TOR EGIL FØRLAND, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation in Historiography*, New York – London 2017, Routledge, 194 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-20373-0

This book by Tor Egil Førland, a professor of history at the University of Oslo, combines an excellent discussion of real-life historical examples with interesting theoretical insights and explorations into the issues of objectivity and explanation in history.[1] The author not only makes clear his own positions and views but also attempts, against the background of an in-depth exploration of the heated and perplexing debate over Cold War history in Denmark, to convince the reader that the ideal of objectivity in history should not be easily rejected in the face of popular skepticism. Thus, in a simplified dichotomy between history understood as a scientific endeavour that aims to provide a truthful and objective account of past happenings, on the one hand, and on the other hand history viewed as the creation of textual outcomes that are significantly determined by the form of presentation and various subjective factors, Førland defends the former scientific understanding of the discipline.

Besides the introduction, his book contains eight chapters equally divided between part I *Objectivity, Values, and Theory Choice* and part II *Explanation and Causality*. The chapters are for the most part revised versions of Førland's previously published articles but they fit nicely into these two sections. After providing a brief overview of the book's chapters, I will focus this review on part I of the book and dispute some of the author's claims regarding narrativity, facts and objectivity in history. This does not mean that various issues concerning explanation and causation, which Førland examines in part II, do not deserve attention. It is just that I find the questions raised in part I more pressing and the conclusions presented there more provocative.

In the first two chapters (*Participants and Fellow Travelers: The Left, the Soviet Union, and the Fall of Objectivism* and *Court Historian: Matters of Fact*) Førland presents a fascinating discussion about the interaction between history (facts) and politics (values). He focuses on the situation in Norwegian and Danish historical research on foreign policy while uncovering the political background of the debate. Førland's overview of the so-called Dragsdahl-Jensen court case –

1 The term "history" is used here to refer to the academic discipline.

the result of a dispute between an anticommunist Danish Cold War historian Bent Jensen and the leftist journalist Jørgen Dragsdahl (the former wrote an article for a newspaper in which he claimed that the latter had been considered a KGB agent of influence) – is particularly gripping. The whole exploration of the case nicely illustrates how complicated but critical some of the claims historians make about past actions are. As Førland concludes his description of the case: "The Dragsdahl-Jensen case probably left both parties poorer, at least in standing. But the discipline of history may gain from the court's display of the rules of source criticism and the need to define concepts. Only by adhering to such requirements, scholars may succeed in the fundamental part of the historical métier, namely, the establishment of facts on which both theories and moral judgments should rest." (p. 62)

The following two chapters (*Witches Cannot Fly: A Critique of the Notion of Situated Truths* and *In Defense of Objectivity: Facts and Theory Choice in Historiography*) contain some of the book's most important theoretical arguments and results. Førland courageously defends the notion of truth and objectivity against various types of skeptical objections popular among postmodernists and more moderate constructivists. To be fair, the author acknowledges various limitations of the historical discipline and he appreciates some of the sophisticated constructivist points (e.g., Danto's point about the retrospective nature of historical knowledge). Still, he is convinced that local objectivity in history (the most crucial here are facts, historians' code of conduct, cognitive values and proper criteria for theory choice) is possible. "As we shall see, historians have access to tools that can prevent historiographical analyses from falling prey to subjective worldviews and values, be they religious, political, or otherwise ideological. What distinguishes historiography from propaganda is a disciplinary code and a set of cognitive values that, while unable to save global objectivity, make historiography a truth-tracking science." (p. 92)

Chapter 5 (*The Ideal Explanatory Text in History: A Plea for Ecumenism*) presents a flexible approach to the issue of explanation in history, which is inspired by Peter Railton's work on explanation. Førland claims that "to explain is to provide *explanatory information* about a subject. In the case of so-called explanation-seeking why-questions, this means to *reduce insecurity* about what the explanandum – the thing to be explained – is *due to*." (p. 114) Those "due to" relations may be causal but may also be non-causal, because for Førland structural or functional explanations are admissible. The next chapter (*Mentality as a Social Emergent: Can the* Zeitgeist *Have Explanatory Power?*) argues for an open-minded approach to explanation. Førland accepts priority of individuals on the ontological level but he rejects a narrow-minded approach when it comes

to methodological questions. He emphasizes that in some cases we may use emergent social properties in our explanations. "Instead of restricting ourselves to methodological individualism, we should use all the tools available to us" (p. 145).

The last two chapters (*Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation* and *Problems of Causation in Historiography*) develop specific issues related to historical explanations. Førland uncompromisingly claims that there is an unbridgeable gap between science and religion. He maintains that historians, just like other scientists, should not refer to any supernatural phenomena in their explanations. "Scientific explanations, however, are void of supernatural entities: they explain the world naturalistically" (p. 150). Finally, Førland discusses some more specific issues regarding causation: he explores whether reasons can be causes, whether there are truly social causes and what the role of causation is in the narrative presentation of historical events. Of course, the book explores plenty of other interesting topics and contains various genuine arguments that its readers will undoubtedly appreciate. In the remaining part of this review, however, I will focus on the more contentious claims made in the book.

The first issue I want to discuss is the so-called de-narrativization that arises within Førland's discussion of the Dragsdahl-Jensen case. In a short article published in Jyllands-Posten, Jensen claimed that left wing journalist and popular public figure Dragsdahl had been considered a KGB *agent of influence* not only by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) but also by the KGB itself. Following this accusation Dragsdahl filed a libel suit. Førland uses his discussion of this complicated case to show that we should not forget that establishing facts is still crucial in history. Moreover, he says that at this stage of their work historians should disregard all the fancy things narrativisits or postmodernists have to say about creating historical interpretations, and should simply make facts clear. As Førland puts it: "Also worth noticing is the nonnarrative nature of the historian's task in this case. *There is only a hypothesis to be checked: was Jørgen Dragsdahl a KGB agent?* The job of the historian is to access the sources (…) evaluate their reliability, and place them in their proper context. There is no story to be composed, no colligation to be made, no theory to be constructed: all such activities belong to other parts of the historian's métier" (p. 52, my italics). By focusing on the rather simple question "was Dragsdahl a token of the type KGB agent?" Førland wants to "de-narrativize the study of historiography" and pull history away "from the writing of text and over to often more time-consuming, and no less important, parts of historians' *praxis*" (p. 52). When the issue is rephrased in this way, it may look straightforward: we need to establish the facts. Either Dragsdahl was (considered) a KGB agent (of influence), or he was not.

Yet Førland's fascinating elaboration on the complications accompanying the Dragsdahl-Jensen case proves the opposite. Is there a clear definition of an agent? Do historians agree on the precise characterization of a KGB agent or an agent of influence? It seems there is no simple or standardized definition. Hypothetically, if there was such a clear and unanimously accepted explication of the notion of an agent (and the same applies to other notions used in historical works such as war, revolution, treason, nation, or group), no complicated dispute would probably have arisen. But in reality, all our notions make sense only in the context of a story, theory or colligation. I know of no possible way of de-narrativizing, de-theorizing or de-contextualizing the notions we use. There is not, and will never be, any definitive dictionary that contains stabilized meanings of the terms and categories we use. Terms such as "agent" will always be fluid and stabilized merely for the moment being and for a given purpose. In a way, the Dragsdahl-Jensen dispute is not just a debate about the facts but also about what it means to be an agent. Of course, scholars will usually (more or less) agree on the meanings of the terms they use, but every new controversial case reminds us that the stability we assumed to be rock solid is just a consensus within a community that may be shaken. The Dragsdahl-Jensen case does not tell us that in history we should simply check the facts (was Dragsdahl an agent?) but rather nicely demonstrates that there is no such thing as an isolated fact that can be verified outside a given story or theory.

The second, related issue concerns Førland's understanding of facts and their role in historical work. In chapter 4, which seems to contain the book's theoretical core, at least as far as the issue of values and objectivity is concerned, Førland proposes ways of attaining local objectivity in history and attempts to limit certain implications of narrativism. "What White's narrativism leaves intact is the potential for making nonnarrative, factual descriptions of limited scope. We can produce descriptive sentences without recourse to metaphors or other tropes. (…) The import is that, even granted the power of tropes in imbuing a narrative with meaning, White's analysis reduces but does not eliminate the room for objectivity in historiography." (p. 88) Førland is far from a naïve positivist or empiricist who would maintain that history is simply about describing past happenings; he realizes that there is a place for values, selection and interpretation in history. Nevertheless, he seems to believe there must be also a part of historical work where subjective influences and constructive elements do not play a part and where facts rule. "My point is not to claim that the exact role and significance of facts like these are beyond doubt but that facts as such are never questioned and probably never will be." (p. 93)

What are these facts, according to Førland? "With facts I mean singular descriptive statements that everybody with knowledge of the subject matter and the idiom used to describe it accepts as true descriptions." (p. 87) But if facts are descriptive statements how is it possible to assume that they are "never questioned"? Historians need to utilize certain terms to describe actions and happenings and, therefore, it is always possible to re-describe, to use different terms, to categorize differently. Consequently, historians *do* come up with diverging facts. Førland himself uses a nice example to undermine the alleged stability of facts (descriptive statements). In his discussion of the Katyn Massacre he writes: "At most, different worldviews can make researchers unwilling to consider the facts, or make them want to see the facts in a different light and value them differently, for example, as acts of political expediency or necessity instead of a lack of respect for human life. Differences of terminology may remain, such as whether the genocide is an accurate term for the actions of the Soviets at Katyn. But conscientious historians can agree on the facts." (p. 94) Førland seems to make a difference between 1) using and assessing facts and 2) facts themselves. He acknowledges that historians may differ when it comes to the importance of certain facts or when it comes to various interpretations of the facts. (One historian may prefer to disregard certain facts while her colleague emphasises their importance, one historian will approach facts from a more conservative perspective while another will look at them from a more liberal point of view.) Yet, he claims that the facts themselves do not differ. Let me recall that, according to Førland, facts are descriptive statements. There is no other way of creating descriptive statements than by using certain terms, certain categories. Førland himself points out that there is no agreement on whether "genocide" is a correct term to use in relation to the Katyn Massacre. Therefore, it seems he himself provides a nice counter-example showing that historians do not agree on the facts. For they do not agree on the descriptive statements and terms used in those statements.[2]

It is endearing that Førland tries to limit skepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge. He is right that history is not propaganda and historians

2 Sometimes the objection is raised that although terms like "genocide" etc. are, of course, subjective and interpretative, there are, nevertheless, facts such as who took part in an event, where it took place or how many people were killed. I agree that there are more and less contentious observations or more and less interpretative descriptions. However, as I pointed out above, there are no pure facts free of interpretation. To view somebody as participating, to locate an action or to count (not to mention describing somebody as being killed), all these things require certain context, theory or interpretation.

should respect certain criteria and standards within their work. It is less clear, however, what he means by local objectivity, and the plausibility of his conclusions is weakened by his adoption of a popular but nonetheless misguided distinction between solid facts and variable historical interpretation. It has been already shown in the past[3] that some narrativists and their critics make the same mistake when they try to separate facts (descriptive statements) from more complex historical accounts (narratives, representations or interpretations). Førland's book is exceptional because it uses gripping real-life history examples. But is it really fruitful to see the Archimedean point on which historical work is founded as (solid and de-narrativized) facts?

Eugen Zeleňák

3 See, for instance, CHRIS LORENZ, *Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the "Metaphorical Turn"*, History and Theory 37/1998, pp. 309–329; PAUL ANDREW ROTH, *Narrative Explanations: The Case of History*, History and Theory 27/1988, pp. 1–13.