

Bijeenkomst studiegroep Geschiedfilosofie

19 Oktober, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, van 15.00 tot 17.00 uur, in HG-14A36
(Hoofdgebouw, 14e verdieping)

Spreker: **Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen**,

Titel voordracht: Redefining the critical and the conservative writing of history

Abstract: One of the foundational distinctions in historiography is that of between description and interpretation. A pure description characterizes the state of affairs in the external world objectively without adding any contextual or value-laden elements. Most known philosophies of history appeal to descriptions, when an account of facts or of other so called factual matter is given. By contrast, interpretation is thought to provide some kind of meaning or significance to the matter of external world. Interpretation makes the matter meaningful, when viewed in a specific light or from a particular point of view. A fact can be interpreted equally well in several ways.

In my talk, I argue that this is a false dichotomy and that there is nothing like a pure description. This is to say that there is no non-inferential description and knowledge. Instead, the dichotomy should be between old (inferential) and new(er) (inferential) descriptions. Both old and new inferential descriptions rely on different presuppositions, or perhaps on the presupposition of different times. The old inferential description appears descriptive of events and facts only because the language of it has been widely accepted and presuppositions thereby concealed.

The view is illustrated by concrete historiographical examples. While the Bolshevik revolution that happened in 1917 may seem like an obvious fact, this is only so because of a certain convention has been accepted. Orlando Figes exemplifies in his book *Revolutionary Russia 1891-1991* (London: Pelican, 2014) how this revolution can be rationally understood in eight different ways.

That all description is inferential is important regarding the rationale of historiography. The approaches that presuppose that there is pure description tend to understand historiography as something like the causal linking of independent events and as the simple narration of events. I argue that historiography at its best is rational criticism, which 'unmasks' old descriptions and their presuppositions. Therefore, we should make a distinction between critical and conservative historiography in which the attitude to historical language functions as a demarcation criterion: the more a study of history focuses on the language used, deconstructing old and reconstructing new, the more critical it is. Further, the less it does this and 'merely describes,' the more conservative the study is.

This talk is one step in an attempt to move away from one conceptual triplet (representationalism, narrativism, descriptivism) to another triplet (inferentialism, critical rationalism, normativism) with regard to historiography.

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