

# Historical Narrative as a Moral Guide and the Present as History as an Ethical Project\*

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**María Inés Mudrovcic**

mmudrovcic@gmail.com

Profesora titular de Filosofía de la Historia del Departamento de Filosofía

Universidad Nacional del Comahue-CONICET

Saavedra, 249 - Cinco Saltos

8303 - Río Negro

Argentina

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain why the many turns that historiography has undergone from the middle of the twentieth century to the present are related to the "living experiences" that have occurred outside of academia. Trying to grasp the concept of "practical past" from Oakeshott and White, it will be argued that the disciplinary transformations such as "gender history" or the "historiography of decolonization" that accompany "living experiences" outside of academia are the result of the "practical attitude" that accompanies historical narratives and function as a moral guide to the present. Finally, it will be discussed that if historians assume a critical attitude toward the "living experiences" and regard the "present as history," then the different transformations of the discipline can be explained by a critical attitude and go together with an ethical project.

## Keywords

Historical narrative; Historical time; Temporalities.

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The International Conference “History of the Twentieth-Century Historiography” was held at the University of Peloponnese, Athens, from June 18th to 20 last year. This paper concurs with the diagnosis of the call for papers of that Conference: the various turns that historiography has undergone from the middle of the twentieth century to the present are related to the “living experiences” that have occurred outside of academia. That is, there is a connection and interrelation between the various experiences of the century, not only those considered “catastrophic” but also those arising from feminism or decolonization, for example, and the various “turns” of historiography. I believe that this diagnosis is correct.

My aim in this paper is to explain why this is so—specifically, why there is an interrelation between the experiences of the century and the turns in historiography, between the “outside” and the “inside” of academia. I will attempt to show that this interrelation is due to the narrative form of the historical discourse. My argument will show that there will be no distinction between the practical past and the historical past if academic historiography is cast in a narrative form. The past of historical narratives is historical insofar as it is practical.

The teleological retrospective movement of the plot of the narrative helps build an intelligible past. This way of linking events is characteristic of narratives and constructs continuities between the present and the past. It also favors the transformation of these continuities into present subjects who understand themselves as coming and resulting from the past. The narrative structure prioritizes continuities over discontinuities. Because the present works as a discursive closure, the historical narrative tends to favor an “arch of solidarities” with the past. The result is a past that helps the present be more livable- i.e., a practical past. Like other ways of addressing the past, academic narrative historiography helps answer the question of what we must do (i.e., provides a practical –moral– answer).

Trying to grasp the concept of “practical past” from Oakeshott and White, I will argue that the disciplinary transformations such as “gender history” or the “historiography of decolonization” that accompany “living experiences” outside of academia are the result of the “practical attitude” that accompanies historical narratives and function as moral guide to the present. Finally, I will try to show that if historians assume a critical attitude toward the “living experiences” and regard the “present as history”, then the different transformations of the discipline can be explained by a critical attitude and go together with an ethical project.

### **M. Oakeshott and the Present**

In the first part of his article, “The Activity of being an Historian”, written in 1955, Oakeshott refers to the common places where the “activity of being an historian” was understood in those times. The historian is one who understands the past, who makes that past intelligible, who verifies his statements, and who addresses “historical events” in which we are warranted in believing because they are conclusions of a “certain” method of inquiry. The historian raises a

special “kind” of questions about the past. The recent past is not appropriated for this sort of activity because it can lead to moral approval or disapproval. In short, a number of features were present in the theoretical and methodological reflections on history at that time. Nevertheless, to Oakeshott, the activity of being a historian is not about the past but about the present.

The “historical past” is the result of the attitude that certain people (in this case, historians) have toward the world around us. Every event that occurs around us can arouse different responses on our parts. The example Oakeshott gives is the demolition of an old building. Given this fact, we can have several responses: we can run and preserve ourselves; we can recognize it as an act of vandalism and complain; we can understand it as a sign of progress; or we can simply contemplate it as an image, like a picture whose design can delight us or not. We are not indifferent to the happenings around us, and the events cause various types of reactions that depend on whether we recognize them as *this* or *that*. For Oakeshott, our responses to the world can be of two kinds: first, the happenings do not arouse any response in us—they are mere “images”—or second, we can consider them as evidence of something that happened or will happen. Oakeshott calls the first of these attitudes “contemplative”, and although he does not give to the second a precise name, he does say that it has an internal variety of different attitudes, among which one can distinguish the practical attitude and the scientific attitude, among others. The contemplation is, essentially, the attitude of an artist or a poet, for example. For anyone who adopts the contemplative attitude, the events are not “signs” of other events but rather images of delight that do not refer beyond the present of themselves. They do not cause moral approval or disapproval, and the categories “real” or “fictitious” are inapplicable. Unlike the “contemplative” attitude, the second attitude regards the events before us as signs of other events. The signs, unlike the images, are events that we interpret as “evidence” of other events. Oakeshott calls this the “practical” attitude.

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In the practical attitude, we recognize what is happening around us in relation to ourselves, our wishes and our activities. The partner of the “practical” attitude is the perception of a “practical” event. We see a tree in a desert, for example, and hasten our steps toward it to protect us from the sun. The tree is the “sign” of the future shadow that we will obtain from it. The tree is “practical” insofar as it is useful or beneficial to someone. “We want to be at home in the world, and (in part) this consists in being able to detect how happenings will affect ourselves and in having some control over their effects” (OAKESHOTT 1962, p. 143). To attain this feeling of being at home, we use our senses. We see, touch, smell, etc., what is happening, and these activities allow us to act “in what we judge to be an appropriate manner”. We understand the events as “signs” that may be friendly or hostile, useful or useless, but in all of these, the appreciation of the distinction between “cause” and “effect” is present. In the practical life, for Oakeshott, we recognize an event as a “cause” when we understand it as a sign of other events that will follow (the comfort I will feel when I am protected by the shadow of the tree, in our example). In the “practical

attitude”, we understand the world in its direct relationship with us, that is, in its habitability. We perceive the events as useful or beneficial. The practical event is something that we can use. This is what Heidegger referred to as a “tool”, i.e., something that is “ready-to-hand”.

However, Oakeshott acknowledges that there is another attitude by which events are interpreted as “signs” of “causes” and “effects”; however, unlike in the practical attitude, these causes and effects are not considered by taking into account either the habitability of the world or the relationship between the events and ourselves. Oakeshott calls this kind of attitude the “scientific attitude”. He says the scientist has a more precise notion of these concepts because they are the necessary and sufficient conditions of “hypothetical situations”, and as such, they are useless for us. Finally, there is a third kind of attitude by which the world surrounding us is understood as the evidence or sign of another event that happened: Oakeshott calls it the “historical attitude”. To understand the happenings of the present world as “evidences” of other events is a characteristic that the “historical attitude” seems to share with the “practical attitude” and the “scientific attitude”; therefore, Oakeshott has to be very careful to distinguish between the different attitudes. The activity of being a historian “is pre-eminently that of understanding present events –things that are before him- as evidence for past happenings” (OAKESHOTT 1962, p. 150). However, this attitude toward the present that sends us to the past is also present in the “practical attitude” and the “scientific attitude”. The point is that the past is only a certain way of reading the present (i.e., there is not a past independent of the present). The present is only what exists and the past is a way of “reading” the present. In this way, there will be many pasts as results of our different ways of understanding the present.

For example, for an individual who considers the present world from a “practical attitude”, the past appears only in relation to the consequences that the past would have for him, in its usefulness. The example that Oakeshott gives of a “practical past” is that of a lawyer who says to his client that “under this will you may expect to inherit 1000 pounds” (OAKESHOTT 1962, p. 147). The lawyer is interested in the past for the consequences that this past will have for his client. Another way in which the “practical past” appears is when we read backward from the present or toward the past to the present, i.e., when we look for the “origins” of the present in the past and make moral judgments about it. In these sorts of cases, the past is practical insofar as it has moral consequences, i.e., it is a practical-as-moral past.

We can also talk about a “scientific past” but with certain caveats. For Oakeshott, this past is independent of our interest, remains “unassimilated to the present”, and reflects the scientific language that does not speak about causes and effects but about necessary and sufficient conditions. There is, strictly speaking, no “scientific attitude” toward the past because the “scientific attitude” is a-temporal.

The “historical past” seems to be the activity of a historian, and Oakeshott asks whether the historical past has a characteristic that could distinguish it from

the pasts that are results of “scientific attitude” or the “practical attitude”. The “practical past” appears when we are placed in front of our daily vicissitudes and wonder whether these events are evidence of some past. That is, the past is presented in a haphazard and uncritical way because it appears only when the interest in the present is understood as a result or consequence of a past. However, for the historian, the past is very different; it does not appear for him in a “casual” way. His “inquiry into the past is not determinate by chance encounters with current happenings” (OAKESHOTT 1962, p. 155). The present for the historian consists of things and events (documents, for example) that he considers for reasons of “appropriateness and completeness”. Considered in this way, the events of the “historical past” seem to represent an interest for “their own sake”, like the events of the “scientific attitude”. However, although the “historical attitude” and the “scientific attitude” were born together in modern Europe, the attitudes differ. To the question so common in the time in which Oakeshott wrote this article, is history a science? he would answer, no. The understanding that the historian has is neither “casual” nor “necessary” or “inevitable”. The historian, unlike the practical man or the scientist, considers past events to be “intelligible happenings”. For Oakeshott, the historian should decline to seek the “origins” of present events because this would mean reading the past backward and thus assimilate it to the present. The expression “the origin of the French Revolution”, for example, belongs to a practical-as-moral attitude that seeks to disguise itself as a historical attitude. Historians adore a dead past that is not offered for aesthetic delight, practical understanding or scientific recognition.

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### **Hayden White and the Past**

In a recently published book, H. Kellner explains that when he was a student of Hayden White, White cancelled one of his seminars in 1967 (KELLNER 2013). When pupils asked him where he had gone, he replied that he had been speaking at a biology conference. The lecture given in 1967 was titled “What is a Historical System?”, and White’s objective was to establish “some crucial distinctions between biological and historical systems”. For White, the fundamental difference between both systems is that the historical systems “are inconceivable without the act of retrospective ancestral constitution that gives them their specific contents” (WHITE 2010, p. 133). The objective of this retrospective act is to replace old ancestors with new ones who help legitimize the present in a better way. Historians are responsible for establishing the connection between the new ancestors and the present of the historical system. Unlike the past of a biological system, the past of a historical system is a result of the conscious choices of its members. They can choose their own ancestors and treat them as genetic progenitors. “The historical past is plastic in a way that the genetic past is not” (WHITE 2010, p. 132). Historians quite often use biological language to refer to historical systems. In this way, they speak of the “origin” of a nation, of the “evolution” of a society, or of the “birth” of an epoch. However, this sort of language obscures because historical systems do not have a “life”; only their members have life and only they are able to make choices

that can destroy the system: "when individuals cease to choose a given way of life, this way of life ceases to exist" (WHITE 2010, p. 129). Animal behavior can be explained as a legacy of the animal's genetic code and mutations in response to the environment; the animal cannot choose its genetic heritage. However, historians, through "a process of retroactive ancestral constitution", provide ancestors for the sociocultural system who are chosen to legitimate the new ends of the present. "The historical, unlike the biological past, is not given" (WHITE 2010, p. 135).

This retrospective movement necessary for building an intelligible past is present in the plot of the narrative discourse. As Danto points out an event gets its "meaning" because of its significance for later events (DANTO 1985, p. 167). The last event gives retrospective closure to the sequence of events. This is what White, many years later, called "figuralism": a way of linking events that is characteristic of narrative and resulting in it being understood as comedy, tragedy or romance, for example. In "Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism", White points out that:

A given historical event can be viewed as the fulfillment of an earlier and apparently utterly unconnected event when the agents responsible for the occurrence of the later event link it "genealogically" to the earlier one. The linkage between historical events of this kind is neither causal nor genetic (WHITE 1999, p. 89).

He gives an example of the linkage established between the Italian Renaissance and the Greek-Latin culture. This linkage is purely retrospective, consisting of the decision of a group of Dante's contemporaries to choose to regard themselves as if they were descended from Greco-Latin culture. In this sense, for White, Auerbach's *Mimesis* "is not to be understood as the effort to produce a verbal mirror image of some extraverbal reality". What Auerbach offers is "the figure-fulfillment [...] to provide the diachronic plot of the history of Western literature" (WHITE 1999, p. 94). This idea is also reflected by Kellner: "White's figuralism is a choosing backwards". The plot of the narrative creates the meaning, because the end of the story gives a backward sense to the narrative as a whole (KELLNER 2013, p. 160). This is what Foucault, in criticizing other historians of medicine, calls "illusion", because it "functions as a retrospective justification" (FOULCAULT 2003, p. 125).

Thus far, White seems to be at odds with Oakeshott's position, because for the latter any past that is a result of hindsight is not a "historical past" but rather a "practical-as-moral past." For Oakeshott, it is inappropriate for the historian to talk about the "origins" or "ancestors" of a nation because this presupposes a retrospective attitude from the present to the past. This would transform the activity of being a historian into a practical-as-moral activity. For White, however, the choice of ancestors or the finding of origins are the appropriate activities of the historian.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> White explicitly recognizes the practical-as-moral dimension of professional historiography because, in the

For Oakeshott, there exists an insurmountable barrier between the practical and the historical past. There is something *avant la lettre* in Oakeshott's article of 1955, which brings him to White, that is considering the historical past as built by or a product of some kind of attitudes that some kind of persons (in this case, historians) have toward the present.

Oakeshott is genuinely convinced that the historical past is different from the practical past, and he believes this because, even if he thinks that historians are not scientists, he believes, like White, in the founding gesture that historians made to distinguish historiography from both literature and practical activities. To White, the historical past arises from the radical gap that Western culture poses between the past and the present and the creation of a "scientific discipline" to bridge this gap (WHITE 2005, p. 334). Professional historians needed that gap because they believed that it would preserve them from subjectivity. That gap would guarantee them the "objective" knowledge proper to a "science". P. Novick summarizes the consensus about the objectivity of historians as follows: "The assumptions on which it rest include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction" (NOVICK 1988, p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

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To this point, some ambiguity should be noted in the use of the concept "practical" that leads to confusion about the semantic scope of the term. We can distinguish three meanings: "practical" as useful, "practical" as moral and "practical" as ethical. On the one hand, the word "practical" refers to "usefulness". Something is "practical" if it can be used or if it "serves" us. This is the sense that we mainly find in Oakeshott's essay. On the other hand, the concept "practical" can relate to actions. In this sense, the term may be understood morally. Morality defines a world of obligations that appears when we try to answer the question what must I do? However, "practical" can also be understood ethically. This is the case when Kant asks what should I do? Unlike the moral world of obligations, the ethical world offers no map to follow. Both of these latter scopes of the concept "practical" are found in White's latest book, *The Practical Past* (WHITE 2014).

In his recent book,<sup>3</sup> White seems to adhere to the distinction between the "practical past" and the "historical past" proposed by Oakeshott, which would lead, according to some, to question of what White had so far held.<sup>4</sup> "The practical

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nineteenth century, historians were endowed "with the task of providing genealogies for the new national estate formations, and charged with of providing genealogies for the new national estate formations, and charged with providing an antidote to the appeal of the future-oriented and socially transformative ideologies" (WHITE 2005, p. 334).

<sup>2</sup> Novick points to the opposition between fiction and history, having in mind *Metahistory*. However, in 2014, White recognized that it was misleading to suggest that historiography "could best be understood as literature and therefore as fiction". History writing and literary writing are two modes of written discourse. Some literary writing may be fictional, focusing on purely imagined entities, or it may not be, like biographies, historical novels, etc. (WHITE 2014, p. xii).

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the practical past and the historical past is also present in two articles "The Practical Past", *Historiein*, 10 (2010) and "Politics, History, and the Practical Past", *Storia della Storiograia*, 61, 1 (2012) and in a discussion with Dirk Moses in *History and Theory*, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> For Lorenz, to accept that the practical past is different from the historical past implies, first, denying the retrospective relationship between events that is present in social and cultural systems and the figuralist

past" in the title of his book has to do with a past that Koselleck named "space of experience".<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it is, for White, the past constructed by historical novelists who, in the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, helped the new middle classes address the new modes of work and labor, the new modes of love and the new sensibilities. This past was a practical-as-moral past. The modern novel transformed the romance "into a range of "how to live" manuals directed at middle-class women left at home and seeking instruction on "what must be done"" (WHITE 2014, p. 11). Nevertheless, on the other hand, the practical past is also the past of historical postmodernist writers who, in the context of the twentieth century, tried to help in "coming to terms with pasts" with "modernist events" such as, for example, crimes against humanity. Understood in this way, the practical past has ethical consequences because it tries to cope with a past that has been "ignored, suppressed, repressed or hidden" without ruling anything or indicating the road to follow. In both these senses, the practical past is "the other" of the historical past of historiography. The historical past is a construction of history as a scientific or para-scientific discipline. It is the object of study for historians and, as such, it pretends to be studied "for itself alone" and as "an end in itself" detached from the present. Conceived in this way, the historical past has no value for present actions and has no practical-(moral-ethical) consequences.

The professional history would recognize only practical-as-useful consequences. As White stated, professional historiography served "the interests of the nation-state, to help in the work of creating national identities, and was used in the training of educators, politicians, colonial administrators" (WHITE 2014, p. 15). For White, this utility of historiography was consonant with the contemporary ideology of science that was considered both "disinterested" and "practical" or "social beneficial at one and the same time". The other way in which professional history can be practical-as-useful for the present is "in the extent to which it can correct or neutralize or dissolve the distortions, myths, and illusions about the past" (WHITE 2013, p. xiv). As the historical past is about "pure facts" detached from the present, historians could "identify and neutralize ideological distortions of the past". These utilities or social benefits are the only "practical" dimensions that historians are willing to recognize for historiography because it maintains their pretensions to purport an objective and detached knowledge of the past.

Nevertheless, evil appeared insofar as the "historical past" is cast in narrative form. The separation between the past and the present, which would guarantee the objectivity of the "professional" historian and give him/her freedom from the interests of daily life, is only a gesture to repress the inherent practical-moral dimension of historiography. It is a necessary repression for a discipline with

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understanding and, second, denying the inevitable ideological implications of historiography, all of which was clearly stated in *Metahistory*. As Lorenz wrote "How, then, can there be a historical past distinct from the practical past if *all* history writing is somehow ideological?" (LORENZ 2014, p. 37).

<sup>5</sup> It is a "warehouse of archived memories, ideas, dreams, and values which we go to as a kind of "old curiosity shop" in search of intimations of where we came from in order to grasp, ..., what we are to do with all the detritus left to us a legacy of dubious relevance to the solution of current "practical" problems" (WHITE 2014, p. 10).



pretensions to be a science. Historiography “reads us moral lessons, whether we would have it or not, simply by virtue of the casting of its accounts of the past in the form of stories”. To White, this point is “hard to swallow if you are committed to telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in what you say” (WHITE 2014, p. 20).

### **The Moral Dimension of the Practical-historical Past**

One of the consequences of the “discursive turn” was unmasking the practical-as-moral dimension of historical narrative and thus allowing an account of why twentieth-century historical experiences have determined the study of the past, i.e., why the experience of feminism gave birth to a history of feminism.

Living in a present with multiple sexualities that can exist without a sexual identity, Fabienne Brugère chooses the ancestors for a French History of Feminist Philosophy. Her historiography has all the elements of a narrative that departing from the present, finds backward its “origin” (in 1942), predecessor moment (in 1673), and moment of consolidation (mid-1970s) that all lead to a “close” in the present. In an article that was published in April 2015 (BRUGERE 2015) she recognizes Simone de Beauvoir’s *Du deuxième Sexe*, published in 1949, to be the foundation stone of French feminism. Her predecessor would have been the Cartesian Poulaine de la Barre who wrote, in 1673, *De l’égalité des sexes*. Simone de Beauvoir’s legacy would be developed from the 70s, when *genres studies* were consolidated with Chistine Delphy and Colette Guillaumin, until the present when the French feminist denounces, along with Judith Butler, any sexual distinction because it is too binary. Fabienne Brugère, as a member of a specific and small social group (the feminist French philosophers), chooses her ancestors and elects the ideal “founders of the family” from whom she wishes to have descended.

Examining the narratological structure of four different historiographies of the Weimar Republic, Jan Eckel shows how they construct very different relationships between the past and the German present. For Eckel, the four historiographies offer a picture of the Weimar Republic as a “negative contrast” that allows “German post-war society to assess the current political and social conditions of the Federal Republic” (ECKEL 2010, p. 44).

Historical narratives are the written expression what M. Mandelbaum calls “historicism” and Z. B. Simon calls “developmental view of historical thinking” (SIMON 2015, p. 820). Mandelbaum defines historicism as “the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development” (MANDELBAUM 1971, p. 42). According to Ankersmit historicism considers that “the nature of a thing lies in its history; if we wish to grasp the nature of a nation, a people, an institution or an idea, the historicist will require us to consider its historical development” (ANKERSMIT 1995, p. 144). On the other hand, the “developmental view” stresses the continuity that is established through time. This temporal continuity retains the self-identity of the subject amid all changes. The retrospective movement of the choosing the ancestors establishes the

subject identity through time. The choice of the origins, the continuity through time and the possibility of retrospective recollecting from the present to the past are all elements for constituting an historical identity. This developmental view is evolved in the nineteenth century when historical discipline is consolidated as science, being historical narrative its written counterpart. In this way, historiography helps to build identities through narratives being one of its first task to build the identity of modern states through nation.

Narrative configuration creates historical identities relating beginning, middle and end which, all together, are temporal coherent wholes.<sup>6</sup> Belonging to historical identities -a nation, a church, a group- allows people to think and act in specific "concrete" situations and it serves as a "practical-moral guide" of future actions "insofar as it is the *very same subject* whose past and future is at stake" (SIMON 2015, p. 825). And it is this element, first, exposes the inherent moral dimension of historiography and, second, explains why "disciplinary turns" (feminist history or decolonial history, for example) are linked to different experiences in the present. Historiography is a "way of providing an event with a past from which it must have derived" (WHITE 2007, p. 225), and, in doing so, it provides a moral guide for what the group must do, considering its heritage. Morality is what is imposed as mandatory and marked by rules, obligations, prohibitions characterized both by a requirement of universality and by an effect of coercion. It tells us "what *we must* and *must not do* in a given situation of choice" (WHITE 2005, p. 338). If I belong to a certain church, a group or a certain institution, for example, I know what I have to do or not, what norms and rules I have to follow.<sup>7</sup> To use the above example, "Weimar" served as a "counter-image" to the new democracy, as a "symbol" that must not be followed. Fabienne Brugère's Feminist genealogy serves as a model which shows her not only where she had come from but also who is she and what future she had a right to choose for herself. Thus considered, historiography would fulfill the same role as other practical activities such as historical biography, witness literature, and the historical industry. In this sense, H. White affirms:

This genealogical connection is a perfect example of how historians produce historical accounts of the past which serve practical rather than scientific ends ... This is the social and political or, I wish to say, ideological function of "the historical past" (WHITE 2014, p. 98).

<sup>6</sup> Louis Mink speaks about the "configurational mode of comprehension" of the narratives which transforms the events in coherent wholes (MINK 1978, p. 142). From a phenomenological point of view, Paul Ricoeur and David Carr point to the role of the emplotment in transforming the events of a story by "grasping them together" (RICOEUR 1983, p. 105, CARR 1986, p. 64-65).

<sup>7</sup> The temporal continuity of the historical identity established through narrative allowed, for example, that Pope John Paul II admitted the Catholic Church's culpability for past crimes against different groups and communities. On March 15, 2000, *The International Council of Christians and Jews* issued a press that regretted the Church's apparent difficulty admitting responsibility and historical guilt: "not only those Catholics in general but also those responsible for leading the Church through centuries must be included". The Catholic Church is the self-identical subject of history that remains the same through all of the transformations in the development of its stages. The Catholic Church is the subject (substance) that results of the historical narrative which is built backwards from the present. Cf.: <http://www.sacredheart.edu/faithservice/centerforchristianandjewishunderstanding/documentsandstatements/internationalcouncilofchristiansandjewsstatementinresponsetopapalapologymarch152000/>.

The practical-moral dimension of the historical past of historical identities helps us in considering the people, institutions, and groups of our present as substances: stable entities whose deep rootedness is built backward by professional historians who look for the linkages that would show a temporal continuity between the present and the past. In this way, historians become the guardians of social identities. In revealing the origins of social identities, historians help naturalize the stability of the world that surrounds us. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault clearly exposes this idea:

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject, the guarantee that everything that has eluded him will be restored to him ...Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are two sides of the same system of thought (FOUCAULT 1972, p. 12).

Discontinuities are “repugnant” to a historiography so conceived. To this sort of historiography, accustomed to find the “origins”, to trace the line of ancestry, to reconstruct evolutionary curves and to turn endlessly to metaphors of life, is difficult to conceive the difference, the singular, the contingency instead the identity. The “historical past” of the “historical narratives” is very far from the past as such or “in itself” that pretended to establish the basis of a scientific discipline.

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### **“Present as History” as an Ethical Project**

The call for papers for the *International Conference: History and Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* noted that the twentieth century was not only “the age of the extremes” but also the age of feminism, decolonization and techno-scientific evolution.<sup>8</sup> The organizers developed questions such as how can we relate these phenomena with historiography? Is there a connection between these rivers running outside academia and those flowing within it? In a word, is there a relation between history (as the course of events) and historiography (as written discourse)? The answer is yes. Most disciplinary turns of academic historiography have to do with the attempt to address the political and cultural transformation of the age. This was translated in gender historiography, decolonization historiography, audiovisual historiography and so on. Each of these new trends in academic disciplines offered a “practical-as-moral” answer to those epochal turns. In trying to address the new problems, most historians intended to look for their origins, i.e., to show how we arrived at the present, casting the answer in a narrative form.

When the “practical past” and the “historical past” are no longer the blind spots of historiography, the “historical attitude” unfolds as a way of relating to the present that in Nietzsche’s words, “living comes to harm and finally is destroyed, whether it is a person or a people or a culture (NIETZSCHE 2000, p.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf.: <http://www.inth.ugent.be/conf-history-and-historiography-in-the-20th-century-athens-19-20-june-2015>.

39). The living is radically contingent; it is not an original unity reconstructed by a narrative. What historical narrative offers us is the “illusion” of the stability of the living. The reconstruction of the origins of practices, institutions and groups (subalterns, women, etc.) that exist in the present gives them a retrospective temporal continuity. This retrospective temporal continuity legitimizes the naturalized stability of the present. Any taken-for-granted idea or established fact is understood to be an inevitable consequence of the march of time that historiography (re)creates backward.

Following Oakeshott’s idea that different pasts are the result of the different ways we relate with our present, the following question arises: what is the attitude that historians should adopt toward the world in which we live to display the living “as such” (i.e., essentially contingent)? And, therefore, what kind of present would be the correlate of such an attitude?

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes the following:

I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing a history of the present (FOUCAULT 1977, p. 30-31).

To Foucault “writing a history of the past in terms of the present” is writing about the past to legitimate the present. It is constructing a historical past for the things of the world that surround us.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, it shows the living as “natural” things proceeding from the past (i.e., from the dead) instead of showing that death is the future of the living. Showing death to be the future of the living is showing the irreducible historicity of all things. It is to disconnect the future from the present and from the past. It is to begin to think that what will happen in the future will not be similar at all neither with the present nor with the past.<sup>10</sup> As Chakrabarty pointed out: “The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience. We normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past” (CHAKRABARTY 2009, p. 197). However, if historians consider the “present as history”—as White recognizes for the “practical-as-ethical past” of the postmodernist writers—they are reversing the historical attitude of the historical narratives. In this sense, “the present as history” is what Joan W. Scott calls “history as critique”. Resuming the work of Foucault, Scott tries to show that none of the concepts which surround us, like “the home, the individual, the self, [...] incest, even bodily experiences such as fever” (SCOTT 2007, p. 30) is stable. All what is now

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: Michael S. Roth: “Writing a history of the present means writing a history in the present...Foucault uncovers the past to rupture the present into a future that will leave the very function of history behind it, a future that will have no need of a past to be endlessly recaptured” (ROTH 1981, p. 43-44).

<sup>10</sup> At this point we can think in what Z. B. Simon has named an “unprecedented change” [...] “this change, by definition, cannot be explained by studying the past, because [...] has no past and no origin in the past” (SIMON 2015, p. 827). An unprecedented change is so entirely new that we can hardly think about it. And this sort of change can only be envisaged if we consider the present as history.

present will die, which means not that our present will be the past of our future but that our present will die for ever. It means that will not be a "future past" of any "future present".

Hayden White describes it thusly: "critique means attention to the evanescent immanence of everything" (WHITE 2007, p. 225). This is the reversal of the temporal regime of historiography: instead of looking to the past, "history as critique" is looking to the present. Because critique means the denial of substances as perennial, the reification of the world or established facts, critique enables us to think that the present can be changed, that the present can be overcome, and that the living will die. Writing about Adorno's critical theory, Hoy affirms: "The intent is to make certain the present is still open to the future despite its problematic connection to the past" (HOY 1994, p. 139). Unlike the moral dimension of the practical-historical past of professional historiography, the idea of "present as history" or "history as critique" defines an ethical project insofar as the present is considered historically. Unlike morality that defines a field of obligations, ethic aims to a life fulfilled of actions that we consider good for us. Instead a world of "musts", ethic delimits a field under the sign of what we should do or not to do. Joan Scott defends the ethical dimension of "history as critique" as it does not offer a map or a road to follow. Ethics is found in history's purely negative side. Only in this way will the present show us its emancipator face; because of its undetermined past, its future cannot be prescribed. Although the social history of the 60s, of which she acknowledges being part, was revolutionary in the sense of bringing the stories of common people into consideration, it was not really emancipatory. For Joan Scott, in those times, "the emphasis was on our similarity with the past, not on our difference from it; on continuity; and on the universality of categories such as class, race and gender" (SCOTT 2007, p. 21). The questioning of these categories that inhabit our present institutions and theories as natural citizens would reveal their historical foundation, lift the veil of their necessity, and suggest that there could be another route to escape from them (WHITE 2007, p. 225).

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To conclude, both the "historical past" with its practical-as-moral dimension and the "historical present" with its critical attitude, even when they show relationships with living experiences, make experiences the discovering of two different worlds. The past of historical narratives shows a world where living is composed of substances and essences related to a past that legitimized them in their continuity with it. On the contrary, the "critical attitude to the present", or the "present as history", displays the living experiences of our world in their naked contingency. It is a world that invites us to act, to transform it for the future. Nevertheless, if we focus on the present as history, then we have to abandon the historical past and its partner "the activity of being an historian", at least such as it has been narrativized till now.

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