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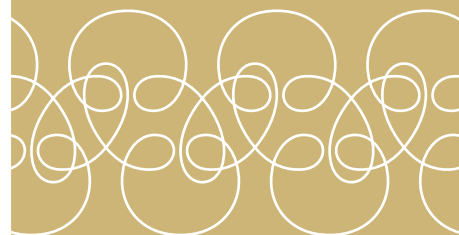
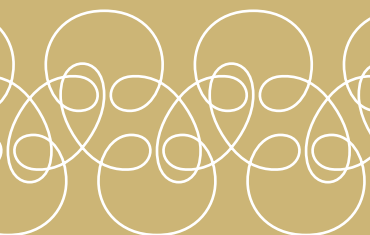
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NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ



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Boundaries of Contemporary History

Zsombor Bódy, András Keszei
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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A Gaze Focused on Itself: On the Perception of Time in the Writing of the History of the Present

Zsombor Bódy

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“Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.”

Alexis de Tocqueville: *On Democracy in America*

Following in the wake of Reinhart Koselleck’s analyses of historical time, the study examines the contemporary history’s perception of time. Comparing it with the perception of time in earlier classical periods of historiography and looking at problems of historical memory, the analysis comes to the conclusion that, in the recent development of historiography and particularly in the writing of the history of the present, a new presentist perception of time has become dominant which differs radically from the structure of the perception of time based on a horizon determined by experience and expectation, on which history as an academic discipline was established. Therefore, the writing of the history of the present is no longer a continuation of the roughly 200-year-old story of history as an academic discipline, but a new practice, whose internal characteristics and position among other disciplines which study the society of the present from different perspectives (such as sociology, political science, etc.) cannot yet be regarded as fully clarified.

Keywords: history of the present, contemporary history, perception of historical time, memory, Koselleck

Timothy Garton Ash, recalling how he witnessed an event of the Velvet Revolution in Prague, mused that no historian would ever be in a more advantageous position than he to report on the events taking place in front of him, thus enabling him to acquaint himself with them directly, in contrast with historians who would subsequently try to reconstruct the developments based on partial sources.¹ Koselleck, on the other hand, demonstrates with a specific example that in the early nineteenth century, serious historians rejected a proposal to write an extensive work of history going up to the present. According to the counter-arguments, the conditions of the present were changing too quickly, and they were too rudimentary for historians to capture. Furthermore—and this

1 Ash, „Introduction.”

is the essential point—the appropriate perspective for the study of events was lacking and could only be created through the passage of time.² The difference between the two approaches is obvious. The example cited by Koselleck is related to the naissance of history as a field of study. The question is whether Timothy Garton Ash's suggestion, representing a contrasting approach, signals the end of the roughly 200-year-old era of history as an academic discipline. In other words: can contemporary history be considered history at all?

The question might sound surprising at first, as one is aware that there are many historians conducting research concerning the history of the present, much as there are many studies of this area in historical periodicals.³ However, many researchers embarking on the study of the history of the present have encountered uncertainties or crisis symptoms when attempting to identify the characteristics and position of this discipline.⁴ The writing of the history of the present seems to be more obviously problematic in Central and Eastern Europe than elsewhere.⁵ The fact that the history of the present is somehow weak compared to the various forms of memory and non-academic representations of history is shown by the long list of complaints raised by professional historians against the memory market.⁶ There seems to be an endless supply of various forms of remembrance, and the demand for them is also inexhaustible in Central and Eastern European societies.⁷ Professional histories of the present often seem lost in the flood of historical memory and popular history.⁸ Against an abundance of amateurish historical books, historical television programs, magazines, traditionalist associations and movements, an abundance of state-initiated (or party-initiated) remembrance policy drives, festivals and other

2 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 335–36.

3 For an overview of contemporary history by countries see Nützenadel and Schieder, *Zeitgeschichte als Problem*.

4 van Laak, “Zeitgeschichte und populaere Geschichtsschreibung.” According to Nützenadel and Schieder: “[es gibt] noch keinen allgemein anerkannten Konsens über die epochale Abgrenzung, thematisches Profil und methodische Grundlagen der Zeitgeschichte.” Nützenadel and Schieder, “Einleitende Überlegungen,” 8.

5 See the studies in Apor and Sarkisova, *Past for the Eyes*.

6 Gérard Noiriel complains that certain institutions of contemporary history research the history of large companies on behalf of the corporations, and the companies use the results in their own internal training to create loyalty among employees. Obviously, this does not reflect the strength of the autonomy of science. Noiriel, *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire*.

7 While in East-Central Europe the political challenges seem to be more severe, in Western Europe the economic challenges—or temptations—seem to be dangerous. See: Kühberger and Pudlat, *Vergangenheitsbewirtschaftung*.

8 Korte and Paletschek, *Popular History Now and Then*.

programs organized as part of historical and cultural tourism, the publications written by professional historians seem pale and ineffective. Furthermore, they reach a far narrower audience.⁹ Why does history—and in particular the history of the present—sound like a faint voice in the current polyphony of the study and representation of the recent past? I contend that there are two interrelated reasons for the fact that the history of the present is weak and lacks authority. One of these lies in external (cultural, market-based, and political) challenges which have a particularly strong impact on the history of the present in Central and Eastern Europe. The variety of challenges faced by professional historians raises the question of the status of memory in contemporary history and other questions, such as how testimony puts pressure on other types of historical sources, to what extent historiography as academic practice is counter-memory, and how new media have changed the power relations of memory-related and scholarly discourses.¹⁰ It would also be worthwhile to analyze methodically changes in the position of professional historiography in the academic and cultural/political sphere. I cannot embark on such an enterprise of the sociology of science here, I would note that in the twentieth century, historiography played a role outside of the academic sphere considerably larger than the role it has at the present. Both before 1945 and in the socialist era, in Hungary, people in leading positions among professional historians were in many cases influential politicians as well. Kúnó Klebelsberg in the 1920s and Erik Molnár in the 1950s actually guided the work of talented young historians as ministers, guiding them to pursue various fields of research which they considered as important. This would be inconceivable today. Professional historians were often involved in political tasks in the twentieth century, e.g. in areas of cultural policy and undertaking background work for foreign policy during World War II. They also determined or at least influenced the topics of public discourse, and in many cases they simply became politicians. One could cite numerous examples of this from period of the 1989/90 change of regime. Meanwhile, the discourses of history remained strictly academic according to their own norms, and this included the exclusion of texts that did not fulfill the criteria of the discipline from the academic register. Today, in contrast, the borders between historical and political discourses seem to be sadly permeable, primarily from the direction

⁹ This fact induces many historians to embark on enterprises on the new market create by the demand for history. See: Hardtwig and Schug, *History sells!*

¹⁰ These questions are discussed by the studies in Takács, *Mémoire, Contre-mémoire, pratique historique*. See “Présentation” by Takács.

of the latter. Politicians play significant roles in the inner world of academic historiography, for example founding new institutions the function of which is to shape the picture of the past, while historians play hardly any role in politics or in the public sphere.¹¹

But beyond these questions of external challenges, which a reflective history of the present has to face, the main internal reason for the weakness of the writing of the history of the present lies in the implicit premises of history of the present, primarily in its perception of historical time, and in its—actually paradoxical—academic self-definition.¹² Although the problems of the history of the present may be particularly obvious in Central and Eastern Europe, where political actors have often tried to shape the field of the history of the present more directly than in other countries, these internal reasons are of a universal nature and not tied to this region.

Looking through the history of historiography, one finds several key paradoxes. In the nineteenth century and even later, for instance, historiography considered itself an objective academic discipline while at the same time it was one of the implements of the project of nation-building. These paradoxes can actually have a seminal and incentive effect.¹³ However, the paradox on which contemporary history is based leads to a misunderstanding which in the current cultural-political constellation makes it ineffective compared to other forms of studying and presenting the recent past. This misunderstanding is related to the foundations on which the history of the present wants to build its authority outside of the narrower circle of professional historians. In this sense, the weakness of contemporary history is not the internal weakness of scholarly production. The history of the present can undoubtedly boast a number of excellent, innovative research projects, and there are productive debates going on within the profession, for instance at conferences and in journals. However, this research and these debates have a very modest authority, persuasive power,

11 Looking at the conditions of contemporary history specifically, János M. Rainer believes that the profession is unable to earn more room for maneuver for itself on its own unless the social and cultural/political environment changes. Rainer, "...az emlékezet is konfrontálódott a történetírás múltképével" General overview: Berger, "Professional and popular."

12 Jaap den Hollander expressed the paradoxical epistemology problem of contemporary history as follows: "Can we describe our own Zeitgeist, or would that amount to a kind of bootstrapping à la von Münchhausen?" Hollander, "Contemporary History," 52.

13 Berger, *The Past as History*, 140–224.

or transmissibility to a wider audience.¹⁴ But the crucial point is quite simply that the various players studying and representing the past don't seem to be willing to accept the claim of professional contemporary history to be the judge of the validity of knowledge of the recent past. In certain countries (for example, in Germany), professional contemporary historians seem to hold stronger positions, but elsewhere, they seem to be as weak as their Central European counterparts. In France, according to the diagnosis established by Pierre Nora, history is on the brink of collapse against the flood of the various forms of remembrance.¹⁵ Francois Hartog speaks about the impotence of history replacing the former omnipotence of history.¹⁶ We believe that the root of the problem lies in the transformation of the perception of historical time, which has removed the earlier foundations—a certain structure of historical temporality—to which contemporary history refers, while still defining itself as part of history as an academic discipline.

Perception of Time, Scholarly History, and Contemporary History

Contemporary history as a historical discipline is a relatively recent phenomenon. Nora notes that when he was studying at university, you couldn't write a dissertation on a post-1918 topic.¹⁷ Gérard Noiriel said that in England, before World War I, no scholarly historical works were written on topics from the period after 1837, the year of the first electoral reform. Historical research on the French revolution began in roughly 1889, a century after it broke out. Although the concept and era of contemporary history—which in France still actually started with 1789 and in the United Kingdom originally with 1837—has existed since the beginning of the twentieth century, historians initially were rather reluctant to write about the present, which has been understood as an era the contemporaries of which are still alive.¹⁸ Then, beginning in the 1970s

14 For a summary of the problems of historiography with respect to memory and the political utilization of the past, see Gyáni, "Történelem, vagy csupán emlékezet." Although Gyáni considers the internal changes of historiography necessary if it is going to prove able to respond to the challenge of memory, on the whole he remains optimistic with regards to its potentials.

15 Nora: "L'histoire au péril de la politique." In Nora's interpretation, the political use of the past is not only associated with politicians, but includes references to the past by civil movements.

16 Hartog, *Croire*, 29.

17 Nora, *L'histoire au péril de la politique*. Jaap den Hollander also notes that in the early 1960s, he was not taught about the preceding fifty years at school. Hollander, "Contemporary History," 55.

18 Noiriel, *Sur la "crise" de l'histoire*, 45–47.

(although not without some precursory works), research on the present era spread very quickly among historians, simultaneously with the rapid expansion of the concept and practices of historical memory. Today, it is no longer surprising if someone writes a historical study about a topic from 20–25 or even only 10 years ago. Memory studies have almost grown into an independent discipline.¹⁹ To understand the reasons and nature for the emergence of contemporary history and the trend of memory, we need first to consider why historiography was earlier reluctant to approach the study of the present.

It is obvious, even on the basis of only superficial knowledge of the historiographers of earlier periods, that historians were not always reluctant to study contemporary events. On the contrary, as Koselleck, who is admirably knowledgeable about the classical authors, demonstrates, historians, from Herodotus to the historians of the eighteenth century, for the most part studied the events of their own eras. This was due primarily to methodological reasons. The present was directly accessible, as the historian himself was an eyewitness or at least could rely on eyewitnesses. If handled with the appropriate caution, eyewitness testimony was considered more reliable than fragmented old documents, which were easy to forge.²⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, a contrary approach had taken predominance. As shown by the example cited by Koselleck, by then, historiography had become the discipline of the study of the completed past. Of course, contemporary history continued to exist in the nineteenth century, but only as an inferior field of endeavor in the shadow of history as an academic discipline. It was practiced by journalists and publicists, who, while wanting to take a position amid the complications of the present, also ventured to make forecasts about the future, in an obviously unscientific manner.²¹ Historiography, which regarded itself as an academic discipline, considered it impossible to study the present.

It was in the spirit of this (now outdated) perception of history that Nora, the prestigious initiator of research on historical memory, declared in the 1970s that history of the present does not exist. For him, this is history “sans objet, sans statut et sans définition.”²² Nora’s statement cannot be ignored, as it is

19 Keszei, “Az emlékezet rétegei.”

20 See Lessing’s famous formula: “Überhaupt aber glaube ich, dass der Name eines wahren Geschichtschreibers nur demjenigen zukömmt, der die Geschichte seiner Zeiten und seines Landes beschreibt. Denn nur der kann selbst als Zeuge auftreten.” Quoted by Hollander, *ibid.*, 55.

21 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*. 335–36.

22 “Tant qu’il n’est d’histoire que du passé, il n’y a pas d’histoire contemporaine. C’est une contradiction dans les termes” Nora, “Présent,” 467.

based on a definition of historiography that was valid for a long time. Historians moved beyond Nora's objection without considering its real weight, i.e. without assessing the change that the emergence of contemporary history brought by disrupting the earlier order of historiography and the perception of historical time. So far, the epistemology of contemporary history has hardly been made a subject of methodical study.²³

Historians who reflect on and write the history of the present tend to define their discipline as one of the branches of historiography, but they must also consider their place alongside other disciplines concerned with the study of the present, such as political studies, sociology, and ethnology. Furthermore, they must address and at the same time differentiate themselves from non-scientific representations of the recent past, often grouped under the term "memory."²⁴ These definitions of the history of the present implicitly continue to consider as valid the older premises of historiography, on which history as a discipline was established. The strange situation arises because, while the study of the history of historiography has long historicized these premises, i.e. it has explored their origins and analyzed their time-bound operation, whenever these premises are not the subject of study, they are still—half-explained or implicitly—considered the foundations of professional historiography.²⁵

There is essentially a consensus that the self-definition of academic, professional historiography in the nineteenth century was based on four interrelated premises. The most important one was the presumption of the reality of history as a linear process in time which can be scientifically examined. The second one was the presumption of a dividing line between past and present. The concept of the fundamental difference between past and present was based on the linear perception of time, in which development—or at least change—makes the earlier conditions obsolete and creates a different present, which in turn is open towards a future as yet unknown. From the perspective of the present, the past—since it has already passed—can only be understood through a methodical processing of the sources remaining from earlier times. The third was the assumption that there is a methodology which enables the historian to bridge the distance between present and past by deciphering the sources originating in the past. The fourth premise was that historiography was

23 According to Jaap den Hollander "the theoretical status of contemporary history [is] enigmatic" and "deserves more theoretical reflection than it has received up to now." Ibid., 51–52.

24 Metzler, "Zeitgeschichte."

25 Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*. Koselleck, *Vergange Zukunft*.

born as a national science, and this premise provided a fundamental frame of reference or range of interpretation for the findings of historians.²⁶

Of these premises, the first and the second are obviously the most interesting from the point of view of the perception of the history of the present. We know from Koselleck's analysis of the space of experience and expectation that the "temporalization" of history took place around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This created a perception of past, present, and future that made it possible to look at historical time in a linear perspective. It also created the possibility of the idea of progress; as expectations for the future were based on the conviction that the future can be different, the future has to be different to what has been experienced in the past. However, from the point of view of this discussion, the way in which this influences historical cognition is more important.²⁷ The idea that events appear different to historians from different perspectives has been well-known since the sixteenth century. Now, the idea of perspective has gained a temporal dimension. A theory and practice of historical cognition has been created in which temporal distance is a decisive factor, which makes cognition possible.²⁸ This was only possible if historiography placed itself at least partly outside of history, or rather at a point beyond the past. Assuming a gap between past and present—the second premise—ensured that the past subjects of study had an existence independent from the present. Phases of history which were already completed could exist as external objects for the historian's scrutinizing gaze in the present. The distance between the historian's present and the fundamentally different past was required for the historian's methodology to work.

It followed from the fundamental difference between past and present as perceived by historiography that the future was also open to change. The present, as the past future of an earlier period, was also unforeseeable once, just as it is impossible to predict the future from the present. This belief in historical change, in which the horizon of expectations for the future was put at a distance from the space of experience, was lacking from the earlier perception of time, which did not expect the ongoing events to bring qualitative changes into the

26 On the foundations of historiography see Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*, 9–10, and Etzemüller, "Ich sehe das, was Du nicht siehst." On the nation as a frame of reference see Berger, *The Past as History*.

27 "Die Lehre von der geschichtlichen Perspektiven legitimiert den historischen Erkenntniswandel, indem sie der Zeitfolge eine erkenntnisstiftende Funktion zuweist. Geschichtliche Wahrheiten wurden kraft ihrer Verzeitlichung zu überlegenen Wahrheiten." Koselleck, *Vergange Zukunft*, 336.

28 In the words of Michel de Certeau, time has become object and measurement tool at the same time for historians. de Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse*, 89.

world of people and things.²⁹ Only at the end of the eighteenth century, as people started to experience the present as radically different from their earlier experiences and had expectations for a future that would be different from the present, could historiography emerge as a discipline of change, which studied the completed past, which was therefore unalterable, dividing it into periods and interpreting it from a perspective of the present that was external to the past. This historiography could not embark on a historical analysis of the present, as its gaze was only suitable for the study of the completed past.³⁰ As Arthur C. Danto expressed, especially in response to the complaint that historians couldn't experience the events they are studying, "the whole point of history is *not* to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later events and as parts of temporal wholes."³¹

However, in the emergence of historiography, it was not only the relationship between past and present that mattered from the triple structure of past, present, and future. Expectations for the future made the evolution of historiography possible not simply because without them the dissimilarity between past and present would have been inconceivable. The study of the past was not independent from the horizon of expectations, because the gaze of the historian studying the past was directed by expectations concerning the future. This is not to say that expectations for the future were always fulfilled, in fact, they were rarely met, nevertheless, according to Koselleck, the horizon of the future still contributed to determining the present and thereby also to determining what event of the past seemed worthy of study to the historian in the present. However, the future was capable of orienting the historian's work not as a general future, but as the future of something, specifically of the community to which the historian belonged and whose past he was researching. The concept of history would have been inconceivable without the subject of history, and it was most often the nation which had a history. If the historian's gaze had a wider scope, then it was the history of the West.³²

The practice of contemporary history, I contend, is not based on the four abovementioned premises of classical historiography or the triple time structure of past, present, and future. Its emergence—along with the memory boom—means precisely that this time perception and these premises have

29 See for example Danto's analyses of Thucydides' perception of time, *Analytical Philosophy*, 22–23.

30 See Etzemüller op. cit. and Jung: "Das Neue der Neuzeit ist ihre Zeit."

31 Danto, *Analytical Philosophy*, 183.

32 Berger, "Introduction."

become outdated. It is therefore possible, however, that history of the present misunderstands itself when it perceives itself as a subdiscipline of history and places its own activity in the line of the history writing founded in the early eighteenth century. The emergence of contemporary history “in a sense ... meant a rehabilitation of the tradition from before 1800.”³³

From this point of view, it is questionable, whether the old historiography itself, in which history was based on the connection between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation described by Koselleck, has by now lost some of its persuasive power. Has it not become increasingly meaningless for today’s audiences because the validity of the perception of time on which it was based has become highly questionable? Even more questionable—and this is the focus of this discussion—is whether the history of the present was ever related to the earlier triple time structure which served as the foundation for historiography.

This question is important in the cultural landscape of today, because several defenders of history criticize—in the name of contemporary history, which they still perceive as part of classical historiography—the unprofessional treatment of history, and they continue to attempt to create the legitimate foundations of this criticism by citing their own methodical procedures. On the part of professional historians, the lack of appropriate methodology remains the most important criticism of unprofessional historical representations. Unprofessional museum displays, monuments which evoke the wrong context, distorting documentaries, pathetic ceremonial speeches which draw their expressive force from references to (what is alleged to be) history, and weak historical novels are all criticized for lacking the methodology to create an appropriate context for the recalled elements of the past.³⁴ But is this an effective way of defending professional history against the challenges of non-professional uses of the past? On what is this defense based, when the foundations of the methodology (which is based on the perception of time and which once made professional historiography able to interpret the phenomena of the past) are also questionable or, rather, according to several diagnoses, have become history and belong to the past? The rise of memory and the more recent studies of historiography make this question unavoidable.

33 “[C]ontemporary History finally became an academic subdiscipline, complete with its own chairs, journals, and research institutes. In a sense, this meant a rehabilitation of the tradition from before 1800.” Hollander, “Contemporary History,” 55.

34 For example, Apor, “Hitelesség és hitetlenség.”

The Expansion of the Memory Market and the Reactions of Historians

It is worth dwelling on the issue of the trend of memory for a while because it is one of the phenomena which shows how the classical concept of history has become questionable. There have been numerous studies of the evolution of the concepts of historical memory—and historical heritage—and the related phenomena, which spread particularly beginning with the end of the 1970s, and they are usually considered a kind of phenomenon of crisis.³⁵ There are also numerous analyses describing the trend of remembrance using images of disease, abuse, and natural disasters, such as flooding. These analyses definitely tend to characterize the increased demand for historical memory as a danger for professional history, or they consider it one result of the crisis of professional historiography.³⁶ This is a very old contrast; Halbwachs, one of the founders of memory studies, contrasted history with memory, primarily based on their different relationship to time. The latter is always related to the living human community, while the former stands outside of all possible communities, and its job is not to remember, but to analyze.³⁷ Memory maintains an experience of time through which the remembering community lived, while the historian's task, according to Halbwachs, is to reconstruct the temporality of the past, which is independent from any experienced time and from the present as well. Halbwachs believes that if the historian strays into the territory of memory, he will cease to be a historian.³⁸ Thus, the conflict between historiography and memory was already expressed in the first analyses between the two world wars, and the problem was rediscovered again around the turn of the millennium.

Historiography fundamentally responded in two ways to the memory boom. It either entered the memory market, widening its audience and, naturally, giving its activity a slightly new direction, or it adopted a defensive position. The negative position underlined the fact that the questions of history writing are not

35 On heritage, see Sonkoly, *Bolyhos tájaink*, 17–33. On heritage in Central Europe, see Erdősi and Sonkoly, “Levels of National Heritage Building.”

36 Gyáni, “Történelem, vagy csupán emlékezet” ; Rainer, “...az emlékezet is konfrontálódott a történetírás múltképevel...”; K. Horváth, *Az emlékezet betegéi*; Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire* ; Revel, “Le fardeau de la mémoire.”

37 According to Pierre Nora, the turnaround whereby historiography abandoned its functions of memory and assumed a critical function—basically associated with the emergence of the Annales school—took place precisely during the period when Halbwachs's analyses concerning memory were being written. Nora, “Pour une histoire contemporaine.”

38 Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, 122–35.

asked by politicians, communities expressing their own needs of remembrance, or the media. If historians settle for positions as servants of the memory market, this might well compel them to abandon their academic principles, even though they appear to gain in terms of the size of their audiences and access to research funding. These views, which are critical of memory, criticize forms of remembrance—such as expositions, rites, memorials, texts, etc.—which seem inaccurate and unreliable from the point of view of academic historiography. There are numerous negative reactions of this kind, representing different attitudes, but similarly conservative in their approach to history as an academic discipline.³⁹ Péter Apor very clearly pointed out certain characteristics of the concept and cult of memory from the theoretical point of view. He highlighted the tendency of memory studies to lead often to a *circulus vitiosus*. According to the general approach borrowed primarily from anthropology, the identity of a community is determined by its collective memory, while memory in turn depends on identity itself.⁴⁰ Other authors—in accordance with Nora—consider academic historiography merely a kind of remembrance,⁴¹ which, under given cultural constellations which are in the process of vanishing, enjoyed a leading role for a while in shaping the image of the past. From this point of view, the vanishing of the conceptual foundations of classical historiography is not a loss from the perspective of our understanding of the past. Apor, however, disagrees with the idea that any form of memory could represent a more authentic relationship to the past than historiography based on analysis, methodical source criticism, and rational evidence, and he emphasizes that the questions addressed in the historiography do not originate directly in the needs of social communities or contemporaries' interpretations of past experiences. He continues to insist on the scholarly ideals of source criticism, rational verification, and the interpretation of documents in the correct context, which would not retain a secure position in historiography considered as a form of social memory.⁴²

39 Romsics, “Új tendenciák” ; idem, *A múlt arcai*; Apor, “Hitelesség és hitetlenség.”

40 Ibid., 164–66.

41 Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, 40–59.

42 Apor wants to enforce the evidence-based methodology supported by rational source criticism, on the basis of which historiography can judge the authenticity of representations of the past falling in the category of non-academic historiography. Apor, “Hitelesség és hitetlenség.” But from the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, we can state that there is no rationality or epistemology independent from space and time. The earlier scientific point of view did not come into being in a vacuum; it is not an embodiment of an abstract rationality. So, the validity of this epistemology may not be considered as self-evident in other historical situations than the one in which it was born.

Placing emphasis on the latter scientific approach to history, which assigns a critical role to historiography based on the procedures of traditional methodology, proves ineffective in itself against the demands of memory. As Gábor Gyáni points out, source criticism and other scholarly procedures are not sufficient assurances of authenticity. For our knowledge of the past to be valid, the present must be able to accept it as its own knowledge, which means that it must meet demands from outside the professional community.⁴³ The space in which the voice of professional contemporary history needs to assert itself and the knowledge generated by historiography needs to have itself accepted as authentic is constituted by representations of what is known as experiences of historical agency and the discursive practices related to the past maintained by the multiplayer memory market.⁴⁴ The contemporary history of eyewitnesses and memory takes no interest in the premises and lacks the perception of time on which academic historiography is based.⁴⁵ This presents a challenge to contemporary history, which cannot be surmounted simply with insistence on the academic conception of history. But it is also not clear whether contemporary history resting on scholarly foundations moves in the dynamics of past, present, and future, in which professional history once moved, or this time structure has lost its validity even in professional contemporary history. If so, the classical perception of time and the methodology on which it is based no longer provide a reliable foundation for historical knowledge, in which case one may well ask why the historical methodology would ensure a base for the defense of professional history against the memory market.

Has the Past Come to an End?

Renowned historians and thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Reinhart Koselleck, and Francois Hartog have all diagnosed a fracture in historical time and time perception. In a study analyzing the relationship between past and present, Arendt made the following statement about the loss of the continuity of historical time: “[W]ithout tradition—which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and

43 Gyáni, “Miről szól a történelem?”

44 Frank, *Der Mauer um die Wette gedenken*.

45 Wiewiorka, *L'ère du témoin*.

the biological cycle of living creatures in it.”⁴⁶ Her statements made an impact among historians several decades later, after Koselleck’s works drew attention to the time structures on which historiography is based. On the basis of Koselleck’s initiative, Francois Hartog embarked on an exploration of the various orders of historical temporality (regimes d’historicité). Researching the history of experience and expectation horizons—although the scope of his inquiry extended over more distant ages and geographical areas as well—he primarily explored the changes which took place in the perception of historical time in the twentieth century. Hartog concludes that as long as the relationship between the horizons of experience and expectations is maintained through the present by the subjects of history possessing an identity, and thus what could be seen from the past was what the future of the “nation”, “society”, “country”, or “the West” (or possibly the “proletariat” or the “race”) threw its light upon, there was a space for historiography. Although expectations for the future rarely shaped the future efficiently—and then mostly only as self-fulfilling prophecies—still they substantially contributed to shaping the intellectual/cultural landscape of the present and thereby to the study of the past as well. However, by the last decades of the twentieth century, the horizons of experience and expectation permanently began to diverge, eliminating the time structure which constituted the conditions for historiography. Hartog says this resulted in an expanded, eternal, and directionless present, which has nothing to do with the past and is not clearly oriented towards any future.⁴⁷ We might add to this—and Hartog does not emphasize this—that at the same time the categories which earlier had functioned as the subjects of history have also disintegrated. If today we want to examine the past of the “nation” or the “West” or the “working class” or the “bourgeoisie,” we keep running into question marks: what is it we want to examine? These categories have been broken down by historical analysis, and their constructed nature has been exposed by conceptual history studies. Thus, if somebody wants to look into his or her future, all one can see on the horizon is obscurity, as the existence of these concepts has also become questionable in a constructivist approach. Historiography has often shown that they are unsuitable as a framework for analyses, and historiography has tended first to transcend the history of any nation by allegedly crafting a European history or a transnational history, and then to transcend European histories by narrating

46 Arendt, “The Gap Between Past and Future,” 5.

47 Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité*.

global histories.⁴⁸ The often-cited disintegration of the “grand narratives” actually results from the disintegration of their subjects as the actors of history. At the very least, the “nation,” “society,” and various social groups (and more recently the frequently mentioned “West” itself) no longer function as subjects which could organize historical narratives and secure the unity of historical time through their existence, pointing from the past towards the future.⁴⁹

This disintegration of the subjects of history and of historical time is partly the result of historiography itself. It has become clear partly from the works of Foucault that historical cognition has become an activity, in which research on the origins of phenomena destroys the picture of a uniform past.⁵⁰ Genealogy—the method of understanding which approaches phenomena in their historical aspects, by exploring their origins—exposes as false the origin stories on which the existence of the subjects of history is based, and thereby the “grand narratives” of which they were the subjects also fall apart.⁵¹ Earlier, this genealogical approach as historical method of understanding did not necessarily involve the disintegration of uniform history. Exposing certain origin stories served precisely to allow the events of genuinely foundational importance to stand clear or to create opportunities for new foundations. However, these applications of genealogy definitely had some kind of vision and expectation horizon.⁵² Only after the horizon of the future became obscure in recent decades

48 Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*.

49 As K. Horváth points out, just as Hartog, Niklas Luhman also emphasizes, there can be no continuity or even chronology without identity. K. Horváth, “Betegségek, pszichopatológiák és időstruktúrák.” On the end of the “grand narratives,” see: Takács, “A történelem vége.”

50 Bódy, “Michel Foucault: A szexualitás története.” Burke said that in foundation myths, unintended consequences of past actions are considered conscious aims of the one-time actors. It is the duty of historiography to destroy these myths and thereby to remind us of the fragmented nature of history. Burke’s examples are Durkheim and Weber, as the founders of sociology, and Luther, as the father of Reformation. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, 58–59. Thus, according to Burke, historiography in a critical sense will itself perform a remembrance function, although what constitutes the foundation for this remains unexplained in Burke’s works.

51 Ádám Takács pointed out that it is not history that ends with the end of the “grand narratives,” but only the more or less clearly outlined social/political alternatives. Takács, “A történelem vége.” Translating this into Kosellecki’s terminology, we could say that it was these alternatives that were earlier outlined on the horizon of expectation, and historical time was moving in their direction.

52 As Schwendtner shows, even the Nietzschean genealogy had an orientation towards the future in this sense. It analyzed what originated from the past precisely in order to open a path towards the future. It is even more true of the genealogy perception of Husserl and Heidegger that they also aimed to lay the foundations for new identities or recreate the foundations of old ones, and at the same time to exit the present and create new, future opportunities by examining past events that were of foundational

did it begin to seem—not independently of the impact of Foucault’s works, but as a consequence of probably far broader changes—that no genealogy is possible other than the kind that destroys uniform history, and only then did it begin to seem that, at the same time, the continuity and unity of historical time also cease to exist. Efforts to reinstate history into its earlier position and recreate the dynamic space of experience and expectations, in which historical time can again move from the past towards the future, are therefore seeking categories which could help transcend the postmodern state and create “grand narratives” again.⁵³ However, it is not obvious that it is possible to recreate a teleological history or to have some kind of philosophy of history generally accepted. Teleology cannot be established intentionally, i.e. with the intention of creating teleology. The last such theories relating to the end of history—late reflections of Hegel’s philosophy of history—were spectacularly short of persuasive power. Fukuyama’s concept seems to want to rescue the West as the subject of history by stopping historical time. If history comes to an end, the West remains unchanged, and its identity is no longer questionable.⁵⁴ It is not in this sense that the often-diagnosed predominance of the present means the end of history. Instead, it delegitimizes and even eliminates the idea of history so far, rather than completing the process of history. We could say that the expansion of the present puts an end not to history, but to the past. More precisely, it dissolves the past in the present.⁵⁵

Consequences: Contemporary History in the Present

In light of this evolution of present-centeredness, the rise of contemporary history is an entirely logical development; in fact, it is an adequate response from historiography to the changes in historical time structures. After all, amid the

importance from the perspective of the present—while thereby relativizing their own present. Foundation or connecting with foundations were definitely considered possible. Schwendtner, *Eljövendö milt*.

53 Baschet, “L’histoire face au présent perpétuel.”

54 Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

55 One could say that from this point of view that all of the past has been dissolved in the present and thus the problem of historical distance does not exist and never existed. “The past only ever appears in our present beliefs; it is never given at a distance,” Mark Bevir confidently declares, as if he thereby transcended earlier errors related to this. Bevir, “Why historical distance is not a problem,” 25. Bevir here does not acknowledge the fact that the idea of a past independent from the present was at least as real in the beliefs of the one-time presents, as real as today’s post-foundational ideas. See Gumbrecht’s analyses of the “chronotopes” and, among them, a description of the “historicist” chronotope, which lost its validity around the 1970s to give place to our broad present. Gumbrecht, *Unsere breite Gegenwart*.

fading of historical time, it is increasingly difficult to write about the history of earlier periods in a manner that allows narratives of the past to be interpreted in the light of the present or in a way that suggests that past phenomena throw light on the present. The growing interest in the contemporary is shown by the fact that H-Net, a central website for the humanities and social sciences, offers 6,811 findings for the search expression “medieval,” which was once the main territory of historical research, in contrast with the 22,365 search results for “contemporary.”⁵⁶ In fact, it is the legitimacy of the history writing of earlier periods that is gradually being called into question.⁵⁷ More precisely, outside of professional circles, events of earlier periods can only be interpreted as exempla for the present—not as part of a continuity—in the sense described by Koselleck as the operation of the “*Historia est magistra vitae*” principle, which was eliminated precisely by the emergence of academic historiography at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁸ We can see traces of the return of the exemplum whenever present phenomena are interpreted through past events without the existence of any causal relationship or more distant, but content-based connection between the two. The past is often recalled in this manner in politicians’ speeches and newspaper articles in order to throw light on current processes, from global politics to local events.

Thus, amid this present-centeredness, it is no wonder that many historians turn towards the study of the present, where the legitimacy, meaningfulness, and importance of research topics is not called into question, and which also meets with far more interest among far wider audiences. However, the present-centeredness of contemporary history means that most of the premises defining historiography in the classical way fail in this case. The necessity of the historical methodology is not self-evident, because there are other ways to access the recent past. If one still wishes to apply the historical method, this requires special explanation, because—unlike in the case of earlier periods—the historical methodology is only one of several possible alternatives. But perhaps most importantly, the classical modern concept of history, in which past, present, and future were simultaneously connected and separated by the

56 While for the search expression “middle age,” 1,671 items appear on the web-site H-Net, the search term “contemporary history” yielded 2,577 findings, and in addition, one can find another 246 items for “present time.” The French expression “moyen âge” yields only 104 results, while the French word “contemporain” yields 420. (These searches were done on May 15, 2017.)

57 Hochmut stated, for example, that “*Public History* in den Berliner Museen ist vor allem *Public Contemporary History*.” Hochmut, “HisTourismus” 177.

58 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*.

linear flow of time, has become empty and lost its meaning. Once the notion has gained currency that the existence of a history in this sense is a question of belief, this history ceases to be a certainty.⁵⁹ The place of the past as a linear process, which can be observed from the present and scientifically analyzed and understood, has been taken, as is well known, by the concepts of memory and heritage. The dominance of the concepts of memory and heritage means that rather than analyzing—based on historical methodology—the process of historical time considered as real, the past is becoming only accessible for the present as heritage or through memory. Hence, one must be faithful to heritage and preserve memory.⁶⁰

Modern historiography was born in a somewhat autonomous system of academic institutions in the sociological sense, which was also the medium upholding the system of rules on the basis of which a specialist work is classified as good or bad. In the classical period of historiography, historiography was connected to non-academic spheres by the teleological approach and the national frame of reference, which also shared these ideas. Today, this is no longer the case. Nation as a frame of reference does not work consensually. Nowadays, though history exists within autonomous academic institutions which function on the basis of certain professional rules, the communication between the historical profession and the broader public sphere is hindered not only by the fact that, outside of this medium, the rules governing the sciences do not apply, but also by the absence of a commonly shared teleological approach or national thinking. This should not be misunderstood as an appeal to bring nation back in the form that in which it used to operate, nor indeed would this be possible. Furthermore, historians cannot artificially create a new teleology, which would go from the past to the future through the present. The potential subjects of such a history (not only the “nation” but also the “West” as subjects of history) were also deconstructed with the emergence of a transnational global history.⁶¹ Hence, it is no use wishing for a return of

59 So believes Francois Hartog, who thinks that for our current thinking, only the ever-wandering present remains, and the past can only be interpreted as recollection and heritage, rather than as history. Hartog, *Croire en l'histoire*, 281–82.

60 Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 1–30.

61 On the website H-Net, the expression “global History” yields 2,415 items and “transnational history” yields 1,449. These two numbers indicate the popularity of these research fields. (These searches were done on May 15, 2017.) However, transfers, interactions, networking, and other key concepts of transnational history are not suitable as historical subjects, or at least not as subjects with which readers can identify. Wehler, “Transnational Geschichte”; Conrad, *What is Global History*, 185–203.

the earlier methods of cognition in the absence of the foundations and wider intellectual framework on which they were based. Thus, using an argument drawn from the sociology of knowledge, we can say in this case that what was classified as rational methodology—proposed for example by Apor⁶²—within the earlier framework and of classical historiography has lost its foundations and, hence, its persuasive power. As can be seen, alternative approaches are highly attractive.

So, historiography is only one of several possible alternative approaches to the study of the present, and the application of its methods is no longer self-evident. But furthermore, its tools do not seem strong compared to those of its competitors. Why would there be any need for the use of historical methods in connection with a period for which the issue is not the interpretation of the remaining sources, but what eyewitnesses can remember of it? The sources are not part of a remote past, which is only accessible through the use of special methods. Rather, they have meanings which are considered self-evident for people living today. Why should professional historians—practitioners of a specific methodology—alone be competent as interpreters of the history of the present, when this present (or at least the sources to which it has given rise) is still accessible in our everyday culture?⁶³ It is obviously impossible to understand events or processes which took place two hundred years ago without special preliminary training. This is basically accepted by everyone interested in history as non-professionals. This is the consequence of the principle of the historical perspectivity, on which historiography was based. However, in connection with periods from which there are still living eyewitnesses or which still have a living collective memory, this is not self-evident. Of course, professional history possesses an analytical force compared to everyday thinking. But anthropology, fictional literature, films, journalistic works, exhibitions, etc. can be just as competent as interpretations of various phenomena of the present as historiography. Literary works such as Péter Esterházy's *Harmonia Caelestis* (*Celestial Harmonies*, available in English translation by Judith Sollosy) and *Javított kiadás* (“Revised Edition”) are arguably important works in Hungary for readers interested in the socialist era, even though by genre they are novels. One could also mention Péter Nádas's *Egy családregény vége* (*The End of a Family Story*,

62 Apor, “Hitelesség és hitetlenség.”

63 This is also essentially the direction in which the arguments of Timothy Garton Ash point when he questions the privilege of professional historiography in researching the history of the present and undertakes to defend his own journalistic methods and writing. Ash, “Introduction.”

available in English translation by Imre Goldstein), not to mention numerous other authors of works of fiction of lower quality but some significance.

As a consequence of the absence of the earlier dynamics of past, present, and future from the study of contemporary history, the history of the present stands in many ways closer to literary fiction or film on the one hand and, on the other, to other contemporary studies than it does to the historiography which is focused on earlier periods.⁶⁴ Of the contemporary disciplines, it is currently obviously closest to anthropology, although, in theory, it could well move closer to sociology or political science, but for the moment there are no signs of this. In any event, the history of the present thus communicates more with other ways of thinking directed at the recent past than it does with the historiography of earlier periods. This is reflected, for instance, by the extent to which many historians of the present are unable or unwilling to connect the phenomena they are studying with events preceding them in time, and they hesitate to place them into context as part of a longer (for example, mid-term) continuity. This mainly happens in the culturalist versions of histories of the present. In Hungary, there are hardly any historians who research both periods before and after 1945, and it may well be true that in most Central and Eastern European countries historians are split into two distinct groups, those studying eras before 1945 and those pursuing research on the post-1945 era, without knowing much more than the educated non-professional about earlier periods.⁶⁵

Of course, the history of the present is a meaningful intellectual activity, which can apply various cultural techniques, but it seems questionable how much it is indeed a continuation of historiography when the premises which once defined historiography are now lacking. At the same time, of course, the history of the present can be pursued well or badly. But the difference between a good work of history on the present or a good exhibition on the history of the present and a bad one does not necessarily lie in the fact that one applies the scientific methodology of historiography well and the other one does not. Nobody would argue with Esterházy in the name of scientific rigor about the fate of the aristocracy after 1945 or the work of the secret service of the party state as portrayed in his literary account of his father's activity as an agent. His

64 See for example the Sándor Horváths' work *Feljelentés*, which offers a detailed historical account of the life of a totally insignificant agent of the Hungarian political police, which throws more light on the history of the state socialism than any analyses of the social and political structure of the era.

65 The problem is diagnosed and the need to examine continuities across the boundary of 1945 is suggested by Bódy and Horváth, "1945 és a háború társadalma," 7–12.

novel and similar fictional accounts are very good books of their own kind. A historian of the present can enter into a dialogue with these works precisely because—although they are specifically not works of historiography—they are intellectual efforts directed at the same object with which the historian is dealing. However, if the historian of the present does not criticize good writers from the point of view of science, then bad writers and poor museum exhibitions should not be criticized from a so-called scientific point of view either.

It follows from this that the criticism by good historians of the present of poor representations of memory, poor museologists, and the designers of bad monuments should not be legitimized with the academic authority of historiography. Calls for adequate source criticism or appropriate contextualization, which cite the old methodology of historiography, are ineffective in themselves. Contemporary history cannot successfully defend itself against these challenges in this manner. In spite of its internal colorfulness, the voice of contemporary history is lost in the polyphony of other contemporary studies, the memory market, and political uses of the past because it tries to base its position and authority on something which one can hardly expect to be appreciated in the present-centered present. In this sense, the history of the present may not be what it claims to be. However assiduously it applies new concepts (for instance transnationality, which has been prominent in the past two decades), it often makes no impact on other contemporary studies or the wider public, and it is often unable to connect with the demand for forms of remembrance. Thus, in the current intellectual sphere, historians of the present are not in the same privileged position as historians dealing with earlier periods which are clearly divided from the present. They argue in vain that they are more competent than others thanks to their use of a historical methodology. The historical perspective, which legitimizes the historical methodology in research on the earlier past, does not provide a solid base for research which is focused on the present, and it definitely does not provide a position of authority which would give historiography a special role among other forms of reflection directed at the present.⁶⁶ Thus, in the absence of the dynamics of time, the history of the present is in fact based on the paradox of the gaze looking at itself, which makes it weak compared to other approaches to the study of the present, which do not draw their analytical power from the temporal perspective. This paradox also leaves the history of the present devoid of tools in comparison with remembrance, from

66 Nora believes that the historian's function regarding the present time is ground down against journalism and contemporary studies such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and geography. Nora, "Présent," 471.

which it does not effectively differ, since, through the latter, the person who remembers can also project himself into the events recalled.

Historians of the present who are doing a good job from the intellectual point of view should reflect on what their activity comprises and the foundations on which it is based. They should also consider the criteria on which any distinction between good and bad history of the present could be made, or between a good exhibition or historical monument and a bad one. They should work out the foundations on the basis of which contemporary history communicates with other academic and non-academic forms of understanding the present, and they should also reflect on and articulate the premises on which they base assertions of the validity of their own procedures. According to Nora's proposition, the first step in this direction should be to acknowledge that contemporary history is not a temporal appendix at the end of the long process of history. In fact, it is not even history. More precisely, he believes it is a history which differs from the notion of history as it is normally understood (a means of seizing an understanding of earlier periods).⁶⁷ History as a discipline established on the basis of a linear notion of time was based precisely on the exclusion of the present.⁶⁸ Thus, the history of the present can only be constructed on foundations which differ from those of classical historiography, and which give rise to different rules. This construction would be necessary to provide effective protection against a flood of low-quality works and against the memory market, where according to the dominant view everyone has his or her own memory and his or her own history, which is immune to criticism, if one relies solely on the old rules of historiography. This is why it would be urgent to find a definition of a history of the present which preserves the values of historiography upheld by the professional community and still holds meaning for non-historians, i.e. is still able to communicate—on the basis of some kind of new foundations—with other social spheres. Of course, the question Nora asked forty years ago concerning the historians of the future who will write on their present remains open: “Mais faut-il encore l'appeler historien?”⁶⁹

67 “[L]’histoire contemporaine . . . n’est pas le simple appendice temporel d’une histoire sûre d’elle-même, mais un histoire *autre* et que l’exclusion du contemporain hors du champ de l’histoire est précisément ce qui lui donne sa spécificité.” Ibid., 467.

68 Ibid.

69 Nora, “Présent,” 472.

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Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European history in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

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