

## What Does “Presentism” Stand For? Towards a Critical Appraisal of the Presentist “Turn”

After a decades-long embargo on presentism imposed by the prescriptive views of the historical discipline, the anti-presentist consensus among professionals seems to have begun eroding. Presentism, broadly understood as subsuming the explorations of the past to the needs, vocabulary, and sensibilities of the present, was not long ago decried as a flattening of the past, guided by a narrow-minded interest for the *similar* and a lack of interest in the *different*, and – against the most intimate logic of history itself – a narcissistic preference for the recent past, its proximity and self-evident direct relevance. Worst of all, presentism was sometimes suspected of anachronistically and self-congratulatorily imposing the values and judgments of the present on the depiction and analysis of the past, thereby blocking important attempts at self-criticism and the relativisation of the present as a contingent outcome of historical processes. In short, present-centrism had to be avoided and castigated as much as its cousin, Eurocentrism, another dangerously distortive perspective, and *historical difference* treated as respectfully as *cultural difference*.

Lynn Hunt’s indictment against presentism, formulated twenty years ago, during her tenure as president of the American Historical Association, has since become a classic description of this position. More recently, however, some historians have expressed their concern with the latent conservatism of history’s retreat into a so-called “scientific neutrality”, explicitly reclaiming history’s political responsibility (or, in David Armitage’s words, its vital “contribution to human flourishing”). With it, it seems, has also come an unapologetic turn to presentism, as recently demonstrated by recent polemical reactions to the anti-presentist intervention of the current president of the very same American Historical Association. Aside from regenerating a venerable historical-philosophical tradition of acknowledging the inherently situated nature of every historical approach – one that extends from the Romantics, and Jacob Burckhardt, to R. G. Collingwood, Walter Benjamin and Hans-Georg Gadamer – the presentist turn has also renewed engagements with critical genealogies of the present and decolonial, anti-racist, or feminist scholarship.

At the same time, newer and older questions regarding the relevance of history of political ideas for political philosophy have begun to gain ground once more, as evidenced in the work of intellectual historians such as Adrian Blau or Michael Sonenscher, as part of a reaction against the waning hegemony of the “Cambridge school”, sometimes accused of reducing history to a series of self-enclosed historical contexts, disconnected from, and almost inconsequential, to new ways of thinking about the relation between past and present.

This, in turn, brings us to another recent shift in the meaning of the term. A growing body of literature, taking its cues from François Hartog’s Koselleckian reflections on “regimes of historicity” (understood as historically specific perceptions of the relationship between a society’s imagined past, present, and future) has redefined “presentism” as a condition peculiar to the contemporary global North. On this reading, ours is a hypertrophic present, unable to either break free from the constantly revisited traumatic past it has absorbed via memorialisation,

or imagine a future that is distinct from it until some inevitable cataclysmic rupture. The latter standpoint, in fact, is more peculiar to – and by now almost universally popular in – left-wing critiques of how internalized hegemonic narratives have rendered imagining radical change impossible.

Convergent with the above, a further development in recent years has been the democratization of the concept beyond debates in, or around academia: “presentism” has now become a buzzword in popular culture, broadly writ. With the “historical” trials of Britney Spears, R. Kelly or Janet Jackson ever-reopened by the media under the pretext of reconsidering their (mis)treatment at the hands of the justice system, the public, or the media itself, this revisiting of the past – which may have been exacerbated by the way the pandemic has affected and inhibited new cultural and media production – assumes an explicitly retro-corrective moral and ideological mission.

Not least, such developments, we argue, should be understood as unfolding in a context in which the politicization of scholarship and culture comes both from within these fields, driven by the progressive political engagements of authors and scholars, and from without, sometimes as intrusions and attacks on scientific autonomy, such as attempts in the US, Eastern Europe, or France to condemn or outright ban discussions or curricula, in schools and universities, of gender, race, or colonialism.

The growing semantic diversity of “presentism”, as is used in contemporary academic and media culture is therefore a useful guide to mapping and understanding our shifting historical (self-)understandings, as well as mutations in knowledge production and diffusion, historical sensibilities, and genres of writing. We therefore invite historians, philosophers, media or film scholars, or sociologists of science to submit papers addressing the following topics, while also encouraging them to propose their own:

1. Is presentism a political or an epistemic matter?
2. The impact of presentism on perceptions of historical distance from an epistemic, political, or affective perspective
3. Presentism and recent transformations of genres in historical writing
4. The impact of popular history and popular media on academic history
5. How specific *is* presentism to our present? Do past presentisms exist?
6. “Presentisms” in the history of political thought
7. Presentism and the evolving relationship between history of political thought and political philosophy

The conference will be hosted by the New Europe College, Bucharest ([nec.ro](http://nec.ro)) on 26 October 2023 and will be held in a hybrid format, both in person and online, via Zoom. Please submit a one-page abstract by 15 April 2023 to Veronica Lazar [veronica.lazar@yahoo.com](mailto:veronica.lazar@yahoo.com) and Andrei Sorescu [andreidansorescu@gmail.com](mailto:andreidansorescu@gmail.com). Keynotes TBC.