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The International and the Limits of History

‘Everything within the whole progresses: only the whole itself to this day does not progress.’¹

Introduction

What is the meaning of the international for history? This, in its most concise form, is the question that underlay the controversy over the status of history in IR that ran more or less unbroken through the 1980s and 90s. That controversy might appear in recent years to have reached settlement and therefore to be closed. Even if no outright victory was achieved, over time history and its proponents undeniably regained legitimacy, the so-called historical turn, around the millennium, announcing a renewed commitment and the establishment in 2013 of the Historical International Relations Section of the ISA setting the seal on the process of revalidation. Indicative of this revival was that, in a statement article on history’s place in IR from 2008 by two of its foremost advocates in the discipline, John Hobson and George Lawson, the tables could be turned and even the once excoriated enemy welcomed, with the magnanimity of the victor, into the historical fold. There they noted that ‘even the apparently archetypal version of ahistorical IR – Waltzian neorealism – has been historically “filled in”² by Robert Gilpin, John Mearsheimer and others, so demonstrating that neorealism itself could be won for history. The incorporation of the extreme case was just part of a broader assertion of history’s prerogatives in IR. Reframing the disciplinary record, Hobson and Lawson suggested that the anti-historical 80s and 90s should be regarded as an anomaly for a subject that has otherwise always accorded historical knowledge due importance, and, in the central claim of the argument, they proposed that the historical nature of all theoretical positions in IR ought now to be recognised: history should be acknowledged as the most catholic of churches, the ‘lowest common denominator’³ across the discipline, encompassing everyone. Such being the case, the question that their article ostensibly addresses – what is history in

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Progress’, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 149.

² John M. Hobson and George Lawson, ‘What is History in International Relations?’, *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), p. 417.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

International Relations? – in truth becomes otiose, the only possible question, if history is a given, instead being a different, and narrower, one: what *kind* of history should be practised in International Relations? And it is this second question that actually forms the substance of the paper, theories being distributed across a spectrum according to their logic of historical explanation, from the macro–nomothetic to the micro–idiographic. As a result, the single open issue is where on this spectrum one is situated: what kind of history one does. The merits of each position are acknowledged and debate and disagreement are recognised as legitimate and welcome – ‘no one “owns” history’⁴ – but nevertheless one has to be located within. If history is common to all, if ‘we are all historians now’,⁵ then there is nothing outside the historical space.

Framed in this way, not only has history re-established its importance and incorporated what appeared ahistorical, but, in a sweeping gesture, it has asserted ownership of the entire field – the history question is answered as IR is swallowed whole. However, the victory is not as complete as it seems, for it comes at a cost. In the same breath in which the claims of history are expanded, the scope of the term is restricted (the latter move enabling the former). The question of history has here become a question of historiography, of the preferred method of constructing historical narrative. As a consequence, what originally in fact animated the controversy is rendered invisible and is forgotten. The problem of history in IR, an issue that in its time generated such heat,⁶ is thereby neutralised or bracketed – but it is not resolved, because that problem was never a historiographic one. Rather, it was always located elsewhere. Although Hobson and Lawson’s question is specifically phrased as ‘what is history in International Relations?’, no sustained consideration is given to either of the basic elements of their own formulation.⁷ Nowhere is the international, as such, made an object of attention in the context of reflection on history. That, as the form of humanity’s political existence at a global level, it might have significance for historical consciousness and understanding goes unnoticed. Instead, the term ‘international’ here functions only as an indicator of disciplinary demarcation and is otherwise empty, denoting an unproblematic,

⁴ Ibid. p. 417.

⁵ Ibid., p. 434.

⁶ ‘Totalitarian’ Richard Ashley once described neorealism as being, and not because it opted for the nomothetic end of the spectrum (Richard K. Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neorealism’ in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 290).

⁷ These absences are equally marked in a subsequent amplification of the argument (George Lawson, ‘The eternal divide? History and International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2010), pp. 203–26).

neutral space that as far as history is concerned is no different from the domestic, requiring no particular consideration in itself. Correlatively, theoretical reflection on history is exhausted in the surveying of different modes of explanation (meaning, essentially, causal reconstruction), the primary problem of which is held to be striking a correct balance of law-like process and eventfulness. ‘History’, as a concept, is confined strictly within historiographic boundaries. As a consequence, fundamental dimensions of the question of history are excluded in their entirety, not even recognised: what history means as a mode of understanding and experience of the past; how in historical consciousness past, present and future are related to one another; how a temporal sense, to which the past and history are indispensable, is central to the constitution of subjectivity; how the form of historical understanding – what counts as valid knowledge of the past – is bound up with social and political form; how and why all of these have themselves changed historically; and so on. If the problem of history and IR is not one of historiography, then to the extent that the resolution is framed in those terms it fails, and the issue remains unresolved and ‘live’. Instead, for the substance of the problem to be grasped, it is to consideration of history in its wider dimensions, and their relation to the international, that one must turn.

The intention of this article, therefore, is to open a different path for the discussion of history in IR. The purpose of revisiting the history controversy is certainly not to refight old battles or to stake out another position within the terms of the old debate but rather to look again at what was really at issue – what the problem was – and to address it in a new way. The interconnection of historical experience and understanding with sovereignty and political subjectivity has long preoccupied critical thought,⁸ and the argument here is centred on this nexus, developing it within the particular context of the international. It is concerned with the character of historicity of historical consciousness and political form. Given this, the discussion cannot be elaborated simply as a history of history, as that would presuppose the type of knowledge that is itself intended to be the object of critique. Rather, the mode of

⁸ See, *inter alia*: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press, 2002); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007); Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.1, 1913–26* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 236–52, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: New Left Books, 1977) and ‘Theses on the Concept of History’, in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.4, 1938–40* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 389–400.

enquiry has an affinity with what Giorgio Agamben has termed a philosophical archaeology.⁹ It is an investigation into, in Agamben's sense, the 'prehistory' of history, the manner of arising of historical consciousness, and its relation to sovereignty and the international. The argument is developed in three sections. The first is concerned to make plain what the 'history problem' in IR is. It returns to the sharp end of the controversy, reviewing the way in which the issue of history in relation to the international was framed, primarily by thinkers associated more or less closely with Realism, and why the radical historicising critics reacted so strongly in opposition to the apparent denial of history in IR. The second turns to historical consciousness and recent work on the development of the concept of 'the past'. It reads this together with the seminal studies by Reinhart Koselleck on the emergence of the modern Western sense of historical time and with the idea of modernity as a 'regime of historicity' orientated towards the future. The third then makes the connection of sovereignty and history – the new historical subject as the new sovereign political subject. It links together temporal and spatial form, history and the international, through the concept of boundaries in time and space. The conclusion draws the implications of the argument and sets out a different answer to the question 'what is history in International Relations?'

The history problem

At first sight it might seem odd that IR could be considered a 'discipline without history',¹⁰ or that there could even be serious debate about the significance of history for the subject. Surely there is as much international history to study as there is history of anything else? Doubtless, but to make this simple observation suffices to reveal that what was at issue in the controversy was the significance of history in an altogether different sense. That 'things happened', that there is an infinitude of international history to study, nobody denied. At the core of the dispute was, rather, the status of history as such, its meaning, in relation to the international. In this respect, what the history problem descended from and always revolved around was a question of a different order: one from the philosophy of history. An indication of its shape emerges in some remarks on the concept of progress by Theodor Adorno:

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of all Things: on Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), pp. 81–111. For a discussion of philosophical archaeology, see William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference: a Critical Overview* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 29–48.

¹⁰ Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648 Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 14.

Today reflections [on progress] come to a point in the contemplation of whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe. The forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life, if a self-conscious global subject does not develop and intervene. The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystallize around it.¹¹

Adorno went on to note that in Kant's construction of the logic of the historical process 'the concept of history, in which progress would have its place, is emphatic, the Kantian universal or cosmopolitan concept, not one of any particular sphere of life.'¹² However, this leads to a contradiction, for 'the dependence of progress on the totality comes back to bite progress.'¹³ Through societal integration on a global scale, the question of the meaning of history has come to exist most urgently at the level of the whole – 'the concept of progress is linked to that of a fulfilled humanity, and it is not to be had for less'.¹⁴ But at that level humanity falls short because its own logic of political organisation as a fragmented totality does not let it attain the whole: it is globalised but without forming 'a self-conscious global subject'. Still unknown to itself, humanity does not yet exist as such. If the question of progress has come to be located in the problem of global political form, that in turn reflects back upon the nature of the historical process: all history, all the progress of Spirit or development of modes of production, has always been within, but never of, the whole. The one level that now really matters was always, and remains, outside the dynamic of progress. So at that level there has been no real history because there has not been substantive, qualitative change that would transform the character of human existence. Instead, humanity's mode of social and political organisation is no more rational, coherent and self-aware now, as a totality, than it ever has been.¹⁵ Despite inconceivable advance in so many fields of human endeavour, the self-divided, subjectless whole itself remains outside and essentially unchanging. The problem of the rationality of history has thus come to depend upon the whole, but the whole exists only

¹¹ Adorno, 'Progress', p. 144. In a contemporaneous lecture series, Adorno added to these remarks: '[W]hat I mean by this global subject of mankind is not simply an all-embracing terrestrial organization, but a human race that possesses genuine control of its own destiny right down to the concrete details, and is thus able to fend off the unseeing blows of nature. On the contrary, the mania for organization, be it for an enlarged League of Nations or for some other global organization of all mankind, might easily fall into the category of things that prevent us from achieving what all men long for, instead of promoting that cause' (Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–5* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) p. 143). Only through a transformation in the nature of humanity's socio-political existence, not merely its supplementation by international institutions or organisations, could a global *subject* come into existence.

¹² Adorno, 'Progress', p. 145.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁵ The non-progressive quality of the international is thereby revealed as the real substance of progress: 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 320).

in absentia, continually posited by humanity's forms of political organisation and equally continually denied by them. There is, still, no global subject – and where there is no subject, there is no history. History as universal, not merely particular, development has thus reached a block in this absence at the centre of global political form, an absence named, necessarily by indirection, in the term 'the international'.

This historico-philosophical question of the not-yet-existent global subject formed the ground of the history controversy. In developing as a distinct field of study after World War II, IR attempted to articulate the relationship of international existence to historical time. While the Realist writers who principally shaped the discipline were far from ignorant of or uninterested in history, in light of twentieth-century experience they figured that relationship as fundamentally problematic. In the eclipse of so-called Idealism, notions of progress, harmony of interests and the advance of civilisation originating in the Enlightenment had to be discarded as naïve: there was no linear development of history to higher stages, no gradual pacific integration of humanity through commerce, and no civilisational step beyond war. Prudential statesmanship might avert or at least mitigate conflict in a fractured, fallen world, and a judicious amalgam of bright-eyed liberal vision and Realist worldly wisdom might perhaps be contrived, but that was the limit of expectation.¹⁶ In the realm of international politics, it was necessary first and foremost to recognise, accept and work within the persisting fact of fragmentation and the immemorial realities of power, security and *raison d'état*. The division that produced such fragmentation was placed at the conceptual centre of the texts that pressed hardest upon the problem of history in IR. For Martin Wight, having surveyed anything that could be construed as relevant literature, international theory was to be discerned only as a shadowy *para* phenomenon, perpetually ancillary to the long tradition of political theory, and as such it had no coherent history of its own.¹⁷ Political theory necessarily developed over time, as society changed in its essence; international thought did not develop because international existence stayed essentially the same. Where progress could be attributed to the history of states 'considered in isolation',¹⁸ once set within the

¹⁶ As argued by both E.H. Carr and John Herz in the attempt to produce a convincing blend of Realism and utopianism (E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: an Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2001) and John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951)).

¹⁷ Martin Wight, 'Why is there no International Theory?', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays on the Theory of International Relations* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966). For this failure, Wight blamed the 'intellectual prejudice' (p. 20) in favour of the state and the belief in progress.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

context of the whole such a developmental perspective disappeared: domestic advances might astound an observer from the past, but international conditions would be wearily familiar, ‘the same old melodrama’.¹⁹ The achievement of internal progress sets into relief the obdurately different temporal character of the international, as the ‘realm of recurrence and repetition’.²⁰ In this famous essay, the boundary between domestic and international thus marks a profound division between forms of life, demarcating one that knows history, politics and progress, where humans enjoy rational control of their own existence, from one that does not: ‘Political theory and law are maps of experience or systems of action within the realm of normal relationships and calculable results. They are the theory of the good life. International theory is the theory of survival.’²¹ Where Wight’s argument concluded with the strong distinction between inside and outside, Kenneth Waltz made this the premise of his structural theory. The flat, anarchic space of the international was strictly distinguished from the hierarchical, ordered internal space;²² everything else followed from that foundational division. This separation was made the organising principle of the theory in order to capture the effects of the fact that international existence, perpetually without overarching authority, does not cohere into a pacified, rational whole but instead remains fragmented and riven by conflict. Waltz readily acknowledged that ‘important discontinuities occur’²³ in international history, but these could be explained by changes within political entities. The more profound problem, one that required a different sort of approach, was that despite all of these discontinuities the *character* of international existence had never been qualitatively transformed: ‘the texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly’.²⁴ A ‘dismaying persistence’²⁵ cancels the innumerable discontinuities, as all the change issues in no change. The borderline that separates anarchy from hierarchy is thus, in Waltz and in Wight, thoroughly temporal and historical in meaning, for it is ‘the enduring anarchic character of international politics [that] accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia’.²⁶ The spatial division – inside and outside – that enables the possibility of the good life has always carried

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 33.

²² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979)

²³ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 66.

with it a form of division in time – history and repetition. Just as the political entails the international, so the historical entails the non-historical.

It was the publication of *Theory of International Politics* that provoked the history controversy, as Waltz, by formulating it in the boldest way, sharpening the antithesis for the sake of the unchanging, brought to a head the qualitative problem of the relation of the international space to time and history – the strong distinction he made between anarchy and hierarchy is simply another way of stating the absence of a global subject. It hardly needs saying that Waltz was perfectly aware that a substantial temporal span separated, for instance, the Peloponnesian War from the Cold War, but for the problem he was concerned with the continuity and identity across time were more revealing and mattered more: in international existence the present did not escape the past by decisively differentiating itself from it but simply repeated it in a new form. This apparent disregard for the significance of temporal distance gave rise to a furious response on behalf of history. The most straightforward mode of criticism was to accuse neorealism of being incapable of explaining history in an adequate way. The deliberate parsimony was too insubstantial and too rigid for the variety and complexity of the historical process: the wealth of actual history could never be reducible to such thin theoretical gruel.²⁷ This criticism was, in its own terms, largely successful. But it was also beside the point, because the problem of history and the international, as formulated by Waltz, was not one of reconstruction of the historical process but was instead concerned with the qualitative ‘texture’ of international existence and its invariant character. In failing to appreciate what was actually at issue and remaining at the level of historiography, this criticism also missed the further implications of Waltz’s argument about the international and

²⁷ Such criticisms started, relatively gently, with John Ruggie (John Gerard Ruggie, ‘Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: toward a Neorealist Synthesis’, in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 131–57) and quickly became more strongly worded (see, for instance, Rodney Bruce Hall and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, ‘Medieval Tales: Neorealist “Science” and the Abuse of History’, *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 479–91). Paul Schroeder’s interventions were particularly emphatic (Paul Schroeder, ‘Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory’, *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 108–48; Colin Elman, Miriam Fendius Elman and Paul Schroeder, ‘History vs. Neo-realism: A Second Look’, *International Security*, 20:1 (1995), pp. 182–95). This line of attack has not yet exhausted itself: see Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance and Zara Steiner (eds), *History and Neorealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) for the most recent contribution. The vulnerability of Waltzian Realism on this score arguably reflects the transition from first-generation American Realism, with its roots in a German pre-World War Two intellectual context, to a new generation acculturated to very different intellectual *mores*. Waltz’s basic premise is a problem from the philosophy of history, but from that he attempted to construct a causal–explanatory, quasi-scientific theory of international behaviour. What is an important problem in the one field is far too insubstantial as a basis for explanation in the other. Hence the theory’s persisting power amidst continual confusion about exactly what and how much it is supposed to be able to explain.

history. Those implications were, however, not lost on his more radical critics, who were quick to interpret them as danger. Although they, too, generally pursued the historiographic critique, they added something else as well: a moral and political outrage at what was being done to history. For them, what was offensive in Waltz's Realism, and sometimes in Realism as a whole, was more than just bad history – the denial of history was tantamount to a denial of freedom. So, critical theory, according to Robert Cox, because it is interested in promoting social and historical change, 'reasons historically'.²⁸ The new Realism,²⁹ by contrast, should be recognised as 'nonhistorical or ahistorical, since it, in effect, posits a continuing present'.³⁰ As such, it was conservative of the status quo. Richard Ashley likewise indicted Waltzian Realism as 'a *historicism of stasis*'³¹ and 'an apologia for the status quo, an excuse for domination'.³² It 'denies *history as process*', it denies '*the significance of practice*', and, most heinously of all, it 'denies *politics*'.³³ For Justin Rosenberg in 1994, Realism was 'the conservative ideology of the exercise of modern state power'.³⁴ To recover 'historical agency', the activity, struggle and contestation that produce the historical process, from Realism's deadening abstractions what was needed was 'historical explanation',³⁵ which would show that 'the history of the states-system has a live political content'.³⁶ Ten years later, Benno Teschke repeated the theme, denouncing neorealism as 'a science of domination [that] compresses the rich history of human development into a repetitive calculus of power'.³⁷ Always, for these critics, what was most offensive in neorealism's apparent ahistoricism was its political import. This was because, although 'history' was the continual cry, it was not primarily the past that was understood to be under threat: 'Ignoring history does not simply do an injustice to the *history* of the international system. Most significantly, it leads to a problematic view of the *present*.'³⁸

²⁸ Robert Cox, 'Social Forces and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 214.

²⁹ In which Cox included Hans Morgenthau as well as Waltz.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³¹ Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', p. 289 (emphasis in original).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 290–2 (emphases in original).

³⁴ Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: a Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁷ Teschke, *Myth of 1648*, p. 274.

³⁸ John M. Hobson, 'What's at Stake in "Bringing Historical Sociology *back* into International Relations"? Transcending "Chronofetishism" and "Tempocentrism" in International Relations' in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (eds), *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 5 (emphases in original).

In the history controversy, at its sharpest point, ‘history’ thus in fact denoted its opposite: today and tomorrow, not yesterday. If, as a result of unhistorical ‘*chronofetishism*’ and ‘*tempocentrism*’,³⁹ IR had ‘effectively written the issue of “change” off the international relations agenda altogether’,⁴⁰ then the history problem was about the possibility of the new, transformation in the present, and the intensity of the conflict arose from its fundamentally political nature. Much more was felt to be at stake than simply debate over the merits of different historiographic preferences: denial of historical process and change was perceived to be denial of the capacity of humans to alter and shape their existence. The question of history in IR thus leads far beyond scholarly study of the past, into conceptions of liberty and political agency. This was always the real substance of the polemics in the 1980s and 90s. But why that should be so, why *history* should carry such political significance, was never made explicit in those debates and remains unexplored. To open up the history question in IR and make evident the proper dimensions of the problem of history and the international it is necessary to consider how modern historical consciousness, with its particular relation of past and present, is bound up with the modern form of subjectivity and political being and its idea of freedom.

Past, present and future

The typical move of the radical critics in response to neorealist ahistoricism was to affirm a strong distinction between past and present: to contextualise and historicise, putting the past into the past, in order to show the essential difference between then and now.⁴¹ What is the logic of this move? What experience of time and history is implicit in it? Why and how are history and freedom related? And, to begin with, what is the idea of the past that is being appealed to here? Though it may appear self-evident, ‘the past’, as such, is not simply a given of any and all historical thought but denotes a type of relation to what went before that took many centuries to come into being. Developing an argument of Constantin Fasolt’s, Zachary Schiffman proposes that to understand the historicity of ‘the past’, it is essential to see that intrinsic to the ‘distinction between past and present’ – the ‘founding principle’⁴² of modern

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 6–15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴¹ Representative is John Hobson’s complaint that in ahistorical IR ‘*discontinuous* ruptures and *differences* between historical epochs and states systems are smoothed over and consequently obscured’ (Hobson, ‘What is at Stake’, p. 9 (emphases in original)). Many of these critics are of course closely associated with historical sociology in IR.

⁴² Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), p. 4.

historical consciousness – is the belief that ‘the past is not simply *prior* to the present but *different* from it’.⁴³ This presumption of difference brings with it modern history’s conviction that ‘each historical entity exists in its own distinctive context, [which] differs from our own’⁴⁴ as well as its ‘most basic principle of method’,⁴⁵ anachronism. Historians in the ancient world, so Schiffman argues, did not share this way of understanding history because they did not have a unified conception of ‘the past’. What they knew, instead, were multiple pasts, quantitative–linear and qualitative–episodic, not necessarily commensurable with each other.⁴⁶ Likewise, they knew not a single time but multiple times, again linear and episodic and again relative to and incommensurable with each other.⁴⁷ The strong conceptual division between past and present characteristic of modern historical consciousness had not yet been made.⁴⁸ As a result, their relation to the past, *qua* object, was different: ‘instead of “the past,”’ ancient historians ‘conceived of things that had passed’.⁴⁹ Nor was there a consistent sense of anachronism: to the extent that Thucydides, for instance, demonstrates an awareness of differences between past and present, he does so ‘without elevating that awareness to a principle of historical knowledge’ itself.⁵⁰ These were not, however, simply primitive and inadequate attempts to articulate the past and history understood in modern terms. Rather, what they expressed were a different form of experience and a different form of subjectivity. Neither time nor the past had yet been unified and articulated to a single point located in the knowing subject. While ‘we expect a historian to view events ... from a perspective that relates parts to whole, just as an artist orients the elements of a landscape in relation to a vanishing point’,⁵¹ how the self of the ancient historian related to the past precluded him from ‘taking a perspective’ in this fashion and from objectifying the past in the same way – Thucydides’ ‘mental landscape’ was such that ‘he could not subordinate what we regard as

⁴³ Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 2 (emphases in original). Priority in time, of itself, ‘does not constitute the past as an intellectual construct’ (p. 71).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Fasolt, *Limits of History*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Schiffman, *Birth of the Past*, Part One.

⁴⁷ Donald J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987), Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ It may not have been the modern one, but the ancient historians did nevertheless themselves represent a crucial temporal division, that between history and myth: ‘Thucydides declares in the book’s opening pages that he intends to eliminate any traces of *muthos* from his account (pejoratively calling it *muthôdes*, a sort of poetic exaggeration, as alluring as it is empty)’ (François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 32).

⁴⁹ Schiffman, *Birth of the Past*, p. 71.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22. The sense of anachronism would only begin to emerge in the Renaissance.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the second (and tertiary) to the primary levels of his argument.⁵² This form of subjectivity and relation to the past also determined the ancient historians' sense of the limits of human agency within a historical time that was understood as essentially repetitive. They did not share 'our notion of "event"'⁵³ and instead thought in terms of 'occurrences' – where 'events generate novelty, occurrences catalyse predictable processes'⁵⁴ that unfold with inexorability. The temporal and historical space of ancient history was thus throughout shaped by the way in which, in the absence of an emphatic distinction – a break – between them, what had passed continued to inform the present.⁵⁵

'The past' is therefore not an a priori but an 'intellectual construct'⁵⁶ and thus itself historical. The mode of experience of the past, and its meaning, changes with the form of subjectivity and the form of society. What, retrospectively, would be termed the Western sense of historical time of course developed substantially from the ancient world, first with the advent of Christianity – the relation of past, present and future being rearticulated in the Augustinian mind and through the idea of the saeculum – and then with the Renaissance's simultaneous rediscovery of antiquity and relegation of the 'dark ages'.⁵⁷ However, only with modernity did 'the past' as a unified entity, decisively divided from the present, come into existence.⁵⁸ This development was inseparable from the advent of the new Cartesian and then Kantian subject, through which the metaphysical and epistemological problems associated with the formation of absolute, Newtonian time were resolved: time was refashioned as abstract, homogenous and without limit, completely independent of and separate from any events that took place within it.⁵⁹ These revolutionary developments, which turned the world inside-out, dividing the subject from the object and subordinating the latter to the former so that the validity of objectivity came to be articulated to and depend upon the subject rather than *vice versa*, transformed the sense of temporality and historical time. In the conceptual language developed in Reinhart Koselleck's classic work on the character of *Neuzeit*, there

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁵ Illustrating the contrast between ancient and modern relations to the past, Schiffman notes that 'this power [of the past in the present in antiquity] is altogether different from the modern one of a revered past, embodied in (say) the Constitution of the United States—yellowed with age and poured over by legal scholars with the aim of determining the "original" intent of the Founding Fathers. Livy felt the weight imposed by his *patres*—and the obligation it entailed—all the more heavily because they were still very much with him. Though they were dead, they had not departed; they had passed ... but not into the past' (ibid., p. 74).

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Parts Two and Three; see also, Wilcox, *Measure of Times Past*, Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

⁵⁸ Schiffman, *Birth of the Past*, Part Four.

⁵⁹ Wilcox, *Measure of Times Past*, Chapter 2.

took place in Europe between approximately the 16th and the 18th centuries a rearticulation of the relation between the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’.⁶⁰ The relatively close and closed connection between experience and expectation that had undergirded and stabilised previous ages was split open, the new social order being instead characterised by increasing disjunction between the two categories, so that as a principle of its own temporal logic ‘expectations ... distanced themselves ever more from all previous experience.’⁶¹ The shape of historical time was thereby profoundly transformed, as an entirely new relation between past, present and future was gradually established. The past lost its binding authority over the present for a social form that increasingly felt itself to be in constant motion and to be subject to change as the innermost determination of its being. What was and what had been no longer, and less and less, served as reliable guides to what would be: history could no longer be exemplary. With secularisation and the fading of an eschatological perspective, a temporality was revealed ‘that would be open for the new and without limit’⁶² – soteriology gave way to infinity. At the same time, history was reconceived as a single, encompassing, immanent process, ‘history in and for itself’.⁶³ Where the old society had been orientated towards the past, the new one, as expectation increasingly diverged from experience, drew validation from the future, which was in principle unknown and open. The category that more than any other encapsulated the character of this new sense of historical time was thus ‘progress’, which ‘opened up a future that transcended the hitherto predictable, natural space of time and experience’.⁶⁴ Under the sign of progress, the present distanced itself to an ever greater extent from the past as it moved towards a new future, a new horizon of expectation.

Consciousness of this new temporal character changed the relation to the past in further dimensions. The distinctiveness of the new necessarily contrasted in a virtually absolute way with the old, the past, the gone, which came to be understood as qualitatively different. The novelty of the new made it ‘possible to conceive the past as something that was fundamentally “other”’.⁶⁵ Progress differentiated historical times so that the developing European modernity understood and defined itself as distinct from the past. It legitimated

⁶⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Ch.14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

itself no longer through continuity but through rupture. Just as the new was different, so each epoch of the past was itself distinct and unique, not continuous with the categories of the present but to be understood in its own terms. ‘The historical axiom of the singularity of all that occurred was ... merely the temporal abstraction of modern everyday experience.’⁶⁶ The new historical consciousness was founded upon radical difference and the individual quality of the historical event, as it ‘replaced the exemplary with the nonrepeatable’.⁶⁷ Only in this way could history as process rather than repetition retain its requisite integrity. Released from a theocentric frame, the logic of causation in history was also transformed. Modern historical thought is based on ‘the conviction that *mankind* makes history’.⁶⁸ Providential history, with the Last Judgement as its ultimate horizon, became secular history, governed by development and progress and stretching out into an unbounded future. ‘Henceforth history could be regarded as a long-term process of growing fulfilment which ... was ultimately planned and carried out by men themselves.’⁶⁹ Human beings, not the deity, acted in the world: they may not have made it under conditions of their own choosing, but they made history nonetheless. For historical consciousness to be *historical* and no longer theological the immanent process of history had to be understood as being the product of the agency and activity of humans.

The reshaping of historical and temporal space and the creation of a new form of historical consciousness thus rested upon a revolutionised view of human action in the world, which it continually affirms. ‘This is the view that human beings are free and independent agents with the ability to shape their fate, the obligation to act on that ability and responsibility for the consequences.’⁷⁰ By virtue of this *reductio ad hominem*, history is tied in its own logic to what was a new form of practice, an unleashed and seemingly unbounded agency, freed from superannuated restrictions. Exigencies of circumstance might constrain that free agency, but it could never be essentially negated. That historical explanation would show the conditions shaping and limiting the possibilities of human action at any given time in no way gainsaid the belief in freedom and responsibility because ‘the technology by which such explanations are produced rests on the opposite assumption: that the bits and pieces historians use in order to construct their knowledge of the past are grounded in some human

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 242.

⁶⁷ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, p. 105.

⁶⁸ François Hartog, ‘The Modern *Régime* of Historicity in the Face of Two World Wars’, *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (eds) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), p. 124 (emphasis added).

⁶⁹ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 266.

⁷⁰ Fasolt, *Limits of History*, p. xvi.

action taken for some freely chosen purpose—as opposed to custom, providence or nature.⁷¹ History's reliance on evidence bespeaks this assumption of freedom: what the evidence means may be continually subject to dispute but '*that it testifies to something some human being did*'⁷² underlies the use of evidence as the raw material of historical knowledge in the first place. It presupposes that the past is intelligible as the product of what human beings do. In the modern understanding, humans are elevated to the status of being both the agents and the locus of meaning of their own historical process, simultaneously its subject and object, and history, secularised, becomes the record of how they have created their own world. The subjects of history may be everywhere empirically constrained but they are transcendently free.

Modernity in Europe thus produced a distinctive 'regime of historicity'.⁷³ Not only was this regime new, but it marked a reversal in the priority of terms unprecedented in human existence: just as in this social form's philosophy the object was subordinated to the subject, so in its historical consciousness the past was subordinated to the future. As a result, the category of the future underwent a transformation. No longer was it simply a repetition or fulfilment of the past; rather, it moved away from it. The topos of *historia magistra vitae*, which had held sway since ancient times,

was based on the idea that the future might not repeat the past exactly, but it would certainly never surpass it. And the reason for this was simply that everything took place within the same circle ... was governed by the same providence and the same laws, and, in any case, involved human beings who had the same nature.⁷⁴

In modernity, that circle, which had held together past, present and future within a space of experience, was broken and the relation between the three terms was drastically rearticulated. Descartes had opened modern philosophy and announced the new freedom of the modern subject with a gesture of rupture – radical doubt that rejected received authority. The modern regime of historicity was founded on the same gesture – a break with the power of tradition and what had gone before. 'The past was, *a priori* or due to its position (which amounts to the same), outdated'.⁷⁵ Disenchanted and devalued, the past was divested of its authority, which was transferred to the future, towards which progress moved: 'If history still dispensed a

⁷¹ Ibid., p. xvii.

⁷² Ibid. (emphasis in original)

⁷³ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, esp. pp. 15–19.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

lesson, it came from the future, not the past. It resided in a future that was to be realized as a rupture with the past, or at least as a differentiation.⁷⁶ Through that break, ‘the past’ as such, qualitatively divided from the present, came into being as the basic principle of historical thought, along with absolute, homogenous time and history in and of itself. All three were founded in the new, self-grounding subject and its freedom. That new philosophical and historical subject, created through forms of division, was also a new political subject, one to which lines of division were no less essential.

Dividing time, dividing space

Koselleck’s account of the transformation in historical consciousness that took place in early-modern Europe is developed through his method of conceptual history, although he does, in passing, acknowledge that the new idea of historical time implied a new actual subject of history: ‘the bearer of the modern understanding of historical process was the citizen emancipated from absolutist subjection and the tutelage of the Church’.⁷⁷ It is the link between history, as a new form of knowledge of the past, and socio-political transformation that Fasolt pursues. History, he suggests, was integral to the prolonged and violent struggle that occurred in Europe primarily in the 16th and 17th centuries as the forces of what was eventually to become ‘citizenship’ sought to liberate themselves from the old order. This conflict between two forms of social and political organisation and authority – declining medieval feudalism and nascent liberal capitalism – was also, and not least, a conflict over time and the relation to the past. In this struggle history was not just one of the stakes but was itself a weapon wielded in the name of freedom, one aimed against the experience of the past embodied in the supremacy of the pope and the Roman emperor. At the apex of the stratified chain of power within medieval Christendom, the authority of pope and emperor derived from a claim to universality in space and time. This claim was made in full awareness of the chronological span separating medieval Europe from antiquity but those who made it judged that extent by a non-modern, non-historical standard, experiencing it not as division but as continuity; priority in time did not here entail difference. Both authorities, temporal and spiritual, ‘insisted that they were in communion with eternity, and both sought to embody the past as though it had endured over the centuries without change’.⁷⁸ Contesting and ultimately

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, p. 17.

breaking the power of pope and emperor, and of the medieval form of life, meant contesting and breaking the particular coherence of past and present that held together the medieval shape of historical time. This was what the early-modern ‘historical revolt’ achieved. Its development of historical method and understanding, to produce what Koselleck identified as a temporalised sense of history, refashioned the relation of past and present. In doing so, it destroyed the unity of the medieval conception and thereby removed the grounds of validity of its political authority. This is the sense of Fasolt’s observation that ‘history jumped on the scene of European mental life with the force of a revolution against a specific form of governance’.⁷⁹ A measure of the success of the historical revolt was that it ‘imposed a new periodization on history’,⁸⁰ a new understanding of the shape of time and of the dynamic of the historical process. Dismissing as illusory the variety of temporal and historical schemas in use in Europe before modernity, historical consciousness in its revolutionary age naturalised as self-evident a tripartite division of history: antiquity, middle ages, modernity.⁸¹

The emergence of modern historical consciousness was thus neither the replacement of a mystified religious conception by a properly secular one nor the result of the advance of disinterested intellectual enquiry. Instead, from its origins history was ‘at the service of European princes and republics seeking to emancipate themselves’⁸² and was both an instrument and a product of the overthrow of one form of society and polity and its replacement by another. In this sense, before all content, ‘history is in and of itself political’.⁸³ The work of history in destroying the medieval mode of imbrication of past and present was coextensive with the effort of emergent sovereign authority in liberating itself from empire. As the founding principle of modern political legitimacy and international order, sovereignty is generally understood as denoting, in simple terms, a state’s territorial delimitation and autonomy, its formal independence from any authority beyond its borders. However,

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸¹ As Fasolt notes, the unselfconscious ease with which historians have, until recently, applied this division ‘not merely to the history of Europe or to their own profession, but to the history of the entire world, merely confirms the one-sided nature of the victory’ of history over premodernity (ibid., p. 20). For a powerfully voiced critique of the way in which periodisation through the medieval–modern break in time is founded on the violence of sovereign authority but has nevertheless ultimately been naturalised even by as probing a thinker as Koselleck, see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: how Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). For a defence of Koselleck on this point, see Helge Jordheim, ‘Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities’, *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), pp. 151–71.

⁸² Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, p. 17.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 19. To be clear: history is not political in the sense of addressing itself to political matters or promoting a partisan cause within the field of politics; it is political in that it underpins the modern form of political being as a whole.

sovereignty should not be thought of as existing exclusively in the spatial dimension: ‘freedom in space (and limits on its territorial extent) is merely one characteristic of sovereignty. Freedom in time (and limits on its temporal extent) is equally important and probably more fundamental’.⁸⁴ To be properly self-determining and autonomous, a state must be sovereign in time as much as in space. It cannot be subservient to the superior power of the past. All the qualities Koselleck identified as characterising the modern sense of historical time – change, process, agency, orientation towards the future, the otherness and singularity of the past – relied upon the progressive differentiation of the present from the past, the space of experience from the horizon of expectation, and that process of differentiation, or rupture, which took several centuries to be accomplished, should be understood as expressing the developing realisation of sovereign freedom.⁸⁵ Only once that freedom and self-determination in time had been established could a state consider itself sovereign and properly modern. ‘No state could be sovereign if its inhabitants lacked the ability to change a course of action adopted by their forefathers in the past ... No citizen could be a full member of a community so long as she was tied to ancestral traditions with which the community might wish to break.’⁸⁶ In the age of the historical revolt, sovereignty and citizenship were themselves the newly emergent horizon of expectation, the form of political order and identity that promised liberation and an open future. The conception of freedom operative in sovereignty and citizenship therefore demanded a severing of the ties that once bound the present to the past. The sovereign state and the autonomous citizen ‘require not only borders in space, but also borders in time’.⁸⁷

History was an essential part of sovereign authority’s effort to define itself as self-validating and self-grounding and its effect in the early-modern European transformation was that of creating the temporal boundary. If it is indeed the case that ‘the two dimensions are inextricably bound together’ and that ‘changes in the experience of space always also involve

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* The ‘break’ with the past discussed here cannot be dated punctually, any more than can the coming into being of the sovereign state and the states-system, or the advent of capitalism. The work of early-modern humanists, stressed by Fasolt, can be placed at the beginning of a long process, the importance of Montesquieu’s relational conception, to which Schiffman draws attention, perhaps just after the mid-point, and the French Revolution, central to the accounts of both Koselleck and Hartog, at the end, as the definitive culmination that announced completed rupture.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* The basic principle that a sovereign authority (for instance, the UK parliament) cannot be bound by the actions of its predecessors illustrates how freedom in time is fundamental to sovereignty.

⁸⁷ Fasolt, *Limits of History*, p. 7.

changes in the experience of time and vice versa’,⁸⁸ then the implication of the claim that ‘history is directly and systematically linked to citizenship, sovereignty, and the state’⁸⁹ must be that the borders in space and the borders in time are inseparable from each other: no sovereign territorial space without sovereignty in time. The boundaries in both dimensions are homologous, integral to a single process of the reorganisation of political and social space–time. That restructuring, of which the historical revolt was an intrinsic part, culminated in the European continent’s division into sovereign nation states. These states in turn composed the core of the so-called Westphalian international system that over the following centuries was spread across the world through the empire building of the major European powers. This at first continental and then global reconstitution of political space – resulting in the modern international – was coextensive with the reordering of historical time on a matching scale. Just as European space universalized itself, so did European time: not for nothing was *Weltgeschichte* the culminating category of the new historical consciousness.⁹⁰ The precise bounding of nation-states in the new system worked both geographically and temporally, sharply distinguishing the inside from the outside and the present from the past. If the extent of the transformational process consequent upon the early-modern creation of the European state order is to be comprehended, it is therefore necessary to understand temporal and spatial reformulation together. To adapt the influential terms developed by Carl Schmitt in this context, the new *nomos* of the earth, which created the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, was not only a spatial, territorial arrangement but also a temporal, historical one.⁹¹ Indeed, Schmitt’s core category of *nomos* as the process of ‘order and orientation’⁹² could be applied as much to time as to space: both were dependent on the drawing of lines. In his account of the logic of instantiation of geospatial order, Schmitt was at pains to make visible and specify the importance of the foundational acts of appropriation and division of land that lie at the origin of any formalised and stabilised political and social space, as providing a validating quality. *Nomos*, Schmitt avers, is ‘beyond a doubt ... a fence-word’.⁹³ ‘In the beginning was the fence. Fence, enclosure and border are deeply interwoven in the world formed by men,

⁸⁸ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ For post-colonial attempts to resist the world-historical power of European time and history, see Ashis Nandy, ‘History’s Forgotten Doubles’, *History and Theory*, 34:2 (1995), pp. 44–66 and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For studies of time and history in the imperial encounter, see Lorenz and Bevernage, *Breaking up Time*, Part 4.

⁹¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press, 2003).

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

determining its concepts.’⁹⁴ The possibility of a concrete political order and of political subjectivity depends upon the originating moment of appropriation and division that turns the physical world into property. The subject grasps the world and makes it its own through division. In the same way, the production of modern historical consciousness should be understood as a new form of appropriation and division of time that decisively refigured what has passed as ‘the past’, the object of historical knowledge: ‘We draw a fence around a part of reality, call that the past, and mine it for knowledge in which historians specialize. That is the founding act of history.’⁹⁵

The intention of Fasolt’s book is to frame the question of history differently, to show the form of relation to the past implied in modern historical consciousness, and to draw out the consequences. When history’s purely historiographic appearance is stripped away, its political content and function can be made evident. In a move that, argumentatively at least, has a certain similarity, Schmitt, determined to reveal the gesture of sovereign decision that bestows vitality and authenticity on the concrete order of *nomos*, famously polemicised against legal positivism for obscuring the essential moment of origin, covering over the dynamic act of division with a reified and neutralised system of mere statute and law.⁹⁶ The legal order tended always to hide the traces of its own foundation, taking on the appearance of a self-validating and self-sustaining system. If this is true of the sovereign division of inside and outside, how much more so is it the case in relation to history. Fasolt observes of the literature on the historical revolt that, while extensive, ‘it is itself chiefly historical in nature and therefore not always as illuminating as one could wish’,⁹⁷ unconsciously caught up in a *petitio principii* of assuming the validity of history as a form of knowledge. Philosophical accounts of historical thought, meanwhile, generally take historical consciousness for granted and concern themselves with issues internal to the logic of history. Uncomprehending of the historicity and political nature of history, they are unable to grasp its ‘rise to prominence, much less its hold over our minds’.⁹⁸ On the same theme, the editors of a recent volume on the subject of ‘Breaking up Time’ note that ‘although since the birth of modernity history presupposes the existence of “the past” as its object, “the past” and the nature of the borders that separate “the past”, “the present” and “the future” until very recently have attracted little

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 74 (Schmitt here approvingly quotes Jost Trier).

⁹⁵ Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, p. 12.

⁹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. Ch.2.

⁹⁷ Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, pp. 235–6.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

reflection within the discipline of history'.⁹⁹ Such is the extent of the successful naturalisation of the modern borders in time that, they admit, very few historians have troubled to study the subject of historical time in depth. Instead, their time concepts, as well as those of philosophers of history, 'are still generally based on an absolute, homogenous and empty time'.¹⁰⁰ All of which suggests the difficulty of recognizing the distinctiveness of modernity's regime of historicity, let alone trying to imagine beyond it, and so to bear out Fasolt's claim that the borders in time are, if anything, of even greater importance to the freedom of the sovereign state and the citizen than the borders in space. The temporal division is so much now second nature that it has become almost invisible. However, once it starts to be revealed, the meaning of historical thought takes on a different aspect. 'History only appears to be a form of knowledge about the past. In truth history serves to confirm a line between now and then that is not given in reality.'¹⁰¹ This is the function of the two basic principles of historical enquiry. First, the absolute distinction between past and present: whatever we may discover about the past from the interpretation of evidence, that can in no way affect (in fact it only reaffirms) the fundamental characteristics of pastness for historical consciousness, 'absence and immutability'.¹⁰² The past is definitively gone and hence unchangeable; it exists on the other side of a line that it is forbidden to cross. Secondly, the principle of anachronism, the difference between past and present that is not to be violated: a prohibition that 'places the past under a great taboo in order to prevent a kind of chronological pollution'.¹⁰³ Seen from this perspective, modern historical consciousness and history are, as Fasolt suggests, before anything else political. They are part of the metaphysical security apparatus of sovereignty: their primary purpose is not to rescue the past for experience but rather to maintain the dividing line between the past and the present for the sake of the freedom of the modern subject.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Lorenz and Bevernage, *Breaking up Time*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰¹ Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, p. 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. To these might be added a third, the principle of historical distance, closely bound up with the difference between past and present and with historical perspective. On this subject, see the special issue 'Historical Distance: Reflections on a Metaphor', *History and Theory*, 50:4 (December 2011) and Mark Salber Phillips, Barbara Caine and Julia Adeney Thomas (eds), *Rethinking Historical Distance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Concerning the recent 'memory boom', Lorenz and Bevernage point to the role of historians in carrying out 'a kind of "border patrol" of the relationship between past and present', ensuring that, for the sake of freedom in the present, the line not be breached (Lorenz and Bevernage, *Breaking up Time*, pp. 19–26). As they note, the matter is put precisely by the historian Gabrielle Spiegel: memory 'cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography' (Gabrielle Spiegel, 'Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time', *History and Theory*, 41:2 (2002), pp.149–62, ref. p. 149).

Conclusion

The critique of history developed by Fasolt opens a number of perspectives on the question of history and the international. To begin at a basic level, with how the history controversy in IR played out, it reveals the shortcomings of the way in which the debate reached a conclusion and the insufficiency of the apparent victory of the cause of history. To frame the history question in purely historiographic terms is to be blind to what one might term the metaphysics of history as a form of knowledge and experience. That rendering of the history problem simply accepts without question the time concepts of modern historical consciousness. It does not enquire into any of the issues explored here: the relation of past, present and future, the borders in time, the political meaning of history, and so on. To be sure, it presumes these, but at the same time it removes them from view. Because of its narrowed conception of what is involved in thinking about history, it cannot see sovereignty and the international within history – that is, within the *form* of historical knowledge. The relationship between history and the international becomes wholly external, a matter of how historical method is to be applied to the subject matter of international history. So far from resolving it, the historiographic approach falls short of the problem of history and the international because it is unable to pose it in a way that reveals its proper dimensions. Instead, the ambitious claim made by Hobson and Lawson for the universality of history in IR resembles nothing so much as the imperious claim to universality across the international space made by the absolute time of European modernity, the temporal form integral to modern historiography.¹⁰⁵ Both depend upon the drawing of sovereign borders in space and time; both, conceptually, have the international within them but without perceiving it.

A similar difficulty besets the radical historicising critics of neorealism, and in an especially pointed form given the political role they want history to play. The argument developed here proposes that history, the nation-state and the international form a conceptual unity. As a category of sovereignty, history has within it the very borderlines and the inside–outside division that generate the international and the problem of history in IR in the first place. Because they do not recognise this, the strong proponents of history find themselves caught up in a contradiction: to appeal to history against neorealism is to appeal to exactly the political subject that is constituted through the boundaries that neorealism insists upon. The agency of that subject, of which history is an integral part, can only ever repeat and

¹⁰⁵ Wilcox, *Measure of Times Past*, pp. 17–18.

continually reinscribe the limits. Historicisation and contextualisation, putting the past into the past and demonstrating qualitative difference between then and now, the move so characteristic of the polemical use of history against perceived ahistoricism, is based upon the break with the past, the sovereign boundary between past and present, that produces the fragmented global political space of the international and its unchanging ‘texture’. The radical historicisers wanted to use history for a political reason, but they did so without understanding the politics already contained in history. During the controversy over history it seemed as if the critics occupied the politically progressive position: to be for history meant to be for agency and transformation, affirming a freedom to change the world; negating it meant denying the capacity of the political subject and upholding the status quo. However, if it is the case that history, in its concept, contains the boundaries that produce the ‘history problem’ in IR, then history and change perpetually reproduce their opposites, the ahistorical and the unchanging. These opposed positions, change and stasis, are, in truth, simply the two sides of the modern political subject, which created a new form of politics and a new conception of freedom but did so by dividing itself from the world through boundaries that it may not breach lest it cease to be a modern subject. The ahistorical Waltz, in whom the limits of history are most clearly delineated, is thus very much a part of history, and in an altogether more emphatic sense than the ‘nomothetic’ categorisation of the historiographic framing suggests. If the two sides are contained within each other, within a single political subject, then the contradiction of change and stasis, history and the international, cannot be resolved by taking one side against the other. Rather, the problem has to be framed differently.

Doing so means rethinking the relationship between history and theory in IR. In light of the approach to history outlined here, this relationship cannot primarily be one of ‘testing’ theory against history – asking which theories best explain history and rejecting those which fail to make the grade. Doing so establishes history as an external standard against which theory is to be judged, a standard that, in the absence of properly theoretical reflection on history, is dogmatically posited. Instead, history, as a form of knowledge, should be subjected to theory. The problematic of the international is essentially concerned with the limits of political form, with the relation of inside and outside, and with the persisting absence of Adorno’s global subject. It therefore demands a critical theory of history. For if historical consciousness is inextricable from modern political form,¹⁰⁶ then the problem of history in the

¹⁰⁶ An insistently stated theme of R.B.J. Walker, *After the Globe, before the World* (London: Routledge 2010).

context of the international is one of the limits of history as an experience of the past. In IR above all, therefore, history cannot be simply history. Rather, the very subject matter of the discipline calls for critique of the relation of past, present and future and of the limits of the sovereign freedom that historical consciousness expresses. The fractured, anarchic political space of the international should be understood as dwelling within historical thought: the subject of history blocks the global subject. Seen in this light, there is a sense in which history in IR has hitherto been guilty of a sort of gigantic domestic analogy fallacy: taking the form of historical knowledge for granted, it has only ever been the history of the inside. But it is exactly that boundary line – inside and outside, past and present – that the problem of history and the international exposes to theoretical reflection.

Addressing the question ‘what is history in International Relations?’, then, requires understanding what the international means for history. For at least three centuries, the nation-state and the citizen were the bearers of history. Innovating the political form of sovereignty, they broke with received authority and opened a hitherto unknown futural horizon. The energy of that movement, as Europe expanded into the rest of the world with irresistible force, derived in large measure from the borderlines that released the European states from tradition, turning what had passed into ‘the past’. Progress – civilization as opposed to savagery, enlightenment as opposed to the dark ages, science as opposed to superstition – was the basic category of this temporalised history, expressing the new orientation towards the future. By the mid-20th century, however, that dynamic had run its course. The historical energy had become exhausted and the borderlines had turned from being the medium of advance into a block, a barrier that thwarted the very movement it had once promoted. History reverted to repetition, progress to stasis, and futurity collapsed into the paralysis of presentism, in which the past was gone but the future no longer promised anything.¹⁰⁷ With decolonisation, the sovereign state was universalised across the globe but no universal humanity, no global subject, resulted. Instead, the problematic of the international, the fragmented totality, made itself felt ever more insistently. The question of history and progress was elevated to the level of the whole but found no resolution there

¹⁰⁷ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, pp. 97–204. Hartog suggests that 1989 should be regarded as the end of the modern regime of historicity in that it marks the final vanishing of the mirage of the future that had always captivated modernity. It would probably be more accurate to say that 1989 was a landmark moment in the revealing of the limits of that regime, as no new regime has yet come into existence. A symptomatic reading might suggest that the anger and hostility that neorealism met with in the history controversy was so intense because Waltz reminded the critics of something they did not wish to know – the waning of the modern regime of historicity and its political subject.

because the whole exists only through the anarchic, subjectless form of the international. This is where the problem of history now lies. The subject of the modern regime of historicity was a sovereign–international one, whose historical consciousness was founded upon a decisive break with the past. The history problem in IR was, and is, based upon the insufficiency of that subject. So the question that the international poses to history is this: what would be the relation to the past of a new, global, subject?