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# Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future

Berber Bevernage · Chris Lorenz

## ABSTRACT

This article sketches some of the recent evolutions in the study historical time. It proposes three issues that up to now have not received a lot of attention, but in our view deserve to be put on the research agenda. Three questions seem especially pertinent and urgent. First there is the question of how cultures in general and historians in particular distinguish 'past' from 'present' and 'future'. We have a closer look at three historians as examples. Secondly, there is the question concerning the 'performative' character of temporal distinctions. Usually 'the past' is somehow supposed to 'break off' from 'the present' by itself, by its growing temporal 'weight' or distance – also in most philosophy of history. The article analyzes the distinguishing of the three temporal modes as a form of social action and proposes to regard the drawing of lines between the present and the past as a form of disciplinary 'border patrol' (Joan Scott). The third question concerns the political nature of the borders that separate these temporal dimensions. Following among others François Hartog we argue that time is not the entirely neutral medium that it is often believed to be, but that it is up to a certain degree, inherently ethical and political.

For three centuries maybe the objectification of the past has made of time the unreflected category of a discipline that never ceases to use it as an instrument of classification.<sup>1</sup>

Michel de Certeau

For well over a century, several old universes have been thrown into ash heaps only to be rescued therefrom by members of the next generation who find the action to have been premature – it should have been postponed until their own arrival on the scene.<sup>2</sup>

Elisabeth Eisenstein

The past is never dead. It's not even past.<sup>3</sup>

William Faulkner

<sup>1</sup> M. de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 216.

<sup>2</sup> E. Eisenstein, "Clio and Chronos. An Essay on the Making and Breaking of History-Book Time", *History and Theory*, 6 (1966): 36-65, 60.

<sup>3</sup> W. Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 92.

Die Zeit ist ein Tümpel, in dem die Vergangenheit in Blasen nach oben steigt.<sup>4</sup>

Christoph Ransmayr

IN 1916, German philosopher and sociologist, Georg Simmel, opened his essay *Das Problem der historischen Zeit* by listing some fundamental questions about the nature of historical time.<sup>5</sup> Stressing the need for further reflection, he stated that “[these] questions have not yet been answered with the clarity that is desirable, nor even with the clarity that is possible.” Today, almost a century later, Simmel’s words seem to us as valid and ‘timely’ as when they were first committed to paper.

Historians have long acknowledged that time is essential to historiography. In his *Apologie pour l’histoire* Marc Bloch famously called history “the science of men in time”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Jacques Le Goff labels time the “fundamental material” of historians, and Jules Michelet once described the relation between time and history with the words “l’histoire, c’est le temps”.<sup>7</sup> Many historians have also recognised the importance of the distinction between different temporal scales and rhythms – think of Fernand Braudel and Reinhart Koselleck for example. Surprisingly, however, very few have investigated the subject of historical time in depth.<sup>8</sup> Symptomatically in Aviezer Tucker’s recent *Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (2009) time is not dealt with as a topic – it is even lacking in the index.<sup>9</sup>

At least this was the case until recently. In the last couple of years a number of

<sup>4</sup> C. Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005), 158.

<sup>5</sup> G. Simmel, *Essays on Interpretation in Social Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1997), 52.

<sup>7</sup> J. Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 24. J. Michelet, cited in A. Cook, *History/Writing: The Theory and Practice of History in Antiquity and in Modern Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>8</sup> As Peter Burke remarks, the notion of the future was placed on the historian’s agenda only relatively recently, **when it was pioneered by Reinhart Koselleck in the later twentieth century.** P. Burke, “Reflections on the Cultural History of Time”, *Viator*, XXXV (2004): 617–626, 620. There are of course important exceptions to the general absence of reflections on historical time. See e. g., R. G. Collingwood, “Some Perplexities about Time: With an Attempted Solution”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XXVI (1925–26): 135–150; W. von Leyden, “History and the Concept of Relative Time”, *History and Theory*, II, 3 (1963): 263–285; S. Kracauer, “Time and History”, *History and Theory*, VI (1966): 65–78; P. Vilar, “Histoire marxiste, histoire en construction. Essai de dialogue avec Althusser”, *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, XXVI–II, 1 (1973): 165–198; R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); J. R. Hall, “The Time of History and the History of Times”, *History and Theory*, XIX, 2 (1980): 113–131; K. Pomian, *L’ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); N. Rotenstreich, *Time and Meaning in History* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987); D. J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1985); D. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); E. D. Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); J. Chesneaux, *Habiter le temps: Passé, présent, futur: esquisse d’un dialogue politique* (Paris: Bayard, 1996); L. Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999); J. Leduc, *Les Historiens et le Temps, Conceptions, problématiques, écritures* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); J. Rüsen, *Zerbrechende Zeit. Über den Sinn der Geschichte* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2001); *Daedalus* (theme issue on time, 2003); *Time and History*, eds. F. Stadler, M. Stöltzner (Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. A. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009). Even in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, edited by O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–1997), time is missing as an entry.

historians and philosophers have addressed the problem of historical time in an increasingly sophisticated way. Following in the footsteps of Koselleck, several historians – in particular Lucian Hölscher, François Hartog, and Peter Fritzsche<sup>10</sup> – have started historicising time-conceptions previously taken for granted. In the philosophy of history, the relationship between past and present recently moved centre stage in debates about ‘presence’, ‘distance’, ‘trauma’, ‘historical experience’, etc.<sup>11</sup> Independently, postcolonial theorists and anthropologists have added momentum to the growing interest in time by deconstructing the ‘time of history’ as specifically ‘Western’ time.<sup>12</sup>

In this article we want to sketch some of the recent evolutions in the study of historical time and propose some issues that we feel are highly relevant and that have not yet received the attention they deserve.

Three issues seem especially pertinent and urgent. First there is the question that is very simple but all too often bypassed: namely that of how cultures in general and historians in particular distinguish ‘past’ from ‘present’ and ‘future’ and how they construct/articulate the interrelationships between these temporal dimensions. Although since the birth of modernity history presupposes the existence of ‘the past’ as its object, ‘the past’ and the nature of the borders that separate ‘the past’, ‘the present’, and ‘the future’ until very recently have attracted little reflection within the discipline of history. Ironically, historians and philosophers of history can hardly claim to have substantial knowledge of how ‘present’ social and cultural phenomena turn into (or come to be perceived/recognised as) past phenomena. The ‘omission’ of this subject of research is remarkable because cultures and societies have fixed, and still do fix, the boundaries between past, present and future in quite different ways. Moreover these differences also vary depending on the context in which this distinction is made. In the modern West, for instance, legal time functions differently from historical time and both are different from religious time.<sup>13</sup>

It has been argued that cultures also have different dominant orientations in time. ‘Traditional’ cultures are generally supposed to be characterised by a dominant (political, ethical, cultural, etc.) orientation to the past, while ‘modern’ cultures characteristically have a dominant future-orientation.<sup>14</sup> ‘Postmodern’ cultures, however, are

<sup>10</sup> Hölscher, *Entdeckung der Zukunft*; F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003); P. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> E. Runia, “Presence”, *History and Theory*, XLV, 1 (2006): 1-20; Forum on “Presence”, *History and Theory*, XLV, 3, 2006): 305-375; “Historical Distance: Reflections on a Metaphor”, theme issue of *History and Theory*, L, 4 (2011); “Holocaust und Trauma: Kritische Perspektiven zur Entstehung und Wirkung eines Paradigmas”, *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, XXXIX (2011).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); A. Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles”, *History and Theory*, XXXIV, 2 (1995): 44-66.

<sup>13</sup> The difference between historical time and religious time has been addressed in Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 40-42, and in W. Gallois, *Time, Religion and History* (London: Longman, 2007). The focus on ‘legal time’ is central in criticisms on legal positivism. See especially D. Cornell, “Time, Deconstruction, and the Challenge to Legal Positivism: The Call for Judicial Responsibility”, *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 2 (1990): 267-297.

<sup>14</sup> For a classical discussion of the past-orientation of ‘traditional’ cultures, see M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001 (1949)).

supposedly characterised by a dominant orientation towards the present. Yet, how these temporal orientations have changed – and whether they simply succeed each other or coexist – has not been analysed in depth. It is symptomatic that François Hartog's thesis that Western thinking about history is characterised by a succession of three 'regimes of historicity' – from a past-orientation until the French Revolution, to a future-orientation until the 1980s, and then a present-orientation in the years since – has hardly been empirically tested.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the questions about the unity, the dominance, the spatial extensions, the transfers and the transformations of 'time regimes' (are there no competing or overlapping 'sub-regimes'?) are badly in need of further conceptual and empirical analysis.

Secondly, scholars of historical time generally pay too little attention to the 'performative' character of temporal distinctions. Usually 'the past' is somehow supposed to 'break off' from 'the present' on its own, by its growing temporal distance or increasing 'weight' – like an icicle. Although few probably would hold that temporal distinctions are directly and unambiguously 'given', even fewer have paid attention to the ways in which the distinguishing of the three temporal modes can be analysed as a form of social action connected to specific social actors.

The question of the historian as (social or political) actor has recently figured prominently in the debate on so-called 'commissioned history' as it manifests itself in, for example, the work of government-appointed historical commissions and truth commissions. Yet the issue in this case is of a more general and fundamental nature. It belongs to those characteristics of 'doing history' that have traditionally been repressed.

Even when all appearances are against them, professional historians traditionally claim to occupy (or to strive after) the *position of the distant, impartial observer* and *not* the position of the *acting participant*. The notion of an ever increasing temporal 'distance' as automatically breaking up past and present has been of central importance for safeguarding this distinction between the 'involved' actor and the 'impartial' observer.<sup>16</sup>

The American historian Elazar Barkan recently addressed this problem when he argued in favour of an 'engaged' historiography in the service of 'historical reconciliation'.<sup>17</sup> The problem with pleas for engaged history is that participation in 'historical reconciliation' smacks of 'activism', 'partisanship' and 'presentism', which professional historians usually regard as deadly sins. Yet according to Barkan, 'this is all beginning to change', because historians are beginning to understand "that the construction of history continuously shapes our world, and therefore has to be treated as an explicit, directly political activity, operating within specific scientific methodological and rhetorical rules".<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*.

<sup>16</sup> The stress on the importance of temporal distance was especially prominent in debates on the emerging field of contemporary history. See, for example, G. Ritter, "Scientific History, Contemporary History, and Political Science", *History and Theory*, I, 3 (1961): 261-279. Also see R. Graf and K. C. Priemel, "Zeitschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften. Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin", *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, LIX, 4 (2011): 1-30, and K. K. Patel, "Zeitgeschichte im digitalen Zeitalter: Neue und alte Herausforderungen", *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, LIX, 3 (2011): 331-351.

<sup>17</sup> See Forum Truth and Reconciliation in History, *American Historical Review*, CXIV, 4 (2009): 899-913.

<sup>18</sup> Forum Truth and Reconciliation in History: 907.



Lucian Hölscher recently pointed to the same ‘blind spot’ concerning the role of historians as actors in present-day politics and attributed it directly to a blindness for the future dimension of the past. Hölscher contends that historians have to free themselves from the traditional ‘prejudices’ that professional history is autonomous from society and politics and that history “is a pure ‘observing’ discipline, that is not simultaneously directed at action”.<sup>19</sup> He thus makes clear his view that the idea that professional history stands in a distanced (observer’s) position vis-à-vis politics is a misconception. On closer analysis the professional historian’s concern for the past simultaneously implies a concern for the future.

A *third* issue, which is directly connected to the previous one, concerns the *political* nature of the borders that separate these temporal dimensions. François Hartog has rightly argued that terms such as ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ are invariably invested with different values in different regimes of historicity.<sup>20</sup> When taken to its logical conclusions this observation suggests that historians must ask whether historical time is a neutral medium or whether it is in fact inherently ethical and political.

Ulrich Raulff is one of the few historians who have pointed out the close relationship between the political allegiance of historians and the use of periodization in historical writing. Raulff analyses the preference of the *Annales* historians for the *longue durée*<sup>21</sup> and traces the origins of this preference far back into the nineteenth century. He argues that both conservative and progressive thinkers who, for different reasons, abhorred specific political events in the past – such as the French Revolution in conservative thinking and the Restoration in Marxist thinking or a lost war in nationalist thought – used periodization for political ends. According to Raulff, the preference for long-term approaches is based on a *politically motivated* rejection of certain events. These events may be at a long or at a close ‘distance’ from the historian in a chronological sense. In Braudel’s case, his political rejection was of the sudden fall of France in the 1940s. He wrote his *Méditerranée* as a prisoner of war, and the *longue durée* enabled him to discount both the French defeat and the later collaboration of Vichy-France as merely ‘ephemeral’ events in history. Thus the choice historians make when they focus on either ‘events’ or ‘structures’ is “not just a choice between two modes of temporalization, but also a choice that has aesthetic, ethical and political consequences”.<sup>22</sup>

Very recently Frank Bösch came to similar conclusions in a short reflection on the influence of break-ups and caesurae on periodization in contemporary history.<sup>23</sup> He criticized the tendency to regard only (national) political events as borderlines of periodization and argued that longer lasting (transnational) ‘silent revolutions’ – such as the oil crisis of 1973 and the economic crisis of 1979 – may have been experienced

<sup>19</sup> L. Hölscher, *Semantik der Leere. Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 146.

<sup>20</sup> Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*.

<sup>21</sup> U. Raulff, *Der unsichtbare Augenblick: Zeitkonzepte in der Geschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Raulff, *Der unsichtbare Augenblick*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> F. Bösch, “Umbrüche in die Gegenwart: Globale Ereignisse und Krisenreaktionen um 1979”, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Ausgabe, 2012, 9, <<http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Boesch-1-2012>>. According to Goshler and Graf, the very concept of contemporary history is based on the experience of unexpected ruptures in time and the need to interpret the present in the light of these ruptures. See C. Goshler-R. Graf, *Europäische Zeitgeschichte seit 1945* (Berlin: Akademie, 2010), 15-16.

as more important by contemporaries. Therefore claims about 'breaking events' and corresponding periods often also involve political aspects. Because of the plurality of possible points of view and their implied caesura, Bösch argues in favour of Geoffrey Barraclough's definition of contemporary history as a problem-oriented – and thus *not* period-oriented – discipline. Which period is relevant for the contemporary historian depends only on the particular present-day problem she is trying to clarify.<sup>24</sup>

Raulff and Bösch provide us with good reasons to ask whether historians too engage in a 'politics of time', as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian and the philosopher Peter Osborne have held to be the case in their respective disciplines.<sup>25</sup> To us this indeed is a rhetorical question, and we believe it is about time to start scrutinising how these politics of historical time function in practice.

As a first step toward such an analysis of the performative 'break-up' of time, we will focus on the way historical time has traditionally been related to modernism and progress. We contend that this connection has recently been questioned – partially under the influence of the so-called 'memory boom' and the development of new ways of dealing with the legacy of historical injustices.

Secondly, we observe that although many historians have noticed these developments, only few have developed new conceptualisations of historical time. Even though the traditional notion of (linear) time has been heavily criticized in the decades since Einstein's relativity theories, the time-concepts of historians as well as philosophers of history generally still are based on an absolute, homogeneous, and empty time. Not accidentally this is the notion of time presupposed by the 'imagined community' of 'the nation', as Benedict Anderson famously has suggested.<sup>26</sup> There are, however, some important exceptions – thinkers who *did* theorise the 'historical relativity' of time. We briefly discuss the cases of Koselleck, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Hölscher.

Next, in the third section of the article, we demonstrate how some historians and philosophers of history have reacted ambiguously and defensively or even with outright hostility to the new forms of historical consciousness and the questioning of classical notions of historical time. By discussing the work of, among others, the French historian Henry Rousso, the Dutch historian Bob de Graaff, and the German historian Martin Sabrow we argue that claims about 'proper' and 'improper' approaches to time (or about historical and a-historical time) are used to guard the borders of the discipline of academic history. These claims are used to draw a line between 'real' and 'pseudo' history and to protect the first against 'intruders' such as memory movements and surviving contemporary witnesses alias *Zeitzeuge*. We point out that this disciplinary 'protectionism' is typically accompanied by a taboo on the very question of how to draw the borders between past, present and future. This boils down to whisking away the performative and political dimensions of historical time.

<sup>24</sup> See Forum 'The 1970s and 1980s as a Turning Point in European History?', *Journal of Modern European History*, IX, 1 (2011): 8-26.

<sup>25</sup> J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); P. Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 22-26.

In the last section, we argue that the cultural and political roots of the memory-boom increasingly call on historians and philosophers of history to elucidate the basic assumptions that underpin their notions of time. This most importantly holds for their assumptions concerning the 'past-ness' of the past and the 'present-ness' of the present. Again we discuss some exceptional thinkers – in particular Preston King – who do reflect on the basic notions of modern western historical consciousness. Their conceptual apparatus can be put to use in future analyses of how and why historians break up time in historical practice.

### I. HISTORY IN / AND CHANGING TIMES

Philosophers of history have often remarked that academic historiography fits very well with ideas of modernism and progress. Paradoxically, scientific history flourishes in an intellectual environment that stresses the constant emergence of the new and the 'supersedure' of the past by movement towards a more advanced future. Koselleck argued that modern historical consciousness came into existence toward the end of the eighteenth century, when social and technological innovations and changing beliefs about the novelty of the future created a new 'horizon of expectation' (*Erwartungshorizont*) that increasingly broke with the former 'space of experience' (*Erfahrungsraum*).<sup>27</sup> According to Koselleck, the historical and the progressive worldviews share a common origin: 'If the new time is offering something new all the time, the different past has to be discovered and recognised, that is to say, its strangeness which increases with the passing of years.'<sup>28</sup>

Koselleck pointed out that the 'discovery' of the historical world and the qualitative differentiation between past, present and future had great methodological implications for historiography. Temporal differentiation and concomitant claims about the 'otherness' of the past allowed historiography to present itself as an autonomous discipline that required methods of its own. Although the idea of the absence of the past has often been presented (usually by empiricists) as a challenge to the epistemological credentials of historiography, historians were able to use the idea of an ever-increasing temporal 'distance' to their advantage. They did so by presenting distance as an indispensable condition for attaining 'impartiality' and 'objectivity'.

Similarly, the progressivist idea that time does not bring random or directionless change, but a cumulative change directed at a more advanced future, has successfully buttressed historians' claims concerning the 'surplus value' of the historical *ex post* perspective and their related claims of epistemological superiority over the perspectives of contemporary eye-witnesses (*Zeitzeuge*).

Michel de Certeau has likewise suggested that modern historiography traditionally begins with the differentiation between present and past: it takes the 'perish-

<sup>27</sup> R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On The Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 120. The claim by Koselleck mentioned here did not remain uncontested. Niklas Luhmann, for example, argues that the development of the modern time perspective started with a reconceptualization of the present rather than the future. The 'open future', according to him, was preceded by more than a hundred years by a 'punctualization' of the present, which gave rise to an experience of instantaneous change. N. Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 273-274.

able' (*le périssable*) as its object and progress as its axiom.<sup>29</sup> If many feel discomfited by the idea of living in a world in which "all that is solid melts into air" (Karl Marx) and in which the present is continuously 'contracting' – what Hermann Lübbe has called *Gegenwartsschrumpfung* – most historians simply presuppose this worldview as 'natural'.<sup>30</sup> The reason for their blind acceptance of this worldview may well be that precisely this (alleged) condition of an ephemeral or even contracting present has enabled historians and philosophers of history to legitimate the writing of history as a necessary form of 'compensation'.<sup>31</sup>

It is a matter of ongoing controversy when exactly the modernist and progressivist worldviews came into existence and whether they were ever dominant enough to legitimize claims about the existence of modernity in an epochal sense, or whether this historical category simply resulted from a self-legitimizing 'politics of periodization'.<sup>32</sup> Yet, whatever the periodization and the precise historical status of modernity, two observations seem beyond dispute: that the modernist and progressivist ways of conceiving of historical time and of the relation between past and present have been fundamental and constitutive for academic history writing. However, it is also clear that these very same modernist and progressivist worldviews have been severely questioned during the last few decades – 'postmodernism' is the catchword here – and that this has important implications for historiography.

This recent questioning of progressivist worldviews in academic historiography can be fruitfully examined in relation to a similar skepticism about the nature of time that has emerged in juridical contexts in the last few decades. If there is one feature that characterizes current international political and juridical dealing with the past it is the combination of an increasing distrust of progressivist notions of time and doubt about presumptions of 'temporal distance', or about an evident qualitative break between past, present and future. Many of the salient phenomena in international and domestic politics of the last decades – reparation politics, the outing of official apologies, the creation of truth commissions, historical commissions and commissions of historical reconciliation, etc. – revolve around a growing conviction that the once commonsensical idea of a past automatically distancing itself from the present is fundamentally problematical and that the belief that the past is superseded by every new present has been more a wish than an experiential reality.<sup>33</sup>

This changing experience of time is of course not confined to the spheres of ju-

<sup>29</sup> M. De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 18.

<sup>30</sup> H. Lübbe, "Die Modernität der Vergangenheitszuwendung. Zur Geschichtsphilosophie zivilisatorischer Selbsthistorisierung", *Zukunft der Geschichte. Historisches Denken an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. S. Jordan (Berlin: Trafo, 2000), 26-35, esp. 29.

<sup>31</sup> H. Lübbe, "Der Streit um die Kompensationsfunktion der Geisteswissenschaften", *Einheit der Wissenschaften. Internationales Kolloquium der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 209-233. For a fundamental critique of the 'compensation theory', see J. Rüsen, "Die Zukunft der Vergangenheit", *Zukunft der Geschichte*, ed. S. Jordan, 175-182. Rüsen emphasizes the *orientational* function of the past vis-à-vis actions aimed at the construction of the future (*Zukunftentwürfe*).

<sup>32</sup> K. Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> B. Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Typically, 'compensation theorists' such as Lübbe interpret the practice of offering apologies for historical injustices differently: as a category mistake for historians and as a ritual of repentance for politicians. See H. Lübbe, "Ich entschuldige mich". *Das neue politische Bußritual* (Berlin: Siedler, 2001).

risdiction and politics: the challenging of classical historicist conceptualizations of temporal distance is a central feature of the so called ‘memory boom’<sup>34</sup> – that again is related to the growing recognition of universal human rights and of historical injustices<sup>35</sup> – and of the growing influence of memorial movements.<sup>36</sup> “Since roughly the end of the Cold War,” John Torpey claims, “the distance that normally separates us from the past has been strongly challenged in favour of an insistence that the past is constantly, urgently present as part of our everyday experience.”<sup>37</sup> According to Torpey this development directly relates to a ‘collapse of the future’, or a growing inability to create progressive political visions, or as the assumption that “the road to the future runs through the disasters of the past.”<sup>38</sup> As he puts it, “When the future collapses, the past rushes in.”<sup>39</sup>

## II. HISTORICIZING HISTORICAL TIME

Many academic historians have clearly sensed the trend towards a questioning of the notions of historical distance and of the break between past and present. A mere look at the frequency of expressions such as ‘present pasts’<sup>40</sup>, ‘everlasting pasts’,<sup>41</sup> ‘pasts that do not pass’,<sup>42</sup> ‘unexpiated pasts’<sup>43</sup> and ‘eternal presents’<sup>44</sup> in recent academic works gives an indication of this growing preoccupation with the ontological status of the past and the relation between past and present. The enigmatic and paradoxical wording of some of these expressions reveals, moreover, the puzzlement that issues of time and temporal breaks create.

Yet puzzlement about the ontological status of time of course goes further back than the twentieth century, at least as far back as Ancient Greece, and it is still with us today. In 2008, Lynn Hunt could still begin her book *Measuring Time, Making History* by quoting the two fundamental questions about time that Aristotle asks in his *Physics*: “First, does it belong to the class of things that exist or to that of things that do not exist? Then secondly, what is its nature?”<sup>45</sup> Many historians probably would think that Hunt’s question – ‘Is time historical?’ – is a weird one, because – as we saw earlier – they simply *identify* history with time or with temporal change and take it for granted that time is somehow ‘real’.

<sup>34</sup> Expression from J. Winter, “The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the ‘Memory Boom’ in Contemporary Historical Studies”, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, XXVII, 3 (2000): 69-92.

<sup>35</sup> See J. K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 121-139.

<sup>36</sup> Another important challenge to the classical notion of historical distance, according to Bain Attwood, has come from oral history, because it stresses the entanglement of ‘then’ and ‘now’ and “because its very practice brings the historians into closer proximity with the past”. B. Attwood, “In the Age of Testimony: the Stolen Generations Narrative, ‘Distance’, and Public History”, *Public Culture*, XX, 1 (2007): 75-95, 80. For the rise and fall of the *Zeitzeugen* in German history, see W. Kansteiner, “Dabei gewesen sein ist alles”, *Die Zeit*, 29 Dezember 2011, 21.

<sup>37</sup> J. Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Torpey, *Making Whole*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Torpey, *Making Whole*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> E. Conan-H. Rousso, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> L. Huyse, *All Things Pass Except the Past* (Kessel-Lo: Van Halewyck, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> W. Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>44</sup> M. Ignatieff, “Articles of Faith”, *Index on Censorship*, V (1996): 110-122.

<sup>45</sup> L. Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 4.



Most historians seem to have assumed that time is what calendars and clocks suggest it is: 1. that time is homogeneous – meaning every second, every minute and every day is identical; 2. that time is discrete – meaning every moment in time can be conceived of as a point on a straight line; 3. that time is therefore linear; and 4. that time is directional – meaning that it flows without interruption from the future, through the present to the past; 5. that time is absolute – meaning that time is not relative to space or to the person who is measuring it.

Stephen Hawking in his *A Brief History of Time* characterized absolute time as follows: “Both Aristotle and Newton believed in absolute time. That is, they believed that one could unambiguously measure the interval of time between two events and that this time would be the same whoever measured it, provided they used a good clock. Time was completely separated from and independent of space. This is what most people would take to be the common sense view”<sup>46</sup> – and this also holds for historians.<sup>47</sup>

Since Einstein’s theory of general relativity physicists know that this presupposition of an absolute time is erroneous, because time is relative to the spatial position of the observer. Since Einstein, physicists also know that time is not independent of space. What Newton did for space – proving against Aristotle that all spatial movement is relative to the observer’s position and that therefore there are no absolute positions in space – Einstein did for time – proving against Newton that all temporal movement is relative to the observer’s position. Relativity theory, however, has not yet prompted many historians to rethink their conception of absolute time.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, since the path breaking work of Koselleck in the 1970s, some important insight into the *historical* relativity of historical time has developed. Koselleck argued that the modern notion of historical time only originated in the second half of the eighteenth century, because it was directly connected to the modern notion of history as an objective force and unified process – with, in his phrasing, *Geschichte* as a *Kollektivsingular*.

Since the end of the twentieth century, modern historical time has also been relativized by postcolonial theorists. They criticized this time conception as being fundamentally calibrated to Western history – in its periodization, for instance – and as being inherently teleological, positing the West as the implicit historical destiny of the rest of the world. This implicit teleology is, according to postcolonial critique, not only presupposed by all brands of modernization and globalization theory, including Marxist versions, but by the western ‘historicist’ conception of history as such.<sup>49</sup> Thus, what is happening in the modern Western conception of time and his-

<sup>46</sup> S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 18.

<sup>47</sup> In Le Poidevin’s words most people – including historians – are ‘objectivists’, meaning that they assume that time is somehow real and not an entity that does not exist independent from what clocks measure by some standard. The latter position is taken by so-called conventionalists. See R. Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-8.

<sup>48</sup> This question of the possibility of a ‘post-Newtonian’ historical time is interestingly raised in Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past*.

<sup>49</sup> See for the inherent teleology of national history writing, C. Lorenz, “Unstuck in Time. Or: The Sudden Presence of the Past”, *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, eds. K. Tilmans, F. van Vree, J. Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 67-105, esp. 71-81. See for the argument that globalization theories are a branch of modernization theory, F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 91-113.

tory, according to theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, is the ‘spatialization of time’, meaning: the implicit connecting of space and time by dividing the world in regions that are ahead in time and regions that lag behind, waiting to ‘catch up’.<sup>50</sup> So how historians measure time is apparently dependent on where they are located in space. With a bit of imagination one could regard this ‘spatialization of time’ as a delayed reception of Einstein’s relativity theory in history.

However this may be, it is Koselleck’s student Hölscher who has taken the historization of time a step further by pointing out that the abstract and empty time and space that historians have taken for granted, actually did not exist before the modern era.<sup>51</sup> Notions of empty space and of empty time developed slowly, between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. For people living in the Middle Ages, events and things had concrete positions *in* time and *in* space, but they did not have a *concept* of empty, abstract time and space *as such*. In other words: things and events had temporal and spatial *aspects*, but time and space did not exist *as realities*. Space and time referred to adjectives, not to substantives.

For Christianity, time was basically biblical time, meaning that it had a clear beginning (God’s creation of the Earth) and a fixed end (Judgment Day). Time was basically ‘filled in’ by the Creation plan of God. There was no time *before*, nor any *after*. Therefore the modern notion of an infinite history, as expressed in our calendar, which extends forwards and backwards *ad infinitum*, cannot be explained as a secularized version of the Christian idea of history, as both Hans Blumenberg and Hannah Arendt have argued against Karl Löwith.<sup>52</sup>

### III. HISTORY, MEMORY AND TIME

The reactions of historians to the problematization of time have been ambivalent. Some have taken the changing and alternative visions of time underlying reparations politics and the ‘memory boom’ as a welcome opportunity to critically rethink classical notions of historical time. More often, however, historians have focused precisely on allegedly ‘non-historical’ or ‘deviant’ approaches to time in order to fence off their discipline vis-à-vis memory or reparation politics and to support its claims to “hegemony in the closed space of retrospection”.<sup>53</sup> It is remarkable how often historians are claiming different, ‘improper’, temporalities as an implicit or explicit argument for the ‘objectification’ of memory and its presentation as ‘mythical’ or ‘pathological’ – or at least as not providing a viable alternative to ‘real’ history.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> However see Frederick Cooper’s critique of Chakrabarty’s ‘homogenization’ of ‘the West’ in his *Colonialism in Question*, xxx. <sup>51</sup> Hölscher, *Semantik der Leere*, 13–33.

<sup>52</sup> H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966); H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 2006), esp. 68.

<sup>53</sup> P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 458.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Broszat’s remark about the supposedly ‘mythical’ character of the – ex post – centrality of the Holocaust in ‘Jewish’ history writing on Nazi-Germany as opposed to the supposedly ‘distant’, ‘scientific’ character of ‘German’ academic history writing induced Saul Friedländer to compose his *opus magnum*: *Nazi-Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) in which linear time is supplanted by non-linear, ‘modernist’ time in a pathbreaking way, as Wulf Kansteiner has argued. See W. Kansteiner, “Success, Truth, and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer 35 years after the Publication of *Metahistory*”, *History & Theory*, XLVII, 2 (2009): 25–53. This ten-

Even an unconventional historian like Hayden White, for example, seems to pay tribute to traditional temporal divisions by subscribing to Michael Oakshott's distinction between the "historical" and the "practical" past.<sup>55</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel, too, rejects theories that posit a reciprocal relation between history and memory by claiming that the "differing temporal structures" of history and memory "prohibit" their "conflation". Memory can never "do the 'work' of history" or "perform historically" because "it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography." Indeed Spiegel writes: "The very postulate of modern historiography is the disappearance of the past from the present."<sup>56</sup>

Similar claims about the proper conceptualization of historical time and about the relation between past and present have figured prominently in Henry Rousso's arguments against the judicialization of history and in his refusal to function as an expert witness in the French trial against Maurice Papon. Rousso's refusal to appear in the courtroom was based, among other considerations, on his conviction that historians have to improve the "understanding of the distance that separates [past and present]"<sup>57</sup> or on the slightly but markedly different conviction that a good historian "puts the past at a distance". Rousso, however, believed that the attempts at retrospective justice in France were influenced by a politics of memory or even a 'religion of memory' that 'abolishes distance' and 'ignores the hierarchies of time'. The valorisation of memory obstructs "a real apprenticeship of the past, of duration, of the passage of time."<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, "otherness is the very reason that historians study recent or even current periods. The historical project consists precisely in describing, explaining, and situating alterity, in putting it at a distance."<sup>59</sup> The historians' craft, according to Rousso, therefore, offers a "liberating type of thinking, because it rejects the idea that people or societies are conditioned or determined by their past without any possibility of escaping it."<sup>60</sup> Historians must resist the role of "agitators of memory" and the growing societal "obsession" with memory. They must do so by allowing what many want to avoid: "the selection of what must remain or disappear to occur spontaneously".<sup>61</sup>

Similar claims about the task of historians are made by Dutch historian Bob de Graaff in a very personal, animate but also highly prescriptive tract on the relation of

dependency to stress the particularity of 'historical time' in order to institutionally defend professional history, of course not new. See T. Lou  , "Du pr  sent au pass  : le temps des historiens", *Temporalit  s: Revue de sciences sociales et humaines*, VIII (2008). <http://temporalites.revues.org/60>.

<sup>55</sup> H. White, "The public relevance of historical studies: A reply to Dirk Moses", *History and Theory*, XLIV, 3 (2005): 333-338. Typically time hardly plays any role in his *Metahistory*. Also see H. White, "The practical past", *Historien*, 10 (2010): 10-19. Frank Ankersmit has argued that time does not constitute a proper object for the (narrative) philosophy of history: because it rather plays a *negative* role in the writing of history than a *positive* one. See F. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012), 30. Oakshott was clear about the temporal status of the 'practical past', which according to him was not 'significantly past' at all. M. Oakshott, *On History and other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 39.

<sup>56</sup> G. M. Spiegel, "Memory and history: Liturgical time and historical time", *History and Theory*, XLI, 4 (2002): 149-162.

<sup>57</sup> H. Rousso, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>58</sup> Rousso, *The Haunting Past*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Rousso, *The Haunting Past*, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Rousso, *The Haunting Past*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Rousso, *The Haunting Past*, 3.



the historian to (genocidal) victimhood – a text visibly influenced by his experiences as a member of the research team that was commissioned by the Dutch government to scrutinize the Srebrenica massacre. Again the argument focuses on proper and improper understandings of (historical) time. Victims or survivors, de Graaff claims, often live in an ‘extratemporality’,<sup>62</sup> or in a ‘synchronic’ rather than ‘diachronic’ and ‘chronological’ time. For them the ‘past remains present’, to them it seems as if atrocities ‘only happened yesterday or even today’.<sup>63</sup> In this regard De Graaff follows Michael Ignatieff, who held that ‘victim time’ is ‘simultaneous’ and ‘not linear’.<sup>64</sup> Of course the historian recognizes the fact that the past can be ‘called up’ again, but in contrast to the survivor, he does this voluntarily. Moreover, he “registers” that facts of the past are “bygone”, “definitely lost” or have “come to a downfall”.<sup>65</sup> In reality, de Graaff claims: “Victimhood is historically determined. It comes about in a particular period. It has a beginning, but it also has an end.” In this context it is the task of historians “to place events, including genocide, in their time, literally historicizing them.”<sup>66</sup> The historian has to do this by trying to “determine the individual character of particular periods/epochs and by that demarcate one period vis-à-vis the other”. To cite de Graaff once again: “[The historian] brings the past to life or keeps it alive *and* kills it by letting the past become past. With that he not only creates a past but he also offers a certain autonomy to the present.”<sup>67</sup> ‘Historization’ in this sense of “closing an epoch by recognizing its entirely individual character’ is not only a professional duty of historians. There also is a social justification to ‘draw a line under victimhood.’” De Graaff therefore concurs with the literary author Hellema: “It became about time to put the past in its place.”<sup>68</sup>

As the above examples illustrate, one could metaphorically describe historians’ recent approaches to their profession as involving a kind of ‘border patrol’<sup>69</sup> of the relation between past and present. Yet the examples also show that although these historians are quite clear when declaring the need for ‘border guards’, they are much less clear when it comes to assessing what this ‘guarding’ actually consists of and how it relates to the borders it claims to patrol. Indeed, although there can be little doubt that these historians oppose an ‘open’ border policy when it comes to relating past and present, it is not clear from their arguments whether they can best be metaphorically represented as merely observers watching over borders between established ‘sovereign’ states, or as activists aggressively engaged in a repatriation policy such as the one that intends to defend the ‘fortress of Europe’ against ‘illegal’ intruders, or as implying a more straightforwardly performative setting of borders that creates new states, such as the ones that created West and East Germany or, more recently, North and South Sudan.

When it comes to relating past and present, historians increasingly seem to waver between a merely contemplative stance and a more active one. Rouso, as we have

<sup>62</sup> B. de Graaff, *Op de klippen of door de vaargeul: De omgang van de historicus met (genocidaal) slachtofferschap* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2006), 27 [Our translation].

<sup>63</sup> de Graaff, *Op de klippen*, 28.

<sup>64</sup> M. Ignatieff, “The Nightmare from which we are trying to wake up”, M. Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 166-190.

<sup>65</sup> de Graaff, *Op de klippen*, 28, 71.

<sup>66</sup> de Graaff, *Op de klippen*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> de Graaff, *Op de klippen*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Hellema, *Een andere tamboer* (1985), cited in de Graaff, *Op de klippen*, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Expression used by J. W. Scott, “Border Patrol”, *French Historical Studies*, XXI, 3 (1998): 383-397.

seen, sometimes defines the role of historians as that of ‘understanding’ the distance between past and present, while on other occasions he describes it as one of ‘distancing’ past and present. On the one hand, the historian has to allow ‘the selection of what must remain or disappear to occur spontaneously’; on the other, the historian’s liberating potential is situated in ‘putting [the past] at a distance’. Also it is far from clear what the precise status is of the ‘hierarchies of time’ that are not respected by memory.

De Graaff’s approach, despite his references to the drawing of lines, seems equally ambiguous. At first sight his thesis that it is necessary to demarcate periods by recognising their ‘entirely individual’ character seems quite unproblematic, but it is amply shown in critical theory on periodization that on a historiographical level the very notion of the individuality or particularity of periods is (at least partly) dependent on their demarcation alias their ‘periodization’ – which in its turn relates to a particular cultural, religious, gendered or ethico-political logic.<sup>70</sup> From a ‘nominalist’ perspective, it is indeed quite senseless to even speak about ‘periods’, before time is somehow periodized. Yet even from a more ‘objectivist’ or ‘realist’ perspective, it is as puzzling as it is important to know what exactly historians are doing when they are ‘letting the past become past’ and how historians can tell ‘when’ exactly ‘it is time’ to ‘put the past in its place’. When, indeed, is this *act* ‘timely’ and thus ‘legitimate’?

The German philosopher Hans Blumenberg has argued that the question of the legitimacy of breaks in time is strongly entangled with the concept of the ‘epoch’ itself.<sup>71</sup> This quandary, for Blumenberg, was especially latent in modernity’s claim to realize a radical break with tradition – a claim which, according to him, was incongruent with the reality of history ‘which can never begin entirely anew’. “The modern age,” Blumenberg argues, “was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in doing so, simultaneously created other epochs”. Due to this performative aspect, an adequate understanding of the concept of epoch cannot be reached so long as one starts from a historicist logic of ‘historiographical object definition’ – which according to Blumenberg can never transcend the longstanding dilemma of nominalism versus realism. Though Blumenberg primarily focuses on modernity (and intellectual history) his argument applies to all attempts to understand the change of epochs in ‘rational categories’.

The fact that the problems of historicist logic are still very prominent today can be illustrated by Martin Sabrow’s recent attempt to come to grips with the problem of time in contemporary history. Sabrow thoughtfully develops historicism to its logical end – without transgressing its borders, however.<sup>72</sup> Starting from the (at least in Germany) classical definition of *Zeitgeschichte* by Hans Rothfels as the ‘epoch of the contemporaries and their handling by academic history’ he observes that this definition does not ‘fit’ the current practice of contemporary historians in Germany anymore. Sabrow’s argument is the fact of ‘1945’, a ‘fact’ he describes as follows: “The end of contemporaneity [*Zeitgenossenschaft*] did not succeed in bridging the epochal caesura

<sup>70</sup> I. Veit-Brause, “Marking Time: Topoi and Analogies in Historical Periodization”, *Storia della Storiografia*, XXVII (2000): 3-10.

<sup>71</sup> H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). Hereafter cited in its English translation *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

<sup>72</sup> M. Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

of 1945 in German contemporary history, although this had been predicted just before the collapse of the Soviet dictatorship in 1989/90 and even more afterward.<sup>73</sup> Because the criterion of having experienced the ‘contemporary’ past does not hold water anymore – World War One, in Sabrow’s view, did not stop being part of ‘contemporary’ history although the last (French) war veteran died in 2008 – Sabrow proposes a new criterion based on the controversial nature and intensity of memory:

The capacity to produce social meaning of counter-narratives, based on experience and memory, distinguishes contemporary history fundamentally from other periods in history. This capacity endows contemporary history with a changing temporal position, crossing over the borders of any specific period and defining its particular unity. The time of contemporary history is rather oriented by the intensity of memory or by the public confrontation with the past as a mix of memory and knowledge.<sup>74</sup>

So again, it is allegedly *not* the historian who decides where the borders of *Zeitgeschichte* are to be drawn, because the borders according to Sabrow are somehow out there to be ‘registered’. Because the failed German revolution of 1918-1919, the Weimar Republic and Hitler’s rise to power are no longer hotly debated, they are no longer part of ‘contemporary’ history. The persecution of the Jews, the Holocaust and totalitarian rule, however, are still objects of ‘hot’ controversies and therefore, in Sabrow’s view, ‘contemporary’ – even though they are in part chronologically simultaneous with ‘Weimar’ and Hitler’s rise to power.

Sabrow therefore is obliged to draw the surprising conclusion that some parts of the history of the twentieth century belong to ‘contemporary’ history while others do not and that their chronological location is *not* the deciding criterion. Only their being part of ‘hot’ memorial controversies is decisive. *Zeitgeschichte*, according to Sabrow, is therefore fundamentally *Streitgeschichte*. As long as that is the case, the contested parts of the German twentieth century are like “remaining islands of contemporary history in a sea of progressing historization”.<sup>75</sup>

Only after having deconstructed the temporal borders of the object of *Zeitgeschichte* does Sabrow shift his attention to the constructive activities of the *Zeithistoriker*. In this respect he is less original, because he holds with the eighteenth-century German historian Johann Martin Chladenius that historians develop an organizing point of view – a *Sehepunkt* – in their reconstructions, that lends an *ex post* narrative unity to temporal diversity. This unity, according to Sabrow, is fundamentally dependent on a certain ‘closure’ in time. Therefore clear-cut ruptures or ‘break-ups’ in time – as in 1945 and in 1989 – are of crucial importance for the contemporary historian. Again, according to Sabrow, the *Zeithistoriker* does not actively ‘break up’ time; rather he ‘registers’ what is ‘out there’. Therefore Sabrow suggests that we think of *Zeitgeschichte* as:

the period or those periods that precede the latest fundamental change of the point of view and that can therefore be distinguished from the succeeding period by the presence of different political, economic and cultural societal norms.<sup>76</sup>

In the end, therefore, Sabrow, in spite of himself, is presenting a new – and temporal – definition of contemporary history, beginning with ‘totalitarian’ Nazism in the

<sup>73</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 7.

1930s and ending with the end of the Cold War in 1989 – which he apparently regards as the latest ‘objective’ break in time.<sup>77</sup>

What is also remarkable here is that after he has thrown the (linear) temporal borders of contemporary history out the front door, Sabrow reintroduces them through the backdoor – by assuming that epochs and breaks apparently are ‘out there’ and succeed each other. It is therefore only logical that Sabrow needs to introduce a new epoch and new kind of history *succeeding* ‘contemporary’ history – that is, after the last ‘objective’ break or caesura in time, the so-called ‘history of the present’ or *Gegenwartsgeschichte* – which in Germany begins in 1989. Its distinctive characteristic is that, because this part of history is not yet ‘closed’ by a recognizable ‘break’ in time, there is no point of view to orient the historian who might wish to write it. As a result, the history-writing of the present is impossible:

Without a break between experiencing and understanding, which is produced by a change in point of view, the writing of history remains a speculative activity based on shifting sands of interpretation, because its parameter and storylines can change continuously.<sup>78</sup>

No ‘objective’ break in time means, according to Sabrow, no break between the experience (*Erleben*) of the contemporary eyewitnesses – the *Zeitzeugen* – and the ex post *understanding* (*Verstehen*) of the professional historian, and thus no break between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’, that is: ‘real’ history.<sup>79</sup>

With Sabrow historicism has come full circle: the arguments he formulates against the possibility of *Gegenwartsgeschichte* are identical to the arguments historicists have traditionally advanced against the possibility of *Zeitgeschichte*.<sup>80</sup> Again we observe the clear and typical wavering between the historian’s passive ‘recognizing’ and his active ‘producing’ breaks in time.

This issue also pops up when Sabrow tries to draw a border between *Zeitgeschichte* as a discipline and the rest of the *Erinnerungskultur* in which contemporary historians participate by joining in public debates. By her participation in public historical culture, the *Zeithistoriker/in* is not only observer but also actor according to Sabrow.<sup>81</sup> He insists, however, that the public activities of the *Zeithistoriker/innen* should not be conceived as political action. His main argument in this regard seems to be that historians, in contrast to other carriers of memory culture, have a ‘method’ and a reflected relationship to time, that enables them to keep ‘distance’ and avoid ‘partisanship’ vis-à-vis the past, even when the past is very present:

Two rules of conduct in my view are extraordinarily important. The first consists in adopting a conscious partisanship in favour of a distancing historization of the past and against a partisan making present of the past. The task of the discipline of contemporary history is to

<sup>77</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Also see M. Sabrow, “Die Historikerdebatte über den Umbruch von 1989”, *Zeitgeschichte als Streitgeschichte: Grosse Kontroversen seit 1945*, eds. M. Sabrow et al. (Munich: Beck, 2003), 127. For the notions of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ history, see C. Lorenz, “Geschichte, Gegenwärtigkeit und Zeit”, *Phänomen Zeit: Dimensionen und Strukturen in Kultur und Wissenschaft*, ed. D. Goltschnigg (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2011), 127-135.

<sup>80</sup> See *Zeitgeschichte als Problem: Nationale Traditionen und Perspektiven der Forschung*, eds. A. Nützenadel-W. Schieder (Göttingen, 2004); *Zeitgeschichte heute – Stand und Perspektiven, Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, 1 (2004).

<sup>81</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 20: “Zeithistorie agiert in unserer Gegenwart notgedrungen als Beobachterin und Gestalterin zugleich”.

explain the past and not to produce a normative evaluation, and even less a public advise. The second strategic rule of conduct that would guarantee contemporary history a legitimate existence within the general culture of memory instead of in opposition to it, consists of the capacity of metahistorical self-reflection. Contrary to the other 'players' in the field of 'working with the past', contemporary history disposes of an armoury of methods that enable it to create a distance to its own activities, that makes up for a lack of temporal distance with analytical distance.<sup>82</sup>

How exactly the 'analytical' distance of the *Zeithistoriker* compensates for a lack of temporal distance is not clarified. Apparently, a good *Zeithistoriker* – in contrast to the *Zeitzeuge* and the memorialist – just *knows*.

#### IV. 'PAST-NESS' AND 'PRESENT-NESS'

The cultural and political reality of the 'memory boom' has compelled historians in search of a new professional role and theoretical legitimation for history to make explicit what previously was based more often on implicit presuppositions than on formal arguments – e. g., such notions as the past-ness of the past and the present-ness of the present. As Ulrich Raulff has convincingly demonstrated, novelists were well ahead of historians in problematising the relationship between the past and the present. On the basis of his study of fictional literature, he characterizes the twentieth century as 'the century of the present' (*Gegenwart*) in contrast to the nineteenth century, 'the century of history' (*Geschichte*). Instead of the questions about origins that dominated nineteenth-century historical reflection, the problems of presence (*Präsenz*) and actuality (*Aktualität*) have come to dominate the literature of classical modernity.<sup>83</sup>

It is remarkable that historians have rarely engaged in explicit reflection on the problem of the present and of presence, for it is clearly central to their notion of historical time and, through the logic of negation, to their notion of the past. Their failure to address the problem may partly be explained by the longstanding taboo among professional historians on the writing of contemporary history or any historiography that does not respect a certain waiting period – defined most often by the opening up of archives or the dying of *Zeitzeugen*, but sometimes defined in straightforwardly chronological terms; e. g., forty years.

So, despite the fact that they include the words 'time', 'contemporaneity' or 'present' in their very names, the breakthrough of the subdisciplines of *Zeitgeschichte*, contemporary history and *histoire du temps présent* has not led to much critical reflection on these notions. A few exceptions notwithstanding, the widespread tendency among historians is to focus on ever more recent events. This trend, which Lynn Hunt has criticized as "presentism",<sup>84</sup> has paradoxically rarely led historians to raise the question whether and in what sense their object of study can still be called 'past'.

Neither have philosophers of history reflected much on the 'meaning' of the notions 'past' and 'present'. It is significant that although philosophers of history are very fond of pointing out that the word 'history' is polysemical – referring both to

<sup>82</sup> Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte*, 20-21.

<sup>83</sup> Raulff, *Der unsichtbare Augenblick*, 10.

<sup>84</sup> L. Hunt, "Against Presentism", *Perspectives*, XL, 5 (2002) <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2002/0205/0205pre1.cfm>>.

historical events (*res gestae*) as well as to narratives about these events (*historia rerum gestarum*) – and that this is no accident but a meaningful fact, they seldom note that the same can be said about the word ‘present’, which can refer both to the (temporal) presence of an ‘instant’ or a ‘now’ as well as to the (material) presence of objects.

Again, there are exceptions. Recently Zachary S. Schiffman has offered some innovative insights in his *The Birth of the Past* based on the argument that a differentiation has to be made between the common sense idea of the past as ‘prior time’ and the historical past defined as a time ‘different from the present’.<sup>85</sup> Earlier Preston King offered a profound reflection on the different meanings that are attributed to the notions of ‘present’ and ‘past’.<sup>86</sup> King differentiates between four distinct notions of ‘present’ (and correlative notions of ‘past’), which are based on a ‘chronological’ notion of time as abstract temporal sequence on the one hand and a ‘substantive’ notion of time as a concrete sequence of events on the other. Relying on chronological time and depending on their duration, two senses of the present can be discerned: a first called the *instantaneous present* and a second called the *extended present*. Both presents are boxed in between past and future and have a merely chronological character. While the first, however, defines itself as the smallest possible and ever evaporating instant dividing past and present, the second refers to a more extended period of time (e. g., a day, a year, a century) whose limits are arbitrarily chosen but give the present some ‘body’ or temporal depth. Because of the meaninglessness and arbitrarily chronological character of these presents and corresponding pasts, historians often use a more substantive frame of reference based on criteria that are themselves not temporal.

One of these substantive notions is that of the *unfolding present*. As long as a chosen event or evolution (e. g., negotiations, a depression, a crisis, a war) is unfolding, it demarcates a ‘present’. When it is conceived of as completed, the time in which it unfolded is called ‘past’. King remarks that this is the only sense in which one can say that a particular past is ‘dead’ or ‘over and done with’. Yet, he immediately warns that any process deemed completed contains ‘sub-processes’ that are not. So, it is always very difficult to exclude any ‘actual past’ from being part of, working in or having influence on this unfolding present.

In addition to the three presents already summed up (the instantaneous, extended and unfolding), King names a fourth one which he calls the *neoteric present*. Drawing a parallel to the dialectics of fashion, he notes that we often distinguish phenomena that happen *in* the present but can be experienced as ‘ancient’, ‘conventional’ or ‘traditional’, from phenomena we view as being characteristic *of* the present, which we designate ‘novel’, ‘innovative’ or ‘modern’.

Historical periodization, on the first sight primarily depending on the extended present, according to King is primarily based on the dialectics of the neoteric present. While every notion of the present excludes its own correlative past, this does not hold for non-correlative senses of the past. The present can thus be penetrated by non-correlative pasts that in a substantive sense stay alive in the present: ‘The past is not present. But no present is entirely divorced from or uninfluenced by the past.’

<sup>85</sup> Z. S. Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>86</sup> P. King, *Thinking Past a Problem: Essays on the History of Ideas* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).



The past is not *chronologically* present. But there is no escaping the fact that much of it is *substantively* so.'

King's analysis is important because it offers an intellectual defence against arguments that posit or, as usually is the case, simply assume, the existence of a neat divide between past and present and portray the past as 'dead' or entirely different from the present. On the basis of his inquiry into the nature of past and past-ness and his critical analysis of notions of present, present-ness and contemporaneity, he is able to counter both arguments that represent history as entirely 'passeist' and arguments that represent history as entirely 'presentist'. In other words, King on the one hand rejects arguments which claim that the writing of history is solely 'about' the past, but on the other hand he also dismisses the claim that historiography is exclusively based on present perspectives or that 'all history is contemporary history'.<sup>87</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

King's sophisticated differentiation between diverse notions of past and present, on an analytical level indeed seems to 'solve' the riddles of historical time and the relation between the past and the present – and we could add: the future.<sup>88</sup> However, King does not say much about the extent to which his analytical categories can be found in the work of historians or in broader social dealings with historicity, nor does he point out the concrete (epistemological, cultural, political etc.) implications of his insights.

In this article, however, we have focused precisely on the question of these more complex 'actual' dealings with and performative creations of pasts and presents. Focusing on 'actual' pasts and presents means transcending their clear-cut analytical descriptions and looking at how they emerge in impure forms, how they are entangled and mixed up or agglutinated. On this 'actual level' one may, as Peter Burke rightly puts it, expect to encounter forms of 'contamination' and find out that "times are not hermetically sealed but contaminate one another."<sup>89</sup> It may thus be worthwhile to pay attention to the way chronological conceptualisations of time combine with and influence more substantive concepts of temporality in historical practice. It can be asked, for example, what status, exactly, should be accorded to ideas about 'short centuries' or 'long centuries', and how experiences and expectations of a *fin de siècle* "influence the way historians and historical actors 'consign' events and processes to history".<sup>90</sup> Focusing on the empirical level implies asking what we *actually* do when we talk about past, present and future and their 'borders'. We have argued that there are good reasons to include the question of the ethical and political charge of temporal demarcations in empirical investigations and analyze more closely to what extent temporal demarcations are a matter of contemplation or rather the result of performative actions. The same reasons make us question the common idea, as expressed

<sup>87</sup> B. Croce, *History: Its Theory and its Practice* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960).

<sup>88</sup> Helge Jordheim in his recent article "Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities", *History and Theory*, LI, 2 (2012): 151-171, offers an interpretation of Koselleck's theory of temporalities that points in the same direction as King.

<sup>89</sup> Burke, "Reflections on the Cultural History of Time": 625.

<sup>90</sup> Expression used by C. S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era", *The American Historical Review*, CV, 3 (2000): 807-831.

for example by Nathan Rotenstreich, that our relation to the past is one of reflection, while we relate to the future through ‘intervention’. Our analysis presented here suggests to conceive of our relation with the past as one that also involves specific types of performative ‘intervention’.<sup>91</sup>

With Michel de Certeau, it makes sense to ask whether and in how far ‘historical acts’ “transform contemporary documents into archives, or make the countryside into a museum of memorable and/or superstitious traditions”. Within the current political and cultural context it certainly seems fruitful to scrutinize de Certeau’s thesis that the ‘circumscription’ of a ‘past,’ rather than being the product of mere contemplation, involves an active ‘cutting off’ or an active creation of an opposition. This means taking seriously de Certeau’s claim that within a context of social stratification, historiography has often “defined as ‘past’ (that is, as an ensemble of alterities and of ‘resistances’ to be comprehended or rejected) whatever did not belong to the power of producing a present, whether the power is political, social, or scientific”.<sup>92</sup>

It should also be clear that we do not intend to settle any ‘border conflicts’ between past, present and future. Nor do we want to make dramatic claims like those of Elisabeth Ermarth who describes/declares “historical time as a thing of the past”.<sup>93</sup> We believe, however, that Ermarth’s deliberately ironic phrasing does raise long neglected and important questions. Indeed, we think it is about time to ask about the historicity of historical time, not just in the conventional sense of scrutinizing its (intellectual or cultural) genesis or genealogy, but also in the sense of its relation to past, future and above all to the present.

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<sup>91</sup> Rotenstreich, *Time and Meaning in History*, 21.

<sup>92</sup> de Certeau, *Heterologies*, 216. As de Certeau claims in another of his works: “Une société se donne ainsi un présent grâce à une écriture historique.” de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 141.

<sup>93</sup> Ermarth, *Sequel to History*, 25. Also see E. D. Ermarth, “Ph(r)ase Time-Chaos Theory and Postmodern Reports on Knowledge”, *Time & Society*, IV, 1 (1995): 91-110.



COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE DANTE MONOTYPE DALLA  
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