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Losing the Present to History

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Histories of the present are premised upon the loss of their subject, which is paradoxically deprived of its integrity by being tied back to the past. Attending to the present has been the prerogative of anticolonial and Cold War writing, for which the disconnection of present from past was crucial. If Gandhi, a critic of historical consciousness as a modality of imperialism, represented the former, Arendt did the latter kind of thinking. Histories of the present disregard these forms of thought, which stress rupture over continuity. This makes them Eurocentric almost by definition, as well as anti-global in their conceptualization. The attack on the US Capitol in January 2021 offers us an example of how an event, understood provincially within a Euro-American history of the present, can be globalised to quite different effect.

Those who would defend and those who criticize histories of the present often switch places during their debate. By choosing to focus on the past on its own terms and without reference to their own times, partisans of the latter position recognize the autonomy of the present far better than those who support the former. By breaking genealogical narratives in imagining a world governed by a quite different logic, they also, if sometimes inadvertently, refuse to naturalize the present and so make it a truly historical phenomenon. The effort to think differently about the past can be understood as a counterintuitive experiment that brings the present into much sharper relief.

The votaries of a history of the present, for their part, adopt the oldest role in the profession by composing a genealogy or record of contemporary power even if only to hold someone responsible for its evils. The historical precedents that have been adduced for recent events ranging from the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror to the financial crisis of 2008, the pandemic of 2020 and the Black Lives Matter campaign suggest, if anything, a flight to the past resulting from an inability to grasp the new. And indeed, it is extraordinary how the rush to history serves as a way of refusing to think about the present and so the future it produces in anything but the most hackneyed ways.

The legitimization of racism or populist authoritarianism in our day, for instance, puts us in mind of European fascism and totalitarianism, just as fears of Muslim ideologues in Europe bring to mind the battles of Christendom, the Wars of Religion or the separation of church and state. In public life these histories often result in explicit efforts to repeat the past, in such ways as reforming Islam as

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Christianity was reformed or reaffirming Enlightenment values. But even among historians there is little sense of the novelty these phenomena might represent. The remarkable Eurocentrism of the genealogies invoked also suggests an anxiety to reconstitute the West as the centre of world history.

No history of the present takes non-Western peoples, places or powers as its origin unless it is to include them in the making of Euro-American societies. But even such efforts at diversification play into the universal enterprise of the West's history in more benevolent and effective ways than the exclusionary narratives of times past. It is not a question of distinguishing between the historical narratives of Eastern and Western countries, or Southern and Northern ones to use another set of directions, since they all look the same. Few histories can be written without the West being central to them in phenomena like capitalism, colonialism, modernity, the world wars, bipolar politics, and so on.

It might be the case that national histories in countries like China absorb the West within their own narratives and terms of reference, though it is unlikely that these can account for the Euro-American past or present. The only case I know of is a conceptually and empirically thin one deriving in part from Western histories. This is the narrative of Islam as Christendom's great rival, one able to match it at what Marshall Hodgson called a hemispheric scale. During the Cold War, for example, it had been possible for Muslim ideologues to see the superpowers as latter-day versions of the Byzantine and Persian empires, each as evil as the other and doomed to be replaced by Islam.

With the end of the Cold War, it became popular to imagine the Soviet Union as having been destroyed by an Islamic movement in Afghanistan, while the United States waited to take the place of Byzantium with the emergence of Al-Qaeda and later ISIS. Osama bin Laden even went so far as to reverse the usual narrative of historical derivation by claiming that the American leadership took its Middle Eastern clients as models for corruption, violence, and illegality during the War on Terror.[1] And this, of course, was simply another sign of their country's imminent collapse as a democracy. Looking at America today, who is to say he was entirely wrong?

Histories of the present tend to make the new familiar, if not less fearsome, by joining rather than separating historical periods in such a way as to maintain a dominant role for the West, even if only to castigate its imperialisms, racisms, or genocides. And in this sense, there is not much difference between pro-Western and anti-Western narratives. Histories of the present are therefore also conservative by definition, especially when they seek to warn us of something we or our ancestors have already experienced. There are far too many such forebodings among historians at the moment, who insist on imagining our time as a new 1848, a new 1914, a new 1933 or a new 1947.

But such Eurocentric, if occasionally inclusive, histories have not been the only ones available to us in modern times. Anticolonial histories from Asia and Africa, for instance, tended to focus on breaking rather than joining narratives in which Europe was the only real subject for good or ill. Decolonization depended upon breaking the hold of the past rather than returning to a precolonial golden age and was focused on a radically open future. Gandhi repudiated historical consciousness itself as a modality of empire, one that allowed people to be classified as modern rulers or traditional subjects who required the pedagogical attention of colonialism to achieve their freedom.[2] He also knew how history allowed empires to understand and control their subjects.

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[1] Many instances of this narrative can be found in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London, 2005).

Gandhi is one of the few political thinkers of the twentieth century to disdain history in a modernity defined by utopias and revolutions that sought its fulfilment. He pointed out that history as commonly conceived was a narrative of conflict to whose violence alone did historians attribute any real change, regardless of whether this was to be praised or condemned. Yet societies could only sustain and reproduce themselves in nonviolent ways, by quotidian and unexceptionable practices that didn't deserve the name of history. For it was not the violence either exercised or prevented by law and the state that provided the parameters for nonviolence, but rather the reverse.

Instead of trying to expand the reach of historical knowledge by including everyday life within its ambit, in other words, the Mahatma insisted upon describing the historical record as providing an account of violence as well as its justification. After all, since narratives of persecution and revenge, peace and war, crime and justice, stood on the same historical footing and indeed overlapped one with the other, none was innocent of violence. And by this token nonviolence was not merely unable to provide a subject for history; it was incapable almost by definition of possessing one.

By suggesting that nonviolence had no history, Gandhi did not mean that it was entirely removed from the world of violence. On the contrary, he held that violence was present in every aspect of life, from eating to giving birth, so that even reflexive processes like blinking or digestion, which preserved life, also ended up wearing down the body and finally destroying it. Nonviolence therefore could not possibly imply the more or less successful avoidance of violence, something that the Mahatma would in any case have considered cowardly, but rather entailed an intense engagement with it.

In keeping with the negative or unhistorical character of nonviolence, such engagement consisted of withdrawing one's implicit or complicit support for violence understood as a positive and so historical phenomenon. This involved the recourse to a whole range of negatively defined acts, from nonviolence itself to noncooperation, nonpossession and nonattachment, each conceptualized as forms of non-doing or undoing whose very logic of absence was what made change possible. Deliberately forsaking the privilege given to action in historical narrative, Gandhi also envisioned the task of negation as being not the enemy's repudiation so much as conversion.

Violence had to be seduced from itself and converted into its opposite by acts of love and practices of sacrifice. And this had to be done not by posing one historical narrative against another but instead by disregarding such narratives altogether. Only by refusing to situate present-day moral and political action within a historical account that could only constrain it might new possibilities for the future emerge.

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[2] See M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge, 2003).

Nonviolence, in other words, worked by breaking up narrative histories and thus freeing human action, though it did so not by opening some dazzling new future for it, but rather by focusing exclusively on the present as a site for moral life.[3]

Gandhi's idea of the present, therefore, had nothing to do with a narrative either of historical continuity or of change that is manifested in ways like distinguishing one period from another. The present was not qualitatively distinct from the past or the future. Instead, he disaggregated such periodization by envisioning a temporality whose similarities and differences could not be historicized, since they always enjoyed a potential existence depending on the actions of individuals. His task was rather to free the present from being determined by the past, and in turn from coming itself to determine the future as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Mahatma's efforts to question the linear and homogeneous form that historical temporality took was common to anticolonial thinkers. His contemporary, Mohammad Iqbal, the most important Muslim poet and philosopher of the twentieth century, drew upon medieval Persian and Arabic texts to disaggregate time by considering the possibility that different kinds of bodies produced or were part of distinctive temporalities. He cited Bergson's pure duration and Einstein's space–time continuum to imagine new ways of thinking about time, dismissing the historian's vision of serial time as naive. Like Gandhi, he was interested neither in historicism nor in temporal continuity.[4]

More than altering our perspective on history, Gandhi asks us to distrust it as a form of knowledge and even recommends forgetting the past. By this he doesn't mean we should tolerate violence or banish all that has happened from our memory, but should refuse to identify with either the victims or the perpetrators of historical violence. The Mahatma was aware that nations, races, religions and other collective categories of belonging were in his time being forged by such vicarious identifications with the past. Repelled by the alternating forms of resentment and fear he saw emerging from these practices of historical recovery, Gandhi wanted nothing to do with them.

Gandhi criticized history because he understood it as betraying the present. A history of the present, therefore, was only capable of restricting future possibilities by tying them to fears and desires from the past. The effort to determine this future by reference to the past, he thought, was an absurd fantasy that risked inviting unexpected outcomes even when its desired goal was forcibly fulfilled. This entailed sacrificing virtuous means in the present only to poison the future ends they were meant to bring about. It also reduced the number of possible ends available to us in the future. A historical understanding of the present seeks, therefore, to control the future by eliminating the very contingency that historians otherwise prize. It is history in the service of power.

If Gandhi questioned history's claims to understand the present in the struggle against imperialism, it is because he realized that it was guided by moral and political aims. But however virtuous these aims, he suggested, they could not be accomplished by historical knowledge, which was fitted out to exacerbate rather than reduce violence. While it was necessary for those engaged in moral and political action to learn from past experience, in other words, this did not require historical consciousness and certainly not a collective identification with the winners or losers of past conflicts. Myth offered a deeper and more philosophical way of thinking about the present than history.

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[3] For Gandhi's emphasis on the present see M. K. Gandhi, *The Bhagvadgita* (New Delhi, 1980).

[4] Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi, 1990).

While Gandhi was concerned primarily with the hubris of historical knowledge and its efforts to sacrifice the present to the future in the name of the past, another appreciation of the past's radical limitation in grasping the present emerged during the Cold War. Reflecting upon the destructive role of technology in the development of nuclear weapons, thinkers like Karl Jaspers, Gunther Anders, and Hannah Arendt often wrote about the historically unprecedented future they made possible. This, indeed, was a commonplace assertion at the time, one which very deliberately broke historical genealogies apart precisely to envision a present without a past.

In an essay on Jaspers, for instance, Arendt writes,

> It is true, for the first time in history all peoples on earth have a common present: no event of any importance in the history of one country can remain a marginal accident in the history of any other. Every country has become the almost immediate neighbor of every other country, and every man feels the shock of events which take place at the other side of the globe. But this common factual present is not based on a common past and does not in the least guarantee a common future.[5]

This way of imagining a global present without a shared past, one in which destruction can be visited upon peoples and countries lying completely outside the history that brought it about, made their potential fate into the result of a natural rather than human history. The problem posed by the novel emergence of the globe as an object rather than simply a context of human action was that its would-be subject, the human race, could only be grasped posthumously. Jaspers and Arendt thought the vision of nuclear extinction brought about a new kind of present separated even from the history that had produced it.

The atom bomb, Arendt held, by making possible the extermination of all life on Earth, lent the human race a kind of posthumous reality. Only by imagining its extinction did humanity come to possess any existential reality as an empirical category. Indeed, such a reality was not only feared in Cold War paranoia, but also enjoyed in the science fiction that marked the age. For the atom bomb lent the race a purely objective reality, uniting it by the common threat of nuclear annihilation in the present even if its constituent parts shared no historical past.

It was the attempt to attach this global present to a history, or at least mediate its inhuman or posthumous reality through the past, that gave meaning to the Cold War's world histories from Toynbee to Hodgson and McNeill. Marshall Hodgson, for example, defined the global present in terms of a general civilizational un-grounding and borderless-ness, one that had to be reconnected to the past or its vestiges in the present to make it meaningful for human beings. And to do this he turned to older forms of historical universality, of which he saw Islam as the chief alternative to the West.

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[5] Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?", in Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, 1995), 81–94, at 83.

What interested Hodgson about Islamic civilization as a universal form was the possibility it offered of not only constructing another genealogy of the global present, whose absence he thought was what made the latter literally unthinkable and so sublime in its technological dominance, but also of imagining an alternative trajectory of the global. He thought that the historical memory of civilizations like Islam, but also the lived reality of religions more generally, permitted them to mediate and ground the global present, if only because they represented older ideas of universality.

Here is how Hodgson described the role of religion and civilization in mediating the global present:

> The basis of community allegiance needs to be reformulated in a society where the religious community is but one of several, none serving as foundation for their common culture. There are many possibilities; I shall suggest one: in such a world, religious communities may play a crucial role, that of communities intermediate between the individual and the global mass of four billions, all potentially watching the same television programmes and buying the same products.[6]

For Hodgson, Islam was especially important because it provided the only universal form that a non-Western civilization took before the global present inaugurated by the West, and thus became capable of serving both as its antecedent and as its alternative. Crucial to both Islam and the West as universal categories was the fact that they had become detached from any particular region, culture area or polity. But this meant that they were faced with a new kind of problem, of how to attach themselves to and be at home in the particular. And this is what they could teach the denizens of the global present.

Unlike Gandhi's non-historicist vision of temporality, such Cold War concerns about the global present were dominated by strong ideas about periodization and historical breaks. Indeed, they may even be said to mimic the original notion of such a break, that of modernity or a modern age seen as being qualitatively distinct from all that came before and radically open to an unknown future. Of course, this future was never understood in the old modernist fashion as being either heroic or utopian, though it remained teleological in a deeply pessimistic way. But Cold War history's questioning of temporal scale and limits continues to be intellectually productive.

The questions asked during the Cold War about the global present and its deprivation of history have evaporated in its aftermath. It is perhaps not accidental, then, that the Cold War tends not to be part of today's histories of the present, at least in their popular variants. These have forsaken the global present without a history of its own and returned to national or at most civilizational narratives about histories of the present. Only environmental histories dealing with issues like the

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[6] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 3 (Chicago, 1977), 433–4.

Anthropocene have inherited Cold War concerns about the radically ahistorical character of the global present and the posthumous agency of the human race.[7]

Public debate in Euro-American societies, as among its historians, is dominated by genealogies going back to the Reformation or the Enlightenment, liberalism or imperialism, and, of course, the ever-popular world wars. What has been lost is any consideration of the present not only as an autonomous and newly global temporality but also as an opening to the unknown future. This was evident with the outpouring of historical analysis following the attack on the US Capitol by President Trump's supporters. Much of it was dominated by debates about whether we were witnessing fascism, a coup, an insurrection, or merely a protest.

Apart from the bizarrely legalistic, if not entirely semantic, character of much of this debate, curious were the remarkably provincial if also typically exceptionalist parameters within which it placed a global power like the US. We have been offered genealogies for which neither the Cold War nor the War on Terror that succeeded it in militarizing democracy and decimating civil liberties are crucial. Instead, we are treated to disquisitions about slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. All important events, but none as recent as 9/11, with its unprecedented empowerment of the presidency and corresponding disempowerment of citizens.

Viewed from outside the charmed circle of Euro-American universities, journals and think tanks, such talking points seem to represent fantasies of historical regression. They are incapable of recognizing the global nature of either the precedents of or of the problems posed by the attack in Washington. The very apocalypticism on display in some of the historical analysis, in other words, might deliver comfort by its sheer familiarity. To see fascism in what happened is one thing, but invoking Weimar is an absurdity. Could it be that America is not so much repeating either its own or the European past as joining the global present it has done so much to bring about?

Even a preliminary consideration of the language deployed by the crowd in Washington, whether in utterance or displayed on signs and items of clothing, makes it clear that its two most important historical and political references were to the Revolution and the Civil War. The former has, of course, been important from the very early days of the populist right, as evident in the very name of the Tea Party. And the latter has been ubiquitous in the use and criticism of the Confederate flag and other symbols of the defeated South. Both are crucial terms in American history, though they were played out at the Capitol in globally rather more familiar ways.

It was not lost upon those observing these events from other parts of the world that the revolution they represented had more in common with recent precedents from the colour revolutions of Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring in the Middle East than with eighteenth-century America or France. With their mixed genders, generations, classes, and even ethnicities, these live-streamed protests organized over social media must be taken together in a way that fractures any singular genealogy of American history. Predictably Eurocentric analogies have also been offered, from the storming of the Winter Palace by sympathizers of the attack to the Reichstag fire by its critics.

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[7] See, for instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021).

There has been much commentary on the irony of America having to face an example of the kind of revolution it encourages, if not instigates, elsewhere. But the importance of this comparison goes beyond blowback or *Schadenfreude* and must be analyzed by historians as part of the global present that Arendt or Hodgson described. This does not mean that a properly national history played no role in the attack or in what brought it about, but it is no longer sufficient to account for the present. It may be that America's revolutionary history played the role of myth in the arguments and identifications of the protestors—a myth whose conspiratorial vision of distant origins and long continuities holds up a mirror to histories of the present.

Like revolution, civil war, too, is an important part of contemporary politics the world over. The United States has been involved in either inflaming or assuaging many of these recently, from Iraq and Syria to Libya and Yemen. But it would be a mistake to think about civil war only in the neocolonial and arguably racist terms of armed hostilities and proxy wars in failing, undemocratic, or incompletely modern states. Even without such violence, a situation resembling civil war can be observed in the unprecedented polarization of politics in countries like Britain, Spain, and the United States, leading to administrative gridlock, militia violence, or separatist movements.

A number of similarities characterize the discursive as much real occurrence of civil war in different parts of the world. These include the hollowing out and capture of political parties by outsiders in countries like India, the US, and Britain. Or the sudden emergence of new parties and the collapse of old ones in places like France or Pakistan. It is not that political interests have diverged so much as to become irreconcilable in such nations, but that parties seem no longer to represent stable social or economic interests at all. This may be why we see such a significant global turn to racial, religious, sexual, and other ascribed identities instead.

The liberal politics of interest and contract seems to be faltering along with the party form that serves to represent it. This likely has something to do with the rendering virtual as well as global of the property regimes that had once made interests possible in national contexts. Also important might be the disintegration in advanced economies of manufacturing and with it the working class that was its product. With the end of the Cold War we have also seen the disintegration of what Schmitt called a *nomos* of the earth, with the War on Terror unable to put another one in place. There has been an upswing in civil wars after each of these conflicts in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, with other regions like Eastern Europe also being drawn in.

There is a global pattern here, visible at the Capitol in the display of Iranian, Indian, Israeli, French, and other flags among the Stars and Stripes. Each represented other kinds of civil war, whether between Hindus and Muslims, Jews and Palestinians, royalists and republicans, or Europeans and Africans. Signaling a small if multiethnic immigrant presence at a protest organized by a black man of Arab and Muslim descent, these flags show that American history cannot contain its meaning. Such symbols were not only tolerated but welcomed by white demonstrators assumed to be exclusive in their world of historical, racial, and religious references. And yet the founder and leader of the Proud Boys, the most apparently white among them, is himself Afro-Cuban.

The nonwhite immigrant presence in American public life can no longer be assimilated within the inherited racial and religious categories of national history, with its binary black-and-white structure. Unlike white immigrants, including President Trump's mother, grandparents, and wife, those from Asia, Africa, and Latin America bring their own histories and identities with them to whichever political side they choose. The increased support for Trump among ethnic minorities, including Muslims, cannot simply be attributed to fantasies of white identification. And this makes them both more suspect and more acceptable, something we have seen with the rise to power of figures like Barack Obama and Kamala Harris, whose African American identity derives from recent immigration rather than historical slavery.

Obama was accused throughout his presidency, not least by Trump himself, of being a Muslim immigrant born outside the United States rather than being identified as an African American. But it may have been these very accusations that also made him more acceptable than an African American to be the country's first nonwhite president. Without diminishing the role that race plays in the country's politics, in other words, the increasing power and influence of nonwhite immigrants has forced open its history to other genealogies and made a new shuffling of identities possible there. Are we seeing the reassertion of America's old race conflicts today, as historians of the present tell us, or their last stand in the face of such a transformation?

Even a cursory look at the attack in Washington tells us how conservative, provincial, and Eurocentric most histories of the present are. The point of such a history should be to demonstrate not the continuity of old problems but the differences that radicalize them, and in doing so to denaturalize our own experience in order to think the future anew. This was what anticolonial histories in Asia and Africa sought to do in the era of decolonization. Seeing what is happening in the US and elsewhere today as the struggle of fascism against liberalism or white against black conceals more than it reveals, because it is a view that refuses to look beyond America or the West in a historical context which has become global.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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