



Extending historical consciousness: Past futures and future pasts

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ABSTRACT: The concept of Historical Consciousness which played a prominent role in modernising history education in many countries was introduced into the debate of history education in the mid 1970s. The fact that after 40 years, no single definition is unanimously agreed upon, need not be a drawback for the concept's further fruitfully instigating research and discussion. In a first part, this article exemplifies the productive challenge which can be exerted onto the conceptualisation of historical learning processes and tasks by a specific version of Historical Consciousness, being a psychological corollary of theoretical insights into the orientating function of history in individuals' and groups' life by interlinking interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations for the future (Jeismann). In a second part, then, the concept of Historical Consciousness itself is focused. It is argued that its understanding as a mental disposition for historical thinking, however fruitful, still does not meet the full extent of the requirements to temporal orientation. An extension of the presented tri-partite formula to integrating both 'past' expectations for 'the future' as well as anticipations of retrospective views of us as part of a past is recommended, drawing, *inter alia*, on reflections from psychoanalysis and current essay writing. An effort to reflect on possible consequences of such an extension for history education and learning tasks completes the argumentation.

KEYWORDS: Historical Consciousness; History Education; Learning Tasks; Past/Future.

Historical consciousness and historical thinking as orientation for the future

In traditional history teaching, the focus is mostly on chronology, causes and consequences – presented firmly from a – mostly national – retro-perspective. Even though traditional lectures and mere reading of textual narratives have been replaced or at least supplemented by activities of historical thinking – including exercises in extracting information from primary and other documents, concluding and judging – in general they are placed within a rather secured framework of solutions and interpretations.

In a lesson model on a Hamburg Harbour workers' strike (Henke-Bockschatz, 2015), e.g., tasks are given as follows:

1. Describe the picture and name the different types and groups of people.
2. Discuss the attitudes of the different people or groups of people to the imminent strike.
3. Formulate questions and assumptions about how a strike could have taken place at the end of the 19th century and what it could have meant for those involved.
4. Read the info text about the strike [2] and clarify comprehension difficulties in partner work or in class discussions.

5. Analyze the materials [3] to see how work in the port was organized around 1895 and which groups of workers in the port had a relatively regular and good income and which did not.
6. Gather information from the sources you consider particularly relevant to the analysis of the strike.
7. Now add a few sentences summarising the social situation of the dockworkers to the info text D at appropriate places. (Henke-Bockschatz, 2015, p. 28, my translations)

Recent research in the nature of history, however, stresses that historical thinking is not only nor even primarily about knowing the past and recognizing it as fundamentally different from today (overcoming 'presentism'; cf. Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 27; Wineburg, 1999, p. 492; Wineburg, 2001; Lévesque, 2016), but that it performs a function of orientating us members of today's generation in the temporal dimension of our existence, that is our identities, possibilities of acting and suffering, and expectations (Rüsen, 2015, [29]; Rüsen, 2017, p. 52). In one of the many different efforts to define "historical consciousness",¹ especially influential in Germany, "historical consciousness", accordingly, has been defined as combining and integrating "interpretation of the past, present understanding and future perspective" (cf. Jeismann, Jacobmeyer, & Kosthorst, 1985), and its main operating principle as "making sense of the experience of time" (Rüsen, 2015, [44]; "Sinnsbildung über Zeiterfahrung"; Rüsen, 1983, p. 52) – by linking past, present and future into mental constructions of temporal connections ("concepts of continuity" or "continuity concepts"; Rüsen, 2015, [49]²). It thus strives to answer the question: "In light of the past: who are we and what can / should we (not) do?" Within this framework, one of the main functions of history education in schools would be not to merely invest students with given distant narratives of the past, but rather to enable them to perform the necessary operations of *historical thinking* required for such orientation in responsible ways.

Students need to learn both – to (1) actively and responsibly reflect on the historical pre-conditions of their current identities, situations, and their possibilities of acting, and to (2) reflectively relate to similar concepts and identities of other members of their society, including (3) to critically comprehend and evaluate narratives present in their societies. History education, then, would be a preparation of the (young) members of society to participate in the societal exchange on history, its relevance and meaning. It is to be considered a strength of this concept of historical consciousness and historical thinking that it is focused on the students' own (individual and collective) situation, challenges, and opportunities in the light of the past, rendering history learning not a mainly detached gathering of information, but rather a tool of societal and cultural empowerment.

In the example given above, this aspect is taken up in the last two tasks presented:

1. "Summarize how labour disputes are fought in Germany today."
2. "Discuss how strikes around 1900 differed from today's strikes." (Henke-Bockschatz, 2015, p. 28, my translations)

In quite traditional manner, this relation to the present ("Gegenwartsbezug") – almost routinely requested for lesson plans because of the referred theoretical insights – is saved for the end of the teaching sequence, rendering it fundamentally inductive with narrow spectrums of solutions up front and comparative conclusions with present conditions, which are also quite constricted not only because of the present not having been addressed in a similar way before, but also because of the common understanding ensured beforehand. The historical thinking made possible for the pupils through this task does not include the requirement to recognize and formulate their own relationship to the object. What has become known as "problem based" history education (e.g. Uffelmann, Andresen, & Burkard, 1990; Hensel-

Grobe, 2012), namely, to enter into historical learning processes by prompting students to formulate questions to the past, is not implemented here.

Accordingly, questions in history education should rather take the form of complex tasks, directing the students' attention and reflections towards the past not for the sake of the past, but for the sake of orientation – of reflecting on identities and possibilities

Consider this framing of the same subject:

Collective bargaining is currently taking place between employers and employees for many professions. The latter are also threatening to stop working. Again and again there is a dispute as to whether under current law the workers are allowed to do so. That's up to the courts. But people are also discussing whether strikes will become dysfunctional or obsolete in the future or whether they need to be preserved as worker's instrument in labour disputes. A look at past examples may help to answer the questions of this kind. The Hamburg strike of 1896/97 – a model or a cautionary example of 'labour dispute'?

Such questions are something quite different from the traditional textbook questions: they confront the students with tasks of temporal orientation, for which they need to apply historical thinking. For not merely answering this question offhand, but rather working them as a task, the students must be able to discuss a complex context, connecting topical challenges to knowledge about the past. Furthermore, the students must reason about possible future situations, based on the past and the present. Such time-connecting perspectives are frequent in everyday contexts.

Such profiling of history education as enabling students to think historically when faced with novel situations of temporal orientation, is to be regarded as a great step forward, turning away from mere endowing students with traditional information, interpretation and pre-formed judgements of the past towards empowering them to critical and sustainable historical thinking.

Challenges to the concept of historical consciousness

In this article, however, I'd like to go one step further beyond the traditional notion and challenge the above cited notion of historical consciousness as being the integration of "interpretation of the past, present understanding and future perspective" (cf. Jeismann et al., 1985) as having its limitations, too – not by being too complex, but rather as still neglecting specific perspectives and challenges necessary for such orientation. I will suggest to extend of the "tripartite" concept of "historical consciousness" in two ways: by integrating reflected concepts of (1) "past futures" and (2) "future pasts".

First challenge: Integrating "past futures"

When we look into the past, the people in the past do not really look at us, just as we can't see them and as we are not able to see the people of the future. But by analysing own own "projected intentionality", the "dichotomy between time as intentions and time as experience" (Rüsen, 2015, [43]; cf. Rüsen, 1983, p. 49), we can try to understand our predecessors' expectations (hopes, plans, expectations, fears) for their own distant future (part of which is our present). But we are not confined to assuming *that* these people before us indeed had such expectations. By way of research we can try to elaborate on their possible or even likely nature, thus constructing meaning not only from our past and present, but their present and future, too.

A few years ago already, Jörn Rüsen pointed out that the historical meaning we construct is *not* only a result and effect of a historically unaffected and thus "neutral" historical thinking

(Rüsen, 2003, p. 38). According to him, we all are coined by history *before we even begin* to think historically. Our "ancestors'" "unheeded" expectations for the future, their hopes, fears, plans, etc. are working within us.

These "ancestors" of ours (and not only our family or national ancestors but all people of former times) constitute more than just objects of our historical thinking – we are obliged to them in a kind of "historical responsibility". This stance may be exaggerated and also exacerbated insofar as these past people's expectations of their future can not simply grow unnoticed within ourselves, but rather have to be constructed by way of our historical thinking. But that does not mean that we are totally free in both our perceptions of present and past and in our expectations. In as far as our present society is not a blank sheet but a product of actions and expectations of our ancestors, we are all unconsciously influenced by the past.

Even more important, however, is that these past futures, the unsubstantiated parts of the past, may also be relevant for our own orientation. Even though specifically these unsubstantiated plans and expectations are devalued as inferior – especially if history is evaluated by the criterion of "success" only – they do belong to the great spectrum of possibilities relevant for our historical orientation. Unredeemed expectations of the past are implementations of what Rüsen calls the human "projected intentionality" (Rüsen, 2015, [43]; cf. Rüsen, 1983, p. 49), which our ancestors exhibited just like we do.

Sure, these "past futures" are not easy to detect. Aiming at orientation in a real world, speculation about our past fellow-humans' fears, hopes and expectations is not advisable. Many of them will have relinquished not a single trace. But even the few we can re-construct from the sources and tradition give hints to the expectations we could be measured by. And they may give some historical grounding to our own expectations and hints to their chances of success. Thus, the component of the "past" that it is to perceive, explore, and interpret to construct and rebuild the consciousness of history should be extended to include the explicit dimension of the "past future."

Second challenge: Integrating "future pasts"

Similarly, people in the future (not to be seen by us) will look back onto us – and if there was something like a "conversation of human spirit across the centuries" (cf. the title of Goebel, 1990), they would not only tell us about their own times, but also question us about our handling of their expectations. It is not only "future historians" – as Arthur Chapman just stated – who "have the same rights to cognitive self-determination as historians in the present" (Chapman, 2018) – people in the future in general are entitled to their perspectives and their (possibly sceptical) questions to their pasts (again including our present) as we are to ours.

Considering the extent of consequences which present actions not only by people of power but by many of us can have for our private and public lives in the present, it may well be asked whether the sketched conceptualization of Historical Consciousness really suffices. It may turn out as ultimately self-centered in approaching the past as the substratum for answering our own questions and the future as a real, of our own actions, only – neglecting the fact that in both the past and the future other people not only with their own lives and actions, but also with expectations, hopes, fears and plans undertake the same venture.

How, could the well-known formula that Historical Consciousness encompasses "interpretation of the past, present understanding and future perspective" (as in the subtitle of Jeismann et al., 1985) be upgraded to reflect on this accordingly? Hints may not only be found within our own discipline, but also in psychoanalysis and public discourse.

A Psychoanalytical Perspective

A passage from the work of the well-known psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan reads:

What realizes itself in my history is not the past definite of what was since it is no longer, nor even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future perfect of what I will have been for what I am in the process of becoming. (Lacan, 1956, p. 144; translated by Gallop, 1986, 81f)³

Even though this, clearly refers to the individual story of a person's (patient's) life, the idea of orientation through an anticipated retrospective, rooted in prolonged contingency is, interesting for historical thinking, too. In his Berlin medico-historical dissertation on Lacan, Nicolas Langlitz, for example, asserts:

If anticipation had previously been primarily about images that the subject made of itself, another form of pre-emption came to the fore: the anticipation of meaning in speech, and its linguistic correlate should be in the grammar of the future. In this temporal form, Lacan saw a characteristic of the unconscious, whose 'pre-ontological' status signifies that it has no present, that it is not 'in the present tense, but by virtue of the symbolic process in the Analysis, will have been. Its ontologisation or implementation is still pending and yet always anticipated (Langlitz, 2003, p. 150, referring to Lacan, 1978, my transl.).⁴

Langlitz states:

To recognize the subject as a subject means not to reduce it to its past or to its state (its internal state, so to speak), but to accept it as desiring, aspiring certain goals, nascent and emerging ("im Werden begriffen"). The confirmation it requires does not concern what it was and is, but what it is about to become (Langlitz, 2003, p. 167, my transl.).

A related thought has been recently formulated by Michael Uebel in an article on psychoanalysis and Medieval Culture, commenting a letter by Sigmund Freud, in which the famous psychoanalyst expressed a fantasy that "someday" one would "read on a marble tablet" on his house about the success of his work:

History involves and identification with what one will have been, as for example when Freud writes to Wilhelm Fliess in 1900 [...]. "This expression of a wish or an ideal ego reads, indeed works, backward from a time in the future when Freud's discovery will have been publicly acclaimed. The retroactive (*nachträglich*) temporal structure of the fantasy here amounts to not to a memorializing of the (future) past, but to a manipulation of it, along with the present, in relation to the future. To put this another way, the past momentarily suspends the present so that the future becomes an open question, a possibility. The present is in effect left for another time. (Uebel, 2016, 274f).

This can be transferred to historical thinking, as well. It is not only our personal identity, but also our historical identity which needs not only to be conceived of from who we are (in the light of past and present), but also in the light of what we are about to become – in our own perspective and that of others.

A public intellectuals' concern

Uebel's interpretation of Freud's fantasy still stresses the concept of the future as an open *possibility*, to be rather freely manipulated by the individual itself. The concept of a future past, of a retrospective sense-making about the self, anticipated in the present, however, has a much stronger potential. A recent reflection of the late German essayist Roger Willemsen in his last public lecture:

Sparing myself the tedious question of how we are likely to be in the future, and using the future rather as the perspective of my contemplation of the present, I'm not going to ask who we are, but who we're going to be. Retrospectively, I will look, from the perspective of him, who wants to deprive himself of his future because it horrifies him, looking back while moving forward in order to be able to better recognise myself, -- in the eyes of those whom will have disappointed. In virtually unlimited ways we have learnt in all the media of the historical reconstruction to look

through the eyes of those who have been and who have left. Comparatively rarely, however, we try to find ourselves in the eyes of those who will come and despair of us (Willemsen, 2016, p. 24, my transl.).⁵

Willemsen recognizes our time as primarily marked by a media-generated simultaneity of our activities, and the resulting loss of discrimination between original and simulation. (Willemsen, 2016, pp. 20–22). The "time of reality" was "over, that of the realities" "entering its first heyday". The "substantiality of the classical reality, however" was not only dismissed "by counterfeiting and simulations". It also "died in all those archetypes that would degrade coming events to *Déjà-vus*." The "last major events of the reality-description", the Gulf War as the first computer war, the Yugoslav war as the "last craft war" (Willemsen, 2016, p. 23). were moulded "by forgeries and exaggerations and deprived of their rank as real originals." The "only, at least largely non-simulated life" is "the one the viewer leads with himself." (Willemsen, 2016, p. 23) According to his analysis, after the revolution which signified the emergence of consciousness, we as a species reached a point in our evolution, at which it can only be saved by "mindfulness."

The imperative of today, he writes, demands of us to "present ourselves in the literal sense of being here, arriving at this time – not in the distance of the displays" or of other parallel forms: "To be conscious would be to arrive in the present *which once was ours*." (Willemsen, 2016, p. 31; my emphasis). It is this last part, emphasized by me, which suggests the idea that this awareness in and of the present requires a historical thinking including the perspectives of the future and the past.

In as far as our historical thinking, in order to orientate our own hopes, fears and plans, is directed to the past only, an important corrective is missing. It is our need not only to discern who we are and what we can or want to achieve in the light of the past, but also who we want to have been and what we want to have accomplished in the eyes of posterity. It is not only our imminent future and subsequent future times, but also the "futur antérieur", which need to be integrated into our formula of historical consciousness, into the list of those perspectives onto our identity and intentions to act, which need to be constructed into a "conception of time". In line with a popular slogan it could be said that it is not only the earth we have borrowed from our children and grandchildren, but also our present and future. Thus, historical thinking promises not only to orientate us on our possibilities and opportunities, but also to integrate a sense of responsibility. Accordingly, historical thinking is not only about what we can do and who we can be and become, but about who we want, can and will have been in the future, about the perspective our successors in some distant times will have on our present times – and what future interpretation of our times we hold both likely and desirable.

In the light of this line of reflection, our identity not only as individuals, but also as societies is not fully reflected by looking to the past only and by doing so only in order to determine our own outlook towards the future. It is the future retrospective we also have to consider in order to be really "ourselves".

Conclusion: Orientation – not only one-directional

"Orientation" in time as the function of historical thinking then does not simply refer to current expectations and possibilities. It leads us not only to ask about what to expect, fear, hope for and plan, to do and to omit in the light of past experiences. Instead, it requires of us to inquire about past experiences with such hopes and expectations themselves, with their success and failure. To focus not only on what has been the case in the past but also on the interrelation of expectations, hopes and fears and their outcomes in later, but still past times, can inform our own expecting, hoping and planning and in a certain way ground them.

Similarly, Historical thinking involving anticipated retrospective not only processes simple contingency of human action between determination and complete indeterminacy – the former of which would deprive us of both necessity and opportunity, the latter of all chance to act – it also takes into account the residual contingency after contingency has been contemplated.

And thus, a circle is being closed: In all our historical reflections, we must consider at least four temporal perspectives, each of which has a normative dimension:

1. the perspective(s) of the past time to be considered at of the time we have considered, their own horizon of perception and values,
2. the perspective which the past protagonists may have assumed and anticipated for the future,
3. our own horizon of perception and value, which we can and should not invalidate in relation to the actions and sufferings of people in the past, from our different times, but which we can and should not override, and
4. possible future considerations not only of our own present, but also of that past we have turned to – then addressed under new circumstances.

What the people in some near or distant future really will think of us, how they will interpret and judge our present action and thinking, is, of course, inaccessible to us. But we should take into account the fact that there will be future perspectives onto us – even in our historical thinking, which is not only about determining our own possibilities but also about the possible effects and criteria we will be considered with.

Historical consciousness, then, should no longer be conceptualized by interlinking three constitutive elements, like in Jeismann's formula, but rather five: (1) perception of the past, (2) recognition of past expectations for the future(s), (3) perception of the present, (4) expectations for the future and (5) recognition of future retrospectives onto the past(s).

The addition of "past futures" and "future pasts" to Jeismann's tripartite-time formula of what constitutes "historical consciousness" therefore promises to inform a more responsibility-based profiling of historical thinking. It should also be explicitly taken into account in history education – and specifically so in times and societies whose present and future actions (both small and large) can have significant consequences for posterity.

With regard to the exemplary subject of labour disputes, the consideration of the suggested dimensions can complete our historical consciousness in (a) helping us to reflect, in how far the efforts to learn about labour disputes in the past, their conditions, the instruments applied, their course and their outcomes cannot only orientate us with regard to assessing our own chances of improving social conditions (or of fencing of unjust aspirations, for that matter) – they can also help us reflect on the question in how far the results of labour disputes and strikes should be upheld not only because they represent current living standards, but also because they represent what our forefathers did not only strive for in their own interest but also with regard to posterity. Even though we should not perceive them as absolute obligations, these past future perspectives can provide valuable aspects to consider. Similarly, then (b), the reflection on how our own decisions about labour disputes and their instruments may affect not only our own future options, but also those of generations past us. To reflect that whatever we do cannot be judged from the present perspective only, but will be judged upon in later times which we partake in shaping, is necessary. And lastly, (c) a combination of both perspectives will help us to face the obligation to determine whether we should sacrifice accomplishments of our forefathers, even if in our present condition they might seem obsolete.

Consequences

What, then, can be the consequence of such an augmented formula of historical consciousness for historical thinking and history education? Firstly, it may help in conceptualizing our questions to the past not only to refer to who we are today because of the past and to our possibilities of acting in the light of the past, but also to taking into account the consequences of our actions in the future and for the past of those coming after us. Coming back to the question of the Israel-Palestinian conflict referred to in the question put to students by the Swedish Textbook quoted in the introduction, it may help us take into account not only the probability and feasibility of different developments under current conditions ("what is going to happen"), but also the question of what our own stance in this question should be – and what it should have been if we were asked about it in a few decades' time.

And what is more: In this future-reflective perspective, it may direct our view not only to the immediate past of the conflict in question, but also to further examples of similar conflicts in the past which we should then analyse not only with regard to what the chances of different solutions were in those cases and under what conditions, but also what their effects had been.

And thirdly, in leading our historical inquiry not only to a past but to more complex historical development, it should also remind us to take into view not only the perspectives explicitly addressed in the initial concerns or question, but also to ask about other stakeholders. In the current example, then, the question should not be only about the Palestinian refugees' future, but about that of all people implied in the context.

To take into account future perspectives onto the extended past which includes our present as well as our immediate future in which our actions become manifest, then, could instigate efforts of narrative construction of "concepts of continuity" (cf. above)) which are not artificially cut off, but more complete in their orientating power – as long as different scenarios are considered.

As for history education, this understanding of historical consciousness might also turn out to be a prerequisite for addressing historical thinking and narrative competence (most recently van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018, p. 155) in a more complete form. If historical thinking is not only about being able to address the alterity of the past (by transgressing presentist stances) but about constructing meaningful "Zeitverlaufsvorstellungen" (see above)) in a responsible way, it also requires to address the chances of our own expectations for the future (Jeismann) to stand the test of time in form of future retrospective evaluations. For this, comparisons of past people's expectations for their future with later (including our own) retrospective evaluations will prove instructive. It is not only what past people have done and how we perceive their deeds and omissions, which will help us orientate ourselves, but also the comparison of what they expected to be remembered as with how they are indeed remembered. Several instances of such comparisons might somehow "ground" our own (and students') ideas as to what our own chances are to be seen from the future the way we would like it to be. This would complete

Thus, e. g., historical thinking (Lévesque & Clarke, 2018) requires to interpret not only the differences between past peoples' and today's norms and insights with regard to questions of societal progress (cf. e.g. the contributions in "Historical and Moral Consciousness," 2017), but also with regard to the distinction between past peoples' expectations and planning in their own view and in retrospective.

This would complete "narrative competence" (a.o. Barricelli, 2015; cf. van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018, p. 155) beyond not only as a somewhat artificial 'finger exercises' in telling stories about the past, into to meaningful questions of orientation.

And again, with regard to the example, tasks for students learning about labour disputes in the past could ask them to reflect on the impact of current decisions from future perspectives. To ask students, e.g. how they as retired seniors would tell their grandchildren about today's perspectives, might initiate such reflections.

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Endnotes

1 For an overview over the great spectrum of definitions and usages of the term cf. Thorp (2013); as well as Seixas (2015); Körber (2016, p. 444).

2 The term is not intended to stress a lack of change. Rösen also uses "concept of continuous flow of time" (Rösen (2015, [59])); German: "Zeitverlaufsvorstellung"; Rösen (1983, p. 65), and more often in a succeeding volume of the project, Rösen (1989)) as a more abstract form.

3 Original: «Ce qui se réalise dans mon histoire, n'est pas le passé défini de ce qui fut puisqu'il n'est plus, ni même le parfait de ce qui a été dans ce que je suis, mais le futur antérieur de ce que j'aurai été pour ce que je suis en train de devenir.»

4 Langlitz (2003, p. 150): "War es bei der Antizipation bis dahin primär um Bilder gegangen, die sich das Subjekt von sich machte, so trat nun eine weitere Form des Vorgriffs in den Mittelpunkt: die Antizipation von Sinn beim Sprechen. Ihr linguistisches Korrelat sollte sie in der Grammatik des Futur II, der Vorzukunft oder *futur antérieur* finden. In dieser Zeitform sah Lacan ein Charakteristikum des Unbewussten. Dessen 'präontologischer' Status bedeutet, dass ihm keine Gegenwart zukommt, dass es nicht 'ist' im Präsens, sondern, 'vermöge des symbolischen Prozesses in der Analyse, gewesen sein wird.' Seine Ontologisierung oder Verwirklichung steht also stets noch aus und wird doch immer schon vorweggenommen."

5 "Erspare ich mir die müßige Frage danach, wie wir wohl künftig sein werden, und nutze die Zukunft vielmehr als die Perspektive meiner Betrachtung der Gegenwart, dann werde ich nicht mehr fragen, wer wir sind, sondern wer wir gewesen sein werden. Nachzeitig werde ich schauen, aus der Perspektive dessen, der sich seiner Zukunft berauben will, weil sie ihn schauert, im Vorauslaufen zurückblickend, um sich so besser erkennen zu können, und zwar in den Blicken derer, die man enttäuscht haben wird. Geradezu grenzenlos haben wir ja in allen Medien der historischen Rekonstruktion durch die Augen jener blicken gelernt, die waren und gingen. Vergleichsweise selten aber versuchen wir, uns im Blick jener zu identifizieren, die kommen und an uns verzweifeln werden." Willemsen (2016, p. 24).

About the Author

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