

## The Historical Writing Reading Contract. The Theory of the Social Role of History

Most historians want their studies to play an important social role. Many of them used to treat their field as a separate sphere of activity and are afraid that its autonomy will be violated if they involve it in the conflicts of the contemporary world. All of them are obliged by state and scientific institutions that allocate funds for research to take into account the impact of their undertakings on the social reality.

In 2014, Jo Guldi and David Armitage published the well-known *History Manifesto*, a book demanding a change in historical studies so that it can better use its specific dispositions to serve society and at the same time allow historians to intervene in contemporary reality. By 2017, one hundred and twenty commentaries to the manifesto had been published, and in none of them did I find statements questioning the social commitment of this project, and many that entered into discussion with the authors on how to adapt professional historiography to activities in the social universe.

The Contemporary History Researchers Forum (Forum Badaczy Dziejów Najnowszych) was held in Warsaw on December 10, 2016. The impulse to organize the debate was the interference of the Polish government in the functioning of the Museum of WWII in Gdańsk. More than 30 renowned historians with different political stands took the floor during the meeting. All of them, however, declared a strong attachment to the idea of the autonomy of history, and at the same time no one, apart from one of the participants, thought that it would be best if the public were not interested in history.

In May 2018, Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder published *Theses on Theory and History* which criticize the state of American historiography and propose solutions to the problems identified. First, the authors describe the functioning of existing historical writing, in which disciplinary norms and taming their guardians are more important than the production of new historical knowledge, which exceeds the horizons of previous thinking. They then point out the inevitability of political involvement in any historical work, as they are all involuntary or deliberate social activities that engage in ongoing disputes, support or question the status quo, reveal or conceal social tensions. Ultimately, in their postulates, they demand a history that is openly and consciously involved in public discussions and political conflicts, speaks truth to power, and supports the building of a better future.

The idea of the social function of history is particularly important for three key approaches to historical studies in the 21st century. Feminist history, environmental history, and memory studies are seen by historians as intervening in contemporary public debates and political conflicts. These research approaches grew in complex relationships with the political movements and social activism operating outside the academy. The proliferation of feminism, environmentalism, grass-roots memory activism, and state historical policies in the twentieth century have resulted in the emergence of these approaches. The ties between them are two-sided, and mutual openness strengthens their vitality: the ideas and practices of social movements constantly inspire and test the work of scholars, while knowledge produced at the academy renews the critical resources of activists.

Historians want to change the world and ask themselves many questions on historiography, which will be an effective instrument of change. They ask themselves, does the public care what historians have to say? But also: should the public care what historians say? They wonder: what are the arguments for the social commitment of history, and what for the insularity of history? Which historical research practices, knowledge resources or writing forms are effective means of political activities? To what extent does the involvement of historiography in a political conflict change its capacity to interfere with reality? In other words, how does taking one side of the conflict affect the critical potential of history? And also: what kind of relationship between historical studies and the audience can a responsible historical discourse establish? What position can history take in it? Is it a provider of expert knowledge, a "teacher of life" persuading the public to adapt to its reasoning, a leader of changes formulating recommendations to solve problems, a collaborator of power, a partner of social movements supporting them with its knowledge? What kind of reading contract should history make with its audience?

Although the idea of the social role of history appears in the statements of the 2018 manifesto of theorists, the contemporary theory of history pays limited attention to these questions. In the first steps of the proposed project, I will analyse the statements that articulate the idea of the social role of history produced within the framework of the three research approaches mentioned. It will focus on a critical description of the self-understanding of their role in the social world. Then, based on these analyses and insights from the theory of history, history of science and philosophy of art, I will develop concepts and arguments for the theory of the social role of history. The central concept of this proposal will be the notion of a reading contract between historians and their audience, which can be used as a framework for historical writing aimed at building socially engaged knowledge.