

# Constructing Context

*Swedish Press Debates  
on Historiography and Society, 1950–2000*

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## Abstract

This article examines how historians positioned themselves within academia and society, as reflected in Swedish press debates about historical research during the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on debates from 1950, 1978, 1993, and 1999, the study explores the evolving relationship between the humanities and the social sciences, as well as the tensions between academic and popular history. Drawing on concepts of contextualisation, it examines how historians articulated the societal relevance of their discipline. Through a close examination of press material, the study shows that historians consistently balanced scientific rigour with the need to engage a wider audience. While popular history gained prominence in the 1990s, its roots extend back to the post-war period. The findings also demonstrate how the increasing influence of social scientific methods placed the humanities in a more defensive position. The article underscores the importance of distinguishing between historical actors' self-understandings and historians' contextualisations, warning that overreliance on the former can obscure broader historical dynamics. This research provides insights into the public discourse that has shaped the discipline, reflecting the shifting boundaries and ongoing challenges faced by historians.

*Keywords:* Press debates, Historiography, Contextualisation, Historical Research, History of the humanities

## Introduction

Once in a while, the role of historians and their contributions – what they do and the benefits they provide – comes under critical scrutiny in the daily press. Such discussions are particularly interesting because they draw historians out of their internal concerns and into a broader forum. In the daily press, historians are compelled to articulate the value of their

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discipline in terms of societal relevance. Well-rehearsed epistemological and methodological arguments are not as persuasive in this context. This article examines Swedish press debates on academic history during the second half of the twentieth century, with particular focus on how historians positioned themselves in relation to other scholarly fields and to society at large.

The article contributes to our understanding of how historians perceived the world beyond their own academic discipline. The approach emphasizes that trends, developments, schools of thought, and the choice of topics within historical scholarship must be understood in their historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> An examination of press debates shows that historians were aware of, and had opinions on, a variety of immediate contextual circumstances. References to the contemporary world – major political events, developments in higher education policy, and a wide range of other events – are plentiful. Analytically, I treat such references to the outside world as a form of context construction: moments when historians expressed what they considered to characterize their present. My analysis examines the types of contexts that were articulated (political, economic, scholarly) and, in turn, discusses how these acts of context construction can be interpreted through a number of theoretical perspectives.

Debates in the daily press are, in many ways, asymmetric source material – the subjects that spark discussion vary over time, the number of replies differs from one debate to another, and a topic that ignites lively exchanges at one moment may fail to do so at another. Historical research is not among the more common subjects debated in the daily press, and the number of debates on this theme is quite limited. This, of course, depends on how one defines a debate. Reading historian Ulf Zander's dissertation on historical-cultural negotiations during the twentieth century, one might get the impression that debates about history are omnipresent.<sup>2</sup> And this is true if one broadens the definition to include implicit negotiations in reviews, essays, popular history, fiction, and so forth. In this article, a debate is defined as an exchange involving shifts in reply among more than two people; thus, negotiations of a more indirect nature fall outside the scope of this study.

I conducted searches in the National Library of Sweden's database *Svenska tidningar* (Swedish newspapers) using the keyword "historieforskning" (historical research).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the debates listed below, these searches also revealed smaller exchanges, as well as articles related to a larger conflict over the appointment of the professorship in women's history in 1987. This latter conflict was excluded from the study partly because it was not primarily a press debate and partly because it has already been analysed in previous works.<sup>4</sup>

I have traced four debates in which the societal relevance of historical research is addressed in different ways. The first was initiated by the political scientist and publisher Herbert Tingsten during the Christmas holidays of 1950, when he questioned whether history offers any lessons. The second was sparked by the literary scholar Sven Lindqvist in the late 1970s, when he urged historians to “come out of the archives”. The third erupted in 1993, when several historians simultaneously responded to the museum exhibition *Den svenska historien* (*The Swedish History*) and to the popular historical works of the journalist Herman Lindqvist. Finally, the fourth debate, in 1999, was triggered by historian Arne Jarrick, who criticized the influence of postmodernism on historical research. These debates revolve around similar questions: what should academic historians focus on, and how should they work to contribute to society – in short, what is the purpose of historical research? Most of the participants in these debates were academic historians (including historians and economic historians), although there were also contributions from academics in other disciplines and from various writers. This is the first time these debates have been examined together – all translations of the press texts are my own.

### Swedish Historical Research in an International Comparison

The history of historical research is a well-studied phenomenon both internationally and nationally. Given the expansion of the higher education sector during the post-war period, it is difficult to make broad generalisations about historical research as a whole. Nonetheless, certain trends can be noted. Historical research became significantly diversified, with economic history establishing itself as an independent discipline in the late 1950s after a prolonged separation process from history.<sup>5</sup> The history of science and ideas was also established during this period, though it did not emerge from history; rather, it had its roots in literary history and poetics.<sup>6</sup> Both history and economic history were particularly influenced by the social sciences, with theories, epistemological claims, and even methods beginning to permeate these disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Studies of modern history, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, became more common, supported by an abundance of preserved source material well suited to quantitative approaches. The social processes prominent during the nineteenth century led to the exploration of new topics, such as the dissolution of the estate society, political reforms, the history of education, industrialisation, popular movements, women’s rights, modern political parties, technological development, and economic, legal, and

social reforms.<sup>8</sup> Social history and economic history formed part of a wider international trend in historical research, but unlike in countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom, the historical-materialist perspective was downplayed in Sweden.<sup>9</sup> Historian Lars Olsson has shown that Per Nyström, one of the leading proponents of historical-materialist perspectives, minimised these in his 1956 doctoral thesis, seemingly to align with a zeitgeist critical of ideologies, particularly communist and fascist ones.<sup>10</sup>

The French *Annales* school also failed to gain significant traction in Sweden, whether in its early interdisciplinary form focusing on the *longue durée* or in its later orientation towards the history of mentalities.<sup>11</sup> One possible interpretation of the limited reception of *Annales* in Sweden is that the discipline of history was protecting its boundaries after the split from economic history, making an approach that openly promoted interdisciplinarity subject to scepticism. *Annales*, in both of its forms, did not align well with the prevailing norms of scientific rigour in Swedish historical research; post-war historians inherited a rather strict form of source criticism, which they challenged but did not overturn.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, various historical syntheses and less empirically grounded approaches struggled to gain acceptance in Sweden. However, as historian Rolf Törstendahl has pointed out, the various branches within historical research during the post-war period were so numerous that it is difficult to speak of history as a unified field.<sup>13</sup> At the most general level, Swedish historical research has followed the same trends as elsewhere: from social history to cultural history; the normalisation of subjects beyond political and economic history; and the increasing influence of theoretical frameworks.

Historical research was shaped by broader developments within academia, particularly the rise of the social sciences and their growing impact on society. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the number of social science disciplines expanded rapidly, including education, political science, psychology, sociology, and economics.<sup>14</sup> However, until the 1960s, these disciplines were housed within the same faculty as the humanities – the Faculty of Philosophy. As historians of ideas Anders Ekström and Sverker Sörlin have pointed out, the establishment of two separate faculties, one for the humanities and one for the social sciences, reinforced the perceived distinction between these fields.<sup>15</sup> This differentiation did not benefit the humanities in the decades following the Second World War, when the demand for social-scientific expertise and knowledge was high. In historian of ideas Hampus Östh Gustafsson's *Folkhemmets styvbarn* (2020), the relationship between the humanities and the emerging democratic society serves as the starting point for his study. He notes that

the humanities faced a significant challenge in presenting themselves as relevant at a time when their traditional contributions – such as national education – were discredited in public discourse.<sup>16</sup> Consistent with previous research, the relationship with the social sciences is a recurring reference point in the material I study. However, the issues facing historical research are not framed in terms of a crisis, which marks a distinction between my study and previous studies – or, more precisely, between how historical research was discussed and how the humanities more broadly were discussed during this period.

### The Practice of Contextualisation

Studying source material in which historical actors are generous in describing the context in which they operated, the conditions they believed influenced their activities, and so on, may seem like an easy route to constructing the historical context. It provides direct access to what the historical actors themselves considered to define the period in which they operated.<sup>17</sup> Yet there are risks associated with too readily adopting the historical actors' own descriptions of their time. For instance, historian Henry Rousso has noted that people's contemporary perceptions often focus on the most recent disruptive event – *The Latest Catastrophe*, as he titled one of his books on history and contemporaneity – which can be a problematic narrative for historians to build on.<sup>18</sup>

The alternative, then, is to do the opposite and independently construct the wider contexts that are deemed illuminating for understanding the phenomenon being examined and the material being studied. The challenge with this method, as opposed to aligning closely with the historical actors' self-understanding, is to justify why certain circumstances should be given more explanatory weight than others. Historian Peter Burke has suggested that the expression “just out of focus” can serve as a guide for this type of contextualisation, indicating that relevant contexts are often implicitly expressed in historical texts or can be discovered by placing related and adjacent phenomena alongside one another.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of context tends to be used to describe events or phenomena within their immediate, synchronous surroundings. This approach, however, has been critiqued for its limitations, as it risks reducing historical explanations to what was happening at a specific moment in time. Historian Peter E. Gordon refers to this as the confining effects of contextualisation, and historian Darrin M. McMahon cautions against an overemphasis on “the exception of the moment”.<sup>20</sup> Both scholars argue that such an approach tends to overlook the historical background and subsequent developments of a phenomenon. In the same vein, historian

of ideas Viktoria Fareld has pointed out the value of approaching historical phenomena as polychronic, containing traces of multiple temporal layers.<sup>21</sup>

In the following results section, I examine the content of the debates with particular attention to how participants understood their own time. This involves identifying the types of contexts they invoked – political, economic, scholarly – and interpreting these articulations of context through the perspectives outlined above: Rousseau’s notion of “the latest catastrophe”, Burke’s idea of searching for contexts “just out of focus”, and the relationship between synchronous and diachronic forms of context.

### Can We Learn from History?

At the end of 1950, Herbert Tingsten, former professor of political science and then editor-in-chief of *Dagens Nyheter*, published an article titled “Ger historien lärdomar?” (“Can We Learn from History?”).<sup>22</sup> He had read a publication containing the text of a radio debate between historians Arnold J. Toynbee and Pieter Geyl, in which they discussed Toynbee’s extensive multi-volume *A Study of History*.<sup>23</sup> In this work, Toynbee drew conclusions about Western civilisation based on the trajectories of other prominent civilisations throughout history. Geyl was sceptical of the idea that conclusions about the world’s development could be drawn from historical studies, arguing that works like Toynbee’s did not provide a “nautical chart” for the future. Tingsten sided with Geyl, adding that Swedish historical research should keep its distance from Toynbee’s “pretentious views”, noting that such ideas usually surfaced only in post-seminar pub conversations.<sup>24</sup>

The debate might never have taken off had he not added two provocative sentences at the end: “In any case, most would agree that thorough historical education is a very small plus in a politician’s toolkit: a bit clearer understanding or livelier imagination is preferable to hecatombs of learning,” and: “No one considers historical knowledge to be a significant factor in a statesman’s actions.”<sup>25</sup> Although Tingsten specifically referred to “the politician’s toolkit”, his phrasing was perceived as a dismissal of the societal relevance of historical knowledge altogether. Did he really mean that common sense and vivid imagination outweighed historical education? Within days, several historians had entered the discussion.<sup>26</sup>

The majority of historians who took part in the discussion addressed the question posed in Tingsten’s headline: *Can we learn from history?* In general, their answer was yes. Historical knowledge, they argued, was of value not because it allowed one to foresee the future, but because it could

help to navigate and make sense of the present, which was itself shaped by the past. At the same time, few believed in the possibility of clear historical parallels, and most expressed scepticism towards the Toynbee idea that history could serve as a tool for prediction. The only exceptions were found among more statistically minded historians, such as Eli F. Heckscher and Kurt Samuelsson, who maintained that certain projections – for example in relation to demography or the labour market – could indeed be made on the basis of statistical calculations.<sup>27</sup>

Still, the historians were provoked by Tingsten's dismissal of historical knowledge as a valuable resource for political considerations. Heckscher countered that the opposite might in fact be true: if politicians were better grounded in history, they could rise, as he expressed it, "an inch above the present moment."<sup>28</sup> The aim, he emphasized, was not to seek support in history for one doctrine or another, but rather "to understand our own reality, to understand ourselves."<sup>29</sup>

Historian Erik Lönnroth, like Heckscher, defended the need for historical education (*historisk bildning*) not only among politicians but also in the general public, particularly "in times such as ours."<sup>30</sup> To illustrate what historical education could offer, he contributed what was perhaps the most explicit instance of self-contextualisation in the debate:

Would those millions who cheered the Munich Agreement in 1938 have done so if they had known the broad outlines of the interplay between Prussia–Germany, Poland, and Russia after the mid-eighteenth century? Would so many people have resigned themselves to Hitler's likely victory in 1940 if they had the experiences of the Napoleonic era fresh in mind? Wouldn't it be quite comforting to know that our leaders and those of other nations were thoroughly versed in the traditions of Russian foreign policy?<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the value of historical education rested in the possibility of grasping underlying processes and past developments, thereby reducing the risk of being duped or misled in the present. For Lönnroth, the Second World War served as the most immediate frame of reference when defending the societal value of historical research.

Not all historians embraced the idea of a clear "use" for history. Ernst Söderlund emphasized that the most common use of history was, in fact, various forms of misuse – when those in power exploited it for their own purposes.<sup>32</sup> He saw value in trained historians being able to expose such abuses and misinterpretations of the past. But the problem was not necessarily the distant past; rather, it was the narratives about the more recent century – the introduction of parliamentary government, the breakthrough of democracy, and the rise of social and political movements.

The way these stories were told likely had a greater influence on day-to-day politics than whether Swedes glorified old kings.

In two replies, Tingsten expressed relief that most historians had distanced themselves from Toynbee-style historiography, but warned that this type of history still held greater popular allure than the works produced by cautious source critics.<sup>33</sup> He placed Toynbee alongside “brilliant fantasists like Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx.”<sup>34</sup> He remained unmoved by the historians’ defence of historical lessons and the value of historical education in the present, arguing that as long as historians disagreed on the causes of key events – why the French Revolution occurred, why Napoleon fell, why Hitler came to power – “one cannot expect any agreement about the future.”<sup>35</sup>

Previous research has described Tingsten’s view of history as an expression of the death of ideologies and the liberal–democratic currents of the time.<sup>36</sup> This perspective is clearly reflected in the debate, but his attack on historians may also be read as a sign of tension between the social sciences and the humanities. In Burke’s terms, Tingsten’s disciplinary affiliation is found “just out of focus”. Lönnroth’s rhetorical questions pointed to the Second World War as a significant contemporary context, but it is worth noting that the examples he used are polychronic in Viktoria Fareld’s sense – meaning that they combine several time layers, such as the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic era, and Russian history. The shadow of the Second World War and the fear of extreme ideologies influenced how Lönnroth articulated the societal relevance of historical research. Drawing on Henry Rousso, it could be described as the latest catastrophe permeating his self-understanding.

### Come Out of the Archive!

In 1977, *Dagens Nyheter* published an article by Sven Lindqvist – literary scholar, essayist and regular cultural commentator – with the imperative title “Kom ut ur arkivet!” (“Come Out of the Archive!”).<sup>37</sup> The call was directed at historians whom he believed were constrained by their preoccupation with material and method, failing to formulate relevant questions and employ theory. He illustrated his point with Bertil Jakobsson’s labour history dissertation *Företaget, kommunen och individen*, which investigated the relationship between Söderfors Ironworks, Söderfors municipality, and its residents – or claimed to investigate it, for Lindqvist was not satisfied with the result. According to him, Jakobsson had done what historians often do: starting with the material rather than a problem:

When he found the material that suited the method he had been taught, then – BANG! – the archive door shut behind him. And there he sits for I don't know how many years, obviously without meeting a single person, endlessly extracting from account books and minutes, calculating to the penny what wages, in-kind benefits, gratuities, healthcare, and poor relief cost the company, saved the municipality, and provided for the individual.<sup>38</sup>

The alternative that Lindqvist proposed was based on a more investigative method. He suggested starting by travelling around the area, visiting places, and talking to people, then examining how individuals perceived power relations in the municipality, the extent of the company leader's authority, what the working conditions were like, the types of union organisations that existed, and how they operated, and so forth.

“Just out of focus”, it should be noted that Lindqvist's appeal to historical research was followed up the next year with *Gräv där du står: Hur man utforskar ett jobb* (1978), and the suggestions for improvement he had regarding Jakobsson's dissertation are presented as chapters in that book.<sup>39</sup> *Gräv där du står (Dig Where You Stand)* sparked an entire popular movement in Sweden, in which local actors engaged in exploring their communities with a focus on industrial cultural heritage.<sup>40</sup> Previous research has linked the impulses for Lindqvist's engagement in local history and history from below to his time in China and his travels in South America.<sup>41</sup> His suggestions clearly bore the influence of educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), in which decolonial and Marxist perspectives were combined to develop a method for more inclusive knowledge production.<sup>42</sup>

In the press article, it was precisely the South American example that opened the text. Lindqvist emphasized that during his travels, he encountered two types of journalists: those who obediently stood outside presidential palaces to report what was conveyed in the official documents, and those who went out into the countryside to talk to people and get closer to reality. The example served as an allegory for the point he wanted to make about historical research: “Then I often thought: In a hundred years, historians will find just these papers from the departments and just these famous people's statements, which have been preserved in the archives. What are they then but poor reporters who are a hundred years too late?”<sup>43</sup>

In the 1978 debate, the focus was not on the grand political context in the same way. Lindqvist's analogy between journalism and historical research, drawn from his travels in South America, did indeed clarify the type of societal relevance he had in mind. However, the response from historians emphasized a research-policy context, focusing on the relationship between the humanities and the social sciences and the economic

steering of research. Historian Gunnar Qvist observed that research topics were often formulated against the backdrop of contemporary issues, as with women's history and migration studies, but he stressed the importance of not going too far in "presentism" and not allowing the agenda of the day to dogmatically dictate what researchers choose to study.<sup>44</sup> He also warned against social science jargon, which he felt threatened one of the real values of historical research – its accessibility to people outside academia: "Ultimately, it's about the human being – and humans should be able to read about humans."<sup>45</sup>

Economic historian Bo Gustafsson agreed with Lindqvist that historical research often struggled to find the balance between telling a compelling story and producing theoretically rigorous scholarship.<sup>46</sup> He believed that social science theories were frequently ill-suited to studies of the past, either being too specific or too abstract. Like Qvist, he also recognised the danger of political steering in research through the funding system, warning that researchers in the system at the time tended to adjust their projects to align with what they believed were decision-makers' preferences. Notably, Gustafsson's response pointed to what he regarded as a relatively new division between academic history and popular history:

I think that contemporary historians are unconsciously transforming themselves into "skeleton painters". But it has consequences. If historical dissertations clatter with dead bones, it will not be the professional historians but (admittedly good) storytellers like [Vilhelm] Moberg, [Per Anders] Fogelström, [Jan] Myrdal, and perhaps [Lars] Widding who will shape the general historical consciousness.<sup>47</sup>

There is no clear answer as to when or how the division between academic and popular history arose, but previous research has suggested that it took shape in the post-war period at the intersection of historical journalism and educational as well as entertaining literature.<sup>48</sup> Gustafsson cautioned against drawing the line too sharply and, like Qvist, argued that the results of historical research should be presented as accessibly as possible for the general public.<sup>49</sup>

The idea that historical research should be societally relevant was something all participants in the debate could agree on. At the same time, the historians who spoke out were protective of disciplinary boundaries and reluctant to let external interests dictate which research problems to pursue.<sup>50</sup> There were also signs of unease about the extent to which historical research had already been shaped by a social-scientific approach. Lastly, the responses by Qvist and Gustafsson indicate that, by the late 1970s, the relationship between academic history and popular history was beginning to emerge as an issue within the profession.

## The Detached Historian

In the mid-1990s, an intense debate unfolded in connection with the exhibition *Den svenska historien* (*The Swedish History*) at the Historical Museum in Stockholm and the popular historical writings of Herman Lindqvist. Previous research has described this debate both as a reflection of the renewed interest in history after the end of the Cold War and as an expression of growing epistemological diversity within the history profession.<sup>51</sup> Here, I focus on the part of the exchange that took place in *Dagens Nyheter*, where the discussion centred less on direct criticism of the exhibition and Lindqvist and more on the role of historical research in society. It began with historian Alf W. Johansson arguing that Sweden's comparatively peaceful development – its non-involvement in both the Second World War and the Cold War – had made Swedish historians the most “world-detached” in the world.<sup>52</sup> This calm development, he suggested, had allowed them to concentrate on internal scientific progress rather than confronting the difficult questions facing society. According to Johansson, historians had “retreated to their ivory towers for theoretical contemplation”, which had led to a “foreign scientism [...] taking over the profession and leading it away from its own roots”.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1993 debate, major political events and developments were once again brought forward as context. References were made to the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the wars in the Balkans, as well as to Sweden's own economic crisis, mentioned in one of the contributions. Given that in both 1950 and 1993 – just a few years after major political upheavals – the grand political context was addressed in the debates, Rousseau's suggestion seems valid: the latest catastrophic event often becomes a central reference point in contemporary discourse.<sup>54</sup>

Johansson was one of those who referred to the end of the Cold War and the ongoing war in former Yugoslavia. He used these events to emphasize his point that academic historians needed to engage more with politically pressing matters. Events like the Cold War and the wars in the Balkans, he argued, were difficult to capture if approached with theoretical postulates, as “a result of impersonal forces”.<sup>55</sup> He wrote:

When people in Leipzig demonstrate under the slogan “We are the people”, when Boris Yeltsin stands on a tank waving the Russian flag, history ceases to be a structure that evolves from its own logic: instead, the fighting and suffering human being emerges, struggling for their interests and dreams.<sup>56</sup>

Johansson's aim was to re-establish the role of academic historians as public intellectuals and to bridge the gap between historical research and

the popular history of the “Herman Lindqvist type”.<sup>57</sup> Among the younger generation, he saw Peter Englund as a rare exception, while much of the rest, he remarked, was the kind one only “reads at gunpoint.”<sup>58</sup>

The notion that existing research was not sufficiently well written or engaging for non-specialist readers – and that Peter Englund and Herman Lindqvist were somewhat alone on the popular history stage – stirred discontent among the other debaters. They objected to the claim that there were no well-written works by Swedish historians widely read outside academia.<sup>59</sup> Several replies listed works and historians that were considered to meet these criteria. Historian Arne Jarrick agreed with Johansson that many specialised studies were “quite introverted” and that historians were poorly trained in making their “interesting findings also interesting for broader circles of people”.<sup>60</sup> But he also reversed the perspective, emphasizing that the growing market for popular history did not absolve popularizers of the responsibility to know what was in the “boringly written books”.<sup>61</sup> Economic historian Lars Magnusson and historian Rolf Torstendahl laconically added that even academic historians could have achieved something extraordinary if they had been provided with the budget that the museum project had.<sup>62</sup>

While Francis Fukuyama was proclaiming the end of history at the beginning of the 1990s, the decade has also been seen as the starting point for a renewed societal interest in history.<sup>63</sup> The 1993 debate about the museum exhibition and the relationship between academic and popular history was an expression of this renewal. Although this relationship was particularly prominent in 1993, the other debates show that the underlying tension ran through the entire period – from Tingsten’s dismissal of daring syntheses in 1950 to Qvist’s and Gustafsson’s resistance to social-scientific jargon in the late 1970s.

### History and Postmodernism

A few years later, in 1999, a new debate about historical research took shape, prompted by an essay in *Svenska Dagbladet* by Arne Jarrick, who had also participated in the 1993 debate. The essay sought to critique postmodernist and poststructuralist currents within academia and to advocate for a cumulative view of knowledge that, in his view, rejected irrelevant identity issues.<sup>64</sup> Historian Roddy Nilsson has examined this debate as part of a broader resistance among Swedish historians to postmodernist ideas.<sup>65</sup> Here, I place the 1999 debate within a longer trajectory of press debates about historical research, viewing it not only as a moment of synchronic tension over postmodernism but also as part of the patterns traced across the other debates in this study.

In his essay, Jarrick criticized two tendencies within postmodernist and poststructuralist research: a neglect of material explanations and the spread of scientific relativism, which, in his view, legitimized truths grounded in collective identities such as ethnicity. As a worst-case example, he singled out the philosopher Judith Butler, highlighting her claim that language precedes material reality and shapes both what we see and how we interpret it. Rather than accepting these directions, Jarrick ended by sketching the “scientific approach” he believed had to be defended.<sup>66</sup> For him, the mission of the humanities was to “devote systematic self-reflection to the human condition, and then to make the results of our efforts available to the public as one of many bases for the ongoing conversation about the human condition.”<sup>67</sup> Such systematic work, he argued, depended on communication between researchers and on comparability of results – foundations that, in his view, supported the possibility of cumulative science and a “referentialist criterion of knowledge and truth.”<sup>68</sup>

In the 1999 debate, the grand political context was once again downplayed. Instead, the discussion circled around Jarrick’s critique of scientific relativism and of truth claims anchored in collective identities. Historians Stefan Nordqvist and Martin Wiklund (both PhD candidates at the time) described the contemporary world as post-industrial, multicultural, and global, and argued that historians needed to pay closer attention to the different roles that history plays in the present:

Modern Swedish historical scholarship, ever since the breakthrough of the Weibull school of critical history, has largely aimed to expose and neutralize common public historical generalizations, particularly nationalist ones. This critical stance has, in practice, been directed against every form of historical self-understanding, which necessarily relies on generalisations in the form of narratives or syntheses. Of course, historical scholarship should continue to serve a critical function in the future. But if it is to meet the evident need for self-understanding and orientation in the present, [...] there must also be reasonable proposals for overarching patterns and historical narratives, which should be assessed not only by their truth claims but also by normative considerations.<sup>69</sup>

History as a means of orienting oneself in the present had been mentioned in earlier debates, but now this notion seemed more provocative. Economic historian Lars Magnusson bluntly referred to Nordqvist’s and Wiklund’s ideas about normative considerations as “Blut und Boden arguments.”<sup>70</sup> This connection between their arguments and Nazi ideology might seem far-fetched, but Magnusson argued that this is what could ultimately happen if one abandoned modernist critical thinking in favour of other considerations, such as ethnic ones:

The legitimacy of the field of history in a democratic society depends on its ability to seek the truth – no matter how difficult this may be in practice. A historiography that serves purposes other than the truth, as far as it can be attained, is destructive and, on the whole, deadly.”<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Magnusson’s reference to “Blut und Boden” can be understood through Burke’s expression “just out of focus”.<sup>72</sup> Ethnic conflicts during the 1990s, much like antisemitism during the Second World War, had led to horrific genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans. As Sweden became more multicultural, bloody conflicts with ethnic underpinnings were taking place elsewhere in the world, rendering questions of culture and ethnicity more charged.

Historian Håkan Arvidsson was the next to offer his perspective, focusing his criticism on the positions advanced by Jarrick and Magnusson. In his view, their defence of truth and critical historical research was “pompous” (grötmyndigt), and the kind of source-critical approach they championed was easier to talk about than to practise.<sup>73</sup> He saw nothing wrong with their intentions, but insisted that questions of what is true or false, tendentious or not, could not be settled through any simple “litmus test”.<sup>74</sup> Like Nordqvist and Wiklund, he pointed to the present as the key limitation to historical truth claims:

Source criticism is necessary for inspecting the timber with which one builds one’s image of history. But it provides no blueprint for how to raise the construction itself, nor does it offer instructions on how the particulars of the past should be joined together. For this reason, all history is ultimately a construction and a narrative shaped by the values, insights, or prejudices of its own time.<sup>75</sup>

The history that is told is destined to be revised by future generations, Arvidsson argued, since the sources will speak to them in a different way. This, he maintained, is what history is, “a communication between the past and the present, between then and now.”<sup>76</sup>

Overall, this was the most internal of the debates. The writers discussed the concept of truth, source criticism as a method, older schools of history, and their influence on contemporary research. As Nilsson has pointed out, it is reasonable to view the polarisation in the debate as an expression of historians’ differing attitudes towards postmodernist currents.<sup>77</sup> While Jarrick and Magnusson primarily feared the relativist implications of postmodernism, the other camp raised questions of cultural self-understanding and historical representation. In this sense, the two sides often spoke past each other: one defending the possibility of truth against relativism, the other problematising truth’s very basis in representation. My

examination of the debate shows that the tensions surrounding cultural issues cannot be reduced solely to whether postmodernism was seen as a threat or an opportunity for historical research. Behind the authors' formulations lie views of ongoing societal changes during the 1990s, which, much like in earlier debates, shaped the way historical scholarship and its societal role were understood.

### Concluding Discussion

Examining press debates from 1950, 1978, 1993, and 1999 reveals patterns of both change and continuity. Each debate had its own tone, scope, and set of concerns, yet all were linked by recurring questions about the societal relevance of history, the boundaries between academic and popular history, and the relationship between the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>78</sup> These questions did not arise in isolation: they were shaped by broader academic and political contexts and took on distinct forms in the historical moments in which they unfolded. In what follows, I discuss some of the key insights that emerge from placing these debates side by side.

The 1950 debate, triggered by an intervention from Tingsten, tended to unite historians in defence of their discipline. In that debate, they emphasized history's civic and educational value and its capacity to link past and present. This finding offers a more nuanced view of the post-war period. Previous research has often highlighted that historians inherited a strict form of source criticism, that there were persistent tensions between economic history and history, and that Per Nyström self-censored his historiomaterialist perspectives in line with the post-war zeitgeist.<sup>79</sup> Yet the debate suggests that, in practice, historians were relatively relaxed about the scientific status of their field, or at least set aside their internal divisions when confronted with Tingsten's authoritative stance. In the 1978 debate, Qvist and Gustafsson likewise portrayed history as a softer science, valuing its freedom from the jargon they associated with the social sciences.

In the debates of the 1990s, historians were more divided on the role of historical research and less inclined to openly relativize the position of academic historians. Johansson's call for the historian as a public intellectual found little resonance, and the arguments by Nordqvist, Wiklund, and Arvidsson – stressing the situatedness of historical research in the present and viewing history as one cultural expression among others – met with resistance. The shift from unity to division may partly be explained by the circumstances: in the first two debates, historians closed ranks in response to an external attack (from Tingsten and Lindqvist), whereas in the latter two they were caught up in internal disputes.

Another finding is that the question of popular history ran through the entire period, even if it was not explicitly labelled as such before the 1990s. Across the debates, historians sought to balance scientific rigour with making their work relevant beyond academia. In 1950, Tingsten's critique of Toynbee's syntheses effectively silenced potential defenders of such approaches, yet historians still emphasized the societal value of historical education. By 1978, the need to address an engaged public was more openly acknowledged, with Gustafsson stressing that historians should not abandon the field of popular historical writing to authors such as Vilhelm Moberg, Per Anders Fogelström, Jan Myrdal, and Lars Widding. In the 1990s, popular history had become an established category, often contrasted with academic history, and the discussion turned to whether academic historians could reach the same broad audiences as figures such as Peter Englund and Herman Lindqvist.

In previous research, popular history has been regarded as an international phenomenon.<sup>80</sup> Beyond showing that popular history has existed throughout the post-war period, the debates also invite reflection on its international dimension. Tingsten read Toynbee and Geyl; Lindqvist referred to his travels in China and South America; Alf W. Johansson compared Swedish historians with their foreign colleagues; and Arne Jarrick reacted to the linguistic turn and postmodernism. Rather than seeing these as mere reactions to external currents, a more fruitful way of describing them – especially when several debates are juxtaposed – is to see Swedish historical research as always having operated in an international context. Popular history is only one of several examples where historiographical norms and conventions concerning theory, method, empirical material, research questions, and subject matter have been negotiated in relation to a wider international context.

In two of the debates, from 1950 and 1993, the grand political context played a more prominent role. I interpret this in light of Rousso's observation that "the latest catastrophe" often becomes a central reference point for people in the present, shaping how they frame their own time in relation to the most recent major upheavals.<sup>81</sup> While these self-perceptions are important for historians to consider, they can also, as Gordon and McMahon point out, risk privileging "the exception of the moment" and creating overly synchronous accounts.<sup>82</sup> Against this backdrop, the prominence of the grand political context in the 1950 and 1993 debates is unsurprising. The challenge, however, is methodological: if we give great weight to the self-perceptions and intentions of historical actors, we may conclude that these contexts decisively shaped the debates; if we give them less weight, it falls to the historian to construct the context more independently.

To identify contexts not explicitly mentioned in the material, one possible strategy is to look for what Burke describes as “just out of focus.”<sup>83</sup> In this case, several elements fit that description: Tingsten’s disciplinary background and how it may have shaped his stance; Lindqvist’s interest in history from below and his travels in South America and Asia; Magnusson’s accusation of Nazism, perhaps coloured by the recent genocides in Srebrenica and Rwanda, as well as the tensions surrounding questions of ethnicity in Sweden in the early 1990s. While I cannot claim to know the authors’ intentions – which may not have been fully clear to them either – treating these adjacent developments as “just out of focus” allows for a broader interpretive frame when reconstructing the context of these debates.

By drawing on Burke in contextualizing these debates, I also risk privileging the synchronous. My analysis has focused mainly on impulses in the contemporary moment that may have shaped the lines of conflict emerging in the debates. Perhaps this is inevitable: such exchanges are often triggered by something immediate – a radio broadcast, a labour history dissertation, a museum exhibition, or a new “turn” in the academic landscape. Yet when we place similar debates side by side across a longer time span, certain patterns of continuity and change become visible. These include recurring tensions between academic history and popular history, between the humanities and the social sciences, and in relation to the geopolitics of the post-war era. Considered together, these patterns suggest that the debates were not isolated events, but part of a longer trajectory in which certain questions and values repeatedly came to the fore.

## Notes

1. Previous research on Swedish historiography during the same period include: Birgitta Odén, *Forskarutbildningens förändringar 1890–1975: Historia, Statskunskap, Kulturgeografi, Ekonomisk historia* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991); Ragnar Björk, Karl Molin, and Rolf Torstendahl, *Societies Made Up of History: Essays in Historiography, Intellectual history, Professionalisation, Historical Social Theory and Proto-industrialisation* (Stockholm, 1996); Rolf Torstendahl, “Scandinavian Historical Writing”, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Vol. 5, Historical Writing since 1945*, ed. Axel Schneider, Daniel Woolf, and Ian Hesketh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 311–332; Daniel Nyström: *Innan forskningen blev radikal: En historiografisk studie av arbetarhistoria och kvinnohistoria* (Malmö: Universus, 2015); Bruno Hamnell, “Bortom realismen? Historieteori och kunskapssyn i *Historisk tidskrift* och *Scandia*, 1965–2009”, *Scandia* 86:1 (2020), 55–80; David Ludvigsson and Martin Åberg, *Historikern i samhället: Roller och förändringsmönster* (Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2021); Johan Östling, Anton Jansson, and Ragni Svensson Stringberg, *Humanister i offentligheten: Kunskapens aktörer och arenor under efterkrigstiden* (Stockholm: Makadam, 2022).

2. Ulf Zander, *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider: Bruk av och debatter om svensk historia från sekelskifte till sekelskifte* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2001).
3. *Svenska tidningar*, <https://tidningar.kb.se>.
4. Cf. Gro Hagemann, "Om å gjøre det enkle komplisert og det usynlige synligt. Noen dilemmaer i kvinnehistorien", in *Historien og historikerne i Norden efter 1965. Oplæg fra den 21. Nordiske fagkonferens i historisk metodlære, Åland, 27.-31. maj 1989, Studier i historisk metode*, 21, ed. Christian Kvium (Århus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 1991); Jacob Winther Forsbäck, "The Chair of Women's History at the University of Gothenburg 1984-1995", in *Methods, Interventions, and Reflections. Report from the X Nordic Women's and Gender History Conference, Bergen, August 9-12 2012*, ed. Ulla Manns and Fia Sundevall (Stockholm: Makadam, 2014).
5. Björn Hettne, *Ekonomisk historia i Sverige: En översikt av institutionell utveckling, forskningsinriktning och vetenskaplig produktion* (Lund: Historiska institutionen, 1980).
6. Anton Jansson, "Things are Different Elsewhere: An Intellectual History of Intellectual History in Sweden", *Global Intellectual History* 6:1 (2021), 83-94.
7. Odén, *Forskarutbildningens förändringar 1890-1975*.
8. Torstendahl, "Scandinavian Historical Writing".
9. Ottar Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. århundre* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1990); Micheal Bentley, "British Historical Writing", in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Vol. 5, Historical Writing since 1945*, ed. Axel Schneider, Daniel Woolf and Ian Hesketh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 291-310.
10. Lars Olsson, "Per Nyström, det svenska historikersamfundet och den fjättrade Clio", *Scandia*, 78:1 (2012), 35-59.
11. Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Birgitta Odén, "Den franska Annales-revolutionen och den svenska historikermiljön", in Peter Burke, *Annales-Skolan: En introduktion* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 1990).
12. Klas Åmark, "Teoriernas intåg i svensk historieforskning", in *Historieskrivningen i Sverige*, ed. Gunnar Artéus and Klas Åmark (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2012).
13. Torstendahl, "Scandinavian Historical Writing".
14. Anna Larsson, *Det moderna samhällets vetenskap: Om etableringen av sociologi i Sverige 1930-1955* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2001); Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine, *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
15. Anders Ekström and Sverker Sörlin, *Alltings mått: Humanistisk kunskap i framtidens samhälle* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2012), 92-93.
16. Hampus Östh Gustavsson, *Folkhemmets styvbjörn: Humanioras legitimitet i svensk kunskapsproduktion 1935-1980* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2020).
17. See for example Daniel Nyström, "Den samtidskommenterande historikern" in *Det lyckliga 1950-talet: Sexualitet, politik och motstånd*, ed. Anders Burman and Bosse Holmqvist (Stockholm: Östlings bokförlag Symposium, 2019); Magnus Rodell, "Att skapa historiska sammanhang: Exemplet Thomas Mores Utopia", in *Konsten att contextualisera. Om historisk förståelse och meningsskapande*, Staffan Bergwik, Linn Holmberg and Karin Dirke (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2022).
18. Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016 [2012]).
19. Peter Burke, "Context in Context", *Common Knowledge* 8:1 (2002), 174.
20. Peter E. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas"; Darrin

- M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?" both in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).
21. Victoria Fareld, "Framing the Polychronic Present", in *Historical Understanding. Past, Present, Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár and Lars Deile (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 25–35.
  22. Herbert Tingsten, "Ger historien lärdomar?", *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 December, 1951, 4.
  23. Pieter Geyl, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Pattern of the Past: Can We Determine It?* (Boston, 1949).
  24. Tingsten, "Ger historien lärdomar?".
  25. Tingsten, "Ger historien lärdomar?".
  26. Eli F. Heckscher, "Historiens nytta", *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 December, 1950, A4; Erik Lönnroth, "Erfarenhetens lärdomar", *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 December, 1950, A3; Kurt Samuelsson, "Den lärrika historien", *Dagens Nyheter*, 29 December, 1950, A3; Ernst Söderlund, "Historiens vådor", *Dagens Nyheter*, 30 December 1950, A3; Yngve Larsson, "Historiens lärdomar", *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 January, 1951, A2; Amorey Gethin, "Historien – Uppfostraren", *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 January, 1951, A3.
  27. Heckscher, "Historiens nytta"; Samuelsson, "Den lärrika historien".
  28. Heckscher, "Historiens nytta".
  29. Heckscher, "Historiens nytta".
  30. Lönnroth, "Erfarenhetens lärdomar".
  31. Lönnroth, "Erfarenhetens lärdomar".
  32. Söderlund, "Historiens vådor".
  33. Herbert Tingsten, "Historien under debatt", *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 December, 1950, A4; Herbert Tingsten, [No title], *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 January, 1951, A2.
  34. Tingsten, "Historien under debatt".
  35. Tingsten, "Historien under debatt".
  36. Andrus Ers, *Segrarnas historia: Makten, historien och friheten studerade genom exemplet Herbert Tingsten 1939–1953* (Umeå: H:ström, 2008).
  37. Sven Lindqvist, "Kom ut ur arkivet!", *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 May, 1977.
  38. Lindqvist, "Kom ut ur arkivet!".
  39. Sven Lindqvist, *Gräv där du står: Hur man utforskar ett jobb* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1978). Recently published in English translation as *Dig Where You Stand: How to Research a Job* (London: Repeater, 2023).
  40. Annika Alzén, *Kulturarv i rörelse: En studie av "gräv där du står-rörelsen"* (Mölnadal: Symposium, 2011), 52.
  41. Alzén, *Kulturarv i rörelse*, 52.
  42. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogik för förtryckta* (Stockholm: Gummesson, 1972 [1968]). Freire's book seems to have sold well in Sweden. The 8th edition of the book was published in 1976.
  43. Lindqvist, "Kom ut ur arkivet!".
  44. Gunnar Qvist, "Problemdebatten ett framsteg", *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 May, 1977.
  45. Qvist, "Problemdebatten ett framsteg".
  46. Bo Gustafsson, "Räkna statistik eller ge det förgångna liv?", *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 June, 1977.
  47. Gustafsson, "Räkna statistik eller ge det förgångna liv?".
  48. Susanne Popp, Jutta Schumann, and Miriam Hannig, eds., *Commercialised History:*

*Popular History Magazines in Europe: Approaches to a Historico-Cultural Phenomenon as the Basis for History Teaching* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014); Fredrik Holmqvist, *Populärhistoriens tjusning och kraft: Peter Englund och Herman Lindqvist i svensk historiekultur 1988–1995* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2016); Marianne Sjöland, *Historia från tidskriftsredaktionen: En komparativ studie av Populärhistorias och History Today's historieskrivning* (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 2016); Daniel Nyström, “Om populärhistoriska tidskrifter”, *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap* 40:2 (2019), 120–137

49. Gustafsson, “Räkna statistik eller ge det förgångna liv?”.

50. The other replies were: Börje Hjort, “Jönköpingsborna forskar själva”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 June, 1977; Åke Daun, “Duger inte etnologin?”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 June, 1977; Kurt Ågren, “Utbildning ger resultat”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June, 1977.

51. Zander, *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider*, 18–20, 402–403, 433–436; Holmqvist, *Populärhistoriens tjusning och kraft*, 1–2.

52. Alf W. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 March, 1993.

53. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”.

54. Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe*.

55. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”.

56. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”. The contemporary example did not go unnoticed in the debate, as one reply stated: “surely Johansson does not mean that ‘events’ like those in Leipzig in 1989 [...] or Boris Yeltsin’s waving of a Russian flag on a tank in August 1991 should not and cannot also be explained in the light of more long-term processes in society?” Lars Magnusson and Rolf Torstendahl, “Världspolitiker och vanligt folk”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 April, 1993.

57. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”.

58. Johansson, “Historievetenskapens diskreta skam”. In 1988, Englund published the book *Poltava: Berättelsen om en armés undergång*, which became a great public success. Today, Englund is a member of the Swedish Academy.

59. Magnusson and Torstendahl, “Världspolitiker och vanligt folk”; Arne Jarrick, “Människor i stället för tabeller”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 April, 1993; Eva Österberg, “Historia som jämför”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 May, 1993; Alf W. Johansson, “Den egna historien ger inspiration”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 May, 1993.

60. Jarrick, “Människor i stället för tabeller”.

61. Jarrick, “Människor i stället för tabeller”.

62. Magnusson and Torstendahl, “Världspolitiker och vanligt folk”.

63. Zander, *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider*, 18–20, 402–403, 433–436; Holmqvist, *Populärhistoriens tjusning och kraft*, 1–2.

64. Arne Jarrick, “Vetenskapen hotar förfalla till kollektiv monolog”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 June, 1999.

65. Roddy Nilsson, “Postmodernism, källkritik och historieskrivning”, *Historisk tidskrift* 125:2 (2005), 233–248.

66. Jarrick, “Vetenskapen hotar förfalla till kollektiv monolog”.

67. Jarrick, “Vetenskapen hotar förfalla till kollektiv monolog”.

68. Jarrick, “Vetenskapen hotar förfalla till kollektiv monolog”.

69. Stefan Nordqvist and Martin Wiklund, “Historikerna måste bidra till nuets berättelser”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 16 July, 1999.

70. Lars Magnusson, “Allsköns vidskepelse framkallar rysningar”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 11 August, 1999.

71. Magnusson, "Allsköns vidskepelse framkallar rysningar".
72. Burke, "Context in Context".
73. Håkan Arvidsson, "Historikerna måste konfrontera då med nu", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 19 augusti, 1999, 14.
74. Arvidsson, "Historikerna måste konfrontera då med nu".
75. Arvidsson, "Historikerna måste konfrontera då med nu".
76. Arvidsson, "Historikerna måste konfrontera då med nu".
77. Nilsson, "Postmodernism, källkritik och historieskrivning".
78. Cf. Odén, *Forskarutbildningens förändringar 1890–1975*; Torstendahl, "Scandinavian Historical Writing"; Östh Gustavsson, *Folkhemmets styvbarn*; Ludvigsson and Åberg, *Historikern i samhället*; Östling, Jansson, and Svensson Stringberg, *Humanister i offentligheten*.
79. Hettne, *Ekonomisk historia i Sverige*; Odén, *Forskarutbildningens förändringar 1890–1975*; Olsson, "Per Nyström, det svenska historikersamfundet och den fjättrade Clio".
80. Popp et al., *Commercialised History*; Holmqvist, *Populärhistoriens tjusning och kraft*; Sjöland, *Historia från tidskriftsredaktionen*.
81. Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe*.
82. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas"; Darrin M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?".
83. Burke, "Context in Context".