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History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 1)

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History Now! On Presentism and a Strange Online Debate in American Historiography (Part 1)

James H. Sweet is the current president of the American Historical Association (AHA), the largest scholarly organization of historians worldwide, and he recently found himself in quite a situation.¹ As part of his function as president of AHA, Sweet writes the monthly column *From the President* in the organization's news magazine *Perspectives on History*. While I imagine the column is usually read with some interest by AHA members and other readers, the text in the September issue of this year entitled "IS HISTORY HISTORY? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present"² garnered rather special and outsized attention.

Over on Twitter, Sweet's text created a real stir among some of his fellow historians, but also among a wider public after the initial outrage had spilled over. Some of his peers described the piece as "absolute trash,"³ "racist trash,"⁴ and "[w]holly embarrassing and white-centric."⁵ Others remarked that it was "going to be weaponized by the right"⁶ and that Sweet was creating "right-wing fodder for the people trying to take over."⁷ One historian wrote that the article "laments presentism like a Twitter troll attempting to one-up a historian."⁸ Yet another called his colleague's text a "half-assed, poorly-written, evidence-challenged screed that justifiably pissed off a wide swath of the membership"⁹ with its "misogynoir, condescending tone."¹⁰ Many more wondered how this thing could have got published in the first place. An email campaign was launched in protest against Sweet's column. There were even calls for his resignation as president of the AHA. And there was a plethora of abuse directed at Sweet by fellow historians (as per their Twitter bios) and many other people. Eventually, even neo-Nazis got wind of the controversy about the text and descended on the thread, with the result that the AHA temporarily restricted public access to its Twitter account.¹¹

Two days after the original publication of his column, Sweet came out with an apology "for the damage [...] caused to my fellow historians, the discipline, and the AHA,"¹² which is now prefixed atop of his original text. While this did not placate all his critics, the outrage seems to have died down as quickly as it swelled up. So, now that the dust has settled, what did Sweet actually write and why did it cause such outrage?

In what follows, I will reconstruct Sweet's argument about what he calls "teleologies of the present" in the title but is in reality an argument against certain forms of

presentism and *anachronism* in historiography and wider culture. I will also talk about the notions of presentism some of his critics in the profession have brought into the debate, notably off Twitter.¹³ Overall, there are quite a few different concepts of presentism flying around in this debate, with the result that scholars talk at cross purposes, as they are actually discussing very different issues while they all use the term presentism. Also, each of the different presentisms raised might have different effects on historiography, they may or may not be avoidable, and we might or might not want to criticize or even scandalize them. But these are all steps we can only take after we have understood what exactly Sweet and others mean by presentism. One blanket presentism term won't do the job here and will only create semantic confusion if not worse, that much is clear from the debate and the outrage. I will end this text by trying to give a more ordered overview of presentism in historiography and I will also offer some more general reflections on the relationship between historiography and politics. Some of the abusive commentary the text received seems explainable by a highly politicized environment and the felt urgency to counter what is seen as a deeply troubling political development in the US.

Be that as it may, the Twitter outrage itself was a pathetic display of anti-intellectualism by many of Sweet's detractors who, as professional historians, should have known and behaved better. Nothing good comes of historians following the slogan "the medium is the message" and behaving like Twitter trolls. When tempers flare and scandalization, insinuation, or simply abuse replace serious engagement with the text, nobody is any the wiser about the issues at stake and the discipline has made a mockery of itself.

Presentism and Politicism in Sweet

In the teaser for Sweet's text on the AHA Twitter account where the outrage became manifest we are told that we live in an "era of unrelenting presentism,"¹⁴ which is also how the text itself begins. Referring to a *From the President* column that Lynn Hunt wrote twenty years ago as the then president of the AHA,¹⁵ Sweet claims that in historiography there is a "declining interest in topics prior to the 20th century" and an "increasing tendency to interpret the past through the lens of the present."¹⁶ These are the two forms of presentism that he worries about in his column, and they could be called 1) *topical presentism* and 2) *interpretative presentism*. Topical presentism is only interested in the history of the twentieth

century, and interpretative presentism interprets any past “through the lens of the present,” in Sweet’s very general formulation.

For most of his text, Sweet is concerned with 2), and the way he discussed this issue in particular brought the ire of many of his fellow historians upon him. This time directly quoting Hunt, Sweet further specifies 2) as “short term . . . identity politics defined by present concerns,”¹⁷ and adds that if historiography was limited to this perspective students would be better off taking degrees in other subjects, such as sociology or ethnic studies. This specific rendition of 2), as it is only one way of interpreting the past “through the lens of the present,” we might call 2a) *identitarian interpretative presentism* (or *identitarian presentism* for short).

Sweet then goes on to explain what is actually wrong with this identitarian presentism. He writes:

“Our interpretations of the recent past collapse into the familiar terms of contemporary debates, leaving little room for the innovative, counterintuitive interpretations. This trend toward presentism is not confined to historians of the recent past; the entire discipline is lurching in this direction, including a shrinking minority working in premodern fields. If we don’t read the past through the prism of contemporary social justice issues—race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism—are we doing history that matters? This new history often ignores the values and mores of people in their own times, as well as change over time, neutralizing the expertise that separates historians from those in other disciplines.”¹⁸

Here we can see how Sweet’s anxiety about presentism in the sense of 1) and 2a) are brought together. Less and less historiography is being done about pre-twentieth-century history, and ongoing research is refracted through “the prism of contemporary social justice issues—race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism.” Further, analyses of the more recent past are mostly conducted in “the familiar terms of contemporary debates” too. This focus on present concerns in all forms of historiography has, so Sweet, two negative consequences for the discipline: α) there is “little room for [...] innovative, counterintuitive interpretations,” and β) such historiography fundamentally misunderstands the past by ignoring “values and mores of people in their own times, as well as change over time.” The result is that historiography loses its specific epistemic qualities of informing us about a past that might have been very different from our present, as it only finds a “predictable sameness of the present in the past,”¹⁹ so Sweet.

We can see here that Sweet further cashes out the “identity politics” and “present concerns” of 2a) as “contemporary social justice issues—race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, capitalism,” and his main gripe with them is β): they are applied to the past in a way that distorts rather than illuminates it.

In contrast to this identitarian presentism, Sweet offers us his own understanding of the process of historiographic interpretation and of the main task of the historian: “Doing history with integrity requires us to interpret elements of the past not through the optics of the present but within the worlds of our historical actors. Historical questions often emanate out of present concerns, but the past interrupts, challenges, and contradicts the present in unpredictable ways.”²⁰

Sweet’s positions here could be called 3) *interpretative historicism*, which for him is counterposed to 2a), identitarian presentism (and possibly to 2) in all its forms). Instead of the “sameness” with the present that we presuppose with our modern-day categories, we might just find real difference in the past if we turned to the “worlds of our historical actors.” Also, historiographic questions may well “emanate from present concerns,” but the past has the power to rebuff those concerns.

These are the *theoretical concerns and arguments* in Sweet’s text. In his apology, he wrote that he intended to “draw attention to methodological flaws in teleological presentism,”²¹ but teleology and Whiggism are not quite what he talked about on a theoretical level in his text. What Sweet problematizes instead is the age-old problem of *anachronism* in historiography; the problem of applying modern or present-day categories to the past.²² He is especially worried about *vicious forms* of anachronism, whereby the categories applied do not fit onto the past and therefore distort it. Given the “interpretative historicism” he puts forward as an alternative, he may even think that all of these anachronisms or presentisms are vicious in this sense. But, as we will see below, this is not correct; there are forms of anachronism that are in fact epistemically beneficial and that historiography cannot do without, just as there those that are epistemically vicious. It would seem that neither Sweet’s “interpretative historicism” nor “identitarian presentism” are the whole story when it comes to the historiographic research process.

Sweet does not end his text with these theoretical musings, though. Instead, he goes on to give examples of the “unrelenting presentism” that he rejects. These are: the Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project* of the *New York Times*; the representation of history at Elmina Castle, a major historical slave-trading place in Ghana that Sweet visited last summer; the movie *The Woman King*; recent decisions of the US supreme court. According to Sweet, the *1619 Project* was a “zero-sum game of

heroes and villains viewed through the prism of contemporary racial identity;²³ Elmina Castle wrongly portrays the locals as having no part in the slave trade and focuses unduly on the history of enslavement in the US; *The Woman King* wrongly portrays its protagonists as fighting against the slave trade when they in fact promoted it; the US supreme court cherry-picks historical evidence to fit its preconceived political biases. What all these uses of the past have in common for Sweet is an “overabundance of history, not as method or analysis, but as anachronistic data points for the articulation of competing politics.”²⁴ History functions in them as nothing more than an “evidentiary grab bag to articulate [...] political positions.”²⁵

Here Sweet gives us what he sees as the purpose of the identitarian abuse of history: to *politicize the past* and *subject it to some political imperatives of the present* as conceived by one identity group or another today. The political positions might be different, even at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but the mechanism that bends history to its purpose is the same: “The erasure of slave-trading African empires in the name of political unity is uncomfortably like right-wing conservative attempts to erase slavery from school curricula in the United States, also in the name of unity. These interpretations are two sides of the same coin. If history is only those stories from the past that confirm current political positions, all manner of political hacks can claim historical expertise.”²⁶ And: “When we foreshorten or shape history to justify rather than inform contemporary political positions, we not only undermine the discipline but threaten its very integrity.”²⁷

Identitarian presentism appears here as *politicism*. The actual goals that history and historiography are subjected to are political goals in the present, and this worries Sweet as a historian regardless of where these goals are positioned on the political spectrum.

What we can now see after this short recap of Sweet’s argumentation is that his text basically contains *two levels* on which the discussion unfolds: a theoretical or philosophical one worried about presentism or anachronism and an empirical one that identifies certain phenomena as falling under this presentism via the category of “identity politics.” What is also clear is that a certain *disconnect* exists between these two levels in Sweet’s text. While he first talks about the dangers of “presentism” in the historical profession in very general theoretical terms without giving any examples, the empirical examples he does give have nothing to do with professional historiography, since historians played no significant role in any of them.

For the rest of this text, I will refrain from talking about these empirical issues, as I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about any of them or about US politics in general. Sweet might or might not be right about them. *Prima facie*, I see no reason to doubt him here—Sweet is an award-winning historian of Africa and the African diaspora—even after reading through the Twitter outburst and the criticism elsewhere. In at least three out of four of his examples, he should be able to speak from expertise. But of course, worrying about some general societal phenomena does not justify judgments about the state of historiography or vice versa. This goes for Sweet himself as much as for his critics, although the initial burden of proof for the claims in his column lies with him. And as readers, it behooves all of us to read carefully and interpret texts in a hermeneutically responsible fashion.

In the next section, we will see how some of Sweet’s critics understood the issues of presentism and politicism, before coming to my own discussion of presentism and politicism in historiography.

Presentism and Politicism in his Critics

One of Sweet’s most vocal critics on Twitter and then also on his own blog has been Kevin Gannon, a professor of history at Queens University of Charlotte. Contra Sweet, Gannon asserts “*all history is presentism.*”²⁸ He substantiates this categorical claim as follows:

“We are historians, in the present, who are selecting some (certainly not all) “historical facts” from the past in order to narrate, analyze, interpret, and contextualize. [...] Thus, the very act of selecting a topic, arranging evidence (or, as Hayden White would have argued, emplotting it), and presenting one interpretation of all that as more legitimate than the others—this scholarly ritual is *absolutely* shaped by the concerns of our present. *That it even exists* is because of “the concerns of the present.””²⁹

With the result that “we are *mapping*, or *representing*, the past; we are certainly not reproducing the past in any exact way.”³⁰ The latter point is a red herring, nowhere did Sweet argue that historians “reproduce the past in any exact way.” More importantly, Gannon argues here *tout court* for 2) from above, interpretative presentism. The selection of topics and historical facts, the arrangement of the evidence, and the interpretation of the past are for him all “absolutely shaped by the concerns of our present.” They even only exist because of these present concerns, so Gannon.

Not unlike Sweet's original formulation of 2), "interpret the past through the lens of the present," Gannon's assertion is, without any further specification, *excessively vague* and is the mirror inversion of Sweet's "interpretative historicism." It is very difficult to assess precisely what is meant by phrases such as "absolutely shaped" or "interpret the past through the lens of the present" when these are bandied about like this. If we take Gannon literally, his interpretative presentism is the strongest possible version of 2). Taken this way, it is difficult to see how the talk of "absoluteness" could be interpreted in any other way than saying historiography is *only* shaped by present concerns. In any case, it seems to me that this position, just as Sweet's, is either clearly false when taken literally, or trivially true when interpreted more charitably. Either way, it does not bring us closer to understanding the use and abuse of presentism in historiography, as it simply reiterates and one-ups the presentism to which Sweet objected.³¹

David A. Bell, a historian at Princeton University, is another critic of Sweet, and unlike Gannon he does offer us a new version of presentism in historiography. But first he, too, affirms against Sweet that historians always "write from a present-day perspective": "While the word 'presentism' often serves as a term of opprobrium, most historians would nonetheless agree that, inescapably, they write from a present-day perspective. Their experience, world view, conceptual resources, and political concerns all contribute, in both conscious and unconscious ways, to the questions they pose, and to what they find salient and interesting in the past."³²

Although no less general, this seems like a reasonable position, as it makes neither interpretative presentism nor interpretative historicism an absolute, and is also less apodictic in its claims than Gannon. "The present-day perspective" of historians *contributes* in many different ways to their work, so Bell. Some of them might be positive, others not, one might add. Elsewhere I have called the ineluctable "anchoring" of historians in their own present and the perspective of hindsight that comes with it "*existential presentism*,"³³ and we will come back to it in more detail in the next section.

Beyond this, Bell gives us another form of presentism that has not yet been a matter of discussion. He writes:

"[H]istory written with an eye to the present serves the common good. It illuminates how elements of our own world came into being, exposing the development of key political, social, and economic structures, tracing the effects of past choices, and offering insight into how change can take place."³⁴

This is an argument for a specific form of 1) above, topical presentism, and could be called 1a) *causal topical presentism*. Society might well have a special interest in how “our own world came into being,” and therefore historians can and maybe should focus on those past phenomena and processes that brought about the current state of affairs.³⁵ This is not a form of “teleological presentism” here, something Sweet worried about, as it does not entail any teleology towards or inevitability of the present as its starting point, and neither does it have to do with Sweet’s “identitarian interpretative presentism” as Bell himself notes. Tracing how the present came about does not *eo ipso* mean misapplying modern categories to it. In this sense, it is an addition to the list of presentisms that can be found in historiography rather than a rebuttal of what Sweet said about presentism.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss Joan W. Scott’s criticism of Sweet’s text.³⁶ Scott is a renowned gender historian and professor emerita at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. On one level, she agrees with Sweet, writing that “the line between a politically engaged critical history and a dogmatic reading of the past is not easy to distinguish. It is made more difficult by the right’s conflation of criticism with dogmatism and by identitarian purists’ attacks on what they take to be distortions of their experiential truth. But it is a line worth attempting to draw.”³⁷

It is this line that Sweet, too, tried to draw with his rejection of identitarian presentism, whether successfully or not. Speaking from her own experience as a female gender historian, Scott makes the cogent point that the histories of excluded groups such as women or African Americans were initially written by those groups themselves, as against a profession of historiography that saw itself as fundamentally unpolitical and uninterested in these histories.³⁸ With this, she raises the question of the *positive impact* identity concerns can have on the discipline. Given that positive impact, it seems that drawing the line between identity politics, on the one hand, and historiography, on the other, is not as easy as Sweet thought.

Let’s take stock for a moment of what the different historians discussed here have said about presentism and politicism before moving on.³⁹ In Sweet, there are two forms of presentism that need to be distinguished: topical and interpretative presentism. Sweet is mainly concerned with a specific form of the latter, identitarian interpretative presentism, which he criticizes and sees as a set of vicious anachronisms and a form of politicism that subjugates historiography to political imperatives of the present. Against such identitarian presentism, Sweet offers a third position: interpretative historicism, the interpretation of the past not

via some “present concern” but from “within the worlds of our historical actors.” To these positions, the critics of Sweet discussed here have added a specific form of topical presentism, causal topical presentism, and a particularly strong form of interpretative presentism that makes historiographic research and its products “absolutely shaped” by present concerns. Finally, Scott raises the question of the positive influence of identity politics on historiography, and with that, of the dividing line Sweet attempted to draw between politics and historiography.

What Sweet and Gannon, who take opposite positions, have in common is the excessive vagueness and one-sidedness of their pronouncements about presentism, one being firmly against, the other firmly in favour. Given their vagueness, these positions are difficult to pin down without further argument or explication. As they stand, however, they are most probably incorrect descriptions of historiographic practice, as we will see in the next and last section of this text.

[The [second part](#) of this post will be published on 22 November 2022].

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Tags: philosophy of historiography / presentism / twitter

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² James H. Sweet, “IS HISTORY HISTORY? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” *PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY* (17.08.2022), URL: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present> (24.10.2022).

³ <https://twitter.com/522GAdams/status/1560028177770110976> (24.10.2022).

⁴ <https://twitter.com/dwidmannabraham/status/1560051525074014209> (24.10.2022).

⁵ <https://twitter.com/JohannaMellis/status/1560052207382298624> (24.10.2022).

⁶ <https://twitter.com/DavidAstinWalsh/status/1560976968941801474> (24.10.2022).

⁷ <https://twitter.com/JohannaMellis/status/1560052207382298624> (24.10.2022).

⁸ <https://twitter.com/DrRobThompson/status/1560058562960916481> (24.10.2022).

⁹ <https://twitter.com/TheTattooedProf/status/1561018161465593856> (24.10.2022).

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/TheTattooedProf/status/1561018170223255553> (24.10.2022).

¹¹ Colleen Flaherty, "Presentism, Race and Trolls," *INSIDE HIGHER ED* (22.08.2022), URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/22/white-nationalist-enters-historians-debate-presentism> (31.10.2022).

¹² Sweet, IS HISTORY HISTORY?

¹³ 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); David A. Bell, "Two Cheers for Presentism. An essay by the president of the American Historical Association generated a firestorm of criticism – but got some things right," *THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION* (23.08.2022), URL: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/two-cheers-for-presentism> (24.10.2022); Joan W. Scott, "History Is Always About Politics. What the recent debates over presentism get wrong," *THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION* (24.08.2022), URL: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/history-is-always-about-politics> (07.11.2022).

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/AHAhistorians/status/1559952700795666432> (25.10.2022).

¹⁵ Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," *PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY* (01.05.2002), URL: <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism> (25.10.2022).

¹⁶ Sweet, IS HISTORY HISTORY?

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nick Jardine, "Uses and Abuses of Anachronism in the History of the Sciences," *History of Science*, 38, no. 3 (2000), 252–270.

²³ Sweet, IS HISTORY HISTORY?

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gannon, ON PRESENTISM, original emphasis.

²⁹ Ibid., original emphasis.

³⁰ Ibid., original emphasis.

³¹ Gannon is also the critic who called Sweet's text over on Twitter a "half-assed, poorly-written, evidence-challenged screed that justifiably pissed off a wide swath of the membership" with its "misogynoir, condescending tone." In his longer piece, Gannon unfortunately continues with the insults, insinuations and adhominems. He emphasizes that Sweet is a tenured professor at an elite research university and calls him a "privileged white man." Ibid. He also insinuates that Sweet, "a white male historian of Africa and the African diaspora," (ibid.) chose to critique two black women because of some resentment of his (see also his characterization of Sweet's text as "misogynoir" above). Even if Sweet were totally wrong about the dangers of identitarian presentism in historiography, Gannon does display a form of identitarian reduction here not unlike what Sweet criticized in his text: He reduces Sweet's arguments to his identity as a "privileged white man/professor." This is not

legitimate ideology critique, since Sweet's text does not offer any clues for such inferences, it is simply abusive (and, when taken as an argument, a form of the genetic fallacy).

³² Bell, *Two Cheers*.

³³ Georg Gangl, "The Essential Tension: Historical Knowledge between Past and Present" *History and Theory*, 60, no. 3 (2021), 513–523, here 516–518, emphasis added.

³⁴ Bell, *Two Cheers*.

³⁵ See also Jeffrey Herf, "Never Apologize for Trying to Tell the Truth," *Quillette* (2022), URL: <https://quillette.com/2022/09/13/never-apologize-for-trying-to-tell-the-truth/> (24.10.2022) for a similar argument in the debate.

³⁶ Scott, *History*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ On this point, see also, very lucidly, Eric Hobsbawm, "Partisanship," in *On History*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm. New York: The New Press 1997, 124–141, here 134–138.

³⁹ Another historian who engaged critically with Sweet's text is Jeffrey Herf, a well-known historian of twentieth-century Germany at the University of Maryland. Herf is the only critic sampled here who correctly reconstructed Sweet's argument about the two kinds of presentism he is worried about. Herf, *Never Apologize*. But since he offers no definition of presentism of his own and mainly discusses the political aspects of Sweet's examples, I will not talk about his text in any detail here.