

Radical *verstehen* necessary

The computer revolution of the second half of the twentieth century was perhaps the major technological development that asserted an influence on the discipline of history. Almost all facets of scientific activity which historians resort to, have been affected directly in some way or another by computer technology. There are even rumours that the silicon brain can do certain things better than the historian.

For this edition of *Historia* two young Norwegian historians have given an exposition of what is being done at the University of Bergen with the aid of computer technology. The accent, as far as the computer is concerned, they declare, has clearly shifted in recent years. Currently information technology (IT) in history mainly has a bearing on the teaching of the discipline. It is however a process which is not taking place without the usual ups and downs. There are failures and accomplishments. Of importance is the fact that a constructive effort is made towards the development of critical thought.

The American philosopher, Robert Nozick, in one of his recent studies took the hermeneutic principle of *verstehen* one step further by formulating the concept of *radical verstehen*. He explains:

(W)e might call *radical verstehen*, the understanding of the behavior of organisms of another species or with whom we have *no* biological links since they evolved on another planet.¹

For many historians the computer is still a foreign 'organism'. It belongs to a class of things with which the historian as a civilized lover of old world things, can hardly have a good relationship. Historians, as practitioners of a discipline which wants to keep alive memories of things gone by, may be justified in declaring that things are at present just happening a little too fast. Still, it is exciting to think that with the help of the computer new worlds can be opened up for future historians.

R. NOZICK, *Socratic puzzles* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997), p. 124.

Historians owe it to their discipline to use the computer more extensively. It is after all more than a mere mechanism aimed at replacing the old trustworthy typewriter.

At last!

By the time the next edition of *Historia* appears we shall, according to some chronologists, be able to lay claim to the fact that humanity (particularly that segment in support of the Western European classifications of time) is shifting into a new millennium.

There is little doubt that the millennium which has just passed by – and is the first of which note has been taken on such a global scale – was an eventful one.

The good news is: with so much happening, there will at least be enough room for comprehensive hermeneutic labour to keep historians occupied for some time to come.

The less uplifting news is: the rate at which memorable events/changes have been taking place will not necessarily slow down in future.