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History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 2)

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Cite as: Georg Gangl, "History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 2)," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 22/11/2022, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9526>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9526>

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History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 2)

Presentism and Politicism in Historiography

Historians find themselves in a peculiar position: They employ the tools available to them in their own present to acquire knowledge about the past, a past that is over and done with and cannot be (experimentally) reinstated, and must therefore be reconstructed and inferred through the traces it left behind.¹ Here the issue of our “existential presentism” and the accompanying issue of anachronism become salient. Whether we have our historian’s cap on or not, we cannot shed our *temporal positioning* in our own present and, with that, in the future of the past. We necessarily live our lives in that present and are simultaneously conditioned by it. The most common term for this conditioning is socialization. So, it makes *prima facie* sense to believe that historians presuppose present categories and perspectives in their inquiries, but this does not mean this is all they do or that they do it almost unwittingly or automatically (especially since disciplinary education includes learning temporal disembedding and debiasing techniques). It is nevertheless reasonable to say that “the present-day perspective” “contributes” to the historiographic endeavour to produce knowledge of the past, just as Bell did. On this level, we are indeed faced with some ineluctable presentism, whose exact effects and reach have yet to be determined.

The unavoidable temporal positioning of the historian in their own present creates the *hindsight* that is characteristic of their perspective on the past and, together with historical change, it is the origin of the vexed issue of *anachronism* in historiography. As its temporal successors, we can (re)describe and analyse the past in ways impossible in the past itself. Given the potential differences between past and present, however, and the frequently spotty record of traces it left behind, there is also a real possibility that our efforts to speak truthfully about the past will fail. Some forms of anachronism constitute precisely this failure: By employing them, we use ill-fitting modern categories, or at least ill-fitting modern meanings of such categories, and thereby fundamentally misdescribe the past for whatever reason. Yet, not all anachronisms, and with them all modern perspectives and categories, are like that, and some are indeed indispensable to the work of the historian. That said, there is a certain tension here. The historian employs her present-day conceptual apparatus and tools via the perspective of hindsight to

gain knowledge about the past, a past that is irretrievably gone, could have been very different and may not have left a bounty of traces behind. In other words, our present theories and categories might very well go wrong here, but not necessarily so, and historiography and historical sciences have developed reliable methods to infer true descriptions of the past under these circumstances.² Either way, we could not do without those modern theories or categories.

In the paper of mine that I referenced earlier, I distinguish three kinds of anachronism employed in historiography and scrutinize them for their epistemic effects: pragmatic, evidentiary and interpretative anachronisms.³ Pragmatic anachronism is a blanket term to convey that historians communicate via their work with a contemporary audience, and that they need to be understood by that audience. Sumerian history is usually written in some modern language but not Sumerian, and so is even Roman history nowadays. This already “presentivizes” the subject matter historians talk about, and the latter typically introduce a number of other conceptual anachronisms simply to be understood by their peers or a general audience. Forms of anachronism like this are not worrisome for most historians, not even for Sweet I suppose, but they still need to be used with much care. In any case, depending on how strictly we define Sweet’s injunction against “interpret[ing] the past through the lens of the present,” this form of presentism might even be outlawed.

Another form of anachronism frequently employed in historiography is evidentiary. By this I mean that historians and other historical scientists regularly use new methods and techniques to tease more information about the past out of the existing evidence, or to locate new (forms of) evidence. Two examples of such evidentiary anachronisms that have only become widely available in the last two decades and have yielded great results are paleogenomics and distant reading.⁴ The former uncovers kinship relations through the analysis of ancient DNA that has been preserved in the bones of (prehistoric) humans, and the latter “reads” large swaths of texts from a historical period with the help of computer programmes and algorithms. There are many more examples of methods and techniques that have been added to the historian’s “toolbox” over the decades and the centuries. What they all have in common is their non-existence at the time the evidence vouches for in the past (and often much later), and that historians wouldn’t be able to employ them if it was not for their temporal positioning in their own present. This, again, is another form of “interpret[ing] the past through the lens of the present” that is epistemically very beneficial.

Finally, there is the question of interpretative anachronisms, the point that seems to trouble Sweet most. After all, he thinks historians should “interpret elements of the past not through the optics of the present but within the worlds of our historical actors” (a position I referred to earlier as “interpretative historicism.”) There are a few things to say here. For one, not all forms of historiography are about what people thought or even could have thought in the past. Economic History, for instance, often infers descriptions of the material circumstances of past societies that no historical actor thought about or could have thought about in any meaningful way; similarly Historical Sociology. Further, some historiography is about processes that are on a bigger scale and much longer than single human lives, think about the many narratives of the emergence of capitalism.⁵ Descriptions of individual actions might of course be given as part of those processes, but here again these descriptions could depend on the future in a way that prevents them from being a meaningful part of the historical actors’ “worlds,” and could not have been given by the latter themselves. To take an example from Arthur Danto,⁶ it wouldn’t have made sense, nor would it have been part of the “worlds of our historical actors” at that point in time, if someone had announced at Newton’s birth in 1642 that a “universal genius” had just born; yet, such a description could easily be found in a (reverential) historiography of physics. Finally, even when historians talk on a very fine-grained level about historical actors, they do not necessarily only do so in a way that mirrors the actors’ own intentions. Even here there is no interpretative privilege to be had for the “worlds of our historical actors.” Historians tend to describe individual actions by means of their unintended consequences, consequences they sometimes could not have foreseen and that, again, might be far down in the future from the perspective of the historical actor (“for want of a nail, the kingdom was lost.”) Now, I do not want to say that understanding the “worlds of our historical actors” in all their potential strangeness is a useless task in historiography, quite the opposite. Instead, it is the generality of Sweet’s claim that turns it into a misguided conception of historiographic practice. From these short reflections, it should have become clear that some forms of presentism or anachronism, some form of interpretation of the past “through the lens of the present,” is not merely unavoidable in historiography, it is even epistemically beneficial. Without it, historians could not have produced much of the knowledge of the past that we have today. This also means that Sweet’s “interpretative historicism” can’t be correct. Historiography is not solely about understanding the past in the way the historical actors themselves understood it,

just as those actors and their actions are not the sole explananda of historiography.⁷

Now, while Sweet is clearly wrong about “interpretative presentism” *tout court*, he still has a point about “identitarian presentism,” since the way he describes it constitutes the case for a vicious anachronism. If someone disregards evidence to the contrary or the lack of evidence and misapplies modern categories to the past, maybe in an effort to bolster a modern political identity in the way Sweet described, then they commit at best an error, or they wilfully falsify the past for their present ulterior motives. Either way, historians have every right, and perhaps even the duty, to call out such abuses of history. Given its epistemic and methodological sophistication, historiography is the only institution in society that can reliably act as a “large-scale *regulatory instance and corrective*”⁸ for our beliefs about the past.⁹ This goes for every (anachronistic) category of analysis we apply to analysis of the past—for “race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism,” Sweet’s examples, just as much as for any other. Whether or not a category has been misapplied must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, but Sweet is not wrong to point out the dangers of such misapplication and the political motives involved.

Further, and similar to Sweet’s historicism, the (absolute) presentism Gannon counsels can’t be right either. Gannon claimed that the selection of topics, the arrangement of evidence, and “presenting one interpretation [...] as more legitimate than the others” all constitute a “ritual” that is “absolutely shaped by the concerns of our present,”¹⁰ and also that this “ritual” only “exists” as a result of “concerns of the present.” As I said before, this is so vague that it is difficult to make anything of it at all. (And it contrasts unfavourably with the otherwise strong judgments with which Gannon impugns Sweet.) It is most definitely true but trivial that historiography, on some level, only exists because of these “concerns of the present,” I mean that the “concerns” or interests historians have when approaching the past are of the present, they cannot but hold them in the present. But then, to speak equally vaguely and from the other end of our temporal continuum, historiography only “exists” because of the Big Bang, but similar to the statement about the discipline’s existence due to “present concerns” this tells us nothing about historiographic practice. Beyond that, it is clearly false that historiographic interpretations and historical facts are “absolutely shaped” by concerns of the present, if we take this literally. Historians infer past facts via theories and the evidence,¹¹ and historiographic interpretations are, at least to some extent, likewise based on that evidence, with evidence defined as an object that preserves information about the past. In this sense, there is a determinate relation to the past

here, and “present concerns” do not absolutely shape neither interpretations nor facts absolutely. Sweet is right when he emphasizes, against identitarian presentism, that “the past interrupts, challenges, and contradicts the present in unpredictable ways,” at least if we want to do historiography.

Next, there is the issue of topical presentism, which was raised by both Sweet and Bell in different ways. Sweet was worried about it in general but especially because he saw historiography that deals with earlier epochs as equally coming under the sway of identitarian presentism. Bell was more sanguine about his version of topical presentism, causal topical presentism, because society might have a legitimate interest in the historical processes that led to the present we can observe. Overall, this is an interesting discussion on the “balance” between the historiographies of different epochs that we might want to have, but since neither of these presentisms per se touches on the epistemic goals of historiography I have little more to say about it here (it touches these goals negatively only in the identitarian version that we already discussed).¹²

Finally, there is the relation of historiography and politics, and the question of politicism, i.e., the subjugation of history or historiography to political imperatives in the present. Sweet is obviously worried about this issue, which he sees emerging at opposite ends of the political spectrum, and his text can also be read as an attempt to erect a firewall against these developments so that they can't take hold intramuros. As a professional historian, he does not want the past to become an “evidentiary grab bag to articulate [...] political positions,” as he writes. Taken together with his admonitions against identitarian presentism, this implies a limit beyond which politics should not enter: When it comes to issues of historical method and the assessment of the evidence there is no place for politics. I think this is correct, and Aviezer Tucker has described the issue aptly:

“The best antidotes to the historiography of identities and passions are then reason, evidence, and probable inference. Historiographic reason, probable inference from information preserving evidence in the present, does not mutate according to personal identities or passions.”¹³

Yet, as important as this is, it is not the whole story either, as Scott emphasized in her reply to Sweet. While historical method and inference are impartial and should be kept free of politics, historically the discipline has shown a bias in the topics it scrutinized and in what it considered significant and having a “history” worth telling. (Think, for instance, of the “great man theory” approach to history in the nineteenth century.) And it was the marginalized and disenfranchised groups themselves who

first brought the histories of those overlooked by the discipline into the historiographic tableau, as Scott has shown for the history of women in detail elsewhere.¹⁴ On this level, there is a definite positive influence of political identities on historiography, and if we assume the continued operation of this mechanism—that the discipline has some blind spots that are first identified by minorities not fully part of the profession—then we should want, in terms of identities, as diverse a discipline as possible.

Of course, there may well be situations where historiographic reason and argument don't matter anymore, as the "enemy" is not open to rational debate and might even use coercion or violence to impose their ideological notions of the past, or worse. Historians who want their disciplinary enterprise to continue have an intrinsic interest in countering such political agents who show a fundamental disregard for the truth about the past, if they do not openly sabotage historiography itself, just as they have an interest in making access to the discipline as equitable as possible. The societal preconditions under which historiography flourishes and can offer its epistemic goods for the benefit of society cannot be produced by the discipline itself. This directs the discipline inevitably back to politics and the constitution of wider society. When historians engage in these spheres, as they sometimes should, they should also make explicit when they are speaking as historians and from historiographic expertise and argument, and when they are not. Conflating politics and historiography does not help either side. It leads to bad history and bad politics, as the various identitarian presentisms that flared up over the last decade have proved yet again.

[Read part 1 [here](#), published on 15 November 2022.]

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Tags: philosophy of historiography / presentism / twitter

¹ Carrol E. Cleland, "Methodological and Epistemic Differences between Historical Science and Experimental Science" *Philosophy of Science*, 69, no. 3 (2002), 474–496; Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past. A Philosophy of Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

² Tucker, *Our Knowledge*; Peter Kosso, "Philosophy of Historiography," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. Aviezer Tucker. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 9–25; Adrian Currie, *Rock, Bone, and Ruin. An Optimist's Guide to the Historical Sciences*. Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2018.

³ Georg Gangl, "The Essential Tension: Historical Knowledge between Past and Present," *History and Theory*, 60, no. 3 (2021), 513–523, here 527–533.

⁴ Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "Is Ancient DNA Research Revealing New Truths—or Falling Into Old Traps?" *New York Times Magazine* (20.01.2019), URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/magazine/ancient-dna-paleogenomics.html> (1.11.2022); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

⁵ See, for instance, Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, 162–163.

⁷ The locus classicus of this insight in the philosophy of historiography is Arthur Danto's *Narration and Knowledge*. Danto famously wrote: "For the whole point of history is *not* to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later events and as parts of temporal wholes." Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, 183, original emphasis. I would not go as far as saying that the *whole* point of historiography is such, but hindsight and the perspective it engenders are indeed crucial to historiography. Historians do not just describe the past as witnesses did, and many of the descriptions of the past they give are such that they could not have been given by any witness or historical actor. This point was emphasized by Chiel van den Akker on this blog already "Practical Wisdom. Or What Can and Should Philosophy of History Achieve?," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (13.09.2022), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/7858> (08.11.2022). Whether this sort of description is the main cognitive contribution historiography makes to our pool of knowledge is an open question. For a critical account of this emphasis on hindsight, see Giuseppina D'Oro, "In Defence of a Humanistically Oriented Historiography: The Nature/Culture Distinction at the Time of the Anthropocene," in *Philosophy of History. Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 216–237.

⁸ Georg Gangl, "Historia Magistra Vitae? The Role of Historiography in Culture and Politics," *Faravid – Journal for Historical and Archaeological Studies*, 52, (2021), 103–122, here 109, original emphasis.

⁹ On this issue, see also Lisa Regazzoni already on this blog "Theorizing History or How to Rethink Theory of History through Questions," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (23.11.2021), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1689> (07.11.2022).

¹⁰ Kevin Gannon, "ON PRESENTISM AND HISTORY; OR, WE'RE DOING THIS AGAIN, ARE WE?," *THE TATTOOED PROFESSOR* (19.08.2022), URL: <https://thetattooedprof.com/2022/08/19/on-presentism-and-history-or-were-doing-this-again-are-we/> (24.10.2022).

¹¹ Peter Kosso, "Philosophy of Historiography," here 9.

¹² If we assume that epochs temporally at a further remove from us are also more different and in this sense “stranger” from a present perspective, then the question becomes one about the balance between studying “foreignness” and relative familiarity, as in “causal topical presentism” where historically more recent events and processes that led to present-day phenomena are of particular interest. A historiography that shows us how the past was vastly different from the present has the power to “estrangle” us from that very present, in the sense of showing us how our own forms of life are not universal and the outcome of more or less contingent processes. A historiography focusing on more recent and presumably more familiar processes that led more directly to the present helps us understand how the present we live in came about, again potentially exposing choices and contingencies where they occur. In an ideal world, we would like to have both kinds of historiographies in abundance, but if Sweet is correct, and he gives numbers in his column to back this up, then there is a certain tendency towards topical presentism visible in the discipline. Whatever the reasons for this tendency, it is clear that with the decline of “topically non-presentist” historiography we are also losing some of the estranging perspectives on our present.

¹³ Aviezer Tucker, “Historical Evitability. The Return of the Philosophy of History,” in *Philosophy of History*, ed. Kuukkanen, 143-161, here 161.

¹⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 15-27.