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# HISTORICAL CONTEMPORANEOUSNESS

## RELATIVISM IN THE "CONTEMPORARY AGE"

Criticism of the traditional periodization of history (antiquity, the Middle Ages, the modern age), generally centered on the medieval period as the crucial point, has not even stooped to consider what is called the "contemporary age." This new and poorly defined phase, proposed by the methodologists to inclose in history the events and times which immediately precede us or in which we live, has not in general been accepted as such a theoretical unity by those who have been occupied with the other pretentious "ages" in order to deny their equal validity.

In the ingenious and controversial scheme outlined here, certainly, the contemporary age represents a concept so artificial, so devoid of unified personality and feeling and of clear differentiation, that it only disturbs the already slight harmony of this controversial and antiquated system.

The addition of contemporaneousness to this tripartite classical arrangement constitutes, in effect, the destruction of its essential completeness, of its total self-containment. According to the plan outlined in the Renaissance, which is self-defined as the inaugural moment of the perfect period

Translated by Alice Zimring.



https://doi.org/10.1177/039219215700502002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of history,[1] there is no place in the elemental cycle for a distinctly subsequent occurrence: the modern age, undetermined in duration but supposedly invariable in essence, was to complete history. Not even the possibility of enlightenment from other values which might come to alter this circular motion was conceived by the ancients who announced the new age.

On their part, rectilinear periodizations of history also deny historiological value to the contemporary age in its present definition by imposing on its presumed periods fixed theoretical conditions which cannot reconcile the actual and conventional contemporary ages.

Spangenberg, for example, requires of all methodological divisions of history that each of their parts be (*a*) an entity contained in itself and (*b*) part of an evolution; that is, that it constitute, on the one hand, a unity clearly differentiated from that which precedes it and that which follows it; and that it possess, on the other hand, a visible organic relation to the whole of which it is a part.[2]

In this sense, what is the characteristic—or characteristics—that typifies our "contemporary age," forming the hub of its aspects and values? At which point in the evolution of the so-called modern age ought we to place the initial break into contemporaneity?

In regard to the first question, we find ourselves confronted with the complete absence of a clear diagnosis and with the presence, on the other hand, of several provisional analyses of living processes, in whose entanglements we determine the true basic characteristic of our times almost by accident.

The second question presents the difficulty inherent in any attempt at logically—that is to say, abstractly, theoretically—parceling the past: understood as a continuous occurrence, history is sensitive to that which repeats or advances in its body, whatever its axis, giving it the character of a reference point; everything depends on its congruence with the methodological system—artificial, instrumental—that we adopt for the intellectualization of that event.

Analyzing what in one or another sense has been done to characterize and give outline to the contemporary age, we find that in some cases the factual representative core of the period has been looked for in actions; the

1. "Modern [present] history which is ended was conceived in the epoch of the Renaissance. We are present now at the end of the Renaissance" (Berdiaeff, *Una nueva edad media* [Barcelona: Editorial Apolo, 1932], p. 11).

2. H. Spangenberg, "Los Periodos de la historia universal," *Revista de Occidente*, III, No. 29 (November, 1925), 196.

outward events of the French Revolution, clearly discernible and datable, have been set as a point of departure. In others, however, the subtle and variegated field of ideas, less apprehensible and forceful, has been preferred; for example, the diffusion in Europe of liberal English ideas, which infiltrated into France in times of the firm solidarity of absolutism but were not settled on the Continent in general until well into the nineteenth century.

A methodological contradiction is produced by joining indiscriminately either line of development to either initial reference point in the description of any particular development. The appearance of a definite doctrine is not the same as, or coincident in time with, the crystallization into action of its consequences. The popular movements of the French Revolution are not the same as, or contemporary with, the systematization of their unformed doctrinal background in a socialist doctrine. "It is methodologically false to make the division at the culmination of a development. A period begins when a new line of evolution is initiated, not when its highest point is reached."[3]

How, then, can we base our other contemporary age on the French Revolution, acme and zenith of a centuries-old social conflict, an intermediate point, however prominent in the evolution of a thought, which contains neither its beginning nor its end?

Nevertheless, the movement of 1789 signifies also the end and the beginning of many things: the collapse of absolutism and the consecration of constitutionalism; the supplanting of the ancient principle of social stratification by the democratic leavening; the liquidation of the physiocratic economic system by the aura of industrialism and capitalism. But how many other things born or consecrated then and as representative as those mentioned above have not yet been brought to light, so that we may decide whether or not they are contemporary?

The "contemporary age" of textbooks now covers more than a century and a half. It is an excessive volume of time to fit into a concept, however loose, of contemporaneousness. Historically, what has occurred—what has changed—is still greater, nor does the intensity of that change correspond to the magnitude of the time it covers.

Furthermore, if we have to share at least the essential currency of the problems which were just appearing in the epoch of our first "contemporaries" so that we can indeed consider them our contemporaries, how sure can we be that the questions which trouble our times are the same as

3. Spangenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–98.

those which disturbed society at the end of the eighteenth century, and vice versa? How far can we blend the romantic world with the present one? Is it legitimate historically to collate present-day Spain with Spain before she lost her colonies? Is it not possible to distinguish a different Europe, spiritually as well as politically and geographically, before and after 1914–18, a world between wars different from that which appeared after 1945?

The guideposts of this progression are susceptible to major variations. What they show us in any case is the need for a greater precision in setting up a concept of contemporaneity as applied to historical periodization—a concept whose logical outline may be better suited to the reality which it seeks to mark out and represent.

## THE CONFIGURATION OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

> Yesterday has gone, tomorrow has not yet arrived,
> Today goes on without stopping a moment,
> I am a has been and a will be and a bore . . .
>
> QUEVEDO

In our judgment the theoretical difficulty in defining contemporary history lies (*a*) in the completely parallel condition under which it is considered in respect to the other "ages" of the past and (*b*) in the strict and exclusive identification which has been made of historical with past—or, even better, with the past which contains only fixed conditions.

Contemporaneity possesses in fact all the qualities inherent in any other historical time but exhibits also certain other qualities, unshared, which make it unique. As a period, it can and should be a whole differentiated from that which precedes it; but, as soon as it begins to be differentiated from that which follows it, a new contemporary period will have been born, and the period in question will then be able to offer itself to historical consideration as a complete period, finished, perfect—which is to say not contemporary.

The contemporary is characterized by its quality of openness, by its continual and always fleeting façade over the future, an unstable boundary in whose continuous shifting rests the dynamic being of the present.

Present and future are, then, special parts of historically contemporary time.

The future is not, in the first place, pure time without determination or pure category without outline or content. "The future is only," wrote Zubiri, "that which is not yet, but for whose realization all possibilities are

given in the present. What does not yet exist or whose concrete possibilities do not exist is not, properly speaking, historically speaking, the future."[4]

Those possibilities as such, therefore, already possess a certain historical value through which they are susceptible to historical consideration. They include, with respect to the past, those other prospects which have not been realized ("futurables," "ex-futures," Unamuno calls them) but which constitute, as for us those prospects of our time, the "horizon of expectations" —in the phrase of Karl Mannheim—of their contemporaries. They are frustrated tendencies, abandoned or lost channels—potentialities which have not been converted into action but which condition simply by their existence the transformation of those which are realized.

Also, from them, as from the events themselves, arises *sui generis* a permanent transcendency; they possess, as do the latter, a special historical reality which permits aligning them closely to the *de facto* realities in the analysis of any period.

Together with these conditions and with those unforeseen ones which, also, constitute the ingredients of the future, the present appears to us as a nexus of directions. Instantaneous, almost intemporal, "boundary of time," a point on a line, it is in this subtle functioning, pure dynamism, in living, that man accredits himself an active subject of history—and realizes history.

In the workings of his past, in the workings of his future, man alone is given a choice among a fixed number of perspectives. A genius, a creator, is only one who perceives the most hidden or accomplishes the most difficult.

## HISTORICITY AND CONTEMPORANEOUSNESS

Having disentangled the problem of periodization from contemporaneousness, we now face a question of historical metaphysics: that of the historical existence of the present.

The problem rests in the antinomy many suppose exists between historical and present. The historical is conceived as exclusively preterite—even more closed than past—which does not begin to be history until it has ceased to be.[5]

In our judgment, that concept is doubly disqualified: (*a*) the supposed ahistoricity of the present would not be an essential quality but a transitory

4. X. Zubiri, *Naturaleza, historia, dios* (Madrid, 1944), p. 407.

5. "The first characteristic that a historic being has to present is, paradoxically, that of its absence" (José Artigas, "La Historia contemporanea," *Arbor*, XXIII [1952], 214).

one and (*b*) the circumstantial aspect rests not in the intrinsic being of the present but in a defect or incapacity of the observer's eye.

The difficulty of objectifying the present, of considering it *sub specie aeternitatis*, of moving it from the now into the dimension of continuity, where, nevertheless, it belongs, is a real one. But the need of a "historical perspective" in this consideration is a need only insofar as it affects us, not the historicity of the present.

The historical possesses two necessary unique qualities: humanity and temporality. All that which develops in time and actively or passively affects man is historical. All other circumstances are accidental to it. The present and the future clearly and fully share in both qualities.

The past is nothing but the disrealization of the present, which produces by diluting itself a precipitate of possibilities constituting the historical future; the new present is nothing but the realization of one of these possibilities.[6] There would be no history without the present. Moreover, the real history, living, effective, is nothing but a permanent present.

How, then, can we deny historicity to this time which is necessarily the creator of history? How can we deny it the future by which it is nourished and into which it is transformed?

History, asserts Focillon, is made up of a three-part bundle of working forces: traditions, influences, and experiences. The first are vertical forces, which come from the depths of the ages; they are the "collaboration of the past with the present." Influences are communications between towns, horizontal forces, over the plane of the present. But it is experiences, the living present, which enrich and renew history, which project outward to tomorrow like an arrow, "grasping the future."[7]

## HISTORY OF TODAY: HISTORY OF TOMORROW

"History stops flowing," someone has written, referring to the progressive expansion and detail of the historical picture as it describes times closer to ours.

But insofar as we refer to the rhythm of that history, the rhythm made by the palpitation of its contents, we can point out only a progressive acceleration as it approaches us from the past. The last hundred years have transformed life—and man—more than the preceding five hundred did. In its anxiety to realize itself, history seems to want to go beyond itself and

6. Zubiri, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

7. H. Focillon, *L'An mil* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1952), pp. 24–25.

to go intuitively into tomorrow, now pure acceleration, pure movement over a pure time.

The notion of a new time being inaugurated is now even more universal than it was in the Renaissance. "The future is already here," a keen reporter of our time has announced in a phrase that is almost a defining slogan.[8] Today "we grasp the future," with a gratification comparable only to the beginning of the moment of creating it; in the instant history began to walk.

The vision of tomorrow had in another time a name: prophesy. Now the time of revelation has passed. The era of the utopia has also passed, an era which dreamed about the future as about the past, in indistinct nostalgias and hopes, both imaginary. The quasi-scientific age of the hypothesis has been unleashed, and today we find ourselves in an epoch which attempts the scientific prospection of the future as though from a metalliferous vein.

The "announcing of future time" is not in our day solely a literary exercise.[9] In our time, which is also "the hour of historical science," in its interest in itself, in its ability to look at itself objectively, will it not correspond in the end to a scientific conception and elaboration of contemporary history?

In summary, contemporaneousness participates in the historical essence inherent in every phase of time and traditionally—and superficially—held to belong exclusively to the preterite. But contemporary history possesses, moreover, peculiar qualities which make it unique. By virtue of those peculiarities, it has happened that the essential ahistoricity of present time has been upheld. The most we can grant to that judgment is a present instrumental and methodological incapacity of historical science for the proper understanding of the time that is presented to it.

This incapacity, this imperfection of methodology, does not affect, of course, the historical essence of the contemporary, and it is, we believe, conquerable. The application of logical systems to the present and even to the future to make them intelligible to the historian is legitimate. Its fallibility does not invalidate it; in any case, it compares them, making them perfectible, to the perfectible—in fact, continually revised—character of traditional historical knowledge.

8. R. Jungk, *Die Zunkunft hat schon begonnen* (Stuttgart: Scherz & Gavert, 1953); Spanish trans., *El futura ha comenzado* (Madrid, 1953).

9. Miguel Artola has dedicated to that "novelisticalness" of anticipation an interesting study in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, XXIV, Nos. 68–69 (1955), 150–67.