

BOOK REVIEW

TRANSLATING THE PAST: RETHINKING THE PRACTICE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

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History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West, Luigi Alonzi (ed.), Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 241 pp., £81.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-350-33821-0

Recent debates in Translation Studies and in the humanities have challenged the idea that historians simply recover a stable past from an objective lens. With developments in conceptual history, historiography, and interdisciplinary approaches to culture, scholars have emphasized that the past is always mediated through interpretive frameworks shaped by language, concepts, and present-day concerns. In this sense, historical writing resembles translation: historians, like translators, must render past experiences, concepts, and discourses intelligible for contemporary audiences while preserving their historical specificity, thereby undertaking a negotiating task between the past and the present. This argument forms part of the central claim advanced by Luigi Alonzi in the edited volume *History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West*.

Alonzi's book challenges linear conceptions of history and instead suggests that historical understanding unfolds through processes of reinterpretation across time, cultures, and conceptual transformation. Bringing together scholars from history, translation studies, classics and cultural theory, this volume examines how the relationship between past and present emerges as a dynamic process of continuous mediation, reinterpretation and rearticulation through acts of translation. Across its nine chapters, it mobilizes a range of theoretical approaches to explore this translational dimension of historical knowledge. These include Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (1989), the rhetorical approaches to political language developed by Quentin Skinner (2002), the historiographical reflections on narrative and temporality linked to Paul Ricoeur (1984), as well as perspectives from classical reception studies, translation theory, and eco-critical approaches. One way to read the work is through three broad dimensions of translation that structure the chapters based on their arguments: history, temporality, and semantics. Although the chapters are not explicitly organized in this way, this framework helps clarify the core concepts that connect the contributions.

This volume matters because it foregrounds the importance of examining how meanings evolve over time and how historical knowledge depends on processes of reinterpretation. Understanding the past enables a deeper awareness of how contemporary societies have emerged from earlier conceptual and cultural frameworks. In this sense, the book contributes to a more expansive understanding of history that encompasses not only human cultures but

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also the broader temporal layers through which meaning, matter, and life itself are continually transformed.

In the 'Introduction: Translating the past', Luigi Alonzi establishes the core theoretical foundation of this volume by situating history as a fundamental translational process. In this perspective, the historian appears not merely as an interpreter, but as a mediator across time. Drawing on George Steiner's notion of 'translator within' (1998 [1975]), Ricoeur's concept of 'correspondence without equivalence' (2006) and Walter Benjamin's reflections on the 'task of the translator' (1968), Alonzi argues that translation is an epistemological model for historiography. He then frames the volume as a work that goes beyond 'history and translation' to 'history as translation', concluding that historiography should be understood as a process of mediation and reinterpretation, rather than a simple representation of the past.

The first chapter, 'Herodotus translating the past', by Richard P. Martin, explores the translational dimension of early historiography through the example of Herodotus. Martin presents Herodotus not simply as a historian who records facts, but more as a *hermêneus* who interprets the unfamiliar customs and rituals for his target Greek audience, across linguistic and cultural boundaries. His narratives (*Histories*) therefore illustrate how historical knowledge emerges from interpretive performance rather than accumulation of objective data. In this sense, the narratives offer an early instance of cultural translation, in which Herodotus acts as both diachronic and synchronic translator. Martin further suggests that a historiographical source is never pure, being the result of a translational act where cultural differences are negotiated. To conclude, his analysis supports the volume's central claim by showing the persistent translational dimension of historical writing.

Lorna Hardwick's chapter, 'Translation and temporalities in classical reception histories: Narratives, genres, forms and the agency of translators', extends the above argument by exploring translation in reception of Greek tragedy and epic. She focuses in particular on the complex temporalities involved when ancient texts are reinterpreted across different historical contexts. Hardwick argues that ancient works already engaged with contemporary political issues such as war, violence, civil conflict, and that later translations and adaptations continue to reinterpret these themes in new circumstances. Through examples including modern reinterpretations by Tony Harrison, Blake Morrison, and Seamus Heaney, she demonstrates how translation relocates ancient narratives within new social and political frameworks. She also emphasises the agency of translators in shaping the ways in which these ancient texts acquire new meanings in the contemporary scenario. Hardwick thus challenges the notions of fidelity and authenticity, proposing instead that translation involves responsiveness to new temporal contexts. A key takeaway from her chapter is that translation is not a linear linguistic transfer but one that reorganizes temporality by reconstructing the relationship between past and present, thereby reshaping cultural memory and producing new historical meanings.

Karen Bennett's chapter, 'Flesh made word: Translational processes in the production of the synoptic Gospels', examines the translational processes involved in the formation of the synoptic Gospels, highlighting how historical texts themselves often emerge through layers of translation. She analyses how these narratives developed through complex interactions

between oral traditions, linguistic transformations and textual compilations. These processes involved both interlingual and intralingual mediation, as the narratives circulated among different communities before being recorded in the written form. From this perspective, the Gospels appear as products of reinterpretation and linguistic adaptation. Thus, this chapter reinforces the volume's main claim by showing that historical sources and knowledge result from complex processes of translation.

In the fourth chapter, 'The historian's dilemma: Domestication or foreignizing?', Peter Burke addresses the historian's dilemma between domestication and foreignization. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti's concepts (1995), he argues that historians must choose between adapting the past to contemporary frameworks or preserve its strangeness. Basing himself on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) theory of polyphony, Burke proposes the idea of 'polyphonic history' as a partial solution, suggesting that rather than imposing a single interpretive framework, historians should acknowledge multiple voices, perspectives, and temporal layers. In this sense, he emphasises the historian's moral responsibility towards the foreign past, seeking a balance between making the past comprehensible and preserving its difference. He thus implies that total fidelity to the past is impossible and that historians face a similar choice to translators.

In the chapter, "'Chance" in Max Weber's later writings', Keith Tribe focuses on the implications of translation for conceptual history through the example of Talcott Parsons' misinterpretation of Max Weber's concept of 'chance'. Tribe argues that Parson's English translation altered the semantic nuances of Weber's original term, producing a different theoretical understanding within sociology. Through this example, the chapter illustrates how translation can reshape the theoretical framework by transforming key concepts across linguistic and cultural contexts. He illustrates how the reception of Weber's work appears partly as the result of translational choices. This chapter therefore highlights the importance of translational awareness in conceptual history, reinforcing the book's argument that understanding history requires paying attention to the translational processes through which knowledge travels.

Kari Palonen's chapter, "'We politicians": Translation, rhetoric and conceptual change', examines political language as a site of conceptual translation by tracing the historical evolution of the term 'politician'. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (1989) and Quentin Skinner's *paradiastole* (rhetorical analysis) (2002), Palonen shows how political actors actively reinterpret and redefine concepts in response to changing political circumstances. The author explains the transformation of the term 'politician' into a more neutral or even positive connotation (illustrated by the expression 'we politicians'), through the rhetorical strategy of *paradiastole*, in which terms are assigned new meanings. This shift in meaning resembles a translation-like mechanism, as it involves reinterpretation of existing concepts within new contexts. Palonen's chapter extends the volume's framework by showing that conceptual translation is not limited to historians, but is also performed by political actors.

In the seventh chapter, 'Translated history and historical time: Transtemporal understandings of Greek and Roman concepts', Alexandra Lianeri addresses the relationship

between translation and historical temporality by introducing the concept of transtemporal understanding. She explores how Greek and Roman concepts are translated and interpreted by historians into modern historical discourse. Drawing on the theoretical discussions of Skinner (2002), Koselleck (1989), and Lovejoy (1948), she emphasises that concepts carry multiple temporal layers that resist complete assimilation into modern discourse (which might be described as ‘untranslatables’). Historical interpretation thus involves negotiating conceptual differences. Her analysis challenges linear temporality and reinforces the book’s argument that historical understanding emerges through acts of translation across time, producing a dialogue between past and present.

Karin Littau’s chapter, “‘Just ask the stones’”: Eco-translation, natural history and geomediality, broadens the scope of the volume by integrating perspectives from geomediality and ecocriticism. Moving beyond textual analysis, she explores how the continuous shifts in natural environments and material landscapes resemble translational process. Littau proposes the concept of eco-translation as a form of mediation between human and non-human temporalities. Her analysis suggests that translation is not exclusively linguistic but also extends to material and environmental mediation, and that history itself is mediated through non-textual systems. She challenges anthropocentric models that limit translation to linguistic communication. Inspired by Novalis (1992), her perspective demonstrates the flexibility of the translational framework for understanding diverse forms of historical transmission.

In the concluding chapter, ‘The historian as a translator of the past’, Luigi Alonzi synthesises the volume’s arguments by conceptualising the historian as a translator who confronts the challenge of translating the untranslatable. Drawing on Ricoeur’s (2006) idea of ‘correspondence without sameness’, he emphasises that historical writing involves translating past meanings into present language, a process that entails both interpretation and transformation since the historian negotiates between the perspectives of past actors and the expectations of contemporary readership. He proposes a ‘general theory of relativity’ in history that helps recognise multiple coexisting temporalities. From this perspective, translation emerges as a fundamental condition of historiography that encourages epistemological openness. By emphasising the role of the historian, Alonzi reiterates the volume’s central thesis that translation is not merely a metaphor for historical interpretation but a process through which historical knowledge itself is produced.

Taken together, the chapters provide a rich interdisciplinary exploration of the relationship between translation and history. Alongside fields such as Anthropology and Cultural studies, the book brings into dialogue translation studies and historiography—two disciplines that have rarely been considered together—thereby opening new avenues for interdisciplinary research. By foregrounding translation as an epistemological foundation in historiography, the volume promotes a reflection on how meanings from the past are continuously reinterpreted with changing contexts.

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