

Research article

## Historiography - A craft like the art of mosaic

### *What historians do and why they disagree*

Tabea Hochstrasser

---

This article explains differences between historiographical accounts by comparing the working process of contemporary historians to the art of mosaic. The metaphor is cast in a postmodern – particularly constructivist – light. The nature of historians' object of study (historical reality), of source materials, and of historians' aim to create meaning are considered essential factors in leading to differentiation in historiography. Six elements are distinguished in the mosaic metaphor: (1) the raw materials, (2) the mosaic tiles, (3) the glue which holds these tiles together and bridges the spaces between them, (4) the flow and direction of tiles as they are arranged, (5) larger constellations into which tiles are organised, and (6) the mosaic. The former three help explain the process of interpreting sources through the creation of inferences, or the process of contextualization. The latter three explore associative creative reasoning, individuality, and the link between them as inducing historiographical differentiation.

---

**Keywords:** historiography; differentiation; contextualization; associative reasoning; mosaic

---

Genom att likna den samtida historikerns arbete med läggandet av en mosaik diskuterar denna artikel uppkomsten av skilda historiska berättelser. Mosaikmetaforen utgår från en postmodern – särskilt konstruktivistisk – synvinkel. Artikeln lyfter fram tre betydelsefulla faktorer som leder till skillnader i historieskrivningen; växelspelet mellan historikerns studieobjekt (historisk verklighet), tillgängligt källmaterial och historikerns strävan att skapa mening. Sex delar urskiljs i mosaikmetaforen: (1) råvarorna, (2) mosaikplattorna, (3) fogmassan som håller samman plattorna och fyller ut utrymmena mellan dem, (4) ordnandet av plattornas förhållande och riktning, (5) större constellationer som plattorna är organiserade i, och (6) mosaiken som helhet. De tre förstnämnda hjälper till att förklara processen att tolka källor genom skapandet av slutledningar och sammanhang. De tre sistnämnda utforskar associativt skapande resonemang, särprägel och kopplingen mellan dem som ger upphov till skilda historiska berättelser.

---

**Nyckelord:** historiografi; differentiering; kontextualisering; associativa resonemang; mosaic

---

**H**ow can we explain differentiation in historiography? In this article, I aim to further our understanding of why historians disagree and why there are so many particularities that differentiate even works that form a consensus. I suggest that we can supplement existing contextual and linguistic explanations by shifting the focus of analyses from practitioners and individual works of historiography to the nature of historiography itself, including its work materials and object of study. In particular, historians' definition and handling of sources are fundamental considerations, as historiography is centred on practical usage of historical sources. I will give prominence to these different factors by comparing the craft of historiography to the art of mosaic.

In the ethnographic tradition, the metaphor of mosaic finds its closest counterpart in *bricolage*, a concept developed by the structuralist, French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). Lévi-Strauss used this term to describe *mythical thought*, with *myth* being “a story that aims to explain why things are as they are” (Hess 1972: 2). *Bricolage* bears two similarities to the work of historians which are of importance to the metaphor explored in this article. First, “the constant re-use of the old in order to make the new” (Johnson 2012: 369), which is reminiscent of a historian's usage of sources. Second, there is Lévi-Strauss' description of the *bricoleur* as “giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes...he always

puts something of himself into [his work]” (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 21). Postmodern views stress similar processes in the creation of historiography, and I will expand on this in detail.

In current historiography, the metaphor of mosaic is generally used retrospectively. It denotes an outdated classical view: empiricist and positivist. This view was modelled on the Baconian ideal of science, dominant during historiography’s professionalisation in the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. Historiography was seen as a “collaborative construction”, with historians each contributing a “building-block...in the construction of a finally perfect edifice” (Southgate 2001: 24). In other words, the historiographical enterprise had the ambition of laying out an enormous “mosaic”, which would eventually depict history in its entirety (Lorenz 1988: 27; Lorenz 2002: 25–26).

This classical view finds expression in August Ludwig Schlözer’s (1735–1809) usage of the mosaic metaphor. In 1772, Schlözer, “one of the originators of modern historical research based upon philological methods” (Eskildsen 2008: 431) wrote: “Individual facts or events in historical science are like the small colored pebbles in mosaic painting. The critique digs out these facts from annals and monuments [i.e. historical sources] ... the composition is the work of the history writer” (Schlözer 1772, cited in Eskildsen 2008: 432). Schlözer’s description of “facts” as “pebbles”, which can be “dug out” with a scientific “critique”, allude to an empiricist belief that sources grant empirical access to a past reality and that facts are something to be “found” (“dug out”) rather than constructed. Nevertheless, Schlözer’s description of “composition” as the work of historians also attributes to historians a role of *organising* their materials.

Indeed, the “father of scientific history” as practiced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the historicist Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), stated in the 1830s: “[historiography] is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art...because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognised” (von Ranke cited in Munslow 1997, cited in Boldt 2014: 470). Ranke’s commitment to empiricism and objectivity in historical research is reflected here by his usage of the words “recreate” and “found”. However, this quote also indicates his belief that “the principles of writing history are artistic or poetic in their nature” (Rüsen 1990: 193).<sup>1</sup> According to both Schlözer’s and Ranke’s classical assumptions, differentiation in historiography can hence be explained as the result of variations in “compositions”, to use Schlözer’s wording.

Positivist historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century understood compositional errors as naturally occurring due to errors in judgement. To counteract

them, they emphasized source critique and rigorous objectivity. Thanks to a cumulative progress of knowledge, mistakes would eventually be corrected, especially if new source materials could be accessed, which could deliver new information. Thus, historians would continually create a “better account of the past” (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 94), which would finally result in a uniform, complete historiography.

These classical assumptions of professional historiography have by now changed fundamentally. They were severely criticised throughout the twentieth century by postmodern philosophers such as Roland Barthes (1915–1980), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Their critiques of meta-narratives, of positivist and structuralist thinking, and their highlighting of the subjectivity and ideology of knowledge led to the revision of empiricist, historicist, and positivist attitudes of historiographers. It is because of their insights that the metaphor of “historiography as a mosaic to be completed” has come to sound disparaging and naïve.

Today, differentiation in historiography is explained as a linguistic effect of authorial input and of the ambiguity of sources, which allows for a variety of interpretations by historians. Moreover, differentiation is explained contextually, i.e., historians subjectively interpret their source material according to their respective “framework”, “subject-position”, or “perspective” (McCullagh 2004: 19; Donnelly & Norton 2011: 60, 62, 94; Paul 2015: 52–54; Currie & Walsh 2019). I will use these postmodern insights to recast the metaphor of mosaic. In particular, I draw on postmodern insights concerning subjectivity and on constructivist thinking as formulated by the historiographical linguistic turn.

I will develop six elements in the mosaic metaphor. This expands on previous readings which have not made distinctions beyond mosaic tiles and a mosaic as a whole. The elements I distinguish are: (1) the raw materials, (2) the mosaic tiles (*tesserae*), (3) the glue which holds the *tesserae* together and is used to bridge the spaces between tiles (*interstices*), (4) the flow and direction of the lines of *tesserae* (*andamento*), (5) the way in which *tesserae* are brought together in patterns (*opera*), including (6) a mosaic in its entirety.

## Identifying raw materials

Let me begin with the most elemental component: the raw materials from which mosaic tiles are made. Contemporary western historiography makes a fundamental distinction between primary and secondary sources. Depending on the language any given historian works in they may also be called, by analogy, “source” and “work”, or “historical sources” and “secondary literature”.<sup>2</sup> Primary sources are any

<sup>1</sup> Let me note here that my usage of the metaphor “art of mosaic” is reminiscent of the debate Ranke touches upon in this quote: the description of historiography as an art (or not). Given its elaborate nature, running from Aristoteles’ *Poetics* to the more recent *Metahistory* by Hayden White (1973), further comment is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in Dutch: “(historische) bron” versus “(historisch) werk” and in German: “historische Quelle” versus “Darstellung” or “Sekundärliteratur”. Translations from Dutch, both in the notes and the text, are by the author.

original, authentic remnants *of* a historical reality, be they written, oral, visual, material, or digital. This terminology from the middle of the nineteenth century is entwined with Rankean historicism (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 65). This positivist tradition considered the information these “remnants from the past” contained as empirically most valuable to the historian’s craft – hence their important, or “primary” status. Despite the aforementioned postmodern critiques, this term has aged well and continues to be used.

Secondary or scientific sources are then produced by historiographers *about* a historical reality – they are considered secondary given their contemplative purpose, their purposeful mental distance as well as their larger chronological distance from the historical reality they consider. These sources are or were not necessarily produced by academic historiographers. Secondary sources can be authored by professional journalists or so-called amateur historians, they have been authored by antiquarians from the nineteenth century, by philosophers of the seventeenth century. Notably, any such secondary or scientific source can both be studied as a primary source – if considered in the function of knowledge creation about a historical reality – or indeed as a secondary source, in which case its arguments and findings are engaged with by a contemporary historian in a scientific discussion.<sup>3</sup> Moving forward, I concentrate on primary sources, which contemporary historians deem to contain or to be their “raw data” (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 65), and which I would name as the material from which they craft their metaphorical mosaic tiles, or *tesserae*.

## Working the materials

What do historiography’s mosaic workers do with their basic materials? How do historians handle primary sources and with what purpose? I proceed with the example of written sources, which from the institutionalization of academic historiography until today, have been the predominant type of primary sources used by historians. It is this type of source for which the historical critique, elemental to modern historiography, was developed.

Historiographers deem primary sources useful as fragments of a historical reality: because they originated in a specific temporal reality and continue to refer to this temporal reality, or so-called *world behind the sources*.<sup>4</sup> Historians study these fragments to construct inferences about this historical reality from which they originate. Metaphorically speaking, they work their raw materials, and select from them parts for *tesserae*. Historians

<sup>3</sup>An extreme postmodern stance can go so far as to regard this distinction between primary and secondary sources as negligible, as both are seen as equally interpretative of the historical reality they describe (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 70). Common usage of “primary” and “secondary” sources stands in opposition to this.

<sup>4</sup>In analogy with the Dutch historical theorist Herman Paul’s formulation “the world behind the text” (Paul 2015: 89).

distinguish elements in their sources that inspire inferences about historical contexts. They distinguish, for example, a source fragment or a source property such as a formal characteristic. Upon such an element, they then graft an inference, which says something about the historical context of that element or about the historical context of the source the element was taken from. To prompt such inferences, historians examine primary sources, equipped with a variety of queries. These queries may start out as feelings, such as curiosity to know more about an anecdote or the desire understand a particular source. Such feelings can be triggered by what historians have come to call a “historical sensation” or “historical experience” (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 77; Ankersmit 2005).<sup>5</sup> In any case, queries eventually evolve into explicit questions or problems.<sup>6</sup> These historical research questions and problem statements are used to work sources. Historians today aim to “not parrot” their sources, but rather to “cross-examine” them, for example with the historical critique in hand, or through cross-referencing. By analysing them “with a question”, several questions, or a problem in mind, “to which a direct answer is unlikely to be found in any source,” historians aim to “produce statements about the past that are in *addition* to anything [explicitly] testified [by sources] (Paul 2015: 85).”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, historians *assign* meaning to sources and *create* new structures of meaning *with* sources. In effect, historians are semanticists, that is, creators of meaning (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 69)<sup>8</sup>. The crafting of meaning is present in some of their core historiography-producing activities, which I will discuss here as stages in the metaphorical crafting of a mosaic. First, there is the interdependent understanding and interpreting of sources, like the shaping of *tesserae* and creating of glue; second, the associative way in which historical inferences derived from sources are arranged, like the movement or flow which occurs as *tesserae* find arrangement; third, the construction of historiographical forms of meaning, such as historical narratives, like the patterns into which historians arrange their *tesserae*, including entire mosaics.

## Shaping tiles and producing glue

Historians are mainly concerned with understanding, that is, assigning meaning to sources, in order to learn about a world beyond the sources. They gauge this world departing from those sources, that is, they attempt to

<sup>5</sup>A term developed by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), recently further advanced by the Dutch philosopher and intellectual historian Frank R. Ankersmit.

<sup>6</sup>As an effect of the French “historiographical ‘school’” of the *Annales*, who criticized the established Rankean tradition as descriptive, rather than explanatory (Soen 2016: 45–46).

<sup>7</sup>In the first quotation, Paul discusses what the “British historian, archaeologist and philosopher of history Robin G. Collingwood (1889-1943)” called “scientific history”. The second is Paul’s citation from Mark Day (2008: 18).

<sup>8</sup>This is an unusual usage of the word “semanticist”, but this definition fits with my interpretation.

plausibly reason out a context in which those sources originated. As this reality is empirically not accessible, historians in essence try to reason out a context in which primary sources make sense – from which they can understand the primary sources. This process of contextualization is equitable with creating meaning of sources, based on sources.

The historical contextualization that historians reason out consists of “strictly speaking...not proposals for interpreting *historical reality*, but proposals for interpreting source material” (Paul 2015: 93).<sup>9</sup> “The task of historians [is] establishing the relative plausibility of such scenarios [historical hypotheses] (Paul 2015: 91)”. For this purpose, they use broadly accepted scholarly “criteria by which plausible and less plausible statements can be distinguished on rational grounds”, also named “truth-tracking criteria”, such as accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, and precision (Paul 2015: 119, 117–118).<sup>10</sup>

This constructed contextualization is built with inferences about a historical reality, which should allow for *understanding* of primary sources. The sources must be comprehensible in the context of this inferred, *constructed*, historical “reality” – it is assumed that they once derived their meaning from a similar, *actual* historical reality.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, *understanding* of sources can be understood as a form of contextualization which cannot exist independently of *interpretation* because this contextualization consists of inferences which *are* interpretation of primary sources. Namely, “one cannot perform an act of understanding a document without making claims (or employing beliefs) about contexts [i.e., interpretation]” (Mitrović 2015: 324).<sup>12</sup> This interpretation cannot exist and is not accepted as plausible without being interwoven with primary sources, on which the inferences – inferences being what interpretation consists of – are grafted. Historical contextualization must thus fit with the understanding proposed for primary sources, or it would be an entirely ahistorical hypothesis, an “anything goes” construction: completely cut off from any empirical historical remains we possess.<sup>13</sup> Metaphorically speaking, if historians

construct interpretations of sources, that is, historical hypotheses, but graft them inaccurately or insufficiently – anecdotally – on primary sources, then it is as if they would use a glue for their *tesserae* which would not be strong enough to hold them together, or as if they would construct a mosaic consisting only of glue, which would simply run away.

To do this plausibly, it is necessary to rationally harmonize understanding of sources and inferred context.<sup>14</sup> One cannot contradict the other, one must make the other comprehensible and vice versa.<sup>15</sup> Historians test understanding and interpretation against each other; they propose inferences grafted on sources and try to either associate inferences or propose more comprehensive ones which allow for understanding of more than one source. Metaphorically speaking, the *tesserae* crafted from primary sources need to be shaped so that they can be related to each other. They need to be related to each other as to make sense, because interpretation cannot be construed by virtue of one source alone: an inference can only be qualified as valid – and be made in the first place – if it bridges the gap between two sources and is accurate for both. The more sources any inference or set of inferences makes understandable, the more plausible they are deemed.<sup>16</sup> It is necessary for a historian to “coordinate” (Burckhardt 1868/69, cited in Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 69). Speaking metaphorically, historical hypotheses constructed without proper alignment from understanding of sources are like an arrangement of *tesserae* that do not fit together very well, and such interpretations would be rejected.

To summarize: historians hold the belief that present-day understanding and interpretation of historical sources through inferences will allow for [inference-based] constructing of hypotheses. These hypotheses are deemed *plausible* if carried out according to rational, scholarly criteria “ancillary to the search for [historical] truth”, such as consistency and precision (Paul 2015: 117). They can be accepted as *historical* hypotheses if they are accurately (qualitatively) and sufficiently (quantitatively) interwoven with historical sources.

### Associating tiles begets movement

Once historians start crafting *tesserae*, that is, distinguishing elements (properties or fragments) from sources and grafting inferences on them, they attempt to arrange them.<sup>17</sup> *Tesserae* fit together if an inference made between them is rationally and logically sufficiently aligned to be called valid. It is possible that initially historians will make rather small or intuitive inferences, which only at later stages of aggregation will become conscious and articulate. Nevertheless, if *tesserae* fit together, they align in an *andamento*, a

<sup>9</sup>Such “interpretative proposals” (Paul 2015: 92) are also called “historical hypotheses” (Paul 2015: 83).

<sup>10</sup>Notably defined, for example, by the British philosopher of history Mark Bevir (1999). Paul borrows the term “truth-tracking criteria” from the American philosopher of history and art Noël Carroll.

<sup>11</sup>This belief relies on a materialist perspective on language (Mitrović 2020: 108-109). That the *actual* historical reality is presumed *similar* to the *constructed* historical reality hinges on the latter's anchorage in primary sources, in particular accuracy and sufficiency of inferences made from primary sources.

<sup>12</sup>Mitrović has discussed a number of *sine qua non* conditions which are needed to make communication (including shared understanding) possible, in particular shared *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs between sender (historical author) and receiver (contemporary historian), as well as a shared rationality. *De verbis* beliefs concern the meaning of words, *de signis* beliefs concern the meaning of signals *tout court* and can be taken to include *de verbis* beliefs (Mitrović 2020: 108-109; Mitrović 2015: 325-328).

<sup>13</sup>This is a criterium of accuracy.

<sup>14</sup>This is a criterium of coherence.

<sup>15</sup>“Interpretation certainly depends on understanding, but the opposite is true as well.” (Mitrović 2015: 324).

<sup>16</sup>This is a criterium of comprehensiveness.

<sup>17</sup>By “properties”, I mean, for example, formal and material characteristics.



rationally coherent movement, and become noticeable as a small aggregation.<sup>18</sup> The word “movement” helps indicate that historians cannot entirely determine whether *tesserae* can fit together. This depends on the inferences they can graft on them. Historians are active as selectors of materials and as crafters of *tesserae* but remain partially dependent on the sources they (can) find and select. Similarly, their inferences are enabled (or not) by their personal reasoning, a result of their respective contexts, experiences, interests and so on.

With arrangement a different element of the art of mosaic comes into play. The American historian of intellectual and cultural history Carl E. Schorske (1915-2015) used the metaphor of crafting mosaics as a comparison to what he considered an activity essential to historiography: association. “To make combinations, that is what the science of history is about, compositions, collages. We historians are the masters of the mosaic.” (Allan & Moerland 1993: 128). There is indeed a great compatibility of contemporary historiography and associative thinking, such as the one found in the art of mosaic.<sup>19</sup> I highlight three reasons I discern for this.

For the first reason, we must look at Schorske’s quotation in the light of the historical distinction between sciences and humanities as having different research objectives. Sciences have been deemed to study *laws*, humanities to study *qualities* of phenomena – initially essentialist or typical qualities, later particular or distinguishing qualities (Paul 2015: 103).<sup>20</sup> This nineteenth-century self-identification fostered in the humanities an emphatic use of the “individualizing method”, which in practice had historiographers come to understand and portray their object of study as “*non-repeatable, unique* historical events [emphasis added]” (Hammersley 1989: 29).<sup>21</sup> Association is particularly suited to this focus on particularities. It is even necessary to study them. After all, there are no laws one can rely on to reason out a coherent understanding or explanation of historical situations if one considers them as non-repeatable and unique. Trial-and-error association is, in a negative sense, the only option forward if one wishes to illuminate contingent particularities of situations.

A second reason is the nature of historiography’s object of study: historical reality “in its totality” (Soen

2016: 179). Even if such a reality would be empirically accessible, historians would have to assign meaning to it, or create meaning from it, in the manner any of us do with the historical reality *we* live in. According to post-modern views, reality does not contain unambiguous patterns of deterministic causality, and therefore does not impose on us preferential treatment of any meaningful accounts of it – the nature of reality does not suggest either correct or incorrect interpretations for itself (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 69). This explains why association is a good working method for historiographers: the non-deterministic totality of reality asks for a theoretically infinite number of associations. In practice, historians are, however, limited in the associations they can construe by both the availability of sources and their own individuality, as by their adherence to criteria of rationality, such as yielding logically valid and accurate inferences.<sup>22</sup>

A third reason for the affinity between association and historiography is the nature of the source material. In comparison to the totality of any historical reality, it is fragmentary. This forces historians to work with their primary materials in an associative manner: from fragment to fragment.

### Constructing larger semantic entities

Like mosaic artists, contemporary historians aim to arrange the amalgam of *tesserae* they acquire to a higher degree than just a one-on-one relationship or small arrangements (constructions like an “event” or “fact”), pursuing a larger scale of semantic entities, overarching constellations into which they integrate singular inferences and smaller arrangements.<sup>23</sup> The latter accrue meaning from being related to each other, and such a conjunction of meaning-bearing entities begets meaning which manifests in that larger composite entity.<sup>24</sup> Historians pursue this consciously, purposefully, as they aim to produce *meaningful* historiographical texts.

Like mosaic artists, historians can choose to arrange their metaphorical *tesserae* according to existing *opera* or styles of placement, which both include *andamenti* and entire mosaics, and are technically free to develop new ones. In historiography, these are called forms of historical thought. Examples are notions such as the Dutch philosopher of history Chris Lorenz’s *fact* and *aggregated fact* (Lorenz 2002), the British philosopher and historian of philosophy William Henry Walsh’s (1913-1986) *colligatory concept*: “a proposal for the ordering (‘colligation’) of statements that...refer to

<sup>18</sup> An *andamento* of *tesserae* can grow further if other *tesserae* fit to any of its constituent *tesserae*, to several, or to all of them, if a mutually valid inference is present. The mosaic work that historians craft is in this sense three-dimensional, and given that it can change over time, even four-dimensional.

<sup>19</sup> Association recurs in different historiographical activities and in different ways. For example, the genre of the historiographical essay can be seen as a formalistic expression of association; early-stage inferences are a more latent example of this.

<sup>20</sup> Especially by the German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911).

<sup>21</sup> This individualizing method was conceptualized by the German philosopher of science Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936) (Paul 2015: 103).

<sup>22</sup> There are several other limiting factors, such as linguistic or cognitive, which are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that any such limitation prevents historians from integrating reality fully into their accounts of it, and hence from fully *understanding* it.

<sup>23</sup> By providing such “intellectual added value”, they aim to distinguish themselves from erudite historiography (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 64-69).

<sup>24</sup> White (1973) termed this a “contextualist approach”.

[historical reality]” (Paul 2015: 120), and the American historian and philosopher of history Hayden White’s (1928–2018) *tropes of language* and *types of figuration* (White 1973; White 1975: 66). It is important to note that these forms, such as *historical narratives* or story forms, “not only have a *referential* aspect, in the sense that they refer to reality and try to interpret it, but also a *performative* dimension”: they “determine[s] at least in part what the author *can* say about the past [emphasis added]” (Paul 2015: 68, 64).

The comparison of historiography with mosaic art is helpful here as both are capable of semantic production. Semantic production or creation of meaning requires a minimal amount of linkage of elements, and therefore an organizing intelligence. Both in mosaic art and historiography these are present due to their constructive nature: they link smaller elements by arranging or organizing them into larger constellations. Construction has the potential to render meaning or have meaning attached to it. That criteria which evaluate this type of activity, such as of comprehensiveness, are essential in evaluating historiographical accounts, reflects how essential constructing sizable constellations is to historiography itself.

### The artisan individualising the mosaic

Historians can both agree and disagree. In recent decades, this has been attributed to historians “bring[ing] an individual – but not unique or context-free – perspective to their work” (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 94). In practice, there are no two identical historiographical accounts. It is with these two elements of historiography that I will conclude: individuality and differentiation.

In so far as historiographical accounts are “construction[s]...in [the] mind...by virtue of...inferences” (Paul 2015: 92), historical theorists speak of historiography as *imagined* semantic constructions. They consider these imagined constructions *imaginative*, and historiographers as applying “constructive imagination” while building them (White 1978, cited in Donnelly & Norton 2011: 91).<sup>25</sup> In my opinion this historiographical imagination is an associative creative logic. It is creative in the sense that it is associative. Association, a creative activity, engages individuality, *because* it is imagined, *because* it happens in the mind, which is individual. The same qualities that foster associative reasoning therefore foster input of individuality: the nature of the object of study as non-dictatory of interpretations of itself, the fragmentary nature of materials, and the constructive nature of the semantic goal of historians. Any account they produce is then both *individualist* in the sense that it is autonomous – as reality does not inherently dictate explanatory accounts or interpretations of itself – and *individualistic* in the

sense that it is distinguished by its author’s individuality.<sup>26</sup>

Individuality is additionally engaged all throughout the construction of individual pieces of work in historiography, just as in mosaic work, from the initial interest to the finalized choice of topic. Selected source materials can be identical or different, possibly even newly discovered. They can then be worked differently, that is, by different historians or by one historian in different ways. This yields *tesserae* with different possibilities for inferences, either if historians select different source fragments or properties to work with, or if historians select the same source fragments or properties from a source but graft different inferences upon them. The latter can vary according to historians’ individuality, which both enables and limits them in the tools available to them and the way they can work their source material: their widely differing individual perspectives, interests, intents and so on.<sup>27</sup> Thus, *tesserae* not previously existing can be shaped, which may provoke new *andamenti* or associations, which may finally be arranged into different, possibly new historiographical forms, accounts, or even paradigmata. So, all “historiographical mosaics” have their distinguishing features, even if they may resemble one another.

### Author biography

Tabea Hochstrasser is a doctoral candidate in the History of Science and Ideas at Umeå University. She combines intellectual history and the history of emotions in her research project on early modern ideas about human connectedness in Scottish cheap print. She is also particularly interested in qualities, functions, and the nature of historiography. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2264-1322>.

### References

- Allan, Machteld & Moerland, René (eds) (1993). *Gesprekken met tijdreizigers [Conversations with time travellers]*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Ankersmit, F.R. (2005). *Sublime historical experience*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bevir, Mark (1999). *The logic of the history of ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boldt, Andreas (2014). Ranke: Objectivity and history. *Rethinking History* 18(4): 457–474.
- Currie, Adrian & Walsh, Kirsten (2019). Frameworks for historians and philosophers. *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 2019 9(1): 1–34.
- Donnelly, Mark & Norton, Claire (2011). *Doing history*. London: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> White described this in the context of “figurative imagination”, a linguistic “literary or artistic component in...[historians’] discourse” (White 1975: *passim* and 67).

<sup>26</sup> I leave aside the discussion of whether or to what extent this individuality is determined by larger forces.

<sup>27</sup> For example, “historians always write about the past from a present perspective” (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 96); a “historian’s subject-position” (Paul 2015: 54).

- Eskildsen, Kasper Risbjerg (2008). Leopold Ranke's archival turn: Location and evidence in modern historiography. *Modern Intellectual History* 5(3): 425–453.
- Hammersley, Martyn (1989). *The dilemma of qualitative method: Herbert Blumer and the Chicago tradition*. London: Routledge.
- Hess, John (1972). The mythical Lévi-Strauss. *The New York Times* 20 February 1972.
- Johnson, Christopher (2012). Bricoleur and bricolage: From metaphor to universal concept. *Paragraph* 35(3): 355–372.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966). *The savage mind*. Letchworth: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd.
- Lorenz, Chris (1988). Geschiedbeoefening en geschiedfilosofie. Enkele kanttekeningen [Historiography and the philosophy of history. Some footnotes]. In: Ankersmit, F.R., Den Boer, P. & Van den Braembussche, A.A. (eds) *Over nut en nadeel van geschiedtheorie voor de historicus*. Leiden: Stichting Leidschrift: 27–32.
- Lorenz, Chris (2002). *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis [The construction of the past. An introduction to the theory of history]*. 6th rev. edn. Amsterdam: Boom.
- McCullagh, C. Behan (2004). What do historians argue about? *History and Theory* 43(1): 18–38.
- Mitrović, Branko (2015). Historical understanding and historical interpretation as contextualization. *History and Theory* 54(3): 311–332.
- Mitrović, Branko (2020). *Materialist philosophy of history: A realist antidote to postmodernism*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Paul, Herman (2015). *Key issues in historical theory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rüsen, Jörn (1990). Rhetoric and aesthetics of history: Leopold von Ranke. *History and Theory* 19(2): 190–204.
- Soen, Violet (2016). *Geschiedenis is een werkwoord: Een inleiding tot historisch onderzoek [History is a verb: An introduction to historical research]*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Southgate, Beverley (2001). *History: What and why? Ancient, modern, and postmodern Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Tollebeek, Jo & Verschaffel, Tom (1992). *De vreugden van Houssaye: Apologie van de historische interesse [The joys of Houssaye: An apology of interest in the past]*. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.
- White, Hayden (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- White, Hayden (1975). Historicism, history, and the figurative imagination. *History and Theory* 14(4): 48–67.

**How to cite this article:** Tabea Hochstrasser. 2022. Historiography— A craft like the art of mosaic: What historians do and why they disagree. *Kulturella Perspektiv*, vol. 31. s. 1–7.

**Submitted:** 21 May 2022    **Accepted:** 4 November 2022    **Published:** 23 December 2022

**Copyright:** © 2022 The author(s). This is an Open Access article, distributed in accordance with Creative Commons, license CC-BY 4.0, which permits unlimited use, distribution, and reproduction in all media formats, granted that original author(s) and source are duly attributed. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Kulturella Perspektiv* — Svensk etnologisk tidskrift, ISSN 1102-7908, är en expertgranskad Open Access-tidskrift som publiceras av Föreningen Kulturella Perspektiv.

OPEN ACCESS 