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What is the "reflexive historicizing of communication"? A philosophical approach

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The purpose of this article is to interpret the term the "reflexive historicizing of communication" used by the editors of the *Handbook of Communication History* published in 2013. In the preface and in the first chapter, the editors introduce the above-mentioned concept, postulating that it is associated with the most important among several possible trends in communication history. Reflexive historicizing, as an important and innovative methodological directive, however, is described therein rather laconically. This article contains comments on both historicism and reflexivity. Their genesis is presented as well as their most important interpretations and possible applications in the social sciences. Particular attention is paid to the concept of historicism, since it is charged with numerous controversies and polemics (Karl Popper's famous criticism). The main purpose of this article is to explain the meaning of historicism (and reflexivity) so as to avoid confusion and over-interpretation in the application of these concepts within communication history.

Keywords: communication history, reflexive historicizing, historicism, historism, reflexivity, antinaturalism

1. Introduction

The publication of the splendid *Handbook of Communication History* in early 2013 (edited by Peter Simonson, Janice Peck, Robert T. Craig, and John Jackson; hereafter the *Handbook*) was the moment when one of communication science's sub-disciplines – communication history – was established. Communication history, a relatively young and, in many ways, undefined field of science, has gained institutional justification, and has significantly broadened its autonomy from other sub-disciplines of communication science.

The process, encouraged since the eighties of the twentieth century by many great communication and culture researchers, consisting in defining communication history as the social or cultural history of communication (Burke 2007: 1), and in obtaining its methodological "independence" (Nerone 2006: 260), is coming to an end. The *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) contains evidence of it, and among the many excellent concepts,

proposals, and solutions, one warrants particular attention: the postulate of the reflexive historicizing of communication.

What is the reflexive historicizing of social phenomena, including communication? The authors of this postulate formulate a precise, albeit laconic, meaning of the term. They also include a few suggestions on how to implement the historicizing of communication. The purpose of this article is to analyze and interpret the reflexive historicism of communication phenomena. Based on the *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013), I will present a philosophical view on the issue, that is, indicate its roots and most important philosophical consequences.

Both the concept of reflexivity and (or even especially) the concept of historicism have a long and rich tradition in the social sciences, and referring to them with regard to communication research is very reassuring. On the other hand, the traditional meanings assigned to reflexivity, and especially to historicism, carry the potential danger of misinterpretation, and even of serious misunderstandings. In the English-speaking social sciences, the term "historicism" still has a bad reputation because of Karl Popper's objections, which were quite serious. Historicizing was not only accused of being similar to both relativism and nihilism, but was also blamed for the negative consequences of nationalism in the form of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.

In the face of such confusion and controversy, the actual meaning and role of historicism is worth considering, especially since the historicizing of communication is very promising and it would be unfortunate if erstwhile objections stood in its path. Conversely, the concept of reflexivity has never caused such controversy as historicism has, yet it deserves an explication if it is to be successfully applied on the basis of communication history and communication science in general.

This article consists of several sections. The first consists of a presentation and an analysis of the reflexive historicizing of communication, as it was presented in the aforementioned *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013). The theoretical, meta-theoretical, and methodological consequences, which can be inferred from the work, are also scrutinized. The second part concerns potentially the most controversial element: historicism. The history of this concept is outlined and the main definitions are presented, with stress being placed on the differences between contemporary and past approaches. I will also attempt to resolve doubts related to historicizing and demonstrate that the awareness of the nature of the criticism that was associated with it in the past allows historicism to be a key concept of communication history. The third part concerns a less complicated and less controversial matter: reflexivity in the field of social sciences. Reflexivity is an important component of the *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) editors' postulate, however, it does not require such a careful interpretation as historicizing does. The last part consists of conclusions and proposals regarding the future of communication history.

2. The postulate of the reflexive historicizing of communication and its interpretation

The *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) opens with an introduction written jointly by the editors of the publication (Peter Simonson, Janice Peck, Robert T. Craig, and John Jackson). It concerns the basic theoretical assumptions of communication history.

At the end of the introduction, in the section entitled *The Future of Communication History*, the authors present six options for the further development of communication history, thus indicating some of the most promising trends, research directions, and methodological stances in communication history. The concept of the *reflexive historicizing of communication* is discussed in detail:

> Reflexive historicizing refers to the need for scholars in all areas of communication research to acknowledge the historicity of their subject matters and to know something of the history if only as a context for understanding present phenomena. Communication history's distinctive contribution to other subfields of communication is to cultivate reflexive historicizing. Both "history" and "historical studies" contribute […]. Of course, reflexive historicizing equally applies to communication history itself. (Simonson et al. 2013: 7)

The term may be understood primarily as a route or direction for the further development of communication history in the coming years, but also more broadly and more generally, as a concise formulation of one of the most fundamental methodological directives with regard to communication history.

Several interesting conclusions can be drawn from the quoted passage. First, (1) the editors of the *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) advocate practicing communication history within the research perspective of reflexive historicizing. It is difficult to determine whether such an attitude could have the status of a methodological proposal, yet I assume, however, that the authors were inspired by just such an intention. It is worth noting that (2) the postulate of the reflexive historicizing of communication is attributed widely to "all areas of communication research […] both 'history' and 'historical studies' contribute" (Simonson et al. 2013: 7). The authors of the postulate also appear to perceive it (3) both with respect to many (or even all) sub-disciplines of communication science, as well as to communication history itself (as one of those sub-disciplines). In other words, reflexive historicizing means either (a) historizing communication phenomena in general, as well as (b) historizing communication history. In the next two sections of this article, I will demonstrate that historizing in the (a) sense is a postulate that is deeply rooted in the tradition of German historicism and that historizing in the (b) sense corresponds to the idea of reflexivity formulated, for example, in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

This topic returns again in the first chapter of the *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) entitled *The History of Communication History,* also written jointly by all the editors of the volume. They suggest a very broad application of the procedure: "we conclude with a call for more historicization across communication studies writ large, from its humanistic to its scientific wings. Here we shift registers from communication history to historically-informed (or perhaps historically-aware) communication studies and communication science" (Simonson et al. 2013: 42). It is another instance of the earlier postulate

that reflexive historicizing should be applied as broadly as possible, which indicates the high importance that the authors attach to it.

Subsequently, we find four forms that – according to the authors – reflexive historicizing may assume. The first concerns the subject of communication history, and thus past practices and communication activities, which should be described in a historical perspective: "historicizing the phenomena we study by recognizing that they express themselves in particular times and places, even when we aim for universality in our findings or broad representativeness in our samples" (Simonson et al. 2013: 42). The second form is not so much about the object of research as the methods, thus reflexive historicizing should also cover the "theories and operative concepts by knowing something of their emergence and genealogies" (Simonson et al. 2013: 42).

The third indicated form of reflexive historicism concerns the method of treatment of the earlier forms of reflection on communication history and communication itself (and therefore the treatment of sources): "historicizing research projects through reference to relevant predecessors that serve not just as abstract references in a literature review but also material endeavors carried out within institutional structures and embodied figures". While the fourth form encompasses a wide range of methodological self-consciousnesses of communication researchers:

> historicizing our broader fields of study by seeing how they are the products of societal and academic problematics that change over time and are likely to seem dated and perhaps flawed within a couple of decades. Communication historians as a group can contribute to this struggle for greater historical awareness by collaborating with colleagues who work in traditionally non-historical subfields, making local arguments for historical education […], and finding new ways to connect the communication history with the present and near future. (Simonson et al. 2013: 42)

The above-mentioned four forms of reflexive historicizing of communication certainly illustrate the great potential of this methodological procedure and reveal the multiplicity of its potential applications. Yet the authors do not explain the exact meaning of the phrase in more detail, even though it was new to the field of communication sciences and had not previously appeared in the literature. One might draw certain conclusions concerning the importance, nature, and consequences of reflexive historicizing, reading between the lines, and referring to the positions adopted by the various authors–editors. Assuming that their postulates are correct, and that reflexive historicizing is one of the main developmental directions for communication science, let us turn to its interpretation, indicate the relevant contexts, and explain some of the controversy (mainly involving historicism).

3. Historicity, historism, historicism, and new historicism

Among the many key concepts functioning in philosophy and the social sciences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are few that have caused so much confusion and misinterpretation as the concept of historicism and historicizing. Historicism, like many other famous "-isms", had many supporters proposing its extreme ver-

sions. It also appeared in a number of less radical varieties, was the subject of very sharp polemics, was called into question, and overcame, to later return in altered forms. To illustrate the importance and controversy of historicism, it is enough to say that for a time, it was the leading trend in the German humanities in their "golden age", to be accused later of favoring nationalism and causing the worst disasters in history, such as totalitarian regimes and two world wars.

The confusion surrounding the basic meanings of the terms "historism" and "historicism" (and the corresponding "historizing" and "historicizing") caused, and in many cases still cause, disagreements and disputes. The distinction between "historism" (*Historismus*) and "historicism" (*Historizismus*) exists in the German language – and thus in the German social sciences – and certainly is not accidental. Nevertheless, the distinction is rather blurred in academic English. The word "historicism" appeared in it relatively late, and almost immediately, due to an attack by Karl R. Popper, received a strong pejorative, though misleading, meaning (Passmore 1974: 30-31).

In order to understand the fundamental importance of historicism and the essence of the methodological procedure involving the "historicizing" of phenomena studied by the social sciences, one should examine the origins and the most important interpretations of historicism. If the reflexive historicizing of communication is to occur (as one of the main elements of communication history's methodology), then it is crucial that the condition for its successful implementation is to avoid the danger of the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the meaning and function of historicism.

It is significant that an attempt to characterize historism would be quite different in a text written in German, Italian, or Polish than in a text written in English. The German term *Historismus* – slightly ambiguous in itself – is translated in the English academic dictionary (with very few exceptions) as *historicism*, even though the word *Historizismus* is also present in the German language. The problem consists in the fact that Karl Popper, writing his famous works *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957 [2002]) and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945 [2002]), used the English word *historicism* (introducing it to the English-speaking scientific vocabulary for the first time) to denote something which had little in common with the German historism (*Historismus*). Popper wrote: "Historicism is an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim and which assumes this aim is attainable by discovering thy 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history" (2002: 3). Naturally, Popper had every right to proclaim the criticism of the position, but its specific meaning differed significantly from how *Historismus* (not even *Historizismus*) was understood in the German humanities since at least the fifties of the nineteenth century. The problem resulting from Popper's arbitrary account of historicism became material as the English-speaking readers of *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957 [2002]) and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945 [2002]) did not bother to distinguish between historism and historicism, and consequently evaluated the whole issue only from the perspective of Popper's use of the term *historicism*.

Contemporary German-speaking researchers sometimes urge that the difference between historism and historicism be perceived and respected. Stefan Berger, a German historian working in Great Britain, suggested a reasonable distinction:

> I deliberately use the term historism […] rather than historicism. Whereas historism (in German *Historismus*), as represented by Leopold von Ranke, can be seen as an evolutionary, reformist concept which understands all political order as historically developed and grown, historicism (*Historizismus*), as defined and rejected by Karl Popper, is based on the notion that history develops according to predetermined laws towards a particular end. The English language, by using only one term for those different concepts, tends to conflate the two. Hence I suggest using two separate terms in analogy to German language. (2001: 30)

Remarks such as the one above are, however, not often made in the English literature. This can be observed in the case of the authors of the *Handbook* (Simonson et al. 2013) using the terms *historicism* and *historicizing*. I think, therefore, that in order not to further exacerbate the terminological confusion, it is better to use the terms *historicism* and *historicizing*, although with attention being focused on how these two concepts are interpreted (and thus consciously rejecting Popper's meaning).

Today, historicism is most often treated as a position, according to which all social phenomena (understood as the social sciences' object of study) are inevitably historical, that is, embedded in a historical context and undergoing historic transformations. Historicism means the recognition that knowledge, cognitive processes, social practices, any cultural phenomena, and so on are historically conditioned, and are consequently relative and variable. According to Robert D'Amico,

> historicism is a position about the limits of knowledge, how human understanding is always a "captive" of its historical situation […]. Historicism abandons efforts to prove the validity of "rightness" of concepts, rather it treats concepts, standards, and presuppositions as part of historical traditions which constitute objectivity. The question of which concepts are fundamental is always relative to a tradition. For the historicists cultural practices make possible many objective worlds whose internal criteria leave reflection sceptical about the "ultimate" criteria of reference or realism. (1989: 10-11)

Historicism can be recognized either as a methodological directive (whereby studying social phenomena should be recognized as historically conditioned) or as a philosophical statement (under which all social phenomena are conditioned historically).

A prominent researcher of the history of German philosophy and the humanities, Herbert Schnädelbach, indicates three basic meanings of historicism. First, historicism is a positivist description of the humanities, with history at its forefront, and the approach prevailed among the first generation of German historicists (thus before the antinaturalist turn). According to Schnädelbach, "the first sense of historicism […] is positivism in regard to the human sciences: the value-free accumulation of material and facts without distinction between what is and what is not important, which nevertheless makes a claim to scientific objectivity" (1984: 35). Second, historicism may be regarded "in the sense of historical relativism […], that is, a philosophical position which, on the grounds of the historically conditioned and variable nature of all cultural phenomena, rejects […] all claims to absolute validity" (1984: 35). And thirdly, historicism is a position of a culturalist nature, understood as being the opposite of naturalism: "Historicism in this sense […] is the view that all cultural phenomena are to be regarded, to be understood and to be explained as historical" (1984: 36). This latter interpretation is closest to the issue of

the historicizing of communication. Contemporary researchers usually agree with such an understanding of historicism (White 1975; D'Amico 1989; Steenblock 1991; Fay 1996; Page 2010), although it is, which should be emphasized, far from Popper's idea.

In accordance with the above understanding of historicism, historicizing can be defined as a methodological procedure in the social sciences, consisting of (1) an assumption that every social phenomenon is historical and/or at least (2) describing social phenomena as variable and relative. In its antinaturalist dimension, historicizing also means (3) a recognition of the methodological independence of the social sciences with respect to the natural sciences (Ellis 2001: 177-180), with particular emphasis on (and even with a primacy of) the methodology of history. Historicizing thus understood is largely related not only to antinaturalism, but also to relativism and narrativism (Brannigan 1998). Brian Fay gives the following keywords referring to historicism. They are *Particular*, *Individual*, *Novelty*, *Temporality*, and *Difference*; while the keywords characterizing naturalism (scientism, nomologism) are *Universal*, *Type*, *Recurrence*, *Atemporality*, and *Sameness* (Fay 1996: 156).

What is the cause, however, of so many misunderstandings and even accusations against historicizing? Apart from the inaccuracies in the colloquial meaning of historicism, there are particular interpretations of the term in which it acquires an entirely different, often pejorative meaning. In order to avoid such confusion, and – consequently – to use the term the "reflexive historicizing of communication" without restraint, the doubts should be dispelled. When considering the genesis and development of historicism, it is worth explaining the origins of and the role of the meaning that was ascribed to it by Popper.

What did historicism originally mean, what transformations did it undergo, how was historicizing understood? To answer these questions, one should focus on the German post-Enlightenment humanities. Giambattista Vico is regarded as a precursor of deliberations over what the German humanists termed *Geschichtligkeit* (historicity).[1] Although the main intellectual trends of the Enlightenment postulated a fundamental ahistoricity of social phenomena, towards the end of the eighteenth century, such scholars as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Friedrich Schlegel began advocating describing social phenomena in terms of their "historicity" (*Geschichtligkeit*). The term *Historismus* was first used by Schlegel in 1797 (Page 2010: 11). The real "father" of philosophical reflection on history was Georg W.F. Hegel, whose *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (ed. 1837) proved to be one of the most influential philosophical works of the nineteenth century.

Hegel's philosophy of history project (*Geschichtsphilosophie*), although continued by his disciples, was met, however, with criticism from scholars who sought to replace history cultivated in the philosophical spirit (*Geschichtsphilosophie*) with history cultivated as a science (*Geschichtswissenschaft*). Thus emerged the project of historicism (*His-*

[1] Occasionally, the French philosopher Michel Montaigne is indicated as one of the precursors of historicism (Yerxa 2012); however, I think that the actual "historical consciousness" only developed in Europe in opposition to the Enlightenment, thus Montaigne and other thinkers of the early-modern era need not be taken into consideration in this case.

torismus) that was developed as a substitute for both the Hegelian (idealist) view and the nomologic (nomologicalism), scientistic description of history. The first generation of German historicists ("classical" historicism, *Klassischer Historismus* (Steenblock 1991)) included Leopold von Ranke and Johann G. Droysen. At this stage in the development of history as an academic discipline, Ranke demanded a positivistically scientific approach: "Ranke argued that the historian's task was not to judge the past or to instruct the present for the profit of future ages, but 'to show only what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)'" (Thomas 1991: 33). In contrast to the Hegelians, classic historicists wanted to see historical eras as "equal in the eyes of God", and therefore not described in terms of progress of a teleological nature, but as characterized by different, specific socio-cultural properties.

The next generation of German historicists was associated with the birth of the social sciences and with the antinaturalist turn represented by Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, and Heinrich Rickert. Ranke's earlier proposal to reject the idealistic approach to history in favor of *Geschichtswissenschaft* (historical science) under the slogan "science instead of a philosophical system and historical science instead of a philosophy of history" (Schnädelbach 1984: 33) was adopted, but significantly modified. A question was asked as to whether *historical science* was to be cultivated with the methods drawn from *Naturwissenschaften* (*natural science*) or rather with independent methods, specific to *Geisteswissenschaften* (*social science*). Earlier, Ranke's historicism was of a positivistic and nomologistic, or naturalistic nature. According to Roy Bhaskar,

> Naturalism may be defined as the thesis that there is (or can be) an essential unity of method between the natural and the social sciences. It must be immediately distinguished from two species of it: reductionism, which asserts that there is an actual identity of subject-matter as well; and scientism, which denies that there are any significant differences in the methods appropriate to studying social and natural objects. (1998: 2)

The antinaturalist turn consisted in a kind of "emancipation" of the social sciences and of granting them methodological independence from the natural sciences. This concerned all the disciplines, whose object of study was culture – *Kulturwissenschaften*, as they soon became known (Bambach 1995: 102) – finally parting from the Hegelian concept of "spirit" (*Geist*). This antinaturalistically cultivated history was of special significance.

It should be noted, however, that during this period (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), German historicism began to diversify; for example, Rickert argued against its relativistic consequences (Bambach 1995: 115) The next generation of historicists were represented by Friedrich Meinecke and Oswald Spengler, however, then a crisis of historicism was diagnosed (*Kriese des Historismus*) – the term was used in 1922 by Ernst Troeltsch. Three problems were identified. The first was the tradition of the rejection of historicism in favor of the philosophy of life (Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacob Burkhardt); the second problem concerned the fear of the nihilistic and relativistic consequences of historicism reported by Rickert and Dilthey (Steenblock 1991: 33); and the third issue was connected with nationalist elements that appeared in historicism mainly because of Freidrich Meinecke.

As a result of the crisis, a number of less radical, nuanced varieties of historicism appeared in the early twentieth century, as exemplified by Enst Troeltsch's philosophy of culture and Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. There were also non-German versions of historicism, such as Benedetto Croce and Robin G. Collingwood's philosophical positions. The true crisis arose, however, with the publication of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945 [2002]) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957 [2002]).

Popper accused "historicism" of all the evil of the twentieth century: "Historicism, as Popper understands it, is not just an intellectual error, of interest only to professional philosophers; it is a prime source of moral and political devastation. […] In short, in attacking historicism, Popper was attacking totalitarianism and defending a meliorist democracy" (Passmore 1974: 30). From Popper's point of view, historicism was a view represented mainly by Hegel and Karl Marx, assuming that there were valid "laws of history" (regarded as scientific, and therefore as objective and immutable), that historical progress had a definite meaning and purpose, and its implementation was not subject to choice, but resulted from the inevitability of historical processes. Carl Page writes, "Popper took historicism to be a very particular view about the nature of historical process: that it is governed by binding laws of development […] from which may be deduced social and political reform" (2010: 14).

Considering the form of the earlier historicist positions, it is difficult to justify Popper's attack. Although he rightly identified Plato, Hegel, and Marx as "enemies of the open society", professing the principle of "immutable laws of history", he called none of the philosophers *historist* or *historicist*. The classic historicists (Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, Troeltsch, Meinecke, Croce, etc.) did not believe that "historical prediction is their principal aim and which assumes this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history" (Popper 2002: 3). Therefore, Popper gave a new, specific meaning to the term "historicism", which does not coincide with any of the meanings indicated by, for example, Herbert Schnädelbach (1984: 35-36). In other words, the author of *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper 1957 [2002]) used the title term "against accepted usage, in this case the accepted usage of the German *Historismus*. When Popper wrote *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957 [2002]), there was, as he rightly remarks, *no* established usage in English for the word 'historicism' – except for the few of us who were keenly interested in Croce" (Passmore 1974: 31). As a result, the English-speaking social sciences assimilated the clearly pejorative, Popperian understanding of historicism. Consequently, the position still has negative connotations.

To justify Popper, it is worth noting that he – speaking German – was probably aware of the difference between historism and historicism, as it is recognized by, for example, Stefan Berger. However, when translated into English, the difference became blurred, which perpetuated the pejorative idea. "Popper saw a clear difference between what he called historicism and the position he thought to be already commonly referred to as 'historism.' The latter was analogous to Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which Popper interpreted as a doctrine of epistemological relativism" (Page 2010: 16). Unfortunately, "for English-speaking philosophers of the last few generations, *The Poverty of Historicism* has done the most to make the term 'historicism' lexically, if not conceptually, familiar" (Page 2010: 14).

In the second half of the twentieth century, there were several significant attempts to "revive" historicism – either through demonstrating the arbitrariness of Popper's accusations, or through transforming it in such a way as to avoid adverse over-interpretations. The most famous of these enterprises was the so-called *New Historicism* from the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. The new historicists – including Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Catherine Gallagher, and Harold Veeser – were mainly literary scholars inspired by certain elements of post-structuralism (primarily by Michel Foucault's views), who put themselves in opposition to the structuralist trend of *New Criticism*. New Historicism is usually associated with the position of cultural materialism on the assumption that "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices" (Veeser 1989: 2). The researchers recognize that analyses of literary works should take into account the historical and cultural (including the religious, economic, political) context in which the works were created.

One of the inspirations of New Historicism is Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology:

> For new historicists, approaching the sign systems of the past was analogous with anthropologists approaching the sign systems of another culture […] [Geertz] argued that contrary to popular anthropological assumption, culture had been a central ingredient in forming human beings, rather than being an addition to human life which had been developed after a biological essence […]. In Geertz we have a theoretical context for the way in which new historicians examine how a particular period of culture fashions itself, manufactures itself. (Brannigan 1998: 33)

New Historicism as a position does not include any references to the idea of the "objective laws of history" – on the contrary. Moreover, while some former German historicists showed certain nationalist and right-wing tendencies (mainly Meinecke), the new historicists built their research on more or less leftist, Marxist, and post-structuralist positions.

The main feature of the modern form of historicism is its vagueness – not necessarily in a negative sense of the word. The broad, peculiarly "open" interpretations of historicism allow us to identify its elements in the positions of many different philosophers, including Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Joseph Margolis, or Alasdair MacIntyre (Page 2010: 4). Historicism, free from the old controversy, can be seen as an integral part of such contemporary research trends as social history, cultural history, the history of anthropology, and the history of ideas with intellectual history, as well as communication history.

4. The idea of reflexivity in the social sciences

The previous section explained the contemporary and erstwhile understanding of historicism, and outlined the genesis of the approach while indicating the most important causes and consequences of the accompanying confusion and over-interpretations. This section will focus on another element of the term "reflexive historicizing" that refers to communication phenomena.

On the one hand, the concept of reflexivity has a very broad meaning and application, however, I narrow it down here to the methodological dimension only in the sphere of

the social sciences. I will primarily make reference to the understanding of the reflexivity principle that occurs in sociology, particularly in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's views or Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. It should be noted, however, that I adopt the understanding of reflexivity that is also related to other areas of the social sciences, such as, for example, Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology, Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and Gregory Bateson's communication anthropology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 36). Simultaneously, I dismiss the approaches to reflexivity that can be encountered in mathematics, logic, or economics. I will focus mainly on the idea of reflexivity in Bourdieu's views, as his view is best suited to explaining the reflexive historicizing of communication.

According to Loïc Wacquant, reflexivity can be presented as a self-reference, or as a (methodological) self-awareness: "Conceptions of reflexivity range from self-reference to self-awareness to the constitutive circularity of accounts or texts. […] Social science is reflexive in the sense that the knowledge it generates is 'injected' back into the reality it describes" (1992: 37). According to this approach, reflexivity can be regarded as (1) the methodological procedure consisting in indicating and applying in a particular scientific discipline the same epistemological requirements, methodological criteria, and interpretation/clarification conditions that are used within the discipline regarding its subject matter (as the research area/field). In the first sense, reflexivity therefore means a realization of the postulate of the "self-reflexivity" of theoretical assumptions with respect to their subject matter. With regard to the researchers engaged in a given field of science, reflexivity would consist in (2) obtaining their methodological "self-awareness", which not only consists of their knowledge of research procedures, but also their capacity to critically overview and contextualize their work.

Reflexivity could also be understood in a slightly different sense. As (3) "self-referability" – not of the methods to the object, or the investigator to the methods, but of the discipline to its object. Reflexivity in this third sense consists in the fact that the object of a theoretical consideration is differentiated from it only in the "order of the lecture". This phenomenon occurs in sociology, linguistics, communication theory, methodology, and so on, and is based on the fact that a linguist pursuing research practice dedicated to language simultaneously realizes a language practice; similarly, a sociologist conducting research on social reality simultaneously remains a part of it. This latter interpretation of reflexivity corresponds with Bourdieu's sociology of sociology:

> The Bordieusian project of reflexive sociology represents a systematic attempt to understand the nature of the social by comprehending itself as part of the social. […] reflexive sociology seeks to acknowledge and problematise its own practical, interested, and contestable immersion in social reality. Thus, the project of reflexivity is essentially a project of sociological self-questioning, recognising that our view *of* the world depends largely upon our place *within* the world. (Susen 2007: 133)

The above three approaches to reflexivity should best be treated collectively as three complementary aspects of the same methodological operation. Reflexivity in the meaning shown above is applicable mainly in the social sciences, where the discussion on it sometimes grows into a debate on the foundations of the humanities: "The debate over

reflexive sociology is essentially a debate over the nature of the social sciences" (Susen 2007: 149).

I will now try to generalize the importance of reflexivity and justify its value (and innovativeness) on the grounds of communication history. A question might be posed: What has the principle of reflexivity brought to the social sciences? First of all, it could be treated as a manifestation of the anti-positivist attitude aiming to strengthen the methodological autonomy of the social sciences. In a traditional, positivist (objectivist) model of scientific knowledge, a researcher assumes a position as an impartial observer, capable of formulating real-world descriptions based on experience. This conviction stems from the Cartesian, thus essentially ahistorical, approach to subjectivity, and is consistent with the modern European ideas about knowledge and scientific cognition.

The antinaturalist movement, mentioned in the previous section, sought to "emancipate" the social sciences and provide them with methodological independence. The reflexivity rule is a consequence of it. From this perspective, a researcher of the social sciences remains a part of the social reality and is subject to classifications, rules, or the cultural context, which are the object of research. Consequently, the reflexive historicizing of an object of study (e.g., communication) means accepting that a research position is derived from past positions, that it is subject to the same determinants as well as historical and social transformations, and that the new knowledge is affected by cultural factors (e.g., economy, politics, religion, etc.). It should also be noted that the principle of reflexivity, opposing the ahistorical approach to knowledge and learning, might not be a condition of historicism, however, it is clearly related to it.

5. Consequences and conclusions

Given the findings from the previous two sections, it can be concluded that the reflexive historicizing of communication is a methodological procedure on the grounds of communication science in general and in the field of communication history in particular. It involves the intentional recognition of communication phenomena as variable and relative, that is, as subject to historical and social transformations. The reflexivity of this procedure consists in the fact that the researchers of communication history who propose the postulate of historicity are also obliged to recognize their own position as relative and varying. This is due to the fact that all research practices involving theorizing on communication are themselves communication practices, therefore, if communication is historicized, *eo ipso* the theoretical consideration is also historicized.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above statement. First, (1) the reflexive historicizing of communication stands in opposition to the universalist views on communication. By applying historicizing (even more so with reflexive historicizing), we acknowledge that there is a general, universal, timeless definition of communication, and that communication practices and activities were not always unvaried, but underwent transformations in space and time. Adopting the reflexive historicizing of communication implies entering into the polemics, with all the theories and models of communication that formulate analytical definitions, and recognizing that certain metaphorical conceptu-

alizations of communication are universal. An example of a communication metaphor that claims universality and ahistoricity is the classic transmission metaphor of "conduit" and "transfer" (Reddy 1979). However, reflexive historicizing implies that the transmission metaphor has a history, that it was created at a certain time and under certain social conditions, and, therefore, is representative of the views on communication common among researchers at a particular time.

It should also be noted that historicizing is associated with the antinaturalist approach, which was written into the nineteenth-century versions of historicism. Communication history, insofar as it would benefit from the principle of reflexive historicizing, would simultaneously be a sub-discipline associated with the tradition of antinaturalism (anti-positivism) in the social sciences (Ellis 2001: 180).

Another conclusion is a consequence and an expansion of the previous one: (2) If communication has a history, then all the components of communication theory described historically also have a history, that is, the media, the collective views on communication, as well as the individual communication activities and communication practices themselves (e.g., epistolary, argumentative, marketing, etc.). It is worth noting that the historical approach to the media is not new: The so-called Toronto School has analyzed media historically since the fifties of the twentieth century.

However, not every communication history involves consistent historicizing. Many older studies in this area focused only on the media and consisted in a simple enumeration of successive forms and means of communication (according to the scheme: "from clay tablets to the Internet"). It boiled down to specifying the chronological sequence. Reflexive historicizing involves, which is another conclusion, (3) going beyond the study of the media and going beyond the simple chronological sequence scheme. For example, collective views on communication can also be historicized. Such views may be theoretical in nature. In such cases we are dealing with the history of the idea of communication (Peters 2012) or the intellectual history of communication. The collective views on communication can be everyday views. Then the study of the communication history should include, for example, the tradition of the French history of mentalities (Clark 2009). Peter Burke's works devoted to the social and cultural history of the media are a good example of going beyond a simple scheme chronology of the media (Burke 1993; Briggs & Burke 2010). Another good example can be found in the studies of the social consequences of the diffusion of printing by, among others, Robert Darnton and Elisabeth Eisenstein.

It may be concluded that reflexive historicizing has a bright future because it already has a past. Historical descriptions of communication are not new, however, only in recent years, these have been supplemented by the theme of reflexivity and have been formulated explicitly. This means that many trends in communication history, which so far have been diverse, have gained a common theoretical and methodological denominator, which will undoubtedly contribute to the intensification of research in this field. It is important, however, that the concept of reflexive historicizing is not distorted or over-interpreted. Consequently, in this article, I tried to perform a type of meta-historicizing – seeking the historical roots of historicism and thus helping to dispel any doubts that might accrue around this notion.

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