Experiencing the Outbreak of The First World War: A Critique of Cultural History

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Published in:
One Hundred Years of Inheriting: The First World War Phenomenon

2016

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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Dear reader,

This is a chapter I wrote for a book on the First World War edited by Snezhana Dimitrova et al and appearing with CEU Press some time later this year. What interests me is the notion of an “experience,” as in the *Augusterlebnis* or “August experience” – the unique experience which people are said to have gone through in the summer of 1914. Revisionist historians reject the notion of an *Augusterlebnis*, but this, as I argue, is because they are cultural historians. Cultural historians always get experiences wrong.

The abstract:

Cultural historians cannot acknowledge the felt experiences of people of the past since they interpret those experiences and explain them in terms of external factors. Yet felt experiences are not interpreted but instead immediately sensed, and felt experiences cannot be explained but only described. The failure to acknowledge these points is what makes Clifford Geertz deny that animals or newborn children have experiences, and it makes post-modernists such as Foucault into apologists for extra-discursive crimes. As an example of this failure, we will consider the way the outbreak of war was experienced in 1914.

Please refer to as:


If you have any comments or questions, email me at erik@ringmar.net

thanks for reading,

Erik
Since the end of the Second World War, there has been a reaction against history understood as the story of kings, wars and nation-states. Instead cultural and social history has been in the ascendant. Already in the 1930s, the Annales School in France focused on social history, and more recently, historians have added the history of mentalities and emotions, the history of everyday life, oral history, women’s history, psychohistory, the history of various minority groups, of sexuality, and so on. Although they differ in terms of the methodologies they employ, the proponents of these newly discovered subfields all present themselves as doing ‘history from below,’ and as such, they share an interest in the experiences of ordinary men and women. Once history is seen from below, we could argue, life is nothing but experience, and a historiography which ignores experiences is for that reason never going to be true to the facts.

Take war. To write about war without considering how it was experienced by ordinary soldiers, civilians, women and children, is surely to profoundly misrepresent it. We cannot understand war unless we understand the fear and thrill of the battlefield; the terror of being under attack; taking flight and taking refuge; the horror

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1 I am grateful to Snezhana Dimitrova, David Seamon, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and to colleagues at Lund University for comments on a previous version of this chapter. This research project was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Grant M14-0087:1, 'State-Making and the Origins of Global Order in the Long Nineteenth Century' (STANCE), PI: Jan Teorell, Lund University, Sweden.
3 See, inter alia, Sylvester, *War as Experience*; Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*.  

of seeing a loved one killed before one’s eyes, and so on. These experiences, arguably, are what war is. Ignoring these experiences is consequently to ignore the very object of our study. To put it more bluntly, a history of war which ignores war as experienced is itself a form of violence. By talking about war in neutral, objective and non-experiential terms, we are no better than the pilots in the bomber aircraft who never have to face the reality of what is happening on the ground. There are political implications of such an objective stance: wars which no one has to experience are a lot easier to embark on.

What we mean by an ‘experience’ is at the same time far from clear, and there is no consensus regarding how experiences should be retrieved and, once retrieved, how they should be interpreted. It is difficult enough to make sense of our own experiences and sometimes impossible to make sense of the experiences of others. These problems are multiplied many times over for historians who are dealing with the experiences of people who no longer are alive. Experiences and how they should be studied by historians are the topics of this chapter. In particular, we will investigate, and criticize, historical analyses which turn the experiences of people of the past into functions of the ‘culture’ of the society in which they live. Although experiences indeed may be determined by culture, and thereby explained by culture, their experiential, felt, quality gives experiences an ontological status which cannot be reduced to cultural factors. To provide a causal account is not enough since to causally explain something is not the same as to understand it. Put more bluntly, cultural history too is a form of violence which ignores that which it purports to explain. Once again our objective stance leads us astray: experiences which are culturally determined are nobody’s experiences and thereby far easier to ignore. To illustrate this argument, we will briefly discuss the way Europeans reacted to the outbreak of the Great War, the

First World War, in 1914. After all, historians have always discussed the events taking place in the summer of 1914 as a matter of the *Augusterlebnis*, the ‘August experience’.

**Cultural history and the problem of reflection**

Before we turn to a discussion of the historical case, let us start with the difficulties involved in interpreting even the experiences that ostensibly are our own. Since we believe we have privileged access to them, we might argue that we, if anyone, should be able to say what our own experiences are. Yet, as a philosopher might explain, reflecting on one’s own experiences is not a straightforward matter. ‘One of the urgent methodological question that phenomenology has to face up to,’ as Dan Zahavi puts it, ‘is the question of whether and to what extent experiential subjectivity can be made accessible to direct examination.’

> If subjectivity, rather than being an object that we encounter in the world, is the very perspective that permits any such encounter, can it then be grasped and described at all, or is it only approachable *ex negativo*? Will any examination necessarily take the subject as an object of experience and thereby distort it beyond recognition?

The problem, as Zahavi points out, is that experiences as experienced and as reflected on are entities of ontologically different kinds. When reflected on, we place the experience at a distance and observe it from the outside. Reflection presupposes alienation, as it were, but an experience from which we are alienated is not the same thing as an experience that we have and go through. ‘Is reflection, in reality, a kind of falsifying mirror or telescope that transforms whatever it makes appear?’ Zahavi’s own solution to this puzzle is, briefly put, that reflection indeed is possible but that

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5 Kustermans and Ringmar, ‘Modernity, Boredom and War’; Ringmar, “‘The Spirit of 1914’”.
7 Ibid.
some forms of reflection are better than others. Besides, it is not clear what the alternative would be. Experiences, it would seem, can only be apprehended as reflected on and there are no more direct methods available to us.\(^8\) It is only through reflection that the experience is turned into an object of cognition, into an item which can be documented, investigated and deliberated on. Since human subjectivity is inherently self-reflective, the problem of alienation will always arise; self-reflectivity necessarily alienates us from life as we experience it.

When it comes to the experiences of other people, philosophers have traditionally posed this as a question of how to interpret ‘other minds’. Understood as a methodological conundrum, this is a question of how to get access to the content of another person’s interior states; how to interpret this content and perhaps how to explain it. But, clearly, even if we manage to sort out these issues, the insurmountable fact still remains that another person’s experiences belong to her and not to me. No matter how well they are documented, interpreted and explained, we can never experience another person’s experiences. Phenomenologists have sought to bypass this difficulty by insisting that empathy with others is not a matter of mind-reading.\(^9\) Instead, all we need to know is directly detectable from their demeanour: the tears on their faces, their shaking hands, their ready smiles, *are* their experiences.\(^10\) Empathy is consequently not a question of ‘putting oneself in someone else’s shoes’ or ‘feeling what someone else feels’. As expressed in the body, an experience is a thing in the world and as such it is readily available to others – perhaps more available to others than to the person whose experiences they are. How successful such an investigation is likely to be is an empirical and not a philosophical matter, yet it is easy to imagine

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8 Ibid., 177–193.
10 Lange and James, *The Emotions*. 
how it could go wrong. And in any case, the problem of reflection has become twice as hard: not only do we have to reflect on the experiences of others but also on our own experiences of those experiences.

For historians, these problems are harder still. Historians can have no direct experiences of the experiences of others since the others tend to be dead. The phenomenological solution does not work: what we have before us are not the demeanours of living human beings, but only the documents they have left us – texts, above all, perhaps diaries or letters. At best such texts contain a person’s reflections on her experiences – statements about how she felt – but what the relationship is between such a statement and the experience itself we do not know. And in any case, the statement has to be interpreted and made sense of and in the case of societies very distant from our own, such sense-making is fraught with difficulties.

This is where the notion of “culture” comes to the rescue.11 The culture of the society in which a person lives, a cultural historian will explain, provides the means by which experiences can be both reconstructed and interpreted. ‘[H]uman experience,’ as Clifford Geertz argues,

is not mere sentience, but, from the most immediate perception to the most mediated judgment, significant sentience – sentience interpreted, sentience grasped. For human beings … all experience is construed experience, and the symbolic forms in terms of which it is construed thus determine … its intrinsic nature.12

It is only as interpreted, in other words, that an experience can come to exist, and interpretations are arrived at by means of the ‘organized systems of significant symbols’ – the ‘culture,’ for short – of the society in which a person lives. It is our interpretations that help us make sense of whatever happens to us, and it is only once

12 Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 405.
they are made sense of that experiences can be identified, documented and reflected on. ‘[U]ndirected by culture patterns,’ as Geertz puts it, ‘man’s behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless.’ Experience, on this account, is conceptual through and through and interpretation ‘goes all the way down to the most immediate observational level’ Fellow anthropologist Victor Turner makes the same point. Experiences are structured, Turner explains; they stand out – ‘like a rock in a Zen sand garden’ – and they have beginnings and ends. It is consequently one thing to live through an experience, understood as a sequence of events, but something quite different to attribute meaning to an experience understood as a meaningful whole. It is only when we remember whatever happened to us, and when we tell others about it, that the sequence of events becomes an experience properly speaking. Philosophers of history such as Paul Ricœur and David Carr draw much the same conclusions. History-writing is obviously narrative in character, they point out, but what these histories refer to is more than anything the stories people tell themselves about their own lives. There is a correspondence between the way life is experienced and the way it is recorded; stories are not only told, but lived. Everyday experiences have an irreducibly narrative quality.

Compare John Dewey’s discussion of what it means to experience a work of art. An experience, Dewey explained, has a distinct beginning and when it ends we

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13 Ibid., 46.
14 Ibid., 28.
15 Turner, From Ritual to Theatre.
16 Ibid., 76; Cf. Throop, ‘Articulating Experience’, 223.
17 Carr, Time, Narrative, and History; Ricœur, Time and Narrative.
19 See the chapter on ‘Having an Experience,’ in Dewey, Art as Experience; Cf. Leddy, ‘Dewey’s Aesthetics’.
feel a sense of completion, much as after we have finished a meal. Each experience has its own pervading qualities – its own rhythm, as it were – and as such it is distinct from the many incoherent things that happen to us as we go through life. This is what Dewey called ‘an experience,’ and which we, somewhat awkwardly, will refer to as ‘an-experiences’. In what follows we will contrast these an-experiences with the experiential quality of life as we live through it, which we will refer to as ‘felt experiences’.

For a historian the cultural perspective introduced by anthropologists and philosophers of history simplifies matters enormously. If the people of the past only had experiences to the extent that they interpreted whatever happened to them in terms of the culture of the society in which they lived, there is in principle no reason why we could not interpret their experience in much the same fashion. A society’s culture is publicly available after all; it is a fact in the world; and although there may be difficulties involved in fully grasping it, there is no philosophical problem involved in the procedure. Think about it like this: when something happens to someone, they consult the cultural resources of their society much as they might look something up in an encyclopedia. The encyclopedia tells them what the event they have lived through means. What we do as historians is simply to acquire the same book and look up the same things. We do this, on the anthropologists’ advice, by comparing the ‘typicality’ of an experienced object with ‘pre-experienced things of similar typical structures’ and with ‘future experiences of the same type’. Or, as Dewey suggested, we understand artistic experiences in terms of the ordinary experiences and the cultural contexts of the people who produced the works in question.

But we can go one step further. As the historian Joan Scott has argued, what someone experiences is always and necessarily a result of the positions they occupy in
society; when we experience the world we always do it as a ‘woman,’ a ‘worker,’ a ‘person of colour,’ and so on. This is why experiences necessarily are functions of social, economic, cultural and political processes that take place prior to the experiences themselves and which serve to position us in a certain fashion. Indeed, in a characteristically post-structuralist move, Scott insists that the subjects of experience are not given prior to their experiences but instead are constituted by them.

It is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.20

It is not, as in the anthropologists’ account, that the sequence of events a person lives through are interpreted by that person by means of the cultural resources at her disposal; there is nothing absolute about whatever happens to us and thereby nothing essential about subjects. Instead, both experiences and subjects are created as subjects are subjected to the positions they are assigned in discourse and as they come to live life in that position. Experiences are discursive in and of themselves and so are subjects. Ignoring these facts, mainstream historians are hopelessly native. ‘[T]he concept of experience,’ says Scott, ‘precludes inquiry into processes of subject-construction; and they avoid examining the relationships between discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge.’21

If Scott and her fellow post-structuralists are correct, the work of the historian is once again greatly facilitated. If discourse produces both subjects and their experiences, it is discourse we should study. On this account there is no encyclopedia

21 Ibid., 783.
which a person consults when something happens to her, but instead person, experience and the encyclopedia itself are all created through the power of language. Put in a slightly different way, by understanding both experiences and culture as texts, we end up with a straightforward problem of intertextuality – a question of how one text can be used to interpret another text. This is the kind of problem which literary scholars engage in all the time, and the kind of problem which other scholars in the humanities – including historians – have become increasingly skilled at addressing. With Michel Foucault we might for example undertake an archaeology of discourse; or in a project inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, a genealogical investigation of how discourse came to constitute both subjects and experiences.

Experiencing the outbreak of war

Let us make this discussion more concrete by considering a historical example. Late in July and early in August 1914, the streets of European capitals were filled with large groups of excited people. ‘Enormous throngs have paraded the streets of the capital all day,’ the New York Times reported from Berlin on 26 July 1914. The crowds were singing, cheering, and thousands of people were preparing to hold an all-night vigil in Unter den Linden in support of the Kaiser and the war. Nothing like it had been seen since the eve of the Franco-Prussian war, and hundreds of Americans in the city were ‘thunderstruck at this convincing evidence of the war spirit of modern Germany’. But the spontaneity of the bellicose sentiments came as a revelation to many Germans too. ‘Germany, armed, ready, and confident, awaits Russia’s next move.’ When war finally broke out, the festive mood remained. ‘The Germans are going to war smiling, singing, and cheering,’ the New York Times reported on 7

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22 ‘War Spirit Stirs Berlin to Frenzy’.
23 Ibid.
August.\textsuperscript{24} Company after company of reservists were marching across Berlin ‘without a suggestion of unwillingness to shoulder the unknown burdens which await the Kaiser’s sons.’ They were singing war-songs – \textit{Die Wacht am Rhein} and \textit{Deutschland, Deutschland, ü ber Alles} – and the refurbished cattle-car coaches in which they travelled had inscriptions such as ‘Excursion to Paris’, and ‘Never mind, we’ll soon be chewing English beefsteak.’ At every station along the way, women and children assembled to throw posies to the troops and to sing the national anthem. ‘The Kaiser’s people are a united nation.’\textsuperscript{25}

Similar scenes were taking place in the French capital. When President Raymond Poincaré returned from talks with the country’s allies in Moscow on 30 July, the occasion was turned into a display of patriotic fervour. Hundreds of thousands of Parisians lined the streets from the Gare du Nord to the Élysée Palace, the \textit{New York Times} reported, shouting ‘Vive Poincaré’, ‘Vive l’armée’, ‘Vive la France’, ‘Vive l’Alliance’.\textsuperscript{26} ‘Heads were bared, handkerchiefs were waved, and bouquets were thrown from balconies.’ The demonstrators then lined up behind the president’s carriage and marched along his route while people on the pavements burst out in impromptu renditions of \textit{la Marseillaise}. What was particularly striking was the spontaneity of the demonstrations, since it was known only a few hours previously at what time the president would arrive.

Other European capitals witnessed similar scenes. ‘War fever seized on St. Petersburg immediately after the announcement of the mobilization,’ the \textit{New York Times} reported on 30 July, ‘and increased almost to delirium’ when it was announced that Britain had entered the war on Russia’s side.\textsuperscript{27} ‘The streets of the Russian capital

\textsuperscript{24} ‘Germany Goes Singing to War’.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} ‘War Spirit Stirs Berlin to Frenzy’.
\textsuperscript{27} ‘War Fervor in Russia’.
are overflowing again tonight with enthusiastic subjects of the Emperor, and patriotic
demonstrations continue without cessation.’ ‘Discord has ceased, people are united,
and it is hardly credible that hundreds of men, now marching to the stations, were ten
days ago erecting barricades in the streets of the capital.’ The Austrians were no less
enthusiastic and no less united. ‘The demonstrations in the streets continue to grow in
enthusiasm, and tremendous popular demonstrations, with all the country’s veteran
warriors present, are now taking place in front of the City Hall.’ ‘The enthusiasm
spread all the way to the United States where various immigrant communities took to
the streets in support of their former countrymen. ‘Britons, Frenchmen, and Belgians
march up Broadway singing national anthems,’ the New York Times reported, and
10,000 Germans who assembled in Ulmer Park in Brooklyn, ‘enthusiastically cheered
the German Emperor, sang war songs, and manifested great enthusiasm for the cause
of the Triple Alliance in the present crisis.’

The revisionist account

What the reporters for the New York Times are describing here is a series of events
which some people in Europe’s capitals experienced in a certain fashion. The
experiences are reflected in the newspaper as they are reflected on by the reporters
and, one would presume, by the editors. What is described is clearly an experience, in
Dewey’s terms – or rather, a series of an-experiences. The question for us is what the
relationship might be between the experiences as described and the experiences as felt
by the people who went through them.

According to the received account of the outbreak of the First World War,

people marched off to their respective fronts with great enthusiasm, and this is indeed

28 ‘War Unites All Russians’.
29 ‘Austrians a Unit for War’.
30 ‘Paraders Cheer Times War News’; ‘10,000 Sing War Songs’.
the interpretation which the reports in the *New York Times* support. However, since
the 1970s, this interpretation has increasingly come to be questioned and it is by now
all but completely replaced. As Jean-Jacques Becker in France persuasively pointed
out in an argument which subsequently was replicated for Germany by Jeffrey Verhey
and for Britain by Catriona Pennell and others, the received account has at least two
major problems.31 First, the experiences described by the *New York Times* and others
were not representative of the experiences of a majority of the population in each
country. Secondly, the experiences taking place on the streets of Europe’s capitals
have themselves been misrepresented and incorrectly explained.

What we have here is consequently a classical case of historical revisionism.32
Take the first problem first. As the revisionists would have it, in 1914 the vast
majority of people were not particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of war and the
soldiers did not march off to their respective fronts with smiles on their faces and
songs in their heart. Instead, as Becker makes clear in the case of France, aggressive
nationalism was mainly an urban phenomenon and it was restricted to members of the
army, the Church, and a few intellectuals and university students.33 The French in
general did not see war as inevitable; they did not want *revanche* for the defeat in
1871; nor did they necessarily want Alsace-Lorraine back, at least not at the price of a
war. It was instead Germany’s aggression which united all Frenchmen and it left them
with no choice. It was with a sense of calm resignation, not enthusiasm, that the
soldiers set off to do their duty.34 Verhey draws much the same conclusions in the
case of Germany.35 In the demonstration that took place in Berlin on July 25 – where,

32 Cf. Ringmar, “‘The Spirit of 1914’”.
33 Becker, 1914.
35 Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*. 
as we saw, the reporter for the *New York Times* was present – some 30,000 people took to the streets, but this was but a small fraction of the population of greater Berlin at the time, and considerably fewer than the crowd of 100,000 people which the Social Democrats assembled three days later *in opposition* to the war. In Britain, as Pennell shows, the popular reaction was much the same.\(^{36}\) There was some enthusiasm to be sure – the demonstrations on the streets in London on 4 August are sometimes used as an example – but there was mainly apprehension, worry, and finally a grim-faced determination to do one’s duty for king and country.

So how did the majority of the people experience the outbreak of war? To a traditional historian, this is first and foremost a question regarding the availability of primary sources, and all revisionists have put in painstaking labour in tracking down obscure material – letters, diaries, photographs and newspaper clippings. People’s experiences, the argument goes, are reflected in these sources and historians can gain access to the experiences by reflecting on these reflections. What historians do here is to reconstruct the experiences which people presumably had, and in the process the events they lived through are turned into an experience. The events as seen from each individual person’s perspective are turned into a little narrative bundle, complete with a beginning, an end, and plot that connects the two. For example, the plot will often present people’s reactions as a jumble of emotions. Among the British people, says Pennell, there was ‘anxiety, excitement, fear, enthusiasm, panic, uncertainty, and criticism. ... Often they were felt at the same time, or, at the very least, within hours, days, or weeks of each other.’\(^{37}\) ‘Germans,’ says Verhey, ‘felt pride, enthusiasm, panic, disgust, curiosity, exuberance, confidence, anger, bluff, fear, laughter, and

\(^{36}\) Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, 52.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 227.
desperation,’ and ‘[a]ll of these emotions may have been felt by the same person.’

The experience, thus reconstructed by the historian, is the story of how this welter of emotions is lived through and how, eventually, it is resolved into one predominant feeling – typically one of resignation to one’s fate and determination to do one’s duty.

Pennell sees this as a perfectly rational process. ‘People were not brainwashed into supporting the war,’ she concludes. ‘They made their own decisions, assessed newspaper reports critically, absorbed and processed information, sought updates where news was lacking, and, more often than not, self-mobilized to support the war.’ Hence the broad, country-wide support which the war eventually enjoyed. In this respect, the case of Germany was quite different. The Germans eventually came to believe that there really had been something called ‘the spirit of 1914’ – a spirit which had united an enthusiastic people behind its government and its plans for war – but this spirit was largely a result of government propaganda. Or rather, as news from the front turned from bad to worse, the government propaganda tapped into a deeply felt urge among ordinary Germans to imagine a happier time of unity and determination. ‘The propaganda narrative of the spirit of 1914 remained a powerful utopian vision against which the reality of Weimar politics and society could and would be judged.’

Consider next the second problem of the received account: the way it described the experiences of people on the streets of Europe’s capitals. What seemed to have happened, the revisionists argue, did not really happen. ‘Expressions of excitement,’ Pennell insists, ‘often masked more complex reactions.’ For example: scenes of

41 Ibid., 205.
departures at railway stations have been described as enthusiastic, ‘but many people were simply trying to give the soldiers a good send-off’; likewise, the cheering crowds in London on 4 August were not actually enthusiastic but instead engaging in ‘a release of tension after weeks of ambiguity.’ Pennell makes repeated use of this pressure-valve theory: ‘Cheering at the moment of announcement was not necessarily an indication of enthusiasm for war but a release of tension, a climax to a week of not knowing’; ‘[I]ike a kettle that had reached boiling point crowds sang patriotic song and cheered with a sense of relief once the declaration of war was announced.’

Besides, enthusiasm comes easily to young people, especially after ‘spilling out of theatres, on a Bank Holiday, perhaps fuelled by alcohol.’

Verhey draws similar conclusions in the case of Germany. The large crowds that assembled in Berlin, he says, were mainly bent on having a good time and thereby not really expressing genuine sentiments regarding the prospects of war. Verhey relies on the notion of the ‘carnivalesque’ in order make the argument. The carnival is a perennial feature of human societies, he says, and so is the urge to take time off from everyday life. It is not surprising if people in the big cities of Europe – trapped by rules and bored by routines – took the chance to enjoy themselves. This interpretation is strengthened, in his view, by the fact that university students were overrepresented among the participants. They were enthusiastic, as university students are wont to be, but not necessarily regarding the prospect of war.

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 39.
45 Ibid., 41.
46 Verhey, The Spirit of 1914, 231; Cf. ibid., 37–38, 82–89.
47 Verhey, The Spirit of 1914.
The experience deniers

On the revisionist account, ordinary people’s experiences of the outbreak of war in 1914 can be recreated as narrative bundles of Deweyan *an*-experiences which tell the story of how they came to lend their support to the war. These experiences are then explained in rationalistic terms, by Pennell, and in terms of government-supported self-suggestion by Verhey. The experiences of the people who took to the streets of Europe’s capitals are reconstructed in much the same fashion. Their experiences are categorized and typified and compared to other experiences of the same kind, and the experiences are then explained in terms of the culture of the time. This, we are told, is what university students typically do; what people do after a night on the town; what happens when ‘steam’ is ‘built up’, and so on. But observe what is being ignored here. What is being ignored are the experiences as felt, as actually lived through. The revisionist historians dispose of the felt experiences by reducing them to factors that are external to the persons whose experiences they are. All that remains are bits of emotions – items of affect – as they show up in the bundled, narrative, accounts. Here emotions are understood as objects – as objects that a person might have, lose or gain, and for which a historian consequently can go looking.

This, let us conclude, is the characteristic *modus operandi* of all cultural historians. They deny people their experiences in the process of explaining what they experienced; or, to be more precise, people’s felt experiences are ignored as their *an*-experiences are being reconstructed on their behalf. Or, as a cultural historian might put it, while people indeed may have ‘sensations’, sensations are not experiences properly speaking. You need access to culture in order to have an experience. Creatures without culture can have no experiences since experiences only come to exist as interpreted. Let us briefly consider what this might mean. It means, most
obviously, that animals have no experiences. A dog, if kicked, may thus feel something like a short, sharp pain, but this is nothing more consequential than what Geertz referred to as a ‘chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions’. A sensation is surely less deeply felt than an experience; it is less real since it cannot be thematized and actively reflected on. It will pass, we say, and it is a good thing the dog does not properly understand what is happening to it. However, much the same conclusions, and for the same reason, can be made regarding, say, people who have suffered serious brain injury, Alzheimer’s patients, or perhaps people with severe psychotic conditions. They too have no culture and are therefore unable to interpret what is happening to them. The same applies to newborn children too, or perhaps to children before they have acquired the use of language. But then neonates, as Geertz puts it, ‘are human only in posse anyway’.48

Consider next the conclusion which post-structuralists draw from this argument. As we saw, they deny the existence of extra-discursive experiences since they deny the existence of an extra-discursive subject. If there is no subject outside of language there is no one to whom the experience belongs; and if there is no subject, there can be no subjective experience. A felt experience is mute, as Giorgio Agamben points out; it is unutterable; and, much like Geertz, he draws a parallel between mute sensations and the wordless world of infants.49 The subjects as post-structuralists discuss them – subjects created by discourse – are curiously unemotional. But this is of course not surprising given that subjects are subjected to the interpretative regimes which the predominant discourses impose on them. As a result, they can feel only what they can interpret. This is why Jacques Derrida suggests that experiences should

48 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 405.
49 Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 47.
be placed sous rature, ‘erased’. An erasure tempts Joan Scott too, although she eventually concludes that the notion of an experience ‘is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion.’

However, as Linda Martín Alcoff points out in an incisive critique, there are profound moral consequences of such post-structuralist arguments. Take the case of date rape. If the notion of ‘date rape’ only appeared in our common discourse in the 1980s, it would seem to follow that ‘prior to the discourse of date rape, the experience itself could not occur, or at least not the sort of experience with such traumatizing after-effects as we now associate with rape.’ Yet this is surely preposterous, Alcoff concludes. The post-structuralists have gone morally astray and the reason is that they have gone philosophically astray. To insist that ‘discourse is the condition of intelligibility for all experience, is to erase all of those kinds of experiential knowledges unsusceptible to linguistic articulation.’

If meaningful experience must pass the test of discursive formulation, we will preclude the inarticulate from the realm of knowledge, a tendency which has nicely served the interests of Western masculinity by allowing it to ignore forms of oppression that could not be expressed under reigning regimes of discourse.

Alcoff indicts Michel Foucault under the same charge. In his History of Sexuality, Foucault argues that the nature of sex between adults and children changed dramatically as a result of changes to the French penal code introduced in 1867. Briefly, sexual acts which previously had been regarded as matters of ‘inconsequential

50 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy.
53 Ibid., 47.
54 Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 3–4.
bucolic pleasures’ were now subject to administrative categorization, medical intervention and legal action. Foucault clearly sees no problem with ‘caresses’ being ‘exchanged for a few pennies’ prior to 1867, and the reason he sees no problem is that discourse saw no problem. It was, on his account, only once the experience came to be interpreted in an administrative, medical and legal language that the experience became traumatic. Alcoff, however, will have none of it: ‘If such relations were reciprocally initiated and pleasurable for both parties, why did there need to be an exchange of a ‘few pennies’ to insure the girl’s participation?’

As we will now notice, there are moral consequences of the revisionists’ denial too. Curiously, once felt experiences are replaced by reconstructed an-experiences, the Europeans of 1914 – both those at home and those on the streets of the capitals – become remarkably similar to ourselves. We know that war is bad, and so did they; we are deliberative and rational, and so were they; we would not abandon our regular lives for heroic action on the battle-field, and neither would they. It is only, as in the case of Germany, the effects of propaganda that can temporarily make us abandon these instincts, and the purveyors of propaganda – governments, newspaper editors and intellectuals foremost among them – are consequently the enemies of ordinary people everywhere. This was true in 1914 and it is arguably still the case today. There is a fraternity of pacifists and footdraggers who unite ordinary people across the ages.

This is all very comforting and self-congratulatory. But consider, briefly, the unpalatable alternative: that sizeable numbers of people in 1914 really were enthusiastic regarding the prospect of war; imagine that they were not drunk on alcohol and jingoistic propaganda but on a genuine desire to kill and to live a heroic life. Surely this is not an image we would like to have of our past and of our

immediate forebears. Feelings of this kind are impossible to reconcile with who we take ourselves to be. Suddenly the experiences of the summer of 1914 would stand out from their context in such a way that they cannot be included in the normal historical account. There would be a kind of madness at the heart of European history.

Felt experiences

A comforting and self-congratulatory account is not necessarily incorrect, however. The kind of history we write depends on which sources we have at our disposal, but it also depends on what kinds of sources our conceptions of the past tell us to look for. It is these conceptions that interest us here. More than anything, which history we write regarding the events of 1914 depends on what we mean by a ‘felt experience’ and whether there is some way in which felt experiences can be included in our accounts of the past.

In order to answer this question, compare the experiences of the majority of people who stayed at home with the minority of people who took to the streets. Obviously, the experiences were quite different in the two cases. The experiences of the two groups differed since they underwent entirely different series of events. They were different, that is, not because they had different beliefs or opinions regarding war, but cause they were in different situations and engaged in different actions. Think about this, first of all, in purely physiological terms, that is, as a matter of the positioning of people’s bodies. The bodies on the streets were moving – marching, running, shouting, singing, standing, jumping, dancing – whereas the majority of bodies at home were sitting, eating, reading, eating, sleeping. The physical setting is also entirely different. The cities had houses, horses and cars, tall buildings, parks and squares, whereas the homes had whatever homes tend to have. More than anything, the streets were full of other people – there was a physical proximity here that put one
body in contact with another as they acted and expressed themselves together. Moreover, a majority of these people were strangers, people who never had met each other before, and the actions in which they engaged were highly unusual. To engage in such acts together with strangers must have been particularly exhilarating. People at home, by contrast, did what they normally do and they did it together with their family members. Of course the experiences were entirely different; they were different since they felt differently.

Felt experiences are always irreducibly subjective, we said; felt experiences are the experiences of a first and not of a third person. This means that a historiography based on a first person’s felt experience never can be objective. There can be no objective descriptions of subjective experiences. Felt experiences cannot be explained, only described, and only as described can they be taken seriously. But explaining experiences is of course exactly what cultural historians do. They go looking for ‘emotional reactions’, identified as items of affect, which they proceed to explain by references to typical behaviour and cultural categories. Or consider post-structuralist historians such as Joan Scott. ‘Experience,’ we quoted her to say above, is ‘not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.’

In order to talk about subjective experiences, we need a notion of a subject. On the post-structuralists’ account, a subject is constituted as someone is subjected to the positions assign to her in discourse. A subject is explained by reference to external factors. According to phenomenologists, however, a subject is first of all a body, and ‘body’ here should not be understood in contrast to a ‘mind’ since minds necessarily

are embodied. Consciousness is a bodily process that operates much as a large number of other bodily processes – including homeostatic processes responsible for maintaining body temperature, say, blood sugar or hormonal levels. Thus understood, felt experiences are always and necessarily prior to language. Although meaning certainly can be discursively constructed and culturally elaborated on, it is originally an embodied event. Or, better put, meaning is, first and foremost, the result of the way embodied subjects interact with their environment. Meaning is thus a far broader and much richer notion than cultural historians ever are in a position to acknowledge. ‘Culture is crude and inhuman,’ as Eugene Gendlin puts it, ‘in comparison with what we find directly. The intricacy you are now living vastly exceeds what cultural forms have contributed to you.’ An embodied view of meaning,’ Mark Johnson agrees,

looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures in interaction with their changing environments. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate things, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation.

This is how experiences can be returned to animals – including kicked dogs – to human beings with various psychological pathologies and to children. The world is just as meaningful, if in a different fashion, to animals who engage in no explicit interpretations of their own, and it is meaningful to newborns too who have no words in which to describe it. Their worlds are not cultural constructs, and they are not dependent on language or discourse, but they are meaningful just the same. We forget that fact at our own moral peril.

61 Johnson, Meaning of the Body, 11.
But note that the pre-linguistic world of felt experiences is not a social no-man’s land. The pre-linguistic is not the same as the pre-social. What and how we feel will differ depending on how we find ourselves in the world. It will differ depending on how we fit into our physical, but also our social, environment. Animals fit differently into the world than do humans but there is a great variety between humans too. Women have, for example, traditionally fit into the world in a different way than men, and as a result they have experienced the world differently. We can certainly include such pre-linguistic differences into the concept of ‘culture,’ but then the concept of culture has to be radically expanded and it is no longer the concept which cultural historians use. If culture is a matter of meaning, and meaning is embodied, the notion of cultural history must be radically reformulated.

Experiencing historical experiences

Experiences as reflected on and as felt have a different ontological status, we said, and this is why written sources cannot tell us what people once upon a time might have felt. What we experience is not what we think we experience since experiencing is not thinking. What the revisionist historians of 1914 found in their documents are statements regarding experiences which are produced on reflection, after the fact, and with particular audiences in mind. The felt experiences are lost and letters and diaries cannot be used to retrieve them. A historian who ignores these facts is a bad historian; or, to be more generous, a historian of something else than of the *Augusterlebnis* of 1914. What people really felt as war was about to break out in the summer of 1914, we will never know. This is not to say, however, that all hope is lost. There is indeed an intriguing possibility – although suggesting it may sound like something of a

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62 Young, ‘Throwing Like a Girl’, 146.
joke. If felt experiences depend on our bodies, and if meaning in principle is independent of cultural articulation, historians do indeed have a means of directly accessing the felt experiences of the people of the past. Historians can feel what the people of the past once felt since historians too have bodies and since their bodies too make sense of their environment as they fit themselves into it. As a result, a wormhole may suddenly open up in the time-space continuum.

For example: an archaeologist working on the burial practices of human societies 5,000 years ago might decide to reenact these practices by slaughtering animals and burying them in the same fashion as the people she writes about. Or, once we come to realize that a large cavernous stone actually was used as a drum by the Aztecs, we can beat on it. What we hear is something the Aztecs too once heard. Or we too could march up and down the streets of a major European capital to the tune of a marching band. This, to be clear, would not be to put ourselves ‘in the shoes’ of the people of the past, and it is not to learn to empathize with them. In fact, we would learn nothing whatsoever about them, their lives or their outlook on the world. As a result, such re-enactments can never add up to a proper historical account. Moreover, it is no doubt true that these felt experiences too may vary from one society to the next as a result of various pre-cognitive factors, and yet the variation is not infinite or random, and the reason is that the people we write about had bodies very similar to our own. An archaeologist working on 5,000 year old burial practices would share a felt experience since human beings have instinctive reactions to the smell of rotting flesh. A drum sounds a certain way since we, much as the Aztecs, have ears which perceive sounds in a certain fashion. We react automatically and pre-discursively to collective actions too, such as the marching up and down a street.

64 Domanska, ‘Frank Ankersmit’, 175–95.
65 Sørensen, ‘More than a Feeling’, 64–73.
together with others. For a brief moment we are right there on the street marching along the people of the summer of 1914.

Although such reenactments will not take us very far, staging them is nevertheless likely to have a salutary effect. Once again we are reminded that human life is not only a matter of interpreting the world but also, and primarily, a matter of feeling one's way through, of making the best of the situations in which we find ourselves and of fitting in. Most of these activities are pre-cognitive and they happen automatically and involve our conscious awareness only belatedly and in parts. Historians who seek to recapture the experiences of the people of the past must take these facts into account.

Bibliography


