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Reading the Future? Late Modern Histories of the Fin De Siècle

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Abstract

Late modern histories of the fin de siècle have projected present dilemmas and their premonitions of the future into historical analysis. Recent historiographical focus on the global nature of the fin de siècle has also reframed interpretations, both complicating and enriching the history of the period and its relationship with present future. This article explores how historians have in recent decades returned to the fin de siècle and the aspirations of its actors, grappling with the dilemma of reviving progressive ideals and politics in the early twenty-first century through their analysis of the creative and at times contradictory turbulence at work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords

Presentism; Fin de Siècle; Late Modernity

I want some more hock in my seltzer,

And Robbie, please give me your hand -

Is this the end or beginning?

How can I understand?

(*John Betjeman*, 1978, p. 22)

Reading the Future? Late Modern Histories of the *Fin De Siècle*

Late modern histories of the *Fin De Siècle* have projected present dilemmas and their premonitions of the future into historical analysis. Histories of the *Fin De Siècle* published from the Millennium and into the early twenty-first century have assessed whether the lessons of the *Fin De Siècle* confirm the relentless power of market capitalism, leading to a bleak 'end of history' devoid of triumph, and characterised by the fear of catastrophe and degeneration often expressed at the *Fin De Siècle*. Other late modern *Fin De Siècle* histories have posed alternatives before submission to this fate: highlighting progressive possibilities of politics, social activism and cultural expression (e.g., LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995; ROWBOTHAM, 2010; DANDONA, 2017; Ó DONGHAILE, 2020). Recent historiographical focus on the global nature of the *Fin De Siècle* has also reframed interpretations, both complicating and enriching the history of the period (SALER, 2015). Rethinking the colonial history of the *Fin De Siècle* has triggered new forms of political activism, including demands for the repatriation of looted cultural artefacts. This analysis provides a basis for reflecting upon the imagined plea that the poet John Betjeman retrospectively applied to that embodiment of *Fin De Siècle* contradictions, Oscar Wilde, awaiting arrest at the Cadogan Hotel: whether the *Fin De Siècle* represented the termination or renewal of possibilities of hope and experience.

The late modern *Fin De Siècle* histories considered below attempt to conceptualise how historical experience and the behaviour of historical actors might be interpreted to change the course of history from its present direction, and how to challenge ideologies or power relations that stand in the way of reform. Historians and philosophers of history have argued that a presentist perspective is an inescapable aspect of historical practice, urging a pragmatic acceptance of this condition: 'There is no reason to bemoan (or to rejoice) the fact that truth claims in historiography either pertain to objects that are in the past or are generated by practitioners who are in some way irrevocably anchored in their own present times' (GANGL, 2021, p.516). The 'present establishes the historian's conditions of work and observation, and so it is always within historical work in this 'weak' sense. The present can also shape historical work in a 'strong' sense, as its concerns become the avowed point of departure, that which sets the historical problem...and formulates its questions.' A key consideration is 'that controlled form of anachronism must convince with the usefulness - *utilitas* as

a social good - of the approach.' (RUBIN 2017, p.236, 244). Events in the present 'simultaneously actualizes sections of the past within itself', and our interpretation of the world around us draws from 'the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic'. (TAMM; OLIVIER 2019, p.2, 13) Ideas and movements once discarded may re-emerge with renewed vigour - including the *Fin De Siècle* alternatives of spiritualism and political ideology, and an acknowledgment of alternative identities of gender and sexuality.

The *Fin De Siècle*, 1890-1914, was a period when global forces of technology and production, communication and culture, and imperial expansion, generated dynamic and troubled transitions. At the *Fin De Siècle* the teleology of progress was punctuated by anxiety at the prospect of change, and reaction against economic and social inequalities: socialism and anarchism, feminism and new forms of spirituality offered alternatives to prevailing values and structures: which was the right path to follow? Unresolved tensions that flowed from the *Fin De Siècle* - between privileging progress or nature, or the clash of impulses deemed rational or irrational - infiltrate the present.

It has been argued that 'many of the currents arising from the *Fin De Siècle* still sways us today' (SALER, 2015, p.7). Accounting for infiltration, John Zammito has assessed Reinhart Koselleck's concept of 'sediments of time', in which sedimentary layers were constituted by 'diachronic and synchronic dimensions at work at various temporal depths'. Koselleck argued that these synchronic units, that is, discrete temporal units, conferred a 'distinctive profile...to a particular period of time'. Synchronic units could be distinguished 'by examining speech patterns, dress and fashion...ways of thinking and expression of ideas...types of political and social conflicts and their resolutions' (KOSELLECK, 2002, p.156, 159) 'The question, according to Koselleck, is how we can analyze and represent the sediments and mixtures of both repetition and innovation' from the synchronic to the diachronic (ZAMMITO, 2021, p.404-405).

Koselleck's notion of multiple temporalities also suggests 'a relativization of temporal units - and of the borders between the beginnings and endings of epochs in favor of multiple constellations that order events without fixing them' (SVAMPA, 2022, p.223; see also HEARN, 2022, p.40-41). *Fin De Siècle* influence endures in the search for comprehension of present circumstance. By exploring 'the metaphysics of historical time' historians may better apprehend that the historical past is not a straightforward reflection of a 'succession of clock time' but 'hits the present and opens it up to the future'. The 'past is flexible and unstable because history is something to be dealt with, even if one must bear it as an unavoidable outcome' (CARDOSO, 2021, p.147-148, 163). The histories considered here cultivate a dialogue between past and present to determine if the past may yield guidance for reorienting future action and may overcome the baleful conditions that confront the late modern subject.

Late modernity has been characterized as a period from the 1980s that has witnessed the

fragmentation of social life and economic relations. A decline in institutional and personal stability reflected a pessimism that 'real change is no longer possible; history itself seems to be coming to an end in a 'hyper-accelerated standstill'. 'High speed' productive and technological forces obscured 'deep-rooted cultural and structural inertia' (ROSA, 2003, p.3, 8, 16-17; see also GIDDENS, 1991). The potential for counter-cultural mobilisation was rendered inert as old forms of communal identity and action atomised in neoliberal individualism, triggered by the Thatcherite repudiation of notions of 'society', and the Reagan revolution of deregulation and privatisation (STEDMAN JONES, 2012; JACKSON; SAUNDERS, 2012). The ascendancy of neoliberalism has marched in step with an increasing alarm over the environmental crisis represented by climate change, the malign product of the industrial revolution. Late modernity has overwhelmed the human spirit. 'The global scale and sheer complexity of contemporary economic and social processes increase the sense of helplessness and incomprehension' (CHOULIARAKI; FAIRCLOUGH, 1999, p.3). Old certainties of social structure collapsed: 'in the last quarter of the twentieth century...Strong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones. Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out. Viewed by its acts of mind, the last quarter of the century was an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture.' Yet in the 'age of fracture', 'struggles over the intellectual construction of reality...took on new breadth and intensity', stressing 'choice, agency, performance, and desire' (RODGERS, 2011, p.2). The potential of an alternative future - or futures - seemed to beckon.

As a consequence of the challenges posed by late modernity, humanity faces an existential challenge, confronted by 'a future that has already arrived', and where the 'meaning-making of human history...ceases to work' (CHAKRABARTY, 2018, p.23). Does this challenge expose modern historiography as complicit in constructing a teleology of material and cultural progress? Notions of progress have long animated the philosophical and historical imagination (FIALA, 2021). Even radical historical critiques of liberal capitalism assumed an alternative modern and progressive future was available in service to a liberating equality: abundant material growth harnessed by an interventionist state. Andrew Fiala has argued that accepting that the future is undirected by 'metaphysical accounts of the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence' means that it may be approached on a realistic, meliorist basis. 'Meliorists hold that situations can be ameliorated but not made perfect. Meliorism is pragmatic, humanistic, and historically grounded...it is connected to a kind of humility and restraint that grows out of understanding the long history of debates about progress and enlightenment.' Progress remains a viable goal if framed in a historical perspective. 'We can make progress so long as we continue to reflect on the history of these ideas, their historical location and the hermeneutical and historicist problems that arise in thinking about progress' (FIALA, 2021, p.31-32). In recent decades, historians have grappled with the dilemma of reviving progressive ideals and politics in the early twenty-first century through their analysis of the creative and at times

contradictory turbulence at work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rethinking *Fin De Siècle* acceleration

Late modern historiography of the *Fin De Siècle* exposed modern acceleration as not a force concentrating a linear development of progress, but accelerating inequality and colonial exploitation, churning contest and disorientation, and generating an unstable break with the past. It has been argued that 'modernist and progressivist ways of conceiving historical time and of the relationship between past and present have been fundamental and constitutive for academic history writing' (LORENZ; BEVERNAGE, 2013, p.14-16). Historians' devotion to modern progress was based in an assumption of limitless time: the 'modern time regime...has been part of the foundations of Western culture, shaping both its epistemology and its ontology'. Yet the history of the modern time regime since the French and Industrial revolutions is filled with breaks, ruptures and crises that could at times induce a dread of the future, including pessimistic historical perspectives. The 'crisis of orientation induced by the experience of modernity...was obscured by the fact that the unknown future was not envisioned negatively in terms of threat and danger but positively in terms of risk and chance.' (ASSMANN, 2013, p.42, 44).

At the *Fin De Siècle* the accelerations of modernity grew at unprecedented pace and complexity, generating instability and disorientation. The acceleration that commenced with the Industrial Revolution triggered developments including 'not merely the technical world of industry, the empirically verifiable core of all acceleration, but everyday life, politics, the economy, and population increases as well'. The consumption of culture, music and literature 'unfolded under the sign of acceleration' (KOSELLECK, 2018, p.81, 88). Late modern historiography focuses on how these forces were concentrated by the late nineteenth century. The economic, technological and cultural accelerations of a 'second industrial revolution' shaped the *Fin De Siècle* and intensified the pace and disruptive impact of change (Killen, 2015). Christopher Bayly described a '*Fin De Siècle* acceleration' that facilitated the rapid dissemination of ideas, and the mass transfer of peoples on an unprecedented global scale, enabled by new transport and communication technologies - steamships and railway networks, undersea cables and transcontinental telegraph lines (BAYLY, 2004, p.451, 456). The *Fin De Siècle* also witnessed the establishment of globally-impacting corporations - the great American trusts and combines of US Steel and Standard Oil, the German petrochemical industry with unprecedented market capitalisation and productive capacity, and whose emergence intensified class struggle and colonial exploitation (CHANDLER, 1990, p.28-31).

Although the *Fin De Siècle* has traditionally been represented as a European and western phenomenon, recent contributions to the historiography have clarified the global impact of the transformative forces at work in the period. A 'third wave' of historical research emerged in the early

twenty-first century into an 'inherently global' dynamic: the *Fin De Siècle* should be understood as reflecting 'the rapid interchange of diverse concepts and experiences drawn from disparate cultures' (SALER, 2015, p.5-6). Since the 1990s the historiography of Latin America has identified *Fin De Siècle* manifestations of the global 'turmoil of progress', accelerating the instability of economic change and a new wave of European cultural influence, including Art Nouveau style (SALVATORE, 2001, p.1; GAZANEO, 1990). Art Nouveau was a project of the wealthy to assert status and class distinction. In the Argentine capital Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, the wealthy 'wanted to construct European preserves to maintain identification with their fantasy of a Civilization unsullied by Latin American architecture or the poor.' The wealthy cultivated a 'neocolonial milieu', in which 'the elite could announce this status through the expense and taste of their European mansions' (NEEDELL, 1995, p.540). The adoption of the new, 'eclectic' style of art and architecture from Europe, dubbed 'chorizo' (sausage) in Argentina and *bolo-de-noiva* ('wedding cake') in Brazil, at once 'theatrical' and 'pompous', may have also reflected a search by the Argentine and Brazilian bourgeoisie for a more secure identity amid the turmoil of progress (ESCRITT, 2002, p.292).

The moment of high Imperialism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries triggered reactions in Asia, generating, as Pankaj Mishra has observed, powerful forces that penetrated the West and challenged assumptions of European hegemony. Japan's humiliating defeat of Russia in the battle of the Tsushima Strait in 1905 led non-Western political activists to appreciate that European imperialism was not invincible. Celebrating Japan's victory, Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen declared that the people of Asia could soon shake off the yoke of European domination (MISHRA, 2012, p.7). Mishra has drawn attention to the neglected history of individuals and movements who resisted European colonial expansion in Asia, or turned it to the advantage of their causes, adapting the instruments and ideologies of modernization. Mishra observes the young rebels who exploited the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and inaugurated the Chinese republic in 1911, including a youthful Mao Tse-Tung, who grasped the potential for 'transformation...because from the demise of the old universe will come a new universe' (MISHRA, 2012, p.181-182). This drive for transformative modernisation 'defined China's distinctive *Fin De Siècle* experience' (DYKSTRA & WASSERSTROM, 2015, p.253).

The twenty-first century has witnessed a rise in historiography critical of the British Empire's 'civilising mission' at the *Fin De Siècle* (BALLANTYNE, 2010; SANGHERA, 2021). The relentless search for markets and raw materials by the European imperial powers yielded cultural dividends at the *Fin De Siècle*. In *Blood and Bronze* Paddy Docherty argued that the sack of the West African Kingdom of Benin by Britain in 1897 was driven by a desire to secure palm oil resources and provided the opportunity to seize an abundant collection of plaques and artifacts known collectively as the 'Benin Bronzes', which record the history and mythology of the kingdom. The 'Benin Bronzes'

subsequently found their way into the museums of Paris, Berlin and not least the 'extraordinarily rich and comprehensive assemblage' in the British Museum, an appropriation that subverts a benevolent narrative of empire: 'telling the tale of the conquest of Benin...[questions] the nature and legitimacy of the British Empire' (DOCHERTY, 2021, p.xvi-xx, xxiii, 44-46). Historiographical revision of the British Empire has been intensified by post-Cold War destabilisation of identity and social and economic life. Instability has fuelled both progressive challenges and nationalist reaction symbolised by Britain's withdrawal from the European Union in 2016. Priya Satia has argued that the post-Brexit era offered a moment 'to find a fruitful way forward for the historical discipline', and not least in rethinking the history of empire. Recognition of colonial era wrongs were not about 'undoing history but making new history', cultivating a 'poetic historical understanding' that drew inspiration from the Romantics and 'progressive writers', such as the 'poetic *and* utopian thinker' William Morris, and which breaks with 'technology or blind confidence in a liberatory future'. A new, 'less future-oriented' history is required, 'that layers past, present, and future together in productive, nonlinear ways,' helping to imagine a utopia focused upon '*now*', rather than a vague, 'possible future' (SATIA, 2020, p.271-273, 275).

Since the early 2000s Belgian Art Nouveau, long represented as a benign cultural movement, has been explicitly summoned to account in a trenchant revision of the cultural and imperial past. Exploring 'the politics of cultural representation and appropriation' of Belgian Art Nouveau as part of a major exhibition and publication project conducted at the Centre for Information, Documentation and Exhibitions (CIVA) in Brussels in 2023, Baloji *et al*. note that the movement was also known as 'Style Congo' at the *Fin De Siècle*. 'Style Congo' drew both ivory material and creative inspiration from the brutally exploitative regime of Belgian King Leopold II's private Congo Free State between 1885 and 1908. The fraught legacy of Belgian *Fin De Siècle* colonialism opened a debate on recognition of communities suspended in 'the double or triple time of colonization', in the 'in-between' spaces of the 'post-colonial metropolis', and led to the assertion of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, as Afro-Belgians demanded a reassessment of Belgium's colonial past and its cultural legacy (BALOJI, 2023, p.3).

Pioneering analysis by Debora L. Silverman opened the space for the CIVA exhibition's historical revision. Silverman described her response to a 2005 Tervuren Museum exhibition, *La mémoire du Congo*, which she found 'flawed and evasive'. Silverman began to study 'the profound and inextricable ties, long un-examined', between Art Nouveau and 'the imperial culture of fin de siècle Belgium during the period of the Congo Free State'. Silverman uncovered how 'the unprecedented economic prosperity and overseas expansionism of fin de siècle Belgium provided progressive artists such as Victor Horta, Henry van de Velde, and Paul Hankar with elite patrons and some budgets awash in Congo dividends... Profits from imports of Congo ivory, wild rubber, and

palm oil traded by Belgian companies had soared to astonishing heights between 1888 and 1897 (stock dividends returned, on average, more than 220 percent from 1892 to 1897)' (SILVERMAN, 2011, p.141, 144, 146).

Baloji *et al.* argue that the history of Belgian Art Nouveau cannot be contained in a 'homogenic narrative', a claim reflecting a late modern revisionist perspective (BALOJI, 2023, p.3). That the history of the *Fin De Siècle* may yet be written as a discrete or homogenic national (or imperial) narrative plotting a teleology of progress is apparent in Pieter Judson's *The Habsburg Empire, A New History* (2016). Judson's construction of the period presents a rationally progressive late nineteenth century regime, an analysis driven by assimilating a logic of benevolent acceleration. Judson's narrative marginalises the creativity and tensions - of culture, race and nationalism - identified by Carl Schorske and other historians as emblematic of the Viennese and Habsburg *Fin De Siècle*, in favour of privileging 'revolutions' in social and economic benefits that 'transformed lives' (SCHORSKE, 1981; HEARN, 2023). Judson's outline of steady progress across the nineteenth century is troubled by aspects of his own narrative, and a growing sense of imperial breakdown under centrifugal pressures of acceleration. Judson observes a 'dizzying array of imperial projects undertaken by small and medium-sized towns in the two decades from 1895 to 1914 - projects ranging from new school buildings and hospitals to libraries and theaters, from electric lights to public swimming pools, from new railway stations to tramway systems.' This 'dizzying array' reflected an anxiety not to be left out of the future. 'To take advantage of the rapid technological and economic transformations underway in the last third of the nineteenth century, towns had to act or risk losing markets and the quotidian benefits of modernity to regional rivals. The placement of a railway link or a military garrison could make or break a town's economic future.' Judson concludes that 'Modernity meant more than a promising economic future. It also meant incorporating the representative elements of a common European modernity in the town's landscape or its appearance.' The militarization of Habsburg society was evident in the spread of garrisons and the increased demands of military conscription, itself a form of acceleration. (JUDSON, 2016, p.355, 356) Habsburg progress seemed to reflect the instabilities evident at the *Fin De Siècle*.

Millennial *Fin De Siècle* Histories: 'Is Market Society The *Fin* Of History?'

Late modern historiography recognised that the instabilities of the present were evident at the *Fin De Siècle*, as communities and cultures across the globe were harnessed to new regimes of time and experience by global forces generated by the second industrial revolution and accompanying imperial expansion. The approaching Millennial centenary stimulated a reorientation of studies of the period and its turbulent dynamics.

The *Fin De Siècle* came into 'much sharper scholarly focus' from the 1980s, as a 'new scholarship focused on the period as one of shifting cultural and social tectonics in which key categories, discourses, formations, and institutions were riven by intense conflict and contradiction' (MACLEOD, 2007, p.697). In 1990, and as the accelerations of the economic globalisation initiated in the 1980s intensified, Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter described the project of the contributors to *Fin De Siècle* and its Legacy as crucially departing from privileging 'literary and artistic' manifestations to 'surveying a diversity of fields', including key developments in the capitalist system, 'industrial and liberal, since the close of the nineteenth century', and the development of corporations of unprecedented scale, notably explored in the contributions of the economic historians Alice Teichova and Alfred Chandler: 'what emerges from their pages is how vital to this process was the materialization of the mass market, as its factor and outcome' (TEICH; PORTER, 1990, p.3).

In an edited collection of *Fin De Siècle* documents published in 1999, Mike Jay and Michael Neve observed the anxiety of the imminent Millennium generated by troubled globalization, over-population and 'radical belief systems', and found one hundred years earlier 'a parallel complex of crises grouped under the term *Fin De Siècle*', blurring a distinction between past and present (JAY; NEVE, 1999, p.xi). In their introduction to *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken recognised that historians faced the problem of 'how to reread the past from the inescapable perspective of the present' and found inspiration for resolving this dilemma in Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', by no longer 'telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary' and instead grasps 'the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one', a formulation that broke with a neatly conceived division between past and present. Published in 1995, *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle* reflected the self-conscious 'presentism' of the perspective of its contributors, as they sought to grasp 'the "constellation" which our own *Fin De Siècle* forms with the last one', at another moment of 'cultural crisis and fragmentation' (LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.1-2). The focus of its contributors Terry Eagleton and Regenia Gagnier on economic and political factors reflected a sustained theme of late modern *Fin De Siècle* histories, notably expressed in Gagnier's lament at the *Fin De Siècle* prefiguring the dismally marketized Millennium (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p. 290).

In her contribution to *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, 'Is market society the *fin* of history?' Regenia Gagnier addressed the economic and political obstacles facing hopes of late modern transformation, a dilemma that formed an inheritance of the *Fin De Siècle*: 'Understanding the road that economics and aesthetics took at the end of the nineteenth century is crucial to our understanding of the possibilities of democratic market society today' (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.291). Gagnier argued that the commodified values of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) mirrored the emergence of the neoclassical marginal revolution in economics

in the late nineteenth century, grounded in 'the perspective of consumers and consumption', and dismissing values or relationships deemed irrelevant 'an individual's ordering of preference among desirable goods'. Dorian Gray's relentless search for sensation, a 'cycle of excess and ennui', is embodied in his portrait, which records 'the shame of his consumption...he is given beauty without limit, the scarcest commodity in a mortal world.' (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.302-303). Consumerism, Gagnier argued, was 'central to *Fin De Siècle* aesthetics and economics' and suggested that material progress and pervasive consumerism dismembers collective action and identity and disables political mobilisation (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.305). Gagnier qualified her analysis, acknowledging that Oscar Wilde did not entirely succumb to the individualism and *Fin De Siècle* consumerism. The author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was also the author, in the same year, of the essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891), hoping for a future of equality, where individuals would feel more fulfilled (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.305-306).

Gagnier framed her argument as a response to Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis. First published as a 1989 essay just months before the Berlin Wall fell, Fukuyama celebrated the triumph of 'the spectacular abundance of advanced liberal economies and infinitely diverse consumer culture made possible by them.' Gagnier noted that only briefly, in his concluding comments, did Fukuyama express nostalgia for history, as he predicted that the 'daring' and 'imagination' of ideological struggle would be replaced by 'economic calculation [and]...environmental concerns' (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.290; FUKUYAMA, 1992, p.xi). Gagnier was also reduced to resignation, as American society in the 1980s '...pursued markets in everything from music to education, babies to blood.' Gagnier added that '...with the end of history in universal markets, the women and workers who were pauperised and disenfranchised by the globalization of markets and new machines are still outside', that is, outside of decision making, still tied to the private sphere of the home (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.308). Gagnier found the sources of an enduring inequality, a closed circle of late modern market rationality evolving from the *Fin De Siècle* convergence of 'rational aesthetic man' and 'rational economic man' (GAGNIER in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.301).

Dissolving the distinction between past and present prompted the question: when was the *Fin De Siècle*? In his contribution to *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, 'The flight to the real', Terry Eagleton argued that the *Fin De Siècle* 'arrived' in the 1960s, reviving the preoccupations of the turn of the century: 'Sexual experiment, pseudo-orientalism, gospels of peace and fellowship, emancipatory politics, exotic art forms, hallucinatory states, flights from civilisation.' Eagleton promptly stretched this arrival into the late twentieth century: 'The postmodern 1980s and 1990s have...some claim this inheritance too.' Although Eagleton claimed there was one crucial point of

difference between the *Fin De Siècle* and more recent 'arrivals':

> For ours is not an era of revolutionary doctrines, even if it resembles its nineteenth-century forbear in being one of global capitalist recession. The capitalist system approaches this millennium, as it did the last, in grave disarray; but the political forces which mustered around the turn of the century to offer an alternative polity to this failed experiment have been temporarily scattered and diffused (EAGLETON in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.11).

Eagleton wrote in search of progress but could not locate it in the present. He was preoccupied with a contrast between the dynamism of *Fin De Siècle* idealism and the political quietism evident a century later: '...somewhere around the late 1980s, we had a discourse of word and body and an embarrassed silence about class, state, imperialism, modes of production, all of which could now be briskly consigned to the ash-can of totality.' Eagleton asserted that

> If the late nineteenth century has an urgent significance for us, then it is precisely because it did not make this mistake...William Morris knew about the politics of how things felt and looked, but also about theories of surplus value; Maud Gonne and Connie Markowitz moved between theatre, the women's movement, the Parisian avant-garde and Irish republicanism. The same figures can be found demonstrating for the unemployed and dabbling in occultism, linking an enthusiasm for symbolism with an interest in syndicalism...these men and women saw no ultimate divide between the more rational organisation of industry and the dismantling of the transcendental ego (EAGLETON in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.12).

Eagleton concluded with a hope that such a transformation would restore the link between personal and economic transformation, resulting in material and spiritual progress. Eagleton turned to the past to construct an idealised image of present and future activism:

> Annie Besant coming hotfoot from spiritual meditation to industrial struggle; Edward Carpenter in Trafalgar Square; Oscar Wilde championing socialism...If in the 1990s we can recapture something of the generous plurality of their project, then we will be spared the shameful admission that the late Victorians have happened again in our own epoch, this time as farce (EAGLETON in LEDGER; MCCRACKEN, 1995, p.20-21).

As Eagleton's analysis demonstrated, Priya Satia was not the first humanities scholar since

the millennium to summon William Morris as an inspiration for political mobilisation. Recent decades have witnessed a revival of interest in Morris, both as designer and political activist. In 2014-2015 London's National Portrait Gallery conducted an exhibition, 'Anarchy and Beauty, William Morris and his Legacy, 1860-1960'.[1] In the accompanying exhibition catalogue Fiona MacCarthy (and the author of a major biography of Morris) declared that Morris 'invented a new outlook' of a 'simpler and more equable society, in which creativity was of the essence'. Morris outlined his utopia in *News from Nowhere* (1892), a work which engendered a 'fever' that 'shaped the lives of innumerable people' in the ensuing century. Morris's influence endured beyond 1960; the exhibition catalogue concluded with a work by the artist Jeremy Deller, *We Sit Starving Amidst Our Gold*, portrayed a giant Morris pitching the billionaire Roman Abramovich's mega yacht into the Venetian lagoon, after the yacht had been ostentatiously moored, confronting the Venice Biennale exhibition space in 2011. Reflecting that the work captured Morris's scorn of the wealthy and the commodification of art, MacCarthy concluded that 'never has William Morris's viewpoint seemed more pertinent' (MACCARTHY, 2014, p.17, 129; MACCARTHY, 1994).

A tension between hope and pessimism may be observed by noting the turn to the *Fin De Siècle* in Sheila Rowbotham's recently published work. Since the 1960s the feminist and socialist historian has maintained a consistently radical interpretative framework. From 2008 her published work - *Edward Carpenter, Dreamers of a New Day, Rebel Crossings* - sought inspiration for a renewal of the radical project in the activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although, as Rowbotham acknowledged, this renewal was confronted by sharply transformed circumstances from those that prevailed in her earlier years of political activism and historical research. Edward Carpenter, the gay rights advocate and adherent of the Fellowship of the New Life, provided a model of courageous if typically heterogeneous *Fin De Siècle* activism, ranging from environmentalism to communalism, socialism to Eastern mysticism. Carpenter 'would have been aghast' at the global environmental degradation of the twenty-first century, and that land and capital remained in the hands of a few; 'the city of the Sun appears to be permanently on hold.' Yet Carpenter's revealing personal correspondence 'kept a careful record for posterity', 'because he believed a future would come in which his desires, and those of his friends, would not be regarded with contempt'. Rowbotham believed that Carpenter would have been pleased with advances in gay rights in the twenty-first century (ROWBOTHAM 2008, p.4-7, 454). *Dreamers of a New Day* drew optimistic conclusions from its accounts of the women who strove to transform the conditions of everyday life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, registering a 'new awakening' one hundred

1 https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2014/anarchy-beauty-william-morris-and-his-legacy-1860-1960-new Accessed 30 November 2023.

years later in 'women worldwide' asserting 'the need to extend democracy into every aspect of everyday life. The boundaries between inner and outer change and differing ways of knowing are being reimagined and reinvented; clear-cut dichotomies are being resisted in favour of fluidity' (ROWBOTHAM 2010, p.240). Yet Rowbotham ruefully observed the context of her research into the 'New Women, Free Lovers and Radicals' whose neglected stories she uncovered in *Rebel Crossings*. 'I first discovered the little group of rebels in this book when I, myself, was young and convinced the world was about to change for the better. Then, thwack, capitalism changed gear, appropriating free-expression, raiding collective spaces, shredding non-marketable aspirations, social solidarity and fellow feeling. Now that I am in my seventies and hence incontestably old, it is evident that a good society, along with a new radical and emancipatory social consciousness, will take longer to realise than I had imagined' (ROWBOTHAM 2016, p.7). The turn towards late modernity was signalled for Rowbotham as capitalism 'changed gear', intensifying a shift from communal to individual, marketized consciousness.

The Future Possibilities of the *Fin De Siècle*

Discussing the late twentieth century collapse of the familiar certainties of the modern era, the historian Beverly Southgate welcomed a blossoming relativity of postmodern perspectives. It provided for Southgate not a moment of disengagement from political or social activism, but the potential for a creative re-engagement, with inspiration sourced in neglected histories. Southgate recommended that historians seek out the stories of those who defied 'the authority of circumstance', emphasising 'historic moments of choice' made by individuals not swept along by the course of events but acting '*against* the prevailing perception of what constitutes reality or necessity' (SOUTHGATE, 2005, p.89, 124). Of these stories, the *Fin De Siècle* provides an abundance. Resisting despair and collapse into political quietude, late modern *Fin De Siècle* histories have drawn attention to progressive possibilities for politics, social activism and cultural expression embraced by historical actors in the period.

That Oscar Wilde engaged with the vibrant politics of his time is explored in *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin De Siècle*, published in 2020. We may observe the apparent contrast between the ennui of 'fin de globe' in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the utopia that Wilde insisted in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' must be included in any useful map of the world. Wilde's call for a radical politics recognised, with characteristic paradox, that the collective movement of socialism would only succeed if it fulfilled the self-expression of the individual. Deaglan Ó Donghaile argued that 'contrary to contemporary representations of Wilde as an effete and socially disengaged figure', Wilde embraced the radical political culture of the *Fin De Siècle* including a 'progressive analyses of

the cultural and political conservatism... expressions of support for feminism...his confrontation with homophobia in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his challenge to religious dogma in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (Ó DONGHAILE, 2020, p.5).

The energetic and outspoken spirit of Eleanor Marx has also been awakened by Rachel Holmes, in order to resist 'a deletion of historical memory underway', a passive acceptance 'that inequality, consumerism and global commodity capitalism are a naturally inbuilt economic system to which there is no viable alternative.' In her 2014 biography, Holmes argued that Eleanor Marx, 'the politician, thinker, feminist and activist leaves us with our own question of personal responsibility to the common interest that is essential to social existence' (HOLMES, 2014, p.448).

In recent years a focus on the work of the French Art Nouveau designer Emile Gallé has shifted from aesthetic appreciation to politics. In *Nature and the Nation in Fin-de-Siècle France, The Art of Emile Gallé and the Ecole de Nancy* (2017), Jessica M. Dandona focused on Gallé's ardent nationalism in the post Franco-Prussian War decades, producing works that reflected his hope for the restoration of his native Lorraine to France, as much of its territory was occupied by a triumphantly united Germany. At the *Fin De Siècle* Gallé produced ornamental glassware, plate and marquetry furniture in his Nancy studio decorated with symbolic motifs in support of the causes he embraced, including demands for justice for French Army Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, wrongfully accused in 1894 of spying for Germany. Gallé's provocative Dreyfusard work formed part of a confronting installation, *The Glass Furnace*, exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition (DANDONA, 2017, p.94-96). Gallé's political activism was yet more extensive: a 2015 monograph produced by the Musée de l'École de Nancy drew attention to the political and social activism of Gallé and L'École de Nancy. The division of Lorraine stimulated Gallé's sympathy and works that symbolised the sufferings of other victims of political violence and repression, including the Armenian victims of the Ottoman genocide that commenced under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the 1890s, and the impact of British imperialism on Boer and Irish nationalism. In December 1890 Gallé offered the Irish nationalist William O'Brien the 'Dragon and Pelican' vase before the Irish militant's return from France to England and impending imprisonment; the vase's motifs symbolised the struggle for freedom (MUSÉE DE L'ÉCOLE DE NANCY, 2015, p.141-142, 145). The Musée de l'École de Nancy monograph, subtitled 'Those who live are those who struggle', observed that today, the values of human rights, secularism and republicanism are 'in crisis'. The works of L'École de Nancy remain 'very up to date with the questions of our time' (MUSÉE DE L'ÉCOLE DE NANCY, 2015, p.7, 13).

Baloji *et. al.* have asked what role heritage studies and museum curation may play in drawing the past and present together, in service to imagining a better future: 'can heritage unlock diverse, even contradicting, narratives, to redefine history as a continuous construction of the present?' (BALOJI, 2023, p. 3). Robert Aldrich has proposed that 'the tasks for the inheritors of the colonial

museums are to awaken and satisfy the curiosity about the present-day world but without denying the colonial conditions and complex history behind the marvels on display' (ALDRICH, 2009, p.154). A case has also been made for a more provocative intervention. Herman Lebovics describes the 'guerrila restitution' of Kinshasa-born Mwazulu Diyabana, a 'militant campaigner for restoring African heritages', who in 2020 'tore an African funereal post from its plinth' and walked out of the Musée Quai Branly-Chirac in Paris. Diyabana's action was filmed and broadcast on the internet by his associates. Approached by the French Police, Diyabana declared that he wished to report a theft. Lebovics concluded that 'the Africans who pulled up the funereal post in the exhibition hall of the Quai Branly-Chirac took an object of heritage which marked the intense ongoing connection between the living, the dead, and the yet unborn' (LEBOVICS, 2021, p.119-120, 127). In 2021 twenty-six cultural works expropriated from Benin by France in 1892 were repatriated from the Musée Quai Branly-Chirac to Benin. The Quai Branly-Chirac retains thousands of African items, which staff were working through to identify those 'taken through violence, without the owner's consent.'[2]

Present needs stimulated a reassessment of Eleanor Marx and Emile Gallé; Oscar Wilde is summoned to await the arrival of the police in the Cadogan Hotel, refusing his friends' appeals to flee. Suspended in history, is that moment an end or a beginning, as the poet John Betjeman had Wilde plead to Robbie Ross? Published in the collection *Continual Dew* in 1937, Betjeman's imagined recall of that dramatic moment resonates in a trajectory from 5 April 1895 and into a succession of futures, as Wilde's reputation was periodically repudiated and revived (GUEST, 1978, p.22). If there is a multiplicity of different times, 'then the question arises as to how these differential temporalities relate to each other. This is basically a question of understanding historical temporalities as relational and synchronized, in the sense that they articulate material and imaginary ties to one another and among social groups' (TAMM; OLIVIER, 2019, p.12). Marking the centenary of Wilde's death, *The Wilde Years, Oscar Wilde and the Art of his Time* (2000), argued that Wilde has arrived in late modernity as both Dorian Grey style dandy and radical activist. 'The intensity of his own particular brand of dandyism, decadence and dissent', rendered Wilde a threat to 'conventional morality', yet it was 'that element of living dangerously, for the moment, in a perpetual search for his own true nature, that has helped turn him into an icon a hundred years after his death' (LAMBOURNE; SATO, 2000, p.58). Deaglan Ó Donghaile's revision argued that Wilde sought 'the development of a popular and democratic aestheticism.' Wilde believed that 'Nature, culture, art and consciousness... were all suffering under the stress of capitalism.' Capitalism and state authority stifled culture and exploited labour. 'Industrial modernity was damaging the aesthetic capacity of the individual and

2 'Paris's Quai Branly museum hosts final show in France for looted Benin treasures. Issued on: 26/10/2021'. Accessed 8 December 2021. https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211026-paris-s-quai-branly-museum-hosts-final-show-in-france-for-looted-benin-treasures'

reducing the value attached to culture by society as a whole.' The growth of a broader appreciation of the value of art among the working class could be fostered by socially-engaged workers and artists' (Ó DONGHAILE, 2020, p.19-20).

Conclusion

Ordering past, present and future was an abiding preoccupation of *Fin De Siècle* discourse. The *Fin De Siècle* was an acutely time-conscious construction, formed by historical actors and subsequently appropriated by historians - the future conceived through historicised constructions of the present/past. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) imagined a reordered realm of the present invested with deeply felt values drawn from the past and projected into the future, in a vision of a communal arcadia, 'replete with beauty and art', and repudiating the 'competition and capitalism' of late nineteenth century industrial Britain (WEST, 1993, p.48). The *Fin De Siècle* preoccupation with time was often not driven by anticipation of an end, but discontent with the present, and an alarm, as Morris expressed, at the rampant accelerations of industrial capitalism; progress seemed gained at prohibitive cost.

Koselleck's exploration of 'synchronic units', and the distinctive characteristics of these intense periods of historical experience, uncovers their relative relationship with the wider periodization of modernity and the cycle of 'repetition and innovation' in the sediments of time. (ZAMMITO, 2021, p.404-405). The apparently fixed temporality of the *Fin De Siècle* resonates into reflection on the present and the future. Was the *Fin De Siècle* the end, as the term implies, or was it a beginning? Consciousness of an end implied awareness of an uncertain beginning, an ambivalence that troubled both historical actors of the period and the subsequent reflections of historians (HEARN, 2022, p.39-40).

Deaglan Ó Donghaile's *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin De Siècle* formed part of the recent revision not only of studies of Oscar Wilde but also the *Fin De Siècle*. The *Fin De Siècle* was a period in which oppositional ideas and practices operated in creative tension, suggesting an historical dialectic from which an alternative future, neither catastrophic nor narrowly triumphalist, might be conceived, and providing the basis for a creative amelioration. 'Human civilization is a late arrival', and '[t]here is no guarantee that it will last; it is up to us to build the world we want...we must be active participants in history' (FIALA, 2021, p.36).

'I must go on as far as possible', Wilde told André Gide as he faced imminent 'catastrophe' in 1895. 'Something is bound to happen...something else' (JACKSON, 1988, p.95). Uncertain of the future, unsure of strategy, yet willing to act; from the *Fin De Siècle* Wilde offers an historical lesson

for our late modern circumstance.

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