**MEMORY, NARRATION, AND HISTORY OF THE PRESENT**

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In what follows I will analyze the distinctive challenges and features of the historiography of the twentieth century with regards to its most salient events. This examination is inextricably linked to an interpretation of historical work as an epistemic and social practice necessarily embedded in the “frameworks of memory” in which the historian is situated. This meta-historical analysis, inspired by the theses of Walter Benjamin, will explore the representation of the historian as a “mnemic vector” essential to processes of social dialogue, a representation which, while respecting the epistemic specificity of his or her labor, repudiates their long-standing monopoly on the interpretation of the past.

Ultimately, the history of the twentieth century is not just an object of study, but also a matter of debate and political contention. Consequently, the interests and conditions of the present cannot be ignored when it comes to analyzing the mechanisms by which the past is given meaning. The contribution and influence of Benjamin in this theoretical context cannot be overlooked. In *History as a Battlefield*, the historian Enzo Traverso offers a general panorama of some most fiery debates regarding the interpretation of the events of the past century by different historians. The guiding thread of the book is to bring to light the many underlying tensions in contemporary historiography, especially in relation to socio-political factors. In the introduction he asserts:

“me parece necesario evocar la influencia subterránea pero omnipresente de Walter Benjamin. En sus escritos he hallado no tanto una respuesta a mis cuestionamientos, sino más bien una ayuda a su formulación, lo que constituye la premisa indispensable de cualquier investigación fructífera […]. No nos ha dejado un método, sino una reflexión profunda sobre los resortes y las contradicciones de un enfoque intelectual que, al tratar de pensar la historia, se obstina en no disociar el pasado del presente.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Benjamin’s essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, presents the image of writing the past as analogous to a battlefield. This criticism of positivist historicism and its *additive* methodology along with its definition of the historian as a member of the victorious party, as well as his revindication of the necessity of recuperating moments of the preterit as *dialectical images* that rupture the historical continuum…all reflect a vision of history whose premise could be simplified in the following thesis: There is no rereading of the past that is axiologically neutral. That is to say, there is no representation of the past that does not implicate historical agents that inhabit the present from which the past is being rewritten.

Nevertheless, Walter Benjamin’s work, despite the value of his theoretical intuitions, also suffers from certain limitations. After all, his dichotomous division between victors and vanquished, as well as the direct connections between the historical text and political factors, turn out to be fairly reductionist. In the following pages, these benjaminian intuitions will serve as our inspiration, especially in the attempt to avoid the dissociation of the past from the present when studying the historiography. At the same time, however, we will offer a brief summary of contemporary historiographic challenges. The goal is to account for the necessary variation of versions of the past when it comes to interpreting historical facts, while attending to structural elements of the discourse itself, to the methodology and objectives outlined by all historians, and, above all, to the challenges posed by the history of the twentieth century.

The principal characteristic of the history of the previous century is its “contemporaneity.” That is to say, its scarce temporal distance from the present from which we write it. From there springs the possibility of assimilating it into the so-called “history of the present.” Inspired by the definition proffered by María Inés Mudrovcic,[[2]](#footnote-2) we will define it as the combination of processes of historicization of those events whose impact still remain in the memory of a generation contemporaneous with the moment of their introduction into a historical framework. The co-existence of living witnesses with those events is, therefore, the defining characteristic of the “history of the present.” It is certain that this delimitation will always be imprecise, in the sense that it will depend 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 framework with a duration of approximately eighty or ninety years. Although, according to this definition, the “history of the present” is as old as classic historiography, it is true that interest in this discipline has grown in the second half of the twentieth century. This tendency has derived from events traces of which persisted throughout proceeding decades. This led to the social need for their explanation and contextualization. This is how Alicia Alted outlines it in “The history of the present or the squaring of the circle”:

“Tras la barbarie que supuso la Segunda Guerra Mundial empezó a abrirse camino un nuevo ámbito que […] suponía una diferenciación con la que desde entonces se iba a considerar historia contemporánea “clásica”. Las secuelas provocadas por lo ocurrido en la Europa de entreguerras y durante los años de 1940-1945 habían conmocionado a las sociedades occidentales. Los supervivientes y los poderes públicos de los distintos países dirigieron entonces su mirada hacia los historiadores para que trataran de explicar porqué se había llegado a aquello.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**­History, ideology, and retrospectivity**

Analyzing our history of the present demands its demarcation. And this delineation implies the application of a retrospective gaze at the last eighty or ninety years. Accordingly, we span a historical period that includes the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Nazi Holocaust, the Soviet Gulag, the nuclear arms race… A historical framework that makes the mid-century crisis the axis around which the history of Europe acquires meaning.

However, given that the past is not fixed, this journey back on the axis of time is not the only thing that emerges as relevant. On the contrary, it is necessary to analyze as well how the present, from which history has been read, has evolved. After all, hardly two decades ago there unfolded a series of events that have determined our way of understanding the history of the present. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm demonstrates, the year in which the Berlin Wall fell led to a new *historic threshold* that reconfigured the conditions with which which allowed us to describe the events of the previous century.[[4]](#footnote-4) This ascertainment derived from the awareness that something essential occurred during that time. The collapse of the Soviet Union constituted an event that required the modification of narratives regarding the history of the twentieth century. There was a large difference between writing history in 1985 versus 1995. Much larger than the gap between describing the same set of events in 1985 versus 1975. The reflections that Hobsbawm developed related to the problem of the history of the present can be perfectly summarized in this thesis:

“Muy pocas personas negarían que una época de la historia del mundo terminó con el derrumbamiento del bloque soviético y la Unión Soviética, prescindiendo de cómo interpretemos los acontecimientos de 1989-1991. Se ha vuelto una página de la historia. El simple hecho de que sea así basta para cambiar la percepción de todos los historiadores del siglo XX que todavía viven, porque convierte un espacio de tiempo en un periodo histórico con su propia estructura y su propia coherencia o incoherencia: “el siglo corto” […] Seamos quienes seamos, no podemos por menos de ver el siglo en conjunto de manera diferente de cómo lo hubiéramos visto antes de que 1989-1991 insertara su signo de puntuación en su fluir. Sería absurdo decir que ahora podemos distanciarnos de él, como el siglo XIX, pero al menos podemos verlo en su conjunto. En una palabra, la historia del siglo XX escrita en el decenio de 1990 tiene que ser cualitativamente distinta de la que se haya escrito antes.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

A historian that had interpreted the events of the twentieth century in 1988 would have adopted an optics that would tend toward binarism. First of all, he or she would be tackling a convulsive era of world wars, ideological conflicts, and great social unrest. Secondly, since the end of the 1940’s, there was a period of growth in the welfare state and a subsequent consolidation of the capitalist system that acquired global reach. Therefore, the underlying narrative structure of this approachhas a clearly binary form: a period of crisis followed by one of recovery and prosperity. However, let’s imagine the same historian assembling a retrospective vision of the twentieth century, having crossed the historical threshold constituted by the dates 1989–1991. The framework changes radically. It is not just about the collapse of the soviet regime. It also includes the appearance of grave problems in the capitalist economies of the Western world that questioned their stability as alternatives to their eastern counterparts and allowed for the emergence of neoliberal policies. In this sense we can no longer adopt a binary perspective but rather a triple one. The framework is instead one of an age of prosperity amid two periods of crises. Hence, she or he who writes history in 1992 not only has to add information to the large quantity of events that occurred in previous years. She also has to change the narrative orientation, criteria of relevance, the historical approach…

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 her influence allows us to anchor historical accounts in the conditions of her own time. A rather significant example, in this case, is constituted by the emergence of a liberal historiography after this *historic threshold* that was the year 1991. The end of soviet communism was accompanied by changes in the western historiography itself. As a result, many historical accounts that appeared after this even established causal connections that retrospectively attributed an entire normative charge to the unfolding of the events. These new historical interpretations were not limited to tracing the features and consequences of the development of communism in the history of the West. 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.[[6]](#footnote-6) The triumph of the 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 Pippes[[7]](#footnote-7) or Martin Malia,[[8]](#footnote-8) François Furet and his book *The Passing of an Illusion*[[9]](#footnote-9)is the principal representative of this trend.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Sidestepping the contradictions and specificities of soviet communism throughout the past century, Furet defines it merely as an ideology, as an “ideocracy.” A political mythology that offered a social panacea capable of mobilizing various political regimes in order to, by virtue of this desired end of history that served as a regulatory idea, commit many of the largest-scale crimes in history. The establishment of a genealogical connection between the French revolution and the Russian revolution justified, from his perspective, the link between revolution and terror as *a priori*. In this framework, just as is the case with Nolte,[[11]](#footnote-11) the differences between communism and fascism tend to blur.

“la única manera de encarar el estudio de las dos analogías y los dos movimientos políticos inéditos que aparecen a comienzos de nuestro siglo, el comunismo marxista-leninista y el fascismo, en su doble forma italiana y alemana, consiste en analizarlos *juntos*, como las dos caras de una crisis aguda de la democracia liberal acaecida con la guerra 1914-1918. Es una vieja realidad de la cultura política europea esta crítica de la abstracción democrática moderna en nombre de la vieja sociedad “orgánica” a la derecha, y la “futura” sociedad socialista, a la izquierda.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Communism loses its status as an economic, social, and philosophical theory…only to be reduced to a revolutionary and totalitarian ideology. In the same vein, the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of those movements is also ignored. Revolution is now 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 events of the twentieth century as a polarization of political forces into two blocks. On the one hand, there are those that prioritize political mythology, in the form of the Volk or that of a classless society. On the other hand, there are those who prioritize individual rights over collective ideologies.

What we would like to highlight is that precisely this interpretation of history can only emerge out of the historical horizon subsequent to the West’s victory in the Cold War and the decline of communism. Only from a present 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, only from this present 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 that equates it with fascism.

Hence, the articulation of this history of the present is not only an index of the importance of a historical context in which the global triumph of liberal democracy appears to have been completed. It also requires an ideological approach to the social and political consequences of said historical process. It is not surprising that historians like François Furet, Ernst Nolte, Richard Pippes…have been labeled with the epithet “conservative.” Indeed, their dichotomous readings have been questioned by historians[[13]](#footnote-13) to whom the twentieth century’s failed and distorted revolutionary projects are ideological linked. We do not only refer to Eric Hobsbawm,[[14]](#footnote-14) we can also include Enzo Traverso, Daniel Bensaïd[[15]](#footnote-15) or Domenico Losurdo.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some have played a leading role in one of the most interesting debates in relation 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 element of those political movements in the face of the dichotomy between “barbarism or liberal democracy” by which the previous historical analyses had been constrained. As a result, a hermeneutic conflict arose that is not only related to the past but also to the present. The elaboration of other hypotheses regarding the origin of violence and other evaluations of the facts, was translated into an interpretation of “revolution” as a political practice with enormous emancipatory potential that does not necessarily lead to totalitarianism. To the contrary, it can put into question the hegemonic economic system and accompanying liberal policies as well as bring to light a series of silenced phenomenon that comprise its darkest sides.

The purpose behind tracing the contours of this debate is not to offer a solution that hails the end of this *battle for history.* Rather it is to describe an example of the dynamics between past and present in the historiography of the end of the century. And so, given this interdependence between past and present, we will attempt to elaborate a series of characteristics of the history of the past century that profoundly affect the context in which the historian works. We have selected those facts that we consider the most relevant in this context, insomuch as they themselves are the challenges of the history of the present, read from a post 1989–1991 optic.

**The Modernist Events**

The twentieth century has been characterized by the use, in both a spontaneous as well as systematic way, of indiscriminate violence: two world wars, civil wars such as the one in Spain, social revolts, deportations, genocides, new arms of mass destruction…These events are those in which the implementation of extermination techniques lead to a veritable industry of death. The heuristic value of these phenomena stems from the fact that they are characterized by a rupture in the collective memories of those groups that inhabit this historic space, as well as for transgressing the traditional limits of representation. These are precisely that which produces what Benjamin called the “destruction of experience.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

These were events so terrible that they became *unsayable* for their witnesses and victims. Their impact, as much on individuals as on collectives, make clear the so-called *disruption of time* that allows them to be defined as *collective traumas.* These are happenings whose impossible recollection is articulated through the figure of the *past that does not pass* and, therefore, never stops happening. Benjamin himself conceptualized the repercussions of these types of events with the notion of the “monad.”

In this context the recovery of such 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 Benjamin’s lucidity that he is considered a kind of “fire alarm.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Said label stems from his ability to anticipate the degree of barbarism that would befall the world in the following decades. Or, from his reading of his own present as charged with that possibility. The potential of his critique of modernity—in relation to our own present—explains how his notion of the monadic event is applicable to the reading of events that post-dated Benjamin’s death. “Cuando el pensar se para, de repente, en una particular constelación que se halla saturada de tensiones, le produce un *shock* mediante el cual se cristaliza como mónada.”[[19]](#footnote-19) From his point of view “the monadic event” was that event that allowed for the reflection, in the cognitive and ethical-political sense, of a historic totality. Since these events constituted the outcome of tendencies inherent to his social context, they are, therefore, microcosms of that historical context.

This benjaminian characterization allows the notion of the monadic event to encompass a great number of singular phenomenon of the previous century: the extermination of Armenians at the hands of the Turkish Empire at the beginning of the century, diverse genocides in Eastern Europe, the apartheid in South Africa….Although the principal event, the protagonist of the bibliography on the topic, is the Nazi Holocaust. The genocide of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis has come to be considered the greatest crime in the history of humanity,[[20]](#footnote-20) the epicenter according to which we 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, the characteristics which link it with the “modernist event.” Based on the symbolic baggage that accompanies the reception of these events, it is possible to explain the distance that exists between these types of events and traditional narratives. Thus, it is the site where its challenge to the “history of the present” is made clear. Hayden White defines the modernist event in these terms:

“el siglo XX está marcado por la ocurrencia de ciertos acontecimientos “holocáusticos” […] que presentan poca similitud con aquellos que los anteriores historiadores tomaron convencionalmente como sus objetos de estudio y, por tanto, no se prestan a lacomprensión por medio de las técnicas de sentido común utilizadas en la investigación histórica convencional, ni tampoco a representación por las técnicas de escritura típicamente favorecidas por los historiadores desde Heródoto hasta Arthur Schlesinger. Tampoco cualquiera de las diversas variedades de análisis cuantitativo, del tipo practicado en las ciencias sociales, captura la novedad de tales acontecimientos. […] no se prestan a explicación en términos de las categorías suscritas por la historiografía humanista tradicional, que exhibe la actividad de los agentes humanos como si éstos fuesen de algún modo completamente conscientes de sus acciones, y como si fuesen moralmente responsables de ellas.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

In what sense do these events remain unexplained or unassimilated by the mechanisms of traditional historiography? When we speak of traditional historical discourse, we 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 and the historicist model that appeals to the historian’s empathetic understanding of those 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 for which we can argue that causal explanations do not allow us to assimilate this series of phenomena is that, in a strict sense, not all of the phenomena are explicable via laws of causation. We cannot account for why the Holocaust occurred; we cannot assimilate the Shoah into a narrative while referring to social, economic, and political factors, boiled down for our comprehension with the aid of universal laws. There is meaning beyond this 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 it has been received in its era.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As for the difficulties with the mode of empathetic understanding, White recovers Christopher R. Browning’s theory to account for the reluctance to employ said mode in the post-Holocaust context. Let’s examine a key quotation from one of his essays:

“¿Puede todavía escribirse la historia de aquellos hombres? No sólo la historia social, organizativa e institucional de las unidades a las que ellos pertenecían. Y no sólo la historia ideológica y de la toma de decisiones de las políticas que llevaron a cabo. ¿Se puede recuperar la historia experiencial de estos asesinos, las elecciones que afrontaron, las emociones que sintieron, los mecanismos que usaron para afrontar las cosas, los cambios que sufrieron?”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Browning’s answer is unambiguous. The nature of these events is difficulty intrinsic to reconstructing 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 is characterized by its apparent opacity in the face of the historian’s empathic efforts.

That being said, such an affirmation of the difficulties of representing the Holocaust emphasizes the impossibility of its assimilation into a narrative within a historical context conditioned by the consequences of that trauma. The account should bestow meaning on these phenomena, a product of its relationship to the “beginning,” the “middle” and the “end” of narrative. It is this last point that will lend a teleological and redemptive weight to each of the events.

Ultimately, 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 implies a “humanization” of the executioners. It would establish hypotheses that would allow them to become figures with whom to empathize despite the fact that the precise 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 processes of the writing of history. In the words of James E. Young, “es posible que la propia noción de «memoria profunda» y su incompatibilidad con la narrativa constituya uno de los desafíos fundamentales de la historiografía del Holocausto.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

**The Fragmentation of Great Narratives**

Hayden White as well as Hans Kellner[[25]](#footnote-25) have suggested that the Holocaust, as a historical phenomenon, has been a necessary condition for the development of postmodern historiography. This has been interpreted as an effect and a confirmation of the termed “crisis of grand narratives”; a notion that has become the leitmotifof contemporary historical interpretation in the West. The “crisis of grand narratives” and its legitimizing potential constitutes an authentic *topos* of our time. For this reason, its influence on the representation of the past will profoundly affect the idiosyncrasies of the “history of the present.” Having become the most explicit 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,*[[26]](#footnote-26) the absence of an epistemological center, of a monolithic block, in which to anchor the roots of the different branches of knowledge and criteria for method is the characteristic of our time. Therefore, the goal is to account for what have been 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, hegemonic forms of representation of the past, are defined based on three characteristics whose lack of effectiveness in our present conditions, among other fields, the work of historiography.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The characteristics that result in the history of the present’s idiosyncrasy are its universality, the potential to provide a totalizing explanation of the past, and a teleology through which it can articulate its accounts. These operations are interdependent. Universality allows for the subsumption of the histories of particular peoples into an account that encompasses all of humanity. Its totalizing impact explains and justifies suffering in history. Finally, teleology offers a final point in the story from which, in a hypothetical future, all of the underlying tendencies of history derive their end. The grand narratives are always configured as a narrative structure that prefigures the meaning of events. It is precisely this teleological structure that permits the organization of events around three axes: “beginning,” “development” and “end.” This ending is the focal point that lends meaning to all historical events. They present themselves as the “eve of the ending,” that 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 with which to introduce historical facts into the narrative; those that are worthy of participating in the narrative in the sense in which they contribute to its consummation. Totalizing narrative determines which events have historic value.

The teleological connection between development and conclusion, in the historic narrative, has its own parallel in history itself in the link between the past and present. The retrospective gaze on the past from the present attributes to the current state of affairs an explanation as much as legitimacy. The teleological unintelligibility of groupings of narrative associations allows the step from “this is how it happened”—and in no other way—to “this is how it should have happened” and in no other way.

Now then, this practical potential of narrative has one requirement: ignorance of the redistribution of figurative meanings that it itself implies as well as an ignorance of the establishment of hierarchies. It requires the “objectivist illusion” to make the narrative structure transparent. Or similarly it requires, as Hayden White argues, the “creencia en que los hechos narrados hablan por sí mismos,”[[28]](#footnote-28) not because they are made to speak by the the narrative plots machinated by those that write history.

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 has 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 this end. These utopic ends have parallels in the figure of the “conclusion” in the narrative text. And so, the historic 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 based on a future that can only be built upon their cadavers. As White emphasized,[[29]](#footnote-29) there is a firm connection between, law, society, and narrative. The end of history furnishes sense and meaning upon these political practices. 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, it could not give it sense or meaning from an *a posteriori* conclusion.

The rupture of the narrative framework that had predominated for the first half the twentieth century is not just proof of its inability to account for new historical experience. It also accounts for the artificial character of that model of historical comprehension. 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 the ideas defended by Frank Ankersmit in his essay “Historiography and Postmodernism” are exemplary. In this essay he accounts for the historiographic overproduction of recent years, that 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. Said situation continues to be symptomatic of the plurality of narratives from which the present can read the past. He writes:

“El escrito histórico integralista genera una enumeración más que una integración […] La pregunta crucial ahora es qué actitud debemos tomar respecto de esta sobreproducción de literatura histórica que se disemina como un cáncer en todas las áreas. Una nostalgia reaccionaria del pulcro mundo histórico de hace cincuenta años es una resignación sin sentido y desesperanzada […] lo que sí ayuda y tiene sentido es definir un vínculo nuevo y distinto con el pasado con base en un reconocimiento completo y honesto de la posición en la que ahora nos vemos a nosotros mismos como historiadores.” [[30]](#footnote-30)

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 dispenser of historic value to the elements which make up its structure. That is to say, 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. On the contrary, now they acquire value for themselves. Proof of this is the biographic turn seen in the previous century’s historiography, beginning with the 1970’s. Alejandro Baer describes the connection between these two processes:

“La irrupción – o retorno – de la perspectiva biográfica, tanto en la investigación social e histórica como en diferentes ámbitos socioculturales (literatura, periodismo, medios audiovisuales, etc.), no se puede desligar de la “crisis de representación” [...] En términos generales, el giro hacia lo autobiográfico en sus múltiples manifestaciones contemporáneas refleja la quiebra de los (grandes) relatos de legitimación histórica y cultural y la búsqueda de nuevas formas de discurso, como la narración personal, acordes con las nuevas socialidades fragmentadas, la cultura de los medios y los traumáticos acontecimientos históricos del siglo XX.” [[31]](#footnote-31)

**The Era of the Witness**

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 originated in historiographic interest in the phenomenon of the Holocaust. After all, this tendency only manifested itself after the famous Eichmann trial in 1961.

The “advent” of the figure of the witness in the decades after the Holocaust created an unusual situation for the historian. Not only for quantitative questions; between 1944 and 1948 a total of 7,300 testimonies were collected. The principal problem stemmed from the fact that the figure of the witness revealed a vision of his or her biographic experiences that was so personal, so partial, and laden with such ethical charge that it was impossible to assimilate the plurality of extant perspectives into a singular narrative without generalizing and abstracting a great deal of the semantic content that comprises testimonial representation. Here are the consequences of the following idea as outlined by Wieviroka:

“El testigo es el portador de una experiencia que, pese a ser única, no versa únicamente sobre sí misma, sino sobre la situación testimonial en la que se lleva a cabo. Debe reconocerse que, en un sentido, la *Shoah* revolucionó el testimonio. Lo transformó en algo que está más allá de la historia de los historiadores, en un trabajo de arte.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The portrayal of events provided by the witness is so intimate that it resists being totalized into an objective historic representation. In this sense it seems to contain a potential that transcends the limits of the historiographic discipline. It is not surprising that some testimonies have found a better space of expression in literature rather than history. Despite the fact that, historically and etymologically, the witness to these events has found a space of expression in the historiography, literature has proven optimal for the witness to achieve the basic functions it acquired throughout the twentieth century: the invocation of moral obligation. As a result of the Eichmann trial, the figure of the witness 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. 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, it also encroaches on the idiosyncrasy of historical agents.

Traditionally the historiography has been characterized by its focus on a pre-determined group of historical agents, considered to be the most powerful of their time. Ancient History revolved around figures like Caesar, Cleopatra…That of the twentieth century concentrated on figures like Hitler, Stalin…History is individualized in reference to concrete personalities. In such a way they are attributed with enormous causal power in history. Löwy’s significant interpretation,[[33]](#footnote-33) 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 focalization of the narration of the past in relation to these figures has been translated into the interpretation of world history as political history. The great historical events were narrated as products of the interrelations between the intentional actions of concrete historical agents. This narrative focus was the object of much critique throughout the twentieth century. Among them, the *Annales* School acquired special importance. Some historians such as Fernand Braudel[[34]](#footnote-34) and Marc Bloch[[35]](#footnote-35) denounced this model of historical presentation for transfiguring the image of the past by pivoting around individual decisions actions and thus had made the transformation of history into scientific discourse impossible. As Siegfried Kracauer suggests with a metaphor “Un imán recolecta las partículas de hierro dispersas entre una multitud de materiales […] el comportamiento del grupo es más rígido y más calculable que el comportamiento individual.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Making history a science requires the use of quantitative techniques proper to social sciences. This modification alters the status of historical agents: they go from being great figures with names and titles to a grouping of impersonal far-reaching forces with long-term stable structures of an economic, social, demographic nature….Historical agents become mere products of these combinations of anonymous forces.

That being said, in opposition to the older form of narrative history and its substitution with the serial anti-narrative of modern history, since the 1960’s, in parallel with the development of oral history, a new type of historic writing has arisen that 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 micro-history: a model of historical writing that reflects the plurality of narratives and perspectives that require articulation so as to encompass the variety of historical experiences. This model rises from the ruins of the great narratives, stoked by the bellows that was the “testimonial explosion”. They encompass heterogenous perspectives, in no way reducible to the optics of an account told on a larger scale.

The term “micro-history” has its origin George R. Steward book *Picketts’ Charge.*[[37]](#footnote-37)It refers to a method of investigation and historical writing that, without losing its element of subversion with regards to traditional historiography, does not abandon narrative. From the perspective of these historians, history focused on great subjects is profoundly biased, given that it studies the behavior of collectives as derived from the actions and decisions of a group of individuals that are situated in social spheres of power. In this sense, micro-history presents itself as a revindication of minor history, of popular figures, of the classes that lack direct power in the making of decisions but that have a greater demographic weight. That being said, this focus does lead them to identify themselves with the impersonal macro-historical project of the *Annales.* Its modes of investigation are not at all quantitative. They do not make use of statistics to study the customs of historical collectives, transforming historical subjects into mere functionsthrough which pass a series of anonymous tendencies. To the contrary, micro-history describes concrete subjects with names and surnames, it constructs accounts based on the biography of these kinds of subjects. This is the reason for which Braudel identified it with traditional historiography. The French historian considered it to be a model of investigation and writing in which history is the product of the intentional action of concrete subjects.

But this framework cannot be adapted to the investigation model of micro-history. In the first place, the value of those examined historical subjects does not derive from their potential to orient the action of collectives, but rather from their status as symptom with respect to those collectives. As well because the accounts redacted about them describe the life, not of a character with an exceptional status within a social body, but rather of a member of the popular classes. As Carlo Ginzberg writes in his essay: “Microhistory: Two or three things I know about it,”[[38]](#footnote-38) it is about transforming into a book what would have been a footnote in a conventional monograph. It is about describing the experience of a regular individual in order to, based on this individual, reconstruct their social and moral world. At the end of the day, those historical subjects of the popular classes are not only documents for historians they are also exemplary of their context.

In this sense, micro-history departs from the premise according to which, given the multitude of possible points-of-view of 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,[[39]](#footnote-39) it is about avoiding the sacrifice of knowledge of individual events for the sake of generalizations and historical abstractions. After all, if we want to give meaning to the experiences of an individual—to the life of the miller at the center of Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*[[40]](#footnote-40)—we should reconstruct the culture in which all those who intervene in his way of life participate. And therefore, it is about relating the biography of a completely normal and conventional individual, to transform it into a micro-cosmos that reflects the popular culture of his era, maintaining a reference to its individual features, irreducible to the great narratives. And thus, respecting the plurality of different experiences of all social strata and historical groups. In this way, it conforms to a representation of the past fully conscious of its own relativity and partiality.

Meta-accounts give way to biographies of members of popular classes. Microhistories are constructed from new identities without the totalizing impulse that has shaped the greater part of traditional narrative. The development of this historiographical current reveals the impossibility of being able to continue applying that premise that undergirded the “great narratives”: the affirmation that all particular historical data only had value as historical representation in forming part of a larger-scale narrative.

**Conclusions. Writing a Present-Past: Between Historian and Judge**

Contemporaneity with the past that the historian attempts to plot, the radical singularity of testimony, the traumatic character of many the events that it is necessary to narrate, have inherent to them an implication of the history of the present that synthesizes our reflections: the interference of ethical-political factors on history is not an exception, it operates as a systematic rule. We suggest, as we indicated earlier, that the permeability of the border between writing history and these ethical-political factors of the context in which the historian labors is a key feature of the history of the present. In the following lines we will focus on this permeability, analyzing the extant relationship between the historian and the judge. We will emphasize, so as to elucidate these dynamics, the relationship between the historian of extreme events and the judge of “crimes against humanity.” Therefore, we take up the figure of the judge, in his or her comparison with the historian, as a lens through which we can interpret the influence of ethical-political factors on historiography. To introduce these topics, we will begin with the following idea suggested by Carlo Ginzburg in “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historians”:

“La palabra *evidencia,* al igual que *pista* o *prueba*, es crucial para el historiador y el juez. Esta afinidad encierra coincidencias y diferencias que se dan por supuestas desde hace tiempo. Ciertos cambios recientes en el quehacer del historiador arrojan nueva luz sobre este tema.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Ginzburg argues that an intimate relationship between the judge and the historian has existed since Antiquity; a relationship that has become ever more intimate in our history of the present. The subject of the present – as well as its circumstances and necessities – serves as an intentional pole that guides the development of the historical account. There are also certain methodological similarities. Each bases their work on facts offered by the past, in its traces, so as to reconstruct causal chains. It is true that, in their origins, the labor of historians and that of lawyers have corresponded to different systems of rules. Notwithstanding, some historical periods have allowed us to appreciate their interdependent relationships. After the advent of modernity and processes of secularization, the axiological order to which to appeal was no longer found in the other world but rather immanent to history. As Kosselleck summarizes: “La moral de la historia se temporalizó en la historia como proceso […] La renuncia a una justicia compensatoria en el más allá conducía a la temporalización de esa justicia. La historia *hit et nunc* alcanza un carácter ineluctable.”[[42]](#footnote-42) This sentence shoulders 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 derived Y, transforms X into the intentional agent of a phenomenon that can be filled with meaningful semantic content for the collective at whom the account is aimed. And so, it is possible to appreciate the convergence between his or her work and that of the judge. The historian does not only explain or represent. They also report the events through a narrative that gathers information and offers evidence with respect to the human agents that triggered these phenomena. He or she not only reconstructs the course of the events that transpired, but also the course of other hypothetical actions that would have been derived from other decisions or other intents: In the words of Charles Maier: “El historiador, como el juez, tiene el deber de construir una narrativa jurisprudencial […] que descansa fundamentalmente en la contextualización para establecer qué constituyó una acción culpable o no culpable.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Consequently, the peculiarities of our history of the present have caused the relationship between the historian and the judge to be much more “agonistic” for being tied to historical events following which a historical gaze and retrospective judgement is necessary. After all, it is a bit naive to attempt to presuppose or to arrive at a value-free neutrality, when the historian confronts a phenomenon replete with a juridical characterization such as “crime against humanity.” In this sense, the relations are bidirectional and reciprocal.

In one direction, describing a historical event like the Holocaust reveals its causes, agents and factors, implies categorizing it as a “crime against humanity” on scale never seen before. In the other direction, these moral and juridical revindications, that are fed by the information offered by the historian, continue to influence the design of his accounts. This mutual influence does not mean 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. It allows for understanding the familial similarities between the historian and the judge, that is a constant constituent of the history of the present.

In this way, as symptomatic proof of the connections between both spheres that I have attempted here to weave together, it will be crucial to appeal to the controversies derived from the sometimes quite complex relationship between two elements: the ethical backdrop surrounding the phenomenon of the Holocaust and historiography’s pretense of impartiality.

In a chapter called “Truth and Circumstance”[[44]](#footnote-44) in his book *The Practical Past*, Hayden White poses the following question: To what do we owe the fact that the historian articulates the question “Is it true that X?”—where X is any historical phenomenon—does not suppose any problems, but rather is legitimate in relation to the idea of truth and the accuracy of the historiography, and whereas formulating this same question substituting X for “the Holocaust” arouses such rebuff? In this sense, there is an incommensurability between the ideal of truth and of critique on the part of the historian and the moral authority of the witness. Proof of this incommensurability has been revealed in the indictment of historians who have negated the existence of the Holocaust. Something analogous happens with the accusations against conservative historians like Nolte, Stürmer, or Hillgruber for relativizing the responsibility of German society before these crimes. But the question cannot be reduced to this problem. When a historian asks, “Is it true that the Holocaust occurred?” the question that arises does not allude to the relationship of this query with reality. On the contrary, what arises is the question: what motives, ethical and political, can said historian have for questioning the facticity of the Holocaust? That is to say, it presupposes from the beginning the interference of these variables 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 the binomial of yes/no, true/false. On the contrary, it involves a plurality of elements that make the speech act derived from the historiography itself more complex and complicated. It is precisely in relation to this problem where Hayden White appeals to Austin’s theory of performative speech acts to elaborate an analysis based on which we will defend the following thesis: Whoever attempts to write a history of the present and refer to traumatic events, that not only have a historical value but also an ethical and political one, will utter perlocutionary acts that not only describe the world but transform it. After all, they are fully entering public debates regarding the respective treatment of those traces or remnants that are left in our contemporary world. It is precisely the orientation of this transformation of the world that is evaluated from ethical or juridical standards. This suggests some standards based on the ascertainment of the political potential of historical accounts as a mode of legitimation: The establishment of red lines that avoid questioning the facticity of an event as sublimated and sacralized as that of the Holocaust.

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