history to be different from pure archaeology and journalism, it must rely on testimonial sources. Let us now discuss the types of testimony at stake in this discourse. Indeed, the epistemological problems regarding testimony – at least in Anglo-American philosophy – seem to be indifferent to how testimony is conveyed (whether orally or in writing). Those problems turn on the question of whether one knows some proposition (p) after someone else says (or writes) that proposition (p). In other words, the problem is susceptible to being generalised because most of what we know comes from transmission. This aspect is generally recognised today, considering that more than a certain amount of knowledge is made up of beliefs formed through what others tell you and that 'your knowledge depends pervasively on the word of others' (Lipton 1998, p. 1). The question of testimony (which is thus generalisable) is strictly connected to this point; and the point is whether testimony is a trustworthy source of knowledge or a valid justification (sufficient warrant) for the acceptance of the content of (p) as true. Generally, principles such as the following are the starting points in such debates:

- Knowledge Norm of Assertion: 'One correctly asserts that (p) if one knows (or represents oneself as knowing) (p).'
- Default Rule for Testimony: 'If the speaker S asserts that (p) to the hearer H, then, under normal conditions, it is correct for H to accept (believe) S's assertion, unless H has special reason to object.'[1]

Though certainly interesting and insightful, debates based on the search for a priori or normative epistemological principles to support the notion that the word of the speaker (or writer) is a warrant of truth do not really address the issues concerning testimony in history (see Adler 2015). Indeed, although many of the a priori accounts of analytic philosophers had already been taken into consideration by historians, the latter appear to trust, above all, a posterior reasons to determine the 'authenticity' of testimony. Their procedures are inspired by the same suspicious positions held by detectives and judges regarding witnesses. Thus, their aim is not to establish a general a priori rule for testimony trustworthiness but to review every case individually. This does not mean there are no methodological rules, as we shall soon see. Moreover, in making their examinations on a case-by-case basis, historians evaluate testimony even beyond its propositional content. This fact is of particular significance for the issue at hand.

First, though, let us consider a historian's need to find a posterior warrants for witnessing. As Brittan says, Thucydides was the first to address the 'inferential scepticism' regarding the 'authenticity' of testimonial and documentary information.[2] For the Greek historian eye- and ear-witnesses were the primary source of information and were made up of, for the most part, coeval facts. Additionally, he decided not to take into account hearsay information or oral traditions that could not be subjected to strict tests. This had two effects, both relevant for our inquiry. The first was that Thucydides had to temporally limit his subject by principle. Indeed, a history of remote past was avowedly thought to be impossible and this was one of the reasons for the criticism he directed toward Herodotus.

The temporal limits Thucydides imposed on his research are particularly interesting. Current oral history, in fact, clearly has similar limitations, notwithstanding the existing recording devices and other factors. As we shall see, if Thucydides must have eyewitness testimony, given his high standards of examination, oral history must find direct witnesses. The other effect of Thucydides' strict testing of testimony was the need to adopt the methodology of the courts of law. Indeed, the most demanding form of testimony review (oral but also written) is cross-examination, i.e. comparing as many accounts as possible of the same occurrence that do not coincide, as usually happens with different witnesses or even from the same witnesses but at different times.

1 For both definitions see Adler 2015, §3.

2 'Inferential' here refers to the scepticism regarding the inference from 'document D, the witness S or oral tradition O reads or reports "p" to "it was the case that p"' (see Brittan 1994, p. 275).

In some sense, the impossibility of comparing testimonial content with past facts led to the 'search for coherent stories' (Brittan 1994, p. 276). This final result of the cross-examination method for testimony permitted an apt response to the problem of inferential scepticism: the impossibility of comparing testimony with the facts does not imply that it is impossible to verify the accuracy of the testimony itself (as well as the non-instrumental use of such testimony from a determinate historian's subjective interest).

Moreover, that scepticism was also overridden by the consideration that the intrinsically limited context of any testimony involved a reasonably short chain of inference from the narrated events to otherwise known events. In other words, gaps in the reports or gaps among different reports in conjunction with direct evidence from the investigators (or historians) could be bridged without any 'appeal to putative "laws" governing human behaviour' (*Ib.*). This appeal became important for authors like Hume, in order to secure the epistemic status of the testimony regarding remote past facts that implied long inferential chains to be connected to facts of direct evidence (see *Ib.*, pp. 277-279). On the other hand, though generally criticised by contemporary scholars (both historians and philosophers) for the naive generalisation of actual human behaviour (see *Ib.*, pp. 279-281), this reference to behavioural laws has a completely different allure for researchers in the social and psychological sciences.

### *The non-cognitive value of testimony*

The general reference to the methodology adopted by trial investigators can provide insight to shifting our accounts of testimony toward a more scientifically oriented view. Additionally, the potential scientific weight of such a methodology can become relevant in order to address also the other two arisen problems, the non-cognitive value of testimony for historical purposes and the ultimate goal of history as a social science. First, as mentioned above, one of the reasons behind the need for a cross-examination of testimony is to eliminate the bias of the witnesses and/or the historians. This can be achieved by taking testimony from all sides involved. Such strategy may also be important to avoid one of the primary inconveniences of oral history. Second, the adoption of an investigative attitude and method has been strictly connected to the core of historical work by another great theorist, R. G. Collingwood. He, in particular, thought that thinking like a detective was a good model to define the intellectual activity of historians (see Collingwood 1970) and according to Collingwood, this was directly connected to the final content of the historical work, i.e. understanding the past as an intentional construct of human actions. This systemic and constructive representation of historical facts would be the ultimate result but would also be the peculiarity of history as a science.

Moreover, according to Collingwood, this feature provides the historian (among other scientists) with a unique autonomy with respect to his/her sources of knowledge (see *Ib.*, p. 256). Collingwood's view and his astonishing claims regarding the insignificance of data and testimony for historical work led to understandable criticism. Coady, for instance, brilliantly shows how – even using the detective story model – the inquirer uses direct as well as indirect evidence and testimony without discussing or much less 'torturing' them in order to obtain certain new conclusions (Coady 1992, pp. 240-245). More charitably, Brittan considers Collingwood's 'intentionality theory of historical understands understanding' to be an alternative option with respect to Thucydides' theory of the primacy of coherence over correspondence. Instead of considering the events corresponding to coherent systems of documents and testimony to b true one can construe events as intentional systems of action and reason (Brittan 1994, p. 283). Collingwood's solution, however, led to another form of scepticism proposed by post-structuralism philosophers. They also criticised a similar idea that intentional meaning in the text of documentary testimony is illusory when used as the principal source of alleged knowledge for history.

The reason for this lack of meaning was based on the following: (1) that text completely transcends the intentions of its author, (2) that the author himself/herself is a sort of fantastic construction, and (3) that because we cannot understand the background in which the author lived, consequently, we cannot understand the reasons and meaning for his/her actions, as any understanding is totally relative to the temporal situation in which it is attempted. In this context, any interpretation is possible and is as admissible as any other, in principle. The only possible way to escape from this absolute communicative in determination might be in the direct speaking where the background is shared by both the hearer and speaker. No one can easily realise how such scepticism – together with its attack on the attempt to rationally understand textual (historical) narratives and its positively evoking speaker-hearer situations – is linked to the question of oral testimony as a vehicle for emotive and individual experiences. In this way, we come to an authentic conundrum regarding testimony: is the content conveyed by historical testimony strictly irrational?

### *The goal of history*

Even when the purpose of history is defined as 'pure knowledge of the past,' history crosses and brings to the knowledge of the human being. Thus, the meaning conferred on historical events by history on one side and the human being's meaning of history on the other become identical through the work of the historian.

It is essentially this dynamism that provides a border-line *speculative* structure to the methodological and epistemological issues related to historical knowledge. In fact, the construction of historical knowledge is not simply an issue of the methodology for obtaining historical knowledge nor is it an issue of the epistemology of historical human and social sciences. It is true that the relationship between the factual dimension and the representational and interpretative dimensions has always been challenged in terms of the theoretical counter position among *epistemological* schools and theories. In fact, on the one hand, we have those who support that there is a substantial identity between history and the natural sciences concerning the criteria of evidence (see Tucker 2004; Kosso 1992) and on other, we have those who underscore the fundamental links between the pragmatic, identitarian, cultural, and political-ideological components of history, which require an objectivity that is different from that used in the natural sciences. However, behind this particular aspect of a constitutive connection between historical thought and collective practices of memory and identity, we find more than a *methodological* or *epistemological* problematic.

In history, methodology and epistemology are blended together with theoretical-speculative and anthropological-philosophical dilemmas. The issue with the representation of past facts, which seems to quintessentially resume the crucial point of all thematic lines, is that it opens the door to an important series of specific theoretical-speculative aspects. Among them are the following: (1) intersubjective, interactive, and narrative aspects referring to the meaning of events (Rüsen 2005) and the historical-anthropological condition of the human being (Ricœur 2004); (2) explanations and interpretations of human actions/behaviours and their representations; and (3) the 'dialectics' of representation and re-narration connected to specific habits, knowledge, interests, conceptions/prejudices, and so on. All of these aspects contribute to reconfiguring the dimension of historical facts as highly epistemological problematics when represented or (re-)narrated by the work of a particular historian. In many ways, in fact, this work seems to have a pervasive *evaluative* weaving. It seems to have a permanent, moving structure of interpretative pluralism. The problem with how to harmonise the need for an accurate analysis of the representational systems and different historians' uses of tools and means (according to their specific approach and conception) is resolved by bringing together the epistemic, methodologic, and speculative problematic of how to approach, study, and conceive human action.

### *Action and Testimony*

It essentially follows the line that the theme/problem with testimony is overcome and reabsorbed within the more vast problematic of the representation and re-narration of the past, or better yet, of past human actions. We are then led to the question of explaining and interpreting action. Closing in on the methodological and epistemological issue of human action in general reinforces the interpretation suggested by von Wright and Ricœur of the historical-social sciences as having a double epistemic structure, i.e. explicative and comprehensive.

*Action: its reasons and causes.* In epistemology, the distinction between explanation and comprehension/ understanding is highly controversial, as would be expected. Thus, we may decide to follow the 'simple' solution of giving provisional definitions to the terms without attempting to delve into the heart of the debate. Thus, we can say that *explanations* refer to events or situations and generally consist of discovering and illustrating the (causal) chain of the other events and situations that brings about the former. (It is better if the connection between cause and effect is systematic and can be defined by a [mathematical] law).[3] On the other hand, comprehension or *understanding* supposedly refers to a global or holistic view of a certain system of events that can generally go beyond the individuation of causes. This means that understanding is a different mode of configuring knowledge compared to (causal) explanations, even if it may comprise explanations (particularly, causal explanations).

3 This may be a simplified generalisation of the famous *deductive-nomological model* proposed by Hempel (1965, 1966).

However, if explanations are considered objective, understanding is thought to be subjective (see Hempel 1965, p. 413) or at least a perspective form of reframing information. However, understanding is also considered to be essential for any form of knowledge.[4] It is indispensable in scientific research that does not look for law like regularities such as historical inquiries, as noted above. Moreover, the distinction is that explanation/understanding is fundamental in building a *theory of action*, which, in turn, is essential for historiography. According to von Wright (1971), for instance, the objects of explanation and understanding are not specifically events in history. They are certainly not considered to be natural states of affair or mere happenings. Historical events are correlated to actions of which there can be conditions or consequences. Thus, in history (and social sciences), the main object of study is action, which is defined as the state of a system and the agent (see von Wright 1963, ch. 3), in particular, can be collective or individual. This system is considered to be a teleological system, i.e. a temporal entity with intentionality.[5] Consequently, as in Collingwood's view, the form of understanding of historical facts is intentional and relies primarily on explanations in the sense of the *teleological explanation* of actions. However, unlike Collingwood, von Wright believes that events correlated with actions can be explained causally, as this is compatible with teleological explanations (von Wright 1971, pp. 125-131) and that such explanations are also used by historians (*Ib*., pp. 135-139). Thus, neither form of explanation is either superfluous or reducible to the other. Their differences are conceptual and based on distinct categories of understanding, that is, causality/mechanics and teleology/intentionality (*Ib*., p. 32; see von Wright 1998).

However, the teleological explanation should have a heuristic priority over the causal explanation. This primacy ultimately hinges upon the need to determine which happenings are relevant in understanding a certain (historical or, in general, human) fact. Indeed, on the one hand, facts are made up *and* surrounded by uncountable series of happenings, among which only few are effectively interpreted as relevant events for that fact. On the other hand, actions can be seen as situations that bring about events or, in any case, there seems to be a sort of 'congruence' in certain situations between the dynamics of human actions (and their determinants) and the movements of human bodies (as well as the environmental events causally correlated with those movements) so that action and events appear strictly correlated, almost 'logically' correlated (von Wright 1963). Thus, the correlation/congruence between action and physical behaviour of any individual entails that even 'a neuroscientific explanation of those bodily movements is adequate only if those movements are the (differently described) *results* of his intentionally moving his body' (Stoutland 2010, p. 595).

*Action and science: modern approaches*. Interestingly enough, this account of the potential heuristic role of the intentional understanding of action is still present even in more recent, naturalised approaches to action theory. For instance, even a critic of the so called 'Good Old-Fashioned Philosophy of Action' will recognise (as did G. P. Stevenson) a similar position for the explanations of action based on 'folk psychology' (Dennett 1971), which underlies intentional understanding.[6] Intuitions concerning the nature of action provide essential (yet fallible) launching points for further investigation, even if they do not constitute fruitful arbiters for testing rival theories within the sphere of conceptual analysis (Stevenson 2004, p. 442).

The basic idea is that in any modern *naturalised action theory*, intentional understanding should bridge the gap between the intuitive recognition of happenings resulting from actions and the scientific models that attempt to understand one agency from the other.[7]

4 This view is so general that we find similar accounts even from philosophers of physics. See, for instance, Friedman (1974). He, also, underlines that, even if one defines understanding as 'pragmatic' or 'psychological,' as Hempel did, because it refers to 'thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, etc. of a person' (Friedman 1974, pp. 7-8), this does not mean that understanding is also necessarily 'subjective,' i.e. 'a notion that varies from individual to individual' (*Ib.*, p. 8). His thesis is that (scientific) understanding as a global view on systems of phenomena can be fully shared by rational individuals.

5 Von Wright also recognises a different domain for teleology, the one of *purposes* and *functions*, which, however, can be understood causally or mechanically – for instance, with the conceptual tools of cybernetics (von Wright 1971, pp. 16-18).

6 Stevenson's criticisms cover both teleological and causal forms of (early) action theory, particularly the latter. If von Wright's account is of the first type, paradigms of causalism in action theory are certainly Davidson (1980)'s and Goldman (1976)'s.

7 The point of view may be similar to the one of Dennett's *intentional system theory*. Its grounding thesis is the 'neutrality' of the *intentional stance* towards the nature of the 'internal mechanism' guiding human (rational) behaviour (Dennett 2009).

Indeed, the goal of those types of theories is not to reduce action and intentional systems to causal events and mechanic systems (in a broad sense, this also includes cybernetic systems) or to reduce categories regarding agency to categories such as neuroscience, biology, or even physics. On the contrary, they aim to integrate models from those sciences into a wider framework capable of including the human sciences (anthropology, social psychology, and sociology in particular) in which the paradigm of the intentional/teleological understanding is still essential. The attention focus is on a search for the individuation of models, methods, strategies, and concepts coming from or in line with those of the empirical sciences.

A very similar attitude toward the methodology of empirical, quantitative sciences is also observable in recent versions of system theory in the social sciences.[8] In these versions, emphasis is not only on the search for mathematical tools able to make predictions but also on the design of models capable to offer new insight into the understanding of social and even historical phenomena. In such a context, the leading epistemic categories seem to be linked to dynamic, emergence, and probabilistic models. It seems that deterministic-causal theories, nomological necessity, and ideas regarding the unity of science relying on methodological reductionism are no longer exclusively referenced (as was the case with the system theories discussed by von Wright). This obviously does not mean that all classical epistemological and ontological debates are closed but that they cannot be resolved using the previous methods alone.

### *Scientifically oriented approaches to action and testimony: witnessing as a case of interaction with the observer*

Among the methodologies adopted by scientific theories, two of them are also utilised in the study of social phenomena. They are: (1) the use of building models that are able to interpret statistical data, and (2) the use of elaborating experiments to test specific aspects in isolation (e.g., hypothesised quantitative correlations among variables). Where the use and effectiveness of such strategies in sociology, economics, or (social) psychology are quite clear, it can be more questionable with respect to history, where the search for general or law like correlations is not a goal. Thus, questions arise regarding testimony as an essential source of historical data and whether it is possible to regulate its effective use considering input from research in the expansive area of social studies. In other words, putting aside for the moment the possibility that explanations of historical facts need support from the models used in sociology, economics, psychology, etc., we can arguably say that the methodology of history may effectively employ mathematical (e.g., statistical/probabilistic) and experimental studies regarding problematic themes such as testimony.

This results in a situation not unlike that of Thucydides' when he decided to employ the methods of reviewing the testimony used in Greek courts. Indeed, a significant amount of research regarding testimony and witnessing comes from social psychology arena, which is particularly interested in the analysis of the human relationships that are established in the context of forensic and investigative practices. These studies address different forms of testimony and, as one would expect, are strictly related to researches on memory and (social) interaction. Moreover, in the last 30 years at least, the outcomes of these inquiries have been used by criminal justice systems and, in drafting procedural rules. An important example is the case of the eyewitness identification of a culprit by face recognition in a police line up (Wells & Olson 2003). Indeed, despite appearances (it is generally considered a very simple and trustworthy form of testimony, excluding occurrences of perjury), this type of testimony is quite problematic. It has become an object of attention in redacting legal procedures after the advent of forensic DNA tests, which are used exonerate people who were previously convicted because of mistaken eyewitness identifications. The significance of studies regarding the epistemology of testimony and the methodology of history relies on two aspects of this research.

First, they were grounded on statistical data, obtained at the end of the investigations and procedures and on direct observations even in experimental settings where, for example, crime situations or police line ups were staged. This allowed for the determination of variables that affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony, some of which were within the control of the criminal justice system and thus subject to regulation. The paradigmatic case is the behaviour of the line up administrator. His/her actions can influence eyewitness testimony in various ways such as prompting eyewitnesses to confirm a doubtful identification.[9]

8 Consider, for instance, the epistemic (and philosophical) approach proposed in Lie et al. 2014.

9 The proposed solution of the *confidence malleability problem* would be to prevent the lineup administrator being one of the investigators (Wells et al. 1998).

Analogously, historians can potentially manipulate witness testimony and the representation of the testimony in various ways in accordance with their interests but also beyond those interests. One example is, not keeping the necessary *distance* from the witness and from the content of the testimony (Attwood 2008, Phillips 2004).[10] In this sense, using the use of outcomes from other sciences (for testimony, social psychology at first) may allow us to identify which object variables and procedures for historical research can be subject to methodological control, avoiding or limiting from the start any loss of accuracy or real mistakes/deceptions.

Secondly, among the external variables related to the criminal justice system (see Wells 1978), there are specific characteristics of the testimony itself or from the interacting parts that cannot be expected or easily regulated. One such characteristic is the lay observer's judgement of accuracy regarding testimony, that is, the ability of people who have no precise knowledge of the psychological issues regarding testimony, such as members of a jury or judges themselves, to correctly discriminate between accurate and inaccurate eyewitness identifications. Generally, when cross-examine; jurors tend to overestimate eyewitness accuracy (Wells 1984, Lindsay 1989). Again, a similar analogy can be made regarding historians. This is absolutely relevant to our starting issue – the role of testimony in oral history. Indeed, although the facts include forms of testimony that are more complex than eyewitness identifications, the case of the *stolen generations* of Australian Aboriginal people described by Attwood (2001, 2008) is an excellent example of how historians can overestimate witness reports for and beyond their interests and how historians may consequently misunderstand historical facts. The main problem with the early narrative representations of witness reports was the complete absence of a detached analysis of the facts (testimonial reports, in particular), which eventually emerged when various related legal cases did not pass 'scrutiny in the form of positivist history and the law' (Attwood 2008, p. 89).

## *Conclusion*

In the previous sections, we suggested that history can productively make use of instruments from other sciences, primarily the social sciences. Though it is a discipline not in search of laws or law like regularities, history employ explanations that involve scientific laws. Even when this is not the case, historical reconstructions can legitimately be considered explanations in a teleological sense, relying on the intuitionist understanding of human action. Action can be seen as the contact point between 'history as an event' and 'history as an experience.' It is a pivotal term that plays a central role within the *dialectics* between different methodologies focused on 'material' data and their external background (as well as their quantitative analysis) on one side and the life world on the other. In this context, the case of testimony, which remains one of the most essential sources of historical information, is the quintessential example. It is strictly a phenomenon that depends on the frame of action and interaction in which it originates. Thus, the category of action can be seen as a key concept for the epistemic and epistemological accounts of testimony. In particular, modern formulations of action theory, oriented to the conceptual thematisation of strategies and models in empirical sciences, seem to be capable of underlying a reconfiguration of the role of testimony in history based on a scientific methodology.

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10 Phillips (2011) clearly explains how the *distance from the past* – in a general sense that certainly comprises also the theme of testimony – is not only a question of 'gradients of time,' but involves elements such as personal/social characteristics (genre, used vocabulary) of the historian, as well as specific features of her activity as a scientist (her particular modes of understanding and claims about the emotional aspects of her account of the past) and as a social agent (her political or moral interests). All of these are seen as mediation levels capable of deeply determining historical representation. About the case of the 'Aboriginal stolen generation narrative' mentioned above, and the relevance of the political interests for Australian historiography, see Attwood 2011.

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