

ARTICLES

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SCHOLARLY HISTORY WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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VÖRÖS, László. The social function of historical knowledge and scholarly history writing in the 21st century. *Historický časopis*, 2017, 65, 5, pp. 785-797, Bratislava. In the 21st century historiography remains epistemologically diverse like no other discipline in the social sciences and humanities. Theoretically uninformed, often nationalist, and objectivist (reconstructionist) narrative historians coexist with constructionist and deconstructionist historians who work with social theories and conduct critical analyses within the same institutional frames of regional or national historiographies. In spite of decades of intense plausible criticism – at least in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – the national/nationalist history writing based on rather naïve objectivist epistemology remains influential and forms an important, if not dominant, part of respective national historiographies. The present paper suggests that there are several factors of the lasting reproduction and even thriving of the obsolete epistemological positions that traditional, narrative national/nationalist historiographies are based on. These might be categorized as cognitive, social, and institutional in their nature. The paper analyses particularly the social purpose of the knowledge about the past and the social functions of institutionalized professional history writing. National histories play an important part in the politics of memory and identity; they provide a historical dimension to the ideal (imagined) national community, they also serve as legitimizing or delegitimizing narratives – these functionalities require a strongly objectivist (naïve) epistemology. In fact, the epistemological points of departure of the traditional narrative national/nationalist historians are very similar to the intuitive “pre-cognitive” theories of the past shared by most ordinary people. Both are based on the idea that the past can be narrated in the form of one true story. The paper comes to the conclusion that historiographies – at least in the Central and Eastern European countries – are formatively influenced by social determinants coming from outside the discipline to a much larger extent that most historians are ready to admit. Key words: Social function of history. Historiography. Abuse of history. Legitimization through history. Epistemology of historiography.

The study of the social function of history and historiography is not new and neither is it simple.¹ It is not simple since it poses some serious theoretical and methodological

1 This article is a slightly developed version of the presentation that was given at the 15th congress of the Slovak Historical Society held on May 11-13 2016 in Skalica, Slovakia. Footnotes and references were