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And If History Were to Turn Its Back on the Future? A Thought-provoking Interjection

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And If History Were to Turn Its Back on the Future? A Thought-provoking Interjection

“How do we want to write history in the future?”

Invited to a roundtable to provide input in response to this apparently straightforward question, I had a sense of unease and quite a few difficulties. Not because I have no vision of how I would like to write history or because I'm incapable of imagining how history could or should be written in the future, assuming history is still told or represented in written form. My unease comes from having to link ideas such as “want to”, “writing history” and “future” in the same sentence. It conjures up the notion of a rational will that forecasts or plans future ways of writing history and of a normative intention to adjust to or improve the way we write and think about history. This kind of thinking about the future of history can only be expressed as a prognosis: how the writing of history will be – and/or as a prescription: how the writing of history should be or how we would like it to be.

But is this not a leftover from our faith in the power of historiography to change history, i.e., in its emancipatory force? Finally, is this faith not rooted in the philosophy of history, whose key claim is that history is the product of its knowledge and therefore its writing?

Given these premises, my unease should hopefully be clear, and my resistance to thinking about the future of historiography either in terms of predicting this future or of prescribing a normative ideal to be pursued in the future.

In retrospect, my research has run in the opposite direction. I have reflected on how to free the future of the prescriptive will of a single individual, and on how it has been possible since the early modern age to think of history as an open endeavour, that is, as contestable, revisable and rewritable. Both ideas have shifted the focus to the present and diverted attention away from the future.

With two arguments I will now illustrate why I consider it problematic to include the future in the reflection of historiography. One argument is heuristic, the other of a theoretical-ethical nature.

The heuristic argument is based on my thoughts on monuments, which I developed in the course of a decade.¹ Monuments demonstrate that any attempt to impose an obligation of meaning and memory on the future is doomed to failure. A monument (be it a statue or a history book) serves the purpose of giving

meaning to the present by shaping the past. In this way, the present delivers not so much the past to the future, but itself while representing the past. In doing so the present dictates through the monument what the future should remember and how it should remember it. But this testamentary purpose contained in each monument is open to failure the very moment the monument is unveiled and becomes the object of synchronic and diachronic perception. Indeed, not only will the future sooner or later reflect differently on the past represented by the monument, it will also see new meanings in the monument itself, meanings that were neither intended nor desired at the time of its creation. From a heuristic point of view, we are trapped in the present, unable to escape the regime of the historicity of presentism.² Hence the interpretations, histories, memory, methods, and call against oblivion that we offer to the future will always be a matter of negotiation, or even rejection. This is what I call heuristic disenchantment due to presentism, whereby an imagined future – even if it refers to a future method – can only be realized as the memory of a “future past”³ (see [Lucian Hölscher on this blog](#)).

The theoretical-ethical argument goes deeper because it questions the very opportunity to think of future ways and methods of writing/representing history (through prognosis or utopia) and consequently to put historiography at the service of the future – typically a future deemed better – through prescription. Both modes of reflection on the future of historiography necessarily contain teleological elements, be they positive or negative; they monopolize historiography and reduce the future to a point along a line of development, making any alternative unthinkable, if not downright impossible. Readers will probably hear an echo of Koselleck’s critique of the Enlightenment and the temporization of utopia.⁴

Instead, my reflection takes its cue from the thinking of philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who in my opinion made the most radical attempt to neutralize, or in Blumenberg’s words, disempower all forms of philosophy of history and its decision-making and voluntarist vocation. In order to neutralize the possible totalitarian tendency of the prescriptive will of the individual, Blumenberg imagined a model for the survival and adaptation of cultural expressions (especially mythologems and so-called “absolute metaphors”) along the lines of Charles Darwin’s natural selection.⁵ This is a model in which individuals, individual decisions, and every single action in the transformation of culture play such a negligible role as to render them harmless. No imagination of single individuals could have conjured up the present diversity of views, myths, and ways of mastering reality; this is never a process reducible to an individual selection, plan or will. In other

words, precisely because individual actions are almost insignificant in the entire economy of evolution, this model can reabsorb or cushion errors and abuses. Hence the variety of cultural expression is seen as the survival of countless negotiations and adaptations, and the reuse or rejection of artefacts and cultural heritage. By so doing, Blumenberg not only downgraded the role of the individual in the production of the future, and thus indirectly of historiography, he also inverted the temporal perspective. Indeed, according to this model, the cultural artefacts that have survived and those that have disappeared can only be determined ex post, a state that no individual alone could have either imagined or anticipated, and consequently produced or forced.

The suggestion to reflect on how to write history by turning one's back on the future is certainly challenging, a thought experiment. It is an invitation to forego anticipating the future by prediction (how history will be written) and, above all, by normative prescription (indicating how history should be written), not to mention the pathos of emancipation that tends to imagine and pursue a single future through a "better" historiography. It means recognizing the synchronic variety of modes and (methodological) rules of thinking and writing about history in the present, and addressing these, highlighting one and rejecting the other, while adapting or forcing them into a continuous process of negotiation with the community. Using Blumenberg's thought as a starting point allows us to imagine a pluralistic society in which no one individual can decide on future ways of doing history and historiography. It is no longer the prerogative of experts alone, but fragmented into a myriad of decisions and negotiations that we academic and non-academic actors, from videogame designers to exhibition curators, have to conduct as producers of history. These negotiations, if considered in an intergenerational and very long-term perspective, turn out to be mini-negotiations, pushing in different and therefore in no specific direction. Only under these conditions can future history and historiography break free from any form of determinism or individual voluntarism and remain truly open.

Although expressed in different terms, I think there is at least one common thread with Ethan Kleinberg's thought, namely, the impossibility of thinking (and desiring) a historiography that predetermines future direction and is guided by regulative principles.⁶ To use his metaphor, the compass is now completely demagnetized. Unable to function as a temporal vector, a compass of this kind is incapable of navigating the topography of historical knowledge and ways of representing history. More than expressing faith in the emancipatory capacity of historiography,

such thinking voices confidence in the heuristic potential of disorientation. Perhaps this very disorientation will open up paths not yet taken.

This blog post is a slightly revised version of the author's contribution to a panel discussion with Ethan Kleinberg, Stefan Berger, Lucian Hölscher, Chris Lorenz, and Kristin Platt on [How do we want to write history in the future?](#) The panel was held on December 14, 2021 at the Institute for Social Movement in Bochum (Germany).

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Tags: Blumenberg / Future / Historiography

¹ See Lisa Regazzoni, *Geschichtsdinge. Gallische Vergangenheit und französische Geschichtsforschung im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2020 (Cultures and Practices of Knowledge in History 5); and recently Lisa Regazzoni, "Unintentional Monuments, or the Materializing of an Open Past," *History and Theory*, first published online: 14 April 2022 (URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12259>).

² François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicités. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil, 2003.

³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973; see in this regard Sebastian Huhnholz, *Von Carl Schmitt zu Hannah Arendt? Heidelberger Entstehungsspuren und bundesrepublikanische Liberalisierungsgeschichten von Reinhart Kosellecks Kritik und Krise*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2019, esp. 8–10, 19.

⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979; on Blumenberg's reframing of Darwinism in light of its ethical controversiality, see Lisa Regazzoni, *Selektion*

und Katalog. Zur narrativen Konstruktion der Vergangenheit bei Homer, Dante und Primo Levi, München: Fink, 2008, in particular 57–78.

⁶ I refer to the *Koselleck Lecture* that Ethan Kleinberg gave at Bielefeld University on 13 October 2021: “Temporal Vectors and the Compass of History. Politics and Ethics at the End-Time of Truth”; see further [Ethan Kleinberg’s post on this blog](#).