

Remembering the Historical Present

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History is always contemporary, that is to say political.

„ Antonio Gramsci

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The unbridgeable • pernicious chasmŽ of the present.

„ Georg Lukács

Ever since 9/11 there has been a swelling chorus of opinion aimed at demonstrating how the destruction of the World Trade towers has constituted an event of world historical magnitude announcing the installation of a new time marked by a boundless present. As if transported by a time machine, Americans were instantly relocated within a new temporal architecture that declared the removal of an antecedent past from the present, history from its future. The nation was forcibly induced to embark upon an unprecedented, endless war against terror, and its citizens were persuaded to accept the imperative of living a new reality in a perennial present. Remarkably,

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

I had the benefit of reading versions of this paper at a number of institutions, and I wish to record the help I received at the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the New School for Social Research, Waseda University (Tokyo), and the University of Washington. I also want to thank Kristin Ross, Carol Gluck, and Hyun Ok Park for commenting on earlier revisions of the manuscript.

Critical Inquiry 33 (Spring 2007)

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rorism, qualifying it further as an infinite war. Underlying the claims of a new temporal tectonics, shifting time plates to set the present adrift, was the presumption that a consequential eventfulness had occurred, which exceeded the framework of received forms of marking time. With this eventful divide, the present was both severed from its historical past and indefinitely deprived of a future from which it once derived expectation. But the wish to live in an endless present committed solely to waging war with an unseen and unknown enemy, a wish that would now define the coordinates of daily life (and rein in its dangerous political excess), was not only overstated by those who seized upon the immediate political opportunities supplied by the attack on the twin towers but actually misrecognized the history of the present we were all already living. If any axial event marked the turn in time it was undoubtedly the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent end of the cold war, even though this episode was the culmination of a process long in the making.

In fact, the assault on the temporal order was magnified by a course of history that had been signaled by the fall of the Wall and the disappearance of the communist idea lived by actually existing socialism and conveyed by the future of revolution.¹ Moreover, the simultaneous manifestation of multiple fundamentalisms in the aftermath has put into immediate question the status of our received forms of temporalization by upsetting the relationship between history and the tripartite division of past, present, and future. The seemingly sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall and the appearance of movements fueled by a potent mixture of modernity and archaisms have inaugurated the removal of a conception of the future, or at least its indefinite deferral, that had once been summoned to shape the experience of

1. See François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris, 2003), pp. 12...13; hereafter abbreviated.



2. During the nineteenth century and the time of great imperial expansions to Africa and Asia, the encounter between representatives personifying capital and the demands of the world market, and the local population involuntarily brought into the market's widening orbit and who stood in its way, often resulted in explosive and violent collisions. New forms then were syncretized with received practices and beliefs to contest the invader and the threat of expropriation. These "fundamentalisms" were place-specific, to be sure, exemplified by the Taipings and Boxers in China, the Jinturen in Japan, the Sepoys in India, the Mahadists in the

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4. See Daniel Ben-El-Mechaieck, *La Discordance des temps* (Paris, 1995).

5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983), p. 30. In his now celebrated account (and sympathetic defense) of nationalism, Anderson

eventually played out in a discourse on modernization during the cold war, the outline of unevenness was blurred by scientific and technological criteria. In its classic formulation by Ernst Bloch, the configuration of the non-contemporaneous contemporary signified consequential political effects associating unevenness with fascism in the Germany of the early 1930s, where, he observed, the coexistence of different times reflected the disjuncture between the new and the traditional (city and countryside) and what he described as a subjective •muted non-desire for the Now, . . . an impoverished centreŽ •spiritually• missed by contrast, Reinhart Koselleck later sought to transmute the “figure into a neutral category belonging to a scheme of •differential classification of historical sequences . . . contained in the same naturalistic chronologyŽ Both believed, for different

6. Ernst Bloch *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley, 1990), p. 108.

7. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Times*, Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 94; hereafter abbreviated.

8. Quoted in Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 82. According to Kern, both William James and Josiah Royce referred to the same phenomenon as a “specious present,” whose length or limits of expansion varies and whose “thickness varies in different circumstances.” Both, moreover, were responding to David Hume’s perception of time constituted of different segments that aggregate into longer durations (*ibid.*, p. 83).

9. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, ed. John Barnett Brough, ed. Rudolf Bernet, vol. 4 *Edmund Husserl: Collected Works* (Dordrecht, 1991),

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- p. 37, hereafter abbreviated; see Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, 10 of *Husserliana* (The Hague, 1966), p. 35, hereafter abbreviated.
10. Quoted in Krzysztof Pomian, *Ordre du temps* (Paris, 1984), p. 337.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

over, the process of rematerializing the lifeworld into everyday life had already begun in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution throughout the industrializing world of Euro-America and Japan and its colonies:^{1,2}

12. See John Robert Bishop, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (London, 2006), pp. 16...58.

13. Tosaka Jun [Tosaka Jun Zenshū [Complete Works of Tosaka Jun], ed. pub., 5 vols. (Tokyo, 1966...1979), 4:182.

14. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 2004), p. 393; hereafter abbreviated as *MH*. See Maurice Halbwachs, *Le Mémorial collectif*, ed. Gerard Namier and Marie Jaisson (Paris, 1997), pp. 97...142.

progress whose realization remains untranscendable. It is important to recognize how this temporal order leads to comparison and the "guration of the noncontemporaneous contemporary as a sign of retarded achievement exemplified as delay, arrest, and catch up. It is equally important to recall Koselleck's commitment to what he called a "naturalistic chronology" and the accompanying developmentalist narrative in which he has embedded it.

In many ways Koselleck's conception of historical practice as the distinct marker of "new time," modernity, was produced by an intense philosophical discussion throughout the "rst half of the twentieth century. Much of this discussion was driven by new scientific discoveries, theorizations of time, and the perception that modern society, constituted by a combination of capitalism and technology, was increasingly being directed by quantitative and objective forms of measurement and the regime of calendar and clock time. The major participants in this discussion, which Heidegger described as a "reckoning with time," were Bergson, who probably inaugurated it by internalizing the "ux of time and envisaging the possibility of coexisting mixed temporalities; Husserl, who explored further the internal recesses of psychological time and provided a dematerialized version of the lived everyday in an abstracted lifeworld; Simmel, who explicitly linked the new urban metropolis to the psychological interiorization of the state of time; Lukács, whose critique politicized a philosophy devoted to the ex-

15. See Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision, and Totality* (London, 1994), p. 184. According to Bull, this shift from perspective to aspect has consequently produced a pervasive antivisualism among a wide spectrum of philosophers from Locke to Rorty.

••our•modernityŽ (MHF, p. 306), which in marginalized societies like Japan (the world outside the industrial centers of Euro-America in the interwar

singular, initiated by the expansion of capital (and its proxy, the nation-state), and received special histories lived by peoples encountered along its route that brings into the immanent time of modernity the forceful contact of a history that has its own unique, internal time with countries like Japan and the colonized world outside of Euro-America. The opening up of the globe and especially the creation of a world market often brought diverse cultures into violent clash in a synchronous drama that inevitably was re-coded in a diachronic narrative upholding a chronologically uniform time ranging from barbaric to civilized and insisting on authorizing discrete comparisons. While it was in the context of this expanding world market that forms of unevenness were "first perceived," then later described as non-contemporaneous contemporaneity,¹⁷ it was undoubtedly Marx who "first called attention to the uneven development of material production and the coexistence of a dominant mode of production and surviving prior modes that often appear in •stunted form, or even travestied,Ž which thus •assign rank and in"uence to the others:Ž And it is this contest between these prior modes of production and a universalizing world history (personi"ed by the world market) appointed to unify and incorporate the plural special histories that is subsequently put into play by discussions in prewar Japan and elsewhere throughout the colonized and semicolonized worlds of the interwar period. Capital's desire to reduce this plurality to a singular space of experience undermines itself because the space already bears the mark of difference, owing to its association with the nation-state. But to say this is not to invite the possibility of an alternative modernity. As Ricoeur observed: •The paradox is great: history is proclaimed to be a world phenomenon by historian-patriotsŽ (MHF, p. 301). But what Ricoeur insists on labeling as paradox was effectively a contradiction that, it needs saying, applies equally to those persisting attempts to identify an alternative that might rid us of the invidious binary of original and copy but lose their advantage by "xing their found objects in space. Moreover, Ricoeur's paradox is hobbled by his own refusal to engage the status of historical time, which in his text is invariably reduced to the structural and spatial constraints of narrative. The time of narrative is always the present, even though narrative time is a divided chronology that structures the unfolding of a story as an accomplished and completed achievement. Like Koselleck, on whom he has written brilliantly, Ricoeur must cling closely to a singular linear time of clock and calendar that marks the course of all national narratives. In this practice, the actual encounter with time itself, things happening through

17. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft), Martin Nicolaus (1939; New York, 1973), pp. 105...6.

time, not simply in it, is avoided and resembles capitalism's own claim to timelessness as a tactic to divert the prospect of change and the risk of becoming merely a historical moment now passed.

If, as Koselleck has envisaged, history was elevated as the subject of its

comes close to resembling what Hannah Arendt once identified as an •odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time when not only the later historians but the actors and witnesses, the living themselves, become aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet. Arendt was echoing Chateaubriand's plaint that had called attention to the dilemma, as phrased by François Hartog, of living between the •impossibility of the past and the •impossibility of the future (H, p. 118). She imposed tof [(,)-:n1 58anc

19. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 1961), p. 9.

20. Ibid., p. 11.

21. See Takeuchi Yoshimi, •Asia as Method: What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi, trans. and ed. Richard Calichman (New York, 2004), pp. 149...65. Takeuchi's essay is prescient in

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time (*Jetztzeit*), as the moment "lled with explosive possibilities, the appointed moment for messianic cessation, and Franz Rosenzweig differentiated the today, which is only a footbridge toward tomorrow from an other day which is the springboard to eternity" (quoted in *IRH*, p. 122).

The presentism implicit in the modernist program proposed a progressive devaluation of the past and all that came before it to guarantee a definitive separation from the present's antecedents. Similarly, it is important to recognize in this modernist project the ideological desire to conceal and displace the very historical unevenness marking its present; at any rate, that unevenness, it was believed, would eventually be eliminated. The early decades of the century, and especially the interwar conjuncture, were crowded with manifestoes arrayed against the past (its slowness) in the name of the immediacy of art and life, often summoning the instant, the sudden, and the simultaneous to attest to the temporality of the present. Whereas these declarations reflected artistic and literary impulses, all infecting modernism itself, they nevertheless managed to match more substantial and materialized intimations associated with capital, which thinkers like Simmel had already described as portents of an endless present. There is, in any case, a good deal of evidence to authorize the image of a temporal dominant of the present already weighted with the future and the rejection of the past. Paul Valéry, despite his harsh dismissal of history, found it necessary to propose a mode of relating between past and present such that the former would no longer pretend to offer the latter lessons. Sartre, still as a novelist, acknowledged that there was only the present, and nothing other than the present. After the war, in the "first issue of *Le Temps modernes*, he advised that writing for contemporaries meant looking at the world through the optic of the future but with the eyes of "esh, with our true, perishable eyes" (quoted in *IRH*, pp. 123, 124). During the early months of the war in the Pacific, Japanese writers and scholars met to discuss the meaning of the conflict for the overcoming of the modern, Westernized present by something distinctly Japanese, while philosophers from Kyoto, at the same time, saw in the present a moment brimming over with world historical significance.

What surely appears to have occurred in this period was a fusion of future and present that, under altered historical conditions, would turn present against future and the force of its expectations to demand its eventual eviction. In spite of these intrawar announcements of a pervasive presentism, "first metabolizing the future and then severing its relationship to it, it was not until the postwar period that the issue was joined in the political world. To be sure, Claude Lévi-Strauss lamented the passing of older, traditional societies and the bankruptcy of a future assuring endless progress. Un-

doubtedly, implicit in this critique was a sentiment that advised a forgetting of the future, which merely formed the "inside of a contemporaneous Japanese recommendation of the early 1960s to forget the Enlightenment. By the 1960s this idea had become a worldwide political slogan and defined the necessary condition to return to the present, marking the progressive invasion of the future's horizon by a contemporary society committed to greater consumption and the global extension of the commodity relation. But, before the future, by which I am referring to anticipation, was vacated from the present, it was necessary to complete the itinerary of narrative expectation traveled by the cold war. Despite either a cultural dissatisfaction with assurance of endless progress in the future or a valorization of an already fulfilled present in Euro-America, the cold war hurdled both by furnishing contending scripts showing progressive fulfillment in a struggle to win the hearts and minds of the nonaligned. Different narratives pledged to make the future better than the present. As we look back upon that period stretching from war's end to the fall of the Berlin Wall, traversing a momentous process of decolonizing, the formation of new postcolonial nation-states in Asia and Africa, regional wars outside of Euro-America aiming to sustain the "unity" of the West, unscheduled but periodic genocides, and more, it is possible to recognize that competing versions of modernization were at stake. What yoked capitalist and Marxian versions together was the allure of a better future, the fantasy destiny of the future perfect toward which the present was being asked to direct its energies; there is of course a difference between revolution and evolution, but perhaps in retrospect not as great as it once was made to seem. If the heady moment

of endism that merely parroted earlier declarations of the end of ideology, a satisfaction that the moment *de faïros*, „self-realization,” had been reached; for others the present meant returning to a scene of ceaseless misery and misfortune and recruiting all available resources from the past. The removal of a scripted, illusory future, coincident with economic transformation everywhere motored by a muscular neoliberal doxa, meant restructuring, limitless privatization, interminable downsizing, outsourcing, endless appropriation by dispossession, and the transformation of the everyday into a day-to-day temporality, a time without any future, so to speak. Here, too, we begin to see the appeal to a past as a reservoir of possibilities and for resolving the misfortunes of an endless present, even in societies of advanced capitalism. For „people without a future,” as Pierre Bourdieu named them in France (but he could have been describing any industrial society), „time seems to be annihilated” because „the work salary is the support, if not the principle, of the majority of interests, expectations, exigencies, hopes and investments in the present, as well as the future or the past that (they) imply” (quoted in RH, p. 126). In the world outside Euro-America, once targeted for a modernizing makeover, the present scarcely exceeded the past or the future. But after the cold war all seemed to have declared a closure on the present and insisted on the placement of a pervasive presentism, heavy and desperate, recalling what T. S. Eliot once described (at another time) as a „provincialism . . . of time,” not of space, „one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no share.”

4. Thickening the Present

What this „provincialism . . . of time” or what temporal narrowing has opened up is the time of the present as the locus of noncontemporaneous

23. T. S. Eliot, „What Is a Classic?” in *Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), p. 69.

24. This passage, which doesn’t appear in the 1975 English edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is quoted from the French translation. But see Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 41...90.

poralities from the past recalls both repetitions from other times and places and what perceiving them meant for social theory. Specifically, this recognition refers to those attempts envisaged by people like Tosaka and Maurice Halbwachs before World War II who sought to account for the spectacle of mixed temporalities in the present. Both, it is important to acknowledge, discounted the veracity of history's claims to a true time and proposed conceptions of temporality they believed to be (temporal)-176be(teu9

25. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1975), p. 145; see also Enzo Traverso, *Les modes d'emploi: Histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris, 2005), p. 24. There is an interesting parallel of the Hegelian allegory in the decision of the Meiji state during the late-nineteenth-century transformation of Japanese society to align its authority with the sun goddess, "state foundation," rather than her brother, who created community.

26. Tosaka, *Tosaka Jun Zenshū*, 96.

27. *Ibid.*, 4:101.

Halbwachs recommended, with his observations on collective memory and the contretemps they represented, was the reinstatement of the historical uncanny, what had been written over by a familiarizing strategy of the socialization of national history, •essentially a narrative taught within the framework of the nationŽMHF, p. 394)Ž²⁸ In this pedagogy, history became (as it still appears to be) mainly external and dead, without witness or being actually experienced. This feeling of externality is reinforced by the presentation of events within a calendrical framework. According to Halbwachs, the discovery of historical memory reflects a process of acculturation aimed at re-forming the regime of external time and relocating a people within the familiarizing narrative of the nation, more about amnesia than remembering, having the intended effect of smothering the uncanniness associated with collective memory. Halbwachs complained that historical time was artificial because it conformed to the external constraints of the calendar and clock, a dead time that introduced cuts and slices absent from forms of collective memorationŽ²⁹ History differs from memory in its presumption of a singular, universal time (history itself) rather than coexisting multiple times that correspond to the memories of different temporalizations proper to each groupŽ³⁰ The artificiality of the historical thus contrasts sharply with a transtemporal memory, which mixes the past experiences with those of the immediate now being lived. If history is concerned with change, with breaks that actually shorten time, memory cultivates resemblance to insure the continuous passage of past into present. •There are, in effect,Ž he wrote, •several collective memories . [whereas] history is one and it can be said of it that there is only one history.Ž Historical practice invariably "attends out time in the interest of putting the ensemble of facts on the same plane. •The historical world,Ž he observed, •is like an ocean into which all the partial histories "ow.Ž Convinced that pasts continue as living vestiges and traces in the present, Halbwachs advised historians to turn away from their preoccupation with the past and make the historical present their vocation.

If, for Halbwachs, history delegitimizes the •live(vac) past,Ž it is possible to observe a similar impulse occurring elsewhere, namely, Japan, where Yanagita Kunio produced a history (Meiji Taishoshi: Sesohem) the model of an immense tableau comprised of past and present customs mingling

28. See also Halbwachs, *Mémoire collective*, 101.

29. See *ibid.*, pp. 101, 144...54. It might be pointed out, in this connection, that Karl Marx made the following, remarkable observation: •We are concerned here only with the broad and general characteristics, for epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by strict and abstract lines of demarcation than are geological epochsŽ (*Marque of Political Economy*, vol. 1 of *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes [Harmondsworth, 1990], p. 492).

30. See Halbwachs, *Mémoire collective*, pp. 135, 137.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 135...36.

together in 1920s Tokyo and actually envisaged history's vocation as recording the cohabitation of different customs reflecting mixed temporalities in the present. In Peru at around the same time, José Carlos Mariátegui was reflecting on the intersection of historical times coexisting in conflict within a developmental framework and with the "figure of unevenness that clearly signified the noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous." And in our time this "fixation on the historical present as the punctual point of mixed temporalities has appeared more frequently, throughout the world,

32. See John Kraniuskas, "Laughing at Americanism: Benjamin, Charlie Chaplin," in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Peter Osborne, 3 vols. (London, 2005), 3:368...77.

turning to a position that might enable us to give shape to a proper ontology of the present in such a way as to rethink the relationship of time and space as a primary condition for both historicization and comparison. Such an ontology must be sensitive to or accountable for the durational present (rather than a merely punctual one), to mixed temporalizations, and to the role played by contemporary political struggles rather than merely the primacy of spatial configurations. But any effort to begin this enormous task of imagining how to fuse an understanding of and an acting upon the historical present requires at the same time that we seek to rescue the •world-timeŽ of multiple temporalities from the •levelling o Ž of significance and the shearing of the •nowsŽ into a simple succession.

33. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 474.