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Book Author(s): FRANÇOIS HARTOG

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INTRODUCTION

ORDERS OF TIME AND REGIMES OF HISTORICITY

NO ONE DOUBTS THAT AN ORDER OF TIME EXISTS—OR RATHER, that orders of time exist which vary with time and place. These orders are, in any event, so imperious and apparently so self-evident that we bow to them without even realizing it, without meaning to or wanting to, and whether we are aware of it or not. All resistance is in vain. For a society's relations to time hardly seem open to discussion or negotiation. The term "order" implies at once succession and command: the times (in the plural) *dictate* or *defy*, time *avenges* wrongs, it *restores* order following a disruption, or *sees justice done*. "Order of time" can thus immediately shed light on another expression that might initially seem a little enigmatic, "regimes of historicity."

As early as the fifth century B.C. the Greek philosopher Anaximander used the expression "order of time" to suggest, precisely, that things "suffer punishment and give satisfaction to one another for injustice according to the order of time."¹ For Herodotus, history was essentially the interval, calculated in generations, between an injustice and its punishment or redress. The historian's task was to study the delays of divine vengeance, with a view to using this knowledge to identify and link up the two ends of the chain.

For example, the true meaning behind the reversal of fortune suffered by King Croesus was that at four generations' remove he was paying for the misdeeds of his ancestor Gyges.² This link between history and justice will not, however, be the path I follow here.

The expression "order of time" might also evoke Michel Foucault's *Order of Discourse*, a short and engaging programmatic text, given as his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France in 1971. It still speaks to us, inviting us to take his work further, elsewhere, in different ways, and with different questions.³ I would thus be doing for time what Foucault previously did for discourse, or would at least draw my inspiration from this. Lastly, *The Order of Time* is actually the title of the historian Krzysztof Pomian's important work on time, which he described as a history of "time itself," a "philosophical" history of time, "approached from an encyclopaedic perspective."⁴

Time has recently become something of an obsession. It is the subject of books, journals, and conferences, more or less everywhere. Literature too is dealing with it, in its own way. An attack of "time-itis" was what our doctors of the intellect instantly diagnosed. Indeed—meaning . . . ? At best, this label suggests "Watch out—problem area."⁵ The work of Paul Ricoeur, from *Time and Narrative* (1983) to *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), conveniently frames the period in question. It shows how a philosopher who had always sought to be the contemporary of his contemporaries was drawn to reflect on the aporias in the experience of time, before turning later to issues around "a policy of the just allotment of memory." In *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur linked up "temporal experience and the narrative operation" directly, but at the price of "an impasse in respect to memory," as he himself acknowledged. *Memory, History, Forgetting* was an attempt to remedy this omission by investigating the "median levels" between time and narrative,⁶ moving from the truth of history to the faithfulness of memory, while keeping both in play.

A few years earlier, Michel de Certeau had remarked, as though in passing, that "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."⁷ It was a thought-provoking statement, and these pages can be read as my attempt to follow it through, starting from an assessment of where we are today.

Gaps

Our relations to time were suddenly and irreversibly shattered and confounded by certain events of the recent past: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the communist ideal as the future of the revolution, and the simultaneous rise of a number of fundamentalist movements.⁸ Everywhere the order of time ceased to be self-evident. Fundamentalisms, with their mixture of archaic and modern features, grapple in part with a crisis of the future. Since the traditions they turn to in order to remedy the ills of the present are incapable of opening onto a future, they are largely “invented.”⁹ How, in such conditions, can past, present, and future be articulated? In 1995 François Furet wrote that history had once again become

a tunnel that we enter in darkness, not knowing where our actions will lead, uncertain of our destiny, stripped of the illusory security of a science of what we do. At the end of the twentieth century, deprived of God, we have seen the foundations of deified history crumbling—a disaster that must somehow be averted. To add to this threat of uncertainty, there is the shock of a closed future.¹⁰

In Europe, deep rifts had already begun to appear many years previously, in the aftermath of the First World War and, differently, after 1945. Paul Valéry’s writings provide a sensitive seismograph of the former. In 1919 he wrote of “our Hamlet of Europe,” gazing out “on an immense sort of terrace of Elsinore” at “millions of ghosts.” “He broods on the tedium of rehearsing the past and the folly of always trying to innovate. He staggers between two abysses.” And, in a lecture from 1935, Valéry drew an even sharper picture of this experience of broken continuity, where “each person” feels he belongs to “two eras.” “On the one hand,” he continued, “there is the past that can neither be abolished nor forgotten, but from which we can derive almost nothing that will orient us in the present or help us to imagine the future. On the other hand, there is the future without the least shape.”¹¹ So Valéry’s experience of time, which he returned to again and again, was an experience of its disorientation, in which the “today” of his *Reflections on the World Today* was situated between two *abysses* or two *eras*. In 1920s Germany,

a similar experience of time informed the writings of Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem, who each cast around for a new vision of history in which continuity and progress would be abandoned in favor of discontinuities and breaks.¹²

Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*, published in the same year as his suicide, also bore witness to such breaks: "All the bridges between our today and our yesterday and our yesteryear have been burnt."¹³ That was in 1942, yet already in 1946 Lucien Febvre was exhorting all readers of the *Annales*, in an eloquently entitled editorial, "Facing Into the Wind," to "do history" in the knowledge that they had entered a world "in a state of irreversible instability," everywhere in ruins. But in this world there were "a lot more than ruins, and worse still: an extraordinary acceleration which, in telescoping continents, erasing oceans, and eradicating deserts, suddenly brings into contact human groups of opposite electrical charge." If we wished to understand tomorrow's—no, already today's—globalized world, we should, as a matter of urgency, look ahead, in front of us, and not backward at what had already taken place: "Yesterday's world is over. Over forever. If we French have a chance of pulling through, it is by grasping this obvious truth quicker and better than others. By not hanging onto the wreckage, but taking the plunge. In you go, I say, and keep your head above water." Explaining "the world to the world," and addressing the questions people ask themselves today—that is the task of the historian who faces into the wind. The point is not to wipe the slate of the past clean, but to "understand fully how it differs from the present,"¹⁴ and so in what ways it is past. From everything in the few pages of this manifesto—its content, tone, and rhythm—the reader senses that there is no time to lose, and that the present dictates.¹⁵

Hannah Arendt was keenly aware of breaks in time as early as the 1950s, but that aspect of her work passed relatively unnoticed at the time. The poet René Char's assertion that "our heritage was not preceded by any *testament*," an aphorism published in his collection *Leaves of Hypnos* in 1946,¹⁶ was an attempt to make sense of the strange experience of the French Resistance as an in-between time, in which a "treasure" had been discovered and fleetingly possessed, but which no one knew how to name or transmit. In Arendt's terms, this treasure was the ability to establish "a common world."¹⁷ Just when Europe was at last enjoying liberation, the Resistance proved

incapable of drawing up a “testament” to enshrine ways of preserving and, if possible, extending the public space it had begun to construct and in which “freedom could appear.” Significantly, insofar as a testament “telling the heir what will rightfully be his, wills past possessions for a future,” it is, from a temporal viewpoint, what “assigns a past to the future.”¹⁸

Hannah Arendt’s *Between Past and Future* opens precisely on Char’s aphorism, as a way of introducing the concept of a “gap between past and future” around which the rest of the book is organized. This “gap” was an “odd in-between period . . . in historical time, during which one becomes aware of an interval in time which is entirely determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet.”¹⁹ Historical time appears to have come to a standstill. And in her pioneering work *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt had come to the conclusion that “Western culture’s innermost structure, with all its beliefs, had collapsed about our ears,” in particular the modern concept of history, based on the notion of process.²⁰ Here again there was an experience of disorientated time.

In 1968 the Western and Westernized world was convulsed by a movement of contestation targeting, among other things, capitalist progress. It gave expression to a loss of faith in time itself as progress, that is, as an agent moving to overturn the present. The words “rift” and “breach” were used by contemporary observers to define this moment, even while they also noted the extensive use of images drawn from the glorious revolutions of the past.²¹ The young rebels of the time, for the most part born after 1940, could, at least in France, turn to the great figures of the Resistance, as well as to the teachings of Mao’s *Little Red Book* or to the example of the Vietnamese communists, who had beaten the former colonial ruler at Diên Biên Phủ and would soon be claiming victory over America. Yet in a recent novel by Olivier Rolin the narrator describes his own origins to his much younger companion in the following terms: “It’s from there [the years 1940–1945] you come, my friend, from this enormous disaster, without having been part of it. Your generation is born of an event it never knew.”²² The crisis of the 1970s (not least the oil crisis) seemed momentarily to confirm the challenges to the status quo. Some people even sang the praises of “zero growth”! France’s postwar boom years had just come to an end, those three decades of reconstruction and rapid modernization when East and West

competed over their achievements against the background of the Cold War and the nascent nuclear arms race.

The theme of “returns to” was soon to enjoy great success (becoming something of a prepackaged formula and a commercial product). Returns to Freud or Marx were subversive, but then came the returns to Kant or God, and many other fleeting “back to”’s which vanished no sooner than declared. Meanwhile, technological progress kept forging ahead, and the consumer society grew and grew, and with it the category of the present, which this society targeted and, to an extent, appropriated as its particular trademark. The products of the digital revolution, the much-vaunted information society, as well as advances in biotechnology, began to trickle down to the general public. Soon came the supremely imperious time of globalization in the form of a *world economy*, which pushed for ever greater mobility and referred increasingly to “real time.” But it also came in the form of a *world heritage*, as codified in UNESCO’s charters, such as the 1972 “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.”

The 1980s saw the idea of memory unfurl like a giant wave, accompanied by its more visible and tangible alter ego, heritage, and the issue of protecting, cataloguing, promoting, and rethinking it. Memorials were erected, museums of all sizes built, others renovated, and a nonspecialist public, concerned or curious about genealogy, began visiting the archives. The memory attached to places became important, and in 1984 a historian, Pierre Nora, introduced the idea of a “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*). The notion emerged from his assessment of France’s present, and gave its title to his vast editorial project, the *Lieux de mémoire*.

At around the same time, Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) was released, an extraordinarily powerful film on testimony and the “non-sites” of memory. In presenting the spectator with “people coming into their own as witnesses,”²³ the film aimed at abolishing the distance between past and present, making the past spring out from the present. A few years previously, in 1982, the American historian Yosef Yerushalmi had published *Zakhor*, which was an immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic. It launched the debates on history and memory. “Why is it,” asked Yerushalmi, “that although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past

was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.”²⁴

Here a little earlier, and there a little later, this groundswell touched the shores of almost all countries, if not all milieus. The wave broke first over Old Europe, and then swept across the United States, postdictatorship South America, the Russia of *glasnost*, the former Eastern block countries, and South Africa as it emerged from apartheid. The rest of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East remained relatively untouched (with the notable exception of Israeli society). After peaking in the mid-1990s, this phenomenon of memory developed in different directions depending on the particular context. But there can be no doubt that the crimes of the twentieth century, its mass murders and monstrous industry of death, were at the origin of these shock waves of memory, which finally caught up with our contemporary societies and shook them in their blast. The past just would not go away, and at the second or third generation it began to be questioned. Other, more recent tides of memory, such as those of communism, still have a long path ahead of them, and will advance at different speeds and rhythms.²⁵

At all events, “memory” became an all-embracing term, a metahistorical and even at times a theological category. It seemed that everything had the makings of memory, and in the duel between memory and history, the former quickly won the day, spearheaded by a figure who has come to occupy a central position in our public space: the witness.²⁶ We turned our attention to the issue of forgetting, and endorsed and promoted the “duty to remember”; we even began, at times, to condemn certain excesses of memory or heritage.²⁷

From the Pacific to Berlin

I did not focus directly on any of these large-scale movements. Being neither a historian of the contemporary world nor an analyst of current events, I pursued my research along other paths. Theorizing history is not immediately my field either, although I attempt wherever possible to reflect on history while doing history. So my intention here is not to add a better and broader explanation of these contemporary historical phenomena to the general ones already in existence. My approach is different, as is my aim. I address these phenomena obliquely, asking what temporalities structure

and govern them. What order of time makes them possible? And of what order of time are they the symptoms or the messengers? What crisis of time do they signal?

To follow this up, I needed to find a specific angle of attack. As a historian of history, understood as a form of intellectual history, I have gradually come round to Michel de Certeau's idea that time has become so everyday for historians that they have naturalized or instrumentalized it. Time is an unthought, not because it is unthinkable, but because it is not thought or, more simply, no one gives it a thought. As a historian who tries to be attentive to his time, I have, like many others, observed how the category of the present has taken hold to such an extent that one can really talk of an omnipresent present.²⁸ This is what I call "presentism" here.

Can this phenomenon be more closely defined? How significant is it, and what does it mean? One can note, for example, that there emerged in the 1980s among French historians a "History of the present time." In the words of one of its most faithful advocates, René Rémond, "a history of the present is a good antidote to a *posteriori* rationalization, to the optical illusions that spatial and temporal distance can bring with them."²⁹ Professional historians were requested, and sometimes required, to respond to a plethora of demands for contemporary or very contemporary history. This history developed on various fronts, and came under the spotlight particularly in connection with crimes against humanity, which are characterized by their utterly novel temporality: for such crimes, statutory time limitations are not applicable.³⁰

The notion of "regime of historicity" seemed particularly useful for my research. It had made a first unobtrusive appearance in my work in 1983, to account for what I considered the most interesting aspect of the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins's thought. But no one paid it much attention at the time, I no more than others.³¹ Times would have to change! Sahlins had been trying to determine the historical form characterizing the Pacific Islands by going back to Claude Lévi-Strauss's notions of "hot" and "cold" societies. I then left the expression alone, so to speak, without working on it further, until it re-emerged for me, not in relation to so-called savages in the past, but right next door and in the present. After 1989, the notion suddenly seemed self-evidently relevant, as the prism through which to examine a particular conjuncture in which the question of time had

become an important stake and also a problem, occasionally to the point of obsession.

Meanwhile, I had become acquainted with the meta-historical categories of “experience” and “expectation,” as defined by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck in his work on the semantics of historical time. He explored experiences of history through the question “how, in a given present, are the temporal dimensions of past and future related?”³² Koselleck had hit upon a most interesting area, in which he was attentive to the tensions between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, and to how the past, the present, and the future were articulated. The notion of regime of historicity could thus be enriched by a conversation struck up—even if only through my agency—between Sahlins and Koselleck, that is, between anthropology and history.

I took up the notion again and worked on it with an anthropologist, Gérard Lenclud, for a conference devised by the Hellenist Marcel Detienne, a fervent advocate of comparative study. It was a way of continuing, while also displacing somewhat, another dialogue between anthropology and history, the one which Lévi-Strauss had begun in 1949, and which had resurfaced from time to time, stagnated along the way, but never disappeared. At the time, I defined “regime of historicity” in two ways: in a restricted sense, as the way in which a given society approaches its past and reflects upon it; and in a broader sense, as “the modalities of self-consciousness that each and every society adopts in its constructions of time and its perceptions.”³³ To borrow Lévi-Strauss’s terms (which I return to below), the notion refers to how a particular human community “reacts” to a “degree of historicity” which is the same in all societies. More specifically, it is a tool for comparing different types of history, and also (or above all, I would now say) for highlighting modes of relation to time, and exploring forms of temporal experience here and elsewhere, today and in the past—in short, it serves to explore ways of being in time. Whereas Paul Ricoeur traced the *philosophical* concept of historicity from Hegel to Heidegger, defining it as “the historical condition,”³⁴ or “man present to himself as a being in history,”³⁵ I will focus rather on the *diversity* of regimes of historicity.

Lastly, the notion accompanied me during a fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin in 1994, at a time when the traces of the Wall had not yet disappeared, when the city center was one huge building site of

work in progress or still to come, when arguments already raged about the project to rebuild the City Palace, and when the huge, dilapidated buildings in the East, their façades riddled with bullet holes, made visible a time which, over there, had passed differently. It would be wrong, of course, to say that time had stood still. But, with its vast empty expanses, its cleared spaces, and its “shades,” Berlin seemed a perfect city for historians, where more than elsewhere the unthought of time—and not only its forgetting, repression, or denial—could come to the surface.

All through the 1990s, Berlin, more than any other city in Europe and perhaps in the world, put thousands of people to work, from immigrant laborers to major international architects. It was manna from heaven for town planners and journalists, and became a mandatory and fashionable reference, a “good subject,” a laboratory, and a space of “critical reflection.” It generated countless commentaries and as many controversies, prodigious quantities of images, words, and texts, and in all likelihood a few great books as well.³⁶ And the city also experienced the suffering and disillusion these upheavals carried in their wake. In Berlin more than elsewhere time was a visible and a tangible problem that could not be eluded. What should the relations with the past be, or rather with pasts in the plural, but also, and no less importantly, with the future? Not forgetting the present, while also avoiding the other extreme, that of being blind to anything beyond it. In other words: how to inhabit the present, in the most literal sense? What should be destroyed, preserved, reconstructed, or built, and how? For any decisions and actions to be taken, relations to time had first to be clarified. Was the sheer obviousness of this fact behind our many efforts to evade it?

For on both sides of the Wall—which would gradually become a wall of time—the first step taken was to erase the past. Hans Scharoun’s statement could be applied to both West and East: “One cannot hope at the same time to build a new society and to rebuild old buildings.”³⁷ Scharoun, who is best known for building the Berlin Philharmonic concert hall, was a well-known architect who had presided over Berlin’s planning and architecture commission immediately after the war. Now, as the twenty-first century has dawned, Berlin is an emblematic city, a site of memory for the whole of Europe, caught as it is between, broadly, amnesia and the duty to remember. There, the *flâneur*-historian can still come across fragments, signs, and traces of different orders of time (in the sense we give to orders of architecture).

Thus the notion of regime of historicity, which had first emerged for me on the shores of the Pacific Islands, ended up alighting at the heart of modern European history, in Berlin. That is where it took shape for me, in its reworked form. In the first section of this book, entitled “Orders of Time 1,” I shall move from the Fiji Islands to Scheria—from the Pacific Ocean of Sahlins’s research to the seas crossed by Homer’s hero Odysseus—to test out the notion and practice of a twofold “view from afar.” Then, in the course of a long voyage that will take us almost directly to late eighteenth-century Europe, I shall make a short stop under the heading “Odysseus Has Not Read Augustine.” There I shall envisage a Christian experience of time, a Christian order of time, and even a Christian regime of historicity.

Thereafter, for Europe’s most momentous crisis of time, in the years preceding and following the French Revolution, Chateaubriand will be our main guide. He will lead us from the Old World to the New, from France to America and back. A tireless traveler and a “swimmer” placed “at the confluence of two rivers,” as he describes himself at the end of his memoirs, the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand seems caught between two orders of time, and torn between two regimes of historicity: the old and the new—or modern—regime. Over and over again his writing starts from and returns to this change of regime, this rift in time which was the French Revolution.

In “Orders of Time 2,” I shall focus on the contemporary period directly, guided by two watchwords: memory and heritage. These key terms, which have been put to all sorts of uses, abundantly glossed and interpreted in all sorts of ways, will not be broached for themselves, but treated exclusively as signs and symptoms of our relation to time: as different ways of translating, refracting, obeying, or obstructing the order of time. As such, they will testify to the uncertainties in, or the crisis of, the present order of time. This second section could be framed by the following question: is a new regime of historicity centered on the present taking shape today?³⁸

Universal Histories

Every historical period has had its great “chronosophy”—a mixture of prophecy and periodization—or, later, its universal history, from Bossuet to Marx, via Voltaire, Hegel and Comte, Spengler and Toynbee.³⁹ These constructions, however varied their presuppositions (whether their vision was,

broadly, linear or cyclical), were essentially concerned to grasp the relations between the past and the future, and to discover, define, and master these in order to understand and predict. As we enter this long gallery which has lain in ruins for many a year, let us first pause before the statue which appeared in a dream to the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar.

This statue is described as gigantic, his “head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.” But a stone falling out of nowhere smashed the statue to smithereens. The prophet Daniel, who alone can interpret the dream, is brought before the king, and begins by declaring that “there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days.” Every metal, and every part, he explains, corresponds to the reign of a monarchy: a first monarchy will be succeeded by a second one, then by a third and a fourth, until the advent of the fifth and final one, which will be for all eternity the reign of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁰ That is what the king’s dream vision means.

The Book of Daniel, which dates from 164–163 B.C., was referring to the Babylonian, Median, Persian, and Macedonian kingdoms, with Alexander and his successors. Its authors combined in an original way the paradigm of metals with that of imperial succession—used by Greek historians since Herodotus—and gave this schema a completely new twist by placing it within an apocalyptic perspective.⁴¹ Later scholars would argue over the identity of the kingdoms, with the Medians sometimes bowing out and the Romans bringing up the rear for a long time, but the prophetic value of the general schema remained intact.

Another highly influential paradigm was that of the ages of the world. In the fifth century A.D., Saint Augustine lent such lasting prestige to the model of the Seven Ages of the World that it could still serve as the backbone of Bossuet’s *Discourse on Universal History* in the late seventeenth century. The “order of times” which Bossuet expounded for the benefit of the young heir to the throne was, he declared, derived from “that famous division of world history [into seven ages] made by the chronologists.”⁴² The first order began with Adam, and the sixth with Jesus. The latter corresponded to the sixth day, was also the time of old age, and was to last until the end of the world.⁴³ But this “intermediate time” was one both of old age and of renewal in

anticipation of the sabbath on the seventh day, which would bring eternal rest in the vision of God.

These models—the ages of the world and the succession of empires, to which was later added the notion of transfer of rule [*translatio imperiū*]—were an active, operative matrix in Western history for a very long time. Humanism brought with it a first set of divisions, into “Ancient Times,” “Middle Ages [*Media Aetas*],” and “Modern Times.” Thereafter, as the ideal of perfection became temporalized, the idea of the future and of progress, and the openness they represented, began gradually but increasingly to split off from the promise incarnated by the end.⁴⁴ Perfection then gave way so completely to perfectibility and progress that not only the past—considered outmoded—but also the present were devalorized in the name of the future. The present, as nothing but the eve of a better if not a radiant morrow, could, and indeed should, be sacrificed.

Nineteenth-century evolutionary theory naturalized time, while humanity’s past kept stretching ever further back. The six thousand years since the Creation, as Genesis would have it, was a fairytale compared with the progress of Reason, the stages of evolution, or the succession of modes of production, not to mention the whole temporal arsenal contained in philosophies of history. For this was the Golden Age of the great philosophies of history, before the 1920s brought with them meditations on civilizations’ decadence and death, for example in Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, or Valéry, whom we mentioned above, “despairing” of history and coming to the realization that civilizations were mortal.⁴⁵ Triumphant and forward-looking universal histories seemed to have run their course. Entropy was gaining ground and would end up carrying the day.

During those same years, historians, or at least those who aspired to see history become a social science, began seriously looking for other, more deep-rooted temporalities, slower and more concretely powerful ones. Their explorations of cycles, phases, and crises gave rise to a “history of price.”⁴⁶ This was the first stage in the development of an economic and social history centered around the first *Annales* school in France. For the period after the Second World War, three features of time stand out. New findings in archaeology and physical anthropology kept placing the emergence of the first hominids at a different point, and in an increasingly distant past. Time

was henceforth measured in millions of years, and since on that scale the “Neolithic Revolution” was only yesterday, what of the Industrial Revolution?! Among the historians, Fernand Braudel advocated the *longue durée* to all social scientists and encouraged attention to the “plurality of social time.”⁴⁷ History itself became a dialectic of *durées*, in which structures, levels, and registers were carefully differentiated, each with its own temporality. No longer was there a single time, and if time was an agent, it had many and mutable forms, and was anonymous, as suggested by Braudel’s description of the *longue durée* as an “immense surface of almost stagnant water” which irresistibly “draws everything onto itself.”

Lastly, and most importantly for us here, there was the theorization of cultural diversity. Lévi-Strauss’s *Race and History*, commissioned and published by UNESCO in 1952, is the authoritative work in this domain.⁴⁸ Lévi-Strauss began by criticizing “false evolutionism,” as displayed by Western travelers believing they have “found,” for example, the Stone Age among the indigenous populations of Australia or Papua New Guinea. Next, the idea of progress was sharply reframed. Forms of civilization which we tended to imagine as “succeeding one another in time” should rather be seen as “spread out in space.” Humanity’s progress “can hardly be likened to a person climbing stairs and, with each movement, adding a new step to all those he has already mounted; a more accurate metaphor would be that of a gambler who has staked his money on several dice . . . it is only occasionally that history is ‘cumulative,’ that is to say, that the scores add up to a lucky combination.”⁴⁹

In addition to this relativization on a theoretical level, Lévi-Strauss introduced a relativization linked to the position of the observer, which he explained by reference to the theory of relativity: “In order to show that the dimensions and the speed of displacement of a body are not absolute values but depend on the position of the observer, it is pointed out that, to a traveler sitting at the window of a train, the speed and length of other trains vary according to whether they are moving in the same or the contrary direction. Any member of a civilization is as closely associated with it as this hypothetical traveler is with his train.”⁵⁰

Lastly, and in apparent contradiction with the preceding point, Lévi-Strauss argued that “no society is therefore essentially and intrinsically cumulative.” The most cumulative forms of history have never been attained

by isolated cultures but only by those which have, voluntarily or involuntarily, “combined their play.” This led to the work’s final argument, that a culture’s “true contribution” down the ages is not to be found in the “the list of inventions which it has personally produced,” but in the *differential gap* between itself and other cultures.⁵¹ Having now entered a world civilization, we should try to preserve diversity, but understood as form rather than content; the “fact” of diversity matters much more than “the outward and visible form in which each period has clothed that diversity.”⁵² UNESCO has at least partially responded to Lévi-Strauss’s call, through its Charters and Conventions, especially in its work toward an international convention on cultural diversity. These, then, are the main points of a text which was hailed as “the last of the great discourses on universal history.”⁵³

But universal history was suddenly thrust into the limelight again, precisely in 1989, with Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?,” as though for a new, but maybe also a last, flowering of the genre. Fukuyama’s argument, first published in article form to worldwide acclaim before becoming a book, was that liberal democracy might well be “the final form of all human government,” and hence, in that sense, “the end of History.” “The appearance of democratic forces in parts of the world where we never expected to see them, the instability of authoritarian forms of government and the complete absence of coherent *theoretical* alternatives to liberal democracy force us to ask the old question anew: from a much more ‘cosmopolitan’ point of view than was possible in Kant’s time, can a universal history of humankind exist?”⁵⁴ Fukuyama’s answer was yes. But he immediately added: and it’s over.⁵⁵

Regimes of Historicity

Where are we to situate the notion of regime of historicity within this gallery of famous landmarks we have been sweeping through at such speed? The claims we make for it are infinitely more modest, and its scope, to the extent that it has one, is considerably smaller. A regime of historicity is simply a tool. It does not presume to decide upon the history of the world as it was, and even less as it will be. It is neither a chronosophy nor a discourse on history, and its function is not to denounce or deplore the present times, but at best to shed light on them. Historians have learned by now not to

claim any superior vantage point. That does not mean, however, that they must live with their heads in the sand or in the depths of the archives, deaf to anything outside *their* period. Nor does it force them to revive a notion of history driven by a single time, whether this is the *staccato* of the event or, at the other extreme, the immobility of the long or very long *durée*. And there is no reason for historians to forfeit the wealth of insights afforded by the discovery of the multiplicity of social times: the many-layered, overlapping, and desynchronized times, each with its own rhythm, which Braudel so passionately explored, and many others in his wake. The social sciences were immeasurably enriched by these discoveries, and their questions gained in complexity and subtlety as a result.

What the notion of regime of historicity can do, however, is help us examine our relations to time historically. Historically, that is, moving across several times at once, putting into play the present and the past, or rather pasts in the plural, however far apart they may be in space and time. The sole specificity of this notion, which was developed in response to our present situation and to the diversity of experiences of time, is its mobility. It is a heuristic tool which can help us reach a better understanding not of time itself—of all times or the whole of time—but principally of moments of crisis of time, as they have arisen whenever the way in which past, present, and future are articulated no longer seems self-evident. After all, is that not what we mean when we talk of a “crisis of time”? The notion of regime of historicity is thus a way of shedding light, almost from the inside, on today’s questioning of time and particularly on the uncertainty of the categories at stake: are we dealing with a past which has been forgotten or which is too insistently recalled? A future which has almost disappeared from our horizon or which hangs over us as an imminent threat? Does our present no sooner arrive than it is consumed, or is it almost static and unending, eternal even? The notion of “regime of historicity” also sheds light on the much-discussed issues of memory and history, memory versus history, and the “never enough” or “already too much” of cultural heritage.

Within its field of operation as outlined above, the notion of “regime of historicity” is only meaningful in its movement between times. However, I do not aim to encompass time as it has always been lived, from the most immediate to the most mediated experience, from the most idiomatic to the most common, and from the most organic to the most abstract.⁵⁶ Again, my

focus is first and foremost on the categories that organize these experiences and allow them to be spoken; and more precisely, on the ways in which these universal categories or forms we call “the past,” “the present,” and “the future” are articulated.⁵⁷ How are these categories, which partake both of thought and of action, actualized at different times, and in different places and societies, and how do they make possible and perceptible a particular order of time? What present are we dealing with in different places and at different times, and to what past and future is it linked? These questions concern something that is not yet history (as a genre or a discipline), but at the same time every history, however it is expressed, ultimately presupposes, refers to, translates, betrays, magnifies, or contradicts an experience or experiences of time. We are thus able to grasp, through the notion of “regime of historicity,” one of the conditions of possibility of historical writing: how, depending on the way relations between the past, the present, and the future are configured, certain types of history are possible and others are not.

If, following Reinhart Koselleck, we posit that a sense of historical time is generated by the distance, and tension, between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, then we can say that what the regime of historicity, and this book itself, seek to explore, are precisely the distance and tension between the two; more precisely, the types of distance and the modes of tension.⁵⁸ For Koselleck, the temporal structure of the modern period is characterized by an asymmetry between experience and expectation that is produced by the idea of progress and the opening of time onto a future. This asymmetry grew ever more extreme from the end of the eighteenth century, as time speeded up. The history of modernity could thus be summarized in the words “The lesser the experience, the greater the expectation.” In 1975, Koselleck tried to formulate what an “end” or “exit” from modern times might look like. Maybe, he suggested, it could be captured in a formula such as “The greater the experience, the more cautious one is, but also the more open is the future.”⁵⁹

Has a somewhat different configuration not taken over since then, in which the distance between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation has been stretched to its limit, to breaking point? With the result that the production of historical time seems to be suspended. Perhaps this is what generates today’s sense of a permanent, elusive, and almost immobile

present, which nevertheless attempts to create its own historical time. It is as though there were nothing but the present, like an immense stretch of water restlessly rippling. So should we talk of an end of, or an exit from, modernity, from that particular temporal structure we call the modern regime of historicity? It is too early to tell. But we can certainly talk of a crisis. “Presentism” is the name I have given to this moment and to today’s experience of time.

This book is neither a discourse on universal history, nor a history of time, nor even a treatise on the notion of regime of historicity. It focuses on certain historical moments, and on certain words of the moment, on a selection of famous characters and a range of familiar and less familiar texts. All of these are examined through the prism of the forms of experience of time constituting or inhabiting them, sometimes in unacknowledged ways. I do not intend to enumerate all the regimes of historicity that have appeared in the long history of human society. Although my starting point is our contemporary situation today, I constantly de-familiarize this context by moving far back in time, in order better to return to the present, yet without ever entertaining the illusion of an all-embracing viewpoint. As previously, my intellectual convictions and leanings draw me to a “movement which breaks up the lines,” in which I privilege limits and thresholds, moments of modulation and reversal, and phenomena of dissonance.

This was how my earlier *Mirror of Herodotus* was also organized. Was Herodotus, I asked, before or beyond the limit which brought Western History into being? Was he already a historian, or not yet? The father of history—or a liar? Similar questions emerged in my exploration of a century of French historiography, a narrower and more restricted field through which I was guided by Fustel de Coulanges, who, born in 1830, died in the centenary year of the French Revolution. He was nothing if not a historian, almost to excess, yet he was always working against the grain. He was at odds with history’s scientific methodology, while at the same time being one of its particularly uncompromising advocates; and he was also in conflict with the newly reformed Sorbonne, despite its creation of the first Chair in Medieval History—for him. These dissonances, which outlived him, enabled me to construct the *case* of Fustel. Later, Odysseus came to epitomize this dissonant perspective, which I explored in *Memories of Odysseus* through the question of cultural borders in the ancient world. As the very first traveler

and frontiersman, Odysseus was forever drawing boundaries and crossing them, at the risk of getting lost and losing himself also. He traced the outlines of something like a Greek identity, along with all those who came after him and who, on some pretext or other, traveled through the space of Greek culture. In the space and *longue durée* of this culture, Greek *itineraries* were thus marked out. They were sensitive to moments of crisis, moments when perceptions became blurred, or changed focus, or were reformulated.

Although this work on regimes of historicity is likewise concerned with itineraries, it has a different focus, and the context is different too. I will be tracing a new itinerary, between experiences of time and histories, one which has developed at a moment of crisis of time. Compared to my previous work, the canvas is broader, and the present is more immediately present. But how I proceed, the way I see and do things, has remained the same: it is what I like to call my way of working.

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