Herbst, Ludolf: *Komplexität und Chaos. Grundzüge einer Theorie der Geschichte*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag 2004. ISBN: 3-406-49455-2; 336 S.

Rezensiert von: Chris Lorenz, Department of History, Free University Amsterdam

Theory of history is a strange domain. Although it has been declared dead or dying continuously over the last 20 years – even by some of its own practitioners – books about theory of history are published with a remarkable frequency and success. Especially the rise of postmodernism and academic feminism has created a broad interest among students of history in 'theory of history'. Its present state may be compared to the theory of fascism in the 1970's and 1980's, when many of its practitioners were lamenting about its condition while contributing continuously to it: „Endlich genug über Nationalsozialismus und Zweiten Weltkrieg?", Andreas Hillgruber asked rhetorically in 1982 – just before publishing another book on the topic. This is the good news – at least for those interested in 'theory of history'.

The bad news is that what is recently presented under the label of 'theory of history', has turned into a very 'mixed bag'. Since the bad old days of analytical philosophy are over, 'theory of history' may refer not only to epistemological and methodological reflections on history, but also to all forms of historiographical and literary analysis – not to mention the issues put on the agenda by structuralism, poststructuralism and the memory-boom. Sometimes even a material 'theory' of history is presented under the label of 'theory of history' – just like in the bad old days of 'speculative' philosophy of history – not dealing with the structure of historical *knowledge*, but with the structure of history *itself*.

Ludolf Herbst's book „Komplexität und Chaos" can best be located within this last category of 'material' theory of history, although a large part of the book is dealing with a broad range of methodological and historiographical issues (including a really dazzling number of authors, ranging from Aristotle and the *Annales* to Hayden White and Wittgenstein). So here too we have a 'mixed bag'.

Let me sketch the structure of the book while elaborating on its problems. The book consists of three parts. In part 1 Herbst gives an overview of a number of methodological issues. The object of history, the logic of question and answer, the everlasting debates about 'Verstehen' and 'Erklären', comparison and theory-formation are dealt with. My problem here is that his chapters are not concrete enough in order to function as introductions and that they are not elaborated enough in order to serve as original contributions.

Moreover, quite a few of Herbst's statements on these topics are highly contentious, for instance when he argues that the object of history does not consist of the „menschliche Lebenswelt" – because it is no longer there –, but of the sources (p. 34). Nor do I agree with him that the historian is incapable of 'understanding' the structured „Lebenswelten" in the past because they are no longer there, and therefore should be 'constituted' by him first (p. 34, p. 39). This is plain old idealism. When Herbst states: „Der eigentliche Gegenstand des Historikers ist daher die Gesellschaft, in der er lebt" (p. 42), this statement definitely indicates that his argument has derailed somewhere.

Another serious problem is Herbst's analysis of 'theory'. His point of departure is actually question begging, because he introduces the 'premise' that „Theorieanwendung und Theoriebildung" are not only 'useful' for historians, but also 'inevitable' (p. 100). Instead of a 'premise' I would have expected an argument, and not only because Herbst's own 'theory' of complexity and chaos is no 'theory' according to his own definition. The situation is even worse: although he states that theory should be 'a logical system of statements and concepts capable of explaining and predicting' (p. 102), I have not been able to detect *one* 'theoretical' explanation nor *one* 'theoretical' prediction of *any* historical fact in his book. Instead Herbst offers a large number of redescriptions of actual historical events in Luhmanian terminology, paradoxically emphasizing their actual unpredictability and contingency. For me, however, the redescription of the 'Reichskabinett'as the '*System* „Reichskabinett"' (p. 37) represents no

theoretical 'surplus value'. Nor do I need Luhmann in order to understand that sources are always 'selective' and 'reductions of complexity'.

In Part 2 Herbst goes into the issues of space and time, touching on various conceptions of historical geography. Combining „mikro-, meso- und makrotemporale Zyklen mit linearen Zeitachsen" – and these again with „makro-, meso- und mikroräumliche Systeme" (p. 140) – Herbst constructs a multidimensional „Raster" in which human action can be located. „Mit den Kategorien Raum and Zeit lässt sich eine komplexe Struktur menschlicher Umwelten konstituieren", Herbst argues – and this kind of „complexity" too accompanies the reader till the very end.

Next Herbst introduces the topic of language and conceptformation. This leads him to an overview of various conceptions of intellectual history – ranging from Koselleck and Skinner to Foucauldian discourse analysis – and to the history of mentalities and historical anthropology. This part of the book belongs to its best.

Part 3 is meant as an application of Herbst's own 'chaos theory' to the 'catastrophes' of the 20th century. Symptomatically Herbst starts without *any* help of his 'theory' in identifying Russia, Italy, Japan and Germany as the countries causing catastrophic developments in the international „Transfer-, Interaktions- und Wirkungssystem" between 1917 and 1941 (p. 206). However this may be, it becomes clear pretty soon that Herbst is basically trying to apply some of Luhmann to modern history. On almost every page we are confronted with „Systeme" with a high degree of „funktionelle Differenzierung", resulting in a wide variety of „Subsysteme" with their own functional logics and media. The different subsystems, Herbst informs us, are usually interconnected by „Rückkoppelungsprozesse" which keep each other in check. If this is done successfully, „Gleichgewichtsstrukturen" follow; if not „Chaos" and eventually catastrophe – characterized by 'instability' and 'small causes, big effects'. With Kant and the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment Herbst holds that modern (European) history is – or rather should be – basically conditioned by a „Gesetz des Gleichgewichts", conceived of as „ein System von einander in Schranken haltenden Antagonismen" (p. 22). There is nothing wrong with this 'hypothesis' – except that one can hardly claim originality for it in 2004.

The state of equilibrium, alas, has been rather rare in the first half of the 20th century, and consequently catastrophes have been rampant. In his introductory chapter Herbst already had plunged his readers into his 'catastrophic' view on 20th century history. World Wars, totalitarian dictatorships, genocides, mass terror and other very nasty phenomena are presented as the fingerprints of the 20th century. According to his 'theory' all of these catastrophes are somehow caused by deficient or absent „Rückkoppelungsprozesse", resulting in the „Entkoppelung" of subsystems – including those specialized in organizing massive violence – and a failure of reducing overall complexity. „Geht die moderne Welt daher dem Untergang entgegen, weil sie zu komplex geworden ist und weil sich Komplexität lähmend auf die Handlungsmöglichkeiten auswirkt und besonders chaosanfällig ist?", is Herbst's leading question, indicating the possibility that the 21st century might go the same fateful way as the 20th (p. 14). Explaining the catastrophes and preventing their repetition in the future is Herbst's idea of the historian's responsibility to society (pp. 18-21).

Again Herbst has some good news and some bad news. The good news is that 'liberal-kapitalistische Systeme' 'idealtypisch' can cope with complexity because they keep their positive and negative feedback mechanisms intact. The bad news is that modern complex societies remain inherently sensitive to chaotical developments and that 'totalitäre Systeme' inherently lack adequate feedback mechanisms. Therefore totalitarian systems have produced chaotic developments – see, e.g., Nazi Germany, Japan, Italy and the USSR – also because the „Variable 'Kriegsgefahr'" was not kept in check. So far for Herbsts chaos theory of 20th century history.

In the end, paradoxically, Herbst's gloomy 'theory' about modern history turns out to rest on three of Kant's optimistic Enlightenment presuppositions: 1. that 'civilized' people prefer peace over war; 2. that war is a

deviation from the 'normal' road of 'civilized' modern history; and 3. that the „ungesellige Geselligkeit" of market integration tends to promote a peaceful attitude (see pp. 20-21 and p. 258). Although I have much sympathy for this theory of the Enlightenment, I fear it is very *standortgebunden* and of little help in explaining especially the gloomy sides of modern history.

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