


# Memory, narrative, and conflict in writing the past: when historians undergo ethical and political strains

Memória, narrativa e conflito em escrever o passado: quando os historiadores estão sujeitos a tensões éticas e políticas

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will analyze the distinctive features of the twentieth century historiography with regards to its most salient events. By doing so, I will provide an interpretation of the struggles which underlay the production of historical knowledge at the end of the century. In contrast to various theories of historiography which assert that autonomy from collective memory is a methodological assumption of the historian, I will argue that historiography is always interwoven with the political and ethical challenges of the historian's time. In this regard, this paper's theses are inspired by Walter Benjamin's ideas concerning historiography, as well as by the interpretations of his ideas provided by other historians and philosophers, such as Enzo Traverso, Dominick LaCapra or Michael Löwy. Their ideas will serve as a framework for understanding the challenges historians face when narrating contemporary history.

## KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin; Memory; Narrative

## RESUMO

Neste trabalho, analiso as distintas características da historiografia do século vinte em torno aos eventos mais proeminentes da época, para, assim, poder delinear uma interpretação das lutas que subjazem a produção do conhecimento histórico. Em contraste com várias teorias da historiografia que afirmam que a autonomia da memória coletiva é um pressuposto metodológico do historiador, argumentarei que a historiografia está sempre entrelaçada com os desafios políticos e éticos do tempo do historiador. A esse respeito, as teses deste trabalho são inspiradas nas ideias de Walter Benjamin sobre a historiografia, bem como pelas interpretações dessas premissas, fornecidas por outros historiadores e filósofos, como Enzo Traverso, Dominick LaCapra ou Michael Löwy. Suas ideias servirão de estrutura para compreender os desafios que os historiadores enfrentam ao narrar a história contemporânea.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Walter Benjamin; Memória; Narrativa

## Introduction. The historian's journey: From Extraterritoriality to Secondary Witnessing

In the recent decades, the history of the twentieth century has become not just an object of study, but also of debate and political contention. Consequently, the interests and conditions of the present cannot be ignored when analyzing the mechanisms which give the past its meaning. In this regard, the contribution and influence of Benjamin in this theoretical context cannot be overlooked. In *La historia como campo de batalla*, the historian Enzo Traverso offers a general overview of the fiercest debates among historians regarding the interpretation of the events of the past century. The guiding thread of this book is to bring to light the many underlying tensions in contemporary historiography, especially in relation to socio-political factors. In the introduction Traverso asserts:

I think it is necessary to evoke Walter Benjamin's underlying influence. In his writing I have found not just an answer to my questions, but also some useful resources for expressing my questions, which is a necessary assumption for any successful investigation [...] Walter Benjamin did not bequeath a method, but a deep reflection regarding the means and contradictions that came from an intellectual perspective that, when trying to think about history, insists on not separating the past from the present (TRAVERSO 2011, p. 27).

As can be concluded from this passage, the closeness between the past and the present and their reciprocal influence are Walter Benjamin's main theoretical contributions towards understanding contemporary historiography. Indeed, in this paper I aim to cast light on the challenges faced by historians at the turn of the twenty-first century, by highlighting the impossibility of detaching the past from the present within the writing of history. This idea does not just present the image of narrating the past as analogous to a battlefield when the interpretation of historical events turned out to be a contested issue. Furthermore, it reshapes the framework

within which historians have been defined. In his *History, the Last Thing before the Last*, Sigfried Kracauer asserts that, for trying to understand the past, which is always a “foreign country” (LOWENTHAL, 2015), historians can be defined as an extraterritorial figure. According to Kracauer, historians are like exiles, insofar they live between two different worlds: the past and the present. This condition impedes them from taking roots in either one of them. “He has ceased to ‘belong’. [...] And just as he is free to step outside the culture which was his own, he is sufficiently uncommitted to get inside the minds of the foreign people in whose midst he is living” (KRACAUER 2015, p. 84). No matter how compelling Kracauer’s ideas are, the features of contemporary history require us to reshape his definition of historian. The aforementioned interweaving of past and present, which became strengthened by the unfolding of traumatic historical events in the twentieth century runs counter to Kracauer’s definition. This is what Enzo Traverso has to say on the subject:

The metaphor of an exile is still appropriate [...] but today it should be nuanced. The historian of the twentieth century is an “exile” but also, directly or indirectly, a “witness,” who maintains a close relationship with the object of research in multiples ways. The historian’s challenge lies not in exploring a strange and distant universe; rather it lies on distancing him or herself from a past that is rather close, that he or she may have lived and whose traces are still alive (TRAVERSO 2012 p. 285).

In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Dominick LaCapra emphasizes the role of transferences, emotions, and values that come from a past which a historian has both experienced and is researching. In this work LaCapra assumes a definition of the historian which is diametrically opposed to the one proposed by Kracauer. By highlighting the ethical and political tensions which a historian undergoes when dealing with a traumatic past, LaCapra defines a historian as a “secondary witness” (LACAPRA 1998, p. 21). Thus, the historian’s task is not only to distance him or herself from a recent past, but also

to “work out an acceptable subject position” (LACAPRA 1998, p. 11) in relation to the historical sources of the aforementioned *transferences*. This definition only makes sense within LaCapra’s new approach regarding the relations between two categories which have been the focus of historiographical debates during the last decades: on the one hand, history, and on the other hand, the social source of *transferences* that may interfere with the historian’s work: collective memory. LaCapra’s position regarding this matter is clearly synthesized in his last work: “The ongoing challenge is to approach the topic without opposing history and memory in a binary fashion but instead by inquiring into the more complex and challenging relations between them” (LACAPRA 2018, p. 81). By assuming this position LaCapra directly opposes theories regarding relations between history and memory that have been defended since the second quarter of the twentieth century by a heterogeneous group of philosophers, sociologist and historians. Pierre Nora’s reflections on “*Lieux de memorie*” is a clear example on the aforementioned binary understanding of the relationship between history and memory.

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in their name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to dormancy and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually current phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar, since it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it [...]. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again [...] memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority (NORA 1989, p 8).

Nora's reflections regarding history and memory have been echoed, in various ways, by other authors such as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (2012), Kristoft Pomian (2002), Tony Judt (2006), Arno Mayer (1988) and David Rieff (2011). The assumption behind their ideas can be summarized in the following set of binary definitions concerning history and memory, which will be deeply questioned along the following sections. According to these authors, (1) collective memory is bound to the social and political purposes of strengthening cohesion within the community, whereas historians just produce historical knowledge; (2) while all the tales and testimonies that came from collective memory are attached to historical events, historians always work at a safe distance from the past; (3) collective memories, which depend on communicative relationships, are always plural, heterogeneous and polyhedral, whereas historical narratives tend to converge as far as their claim to be universally recognized; and (4) while depictions of the past that came from collective memory always moralize and judge historical agents, historians just try to understand and explain. Without denying these distinctions between history and memory, I will present an analysis of certain trends within contemporary history in which discontinuities and borders between history and memory tend to get blurred. In order to make my underlying argument clearer, each chapter of this paper focuses on re-thinking one of the distinctions between history and memory that have been presented earlier. In this respect, the following analysis of contemporary history supports a non-binary approach to the relationships between history and memory; this is in line with some arguments presented by LaCapra and Traverso, and with some of Walter Benjamin's theoretical insights from "On the Concept of History". Despite the fact that historiographical strains discussed in this paper go beyond the scope of Walter Benjamin's theory of history, I will point out instances in which the ideas presented here reflect Benjamin's insights.

The principal feature of the history of the previous century is its "contemporaneity", defined by a short temporal distance from

the time in which historians wrote about it. This contemporaneity allows the twentieth century history to be assimilated into the so-called "history of the present." This term has been defined by María Inés Mudrovic (2005), as the processes of historicisation of the impact of events which remain in the memory of a generation that is still alive when those events become part of a historical narration. The existence of living witnesses of those events is, therefore, the defining characteristic of the "history of the present." This definition can never be precise since it depends on the biological continuity of a generation, which can fluctuate, as can the bonds between survivors and the deceased. Nonetheless, it allows us to define a temporal frame of approximately eighty to ninety years. Although the "history of the present" is as old as classic historiography, the interest on it has grown in the second half of the twentieth century. This interest was the result of events whose impact persisted for decades after their occurrence which in turn led to the social need for their explanation and contextualization. This is how Alicia Altred puts it in "The History of the Present or the Squaring of the Circle":

From the brutality of the Second World War arose a new field that [...] made a difference from which, until now, it will be considered as contemporary "classic" history. The aftermath of the events from the interwar period in Europe and from the Second World War had shocked Western societies. The survivors and the public powers of the European states projected their gaze towards historians as they needed those facts to be explained (ALTED,2006, p. 33).

## Retrospectivity and ideology within the history of the present

According to its aforementioned definition, the "history of the present" spans a historical period that includes the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Gulag and the nuclear arms race. This is a historical framework that

makes the mid-century crisis the axis around which the history of Europe acquires its meaning.

However, since the past is not fixed, this journey back in time is not the only relevant thing. On the contrary, it is also necessary to analyze as well how the present, from which history is being read, has evolved. After all, it was less than three decades ago that a series of events that determined our understanding of the history of the present unfolded. According to the historian Eric Hobsbawm, the fall of the Berlin Wall led to a new *historic threshold* that reconfigured the conditions which allowed historians to describe the events of the previous century (HOBSEBAWN 1995). This ascertainment derived from the awareness that something essential occurred during that time. The collapse of the Soviet Union constituted an event that required a modification of narratives of the twentieth century history. There is a large difference between the writing of history in 1985 and in 1995, much larger than the difference between the description of the same set of events in 1985 and in 1975. Hobsbawm's reflections on the problem of the history of the present perfectly summarize the ideas I am delving further into:

Very few people would deny that an epoch in world history ended with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union, whatever we read into the events of 1989–91. A page in history has been turned. The mere fact that this is so is enough to change the vision of every living historian of the twentieth century, for it turns a tract of time into a historic period with its own structure and coherence or incoherence—'the short twentieth century' [...] Whoever we are, we cannot fail to see the century as a whole differently from the way we would have done before 1989–91 inserted its punctuation mark into its flow. It would be absurd to say that we can now stand back from it, as we can from the nineteenth century, but at least we can see it as a whole. In a word, the history of the twentieth century written in the 1990s must be qualitatively different from any such history written before (HOBSEBAWN 2011, p. 237).



A historian interpreting the events of the twentieth century in 1988 would have adopted a viewpoint tending toward binarism. First, he or she would have been tackling a convulsive era of world wars, ideological conflicts, and great social unrest. Second, since the end of the 1940s, there was a period of growth in the welfare state and a subsequent consolidation of the capitalist system that achieved global reach. Thus, the underlying narrative structure of the historian approach would have had a clear binary form: a period of crisis followed by one of recovery and prosperity. However, if the same historian assembled a retrospective vision of the twentieth century, after the historical threshold period 1989–1991, the framework would have changed radically. Not only did the Soviet regime collapse during this period but the capitalist economies of the Western world also began to be beset by serious problems that brought into question their stability and status as alternatives to their Eastern counterparts. In this sense, historians could no longer adopt a binary perspective but rather a ternary one, with the framework consisting of one period of prosperity amid two periods of crisis. Hence, a historian writing history in 1992 would not only have had to add information to an already large number of events from the previous years. She or he would have also had to change the narrative orientation, criteria of relevance and historical approach. In his critique of historicism Walter Benjamin discussed the retrospective gaze that underlies historical narration. "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having casual significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it" (BENJAMIN 2006, p. 397). The posthumous condition of the historical past highlighted by Benjamin points at the relevance of retrospectivity within a historian's gaze.

These changes in teleological orientation are also linked to the political and ideological commitments that frame the work of the historian. In this way, the recognition of its influence allows us to anchor the historical accounts to the conditions



of the historian's time. A rather significant example is the emergence of a liberal historiography after the *historic threshold* that was the year 1991. The end of Soviet communism was accompanied by changes in western historiography itself. As a result, many historical accounts that appeared after this period established causal connections that retrospectively attributed normative charge to the unfolding events. These new historical interpretations were not limited to tracing the features and consequences of communism in the history of the West. Rather, they also attributed a condition of necessity to its failure; its resolution was indispensable to the global triumph of liberal democracy; a new Hegelian end of history (FUKUYAMA 2012). The triumph of market economy and liberal democracy had implications for the history of the present, through the establishment of historical dichotomies that blurred the outlines of the past. In addition to historians like Richard Pipes (1991) or Martin Malia (1973), François Furet and his book *The Passing of an Illusion* (FURET 2000) is the principal representative of this trend (TRAVERSO 2013, p. 83).

Sidestepping the contradictions and specificities of Soviet communism, Furet defines it merely as an ideology, or an "ideocracy." According to Furet, communism was just a political mythology that offered a social panacea capable of mobilizing various political regimes in order to commit many of the largest-scale crimes in history. The establishment of a genealogical connection between the French revolution and the Russian revolution justifies, from Furet's perspective, the link between revolution and terror as an *a priori* fact. In this framework the differences between communism and fascism tend to get blurred.

The only serious way to approach the study of the two original ideologies and political movements that appeared at the beginning of our century, Marxist-Leninist communism and fascism in its Italian and German forms, is to take them *together* as the two faces of an acute crisis of liberal democracy that arose with the First World War. This critique of the modern democratic idea in the name of a former "organic" society on the Right and in the

name of a “future” socialist society on the Left is a longstanding reality of European political culture (FURET 2004, p. 32).

In this framework, communism loses its status as an economic, social and philosophical theory and becomes reduced to a totalitarian ideology. In the same vein, the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of communism is also ignored and revolution is conflated with terror. All communist projects are represented as the antechamber to authoritarianism and genocide. This reading of events leads us to interpret the evolution of the twentieth century events as a polarization of political forces into two blocks. On the one hand, there were those who prioritized political mythology, such as the mythology of the Volk or that of a classless society. On the other hand, there were those who prioritize individual rights over collective ideologies.

What I would like to highlight is that this specific interpretation of history could have only emerged out of the historical context subsequent to the Western victory in the Cold War and the decline of communism. Or rather, out of the context in which, after the experience of Stalinism and the imperial ambitions of USSR, the perversion of ideals which underlie communist revolution could be unambiguously certificated (PRIESTLAND 2009, p. 273-314). Only from a point in time in which no political change seems to have the potential to fully affect the political and social order of the market economy and liberal democracy, can all past revolutions be interpreted as the causal antecedent of a collective crime perpetrated in the name of a political ideology. It is only from the end of this “short twentieth century” that it is possible to project a gaze that reduces the historical experience of the Soviet revolution—with all of its ambiguities, discontinuities, heterogeneities—to an expanse of ruins that equates it with fascism.

Hence, the articulation of the history of the present is not only an indication of the importance of a historical context in which the liberal democracy appears to have triumphed

globally. It also requires an ideological approach to the social and political consequences of the aforementioned historical process. It is not surprising that historians like François Furet, Martin Malia or Richard Pipes have been labeled as “conservative.” Indeed, their dichotomous readings have been questioned by historians (HAYNES; WOLFREYS 2007) such as Eric Hobsbawm, Enzo Traverso (2017), Daniel Bensaïd (2007) or Domenico Losurdo (, 2011), who have ideological links to the twentieth century failed and distorted revolutionary projects. All of these historians have played a leading role in one of the most interesting debates related to the interpretation of the history of the present. In constant opposition to liberal historiography, they have attempted to rescue the revolutionary and anti-fascist elements of the left-wing political movements from the dichotomy between “barbarism or liberal democracy” that has constrained previous historical analyses. The result led to a hermeneutic conflict that is related not only to the past but also to the present. The elaboration of other hypotheses regarding the origin of violence and other evaluations of the facts were translated into an interpretation of “revolution” as a political practice with enormous emancipatory potential that does not necessarily lead to totalitarianism. On the contrary, such an interpretation can bring into question the hegemonic economic system as well as shed a light on its darkest sides (LOSURDO 2011). As can be concluded by analyzing this historical debate, it is not possible to consider historiography detached from the political and ideological struggles that surround the social context in which historians live and work. For this reason, the aforementioned theories of historiography and collective memory, according to which the former produce historical knowledge whereas the latter just strengthens the bonds between political communities cannot be maintained. The role of the historian in the ethical and political controversies blurs the distinction between historiography and collective memory.

The purpose behind tracing the contours of this debate is not to offer a solution that would end the *battle for history*. Rather, it is to describe an example of the dynamics between

the past and the present in the historiography of the end of the century. In order to offer further arguments for the interdependence of past and present, I will present a series of characteristics of the history of the past century that could have profoundly affected the context in which the historian works. Furthermore, by highlighting the features of the history of the present, the remaining distinctions defended by those that argue for a complete separation of history and memory will also be refuted.

## Monads and Modernist Events

The twentieth century has been characterized by both spontaneous and systematic indiscriminate violence: two world wars, civil wars, social revolts, deportations and genocides. These events are those in which the implementation of extermination techniques led to a veritable industry of death. The heuristic value of these phenomena stems from the fact that they were characterized by a rupture in the collective memories of the groups that inhabited this historic space, as well as for transgressing the traditional limits of representation. These are precisely the phenomena that produce what Benjamin referred to as the “destruction of experience.”

Experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, has undergone changes overnight which were never thought to be possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power (BENJAMIN 2002, p. 143).

These events were so terrible that they became *unsayable* for their witnesses and victims and it is not possible to plot them into a narrative that would give them sense. Benjamin conceptualized the repercussions of these types of events with the notion of the “dialectical monad.”

In this context the recovery of benjaminian categories remains paradoxical. After all, his death left him at the threshold of a period that constitutes our history of the present. Nevertheless, it is for his lucidity that Benjamin is considered a “fire alarm” (BENJAMIN 1979), a term referring to his ability to anticipate the degree of barbarism that would befall the world in the decades that followed. Or, from his reading of his own present as charged with that possibility. For this reason, the categories that were developed in “On the Concept of History” are applicable to the reading of events that followed Benjamin’s death. In this theoretical context, Benjamin’s notion of monad requires a special mention. “When thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad” (BENJAMIN 2006, p. 396). From his point of view, “the monad” is an event that sparks some glimpses that reflect, in the cognitive and ethical-political sense, a historical totality. Since these events constituted the outcome of tendencies inherent to his social context, they are, therefore, microcosms of that historical context. Furthermore, monads content a potentiality for being mobilized in order to criticize a historical situation which had been built above the shoulders of the victims. “In this structure he recognizes the sign of a [...] revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (BENJAMIN 2006).

The notion of the monadic event thus encompasses a great number of singular phenomena of the previous century: the extermination of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the century, various genocides across Eastern Europe or the apartheid in South Africa. However, the principal event, the main subject in the bibliography on the topic, is the Holocaust. The genocide of Jews at the hands of

Nazis has come to be considered as the greatest crime in the history of humanity, the reference point against which historians interpret and compare all other uses of violence.

It is precisely its status as the “epicenter,” as well as the blurring of history and ethics, that allows it to be defined as a “modernist event.” This notion has been provided by the narrativistic approach to historiography, which grasps the distance between these types of events and traditional narratives. Thus, it is where its challenge to the “history of the present” and to the traditional position of the aloof historian is made clear. Hayden White defines the modernist event in these terms:

The twentieth century is marked by the occurrence of certain “holocaustal” events (two world wars, the Great Depression, nuclear weapons and communications technology, the population explosion, the mutilation of the zoosphere, famine [...]) that bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry nor even to representation by the techniques of writing typically favored by historians from Herodotus to Arthur Schlesinger. Nor does any of several varieties of quantitative analysis, of the kind practiced in the social sciences, capture the novelty of such events. Moreover, these kinds of events do not lend themselves to explaining in terms of the categories underwritten by traditional humanistic historiography, which features the activity of human agents conceived to be in some way fully conscious and morally responsible for their actions and capable of discriminating clearly between the causes of historical events and their effects over the long as well as the short run in relatively commonsensical ways” (WHITE 2012, p. 70).

In what sense do these events remain unexplained or unassimilated by the mechanisms of traditional historiography? When speaking of traditional historical discourse, I should allude to the possibility of a double interpretation in regard to what it is to explain or to represent the facts. This binomial

is an inheritance of the two epistemological traditions around which the debate regarding the state of historical knowledge has revolved: the positivist model that adheres to a causal explanation (HEMPEL 1942) and the historicist model that appeals to the historian's empathetic understanding (COLLINGWOOD 1994) of the intentional agents involved in the events. It is from both parameters from which difficulties are presented when it comes to attributing a unitary meaning to this series of events.

The reason why causal explanations do not allow us to assimilate this series of phenomena is that not all the phenomena are explicable via laws of causation. Historians cannot explain why the Holocaust occurred nor can they assimilate it into a narrative just by referring to social, economic, and political factors, boiled down for our comprehension with the aid of universal laws. There is meaning beyond the Holocaust that the nomological model cannot encompass, but that is as essential for accounting for the phenomenon itself as it is for analyzing the ways in which its aftermath had been faced by its witnesses (MATE 2004).

As for the difficulties with the mode of empathetic understanding, Christopher R. Browning's theory should be used to account for the reluctance to employ the aforementioned mode in the post-Holocaust context. Let us examine a key quotation from one of his essays:

Can the history of such men be written? Not just the social, organizational, and institutional history of the units they belonged to. And not just the ideological and decision-making history of the policies which they carried out. Can one recapture the experiential history of these killers—the choices they faced, the emotions they felt, the coping mechanism they employed, the changes they underwent? (BROWNING 1992, p. 27).

Browning's answer is unambiguous. The nature of these events is such that it is intrinsically difficult to reconstruct



the perspective of the executioners. These events cannot be explained from a perspective that is completely transparent to the reader, given that the activity of various historical agents tends to remain opaque in the face of the historian's empathic efforts.

That being said, the affirmation of the difficulties in representing the Holocaust emphasizes the impossibility of its assimilation into a narrative within a historical context conditioned by the consequences of its traumatic effects. It is precisely the influence of those traumatic effects within the writing of history that disqualified the aforementioned assumptions according to which the historian's gaze entails a wide distance from the object of research. After all, the notion of an "absolute evil," retrospectively linked to these historical events, is incompatible with the application of a narrative. The construction of the traditional account of the Holocaust would imply, first of all, a normalization of the events by adapting them to a traditional scheme of comprehension. Furthermore, it would imply a "humanization" of the executioners by establishing hypotheses that would allow them to become characters to empathize with despite the fact that the social and cultural context presents an imaginative resistance to this process. The effectiveness of this imaginative resistance in post-traumatic contexts is a reflection of the already cited interference of ethical-political factors in the process of the writing of history. In the words of James E. Young, "I find that it may be the very idea of "deep memory" and its incompatibility with narrative that constitutes one of the central challenges to Holocaust historiography" (YOUNG 1997, p. 49). It is precisely this incompatibility which makes the historical narratives of the second half of the twentieth century, not only more complex, but also more plural and heterogeneous.

## The Fragmentation of Great Narratives and the Era of the Witness

Both Hayden White and Hans Kellner (1989) have suggested that the Holocaust, as a historical phenomenon, has been a necessary condition for the development of postmodern historiography. However, the connection between the Holocaust as a historical experience and the fragmentation of “great narratives” requires further support, which will be provided in this chapter. The Holocaust has been interpreted both as an effect and a confirmation of the “crisis of grand narratives”; a concept that has become the leitmotif of contemporary historical interpretation in Western culture. The “crisis of grand narratives” with its legitimizing potential constitutes an authentic *topos* of our time. For this reason, its influence on the representation of the past profoundly affects the idiosyncrasies of the “history of the present.” Having become the most obvious symptom of the supposed “end of modernity,” the dissolution of the great narratives runs parallel with the fragmentation of knowledge. As Lyotard argues in his classic *The Postmodern Condition*, (LYOTARD 2001), the absence of an epistemological center or monolithic block to anchor the roots of different branches of knowledge and criteria method has defined our time. Therefore, it is necessary to address the causes, historical and metahistorical, of this phenomenon and how they have affected the areas of human wisdom dedicated to historical knowledge. In this sense, the great narratives, as hegemonic forms of representing the past, are defined based on three characteristics whose lack of effectiveness in our present conditions, among other fields, in the work of historiography.

The features that define “great narratives” are their universality, the potential to provide a totalizing explanation for the past and a teleology through which it can articulate their accounts (KHOURT 2016). All of these characteristics are interdependent. Universality allows for the subsumption of the histories of particular peoples into an account that encompasses all of the humanity. Its totalizing impact explains

and justifies the suffering in history. Finally, teleology offers a final point in history in which, in a hypothetical future, all of its underlying tendencies will be fulfilled. The grand narratives are always configured as a structure that prefigures the meaning of events. It is precisely this teleological structure that permits the organization of events along three axes: "beginning," "development" and "end." The ending is the focal point that lends meaning to all historical events. They present themselves as the "eve of the ending," which constitutes its prospective justification, as necessary elements for the achievement of that *telos*. Besides, it is precisely this *end of history* that serves as an axis to introduce the historical facts into the narrative. Totalizing narrative thus determines which events have historic value.

The teleological connection between the development and the conclusion, in the historic narrative, has its parallel in the writing of history as the link between the past and the present. The retrospective gaze on the past from the present attributes as explanation as well as legitimation. The teleological unintelligibility of narrative associations allows the step from "this is how it happened" to "this is how it should have happened."

Furthermore, this practical potential of the narrative has one requirement: the ignorance of the redistribution of figurative meanings that implies for itself the ignorance of the establishment of hierarchies. Thus, it requires the "objectivist illusion" to make the narrative structure transparent, or it requires, as Hayden White argues, the "belief according to which the plot facts speak for themselves" (WHITE 1985, p. 13).

However, this illusion lost its efficacy as a result of the crisis of the notion of progress as a model of interpretation and justification of the unfolding of events. The historical framework that accompanied and legitimized ideological progress was sustained by the horizon of a utopian future, the legitimizing source of historical actions that were necessary to achieve that

utopian goal. These utopic ends have parallels in the figure of the “conclusion” in the narrative text. Thus, the historical present that has still to achieve utopia would be interpreted as the eve of the conclusion and should be subordinated to its realization. In this sense, in ethical-political terms, the production of victims in the present would be legitimate if the future could only be built upon their cadavers. According to White (1987), there is a firm connection between law, society, and narrative. The end of history provides a sense and meaning to these political practices. However, it was precisely the Holocaust and its reception in European culture and philosophy, that disqualified the continuance of that framework. The narrative that accompanied modern progress could not assimilate the systematic crime of more than five million people nor could it give it sense or meaning from an *a posteriori* harmonizing ending.

The rupture of the narrative framework that dominated the first half the twentieth century is not the proof of its inability to account for new historical experience. Furthermore, it also accounts for the artificial character of this model of historical comprehension. However, if the progressive framework of history stops working or loses its legitimacy, it opens the possibility for the articulation of different forms of representation.

In this sense, Frank Ankersmit’s ideas in “Historiography and Postmodernism” are exemplary. In this essay he accounts for the historiographic overproduction of recent years, which seems to challenge the presence of a prevailing canon given that it reveals the possibility of articulating a plurality of possible perspectives of one set of events. Ankersmit’s statement is symptomatic of the plurality of narratives from which the present can read the past. He writes:

Integral historiography leads to enumeration rather than to integration. [...] That is why, if we were to try to find a new jacket for historiography, as considered necessary above, the most important problem would be to situate historiography within present-day civilization as a whole. This problem is of a

cultural-historical, oral and interpretative nature and could be compared with the sort of problem which we sometimes pose ourselves when considering the place and the meaning of a particular event within the totality of our life-history. In general, it is strange that historians and philosophers of history have paid so little attention over the last forty years to parallels between the development of present-day historiography on the one hand and that of literature, literary criticism, printing—in short, civilization—on the other (ANKERSMIT 1989, p. 139).

The dual criticism—historical and metahistorical—of the notion of narrative as well as the possibility of great narratives carries with it the loss of its condition as a dispenser of historic value to the elements which make up its structure. In other words, the classic documents of the historian no longer have historical value to the extent that they are transmitted and represented on the basis of the format of the narrative. Rather, they now acquire value for themselves. Proof of this is the biographic turn evidenced in the historiography of the previous century, starting in the 1970s. Alejandro Baer describes the connection between these two processes:

The irruption—or return—of biographical perspective, both in social and historical research and in different sociocultural fields (literature, journalism, etc) cannot be detached from the “crisis of representation.” Generally speaking, the autobiographical turn in its different manifestations reflects the rupture of (great) narratives which established historical and cultural legitimacy, and seeks new discursive ways, like personal narratives, that engage with new shattered sociabilities, the media culture and the traumatic events of the twentieth century (BAER 2005, p. 33).

As a consequence of the fragmentation of great narratives, the production of historical knowledge became more plural and biased, and started a new relationship with one of its sources: testimony. As stated in the title of Annete Wiviorka’s famous book, the history of the past century was the “era of the witness.” This work emerges from a historiographic

reality: the testimonial explosion of the previous century was a consequence of the historical interest in the phenomenon of the Holocaust which started manifesting itself after the famous Eichmann trial in 1961.

The “advent” of the witness figure in the decades after the Holocaust created an unusual situation for the historian. This was due not only to the issue of the number of testimonies (between 1944 and 1948 a total of 7,300 testimonies were collected) but also to the fact that witnesses revealed visions of their biographic experiences that were so personal, partial, and ethically charged that it was impossible to assimilate the plurality of the extant perspectives into a singular narrative without generalizing and abstracting a great deal of the semantic content that comprises testimonial representation. As is outlined by Wieviroka:

The witness is the bearer of an experience that, albeit unique, does not stand on its own, but only in the testimonial situation in which it takes place. It must be recognized that, in a way, *Shoah* revolutionized testimony. It transformed it into something beyond the history of historians, into a work of art (WIEVIORKA 2006, p. 83).

The portrayal of events provided by the witness is so intimate that it resists being totalized into an objective historic representation. Rather, it seems to contain a potential that transcends the limits of traditional historiography. It is not surprising that some testimonies have found a better space of expression in literature rather than history. Whereas witnesses to these events have found a space of expression in historiography, literature has proven optimal for them to invoke a moral obligation. As a result of the Eichmann trial, the witness figure became the center of media attention with the aim of giving the world a moral lesson. This performative function, that radical singularity of the witness, cannot be integrated into the reconciliatory and unidirectional framework of narrative. As Shoshana Felman (FELMAN; LAUB 1992) remarked in her study

on post-holocaust testimony, if the Holocaust demonstrated anything, it was that each of its singular perspectives was irreducibly unique. Evidently, the “testimonial explosion” not only affects the teleological plane, “the meaning of the end” of the historical tale, but it also encroaches on the idiosyncrasy of historical agents.

Traditionally, historiography has focused on a predetermined group of historical agents, considered to be the most powerful of their time. Ancient history revolved around figures like Caesar or Cleopatra, whereas the history of the twentieth century concentrated on figures like Hitler and Stalin. Since history is individualized through references to concrete personalities, they become attributes with enormous causal power in history. Löwy’s (2005) work, following Benjamin’s theses, suggests this prioritization of historical agents results from the ancillary character of historiography with respect to the social and political order from which, retrospectively, the events are interpreted. The focus of the narrative of the past onto these figures has been translated into the interpretation of world history as political history. As a consequence, great historical events were narrated resulting from the interrelations between the intentional actions of concrete historical agents. This narrative received considerable amount of criticism throughout the twentieth century, primarily from the *Annales* school. Some historians such as Fernand Braudel (1992) and Marc Bloch (1984) denounced this model of historical presentation for transfiguring the image of the past by pivoting around individual decisions and actions. According to them, traditional narratives had made it impossible to transform history into scientific discourse. Siegfried Kracauer expresses this through a metaphor. “Thus a magnet gathers scattered iron particles from a mass of material. For this reason group behavior is more rigid, more calculable than individual behavior” (KRACAUER 1995, p. 23). As a consequence, the *Annales* school assumed that turning history into a science required the use of quantitative techniques appropriate for social sciences. This modification altered the status of historical agents: they went from being



great figures with names and titles to a grouping of impersonal far-reaching forces with stable long-term economic, social and demographic structures. Historical agents become mere products of these combinations of anonymous forces.

That being said, in opposition to both older forms of historic narrative as well as to the serial anti-narrative of the *Annales* school, a new type of historical writing has developed since the 1960s in parallel with the development of oral history. This type of writing questions the dichotomy derived from the contrast between the two previous models: a narrative historiography centered around history's great figures and an anti-narrative historiography lacking references to historical personages. I am referring to the rise of microhistory: a model of historical writing that reflects the plurality of narratives and perspectives by encompassing a variety of historical experiences. This model rises from the ruins of the great narratives, stoked by the ones below the "testimonial explosion." It encompasses heterogeneous perspectives, in no way reducible to the optics of an account told on a larger scale.

The term "microhistory" has its origin in George R. Steward's book *Picketts' Charge* (STEWART 1963). It refers to a method of investigation and historical writing that subverts traditional historiography without abandoning the narrative. The perspective of the historians espousing microhistory is that the history focused on great subjects is profoundly biased, since it studies the behavior of collectives as derived from the actions and decisions of a group of individuals in the social spheres of power. In this sense, microhistory presents itself as a restitution of minor history, popular figures, and the classes that lack direct power in the decision-making but that have a greater demographic weight. Microhistory does not identify itself with the *Annales'* impersonal macro-historical project. Its modes of investigation are not at all quantitative and it does not use statistics to study the customs of historical collectives. Rather than transforming historical subjects into mere functions which led through anonymous tendencies,

microhistory constructs accounts based on the biographies of concrete subjects with names and surnames. It is for this reason that Braudel, a French historian, identified microhistory with traditional historiography and considered it to be a model of investigation and writing in which history is the product of the intentional action of concrete subjects.

But Braudel's interpretation cannot be adapted to the investigative model of microhistory. First, the value of the examined historical subjects does not derive from their potential to rule the action of collectives but rather from their status as a symptom with respect to those collectives. After all, microhistorical accounts do not describe the lives of characters who achieved an exceptional status within a social body but rather the lives of members of the popular classes. As Carlo Ginzburg writes in his essay: "Microhistory: Two or three things I know about it," (GINZBURG 1994) microhistory is about transforming into a book what would have been a footnote in a conventional monograph. It is about describing the experiences of regular individuals in order to reconstruct their social and moral world. After all, members of the popular classes are not only documents for historians but are also exemplary of the context they inhabit.

In this sense, microhistory departs from the premise according to which, given the multitude of possible points of view from the past, the best way of accessing this knowledge is through phenomena which constitute indices or symptoms of more general historical situations. As Giovanni Levi suggests (LEVI 1993), it is about avoiding the sacrifice of knowledge on particular events for the sake of generalizations and historical abstractions. After all, if historians want to give meaning to individual experiences—for example, the life of the miller at the center of Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (GINZBURG 1976)—they should reconstruct the culture in which all those who intervene in his or her way of life participate. Thus, microhistory is about transforming the biographies of conventional individuals into a micro-cosmos that reflects the popular

culture of their era, with all its unique characteristic irreducible to the great narratives. Microhistory respects the plurality of different experiences of all social strata and historical groups and conforms to a representation of the past fully conscious of its own relativity and partiality.

To sum up, meta-accounts have given way to biographies of the members of popular classes. Microhistories are constructed from new identities without the totalizing impulse that has shaped the greater part of the traditional narrative. The development of this historiographical current reveals the impossibility of being able to continue applying the premise of the “great narratives”: that all particular historical data had value only when forming part of a larger-scale narrative. Furthermore, this development illustrates how historiography endorsed the same plurality and heterogeneity that had been ascribed to the depiction of the past that came from collective memory.

## Conclusion. Writing a Present-Past History: Between the Historian and the Judge

Contemporaneity with the past that the historian attempts to describe, the radical singularity of testimony and the traumatic character of many events that one needs to narrate all lead to the following conclusion: rather than being an exception, the effect of ethical-political factors on history operates as a systematic rule. By developing Walter Benjamin’s ideas, I suggest, as indicated earlier, that the key feature of the history of the present is the permeability of the border between writing history and these ethical-political factors of the collective memory. In order to conclude the analysis of the intertwinement between past and present I will focus on this permeability, and analyze the relationship between the historian and the judge. In order to elucidate the dynamics between these two roles, the analysis will emphasize the relationship between the historian of extreme events and the judge of “crimes against humanity.” Thus, the figure of the judge will serve as a lens through which

one can interpret the influence of ethical-political factors on historiography. This analysis will refute the last thesis quoted at the beginning of this paper, according to which the tales that come from collective memory have always dramatized and moralized historical agents whereas historical works provide a value-free account of events. In his famous paragraph German historian Leopold von Ranke asserted: "History has often been assigned the task of judging the past so as to teach one's contemporaries for the benefits of future years. The present work [...] wants only to show how things actually were" (RANKE 1885, p. 8). By taking Benjamin's influence on the present these aspirations are to be considered untenable. After all, as Kittsteiner clarified, Ranke's thesis "was directed against certain politization of historical research. Benjamin seems to want to restore historiography to this political function, albeit with quite a different theoretical armature" (KITTSTEINER 1986, p. 180). To introduce these topics on contemporary historiography, I will begin with the following idea suggested by Carlo Ginzburg in "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historians":

*Evidence*, like *clue* or *proof*, is a crucial word for the historian and the judge. This affinity implies convergences, and divergences as well, which have been recognized for a long time. Some recent developments in the historian's work shed new light on this old topic (GINZBURG 1991, p. 14).

Ginzburg argues that an intimate relationship between the judge and the historian has existed since antiquity and it has become more intimate in our history of the present. There are also methodological similarities between their work. Each one bases his or her work on facts offered by the past, in its traces to reconstruct causal chains. It is true that originally the labor of historians and that of lawyers have corresponded to different systems of rules. Nevertheless, some historical periods allow us to appreciate their interdependent relationship. After the advent of modernity and the processes of secularization, the axiological order to which one could appeal could no longer be found in the other world but rather became inherent to history.

As Koselleck summarizes: “The morals of history became temporalized in history as a process [...] The renouncement of compensatory justice in the beyond led to the temporization of this justice. History *hic et nunc* attains an ineluctable character.” (KOSELLECK 2001, p. 63). This statement burdens the historian with the task of elaborating an account of the past from which individual guilt and responsibility can be derived. After all, determining that the action of X led to Y, transforms X into the intentional agent of a phenomenon that can be given meaningful semantic content for the collective at whom the account is aimed. And so, it is possible to appreciate how the work of the historian and that of the judge converge. Historians do not only explain or represent but they also report the events through a narrative that gathers information and offers evidence with respect to the human agents that triggered such events. They reconstruct both the course of the events that have actually happened and the course of other hypothetical events that could have resulted from different decisions and different intents. As Charles Maier puts it: “The historian, like the judge, has the duty of constructing a jurisprudential narrative [that] relies primarily on contextualization to establish what constituted culpable or nonculpable or even praiseworthy action” (MAIER 2003, p. 300).

Consequently, the peculiarities of our history of the present have caused the relationship between the historian and the judge to become rather “agonistic” for being tied to historical events that require a historical gaze and retrospective judgment. After all, it is naive to presuppose a value-free neutrality, when the historian confronts a phenomenon legally characterized as “crime against humanity.”

The relationship between the judge and the historian is bidirectional and reciprocal. On the one hand, describing a historical event like the Holocaust by revealing its causes, agents and factors, implies categorizing it as a “crime against humanity” on an unprecedented scale. On the other hand, these moral and legal revindications supported by the information

offered by the historian continue to influence the design of his or her accounts. This mutual influence does not mean that the facts are infinitely malleable nor that the historical register allows for any kind of interpretation or manipulation. It simply shows the influence of one sphere on the other and allows one to understand the familial similarities between the historian and the judge, a constant of the history of the present.

In order to prove the connection between the two spheres, it is crucial to address the controversies stemming from the sometimes quite complex relationship between the ethical backdrop of the Holocaust and historiography's pretense of impartiality.

In a chapter called "Truth and Circumstance" (WHITE 2014, p. 25-40) in *The Practical Past*, Hayden White poses the following question: To what do we owe the fact that when a historian articulates the question "Is it true that X?"—where X is any historical phenomenon—it does not pose any problems, but is a legitimate question in relation to the idea of truth and the accuracy of historiography, whereas formulating this same question substituting the Holocaust for X arouses such considerable rebuff? In other words, one may ask why there are so many arguments when historians put the veracity of the Holocaust into question. In this sense, there is no common measure between the historian's ideals of truth and of critique and the witness's authority. An evidence of this incommensurability has been revealed in the indictment of historians who have negated the existence of the Holocaust. Similarly, conservative historians like Nolte, Stürmer, or Hillgruber come under criticism for relativizing the responsibility of the German society for the occurrence of Nazi crimes. But the question cannot be reduced to this problem. The question of whether it is true that the Holocaust occurred does not allude to the relationship between this query and reality. On the contrary, what arises is the question of what motives, both ethical and political, can a historian have for questioning the facticity of the Holocaust. In other words, it presupposes from

the beginning the interference of these motives in the process of writing history.

The fact that it is from such a social context that the question “is it true that the Holocaust occurred?” is valued as morally pernicious, indicates that in this conversational context, the question does not have a merely declarative function. It cannot be answered with simple yes/no, true/false. On the contrary, it involves a plurality of elements that makes the speech act derived from historiography itself more complex and complicated. It is precisely in relation to this problem that Hayden White appeals to Austin’s theory on performative speech acts (AUSTIN 1975) to elaborate an analysis that will support the following thesis: Whoever attempts to write a history of the present and refers to traumatic events, that not only have a historical value but also an ethical and political one, performs perlocutionary acts that not only describe the world but transform it. The historiographical depiction of these events cannot be considered detached from the ethic-political struggle regarding whether their memories should be recovered or forsaken. On the contrary, those struggles projected into historiographical academy bring a political and ethical concern that emerge from the possibility of these events being forgotten or denied. These continuous trends within the historical discourse cast a light on the understanding of history which has some resemblances with Walter Benjamin’s ideas quoted at the beginning of the paper. After all, the conclusion that has been drawn could be framed within an understanding about the writing of history which denies any detachment between past and present and which echoes Walter Benjamin’s theses according to which: “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (BENJAMIN 2006, p. 391).



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