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# *Pedagogical Poem*

*The Archive of the Future Museum of History*

Marsilio

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# Contents

## 5 Introduction

### WHEN MUSEUMS STRIKE BACK

- 11 Ilya Budraitskis, *When Museums Strike Back*
- 19 Yevgeniy Fiks, *Nationalization of All Galleries and Museums*
- 25 Tamás Kende, *(Counter-) Revolution in Museums: An East European View*
- 39 Arseniy Zhilyaev, *The Vulgar Freedom of Museum Work*

### BACK TO THE ROOTS OF AVANT-GARDE

- 53 Igor Chubarov, *Communist Sensuality. Theses on Production Art*
- 60 Ekaterina Degot, *The Cultural Revolution's Aesthetic Revolution*
- 76 Alexei Penzin, *The Biopolitics of the Soviet Avant-Garde*

### HISTORY SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

- 97 Ilya Budraitskis, *When Does the History of a Revolution Begin?*
- 105 Vladlen Loginov, *What Color Were Lenin's Eyes?*
- 112 Michael Löwy, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*
- 115 Andrei Oleynikov, *History with No Statute of Limitations*

### SEARCHING FOR NEW REALITY AND REALISM

- 127 Maria Chekhonadskikh, *Lost in Translation: Precarity in Theory and Practice*
- 139 Vlad Sofronov, *Introduction for the Critical Theory Reading Group*
- 143 Dmitry Vilensky, *In Defense of Representation*
- 147 Arseniy Zhilyaev, *Ethics of the Future. Art in the Extraordinary Situation of Emerging Hope*
- 154 Olga Zhitlina, Dmitry Borodulin (Utopian News Agency), *The Right to Have Nothing*

- 159 *Dialogue between Ilya Budraitskis and Arseniy Zhilyaev*
- 175 Polylogue "We Don't Understand What a Bagel Means"
- 185 *Participants' Bios*

keys to understand his method of weaving a new philosophy of history with the threads of Marxism and Romanticism. Rejecting the conservative (Klages) and fascist (Bäumler) interpretations, he claims that Bachofen's work on matriarchy, "inspired by romantic sources," has attracted the interest of both Marxist and Anarchist thinkers because of his "evocation of a communist society at the dawn of history." The Anarchist geographer Elisée Réclus found in Bachofen's books the ancient sources of his libertarian ideal, while Friedrich Engels and Paul Lafargue were interested in his presentation of matriarchal communities as social organizations where there existed a very high degree of democracy and civil equality, as well as forms of primitive communism which subverted the concept of authority.<sup>5</sup> This lost prehistoric Garden of Eden is one of key "dialectical images" of the famous Thesis IX "On the concept of history" (Über den Begriff der Geschichte, 1940). One should interpret this enigmatic and fascinating text as an *allegory* where each sacred image has a profane "correspondent" (in the Baudelairian meaning): history is represented by a powerless angel, inexorably projected into the future by a storm which blows from paradise, while on his feet ruins and wreckage accumulate: "What we call progress is *this* storm."<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the paradise from which we are being blown away by the catastrophic progress has its profane equivalent—or rather, its "correspondent"—in the egalitarian prehistoric society, the primitive community that not only the historian of matriarchy, but also the *poète maudit* and the founding fathers of socialism dreamed of.

In other terms: Benjamin's heretical interpretation of Marxism remained to the end illuminated by the Romantic night star.

<sup>1</sup> *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 1, 16–34.

<sup>2</sup> *GS*, II, 1, 75.

<sup>3</sup> *GS*, I, 1, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *GS*, II, 2, 642–647.

<sup>5</sup> *GS* II, 1, 220–230.

<sup>6</sup> *GS*, I, 2, 698.



## History with No Statute of Limitations\*

Andrei Oleynikov

Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* was published in 2005, the twilight of a period destined to become (this is still difficult to doubt today) a golden age in the evolution of the theory of history. Ankersmit wanted to extend this age by writing the book. But, apparently, its time had already been measured out. Despite its indisputable merits—the power of its philosophical intrigue, the amazing clarity of the arguments, the subtle lyrical tone, not to mention its ability to force thinkers from a variety of schools and trends to respond to the questions it poses—*Sublime Historical Experience* never did materialize as the intellectual event its author had every right to count on. Rather, it was greeted with cautious skepticism. In this article, I try and give my own answer to the question of why this happened. Ankersmit has earned recognition as one of the brightest and most talented advocates of the narrative approach to the reality of historical events. In his day, he (like Hayden White and Arthur Danto before him) tirelessly argued that the past had no independent essence that would enable us to examine it outside of narrative.<sup>1</sup> It cannot function, either, as the referent of historical narratives or as an "untold tale" awaiting its teller. The past cannot be given to the historian in any form. It is not even projected, but is directly *constructed* in narrative. In the book, Ankersmit seemingly renounces his former convictions and argues that the language of historical works, belonging wholly to the present inhabited by the historian, blocks our access to an immediate *experience* of the past. Here, Ankersmit actually suggests exploring the possibilities of this experience. If we consider that this suggestion comes from a researcher known for his antipathy towards phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy (and therefore his opposition to mental constructs

alleging the continuity of history and life, past and present), the question inevitably arises as to where this experience comes from and how it can be imagined generally. In fact, the way this question is answered is the book's main intrigue.

Odd as it may seem, Ankersmit's avowed rejection of the need to see the past solely from the perspective of historiographical language should be regarded as his next step in implementing his entire program of narratological research. For narrative had always interested him not so much as a kind of historical account, but mainly as a cognitive tool for establishing and measuring the distance that should separate the past from the present. By placing the past at a convenient distance, narrative historiography was able to interpret and explain it in terms of the distance it had itself established. From Ankersmit's viewpoint, therefore, narrative is not only a tool for describing and explaining the past but also an ideal means of appropriating and controlling it.

Such reasoning gives rise to the hypothesis that, even before the *distinction* between the past and the present is deployed and objectified by means of narrative, there must be experience in which it first makes itself freely felt.<sup>2</sup> Ankersmit believes that such experience might be provided by events causing *alienation* from the familiar order of things. The past is not primarily a historical narrative; above all, it is an alienated and defamiliarized present, a present that has ceased to be comprehensible. Nostalgia and feelings of loss (which break life's continuum into "before" and "after") give us a keen sense of the past's immediate presence, which narrative then tries merely to alienate from us by paralyzing it with the objective logic of the changes that have occurred with the passage of time. Put another way, narrative turns the immediate *experience of the past* into *past experience*, into something that happened and was digested long ago. And the main drawback of all philosophical doctrines that have ever openly raised the issue of the human experience's historicity is the inability to see the past other than from the perspective of its inevitable narrative (and, thus, linguistic) appropriation.

Ankersmit's book is sharply polemical. "No compromise is possible between language and experience," he writes, "and the triumphs of the one are inevitably the defeats of the other. They truly are each other's mortal enemies: where you have language, experience is not and vice versa."<sup>3</sup> Ankersmit draws his opponents mainly from among those researchers whose attempts to reconcile the two enemies have had the direst consequences for experience. He criticizes Rorty for inconsistent historicism, which finally prevented him from transcending the transcendental tradition he had made such a huge effort to expose. Ankersmit makes similar accusations against Gadamer, despite the fact that the founder of philosophical hermeneutics was almost the first to thematize historical experience, raising it to the level of a freestanding theoretical problem. Nevertheless,

because he turns language into "being that can be understood" (per Gadamer), thus causing us to recall Heidegger's famous phrase "Language is the house of Being," all that remains for experience to do, in Ankersmit's conception, is to keep the "house" in good order, figuratively speaking. Ankersmit is convinced that Gadamer's famous notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* implies nothing other than interpretation of the historical text as it has unfolded over time.

The experience of liberation from the "prison house of language" (to borrow Nietzsche's expression) means rehabilitating the *world of feelings and sentiments* behind our attitude to the past. This can be done only if we cease to impose solely cognitive tasks on historical experience. "We experience the past in the same way," argues Ankersmit, "in which we may experience the work of art. In both cases we are required to stay 'on the surface,' so to speak, and to avoid the temptation to look for deeper foundations for what we see and experience either on the side of the subject or on that of the object. Truth has no role to play here."<sup>4</sup> Ankersmit is sympathetic to theorists and historians whose work has enabled us to see the essential affinity between aesthetic and historical experience: Otto Friedrich Bollnow, John Dewey, Jacob Burkhardt, and Johan Huizinga. Ankersmit devotes a special place in his book to Walter Benjamin and his theory of photography. He explains his interest in the latter by arguing that the photographic image, unlike the painted image, maintains the tension between the "found" and the "made." For this reason, the photograph is able to sustain the experience of the past, which manifests itself in the gap between what it was supposed to depict and what has been possible to see in it. No other visual means can bring us closer to what has been lost forever. According to Ankersmit, Benjamin's notion of "aura" nicely captures this peculiarity of photography.

The "surface" on which experience of the past unfolds is never serene. Its tension is formed by conflicting feelings of various tenors and different degrees of intensity. Some of the most brilliant pages in the book are those where Ankersmit dares to present his personal experience of the past. Thanks to a single insignificant detail, a strip of sunlight on the left side of the ceiling, a capriccio by Francesco Guardi, depicting Pulcinellas feasting against the backdrop of a magnificent arcade and a view of the Venetian Lagoon behind it, reveals to Ankersmit the emotional world inhabited by people in the late eighteenth century. It was a theatrical world where the regulation of all (even the most ecstatic) forms of self-expression was offset by individual boredom, which signaled the birth of desires provoked by the social order but which it could not satisfy. And this long-vanished world of the "ancien régime" is revealed because Ankersmit recognized the strip of light as the same one that passed through his room when, as a sickly and bedridden child, he first experienced the feeling of boredom because he was unable to play with his com-

rades, noisily frolicking outside. Thus, a private and seemingly facultative feeling can serve as a vehicle to the collective European past. Ankersmit, however, is in no hurry to pass off his own feeling as a special cognitive insight. Although there are many studies and historical documents testifying to the fact that boredom became an integral part of European life in the eighteenth century, they cannot help verify the “correctness” of the feeling relived by Ankersmit when he looked at Guardi’s painting. The point, Ankersmit believes, is not to prove the veracity of his feeling by inserting it into the context of already existing historical research; it is much more important to be able just to trust it and realize its randomness. Mundane boredom is not as facultative and harmless as it might seem at first glance. By suspending or even altogether sidelining the adaptive tools that hitherto furnished contact with external reality, it liberates the force of the imagination to configure reality anew.

And yet if the feelings evoked by the past were purely aesthetic in nature, the constancy with which people continue to glean the difficult “lessons” of history would be incomprehensible. In the final, eponymous chapter of *Sublime Historical Experience*, Ankersmit returns to the relationship between experience and knowledge. Now, however, he no longer engages in what he likes to call “negative heuristics”: the problem of “unknowing” the past, releasing it from the oppression of linguistic and cognitive schemes, does not primarily interest him here. His focus is the existential premises of historical knowledge. Ankersmit argues that the actual existence of such premises should explain the urgent need for this kind of knowledge along with its fundamental limitations.

Ankersmit links the need to study history with rejection of a familiar self-identity, occasioned by mental or cultural trauma, a rejection impelled towards a new, not yet fully established self-image. “The new identity,” writes Ankersmit, “is mainly constituted by the trauma of the loss of a former identity—precisely this is its main content.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, it has no other content, only the awareness that is impossible to regain what has been irretrievably lost. In this situation, knowledge of the past is the only way of explaining to us why we can never be what we were before. “Becoming what one is no longer,” the individual, nation or cultural community sees its previous life through the screen of knowledge that provides an objective picture of that life to the same extent as it expresses the impossibility of reliving and reappropriating it. This, argues Ankersmit, is the fundamental difference between the traumatic experience at the basis of historical knowledge and that with which psychoanalysis is concerned. Historical trauma can neither be effaced nor replaced by new, positive knowledge of the past, because it is itself the necessary condition for this knowledge’s emergence. The overwhelming number of works written, or in the process of being written, on such crucial events in European history as the

French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the two World Wars speaks to the fact that the wounds they left have not healed and continue to constitute the content of new types of collective identity. “In this way,” Ankersmit writes, “we can say that our collective identity largely is the sum of all the scars on our collective soul, scars that were occasioned by our forced abandonment of former identities, scars that will never wholly cure and that will cause in us a continuous and enduring pain. Similarly, we may argue that the past will always accompany us as a past love: absent, but precisely because of this, always so very much and so very painfully present.”<sup>6</sup>

This poignant lyricism proved unable to move our contemporaries, who have learned well the lesson that history is largely a set of texts, and texts generally do not “blush.” The ambitious naivety of Ankersmit’s concept of historical experience cannot fail to amaze us, for he attempts to espy the foundations of our interest in the past, which lie somewhere on the sidelines of a life preoccupied with the present. Sublime historical experience is an experience of extreme disengagement from the present, which Ankersmit deliberately dramatizes by likening it to an incurable trauma. It is hard not to notice, however, that this experience is too sterile to deal with real traumas. In the same chapter, Ankersmit resolutely refuses to recognize the Holocaust as a historical sublime because the Allied victory spared us the need to adapt to the Nazi regime and thus prevented the loss of our old moral compass. Obviously, Zygmunt Bauman’s insistence on the essential connection between modern civilization and the Holocaust, and his warning of its possible recurrence in the future (not to mention Adorno’s famous doubts as to the existence of poetry and philosophy after Auschwitz) would not succeed in forcing Ankersmit to alter his concept. It requires a past for which we can feel endless longing and nostalgia, and a present to whose mercy it would not be shameful to surrender ourselves so as to pay as little mind to it as possible. Despite its polemical fervor and proclaimed intention of restoring the existential dimension to the study of history (something hitherto neglected by the narrativists), Ankersmit’s book does not deviate in the least from the constructivist dogma that states the past is, by definition, what no longer is. It merely dramatizes stupefaction by the specter of the past, which Ankersmit argues we should regard as sufficient grounds for a serious interest in history, but which hints at a reluctance to change anything in the present.

Despite the fact that the book fits perfectly into the “anthropological turn” that occurred at the turn of the century, it was rather coldly received by professional scholars. Narrativists criticized Ankersmit for naturalizing the past and retreating from his own programmatic ideas, as set forth in his early works.<sup>7</sup> Specialists in the humanities and social sciences found his concept of historical experience too

speculative and lacking in substance.<sup>8</sup> In my view, however, the concept's main problem is that it attempts to extend the life of classic nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historicism by instilling it with the notion of trauma employed nowadays to interpret the historical catastrophes experienced by humanity since at least the WWI.<sup>9</sup> Classic historicism was an ideology that turned the past into the historian's sole focus. The ability to distinguish the past from the present was considered the necessary condition of its objective intelligibility. This skill was taught in the special university departments that produced professional historians. The point of their work, if we define it in Ankersmit's terms, was to subjugate the past to the present through its narrative *re-presentation*. In other words, classic historicism was an ideology that legitimized the existing order of things through retrospection. By speaking of traumatic experience resisting narrative appropriation, Ankersmit seemingly problematizes the very possibility of distinguishing the past from the present, historicism's *sine qua non*. However, from his point of view, this historical experience is never so traumatic as to completely abolish the possibility and need for its subsequent narrative appropriation. In fact, what he has in mind is only that the appropriation can never be complete and final. Significant events in the history of Western civilization (which, in the end, Ankersmit regards as the only full-fledged subject of sublime historical experience) will continue to provoke in us the "pain" that sets in motion the narrative mechanisms for sublimating it into historical texts. For Ankersmit, historical trauma is not so much the real suffering and disasters that occurred in the past as it is a kind of *supplément* (in Derrida's sense) to a significant historical text, endowing it with the authority to represent them. In other words, this trauma merely "reboots" our capacity for distinguishing the past from the present. After this reboot, historians can continue their usual work of neutralizing it.

Even before Ankersmit had begun working on the book, it was obvious to many that academic historiography was losing its control over the past. With the collapse of the postwar Yalta–Potsdam world order, memory—the memory of those who never did learn, over all those years, to distinguish the past from "what no longer is"—has staked its claims on the past. This memory calls for revenge and demands to be enshrined in law. It sees history as "nothing but one long series of crimes against humanity," as Pierre Nora has written.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to traumatic experience, as interpreted by Ankersmit, it does not alienate us from the present, but, on the contrary, binds us to it even more strongly. Selective and biased, it recognizes no distances and easily awards its adherents with whatever national, cultural, or other group identity they like. It is becoming more difficult to evade this memory's hegemony. Today, according to Nora, "All historians are now suspected, quite intolerably, of reacting defensively to protect their professional rights—as

though history were merely the collective interpretation of the past invented by a group of professionals in love with their archives and their privileges, whose tranquil occupation has rendered them insensitive to real history, which is the sum of the real pain and suffering of women and men."<sup>11</sup>

While working on this book, Ankersmit seemingly did not notice that the memory of the twentieth- and early twenty-first century traumas no longer provides modern historians with the advantage that their great predecessors (Ranke, Michelet, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and even Huizinga) had in envisioning the past. Invoking the well-known concept of François Hartog, we could say that these traumas have contributed to the consolidation of a completely different "mode of historicity." The present has ceased to be regarded as a transitional state from what has been to what has not yet been. The past and the future now exist as the present's own immanent modes: the past "represents the ongoing nature of the present,"<sup>12</sup> while the future is what inspires us with responsibility for the present. This means the distance necessary for studying the past emerges not for any objective reasons (whether the "end of an era" or, as in Ankersmit, the experience of alienation from an old identity), irrespective of the historian's desires. Historians establish it themselves or, in any case, from the outset a certain political or moral investment should be discerned in the desire to constitute it. As the German historian Lucian Hölscher writes, we must free ourselves from the traditional "prejudices" that history is independent of society and politics, and that "history is a pure 'observing' discipline, that is not simultaneously directed at action." According to his American colleague Elazar Barkan, "the construction of history continuously shapes our world, and therefore has to be treated as an explicit, directly political activity, operating within specific scientific and rhetorical rules."<sup>13</sup> It seems we are on the verge of redefining the political dimension in the practice of history. It is possible that the measure of "pastness," the remoteness of a particular historical subject from our day and age, will be determined only by the weakness of the political culture that may be interested in revitalizing it. Perhaps the time has already come to stop stipulating the possibility of studying history on its objective "remoteness." The very idea of the past needs drastic rethinking. After all, there was a time when historiography made do without it. Thus it was in ancient times: as Zachary Schiffman has shown in his recent book, the modern idea of the past owes its origins to the Renaissance concept of anachronism.<sup>14</sup> However, the problem of distinguishing without bias between historical constellations that have maintained or lost their relevance seems less and less soluble. Today, the difference between the past and the present seems performative rather than temporal in nature. But is this not exactly what Ankersmit meant when he argued that reception of the past is akin to reception of a work of art? Does his impressive analysis of the Guardi painting

not show the effect of the immediate presence of a past “ancien régime” in the current, “post-revolutionary” present? The notion of experience, which plays the crucial role in Ankersmit’s concept, prevents us from giving a clearly affirmative answer to these questions. After all, it is meant to emphasize the possibility of an unpremeditated, “disinterested” (in the Kantian sense) encounter with the past, which should by definition inevitably contradict the idea of such an encounter’s performativity (and, hence, pragmatic causality).

Leaving these questions open, I will restrict myself to the assumption that in the current circumstances the notion of experience is less and less able to cope with the critical and descriptive task with which it has been charged. In François Hartog’s works, “experience” is essentially a synonym for the “presentist mode of historicity.” Within this mode, “experience” is all embracing; there is simply nothing that can be opposed to it. Ankersmit, on the contrary, uses this notion to criticize the inability of epistemological theories to explain the initial need to study history. Nevertheless, in his work, the *timeless* “experience of the past” never protests its subsequent transformation into “past experience.” In other words, Ankersmit’s concept of experience constantly betrays its epistemological origins. Even sublime historical experience is, at best, the “seamy side,” the dark side (like that of the Moon) of the historiographical representation of the past. As for this experience’s traumatic dimension, the components of its “loss” testify, paradoxically, to an inexhaustible supply of the images of identity it is able to induce. However serious all its previous losses have been, Western civilization always does have something to lose by way of regenerating and evolving further.

What else has Western civilization not managed to lose during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to stop being itself? However we answer the question, one thing is clear: it is a political question, not so much because of the inevitable bias of all positive responses to it, but because they must unfold within a logic different from that of historical experience. In other words, however great all past losses are, they are doomed to oblivion if they do not become part of a redemptive political project. On its own, historical experience cannot compensate for the absence of such a project in the present. By itself, it expresses only our present confusion, disunity, and apathy. If such a project is no longer possible or is preemptively doomed (and Ankersmit’s concept is based on just this presumption) we should agree we have entered an era in which universal history is no longer needed.<sup>15</sup> If we recall what Nora has written, we would say that universal history has been seized and privatized by various “memorial groups,” who have put it at the service of their own selfish interests. If, on the contrary, this project is still possible, then the concept of *action* should become crucial for the theory of history, rather than the concept of experience. But this topic warrants a separate discussion.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my review of *Sublime Historical Experience*, a book I was fortunate to read in manuscript. I am incredibly grateful to the author for giving me this opportunity. Andrei Oleynikov, “Stanovias’ temi, kem my bol’she ne iavliaemsia,” *Sinii divan* 4 (2004): 249–255.

<sup>2</sup> See his programmatic work *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> These arguments are mainly presented in F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Sublime Historical Experience*, 313.

<sup>6</sup> *Sublime Historical Experience*, 324.

<sup>7</sup> *Sublime Historical Experience*, 324–325.

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Icke, *Frank Ankersmit’s Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Ewa Domanska, “Frank Ankersmit: From Narrative to Experience,” *Rethinking History* 13.2 (June 2009): 175–195.

<sup>10</sup> This attempt follows from Ankersmit’s longstanding idea that postmodernism is a radical version of historicism. See F. R. Ankersmit, “The Origins of Postmodernist Historiography,” in Jerzy Topolski, ed., *Historiography Between Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 84–119.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Nora, “Historical Identity in Trouble” (2008); accessed at [http://www.lph-asso.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=152&Itemid=182&lang=en](http://www.lph-asso.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=152&Itemid=182&lang=en).

<sup>12</sup> Nora, “Historical Identity in Trouble.”

<sup>13</sup> François Hartog, “What is the Role of the Historian in an Increasingly Presentist World?” in Gelina Harlaftis, Nikos Karapidakis, Kostas Sbonias, and Vaios Vaiopoulos, eds., *The New Ways of History: Developments in Historiography* (London & New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 243.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage, eds., *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 11, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ankersmit’s philosophy of history springs from the liberal conservative political culture, whose key figures are Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville; these are Ankersmit’s favorite writers, to whom he refers in nearly all his works. The defining feature of this culture is recognition of the defeat of the old “aristocracy” during the French Revolution, which figures for Ankersmit as the tragic European historical event par excellence. His historical outlook rests on recognition of the need to study the past, to return to it in thought, but not direct restoration of the bygone “ancien régime.” In other words, this outlook bows to forces of history capable of plucking a person from dear and familiar surroundings and making him abandon old loyalties, but which ultimately contain the rudiments of a new, just (in its own way), and perhaps even noble world order. However, the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s, which surprised many old-school liberals, deprived them of the image of that historical kismet which they had been willing to obey. In other words, this essentially epistemological concept of historical experience justifies its applicability only so long as it is accompanied (as an unwanted *supplément*) by a certain metaphysic of historical progress. When this metaphysic is discredited, the concept of historical experience sheds all legible content.

<sup>17</sup> The more and more frequent current calls for the study of the historical profession’s performative side and the emergence of so-called public history as an independent trend in the social sciences and humanities speak in favor of this conversation. In this regard, see the following very informative collection of articles: Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay Winter, eds., *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

