

## Book Review - Debates



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Carmen Leccardi, Paolo Jedlowski, Alessandro Cavalli  
*Exploring New Temporal Horizons. A conversation between Memories and Futures*  
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The *Conversation between Memory and the Future* of Carmen Leccardi, Paolo Jedlowski and Alessandro Cavalli, offers us a synthetic, but very dense, analysis of the *Temporal Horizons*, which nowadays frame our experience of the world. So, we are first and foremost dealing with an analytical tool that, the authors hope, could enable the «social sciences to recompose what other disciplines have gradually separated and fragmented» (1). A recomposition that can only take place in a global perspective.

However, the volume is also, and perhaps above all, meant to be a contribution to rethinking the contemporary possibilities of communicative and political action, which have been profoundly altered by the transformations that have occurred in recent decades in the «space-time regime» (Rosa 2010: VIII) of the years we live in. Indeed, the authors start from the observation of how «the forms and exercise of democracy, collective action, symbolic and communicative expressions, biographical constructions and identities, social reproduction and conflict, the relationships among generations, and even-and most importantly-the concept of action itself are profoundly changed» (2).

Indeed, the dizzying acceleration of social, cultural and technological change we are witnessing has disarticulated the traditional links between past, present and future as they have been defined over the past two centuries. The growing tension between the «space of experience» and the «horizon of expectation» (Koselleck 2004: 300) that distinguishes the «modernity's consciousness of time» (Habermas 1997: 1) seems to have exploded, producing a profound laceration that compromises our ability to process lived experience by transforming it into meaningful experience. Neither the past, as was the case in traditional societies, nor the future, as was the case in early modernity, seem any longer capable of shedding light on a present that «is no longer the fruit of the slow maturation of the past, no longer allows the lineaments of possible futures to shine through, but imposes itself as an accomplished, overwhelming fact, whose sudden arising makes the past disappear and saturates the imagination of the future» (Augé 2015: 27).

However, this «dilation of the present that incorporates past and future and asserts itself as a single time» (Perniola 1998: 44) results in a

kind of implosion of the present itself. The black hole of the present, a remnant of the collapse of *futurist* temporality, despite its apparent hegemony, is unable to radiate energy onto the other temporal dimensions allowing us to decipher them. We find ourselves “stranded” (Fritsche 2004) in a blind, inert present. This presentist pathology at once threatens the symbolic reproduction of society, atrophying many functions of memory, and brings a perhaps fatal blow to the Enlightenment anthropological and political project, founded on the ideas of progress and emancipation hinged in a historical process. And appropriately, the authors point out how this tendency makes it particularly difficult to address some of the crucial challenges of our age, such as that of climate change, which by its very nature would instead require a radical temporal reorientation in favour of the medium and long term and a new covenant between generations.

It is not surprising that this conjuncture, socio-anthropological and cultural, had a particularly severe impact on the discipline – history – which has traditionally been entrusted with the task of governing the relationship between the past, the present and the future. As the authors observe, «the ambivalence surrounding the future is reflected in teaching and particularly in teaching history, where the memory of the past seems to both teachers and students irrelevant to understanding the present and the future» (96). Indeed, it is especially since the last decade of the twentieth century that historians, *quorum ego*, have shown a growing disquiet about the fates of a knowledge, the historical, that had long enjoyed an almost unquestioned centrality within the humanities and social sciences and widespread social recognition.

The uncertainty in which history finds itself has a double dimension. The first we might call epistemological and concerns the complex, but on the whole fruitful, relationship that history and the social sciences carried on from the second half of the nineteenth century to the latter part of the twentieth century. However, the interdisciplinary dialogue between history on the one hand and sociology, geography, anthropology, economics etc. today seems to have lost momentum. Historians, now that any hegemonic or, at the very least, federative claim, as Braudel would have wished (Braudel 1982), in the field of social knowledge appears unrealistic, seem to be giving in to the defensive temptation to claim their own disciplinary self-sufficiency.

The problem is broader, however, and when historians ask whether in the globalized high-speed society «do we still need history» (Gruzinski 2016) and whether what we are living through is not now irretrievably, *A Time Without History* (Prosperi 2021) they are not only referring to the role of historiography as an academic scientific discipline but more generally to the relationship that men and women of our time – lay and clerical – have with the past and how memories and past experiences can be used to make sense of the present and imagine possible futures. About thirty years ago Hobsbawm already feared the «destruction of the social mechanisms that links one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations» (Hobsbawm 1996: 14). That of the relationship between generations, of the transmission of experience, is a junction, a privileged vantage point for understanding the *Order of Time* (Pomian 1985) of a culture or society. And thus also its regime of historicity.

In the social and scientific crisis of the historical perspective, the social sciences also have their share of responsibility. Today they manifest a certain inclination to cut definitively the umbilical cord that has long tied them to history. Moreover, the encompassing *presentist* context can only encourage these tendencies. Contemporaneity seems to be self-sufficient, and the social sciences deputed to explain it, draws the consequences, perhaps not always consciously. Therefore, the Weberian idea of the existence of a unified epistemological, and to some extent methodological, domain of the «social-historical sciences» appears hopelessly obsolete (Weber 1958).

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, this growing distance, I think that both sides, historians and social scientists, could benefit from a closer discussion on the subject of ongoing temporal change. The theoretical reflection carried out by the social sciences, as well as by philosophy, on temporality and its transformations has led to undoubtedly very significant results, which could help historians to escape the sometimes nostalgic and somewhat victimistic drifts and to reconstruct their own cognitive horizon and social function. It is also true, however, that the historical perspective can in turn enrich theoretical reflection in the social sciences on the ongoing changes in temporal horizons, as shown by the contributions of Koselleck (2004) and Hartog (2016; 2024)

The theme of the succession of generations, and the closely related theme of the transmission of an inheritance, to which the authors of the *Conversation* have devoted the third and final panel of their triptych, offers us

an appropriate common ground. The first aspect is demography. In advanced industrial, or postindustrial, societies, an aging population, the result of a declining birth rate and longer life expectancy, undoubtedly weakens the propensity to project politically into the future. A significant component of the population already has most of its existence behind it, and is disinclined to sacrifice present gratifications for future benefits, often far beyond their foreseeable life horizon.

The second aspect, perhaps more interesting, is the one evoked in the passage by Hobsbawm already quoted, namely the growing estrangement between generations and the interruption of the transmission of experiences and values. The notion of inheritance, recalled several times in our text, is central to the dynamics of intergenerational transmission and its jamming in contemporary society and is also decisive in coming to terms with the current difficulties of historiography: «It is in the first place as heirs», Ricœur wrote in fact, «that historians place themselves in relation to the past even before they propose themselves as the architects of the narrative of the past itself. This notion of legacy presupposes that to some extent the past is perpetuated in the present» (Ricœur 1990: 25). And it presupposes at the same time, and there is no contradiction, that the past is willing to set in order to reinvent itself in the present and especially in the future: «He that hath a goal and an heir wanteth death at the right time for the goal and the heir» (Nietzsche 1883, trad. ing. 2017: 84). The historian is thus an heir who cannot but belong to his own time, but who also belongs to, and recognizes himself in, the time he narrates and interprets. With respect to the past he is thus in an unstable, and fruitful, balance between belonging and foreignness, and this temporal ambivalence constitutes the specific condition of his work. It is easy to understand, then, how «the ‘closure of time’ on the present» (1), the collapse of different temporalities on the present that makes the transmission of any inheritance arduous, breaks down the very conditions that make historiographic activity possible.

But is this really such a recent development? Indeed, most analyses converge that «the crisis of modern time, which is centered around trust in the future and the ideology of progress that warrants it, began in a very clear manner in the 1940s» with the Shoah and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, although it is only in «the last decades of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century» (68), after the long, and perhaps illusory, ‘progressive’ parenthesis of the *Trente glorieuses*, that the crisis of the modern and futurist time horizon, appeared overt and irreversible, coinciding with the weakening of the West’s global hegemony.

Yet, at least from the middle of the nineteenth century, an awareness of a rupture between past, present and future emerged clearly in European culture, which also manifested itself in an estrangement between generations: «We shall have no heirs», de Tocqueville wrote to his wife in 1859, «because we are part of a disappearing world [...] Happy are those who in their thoughts can reconnect past, present and future with each other! We hardly belong to our time. Our children would belong entirely to theirs» (de Tocqueville 1859: 645-46). And twenty years earlier, de Musset had already expressed the existential torment of the *enfants du siècle*, prisoners of an early manifestation, but one in which we certainly recognize ourselves, of *presentism*: «There remained for them therefore only the present, the spirit of the century, the angel of twilight, which is neither night nor day [...] The anguish of death entered their souls at the sight of this spectre, half mummy, half fetus» (de Musset 1888: 9). A «generation-certainly that of the 1930s and 1940s-that had seen a world collapse, was detached from the past and doubted the future» (Pauwels, Bergier 2017: 6). It would not be the last but it was the first to experience at the same time the loss of an anchorage to the past and of hope in the future. It was, after all, the second «Crisis of European Mind» after that of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when the West had gone «from stability to movement» (Hazard 2019: 1). Writers and philosophers – from Balzac to Leopardi to Schopenhauer – warned early on of the cracks that had opened in the belief in futures and progress. Historians got there a little later. The breaking point is represented by the “deplorable revolution” – these are Thierry’s words – of ‘48. Deplorable because the European bourgeoisies are brutally confronted with the fact that history may have unpleasant surprises in store for them. «Now – this is still Thierry speaking – this history I no longer understand. The present has upset my ideas about the past and, even more so, about the event. I have lost my faith in history and, what I never thought possible, also my political faith» (Thierry 1850:). After ‘48, the *Bourgeois Philosophy of History* (Horkheimer 1993) is in essence moribund although faith in the future and in a progressive history will have jolts of vitality in the phases of most rapid scientific, technical and economic development such as the *Belle Époque* or

the years of the Economic Boom after World War II. We could say that from the second half of the 19th century we are already in an essentially postmodern context, characterized by a *presentist* or, if you prefer, polychronic and hybrid consciousness of time. What the literature calls “classical modernity” or even modernity *sans phrase* was perhaps but a brief transitional phase during which Western culture tried, by ingeniously readjusting an intellectual instrumentation inherited from its classical and Christian past, to make sense of an incipient, gigantic transformation that was radically transforming its relationship with other civilizations and nature itself.

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