

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



New Europe College (Online)
26 October 2023, 10:00-19:00 (EET)

Zoom Meeting Link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88500143730?pwd=a0JuczI4TnZnZUZlSzhpcXZ6bl>

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Meeting ID: 885 0014 3730 Passcode: 872093

Break
(15:15-16:00)

Session Two
(16:00-19:00)

16:00-16:25	Holly Case	<i>Taint Tracing as Presentism</i>
16:25-16:50	Irina Trocan	<i>Romanian Revolution in the Film Festival: 'Between Revolutions', a Transnational Found Footage Fiction</i>
16:50-17:15	Hakob Barseghyan	<i>A Typology of Presentist Practices in Academic History</i>
17:15-17:40	Gregory Jones-Katz	<i>Koselleck and Gumbrecht on the Task of the Historian; Or, the End of Sattelzeit and the Beginning of Re-Enactment</i>
17:40-18:00		<i>Short Break</i>
18:00-19:00		<i>Q & A</i>

The event will be recorded, as per the policy of the New Europe College and pending the consent of the participants.

Each presentation has been allocated a twenty-five-minute time slot and fifteen minutes for comments and queries in the Q & A section of the respective Session.

Presentism and the Family Novel

Adrian Grama, IOS Regensburg

What better illustration of François Hartog's diagnosis of our contemporary experience of time than the proliferation of the family novel in German language literature over the past decades? Classics of the genre still operated with a conception of history that was distinctly modern, whereby the succession of generations could be read as part of the same temporal order, mostly in narratives of decline for which a widening gap between experience and expectation accommodated the passing of aristocracy or the bourgeoisie, haute et petite. Golovlyov, Maias, Buddenbrooks, Trotta and even Moskat are all families on the wane, coping with social and political change not of their own making. So too are the postwar family novels of a Morante and Dumitriu, or, outside Europe, of a Márquez and Allende. By contrast, the contemporary *Familienroman* in Germany bears all the marks of presentism: fixation on trauma, memory and catharsis. Nazism, war and the Holocaust form a past that cannot be fully historicized (the same goes for the Spanish Civil War in Almudena Grandes's 'El corazón helado'). This makes this literature less historical than its predecessors and more experimental in its treatment of temporality. Could the same regime of historicity, then, hold for really-existing socialism? In this paper I will explore Eugen Ruge's novels of the Umnitzer saga ('In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts', 'Follower' and 'Metropol') to ask 1) how likely is it for the historical experience of communism in the twentieth century to pass into history and 2) what challenges this might pose to the conventions of the family novel in the age of presentism? Special attention will be given to Ruge's 'Annäherung' – travel notes which the author kept while writing his novels – to reflect on questions of literary form, memory and history.

Three Versions of Appropriating History

Ondřej Slačálek, Charles University, Prague

The paper will focus on three versions of presentist writing about history which from very different points of departure draw a very clear connection between past and present. The three are (1) writings focusing on the decline of civilisations, (2) writings focusing on the minority victims of past oppressions, and (3) new forms of the Cold War version of Whig history. While these approaches differ both in political background and thematic focus, they all challenge the way we approach the distance between past and present. In all three cases, this distance is somehow put in doubt: declinist historians postulate a civilizational unity that transcends time, promoters of the memory of victims and minorities postulate the moral unity of oppression and resistance, and the new Cold War version of Whig history postulates unity in depicting the totalitarian past and Putinist present. These versions of presentism may of course be criticised for destroying the distance between past and present, but we can also understand them as symptoms of a deeper crisis with our inherited concepts of this distance and as a challenge to rethink them. After all, modern historiography was built, as Benedict Anderson suggests, on a strange ambivalence of radical distance between epochs and radical unity of certain transhistorical subjects (above all nations, but sometimes also class, civilisation and so on). Many times this combination has been “deconstructed”, but can we say that it has been replaced in our social reality by some sort of real alternative? Our contemporary confrontation with the age of presentism may also be an opportunity to create new forms of historiosophical imagination, relationships towards the past and adequate rhetorical/terminological forms to express them.

Fascist Presentism, Or: On the Impossibility of Redemption

Raul Cârstocea, Maynooth University

In my paper, I discuss fascism in light of the two different understandings of ‘presentism’, arguing also for the existence of a link between the two that might account both for the abuse of the term in relation to contemporary politics and for the different temporal horizon of neo-fascism as compared to its interwar counterpart. First, the lax use of the term in relation to the contemporary far right and or as a term of abuse in everyday parlance has been consistently met with the ire of specialists of historical fascism, united (with very few exceptions, mostly related to Donald Trump’s presidency) in their criticism of such views as inherently presentist and ignorant of the interwar history (or ‘nature’) of real-existing fascism. Acting as gatekeepers, specialists in the field reserve the right to dismiss not only the contemporary far right as ‘not fascist’, but also discussions of ‘fascism’ in the present as politically-driven rather than scholarly. Here the role of the specialist is certainly one of providing more precision and clarity based on detail and careful analysis of historical fascism, some of its core tenets discernible beneath the fluidity of its numerous iterations in the interwar period. But, as I have argued elsewhere, it might also be to take these contemporary ‘lay’ meanings more seriously and to try to understand the mechanisms that account for the concept’s staying power. This could be useful in pinning the mutations we are confronted with today, profoundly marked by the legacy of historical fascism under the hegemonic myth of an anti-fascist world proclaimed after its defeat. While it is certainly reassuring to dismiss present-day fascists as ‘pathetic’ online warriors and to reasonably assume most of them would fail even a basic quiz about their interwar heroes, could these comparisons miss the transformation fascism undertook precisely because of this legacy, because of the Holocaust and the compulsive, institutionally ritualised repetition of its trauma?

This feature, prominent in the second, Hartogian understanding of presentism as the contemporary regime of historicity, is particularly acute for would-be fascists, confronted both with their predecessors’ defeat and with their role as perpetrators of the ultimate horror of the Holocaust. Unable to freely mine the past for models as their interwar counterparts did (as the immediate past inevitably confronts them with defeat), and unable to imagine a glorious future for fascism as new men creating a new civilization stretching forward centuries or millennia and complete with its own ‘ruin value’, fascists today face a hypertrophic present bloated with a memory culture stacked up against them. On the one hand, this creates a divide between far-right activists who go to great lengths to avoid the label of ‘fascist’ and a committed self-identified fringe whose notions of a putative continuity are however marred by the eventual outcome of historical

fascism. On the other, it translates into a blockage to imagine any positive future akin to the one projected in the interwar period; instead, neo-fascists today see their future in bleak terms, as fighting a losing guerrilla war against perceived racial decline, ideological as well as demographic, in a post-apocalyptic world. This presentist regime of historicity, I argue, is in stark contrast to the temporality of interwar fascism, centred on palingenesis and the notion of an ontological revolution that would ultimately justify and redeem the cataclysmic violence that would precede it. This horizon of expectation was central to interwar fascism, despite its spatial variations; understanding the different one prevailing among the far right today, in relation to the legacy of fascism, might be key to identifying its specificity.

Taint Tracing as Presentism

Holly Case, Brown University

In a speech from February 24, 2021, the day Russia invaded Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin argued that the aim of the war was to “demilitarise and denazify Ukraine,” and predicted that Ukraine and its supporters in the West would “kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War.” His prediction assumed that the drive for Ukrainian independence during the Second World War amounted to both past and destiny, constituting an indelible stain that could never come clean. Meanwhile, in Ukraine and elsewhere, commentators argued insistently that the WWII past of Ukrainian collaboration with Nazi Germany was not identical with its present resistance to Russian aggression and that Ukrainian nationalism was qualitatively transformed by subsequent events, not least of all the Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014.

The exchange echoed the tenor of earlier debates, especially those that unfolded during the Wars of Yugoslav Succession of the 1990s, as the symbolism of the emergent independent states recalled that of right-wing paramilitary groups from the Second World War. Arguments about tainted histories multiplied and were themselves wielded to justify war and ethnic cleansing in the present. It’s telling that in 2007, in a darkly comic search for untainted histories, a statue of Rocky Balboa was unveiled in the northern Serbian town of Žitište.

Looking back from a present presumed to be tainted by symbols, structures, and ideas from the past is a form of presentism with its own history. As method, taint tracing is both necessary and important, yet like many approaches to history, it is also fraught with dangers and open to manipulation. Long practiced by politicians and historians alike, taint tracing has enjoyed a golden age since the Second World War, when so much that happened needed to be explained, and part of the work of explanation entailed identifying root causes. Even before the war began and during the war years themselves, the evils of Nazism were traced back to German Romanticism or the Enlightenment. The notion that Germany took a *Sonderweg* (separate path) into modernity is also a story about taint.

There is an unsettling power and ambiguity to taint tracing that the young German historian Reinhart Koselleck was among the first to register. As a doctoral student in the 1950s, Koselleck traced the origins of twentieth-century ideologies—among them Nazism—back to the eighteenth century. Later he would write that “Whoever tries to trace Hitler back to Hegel or Schiller succumbs to a claim to be able to chart influences through history, one that proceeds in a selective manner.”

Taint tracing has by no means remained limited to the historiography and memory politics surrounding the Second World War. Earlier tracers included nationalists who objected to “foreign” (often French or broadly “Western”) thought, right-wing thinkers of the nineteenth century who viewed certain ideas and ideologies (materialism, communism, capitalism) as “Jewish,” and communists who decried the taint of “bourgeois” science, diplomacy, and democracy. In his work, the French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote of the tainted ideas and practices that spread through European imperialism and colonialism such that “When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.” More recently, the science fiction writer N. K. Jemisin, in a similar vein, has written of “the taint of our world” and fantasized in fiction about “quarantine” and “harsh enforcement” in an imagined better world free from supremacist prejudice: “there is only one treatment for this toxin once it gets into the blood: fighting it. Tooth and nail, spear and claw, up close and brutal; no quarter can be given, no parole, no debate.”

Among the many ideas and structures to which taint has been ascribed are socialism, the “American dream,” Judeo-Christian eschatology, idealism, Darwinism, progress, and dualism. More recently, the development and expanding application of machine learning technologies has given rise to another concept related to taint tracing: “dirty data,” or the insight that systems trained on existing data sets (images, text, etc.) contain the historical and social biases that produced them, including racial, class, and gender bias.

Taint tracing can take a variety of forms. One way of thinking about “dirty data,” for example, is to view the data as “dirty,” but the algorithm as neutral. Other explanations suggest that once algorithms are trained on large data sets, the taint becomes locked in and reenacted indefinitely, moving from mere content to the very structure of decision making. A forthcoming article, for example, ascribes “epistemic injustice” to AI and machine learning systems, suggesting that the systems themselves—not merely the content they carry—are implicated in the problem.

This latter understanding locates taint in method rather than content. Historian of science Peter Galison has argued that cybernetic theory carries the taint of its origins in WWII aerial warfare into the various fields that were inspired by cybernetic models. Postmodernism and game theory are among the fields Galison views as infected by the “ontology of the enemy” at “the heart of the Manichean sciences,” and specifically cybernetics.

With a pedigree stretching back at least to the Abrahamic religions’ notion of the “fall of man,” and as one of the most widespread practices of our time, taint tracing is arguably always a matter of methodological interest and concern for the historian. Historians are both its most expert practitioners, as well as its most insightful critics. Though reflections on the phenomenon are few,

the insights gleaned from such reflection could affect a variety of fields—from the study of political rhetoric around the war in Ukraine to methods and theories of machine learning.

Above all, the tendency to scale up taint-tracing claims, often to global/universal levels, makes it much more difficult to imagine alternatives to tainted histories. Although the ostensible aim of taint tracing is to eradicate taint, the effect is often the opposite, as taint tracers project the stain in ever wider arcs and see it acting with ever greater ubiquity and subtlety. How then to think rigorously about cause and effect in history without working the critical framework into a cage?

Romanian Revolution in the Film Festival: 'Between Revolutions', a Transnational Found Footage Fiction

Irina Trocan, National University of Theatre and Cinema, Bucharest

The 2023 feature film *Between Revolutions* (directed by Vlad Petri) belongs to a genre of hybrid practice (using fiction as well as documentary conventions) of cinematic works that often elicit epithets such as „timely” and „oppositional” in critical reviews, thus reflecting a presentist reading of their articulation of historical events. In this case, the former appreciation suggests an equivalence between recent news stories and the storyline of the film (primarily, at the date of its appearance, political turmoil in Iran), while the latter largely evokes found footage films’ capacity to reuse, often against their initial propaganda purpose, state-produced images. What remains to be explored is whether the presentist reading is inherent in the work – its reappropriation of documentary footage in order to compose a fictional narrative, a decade in two females’ lives whose friendship is maintained by exchanging letters between Romania and Iran – or whether it is rather imposed on the film by its reception in the global film festival circuit. Recognizing that the media/cultural landscape provides an overabundance of films while securing little room for film criticism as a long-term profession, it becomes likely that only the most “meaningful” films get critical attention, as a validation of their aesthetic/cultural/political worth, while critical appraisal of festival films is seen as a much less desirable goal than immediate consumption by global audiences. Surely, there are solid indicators that *Between Revolutions* employs a fictional Ceaușescu-era friendship to chart it according to global consumerist era values, even beyond the film’s convenient placing in Berlinale’s 2023 focus on Iran or its moderate feminist advocacy. Nevertheless, certain traits of the film (the importance of 1980s home movies or excerpts of poetry to its texture, its tonal ambiguities) – that might be easy to overlook during a single cinematic screening – still qualify its dismissal as a presentist take on the 1980s.

A Typology of Presentist Practices in Academic History

Hakob Barseghyan, Victoria College, University of Toronto

Presentist practices in academic history have been traditionally labeled as ‘whiggish’, as something that is to be avoided at all costs (Stocking 1965; Graham 1981; Mayr 1990; Nickels 1995; Pickstone 1995; Hull 2000; Moro Abadía 2008; Lowenthal 2015). Yet, many historians agree that equating presentism with whiggism is a mistake: there are various types of presentism, some of which are undesirable and eliminable while others are unavoidable or even desirable (Winsor 2001; Jardine 2003; Spoerhase 2008; Oreskes 2013; Loison 2016; Barseghyan 2022). Despite this, ‘avoid presentism’ is still often preached as ‘rule one’ of historiography (Bashkow 2019) and there is still a general fear of presentism (Winsor 2001). This is at least partially due to the lack of a clear delineation of legitimate (non-whiggish) forms of presentism from those forms that should not have a place in academic history. Strictures like ‘study the past for its own sake’ or ‘do not be present-minded’ are notoriously vague. Consequently, many historians choose to err towards caution. In practice, this often implies a reliance on one’s gut feeling when deciding exactly what sort of present-mindedness is to be eschewed (Chang 2009).

The efforts to discern different types of presentism and delineate exactly which presentist practices are unwelcome in academic history are not new; several presentist practices have already been identified in the literature (Hull 1979; Wilson & Ashplant 1988; Dray 1989; Laudan 1990; Rée 1991; Jardine 2000; Tosh 2003; Moro Abadía 2009 & 2011; Oreskes 2013; Alvargonzález 2013; Loison 2016; Barseghyan 2022). Despite these considerable efforts, more work is still needed to produce a comprehensive typology of presentist practices in academic history.

The aim of this paper is to develop such a typology and, by doing so, facilitate more focused discussions on the virtues and vices of various presentist practices. A close reading of the extant literature on the subject suggests that there are more than a dozen distinct presentist practices. These concern the choice of a priori assumptions of historical research, selection of historical questions and facts, description and explanation of past actions, events, and transitions, evaluation of the deeds and beliefs of historical actors, testing present-day general historical hypotheses, as well as using the fruits of historical research in elucidating the present and providing guidance for the future. To demonstrate that these are orthogonal historiographic practices, I show that each of these practices implies a specific answer to a distinct historiographical question; an answer to any one of these questions does not imply any specific answer to the others. Untying these practices helps us recognize that the historiographic literature is less polarized than it often

appears. The main purpose of such a typology, however, is to serve as a foundation for future discussions on acceptability/unacceptability and desirability/undesirability of these presentist practices.

Koselleck and Gumbrecht on the Task of the Historian; Or, the End of Sattelzeit and the Beginning of Re-Enactment

Gregory Jones-Katz

The first questions to be answered in this paper are: what role does Koselleck's concept of Sattelzeit (above all how this new temporality gave rise in the late 18th century to "History" as a way to interpret ever-accelerating social change) play in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's philosophy of history, above all the latter's notion of the "chronotype of the broad present"? Relatedly, what are the interpretive consequences for historians who find Gumbrecht's historicization of Koselleck's concept of Sattelzeit compelling? Engaging these questions may not only change our understanding of Koselleck's work, but is aligned with the spirit of his historical project.

Gumbrecht argues that, since the late 1970s, the "historical worldview," a concept clearly derived from Koselleck's Sattelzeit, was no longer "the dominant epistemological structure of western culture." In Gumbrecht's new "chronotype of the broad present," the future is met no longer as a sweeping vista of possibility, but as closing in upon us at an increasing rate; the threats of climate change, nuclear annihilation, and "conventional" war all factor into our temporal-existential mix. Consequently, Gumbrecht argues, our new presence-based configuration of time challenges core philosophical principles of Enlightenment thought, including a number that form the bedrock of many liberal political commitments: faith in progress and overarching historical narratives, the power of agency and intention, and our ability to change ourselves and our world.

The emergence of the "chronotype of the broad present" impinges upon the historian's task, challenging the very act of "thinking historically" that emerged during Koselleck's Sattelzeit: since presence-based epistemologies suggest a spatial link to the world and its objects, they short-circuit the historian's undertaking, an enterprise that, by tradition, considers "presence," and all phenomena, as deeply entangled in transformations in time. Whereas Koselleck postulated that Sattelzeit stimulated the rise of "History" and, relatedly, defined the historian's task as providing new ways of assimilating novel experiences, Gumbrecht's new configuration of time suggests and provides tools to defend a different idea of the historian's task (post-Historical History?) that is less (politically) progressive, "modern," or Enlightened and more conservative in orientation.

The other key question to be answered in this paper: how might the historian retain features of the "historical worldview" while focusing on cultural protagonists and works that defy the modalities of change in time? This is specifically to ask: how can historians after Sattelzeit value the past's "presence." Drawing on not only Gumbrecht, but also F.R. Ankersmit, Byung-Chul

Han, Lauren Berlant, Eelco Runia, and others, such a shift in emphasis might not only affect historical theory and practice, but also help in the understanding of non-specialized audiences' engagements with the past, whose lived experiences feel more than ever like a constricting enclosure from which there is no escape. The "presence-sensitive" historian, for example, can identify conflicts between the "historical worldview" and the "chronotype of the broad present" as they play out in re-enactments, such as the acting out of Civil War and World War II events. The "presence-sensitive" historian may also begin to understand, rather than exclusively criticize or historicize, the reasons for and political effects of communities based around such events, how they "metabolize the world" through their rituals and embodying the past. Along these lines, it will be proposed, whereas contemporary capitalism stimulates the (de)construction of narrative, for example disrupting closure, re-enactments, however "unhistorical," partly tap into anti-capitalist attitudes.

Finally, the paper will investigate what remains, in the neoliberal era, of historical theory after "History," elaborating how historians might post-Historically engage the past, a way that describes and diagnoses our current existential situation.