

Semiotics and the Labor Theory of (Historical) Knowledge

Federico Marcon

“The labor of sign production releases social forces and itself represents a social force. It can produce both ideologies and criticism of ideologies. Thus semiotics (in its double guises as a theory of codes and a theory of sign production) is also a form of *social criticism*, and therefore one among the many forms of *social practice*.”
Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*

1. *Some absurdly abstract observations on the whats, hows, and whys of the cognitive process*

When I reflect on what sort of knowledge historians produce, I obsessively return to the debates at the 1989 UCLA conference, which Saul Friedlander later anthologized as *Probing the Limits of Representation*, and in particular to the violent clash of Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg.¹ The debate is for me significant more at a symbolic level than historically, even though it occurred in the historically interesting transition between the end of the linguistic turn and the debut of cultural history, soon to acquire hegemonic status among professional historians; and even though it occurred after a decade marked by revisionisms.² The clash between Ginzburg and White and the ways in which the other participants proposed to overcome that opposition help me to argue about the usefulness of thinking about the epistemological *labor* of historians in semiotic terms.

The debate is well-known, so I summarize it only in its essential components. On the one hand, for Hayden White, since “one must face the fact that when it comes to apprehending the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of constructing its meaning over another,”³ historical narratives function like fictions insofar as the meanings their form produces (i.e., through narrative structures, semantic choices, conceptual apparatus, etc.) depend solely on historians’ political, ethical, aesthetic, and ideological stances, while their truth-value depends solely on their deontological disposition—what he called the “practical past,” that is, “the ethical and utilitarian aspects of our desire for the past without a basis in being,

¹ Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

² The *Historikerstreit* polemic in West Germany had just ended, and Holocaust denialism found new supporters—implicit, as in Ernst Nolte’s *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917-1945* (Propyläen, 1987); explicit, as in the works of David Irving and of California’s Institute for Historical Review; and unintentional, as in Arno Mayer’s *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (Pantheon, 1988).

³ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 74.

without an *ontos* and an *ousia* in life.”⁴ Confronting historical themes like the Nazi extermination of the Jews, White’s cognitive relativism posited a challenge that was at once ethical, political, and epistemological. Carlo Ginzburg’s response—in Friedlander’s words, a “passionate plea for historical objectivity and truth”⁵—charged that White’s relativism offered an opportunity for revisionists and denialists of all sorts.⁶ History, for him, shares with jurisprudence a similar methodology of investigation based on proofs and truths.⁷ For Ginzburg, the conjectural examination of the evidentiary material—and he sustained in a number of essays that, contra White and Roland Barthes, classical rhetorics implied conjectural reasoning built on enthymemes⁸—can establish beyond reasonable doubt that past events can be positively grasped matter-of-factly, objectively in a ontological-realist sense.

White’s and Ginzburg’s positions, in the instance of that debate, were pushed to such extremes that betrayed their own more sophisticated elaborations: White’s claims on the cognitive content of the form historians give their arguments was grounded on the assumption of rigorous analysis of the archival sources,⁹ while Ginzburg’s objectivism was not a return to a naïve *adaequatio rei et intellectus*—a Thomistic realism shared by both positivists and orthodox Marxists—but based on a clear understanding that historians’ labor is interpretive in nature. Between the two extremes, the essays of Christopher Browning, Martin Jay, Perry Anderson, and others, all pointed out, from different perspectives, that historical knowledge is grounded on truth-claims that are accepted as valid by the consensus of the community of scholars engaged in rational communication, a position that I’d like to call of “contractualist realism.”

These three historiographical positions can be metaphorically described as three different models of epistemological “governance.” White’s historians are indistinguishable from any other cultural producer apart from their ethical commitment to truth-telling, the value of which is however confined to individuals’ professional deontology or ethical commitment. The contractualist

⁴ Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), p. 100.

⁵ Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 8.

⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in Friedlander (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation*, pp. 82-96.

⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Methods*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96-125.

⁸ In *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 38-53; and *Thread and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, trans. Anne C. and John Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), esp. pp. 65-66 and 169-177.

⁹ White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 1-42.

paradigm conceives of historians as operating within a self-ruling parliament of certified experts, which collectively establishes the validity of the rules of engagement with the reality of historical past, i.e., the rules whereby epistemological claims can be pragmatically assumed *as if* they were ontological descriptions, where the “as if” plays a fundamental role in signaling a weak ontology. Ginzburg’s historian is essentially a judge, entitled to rule upon the ontological status of specific (and usually small-scale) events of the past on the basis of inferential rules that are supposed to be universally valid, insofar as her/his interpretive act functions as precedent in an epistemological *modus operandi* conceived as a sort of common law.

These cognitive models follow the classical paradigm whereby true knowledge—a set of beliefs justifiably held as true on the basis of, respectively, ethical deontology, a contractualist adherence to what Allan Magill has called “disciplinary objectivity,”¹⁰ or “juridically” sanctioned adequation to reality—is held to correspond to reality in an operational sense. In other terms, the efficacy and truth-value of a cognitive claim is always measured on its ability of standing for (a past) reality, for the world (in a historical moment): an adequation that is justified on the premises of its testability or verifiability, in turn grounded on the possibility of mistakes (falsifiability principle) or falsification (ideologies, fictions, etc.). This is a quite undisputed, even trivial description of historiographical epistemology. All three models operate as biplanar models opposing the cognitive act to the “test” of the world. These biplanar models (opposing a belief to a state of affair), however, hides a third relation, which should be always kept in mind to avoid that the complex processes of knowledge production are reduced to a simple binary relation of “beliefs” vs. “reality”: this is what I call the cognitive *labor*, the process of cognition, which is grounded on socially shared and historically situated methodological, conceptual, and institutional conditions.

Explicitly referring to the production of knowledge as a triadic process—i.e., the interaction of three elements that are not reducible to binary processes—means that knowledge is never a direct or unmediated adequation to reality, nor is it simply the result of reflections on or commitment to one’s system of beliefs. And while what we tend to conceive of and value as “knowledge” is the *result* of our cognitive practices—the “what” that we can assuredly say we know about the world (or about the past)—, when we analyze its production and its functioning, “knowledge” is always an action, a

¹⁰ Alan Magill, “Objectivity for Historians,” in *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 107-124.

“how,” a practice, a process involving labor. The main claim of this short essay is that the nature of this labor is *semiotic* and should be understood and studied as such.

In the most abstract terms, knowledge is both a practice and the result of that practice. As such, it is a semiotic labor that assumes the form of a triadic process: the act of knowing involves an agent producing cognitive claims (the first element of the triad), which are *significant* and *communicable* because grounded on socially shared concepts, notions, epistemological protocols, etc. (the second element, what Umberto Eco called the “encyclopedia”) and which are taken to reveal something of the world (the third element) with authority, truthfulness, and consequence. The concepts, views, and methodologies (the second element) that agents employ to create their cognitive claims about something do not mirror reality (via ineffable intuitions or anamnesis of transcendental aprioris), but they develop via historical processes of consolidation, conventionalization, habituation, and institutionalization; of forgetting, obsolescence, and erasure (a process of cultural “filtering”); and of transformation, adaptation, and hybridization within a society. In turn, the world (the third element) does not result from the acts of knowing, as in various idealistic epistemologies (which often adopt the concept of “ontologies”), but rather tests the soundness or felicity of those claims by “kicking back,” what Eco called “negative realism.”¹¹ The kicking back can take the form of the painful effect of the wall of King’s Cross’ Platform 10 denying access to Platform 9 ¾ to those who strongly believe in the existence of the Hogwarts Express; but most frequently, it resists impossible or implausible interpretations.¹² Finally, the encyclopedia of concepts, views, and disciplinary protocols (second element) that vehicle the agent’s cognitive claims (first element) contains also the rules for their application (and verification) in the world (third element). So, the process of knowing the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* of something worth knowing of the world never depends solely on the agency (deontology, morality, politics) of the knowing agent, nor solely on the shared encyclopedia of concepts, conceptions, and methods by which the agent operates, nor solely on the world itself (which is knowable but never unmediatedly so, only through falsifiable conjectures): it depends on the constant negotiations of the three elements constituting every cognitive act.

¹¹ Umberto Eco described his idea of negative realism in “Di un realismo negativo,” in *Bentornata realtà. Il nuovo realismo in discussione*, ed. by Mario de Caro and Maurizio Ferraris (Torino: Einaudi, 2012), pp. 91-112 and in “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Sarah G. Beardsworth and Randall E. Auxier (eds.), *The Philosophy of Umberto Eco* (Chicago: Open Court, 2017), pp. 46-54. See also Rossella Fabbrichesi, “Semiotics and the Something: A Pragmatist Perspective on the Debate on Realism,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, vol 10, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-16. The world “kicking back” is an expression used in Eco, *Kant and the Platypus* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1997), p. 14.

¹² Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

A few corollaries derive from this triadic model. First, every cognitive act is potentially falsifiable (in line with the philosophical positions of Charles Sanders Peirce and Karl Popper), either because of the negative response of the world or because of changes occurring in the encyclopedia of methods and conceptions. Second, contradictory and aporetic cognitive claims can coexist without prejudicing the epistemological value of the cognitive process. Third, it is not only agents' cognitive acts that are *historical* (and, thus, subjected to change and transformation), but also the encyclopedia of concepts, conceptions, and methodologies, *as well as* the world. Fourth, and consequently, every cognitive act has the capacity of potentially affecting the structure of the shared encyclopedia (by either confirming or modifying it) as well as the world (as often cognitive acts imply social actions *in* the world and *to* the world). As Eco put it, "The labor of sign production releases social forces and itself represents a social force. It can produce both ideologies and criticism of ideologies. Thus semiotics (in its double guise as a theory of codes and a theory of sign production) is also a form of *social criticism*, and therefore one among the many forms of *social practice*."¹³

This triadic model is congruent with Peirce's notion of "explanation" (CP 2.716-24 and 7.189-201) and is homologous to his model of the sign-function as resulting from the triadic operations of a Representamen, its Interpretants, and a Dynamical Object. It is, in other words, a model that is conjectural (CP 7.202-22), insofar as it understands the cognitive act as operating via abductions, which claim to explain a series of clues in light of a rule one postulates by hypothesizing a theoretical scenario that can offer a credible explanation for the evidence under scrutiny.

Some complications in the production of historical knowledge

This triadic model of knowledge production is clearly distinct from the three historiographical paradigms sketched at the beginning of this essay. A triadic understanding of the cognitive process is different from White's dyadic relation between the historian's cognitive act and the conventional encyclopedia s/he addresses (any regulative relation with the world having been severed in his historiographical conceptions); from Ginzburg's dyadic relation between the historian's cognitive act and the world; and from the contractualist realism that assumes the operating correspondence between the institutionally sanctioned encyclopedia of concepts and

¹³ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 298.

methods and the world (since the implied ontological “as if” tends to be erased). But the application of this triadic model to historical knowledge presents an immediate difficulty in understanding, first, *what* is that historians know by the name of “history;” second, in the case of history-writing, we are presented with the paradox of dealing with an ontological absence of the world as third element: if historians’ business is to produce knowledge of the past, then this *what* of historical research is gone, it is an absence, a “ghost” that haunts us, as Ethan Kleinberg put it.¹⁴ It can be hypothesized through partial and ambiguous traces it left, but unlike the wall in King’s Cross station, it cannot “kick back.”

The embarrassment of clearly understanding *what* is that historians seek to know under the category of “history” may be unraveled as a case of homonymy. The English “history,” in fact, is today used in a fairly ambiguous way to refer to what historians do as well as to the referent of what they study.¹⁵ The term comes from the Greek *ιστορία*, “an account of one’s inquiry.” It comes from the verb *ἵστορέω*, “to witness,” “to give testimony,” “to recount,” or “to inquire,” which in turn comes from the noun *ἵστωρ* (“the wise one,” “the one who knows”). In everyday language, the English “history” has come to signify (1) the “texts” (lectures, articles, monographs, videos, etc.) that historians produce, (2) a particular “style” or “genre” of texts, (3) the “meaning” or “content” of these texts, (4) the “referent” of the content of historians’ texts, and (5) the institutional practice or discipline historians belong to. That is, the signifier “history” blurs the semantic divide separating the claims and texts historians produce, the methodology and the genre they follow, the institutional discipline they inhabit, and the *what* (a past condition or event) that they aim to reconstruct. This is obviously not just a stylistic issue, simply calling for the substitution of “history” with “historiographical texts” for (1) and (2), the “past” for (4), “historiography” for (5), and using “history” only for (3). It is a homonymity that confuses referent and meaning, methodology and the discipline regulating that cognitive practice. The metonymical substitution of “history” for “past” has the effect of erasing the qualifier “as if” that distinguishes epistemology from ontology and thus

¹⁴ Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ A homonymity that is even more ambiguous in the cases of the French *histoire* and the Italian *storia*, which are also homonyms of the vernacular equivalents of the English “story.”

preventing their fusion.¹⁶ The result is a suggestion of immediacy, a claim of objectivity without proper epistemological justification: the erasure of the cognitive labor of historians.

Maintaining the distinction of “past” and “history” reinforces the conception that the past is gone, that it is not directly observable unless through its effects: it is a “ghost.” And it keeps clear the distinction of referent and meaning (at the semiotic level, of Dynamical Object and Interpretants) and of the cognitive process and its result. It insists that what we call “history” is not the “past,” even though the encyclopedia contradictorily registers this synonymic use. From a semiotic perspective, we can say that history is a mode of sign production that claims to communicate truthful knowledge of the past. As such, it is a possible (i.e., truthful, falsifiable, or false) reconstruction of aspects of the past through abductive inferences on the traces (e.g., archaeological remains, documents, witness testimonies, etc.) that the past “left” and the truth value of which must be socially and epistemologically accounted for. So, in Peirce’s terms, what we call “history” is the content of historians’ work (i.e., an Interpretant), the “mediating representations” (CP 1.553) or the “proper significate effect” (CP 5.475) of a past (Dynamical Object) that is no more, that cannot be accessed directly or unmediatedly. Historians’ texts convey cognitive claims on the past that become part of the shared encyclopedia, which can be metaphorically imagined as consisting of libraries of often contradictory notions, beliefs, facts, narratives, descriptions, hypotheses, and fabrications on past events, dynamics, and processes.¹⁷

The form historians give to their accounts, as Hayden White sustained, have semiotic effects in the construction and interpretation of the past, just as the form of every sign vehicle produces specific meanings through which an object or event in the world is referred to not in itself, but “in some respect or capacity” (CP 2.228). And yet, it is a mistake to conclude that historians’ narratives would be fictitious if not for the ethical or deontological commitment of their authors, as White alleged. Sure, the past that historians reconstruct by analyzing and interpreting the traces it left is not directly experienceable: archives, a particular kind of trace, are not open windows or time machines. Again, the past is a “ghost,” and historians are not shamanic mediums. But through the mediation and constraint of historians’ conjectural labor on its partial traces some meaningful (and

¹⁶ Which is not a problem for (postmodern) antirealists who surmise that we all live in different, mutually intersecting ontologies; but I prefer to use “worldviews” (or *Weltanschauungen*, or “ideologies”) instead of “ontologies,” and continue to Kantianly decline “ontology” in the singular, no matter the impossibility of unmediatedly knowing it.

¹⁷ It is important to also consider history as potentially a fabrication of the past, under which rubric we can include mistakes and misreadings, but also ideologically motivated falsifications and mystifications as well as historical novels and films, so important in the construction of the public memory of the past.

epistemologically truthful) accounts of the past (“history”) can be produced, just as “a sign can stand for something else to somebody only because this ‘standing for’ relation is mediated by an interpretant.”¹⁸ It is about this labor we must now turn.

Towards a Labor Theory of (Historical) Knowledge

If we cease to think of knowledge simply as a collection of facts, notions, information, or, more generally, the final result of a cognitive activity, and we consider instead the entire process involving a knowing agent making claims on the basis of a methodology, a conceptual apparatus, and an encyclopedia of notions in order to develop an understanding of the world (and waiting for the world to kick back, at least in the form of negative responses or of malleability/resistance to change), then the labor of the agent acquires a prominent role.¹⁹ The erasure of this labor in the presentation of cognitive claims inevitably produces reifying reality effects in the ontological-realist sense (e.g., the forgetting of the *as if* in the contractualist mode considered above). A labor theory of knowledge not only corrects that effect. It offers a materialist account on how we know the world that (1) does not require any transcendently suspicious anchor;²⁰ (2) that is historical and socially situated; (3) that does not require any idealist reductionism; (4) that tolerates diverging and contradictory but equally authoritative conclusions; (5) and that takes into account at the same time the social embeddedness (social constructivism), the conceptual framing (the realm of intellectual and conceptual history), the material aspect (negative realism), and the inevitable ethical and political implications of the cognitive process.

It would be interesting to reconstruct how the cognitive process unfolds within different disciplines, around different objects of inquiry (including the analysis of aesthetic texts and artistic works), or in different historical contexts. I focus here on the discipline of history as this is my own field of professionalization. Historians’ research is often described as starting from archival or documentary sources of different sorts, which constitute the evidentiary apparatus upon which they

¹⁸ Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Just as by substituting the expression “sign” with “sign function,” Peirce and Eco emphasized the triadic process whereby someone *takes* something to stand for something else in some respect, for some purpose, and on the basis of an encyclopedia of interpretants.

²⁰ Like, for instance, Daniel Dennett’s “skyhooks,” a metaphor he used to criticize explanations invoking ungrounded or supernatural entities to explain design complexity in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

tentatively conjecture the reconstruction of a past event or process. The resulting “history” thus stands for the “past” only insofar as it is mediated by historians’ interpretive labor on that evidentiary apparatus. This is a fairly common view, although it is simplistic to the point of being an ideological falsification, since historical research never starts from the archive, but (eventually) gets there only in response to preexisting discourses within the field in a particular historical conjuncture.

What is less obvious, though, is the semiotic relation that different kinds of traces or sources entertain with the “past” (the world that was; the absent Dynamical Object of historians’ semiotic production). On the one hand, documents are not direct (unmediated) indexical signs of the past events or processes that historians want to investigate—with the exception of traces like archaeological remains, ruins, geological sediments, etc. What a document indicates as an indexical sign is *only* the (voluntary or involuntary) act of leaving that trace; but the larger event or process which historians aim to reconstruct through it is already mediated and must therefore be considered a complex semiotic construct (no longer an indexical sign) that signifies that past event in some respect and capacity and from the perspective of someone willing to attain some goal. On the other hand, a trace, pointing either to a past event (in the case of archaeological, geological, or other sorts of material clues) or to the recording of that past event in a text (documentary sources), becomes evidence only when it is collected along with other traces into an evidentiary apparatus (and I follow here Ginzburg) which is part of a process of inferential reasoning, the purpose of which is to conjecture the nature of a past state, event, or process. This conjecture follows the logic of abduction, as I said before, which starts by hypothesizing a theoretical scenario that can offer a credible explanation for the evidence under scrutiny.²¹ It is in the postulation of this interpretive scenario that the shared encyclopedia of methodologies, concepts, and socially conventionalized knowledges, interpretive habits, and theories comes into play. It is, that is, in the construction of a plausible explanatory paradigm that interpretive habits; disciplinary orthodoxies; institutional

²¹ “Much contemporary research has identified abduction with the conjectural procedures of physicians and of historians. . . . Now a doctor looks both for general laws and for specific and idiosyncratic causes, and a historian works to identify both historical laws and particular causes of particular events. In either case historians and physicians are conjecturing about the textual quality of a series of apparently disconnected elements. They are operating a *reductio ad unum* of a plurality. Scientific discoveries, medical and criminal detections, historical reconstructions, philological interpretations of literary texts (attribution to a certain author on the grounds of stylistical keys, “fair guesses” about lost sentences or words) are all cases of conjectural thinking.” Umberto Eco, “Horns, Hooves, Insteps: Some Hypotheses on Three Types of Abduction,” in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. by Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 205-6.

pressures; philosophical, religious, and political biases; and class, gender, and racial unequal positionality factor in.

A focus on the cognitive labor of historians, within a cognitive process thus conceived, affords to conceptualize and account for the conditions in which that knowledge is produced. Historians, in fact, do not produce their accounts of the past out of nothing, but on the basis of a complex assemblage: this is made up, certainly, of traces (archival documents, archaeological and geological remains, data of various kinds, photographs, paintings, etc.); received notions and competences from national and global historiographical traditions; fashions, concerns, and themes traversing the field in historians' own times; subfield-specific approaches, terminologies, analytical techniques, linguistic competences, and the like; theoretical, philosophical, legal, and methodological beliefs and biases; but it is also constituted by political, ethical, and religious convictions and prejudices; external and internal compulsions, discriminations, unwritten rules, and commitments grounded on ethnical, racial, sexual, and gender differences; pressures from peers (in individual departments as well as in the field in general); individual life trajectories (at once personal and social), emotional inclinations, interdisciplinary skills, psychological perversions, creative imaginations; and competing institutional organizations and their positions within the larger society. In short, the analysis of the production process of historical knowledge requires holistic, interdisciplinary perspectives not dissimilar from the ones that historians mobilize to understand the social history of knowledge at the time of Galileo or of early modern Japanese naturalists.

A complete analysis of historians' labor encompasses considerations ranging from the physical energies that this labor required; the emotional, affective, or political investments; its economic and institutional conditions; the effect of various markets regulating its circulation (academic publishing, media, etc.); career investments (tenure, promotion, awards, etc.); and so on. But historians' knowledge is also (and principally) semiotic insofar as it consists of producing signifying and communicable discourses on the past that rest upon the shared encyclopedia of views, notions, concepts, laws, interpretive habits, and methodologies at the same time that they have the potential of changing (or reinforcing) that encyclopedia (according to the triadic model introduced above).

But historians' labor is of semiotic interest for yet another reason. The discourses and accounts that historians produce as "history" involve a Dynamical Object (the past) that must be conceived of in a different manner than that of other semiotic utterances in the different fields of

knowledge production. While scholarly statements pertaining aspects of the (social or natural) world are expected to have a mediated relationship with it (in the terms of a negative realism, insofar as the Dynamical Object is always immediately or non-semiotically unrepresentable), history's Dynamical Object is an absence (Kleinberg's "ghost"). The past world that historians construct stands for the ontological past (Dynamical Object) as a "possible world" that fills in for its absence. Umberto Eco adopted the notion of "possible world" from modal epistemology to refer to the worlds that texts produce and furnish:²² a text is a machine triggering in the mind of the cooperating readers the production of a world that entertains complex relationships with the "real" one. For example, Michael Connelly's novels depict a world that is supposed to be taken as analogous to today's Los Angeles, only augmented by the presence of the fictional characters of Hieronymus Bosch and his colleagues, friends, and foes ("supernumeraries"), who do not however alter the structure of that world like they would if detective Bosch's stories were written by Stephen King.

The possible world that historians' texts produce entertains a different relation with the "real" world when compared with the possible worlds that biologists, physicists, sociologists, political scientists, etc. construct in their texts, because the Dynamical Object it confronts and relates to is not there, even though it is assumed to be the same "real" world (albeit in a different temporality). The informed readers cannot experience any kicking back of the world (if they endeavored to move beyond straightforward trust in the historian's word and attempted to "test" the veracity of the possible world the author has constructed), because the world that the possible world of a historiographical text is taken to represent is no longer there, it cannot kick back, it cannot resist nor test the soundness of the product of a historian's labor. That said, it would be incorrect to sustain that the nature of this possible world is the same of the narrative worlds that fictions construct (as Hayden White would surmise), since the possible worlds historians produce and furnish are taken to have more stringent temporal and causal relations with the "real" one. Fictional possible worlds are cultural constructs that entertain with the "real" world complex relations of convergences and divergences of some essential or accidental properties, but they are declaredly distinct from it by different degrees of supernumeraries (in realist fictions) or the

²² The notion of "possible world" is a construct of modal epistemology. For an introduction, see Christopher Menzel, "Possible Worlds," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Fall 2023 Edition), at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/possible-worlds/> and Takashi Yagisawa, *Worlds & Individuals, Possible & Otherwise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For its application in the truth-value of narrative texts, see Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text," in Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 200-260

suspension of some fundamental laws (like in Sci Fi, fantasy, or horror fictions). To be philologically accurate, Eco restricted the analytical use of possible world logic to fictional texts. As he put it, “If I am telling someone how Columbus discovered America, I am undoubtedly producing a text which refers to what is commonly believed to be the ‘real’ world.”²³ But nothing prevents us to adopt the logical construct of possible worlds beyond the analysis of fictional texts (as Eco does) in order to distinguish the world imagined in scientific texts by sociologists, political scientists, and biologists and the world imagined in historiographical texts—the former assuming the contours of an implied likeness with the “real” one, the latter of causal implication deriving from their temporal dislocation.

The world (as Dynamical Object) that a historiographical text represents in the form and terms of a possible world is not there to guide, if only negatively, readers’ disposition to accept it. Furthermore, the fact that the possible world of historians’ texts is taken to stand for the past is itself the result of the willing collaboration of the readers (and, among them, the community of historians), who accept the truthfulness of historians’ conjecture on the basis of both heteronomous and autonomous processes of authorization, the former grounded on institutional trust (*auctoritas*), the latter on readers’ ability of verifying the trustworthiness and meticulousness of the author’s conjectural labor. That is, historians’ labor is essential to assess the trustworthiness of the past world they create.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the truth-value of the semiotic constructions of historians (“history” as a possible, conjectural reconstruction of aspects of the past) rests on a contractual assessment of the soundness and felicity of historians’ labor. Hence, any claim of objectivity that does not rest on the critical assessment of historians’ labor—in the sense, for example, of an implied *adaequatio rerum et intellectus* or of historiographical positivism—is necessarily ideological. Claims of objectivity in a realist-ontological sense (as in Ginzburg) can only be sustained for nuclear events that left unequivocal traces. In any case, the verifiability of historians’ claims (the truth-value of the possible world they constructed) cannot rely on a Dynamical Object kicking back (since the past world as both *terminus ad quem* and *terminus ab quo* of historians’ claims is no more), but on the historically contingent labor of historians. The transparency of the labor of cognitive agents is thus central to the truth-value of the knowledge it produces.

²³ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 220.

Three further consequences can be drawn from this conclusion. First, historians' labor, semiotic in nature, must be at the forefront of their work, as it is the main element upon which the truth-value of their claims can be assessed. Second, if historians' labor is the yardstick of their cognitive authority, they should feel compelled to pursue an ethic of truth-telling, not only for the sake of the production of sound knowledge, but especially for the political consequences of their work. Third, and most important, historians' labor has inevitably *political* consequences.

Historians' labor is political in five important senses. First, because that labor is a contribution that cements, modifies, or expands both the encyclopedia of notions and views on the past that a community shares and the methodologies and theories sustaining and legitimizing other historians' work. Second, because it produces a version of the past (qua possible world) that stands for an ontological condition that is no more: it has the responsibility of speaking for the dead, as Walter Benjamin put it in his *Theses*. Third, because, independently of historians' intentions, it can strengthen, criticize, or lay the condition for changing the social conditions of the present: it does so allegorically, indirectly, but also directly by regulating the views on social structures, human beings, causation, temporality, genealogical onto- and phylogenesees, forms of government, diplomacy, the organization of economic production, the distribution of wealth, power, violence, etc. that have normative role within society today. Fourth, because it offers a model that has a direct pedagogical impact, insofar as it shows how the means of semiotic and cognitive production are ultimately regulated by collective negotiations and are a collective responsibility. And finally, because it shows how every form of knowledge, insofar as it results from (some kind of cognitive) labor, is a creative event: it adds something new to our mind (in the forms of new ideas, semantic values, perspectives, ethical and political views, etc.), but also to the society and to the world we live in.