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Blurred Lines

History, Memory and the Experience of Time

Chris Lorenz

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Abstract

This article argues that fundamental controversial parts of the past – that since 1990 have been labeled as "catastrophic", "post-traumatic", "terroristic" and "haunting" – are overstretching the normal "historical" concept of "the past". This is the case because historians normally presuppose that the past does "go away" – and therefore is distant and absent from the present. The presupposition that the "hot" present transforms into a "cold" past by itself, just like normal fires extinguish and "cool off" by themselves, has been constitutive for history as a discipline. This process of "cooling off" is often conceived of as the change from memory to history. The first part of this article connects the rise of history as the discipline studying "the past" to the invention of the "modern" future in the late eighteenth century and to the introduction of a linear and progressive notion of time. Next, the rise of memory as the central notion for understanding the past will be connected to the implosion of the future and of progressive linear time at the end of the twentieth century. This implosion was predominantly caused by the growing consciousness since the late 1980's of the catastrophic character of the twentieth century. The second part argues that present definitions of the relationship between history and memory have typically remained ambiguous. This ambiguity is explained by the problematic distinction between the past and the present. Historians have been rather reluctant in recognising the fact that this fuzzy distinction represents a problem for the idea of history as a discipline as such.

 $\textbf{Keywords:} \ past-present-future \ distinction, linear time, "hot" \ history, history \ and \ memory$

Die Zeit ist ein Tümpel, in dem die Vergangenheit in Blasen nach oben steigt. $^{\scriptscriptstyle 1}$

Christoph Ransmayr

The Past and the Burning Coalfields of China

The BBC-News of the third of November in 2004 contained the following amazing report titled "130-year-old Chinese fire put out" concerning the Liuhuanggou colliery, near Urumqi in Xinjiang province: "A fire that broke out more than 100 years ago at a Chinese coalfield has finally been extinguished, reports say. In the last four years, fire-fighters have spent \$12m in efforts to put out the flames [...] in Xinjiang province. While ablaze, the fire burned up an estimated 1.8m tons of coal every year [...]. Local historians said the fire first broke out in 1874, [...]".



Figure 1: Coal fire in Xinjiang, China.
(Source: Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kohlebrand_in_Xinjiang.
JPG?uselang=nl)

The burning coal had emitted 100,000 tons of very harmful gases and 40,000 tons of ashes every year, causing a momentous environmental pollution. In 2003, when the fire was still burning, a Chinese newspaper had provided

another mind-blowing detail on this fire: "Even if the fire-fighters are eventually successful [...], it could take 30 years before the ground surface is cool enough to allow mining to go ahead".2 I found this news message fascinating for at least three reasons. The first reason seems obvious: a "normal" fire is not supposed to last for 130 years, just like a birthday party is not supposed to last for a year. The second reason for my fascination by this news was the thirty years that the cooling process of the mine will need before the coal mine can be entered again. This means that the mine cannot be entered before 2034! What an incredible amount of heat can explain a cooling down process that will take some thirty years? The third reason for my fascination was the incredible amount of environmental pollution that this fire had produced since its beginning. Millions and millions of tons of poisonous gasses and ashes had been spat out of the earth since 1874. Such an extreme fire simply stretches our normal idea of what a fire is. This coal fire not only scorches the ground surface in western China, but also seems to scorch the very *concept* of what a fire is. Such a fire is literally beyond our imagination. So far for this burning coal mine in Western China.3

In this article I hope to clarify that there is a deep analogy between this burning coal mine in western China and the present, one could say "hot" state of large parts of history since the end of the Cold War. And with "hot" history I mean a past that does not "cool off" by itself and that remains present. It concerns a past that remains toxic, contested, and divisive in a political, social, moral and – often also – legal sense. 4 So "hot" history is essentially "*Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*" – "the past that won't go away" – in Ernst Nolte's formulation. One may also label it "post-traumatic" history, as Aleida Assmann does, or, "catasthropic" history, as John Torpey calls it. Or one could call it "the terror of history", as Eliade did long ago and Dirk Moses did recently. 5 One could also call this type of history "haunting" history, as Henri Rousso and some anthropologists do, because the ghosts of the past keep on haunting the living in the present. 6

Whichever label one applies to this present condition of important parts of history – "hot", "post-traumatic", "catastrophic", "terroristic" or "haunting" – I will argue that this type of history is stretching our "normal" concept of history, because historians presuppose that the past "goes away" and is thus distant and absent from the present. In other words: Historians presuppose that the hot present "cools off" and transforms in a cold past *by itself*, just like normal fires extinguish and "cool off" by themselves. This process of "cooling off" is normally conceived of as the change from memory to history. It is the process in which both the interests and the passions of the *Zeitzeugen* (eyewitnesses) literally die out and the "distant" professional

historians take over, armed with their critical methods and their "impartial" striving for "objectivity".

This change from "hot" to "cool" also represents the narrative backbone of most histories of academic history writing, as the Dutch historian Jan Romein signalised back in 1937. Increasing distance in time is simply identified with increasing "objectivity" and with the transformation of the "political" to the "historical". In the following, I will argue that the recent "hot" condition of important parts of the past can best be explained by a fundamental change in the experience of time. The dominant time conception has changed from a linear, irreversible and progressivist time conception to a non-linear, reversible and non-progressivist one. 8 The non-linear time conception allows us to think of a temporal simultaneity and coexistence of past, present and future, because it does not presuppose that the three dimensions of time are separated and "closed off" from one another – as linear time does—but instead regards them as mutually interpenetrating, meaning that the past can live on in the present just as the future can be present in the present. Non-linear time allows for a pluralisation of times and to conceive of the present, past and future as multidimensional and purely relational categories, as for instance Preston King has argued.9

King differentiates between four distinct notions of "present" (and correlative notions of "past"), which are based on a "chronological" notion of time as abstract temporal sequence on the one hand and a "substantive" notion of time as a concrete sequence of events on the other. Relying on chronological time and depending on their duration, two senses of the present can be discerned: a first called the *instantaneous present* and a second called the *extended present*. Both presents are boxed in between past and future and have a merely chronological character. However, while the first defines itself as the smallest possible and ever evaporating instant dividing past and present, the second refers to a more extended period of time (e.g., a day, a year, a century) whose limits are arbitrarily chosen but give the present some "body" or temporal depth.

Because of the meaninglessness and arbitrarily chronological character of these presents and corresponding pasts, historians often use a more substantive frame of reference based on criteria that are themselves not temporal. The first of these substantive notions is that of the *unfolding present*. As long as a chosen event or evolution (e.g., negotiations, a depression, a crisis, a war) is unfolding, it demarcates a "present". When it is conceived of as completed, the time in which it unfolded is called "past". King remarks that this is the only sense in which one can say that a particular past is "dead" or "over and done with". Yet, he immediately warns that any process

deemed completed contains "sub-processes" that are not. So, it is always very difficult to exclude any "actual past" from being part of, working in or having influence on this unfolding present.

The second of the substantive notions of "the present" King names is the *neoteric present*. Drawing a parallel to the dialectics of fashion, he notes that we often distinguish phenomena that happen *in* the present but can be experienced as "ancient", "conventional" or "traditional", from phenomena we view as being characteristic *of* the present, which we designate "novel", "innovative" or "modern". The neoteric present assumes a distinction within the substantive, behavioural content of the present, as between what is new and what is recurrent.

While every notion of the present excludes its own correlative past, this does not hold for non-correlative senses of the past. The present can thus be penetrated by non-correlative pasts that in a substantive sense stay alive in the present: "The past is not present. But no present is entirely divorced from or uninfluenced by the past. The past is not *chronologically* present. But there is no escaping the fact that much of it is *substantively* so." 100 pasts in the past is not present.

King's analysis is important because it offers an intellectual defence against arguments that posit or, as usually is the case, simply assume, the existence of a neat divide between past and present and portray the past as "dead" or entirely different from the present. On the basis of his inquiry into the nature of past and past-ness and his critical analysis of notions of present, present-ness and contemporaneity, he is able to counter both arguments that represent history as entirely "passeist" and arguments that represent history as entirely "presentist". In other words, King on the one hand rejects arguments which claim that the writing of history is solely "about" the past, but on the other hand he also dismisses the claim that historiography is exclusively based on present perspectives or that "all history is contemporary history"."

Non-linear time conceptions allow for - some - reversibility of time because important recent ways of dealing with the past, like the "politics of regret" and "reparation politics", presuppose the limited reversibility of time. This limited reversibility is the hallmark of the time of jurisdiction because jurisdiction is based on the presupposition that a sentence and punishment are somehow capable of annulling crime – e.g. in the form or retribution, revenge and rehabilitation – and thus of reversing the arrow of time. 12 Nevertheless this reversibility of the time of jurisdiction is always limited – as is defined, for instance, by statutes of limitation – with the important exception of crimes against humanity, in which case no statute of limitation applies. This exception to the general legal rule (at least in states

without common law) is quite recent, as we know, and it is a clear sign of the changed experience of past injustices for present day, post-postmodern life – and thus a change in the experience of time. Through this "backdoor" the recognition of universal human rights has also impacted the discipline of history, I will argue in the following. 14

I have structured my argument in two parts. In the first part I will connect the rise of history as the discipline of the past to the invention of the future in the eighteenth century. Then I will connect the rise of memory as the central notion for understanding the past to the implosion of the "progressivist" future at the end of the twentieth century. This implosion was also caused by the growing consciousness since the late 1980's of the catastrophic character of the twentieth century. In the second part I will argue that present definitions of the relationship between history and memory have typically remained somewhat ambiguous. I will connect this ambiguity to the notions of time involved and conclude that historians as yet have been rather reluctant in recognizing that "hot" history represents a fundamental problem for them.

The Birth of "the Past" from the Spirit of Modernity: Hegel as the Secret Founding Father of History

If there is one feature that characterises current international (political and juridical) ways of dealing with the past, it is the combination of an increasing distrust of progressivist and linear notions of time. This distrust manifests itself in a fundamental doubt that there is an evident qualitative break between past, present and future. In short, we are confronting a fundamental doubt that chronological time produces "temporal distance" between the past and the present and "progress" by itself.¹⁵

As Koselleck has argued, the belief in progress and the birth of history as a discipline has gone hand in hand in the *Sattelzeit*, that is, during the "birth of modernity". He pointed to the surprising fact that the historical and the progressive worldviews share a common origin: "If the new time (*Neuzeit*) is offering something new all the time, the different past has to be discovered and recognised, that is to say, its strangeness which increases with the passing of years". ¹⁶ So it was the birth of the future that paradoxically gave birth to the past as an object of historical knowledge, as Lucian Hölscher has argued convincingly in great detail. ¹⁷ Therefore history as a discipline has been dependent on the "modern" worldview in which "progress" is permanently and simultaneously producing both "new presents" and

"old pasts"- in one dialectical movement. Historicism therefore must be regarded as the twin-brother of modernity. ¹⁸ This is the worldview in which the present is also continuously "contracting" – what Hermann Lübbe has called *Gegenwartsschrumpfung*. ¹⁹ Remarkably, most historians conveniently have presupposed this definite "modern" worldview as "natural".

This temporal differentiation between "the past" and "the present" and the connected claim about the "otherness" or "foreignness" of the past, allowed history to present itself as an autonomous discipline that required methods of its own. Historians were able to use the idea of an ever-increasing temporal "distance" between the past and present to their advantage. They did so by presenting distance in time as the break or rupture - as a discontinuity - between "the past" and "the present" that produces "the past" as an object of knowledge and simultaneously as an indispensable condition for attaining "impartial" and "objective" knowledge of the past. At the same time "the present" is conceived of as both "growing" and "developing" out of the past in which it is "rooted", which explains their continuity.²⁰

The modern idea of history is thus based on a specific "progressive" conception of time, that can be characterised as flowing, directional and irreversible. Therefore it is not accidental that the master metaphor of historical time is the metaphor of the river - in the singular and not in the plural. "Modern" history presupposes that there is *one* flow of time – sometimes referred to as "History" with a capital H – of which all histories are part and in which all histories can be located. All attempts – from Ernst Bloch to Reinhart Koselleck - to introduce plurality and complexity in linear, "progressive" time with the help of the notion of the "*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*" ("the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous") have failed because they presuppose *one* timescale that is regarded as *zeitgleich*, as both Achim Landwehr and Berber Bevernage have recently argued. "

This unitary conception of flowing time was also the presupposition of fundamental historical concepts like "process" and "development". The time of history presupposes not random change, but directional change. Historical time has an built-in "arrow", so to speak.

Based on the supposed "surplus value" of their "distant" *ex post* perspective, historians have been claiming an epistemological superiority compared to the knowledge and memories of the eyewitnesses in the past – the *Zeitzeugen*. History based on distance in time is not only different from memory but always better than memory – at least according to the claim of the historical profession.²³ So, with Hegel professional history is presupposing that time is the carrier of truth. In matters of time, paradoxically, professional historians appear to be Hegelians *by definition*.²⁴

History and jurisdiction share a fundamental distrust of eyewitness testimony, which both see as becoming increasingly unreliable – that is: worse in quality – over time (although this view is not uncontested). Since the eighteenth century the introduction of statutes of limitation for all crimes has been based upon the argument that the quality of evidence – especially testimonial evidence – gets worse over time. Therefore the chances of a "fair trial" would also diminish over time. ²⁵

Given the conceptual relationship between the future and the past we should not be surprised that the recent change in the idea of the future has translated into a change in the idea of the past. When the basic idea of progress started crumbling in the 1980's – progress being the idea that we can forge the future and make it better than the present and the past – the idea that we can somehow improve the past seems to have taken its place. This is remarkable because the idea of improving the past by repairing past injustices was and is completely new. As Christian Meier has shown *in extenso*, forgetting about past crimes and past injustices had been the rule throughout Western history ever since Greek Antiquity. Amnesia and amnesty – after a short and a limited period of cleaning the slates, implying the idea of "new beginnings" and of "zero hours" – had always had gone hand in hand. ²⁶ Even Spain's transition to democracy in 1975 was still based on a conscious policy of forgetting – as was the case in Poland and in the Czech Republic after 1990. ²⁷

Now this idea to "improve" the past by repairing past injustices is the most salient phenomenon in international and domestic politics of the last decades. I am now referring to reparation politics, to the offering of official apologies, to the creation of truth commissions, to historical commissions concerning the compensation of slave labour and robbed property, to commissions of historical reconciliation, etc. All these actions represent attempts in the present to redress injustices performed in the past by states and other organisations. Typically these are connected to the Holocaust, to colonialism, to slavery and to problems of "transitional justice". ²⁸

So "forget about it" and "forgive and forget" are no longer regarded as a live option since "historical wounds" – to use Chakrabarty's term – are increasingly being recognised. "Historical wounds" are the result of historical injustices caused by past actions of states which have not been recognised as such. The genocidal treatment of the "First Nations" by the colonial states in the former white settler colonies represents a clear historical example of this category. Quoting Charles Taylor's analysis of "the politics of recognition" Chakrabarty argues that "misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its

victims with a crippling self-hatred". Here it makes sense to speak, along with Chakrabarty, of a "particular mix of history and memory": "Historical wounds are not the same as historical truths but the latter constitute a condition of possibility of the former. Historical truths are broad, synthetic generalisations based on researched collections of individual historical facts. They could be wrong but they are always amenable to verification by methods of historical research. Historical wounds, on the other hand, are a mix of history and memory and hence their truth is not verifiable by historians. Historical wounds cannot come into being, however, without the prior existence of historical truths."²⁹

Because "historical wounds" are dependent on the recognition as such by the perpetrator groups they are "dialogically formed" and not "permanent formations". As their formation is group specific and partly the result of politics, the notion of a "historical wound" — like the idea of trauma as "Unbearable Affect"³⁰ — has predominantly been approached with great suspicion in academic history.³¹

All actions to improve the past are attempts "to make whole what has been smashed", to use John Torpey's apt formulation.³² They signalise a growing conviction that the past is no longer experienced as distancing itself from the present, contrary to what the time of history presupposes. The very - modernist *and* historicist - belief that the past is superseded by every new present turns out to be more so a wish than an experiential reality. Since the 1980's important parts of the past are no longer experienced as "cold" and "different": they are no longer experienced as a "foreign country".³³

This changing experience of time is not restricted to the spheres of jurisdiction and politics but also pertains to the sphere of history. This change manifests itself in the challenging of classical historicist conceptualisations of temporal distance (inherent in historical "development" and "progress") and this challenge is a central feature of the so called "memory boom". Since around 1990 we have been witnessing the "shrinking of the future" or Zukunftsschrumpfung, if I may suggest a new concept. This shift of focus from the "shrinking" future to the "expanding" past as a consequence of the "accelerated change" of the present – known in German as Beschleunigung - is often seen as explaining the explosive growth of museums in the same period – the Musealisierung der Vergangenheit ("musealisation of the past"). It is also the basis of the idea of "compensation theorists" like Odo Marquard and Hermann Lübbe that under circumstances of "accelerated change" people cling to their known past like a "teddy bear" (Marquard). The remarkable succession of "retro-cultures" is interpreted as pointing to the same change in the experience of time.34

John Torpey's diagnosis of our present predicament seems to support of this view. "Since roughly the end of the Cold War," John Torpey claims, "the distance that normally separates us from the past has been strongly challenged in favour of an insistence that the past is constantly, urgently present as part of our everyday experience." According to Torpey this development directly relates to a "collapse of the future", or a growing inability to create progressive political visions. This inability has been replaced by the "backward pointing" assumption that "the road to the future runs through the disasters of the past." As he formulates it in a bold metaphor: "When the future collapses, the past rushes in." Aleida Assmann argues along similar lines when she evaluates the "memory boom" as a reflection of a "general desire to reclaim the past as an indispensable part of the present" and as the acknowledgement of "the multiple and diverse impact of the past, and in particular a traumatic past, on its citizens".

All in all – if appearances are not deceiving - this means that the past, present and future are no longer conceived of as orderly "sequential" and separated rooms with walls between them, but as open, interconnected and interactive spaces. A spatial conception of time seems to have replaced the "progressive" linear idea of time since the 1980's – for example in Koselleck's (geological) notion of *Zeitschichten* (layers of time).³⁹ Since the end of the Cold War therefore the temporal presuppositions of (the discipline of) history are increasingly being undermined. This leads me to the second part of my argument, that is: how the rise of memory and the relationship of history and memory have been analysed.

The Fall of "Cold" History and the Rise of "Catastrophic" Memory

Without any doubt it was the notion of memory that became the common denominator for anchoring the past in collective experiences of specific groups since the 1980's. Especially traumatic or catastrophic memories became the privileged window on the past. Wulf Kansteiner has summarised the present predicament of "memory studies" as follows: "The predominance of traumatic memory and its impact on history is [...] exemplified by the increasing importance since the 1970's of the Holocaust in the 'catastrophic' history of the twentieth century. Despite an impressive range of subject matter, memory studies thrive on catastrophes and trauma and the Holocaust is still the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies.[...] Due to its exceptional breadth and depth Holocaust studies illustrate the full range of

methods and perspectives in event-oriented studies of collective memory, but we find similar works analyzing the memory of other exceptionally destructive, criminal and catastrophic events, for instance World War II and fascism, slavery, and recent genocides and human rights abuses. Especially with regard to the last topic attempts to establish the historical record of the events in question and the desire to facilitate collective remembrance and mourning often overlap.⁷⁴⁰

The standard modern history of "history and memory" typically starts with Pierre Nora in the 1980's and with his *lieux de mémoire* project. In the 1980's Nora interpreted the rise of memory as a consequence of the "fragmentation of the national past". What was going on in his view was the displacement of "national history" by "collective memories" in the plural – that is, of "group memories" underpinning sub-national collective identities. In his nostalgic view, the fragmentation of the nation in the second half of the twentieth century meant that the only real "milieu de mémoire" – the nation – was disintegrating.⁴¹

Since then, the place of the nation has been taken over by a variety of "lieux de mémoire", Erinnerungsorte or "sites of memory". Therefore we might conclude that the very concept of "site of memory" is rooted in a nostalgic vision of the national past and that it is embedded in the idea of the decline – of a Verfallsgeschichte – of the nation. When the history of the nation can no longer be experienced and represented as progress in time, apparently the only remaining task of the (national) historian is to "collect" the nation's symbolic traces and places. One could argue that in Nora's view of the 1980's "sites of memory" are like the tombstones on the graveyard of the nation. 42 "Sites of memory" have a kind of substitute-character: they represent "a will to remember" when the *real* will to remember the nation has vanished. In a sense they are futile attempts to make sense of history after the flow of time has stopped to make "progressive" sense. When past and future no longer confer meaning to the present, located spaces – alias "places" – seem to take precedence over located time. 43 The "spatial turn" and the "material turn" - alias "the return to things" - therefore are interconnected and central parts of the "memory boom".44

There has been little clarity concerning the conceptual relationship between "history" and "memory" – typically starting with Nora himself. And Nora has been justifiably criticised for his unclarity ever since. ⁴⁵ While Nora, with Halbwachs, argued that "history" and "memory" are opposite ways of dealing with the past – history being "objective", or at least "intersubjective", and memory being "subjective", selective and emotional – all leading experts of memory have relativised Nora's central opposition – however, without

abandoning it. We can take Jay Winter and Aleida Assmann's arguments in case as examples, both without any doubt leading scholars in the field of memory studies. Winter writes as follows: "History is memory seen through and criticized with the aid of documents of many kinds – written, oral, visual. Memory is history seen through affect. And since affect is subjective, it is difficult to examine the claims of memory in the same way as we examine the claims of history. History is a discipline. We learn and teach its rules and its limits. Memory is a faculty. We live with it, and at times are sustained by it. Less fortunate are people overwhelmed by it. But this set of distinctions ought not lead us to conclude, with a number of French scholars from Halbwachs to Nora, that history and memory are set in isolation, each on its own peak". 46 So Winter depicts history and memory as distinct accesses to the past, and yet as not unconnected – they cannot be located on different peaks. However, the nature of their interconnection remains unspecified. We don't know whether both are part of the same mountain, for instance, or if both are located at opposite sides of a deep abyss.

Or take Aleida Assmann's description of the present relationship of history and memory. She emphasises "the complexity of their coexistence". They are two competing ways of referring to the past, both of which correct and supplement the other. "[...] Historical research depends upon memory for orientation in terms of meaning and value, while memory depends upon historical research for verification and correction". An Nevertheless, in her Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit Assmann also presents memorial testimony of "moral witnesses" in the context of Holocaust history as an "authentic" access to the past – and she was heavily criticised by Martin Sabrow for suggesting so. An In Sabrow's view the borderlines between facticity and fictionality could easily be crossed in case memorial testimony is not methodically controlled by historians. How memorial witnessing and historical methods are interconnected was not further specified by Assmann, nor by Sabrow for that matter.

So even after Winter and Assmann's analyses of the relationship between history and memory we are left with some thorny questions. However this may be, it is clear that they both identify the emotional and moral aspects of dealing with the past with memory, and the critical, methodical aspects of dealing with the past with history. This neat division of labour fits perfectly in the dominant view of the distinction between "hot" memories and "cold" professional history — and the distinction between "hot" jurisdiction and "cold" history, for that matter, and the distinction between the "practical" past and the "historical" past that Michael Oakeshott coined in the 1930's and that Hayden White recently picked up. 51 But can this view of the division

of roles between history and memory still be sustained? I think this view cannot be upheld and I will summarise my main arguments by the way of a conclusion.

Conclusion

In my view the neat distinction between history and memory cannot be upheld because the phenomenon of "hot", "post-traumatic", "catastrophic" and "haunted" history poses a fundamental problem to the very idea of the past as an object of a discipline. This is the case because history as a discipline presupposes that the "hot" present transforms into a "cold" past by a growing distance in time. History as a discipline is built on the presuppositions first, that the past can be clearly distinguished from the present; second, that the living inhabit the present and that the dead inhabit the past; third, that the past remains the icy domain of the dead and that there is no blurring of the borderlines between the past and the present; fourth, that the past "breaks away" from the present by itself, just like an icicle breaks off by its own increasing weight – thus creating the past as an independent - "objective" - and distant object of "historical knowledge"; fifth, that the past, present and future are part of *one* and the same temporal flow. There is just one river of time and historical time therefore has one direction, pace all "Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen". Therefore the past as the object of history as a discipline can only exist as long as it is "disciplined" - and thus as long as the dead refrain from haunting the living. As Michael Ignatieff rightly observed, "historical" time is conceived of as the very opposite of the "time of revenge" - and thus also of "legal" time - which is essentially a time conception that conceives of the past and the present as one whole and thus as more or less simultaneous.52

The claim to the epistemological "surplus value" of *ex post* disciplinary history over the memories of the eyewitnesses is essentially based on this (Hegelian) idea of a linear "productive" *and* "erasing" time (although many reflexive historians have cherished the idea that historicist time represented the very opposite of Hegelian time). Therefore the time of disciplinary history must really "progress" in order to be able to "produce" the "surplus value" of historical knowledge. But what if there is no longer a growing, productive and erasing "distance in time" and no experience of "progress" in time? What if there is no clear *ex post* as a vantage point from which the past can be conceived of as distinct and as distant from the present? What if the past refuses to be "erased" and to "go away"? What if the past and the

future remain stuck *in* the present – and thus remain more or less present and simultaneous - as increasingly appears to be the case since the end of the Cold War?

As far as I can see, historians have predominantly been solving this problem by denying it, that is: by simply claiming history's traditional "hegemony in the closed space of retrospection" – to use Paul Ricoeur's formulation.⁵³ I will end my article by providing two examples of reflexive historians who do just that. I am talking about the US-historian Gabrielle Spiegel and the French historian Henry Rousso.⁵⁴ In both we confront a typical discursive strategy of the historical profession when it reflects on the temporal aspects of history and memory: they are fencing off the discipline of history from memory. They do so by claiming a different, "improper", temporality for memory and by presenting memory as "mythical" or "pathological" - and surely as *not* providing a viable alternative to "real" history. Gabrielle Spiegel rejects theories that posit a reciprocal relation between history and memory by claiming that the "differing temporal structures" of history and memory "prohibit" their "conflation". Memory can never "do" the "work" of history or "perform historically" because "it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography." Indeed Spiegel writes: "The very postulate of modern historiography is the disappearance of the past from the present".55

Similar claims about historical time and about the relation between past and present have supported Henry Rousso's refusal to function as an expert witness in the French trial against Maurice Papon. Rousso's refusal to appear in the courtroom was based, among other considerations, on his conviction that historians have to improve the "understanding of the distance that separates [past and present]" or on the slightly but markedly different conviction that a good historian "puts the past at a distance".56 Rousso, however, believed that the attempts at retrospective justice in France were influenced by a politics of memory or even a "religion of memory" that "abolishes distance" and "ignores the hierarchies of time". The valorisation of memory obstructs "a real apprenticeship of the past, of duration, of the passage of time."57 In contrast, "otherness is the very reason that historians study recent or even current periods. The historical project consists precisely in describing, explaining, and situating alterity, in putting it at a distance."58 The historians' craft, according to Rousso, therefore, offers a "liberating type of thinking, because it rejects the idea that people or societies are conditioned or determined by their past without any possibility of escaping it."59 Historians must resist the role of "agitators of memory" and the growing societal "obsession" with memory. Historians

must do so by allowing what many want to avoid: "the selection of what must remain or disappear to occur spontaneously". 60

So it seems that confronted with the "memory boom" historians like Spiegel and Rousso are just trying to put the past back in its traditional "cold" place where historians had located it since the beginning of modernity: at a safe distance from the "hot" present. It had been fixed in this place by the anchor chain of irreversible, linear and progressive time. In this article I have argued that since the 1980's this anchor chain has snapped as modernity increasingly lost its credentials, especially its promise of progress. Since then we seem to be "stranded in the present". As the future lost its promise of progress, the past lost its fixed place at a safe distance from the present and its character as an object. What is called for is a renewed reflexion on both the temporal and moral notions implicit in this new experience of time because historians will not change the new moral sensibilities concerning the past by simply repeating the old mantras of their discipline. These historians are like fire fighters who are trying to extinguish a burning coalfield by shouting: "Fire, go out! Just go away!".61 This may help them to reduce their professional anxieties, but surely it will not help to restore the borderlines between present, past and future that have become blurred since the 1980's. As Bevernage suggests what is needed is "a historical approach to spectrality" that enables us "to account for the fact that there exist different levels in which a present can be haunted. A genuinely historical account of haunting will, for example, need to be able to explain that situations of violence and civil war tend to produce a much more vigorously persisting past than peaceful and stable situations". 62 However this may be, as long as past injustices will be experienced as persisting in the present – as subterranean coal fires - and as long as they will be recognised as "historical wounds", the liaison dangereuse between history and criminal justice is here to stay. 63

Notes

2005), 158.

- I want to thank the Gerda Henkel Foundation for financing my Marie Curie Research fellowship at the Institute of Social Movements, Ruhr-University Bochum. Further I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the *International Journal of History, Culture and Modernity* for their critical comments on an earlier version of this article. Christoph Ransmayr, *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer,
- See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3978329.stm and http://quickstart.clari.net/ qs_se/webnews/wed/cq/Qchina-fire.RjOh_DIV.html.

- 3. This coalfire is just one of many. Internationally, thousands of underground coal fires are burning on every continent except Antarctica. The problem is most acute in industrialising, coal-rich nations such as China, where underground fires are consuming between 20 and 200 million tons of coal annually. In India, 68 fires are burning beneath a 58-square-mile region of the Jhairia coalfield near Dhanbad, showering residents in airborne toxins. "Go there and within 24 hours you're spitting out mucous with coal particles," one expert commented. http://www.sapient-horizons.com/Sapient/Underground_Fires.html; http://www.businessinsider.com/photos-of-abandoned-centralia-pa-2012-5?op=1); http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/firehole.html).
- 4. This is of course the most important characteristic of situations of "transitional justice".
- 5. See A. Dirk Moses, "Genocide and the Terror of History," Parallax 17 (2011): 90-108.
- 6. For extended versions of this argument see: Berber Bevernage, "Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice," *History and Theory* 47 (2008):149-167, Berber Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz, "Introduction," in *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 7-30.
- Jan Romein, "Zekerheid en onzekerheid in de geschiedwetenschap. Het probleem der historische objectiviteit" (1937), in Historische Lijnen en Patronen. Een keuze uit de essays, ed. Jan Romein (Amsterdam: Querido, 1976), 90-119.
- 8. As Lucian Hölscher has argued, faith in "progressive" time had been undermined before among some of the more sensitive artistic minds during the First World War. See his "Mysteries of Historical Order: Ruptures, Simultaneity and the Relationship of the Past, the Present and the Future," in Bevernage and Lorenz, *Breaking up Time*, 134-155.
- 9. See Preston King, *Thinking Past a Problem. Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25-68.
- 10. King, Thinking Past a Problem, 55.
- 11. King, Thinking Past a Problem, 49-55. Also see Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz, "Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between the Present, Past and Future," Storia della Storiografia 63 (2013): 48-49, and Hölscher, "Mysteries of Historical Order", and Peter Osborne, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of Historical Time," in: Lorenz and Bevernage ed., Breaking up Time, 69-85, and Aleida Assmann, Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 2013), 281-304.
- 12. See for this argument Bevernage, "Time, Presence and Historical Injustice".
- 13. Fundamental on this topic is: Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*. Also see Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For the history of the ideas of universal human rights see: Sam Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010). For a nuanced stock taking of the "Global Justice Revolution" in legal practice see Payam Akhavan, "The Rise, and Fall, and Rise, of International Criminal Justice," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11 (2013): 527-536, and Liesbeth Zegveld, "Victims' Reparations Claims and International Criminal Courts. Incompatible Values?," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 8 (2010): 79 -111.
- 14. See Antoon de Baets, "The Impact of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on the Study of History," *History and Theory* 48 (2009): 20–43.
- 15. Bevernage, "Time, Presence and Historical Injustice".
- R. Koselleck, The Practice of Conceptual History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 120.

- L. Hölscher, Die Entdeckung der Zukunft (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999). Now also see
 Z.S. Schiffman, The Birth of the Past (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
- 18. See for the conceptual history of "modernity": Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Modern, Modernität, Moderne," in Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, vol.4, ed. O. Brunner, W.Conze and R. Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 93-131, and Assmann, Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?.
- H. Lübbe, "Die Modernität der Vergangenheitszuwendung. Zur Geschichtsphilosophie zivilisatorischer Selbsthistorisierung", in Zukunft der Geschichte. Historisches Denken an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert, ed. Stefan Jordan, (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2000) 26-35, especially 29.
- 20. This double focus on continuity and discontinuity was of course the claim of *Historismus* as the founding philosophy of history as a discipline.
- 21. See Alexander Demandt, Metaphern für Geschichte. Sprachbilder und Gleichnisse im historisch-politischen Denken (Munich: Beck, 1978).
- 22. See Achim Landwehr, "Von der 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen'," Historische Zeitschrift 295 (2012): 2-34, who argues that "das grundsätzliche Problem" is the following: "Man muss nämlich immer wissen und sagen können, wo denn nun die Gleichzeitigkeit steckt und wer an ihr teilhat, sobald man von Ungleichzeitigkeit redet" (10). As Landwehr shows since the Enlightenment "zeitgleich" has basically been identified with "being modern", that is "being European". Also see Bevernage, History, Memory and State-Sponsored Violence, esp. 110-130: "What we need and what is mostly lacking [...] is an explicit deconstruction of any notion of a time that acts as a container time of all other times" (130). Both Landwehr and Bevernage hark back to Johannes Fabian's anthropological classic Time and the Other (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). In contrast to Landwehr and Bevernage Helge Jordheim attempts to "save" Koselleck from this fundamental critique in his "Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities," History and Theory 51 (2012): 151-171.
- 23. See M. Sabrow and N. Frei eds., *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).
- 24. Also in this respect the *Historik* and the *Hermeneutik* are resting on the same presuppositions, as Gadamer pointed out in his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960).
- 25. This argument is increasingly questionable because new techniques like DNA sampling have improved the quality of evidence over time significantly and many state archives are only accessible after long lapses of time. See R.A. Kok, Statutory Limitations in International Criminal Law (dissertation Faculty of Law, University of Amsterdam 2007), esp. 206-242. Another ground for skepticism in case is the fact that memory research suggests that memory as such is fundamentally unreliable, even independent of the factor time. See D. Schacter, The Seven Sins of Memory. How the Mind Forgets and Remembers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001). Schacter argues that memory's malfunctions can be divided into seven fundamental transgressions or "sins". These are transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence. The first three are described as sins of omission, since the result is a failure to recall an idea, fact, or event. The other four sins (misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence) are sins of commission, meaning that there is a form of memory present, but it is not of the desired fidelity or the desired fact, event, or ideas.
- 26. Christian Meier, Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns: vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2010); Bradford Vivian,
 Public Forgetting. The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania
 State University Press, 2010), Hagen Schulz-Forberg ed., Zero Hours. Conceptual Insecurities
 and New Beginnings in the Interwar Period (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).

- 27. Timothy Garton Ash, "Trials, purges and history lessons: treating a difficult past in post-communist Europe," in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Present of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 265–82.
- 28. See Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*, 11: "In fact, in the whole field of transitional justice, the once and well-guarded borders separating history and jurisdiction have become vague and permeable".
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "History and the Politics of Recognition," in Manifestos for History, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), 77-78.
- 30. See for a nuanced version of the idea of "collective trauma" Dirk Moses, "Genocide and the Terror of History".
- 31. Also Antoon de Baets' arguments seem to fit in the traditional view concerning the division of labour between history and jurisdiction. See de Baets, "Impact of the *Universal Declaration*". Universal human rights in his view can only pertain to the living. He introduces a distinction between "remote" and "recent" "historical injustices". In the first case all victims and perpetrators are dead while in the latter case at least some of the victims and perpetrators are still alive. Therefore, he argues, legal action can only apply to the "recent" cases. "Thus, dealing with remote historical injustice is primarily a mission not for judges, but for historians" (35-38). "Retroactivity is for legal scholars what anachronism is for historians" (26). Relabeling of "remote" mass murders by historians as "genocides" and as "crimes against humanity" is therefore to be avoided according to de Baets, although historians are also advised by him to justify labels when they differ from those of the UN.
- 32. J. Torpey, Making Whole What Has Been Smashed (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 33. David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For a recent overview see: Alon Confino, "History and Memory," in The Oxford History of Historical Writing, ed. Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf, Vol. 5, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36-51.
- 34. For a recent comparison between the "compensation theory" and the theory of "cultural memory" see Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?*, 209-245. For a fundamental critique of the *Beschleunigungs*-thesis from a Luhmanian perspective see Robin Vandevoordt, "Systeemtheoretische perspectieven op sociale versnelling," *Krisis.Tijdschrift voor Actuele Filosofie* (2013): 30-43.
- 35. Torpey, Making Whole, 19.
- 36. Ibid., 6.
- 37. Ibid., 23.
- 38. A. Assmann, "History and Memory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2002), 6822–9; Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?*, 281-327.
- 39. Also see E. Runia. "Spots of Time," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 305-316, and Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003), 49. Landwehr, "Von der 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen," 17-19, argues that Koselleck tried in vain to solve the problem inherent in his notion of "Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen", by substituting the notion of *Zeitschichten* for it.
- 40. Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner, "The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History," in The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, Claudio Fogu (Duke: Duke University Press, 2006), 286; Assmann, Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?, 296-304.
- See P. Nora, "Between Memory and History: les Lieux de Memoire," Representations 26 (1989): 7-25. For an overview and analysis of this process see: Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz eds., The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories (Houndmills: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2008).

- 42. See Chris Lorenz, "Unstuck in Time. Or: the sudden presence of the past," in *Performing the Past. Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) 67-105. In the beginning the *lieux de memoire* project was thus very much rooted in the post-1945 history of France as the history of a former "Great Power" in long-term decline (just as the *Annales* project with its "rejection" of "superficial" national history had been). In that light the later transfer of this French historiographical project to practically the rest of Europe is all the more remarkable.
- 43. It is remarkable that not only time but also space has not been a topic of much reflection in historical thinking. The same goes for the notion of place *Ort* that is of "localised" space. See Katie Digan, "Space and place of memory: the case of the Haus am Grossen Wannsee 56-58," in *Erinnerungsorte: Chancen, Grenzen und Perspektiven eines Erfolgskonzeptes in den Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Stefan Berger and Joana Seiffert (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2014):209-229.
- 44. These "turns" are most clear in archeology and anthropology. See Ewa Domanska, "The return to things," *Archaeologia Polona* 44 (2006):171-185; Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2012); Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, (Laham: Altamira Press, 2013).
- 45. See Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory 'Industry," *Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009): 122–158.
- 46. Jay Winter, "Introduction. The Performance of the Past: History, Memory, Identity," in Tilmans, van Vree, and Winter, *Performing the Past*, 12.
- 47. Aleida Assmann, "Re-Framing Memory: Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past," in Tilmans, van Vree and Winter, Performing the Past, 39; Assmann, Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?, 304-308.
- 48. Compare Verónica Tozzi, "The Epistemic and Moral Role of Testimony," *History and Theory* 51 (2012): 1-17.
- 49. Aleida Assmann, Die lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006); Martin Sabrow, "Die Lust an die Vergangenheit. Kommentar zu Aleida Assmann," Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History Online-Ausgabe, 4 (2007), URL: http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen. de/16126041-Sabrow-3-2007.
- 50. Elsewhere Bevernage and I have argued that Sabrow has put forward similar claims as Spiegel and Rousso concerning the distinction between history and memory. See our "Introduction" to *Breaking up Time*.
- 51. H. White, "The Practical Past," *Historein* 10 (2010): 8; H. White, "Politics, History, and the Practical Past," *Storia della Storiografia* 61 (2012): 127-134; Chris Lorenz, "It takes three to tango. History between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past," *Storia della Storiografia* 65 (2014) (in press).
- 52. Michael Ignatieff, "The nightmare from which we are trying to awake," in: *The Warrior's Honour. Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, ed. Michael Ignatieff (London: Holt Paperbacks, 1998), 166-190.
- 53. P. Ricoeur, La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 458.
- 54. See Bevernage, "Time, presence, and historical injustice" for Rousso and Spiegel.
- G. Spiegel, "Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time," History and Theory XLI (2002): 149-162.
- H. Rousso, The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 8.

57. Ibid., 16.

- 58. Ibid., 26.
- 59. Ibid., 28.
- 60. Ibid., 3. Nora even refers to the "terrorism" of present day victim-oriented and "pathological" memory and posits that "memory divides and history alone unites". See Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 268-270.
- 61. Remarkably China's claim in 2004 that the fire in the Liuhuanggou colliery had been successfully extinguished was refuted later on by the researcher Steven Q. Andrews. He is quoted in the article "Is Beijing Manipulating Air Pollution Statistics?" of the March issue of *Time* as saying, "I decided to go to see how it was extinguished, and flames were visible and the entire thing was still burning [...] They said it was put out, and who is to say otherwise?" (at: http://www.time.com/time/world/article/o,8599,1722450,00.html).
- 62. Bevernage, History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence, 146.
- 63. The abolition of the statute of limitation for crimes against humanity fundamentally implies that the temporal distinction between the "historical past" and the "legal past" has been abandoned in jurisdiction in this domain. This can be seen as the blurring of the borderline between history and jurisdiction from the side of jurisdiction. According to Koselleck the concerns of history and jurisdiction have always been connected. See his *Zeitschichten.Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 349: "Implizit oder explizit wird immer die Gerechtigkeit oder Ungerechtigkeit einer geschichtlichen Lage, einer Veränderung oder einer Katastrophe zur Sprache gebracht. Das gilt nicht nur für die moralisierende Historie, die seit dem Hellenismus gepflegt wird, die Ranke und Weber überdauert hat und die bis heute nicht ausgestorben ist. Auch die sogenannten wertfreien Bemühungen entrinnen nicht einer der Geschichte unterstellten oder bewußt abgesprochenen Gerechtigkeit, die also denknotwendig in die Urteilsbildung einfließt."

About the Author

Chris Lorenz is Professor of German Historical Culture at VU University Amsterdam and since September 2013 Marie Curie/Gerda Henkel senior research fellow at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. His research themes comprise modern historiography, philosophy of history, and higher educational policies. He has held visiting professorships in Graz (1999), Erfurt (2000), Stellenbosch (2003) and Ann Arbor (2005). Recent publications include: Chris Lorenz ed., If you're so smart why aren't you rich? (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008); Chris Lorenz, Bordercrossings. Explorations between Philosophy and History (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznañskie Publishers, 2009) (in Polish translation); Chris Lorenz and Stefan Berger eds., Nationalizing the Past. Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe (Houndmills: Palgrave Mcmillan 2010); "History and Theory," in: Daniel Woolf and Axel Schneider eds., The Oxford History of Historical Writing, vol.5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13-35; "If you're so smart, why are you under surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism and New Public Management," Critical Inquiry 38 (2012): 599-630; Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage eds., Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders

between Present, Past and Future (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). Email: c.f.g.lorenz@vu.nl



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