



## Deconstructing Karlsson, Part 1: Historical Consciousness

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents an analysis of how leading Swedish historian and history didactical researcher Klas-Göran Karlsson presents the concept of historical consciousness in some of his most recent publications and seeks to analytically deconstruct his view of the concept. The study finds that Karlsson presents definitions of the concept that may not be compatible to each other. Using this result, the paper then tries to present and argue a view of the concept that harmonises with the one presented by Karlsson.

**KEYWORDS:** Klas-Göran Karlsson; historical consciousness; deconstruction; history didactics.

### Introduction

Swedish professor of history Klas-Göran Karlsson is undoubtedly one of the most prominent figures in Swedish history didactics. During the last three decades he has published extensively on key topics in history didactics both in Sweden and abroad. If one works within the academic field of history didactics in Sweden, it is impossible not to pay attention to Karlsson's research. During a history didactical conference held at Karlstad University in 2015 Klas-Göran Karlsson expressed concerns about the present state of history didactical research in Sweden. One of the more acute problems, according to him, was that recent research did not engage itself theoretically to a satisfying degree. In Karlsson's view, researchers adopted the work of others and himself uncritically, instead of "pulverising Karlsson, or at least deconstructing him to create something of their own" (Ludvigsson et al., 2016, p. 22). This has resulted in research that lacks perspective and uncritically confirms positions previously held in research (Ludvigsson et al., 2016, p. 22). This paper should be seen as an attempt to reply to Karlsson's call by way of deconstructing what four of his more recent publications (Karlsson, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014) state regarding what should be seen as the most central history didactical concept in a Swedish context: historical consciousness (cf. Schüllerqvist, 2006, pp. 136–140). This concept is also generally perceived as a problematic one due to its vagueness, thus making critical theoretical inquiries into the concept relevant also at a more general level both in a Swedish and international context (cf. Duquette, 2011, p. 259; Körber, 2016, pp. 443–447; Seixas, 2016, pp. 428–430).

The paper will present an analysis of how Klas-Göran Karlsson presents historical consciousness that has been directed by four questions: (i) what is historical consciousness? (ii) how does historical consciousness affect our understanding of history and the world around us (i.e. how is it applied)? (iii) how does historical consciousness function? and (iv) how is historical consciousness operationalised? These questions were chosen in order to

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cover what can be perceived to be crucial theoretical aspects regarding the concept (cf. Thorp, 2013, pp. 221–222). A rather straightforward methodology has been applied to carry out this study. Four texts recently published by Klas-Göran Karlsson that have longer sections devoted to historical consciousness were chosen in order to allow in-depth analyses of Karlsson's view of the concept in texts that hopefully represent his latest positions regarding the concept. The presentation of the results of these analyses will be divided into three sections: the first section will deal with how the concept is defined, how it is applied, how it functions, and how it is operationalised in the studied texts. The second section ('Deconstruction') will discuss these results and the third section ('Reconstruction') will suggest a possible approach to the concept. This will be followed by a brief conclusion both highlighting the most important results of the present study and suggesting how to move forward.

## **Historical consciousness according to Karlsson**

### ***Definition***

Klas-Göran Karlsson presents five views of historical consciousness in the studied texts that could serve as a basis for stipulating a definition of the concept. A first view of historical consciousness that is offered in all of the analysed texts is one that regards the concept as a temporal processor or compass that enables us to orientate in time (Karlsson, 2009, p. 49, 2010, p. 53, 2011, p. 37, 2014, p. 58). With this view historical consciousness becomes an entity that helps us orient in time and create meaning in life. This is done by relating us to temporal relationships or dimensions that are longer than our own lifespans (Karlsson, 2014, p. 58). The second view of the concept that is offered is one that Klas-Göran Karlsson ascribes to German historian and history didactical researcher Karl-Ernst Jeismann: historical consciousness is the relationship between our interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspectives on the future (Karlsson, 2009, p. 48, 2010, p. 56, 2014, p. 58). Thus, historical consciousness is not a processor or a compass but rather the relationship between how we perceive and approach what is past, present, and future. A third view offered by Karlsson is historical consciousness as present knowledge that human kind and all our social institutions and forms of social interaction exist in time, and thus have a past, a present and a future (Karlsson, 2009, p. 49, 2010, p. 53). This turns the concept into a kind of knowledge of historicity: historical consciousness is the knowledge that everything is historical and exists in time. A fourth view provided by Karlsson equates historical consciousness with the presence of the past, the present and the future (Karlsson, 2014, pp. 57, 58–59). Here historical consciousness becomes a presence of all temporal dimensions. The fifth view of historical consciousness that can be found in Karlsson's texts defines it as all mental operations that create historical meaning (Karlsson, 2010, p. 55). Historical consciousness is what we use to create meaning in history or from a historical perspective.

### ***Application***

A first application of historical consciousness offered by Klas-Göran Karlsson is one that helps us understand that we are both created by history and creators of history (Karlsson, 2009, p. 55, 2011, pp. 35–36). Through our historical consciousness we gain an insight that we are part of social and cultural communities with historical dimensions and that we have a role to play in these communities. A second application applies historical consciousness to enable us to situate ourselves in an extended temporal flow that gives meaning to our lives (Karlsson, 2010, p. 53, 2011, p. 34, 2014, p. 59). We are able to understand that we are part of

a dimension of time that extends our present experiences and lifespans, thanks to our historical consciousness. Karlsson furthermore regards historical consciousness as the basis of orientation, sense-making, and identity construction (Karlsson, 2009, p. 48, 2011, p. 38, 2014, p. 57) and this is the third application found in the studied texts. Here historical consciousness is not merely applied as that which enables us to situate ourselves in an extended temporal flow, but also as that which helps us make sense of things and construct our identities. A fourth application provided by Karlsson is that historical consciousness relates to how the three tense forms affect and interact with each other to provide an understanding of how historical change happens (Karlsson, 2009, pp. 50–51). The final application (inspired by John Lukacs) applies historical consciousness as an insight about the incompleteness of history (Karlsson, 2014, p. 60), i.e. through our historical consciousness we are given an understanding of how history is always someone's history and thus contingent on this fact.

### ***Function***

The third aspect I analysed was what functions of historical consciousness that are presented in the studied texts. In other words, how does Klas-Göran Karlsson represent the functions and uses of historical consciousness to us? A first function of the concept he presents is a heuristic one (Karlsson, 2010, p. 54, 2011, p. 39, 2014, p. 58). Here historical consciousness functions as a heuristic tool that enables us to uncover new aspects of history, apply different perspectives and ask different questions to it. Another way historical consciousness functions is to provide us with agency: through making us aware of the fact that we are both created by and creators of history, it functions as a kind of instigator or catalyst for agency. A third function of historical consciousness is that of providing us with an ability to articulate ourselves to give a meaningful temporal direction in time (Karlsson, 2009, p. 53, 2014, p. 60). With this view, historical consciousness functions as a way of making us articulate historical narratives. Another function stipulated by Karlsson is that historical consciousness functions as a means of confirming and justifying our present knowledge and social relationships (Karlsson, 2010, p. 56), i.e. through our historical consciousness we are given means to argue for and justify why the knowledge we have and relationships we adhere to have come to be the way they are. It could also function to normatively argue for contemporary conditions. Finally, historical consciousness can also function as a kind of a language: it provides us with the means to talk comprehensibly about dimensions of time and function as active individuals and citizens (Karlsson, 2009, p. 48).

### ***Operationalisation***

The final aspect of how historical consciousness is presented in the works by Klas-Göran Karlsson I have studied is how it is manifested, i.e. what operationalises and sets historical consciousness in motion. The first operationalisation offered by Karlsson is that historical consciousness is activated by borderline events or paradigmatic changes (Karlsson, 2009, pp. 54–55, 2010, p. 58, 2011, p. 36). Examples of such changes can be the fall of communism in Russia or more broadly, the end of the Cold War: these changes prompt people to re-negotiate and re-evaluate their notion of and relationship to history, and this in turn engages their historical consciousnesses. In a similar vein, Karlsson also proposes that historical consciousness is operationalised when history touches our personal lives (Karlsson, 2011, p. 34) or when questions related to our identities are awoken through history (Karlsson, 2009, p. 52). An example of how this works is provided:

The day you realise that your grandfather not only *has* a face much more wrinkled than yours, but also make the reflection that your own face in due time, if you may live and keep your health, *will*

*become* just as wrinkled as your grandfather's, and – mind-boggingly enough – your grandfather's face once *was* just as smooth as yours, you have without a doubt activated your historical consciousness by widening and deepening your understanding of time in a contemporary observation or situation. You have received a multidimensional reflection of yourself and you have become more self-reflective. (Karlsson, 2014, pp. 62–63)

Through an understanding of how time and history transcends your individual life span, you have activated your historical consciousness in an understanding of time that connects past, present and future perspectives. Karlsson furthermore claims that historical consciousness is activated when basic dimensions and values in human life are touched upon by history (Karlsson, 2010, p. 57, 2014, pp. 64–65). Such basic dimensions can be matters of life and death and values relating to questions of good versus evil, justice versus injustice, et cetera.

## Deconstruction

In the presentation above we have been given what could be called a rather multifaceted but also diverse picture of historical consciousness. This section will analyse the results above and deconstruct the image of historical consciousness presented in the studied texts. The presentation below will follow the same disposition as the sections above, i.e. I will start with the concept's definition and then move on to how it is applied, et cetera.

A first crucial step in theoretically making sense of how a concept works is by looking at its definition: do we have a definition of the concept that can work as a basis for further theoretical inquiries? As shown, Karlsson offers five views of historical consciousness that may work as a basis for stipulating a definition of the concept. The first view presents historical consciousness as a temporal processor or compass that enables people to orientate in time. With this view, historical consciousness can be regarded as a certain capacity or competency individuals may have that enables them to make a certain sense of time and/or history. This could be perceived as relating to the fifth view of historical consciousness outlined above: that of historical consciousness as all mental operations that create historical meaning. What these views have in common is that they seem to place emphasis on what we use to create meaning: it can be through a temporal processor or compass or through mental operations. One difficulty, however, is that they do not specify what historical consciousness *in itself* may be. Instead we may be able to back-track it through how it creates meaning or helps us orientate in time. The temporal processor or mental operations that do this is historical consciousness. Unfortunately, this does not help us much in understanding what historical consciousness is for two reasons. Firstly, almost anything can be used to create meaning or orientate in time, hence it becomes difficult to say what historical consciousness is using this definition. Secondly, this does not specify *what kind* of processor or mental operations for orientation or meaning making we are dealing with. Surely there are many different ways of orientating or making sense of history, but Klas-Göran Karlsson is not specific about what definition of the concept he is referring to and this makes it hard to say what historical consciousness may be and how to understand its applications, et cetera.

A view presented by Karlsson that does specify a certain kind of meaning making in relation to history is the third one above: historical consciousness as the knowledge that man and all social institutions exist in time and thus have a past, present and a future. This is quite similar to the fourth view that states that historical consciousness is the presence of the past, present and the future, since it could be regarded as similar to a notion of historicity. Here a sense of historicity is equated with historical consciousness, and here we would have a way of specifying what it is. If a person expresses knowledge that we and our social environments exist in time and have a past, present and future, that person would be expressing his or her historical consciousness. This definition does, however, reduce historical consciousness to

something rather commonplace: knowledge or understanding that we exist in time. Furthermore, this definition is not easily made compatible with the views presented above. Even if we disregard the fact that this is a completely different way of defining the concept, we are still left with the question of how knowledge of history relates to meaning making, mental operations or temporal processors that help us orientate in time.

The second view offered by Karlsson, i.e. historical consciousness as the relation between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspectives on the future, is perhaps the most commonly stated definition both in Sweden and abroad (cf. Ahonen, 2005, p. 699). According to this definition historical consciousness is to be found in the relation between how we interpret the past, understand the present, and have perspectives on the future. It is, however, quite difficult to say anything about what this kind of relationship may be. The relationship could be knowledge of historicity as stipulated above, but it could also be a mere mentioning that something extends in time beyond the present. Once again, there is a risk that historical consciousness becomes something rather trivial (e.g. a statement mentioning past, present, and future perspectives on something) and is reduced to a content rather than an ability. This definition also seems to be incompatible with the view of historical consciousness as a temporal processor or mental operation previously stipulated by Karlsson. Karl-Ernst Jeismann, the alleged author of this definition of historical consciousness, also specifically warned against a view of historical consciousness that reduces it to deal with content rather than cognitive abilities (Jeismann, 1997, p. 43). We will return to Jeismann's view of the concept in the following section.

Hence, the views offered by Karlsson include a number of tensions that render a definition of the concept cumbersome. According to the view presented here, it is problematic to claim that historical consciousness is a relationship between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspective on the future, and a mental processor we use to orientate in time, for instance. This does not mean that it is impossible to encompass these aspects of historical consciousness (as I will try to show in the following section), but we cannot easily do it by using multiple and seemingly conflicting views of the concept. This becomes more obvious when we come to apply or operationalise the concept. The applications of the concept that Karlsson stipulates are all focussed on cognitive abilities individuals may have: we use historical consciousness to make sense of things, create meaning in our lives, and to orientate ourselves. To try to make sense of how and why this is the case, we need not only a clear-cut definition to work with but also some kind of theoretical connection between the concept and its application. It is one thing to claim that historical consciousness is a mental processor that we apply to make sense of things, and another to argue why this is the case and show how it may work theoretically. No such definition is offered by Karlsson and neither are any direct suggestions provided as to why historical consciousness does what it is claimed to do.

One example given by Karlsson that may be used to try to make sense of how historical consciousness works is the one presented above where a presumed child's historical consciousness is activated when he or she realises that he or she will grow just as old as his or her grandfather and that his or her grandfather once was just as young as he or she is now. Karlsson claims that the child's historical consciousness has "without a doubt" been activated through this extended temporal understanding, i.e. the child has come to realise that time extends beyond her own personal perspective both into the past and into the future. It is, however, difficult to analyse what this understanding specifically is and how we are to understand what it could mean to the child. Determining what this understanding is depends on what definition of the concept we choose to work with. If we take historical consciousness to be the relationship between past, present and future, we may say that the child's understanding is that there is in fact such a relationship and that this would be tantamount to his or her historical consciousness. We are then left with the question of how we are to

understand what this realisation means to the child: how does this realisation affect her identity construction, meaning making and orientation in time? What happens to the child's cognitive understanding of time apart from the fact that he or she realises that it extends beyond her own horizon? If we take historical consciousness to be a mental process or compass, we are left with the problem of figuring out how this process works: the child reaches an understanding of extended time but how does that affect her temporal processor or compass and, furthermore, how does it relate to her sense of orientation and meaning making? We can certainly assume that an understanding of extended time does all these things to an individual, but we have few reasons to think this to be the case using Karlsson's view of the concept.

I have now touched upon what I perceive to be problematic aspects of how Klas-Göran Karlsson presents historical consciousness in the texts studied. Since we are offered multiple views of historical consciousness in these texts, it is difficult to render a clear-cut definition to work with. This results in difficulties in theoretically connecting the concept with its applications and uses. Furthermore, since these applications are different and not entirely compatible, we cannot use all of the possible definitions stipulated. It has indeed been argued that it may be futile to settle on just one definition of historical consciousness and that it could be beneficial to work with many versions of the concept (cf. Körber, 2015, pp. 6–7). While this may well be the case, we are still presented with difficulties of theoretically making sense of the concept due to the imprecision and vagueness highlighted above. In my view, we need sharp tools in order to perform complicated tasks. This vagueness regarding what the concept should be understood to be results in difficulties in understanding how the concept relates to its applications and functions, and how it is operationalised, particularly since we are not given any arguments as to why this might be the case. I do not take this to mean that the concept should be abandoned, but rather that we should engage with it theoretically to try to deal with the difficulties I have highlighted above. In the next section I will propose an understanding of historical consciousness that I believe manages to evade some of the difficulties we have encountered and theoretically specify how the concept relates to its applications and functions.

## Reconstruction

According to my main argument above, the basic difficulty in understanding historical consciousness in Klas-Göran Karlsson's work is that he makes use of various views of the concept that are not identical and compatible with each other. To solve this problem I will propose one particular definition of the concept and try to argue how we could use this definition to build a coherent and comprehensive theory of historical consciousness. Due to reasons of scope and space, this theory will be of a more general kind and all aspects of it could be the object of further theoretical investigation, but I still hope that it may be able to point in the direction we might go with the concept. I am fully aware that this is merely one of many ways of understanding historical consciousness, but it is the one I presently feel is most worth pursuing.

German historian Karl-Ernst Jeismann is by many perceived to be the first to offer a definition of historical consciousness (cf. Eikeland, 1997, pp. 77–79) and he is also generally ascribed the definition of historical consciousness as the relation between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspective on the future, as I have shown above. If we turn to how Jeismann defines the concept in the first edition of the *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* from 1979, we find that:

By historical consciousness we mean the permanent presence of the awareness that mankind and all social institutions and forms of co-existence created by us exist in time, i.e. they have an origin and a future and represent nothing unchangeably or unconditionally (Schieler, 1974, p. 78f). Besides the mere knowledge of or interest in history a historical consciousness also incorporates the relationship between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspective on the future. Since history cannot be perceived as an image of past realities, but can only be made aware through selection and interpretive reconstruction, historical consciousness is the awareness that the past is present in representations and conceptions. "History is the reconstruction, by and for the living, of dead people's lives. Thus history is born through the contemporary interest that thinking, suffering and acting people have for exploring the past" (Aron, 1961, p. 17). (Jeismann, 1979, p. 42)

This definition is interesting for a number of reasons. We find that Jeismann does not define historical consciousness as the relation between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and perspective on the future (that is commonly held to be the actual definition of the concept), but rather as the permanent presence of the awareness that mankind and all social institutions and forms of co-existence created by us exist in time. Further, he sees the relation between past, present and future as one of the constituents of historical consciousness together with an interest in history and knowledge of historical facts.

I find Jeismann's view of the concept to be a plausible one for reasons I will try to give below. To begin with, he specifies not only what historical consciousness is (i.e. awareness of historicity), but we are also given explanations of what this awareness consists of (i.e. knowledge of and interest in history, and a relationship between past, present, and future), and what kind of meaning-making that historical consciousness endows people with: an understanding of history as contextually contingent reconstruction. As I understand Jeismann's view of historical consciousness, an application of temporal dimensions to history will lead to an understanding that history is always constructed in a context by someone for a particular reason. This understanding will in turn lead to an awareness of historicity not only regarding history and representations thereof, but also concerning our own representations and conceptions. Thus, historical consciousness could be regarded as a kind of hermeneutic concept that engages with the totality of the interpretive process (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 47–48; Thorp, 2016, pp. 46–50). Not only is history contextually contingent, but also our own representations and conceptions of it. This, in turn could also be argued to relate to how we come to perceive ourselves and others since we may come to appreciate the contingencies that lay behind our perceptions and thus engage with these both regarding ourselves and others.

If we try to relate this view of historical consciousness to how Klas-Göran Karlsson presents the concept, there may be a way of circumventing the problems highlighted above. The awareness of historicity we have stipulated as a definition of historical consciousness can be regarded as equal to the knowledge of historicity, the temporal processor or compass, and the mental operations presented by Karlsson. Knowledge of historicity leads to an awareness of historicity both regarding history and our conceptions of it, which could in turn be viewed as a mental operation or a temporal processor or compass. The relation between our interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspectives on the future, should not be regarded as a definition of historical consciousness but rather as a constituent of it that together with our interest for history and knowledge thereof, works to enable us with an awareness of historicity perceived as an understanding of history as characterised by contextual contingency. This awareness can then in turn be applied to enable us to situate us in an extended temporal flow that give meaning to our lives and allows us to orientate and create meaning and construct our identities according to this contextual contingency. This could also be perceived as functioning as a cause for agency since we are both created by and creators of history, i.e. through our awareness we realise that we cannot escape this fact. It could further be argued to function as a kind of language (i.e. the awareness makes us talk

about history in a certain way) that will help us to articulate histories to give a meaningful temporal direction in time (in the sense that it stresses the contextual contingencies inherent in all approaches to history). This kind of understanding can then be used to confirm and justify our present knowledge and social relationships in a way that conforms to this awareness of contextual contingency, i.e. our knowledge and social relationships are just as contextually contingent as all other kinds of knowledge and social relationships.

Finally, regarding the example Karlsson gives us where a child's historical consciousness is activated through a realisation that his or her grandfather's face once was not wrinkled and that his or her own face once will be, we could maybe claim that what the child has experienced was maybe not an activation of his or her historical consciousness, but an understanding of how temporal perspectives may change our perspective of things, a prerequisite for historical consciousness according to the view presented here.

### Concluding remarks

Heeding the call from Swedish professor of history Klas-Göran Karlsson, that Swedish history didactics is in need of more deconstruction, if not pulverisation, of his work, this paper analysed how Karlsson presented historical consciousness in some of his recently published work. The analysis finds that while Karlsson provides us with many reasons why historical consciousness should be perceived to be an important history didactical concept, we are presented with a rather multifarious and in certain aspects problematic view of the concept. According to the argument presented here, we are encountered with difficulties in how to understand the concept and its applications and functions that stem from how Klas-Göran Karlsson defines the concept. To remedy these problems, I suggested a move towards a hermeneutic view of the concept as awareness of historicity that enables us to appreciate and engage with history as contextually contingent reconstruction of past realities, drawing on a re-examination of the definition provided by Jeissmann (1979). I then tried to show how this understanding of the concept may be used as one way of circumventing the problems concerning historical consciousness in the studied texts.

While the argument presented in this paper is limited in many ways, my wish is that it could be regarded as a contribution to the field of history didactics both in Sweden and abroad. A view of historical consciousness as awareness of historicity and contextual contingency may be a way of arguing the concept's importance and relevance in history and history didactics both in Sweden and abroad. Furthermore, this paper also highlights the importance of Karlsson's research, not only regarding how we should understand the field of history didactics and one of its central notions, but also concerning the challenges that lay ahead in future history didactical research.

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