

Review of

Historical Consciousness and Practical Life: A Theory and Methodology

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Debates concerning the purposes and pedagogical approaches of history education have intensified in recent years, particularly as Canadian scholars and educators grapple with questions of identity, collective memory, democratic citizenship, and reconciliation. Within philosophy of education, these discussions intersect with longstanding questions about the nature of history and historical consciousness itself: the ways and extent to which history should be approached as distinct disciplinary knowledge, as interpretive and highly subjective practice, and as a mode of ethical and civic orientation for the present (Clark, 2011; Donald, 2009; Sandwell, 2012; Sears & Peck, 2026; Seixas et al., 2013). In educational research and pedagogy, the prominence of “historical thinking” frameworks has further shaped how history is conceptualized and taught, sometimes privileging procedural competencies at the expense of deeper engagement with historicity, meaning, and lived experience.

It is within this scholarly and practical context that Paul Zanazanian’s *Historical Consciousness and Practical Life: A Theory and Methodology* makes a timely and ambitious intervention. The book offers a philosophically rigorous account of historical consciousness, engaging questions of its essence, form, nature, and function with admirable conceptual clarity. Drawing on a carefully articulated theoretical framework, Zanazanian challenges reductive or overly instrumental approaches to historicity and historical consciousness, gesturing towards the transformative potential of historical consciousness in everyday life.

At the same time, the book leaves open a central tension signaled by its title. While the philosophical and methodological groundwork is developed through insightful, nuanced, and novel conceptualizations, the translation of these rich and robust processes and insights into educational praxis remains an open question. This review examines the book’s conceptual and theoretical contributions while also considering the challenges it poses for educators seeking to bridge philosophical rigour and classroom practice.

The book is organized into three main parts, structured around the development and empirical application of what Zanazanian terms the *practical life methodology*. The overarching purpose of the volume is to illustrate how this methodology may be used in empirical research settings to examine how historical consciousness is enacted in relation to collective social action. In this sense, the book moves deliberately from theoretical and methodological development to applied analysis, drawing on a qualitative study of English-speaking community leaders in Quebec.

Chapters one through three establish the theoretical foundations necessary to operationalize historical consciousness for empirical inquiry. In Chapter one, Zanazanian frames historical consciousness as a mode of sense-making situated in the present, emphasizing how cognitive processes

involved in interpreting historical knowledge shape decision-making and action in contemporary contexts. Chapters two and three introduce two central stages of analysis integral to the practical life methodology—narrative schematic templates and enactment—through which historical sense-making is examined as both interpretive and lived practice.

The second part of the book turns to empirical application. Chapter four presents the main findings of the study, offering a concrete illustration of how the practical life methodology may be employed in qualitative research. Chapters five and six provide more sustained interpretive and analytical engagement, examining how participants operationalize historical consciousness in relation to two interrelated themes: history as an instrument for positive outcomes and history as a form of group empowerment.

The final chapters address synthesis and broader implications. Chapter seven draws together the preceding analyses to reflect on the relevance of the practical life methodology for examining how leaders engage with historical consciousness in efforts to effect positive social change. Chapter eight extends this discussion by considering the broader implications of the methodology for future empirical research and outlining prospects for further studies. The final chapter offers a brief conclusion summarizing both the central concepts and theorization underpinning the practical life methodology, as well as recommendations stressing the context-bound nature of the ideal-type stances for mobilizing group members outlined in Chapter seven.

The most significant conceptual contribution of *Historical Consciousness and Practical Life* lies in its development of a methodology capable of examining, with empirical rigour, how individuals engage historical consciousness in qualitative research settings. Zanazanian's practical life methodology is designed to make visible the processes through which individuals draw on historical knowledge to construct meaning and to use that meaning to inform action and decision-making in real time. Central to this contribution is the methodological articulation of how historical sense-making can be analyzed through the identification and examination of schematic narrative templates and their enactment in practice.

Chapter two marks a pivotal moment in this conceptual development, as Zanazanian introduces the first core concept underpinning the practical life methodology: schematic narrative templates. The chapter proceeds in two stages. First, Zanazanian further theorizes historical consciousness, situating it as a dynamic process through which individuals interpret the past in relation to present concerns. Second, he demonstrates how this theorization can be operationalized for empirical research purposes. The aim is not merely descriptive, but analytic: to understand how historical consciousness interacts with the underlying stances that structure individuals' beliefs and guide their sense-making, and how these stances, in turn, inform action in the present.

In developing this framework, Zanazanian draws extensively on the work of Gadamer, Koselleck, and Ricoeur, mobilizing their insights to explain the mechanisms through which individuals employ historical understanding to orient themselves in time and guide decision-making. Following what he describes as the general logic of Koselleck and Ricoeur—supplemented by Rösen's sociocultural perspective—Zanazanian contends that two schematic narrative templates account for how individuals seek meaning “in the now”: history-as-interpretive-filter and history-as-content-configuration. These templates function as mediating structures through which individuals navigate the tension between, in Koselleck's terms, a space of experience and a horizon of expectation.

The sociocultural dimension of this theorization is particularly salient given the empirical context of the study—English-speaking community leaders mobilizing for positive social change within a Francophone-dominant province. Drawing on Jorn Rösen, Zanazanian positions culture as providing the conceptual resources necessary for the interpretation of time, understood as shared interpretive patterns through which historical meaning is constructed. Narrative, in turn, serves to bring coherence to culture and memory, a move that underpins Zanazanian's methodological emphasis on narrative analysis. For Zanazanian, historical consciousness emerges at the intersection of culture, memory, time, history, narrative, and schematic templates, all of which converge to shape sense-making in the present.

While Zanazanian's reliance on William Labov and Joshua Waletzky provides a clear and systematic means of accessing narrative structure, this analytic move introduces a degree of reduction that sits uneasily with his broader socio-cultural commitments. If historical consciousness is understood as culturally mediated and interactionally constituted, questions arise regarding whether structural decomposition alone can fully capture the dynamic processes of sense-making the theory seeks to illuminate. This tension is best understood not as a methodological failure, but as an unresolved challenge inherent in operationalizing culturally situated meaning-making.

While this reliance on structural reduction raises theoretical questions, it also serves a vital methodological function. The analytic steps Zanazanian outlines offer readers a transparent and replicable process for identifying schematic narrative templates, a feature central to rigour and validity in qualitative research. In the case of *history-as-interpretive-filter*, the analytic aim is not simply to catalogue narrative structure, but to examine how "interpreting-actors" mobilize history within their narratives—how history functions as a resource for sense-making in the present. This tension is further mitigated in the subsequent stage of the practical life methodology, where Zanazanian purposefully reintroduces sociocultural theory through his analysis of enactment.

In this second stage, Zanazanian shifts analytic attention from narrative structure to how interpreting-actors position themselves in relation to knowledge claims about the world. Drawing on sociocultural approaches that foreground the relationship between cognition and the social contexts in which it unfolds, he returns explicitly to the roles of cultural history and cultural memory in shaping meaning-making. As with the analysis of narrative templates, Zanazanian provides a clear, step-by-step process for accessing enactment, detailing how schematic narrative templates are mobilized in navigating social reality. Yet, here another methodological tension emerges. Although enactment is described as inductively coded, the analytic process is guided by a set of prescriptive prompts, raising questions about the balance between inductive openness and theory-driven interpretation. This tension does not undermine the coherence of the methodology but highlights the challenge of operationalizing culturally situated sense-making without constraining the very interpretive processes the framework seeks to illuminate.

In the final chapter, Zanazanian identifies six key themes that emerged through the application of the practical life methodology to the study of community leaders' historical sense-making. His purpose in outlining these themes is not merely to synthesize findings from the empirical study, but to establish a foundation for the broader applicability of the methodology in future research contexts. In this respect, the practical life methodology is positioned as a framework for examining how actors—understood more generally as individuals or groups engaged in practical life activities—draw on historical consciousness in both cognizant and incognizant ways to navigate social reality and enact change. This framing extends the potential relevance of the methodology well beyond the specific context of community leadership and into wider inquiries concerned with processes of meaning-making and social transformation.

While each of the six themes presents compelling avenues for further empirical investigation, the final theme—pedagogical implications—is particularly salient for educational research and, more specifically, for philosophy of education. Zanazanian's discussion of pedagogy unfolds along a continuum that moves from individual sense-making toward broader epistemic and ethical considerations. He first frames the practical life methodology as offering empirical and conceptual support for learners to "discover who they are and how they function as historical beings" (p. 251). This claim situates the methodology within a broadly humanistic tradition, connecting historical consciousness to personal growth and self-actualization. This is not, however, an individualized or atomistic conception of self-development. Consistent with Zanazanian's sociocultural commitments, self-actualization is understood as relational and socially embedded, tied to recognizing similar needs and drives in others and to one's membership within a broader community.

Extending this humanistic orientation, Zanazanian also suggests that the practical life methodology holds promise for fostering the coexistence of multiple epistemic traditions. By conceptualizing historical sense-making as situated and enacted in the present, the framework opens space for engaging both

Western and non-Western epistemologies. From an educational standpoint, this possibility is significant, particularly in contexts where pluralism, reconciliation, and epistemic justice are central concerns. At the same time, this claim warrants careful qualification. Zanazanian's suggestion that actors might selectively take up—or “appropriate”—historical knowledge deemed useful for navigating everyday life raises important ethical questions, especially in relation to Indigenous knowledge systems. Given the long history of extractive and exploitative engagements with Indigenous knowledges, further theoretical and pedagogical work is necessary to articulate how such engagements might occur in ways grounded in relationality, responsibility, and an ethic of care. Without this intentionality, there remains a risk of reproducing the very dynamics of appropriation that educational research increasingly seeks to unsettle.

Zanazanian concludes the final chapter by gesturing toward the potential of the practical life methodology to disrupt prevailing tendencies in history education to frame historical understanding in narrowly modernist or disciplinary terms, often exemplified by the dominance of skills-based frameworks such as the Big Six historical thinking concepts (Seixas et al., 2013). While this diagnosis resonates with critiques in the field, it is also worth noting that history education scholarship has already begun to explore subjectivity, relationality, and meaning making in more expansive ways. Work such as Sandwell's (2003) emphasis on moving students beyond questions of “what is true” toward “what does it mean” illustrates that the pedagogical terrain is already shifting. In this context, Zanazanian's contribution is best understood not as a corrective to an inert field, but as an ambitious and generative extension of ongoing conversations. His affective and moral-ethical framing of historical consciousness—rooted in self-understanding oriented toward the possibility of a more just future—offers a compelling invitation for philosophers of education and educational researchers alike, even as it underscores the need for continued work on pedagogical viability and accessibility.

Broadly speaking, *Historical Consciousness and Practical Life* offers a unique theoretically grounded and empirically supported contribution to education foundations scholarship. At a time when the foundations of education are often treated as discrete and loosely connected fields—philosophy, history, and sociology operating in parallel rather than in conversation—Zanazanian's work offers a genuine commitment to interdisciplinarity. The book models a way of theorizing across traditions that is foundational to foundations scholarship itself, yet increasingly difficult to sustain within contemporary faculties of education, where foundations courses have become scarce and methods or skills-based approaches often dominate.

Zanazanian's blending of philosophical inquiry, historical analysis, and sociocultural theory is carried out with notable rigour and care. His engagement with sociocultural perspectives enables a nuanced account of historical consciousness as a form of human mental functioning shaped through social interaction, while also grounding the study's methodological aims. The proposed practical life methodology—designed to examine how individuals position themselves in relation to social problems with historical roots—offers a promising lens for understanding the role of historical consciousness in ethical judgment and social action. The empirical focus on community leaders and social change underscores the book's potential relevance beyond formal schooling.

While questions remain regarding how these insights might be translated into attainable pedagogical praxis, especially when considering undergraduate level teacher candidates' contexts, the book's interdisciplinary scope and theoretical ambition marks it as an important and timely contribution for scholars and educators concerned with historical consciousness. For philosophers of education and foundations scholars alike, Zanazanian's work serves as both a substantive intervention and an invitation: to reclaim the integrative, intellectually expansive possibilities of education foundations scholarship in an era that increasingly fragments it.

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