



## Present Times Concerning Things Past: On Recent Conceptions of Memory

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„Wer nicht von dreitausend Jahren  
Sich weiß Rechenschaft zu geben,  
Bleib im Dunkeln unerfahren,  
Mag von Tag zu Tage leben.”

J. W. v. Goethe

After sketching modern experiences and visions of historicity, the present study outlines two fundamental modes of our relationship to present time and memory. In an ideal typical way, two theoretical conceptions are contrasted for this purpose. A radical system theory of time presumes that there has been a rupture in the human temperament, which has opened our understanding of time functionally by focusing in an accelerating manner on the future. The cultural memory paradigm asserts the existence of the individual as a genuine part of remembering communities, who draws orientations from the past. In the terms of the Hegelian philosophy of history, we have here the pragmatic representation of the past for the sake of efficiency on the one hand and the search for an internal order of the most heterogeneous events for the sake of discovering continuity in human activity on the other.

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In this essay, I pose questions concerning time and, more narrowly, the ways in which, recently, we have come, essentially, to relate to our memories. I begin with a presentation of the modern shift in historical consciousness (1) and then, based on a theoretical design outlined by G.W.F. Hegel in his philosophy of history (2), offer a discussion of two fundamentally different concepts of time and memory which strive to grasp in a consistent ideal-typical way the potentials of the modern era for assessing perspectives of time. Both take the present as their point of departure, but they assign different roles to the past. One presumes that there has been a rupture in the human temperament (3), while the other firmly asserts the existence of the individual as a genuine part of communities (4). Among the ways in which we relate to past, a third possibility also recurrently appears, but it seeks a radical withdrawal from the world of events.

### *Modern Experiences and Visions of Historicity*

In an era marked by a seemingly infinite proliferation of differences which, according to diagnoses based on the most varied approaches, break the inner and outer human world into spheres that seem increasingly independent of one another, a longing for continuity and interconnection among the pieces emerges with renewed strength. In a life-world of “contingency” and “fragmentation”, which on a temporal horizon that has been brought into motion both sensually and spiritually strike an era named (without any classification of events based on content) modernity, the search for orientation falters between the present and the past in order to gain perspective for the future, which is regarded as open. But neither the present, which is permanently in motion, nor the past, which is seen as inexhaustible, offers any certainties that seem beyond doubt.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, these empiric and semantic changes of historicity only cause problems of immediate urgency for a manner of relating to the world that seeks to situate itself in time, as it were. Greek antiquity significantly aspired to attain solid models (“ideas” and “forms”) considered eternal and therefore worthy of imitation, so that it could realize them in evanescent time. The Judeo-Christian notion of divine “providence” sacralized some of the events of the world into a story of redemption, but it could only give them religious significance with the appeal to faith in the idea that “nothing happens except by the will of God.” For the early Christian, the existence of the Roman empire was for the most part an uninteresting contingency: the “heavenly city” was an inner issue.<sup>2</sup> The man of the time did not have a developed sense of the theological significance of the prevailing order of the imperial milieu, much as there was no real recognition of the thought of the broad historical horizon and the fertile social soil as a potential sociological precondition of the spread of the new religion. Anticipations aligned with the presence of the “end of times,” which seemed to be prefigured and were indeed institutionally represented. The primary reference points of memory, however, were given by the correlation of the history of the Jewry, which was led by God, to the events of the last days in the life of Jesus as promises fulfilled.

As the Western world becomes increasingly open to purely secular approaches (on the basis in part of its own—political, scientific etc.—efforts

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1 See e.g. Makropoulos, *Modernität und Kontingenz*.

2 Augustine: *De Civitate Dei*, Books XVII–XVIII. Important exceptions include Origen (III) and Orosius (IV–V).

and in part of the gradual consent of religion),<sup>3</sup> for a long time people thought to find valid handholds in time, seeing themselves on the heights of development as they progressed along a path from a rudimentary but clearly identifiable past to a valuable near-future, designated from the outset. The philosophy of history projects of the modern era unfold the large-scale whole that continues to hold together the spheres of the world that function according to independent principles: global economic growth, global political unification attains in the universal world history the consummation of the principles of humanity that are claimed and hoped to be general. History understood in the singular, as the notion of a unity that goes beyond the multitude of separate histories, can develop as the horizon of humanity, rich with meaning.<sup>4</sup>

From a rather formal perspective (in other words beyond geographical, historical, economic, and ideal elements), the birth of “modernity” seems just to begin with the discovery of temporality, understood in the strict sense: the future can be filled with acts that are seen as not bound to the past, in terms of the experience and anticipation of a kind of “never has been before.”<sup>5</sup> The logical foundation of this idea and also its philosophical-historical cornerstone is an understanding of the original temporality of human existence. All this attains its fully developed form in the existentialist projects of the “moments” that require life-shaping decisions and personal “life plans,” as the task of the person “thrown into the world.”

Of course, the rise of a genuine historical consciousness always sees the phenomena of culture either as in an incipient form or in decline and ruin. The search for that what is generally valid is thrown into suspicion afresh by the always possible critique that can on its own terrain attack reason and rationality as the supposedly highest authority. Herder’s caution was made at a time when the most ambitious world history projects were forming: “in a certain respect, every human perfection is national, secular, and, if most closely considered, individual.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the questions concerning “essence” are replaced by the question concerning “formation” and “development”: metaphysics loses its priority of place to genealogy. The longing for the unified and the unconditional have ever since been washed away again and again by the unpredictable whirlpool of history, from which religious faith, which is increasingly considered irrational

3 On these processes, see Max Weber’s study on Protestant Ethic.

4 See Koselleck, “Historia magistra vitae,” 26–42.

5 Koselleck, “*Neuzeit*,” 222–54.

6 Herder, “Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit,” 509.

compared to the rationalities of the world, continues to seek a way out, stepping from the familiar relevances of the world of everyday life into other worlds of meaning.<sup>7</sup> Reflection taken to the power of infinity has captured the generalness of principled thinking, and in its cunningness and refinement it is capable of finding—i.e. “reflecting”—everything in everything. The strength of and hope in unity is shattered by plurality, both in the inner and the outer worlds. What was once held to be the unity of reason unravels into a diversity of rationalities, which remain a worthy object of renewed attempts to make rational insights.<sup>8</sup>

The formula offered a century ago by Jacob Burckhardt, who pondered the nature of world history, today is only occasionally overwritten by visions of history garbed in scholarly guise: “history, that is coordination, is not-philosophy, and philosophy, that is subordination, is not-history.”<sup>9</sup> Every exit from this circle of thought is “transcendence” in the most original sense of the word. Intellectual efforts to join the various worlds are given new momentum again and again by the human will for comprehensive unity and meaning.

The impossibility of an inner-worldly desertion from time, in other words the impossibility of a perspective that allows for total overview, makes reality accessible only through mediations and furthermore makes knowledge of that what happened a process that can never come to conclusion. Giving up on post-metaphysical aspirations that are bound to theories of knowledge or to the clarifying of the capabilities of human reason, the craft of interpretation, which comes near to the status of an art, gains ground under the label of “hermeneutics”. In the process of thinking on thinking, the one-time and present sights of the world appear as “concepts” or “visions” of the world. The relationship between facts and interpretations is increasingly reversed: according to the most logically consistent formula, “there is no such thing as a pure fact” and every fact is an interpretation from the outset.<sup>10</sup> For reason, which itself is becoming a historically situated phenomenon, progressively unfolding world-*understanding* consistently proves to be renewed world-*interpretation*. Knowledge put into human molds is a world-transforming achievement. Thus, sources also do not speak for themselves, but always wait to be called on by the present

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7 Schütz, “On Multiple Realities,” 207–59.

8 Schnädelbach, *Vernunft*, 137.

9 Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, 17.

10 For the most extreme position, see White, *The Content of the Form*. According to White, the same series of events can be narrated legitimately in the most varied genres, from the satire to the tragedy, the comedy, and the romance.

to speak. Perspectives are offered by our own subjective relevances: setting out from them, the infinite plenitude of events, which in itself is structureless and unbroken, takes form. The way in which one relates to the past is always established in the present, and this makes it impossible, for reasons of principle, for consciousness today to draw a clear line between the two. If now it is not the past—the pure past, as it existed before it was discerned—that survives for the actual present, then the “enigma” of time is centered in the present, instead of the historical-philosophical future, which bore the hypothetical potential of fulfilling everything.

Saint Augustine’s famous arguments, which in his thinking still fit in the context of the development of an inner man who maintains a direct relationship with God, preshadow with a force that lasts to the present day our most modern way of relating to time: „But even now it is manifest and clear that there are neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a *time present concerning things past*; a *time present concerning things present*; and a *time present concerning things future*. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is *memory*; the time present of things present is *sight*; the time present of things future is *expectation*.”<sup>11</sup>

According to this understanding, past, present, and future are three aspects of a *present* in which difference has arisen even with regards to itself. If time, as the “expansion of the soul”, is an inner matter for man, there is in principle nothing to prevent the internal rift of “time present concerning things present” from becoming deeper, and the reflective-intellectual work of centuries does indeed attain this. The transformation of the idea that everything has an ordained time and that the rhythm of events beats at a consistent tempo, into an eternal-human “form of observation” (Kant) was crowned by the notion of time as a continuously shifting pattern of human relations and our shared simultaneities and non-simultaneities as a well-articulated symbolic order.<sup>12</sup> The present, which had once been regarded as a direct given, thus becomes the present of the “contemporary-world” (“Mitwelt”), invested with meanings, while the past that is suited to the present is a “predecessor-world” (“Vorwelt”), ever more distant in the generational chain and continuously shifting in its significance.<sup>13</sup>

11 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI/20.

12 Cf. Elias, *Über die Zeit*.

13 Schütz, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, 129.

The relationship to the past is humanly nurtured “culture”; the ever shifting manner of dealing with time is a question of “strategy.” According to this, the main question concerning our current manner of relating to the past—beyond the idea of mere mapping, which increasingly counts as little more than an illusion—is not the dependency of historical knowledge on point of view, but the actual weight of the present in comparison with what has taken place, or, conversely, the power of historical awareness to shape the present.

### *A Hegelian Typology of Grasping History*

In the introduction to the most broad philosophical world history ever written, Hegel offers an overview of the possible ways of writing history. Thus, “reflexive history” goes beyond the naïve primitiveness of the great masters of history writing, who dissolved in their own present. This reflexive history extends from the simple anachronism through *a pragmatic representation of the past* to the *search for the internal order and unity of events* in a given circle of humanity. The philosophical approach, which supposes a reasonable progression of events, steps up onto the highest rung of history so that its presupposition prove necessarily true in the coherent progression of events and their presentation.

The treatment of the past, which was becoming a matter of scholarship, seeing the a-historical unfairnesses and totalistic consequences of absolute measures, devoted itself increasingly to the partial interconnections of inner-worldly events, and, in the thrall of “pure facts,” for a long time it considered the discovery of the “actual” events its primary task. Science, which was more sensitive to differences, ruptures, and omissions, demonstrates the fictional nature of the intellectual edifices of unity. However, for self-reflective historical consciousness, a reading of the memory traces that have palpably survived increasingly proved a form of reconstructive work done on the basis of the sources. The abstractive gestures of science proceed from the primary constructions of the everyday world, constructions with which the debate community, which is skeptical of everyday evidence, is incapable of breaking entirely, its experience in practical “disinterestedness” notwithstanding.<sup>14</sup> Because of the uninterruptible dialectic of terms and events, history writing that aspires towards universality itself remains in part in the sphere of influence

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14 Ibid., 245–59.

of the retrospective “mastering of the past.” Any deposit of the past, whatever form it takes, cannot be definitive.

Regarding the hierarchy of cognizance established by Hegel, the paths to direct accessibility of events and the discernment of their necessity in the meantime have been obstructed. Two possible procedural perspectives remain in the potential spaces of recollection, more narrowly understood: the effectiveness of memories correlated to particular (economic, political, religious, or even artistic) partial presents in the respective environment and, on the other hand, the horizon of meaning of the commemorated past, again and again contoured from the present. Although both projects use the implements of historical criticism, the focus of the first is actuality, which ensures functionality, by excluding memories that are dispensable to this. The focus of the latter is the manifold presence of guarded and concealed pasts, and the derivation of the future from some kind of origin.<sup>15</sup> As we will see, all this is not independent of our possible ways of relating to ourselves either.

According to an originally sociological insight, the sense of acceleration which comes from the proliferation of groups which transect one another in a single individual brings a new rhythm to the succession of events in the past and the succession of events today. The apocalyptic attitude bound the fulfillment of promises to the merciful arrival of the end times and the unexpected curtailing of history. Among the driving forces of the acceleration, which is also self-propelling, the faith in the expedient transformability of a progressive world is intertwined with the intensification of traffic and the proliferation of contacts. The increase in contents of consciousness for a single unit of time and the rapid change in patterns of behavior and associations have brought about an “intensification of sensed-life” and in general a fundamental transformation of human time.<sup>16</sup> In any case, the shocking experience of the compression of the present, which is experienced as something in a continuous state of acceleration, assails with tremendous force the tradition of learning from continuous narratives.<sup>17</sup> History loses its quality and role as teacher: expectations concerning the future cannot be derived on the basis of acquired experiences. The new present—according to the first project, which is becoming more and more dominant—selects the

15 On the latter thought see Marquard, “Zukunft und Herkunft,” 45–58.

16 See Rosa, *Beschleunigung*, 243. Koselleck, “Gibt es eine Beschleunigung der Geschichte?,” and idem, “Zeitverkürzung und Beschleunigung,” 150–202. Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes*, 696, and idem: “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben,” 227.

17 See Rushkoff, *The Present Shock*. Nyíri, “Historical Consciousness in the Computer Age,” 75–83.

requisite accessories of functioning in the spirit of efficacy, if necessary even from the distant past. Our strategic use of time fits well into the frameworks of a manner of relating to the world based on domination—while in the servile dialectic of human and time it is increasingly difficult to find a handhold.

### *The Forgetful Memory of Efficacy*

Let us consider for a moment the first option: systems theory sociologist Niklas Luhmann has provided the most consistent theoretical examination and at the same time self-reflective look at the *pragmatic perspective*. Each of the social system-worlds, which are increasingly separating from one another, is built on a particular distinction: according to a bivalent code, it selects or—more precisely—creates its own elements, events, and borders in its separation from its immeasurable environment. Science selects truth, economics selects the profitable, religion selects the transcendent in the face of falsehood, the unprofitable, and the immanent, and so on and so on in each of the various systems of the system-worlds. In the meantime, communication embraces the systems, which are closed within themselves, i.e. they are “self-referential”: the borders of the social world are denoted by the borders of communication. If continuity is thus nothing more than the bearing of the systems on themselves, then the task is the connection of the communicative acts that are just taking place to the previous ones in the interests of maintaining the own system.

The system functionings, however, are no longer structured into a unity by any central ordering project. In Luhmann’s model, the systemic place of identity is occupied ever more consistently by difference: the abstract and paradoxical fundamental principle is “the difference of identity and difference”.<sup>18</sup> Correspondingly, the divergent motions, which since they were first discerned have been expressed with metaphors of “fragmentariness,” “fluidity,” and “mobility”, find structured theoretical form as “differentiation”. The systems, which become independent without any internal relation, live their own, separate times, so to speak, which for the personal experience of the world finds manifestation in the impossibility of harmonizing individually and communally the spheres of life. Various system times of varying pace and rhythm come into being between the cosmic world-time and the personal lifetime, which are of differing scales from the outset. The simultaneous multitude of non-simultaneous

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18 See Luhmann: *Soziale Systeme*, 26.



system presents compete for the inclusion of the communicating participants—i.e. even for their creation as communicational partners. For “psychical systems” (which were once called “consciousnesses”), which also count as independent (because they function within their own spheres of thought), participation in the various projects renders establishing and ordering themselves within the temporal differences of the many kinds of present an increasingly unmanageable task: hindering the dispersion of differentiation, in other words synchronizing the presents, is a challenge that puts the “psychical system” to the test. The increasingly fast-paced differentiation of the systems, which by this time are preoccupied with themselves, place our own observational position (which distinguishes the task immediately to be performed from all tasks that must be neglected) under ever stronger pressure to select. “Not to act is lost time.”<sup>19</sup> Complexity, which continues to build with ongoing differentiation, features the omitted selections as postponable. But while the future which belongs to the prevailing present becomes unattainable, as it were (and bears an ever larger quantity of decisions),<sup>20</sup> it contracts and becomes increasingly short because of the increasingly uncertain expectations. The evolutionary logic of the process of variation, selection, and stabilization may imply temporality, but the necessity of maintaining the system does not tolerate delay.

In the present which has become permanent not only the “future cannot begin,”<sup>21</sup> the continuous communicational uncertainties of the continued functioning of the systems make uncertain the status of the past. For the systems, “now”, which becomes ever shorter in the difference between “before” and “after”, borrows a kind of eternal present tense without duration: the diminution of the duration of the elements to a point—already ephemeral in their moment of coming into being—is an elementary interest adequate to the irreversibility of time.<sup>22</sup> If the present is now the paradoxical unity of the difference of the past and the future, the possible point of origin of novelty,<sup>23</sup> then for the assurance of functionality the past appears less and less as the present reality of what has taken place. The past which has been chosen by the system as its own (a past which for a long time was called “tradition”) thus can reach the present, but its contents, depth, and pace continuously change

19 Idem, “Temporalisierung von Komplexität,” 280.

20 Idem, *Soziale Systeme*, 70.

21 Idem, “The Future Cannot Begin,” 130–52.

22 See idem, “Temporalisierung von Komplexität,” 242, 296.

23 Idem, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1004.

according to the exigencies of the given present. For the time of the *everyday*, the ever-developing technology of data storage, which is increasingly incapable of forgetting, tends to account for *historical* time, while the appeal to history becomes an incidental question. For the principle of functionality, the *historical-causal* continuity of the past is merely a question of expedience. Because of the inexhaustibility of causal interconnections, the selection of reasons that would be worthy of being taken into consideration in a given case falls, furthermore, to the incidental observer.<sup>24</sup>

If, however, in the compression of time the present continues to lose its expansure, how does the space for memory take form? The re-use of successful experiences—in other words the selection of what has been selected before, the repetition of tried and tested differentiations—of course is possible anytime under favorable circumstances; in this way, the self-regulating system wins time, so to speak. The intensification of complexity, however, increasingly hampers a purely redundant self-creation. Thus, according to the explanation given by the systems theory sociology of knowledge, instead of a differentiation between the tranquility of eternity and the restlessness of change, a model origin and uncertain transformations, in the historical approach of the modern era a temporalized self-description of society appears and comes to culmination. As we already know, history “comes into being if observation of socially important events is made with consideration of the difference of before and after.”<sup>25</sup> Historical consciousness lets the present emerge out of the past, but—paradoxically—it finds the only possible identity on constantly shifting differences. Instead of spatiality, the semantics of temporality corresponds well to the functional differentiations of the social world: the sense for “formations” and the “processes” that gave rise to them (instead of the “essence” of “things”) and “originality” (instead of “origin”) become information for the present. Memory does not seek orientation simply in historical succession, but rather it makes its way towards an understanding of the past which makes the present visible as a “space for action,” in which the novelty of the future can be born of novelties past. The problems of the actual present are none other than the always peculiar differences between the past and the future. Seen from the perspective of systems theory, the demand for continuous rewriting of the past (a demand

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24 Ibid., 1011.

25 Ibid., 573.

striving for originality) stems from the search for novelty hidden in the one-time evolutionary variations, i.e. ruptures.

Given all this, it is hardly coincidental that Luhmann closes his presentation of the eventually timeless evolutionary logic of systems with a discussion of memory.<sup>26</sup> The presentism of system memory that prevails in the name of functionality makes selections from the endless material with consideration of the functioning of the given system: it forgets anything and everything that it doesn't happen to need at the moment and remembers only the one thing that gives continued momentum to communication. Thus, the primary function of memory is, paradoxically, forgetting, even if the self-description of society continues to the present day to be wrong about this. The stakes are not the coherence of events, but rather the consistency of the systems which is open to new impulses and disturbances—a consistency, which in the social world sometimes can even be served by historical coherence. However, with the obstruction of forgetting, the culmination of earlier results into “identity” can lead to the destruction of the system. Recently, the concept of “culture” has been called on, as the horizon of comprehensive comparisons (instead of stable identity), to ensure at least similarity, in spite of every difference. Culture, as a vessel that is formless in and of itself, is supposed to receive world contents, but at most it is capable of duplicating them by their external observation. Today's “culture” of the past is the memory of the social system, which of course is quite aware of its character as memory. This twofold reflection, the consideration of what has been bequeathed as tradition, sheds light on the double contingency of the particular past: that it could have evolved differently, and something else could have been selected. With ordered remembering (for instance the guidance of historical comparisons), culture tries to adapt to the increasingly complex social system-world. Systems thinking instead calls on us to observe “who uses what differentiations in order to offer his past for the future.”<sup>27</sup>

In society understood as communication, instead of the bearer of memory, whether personal or group, the media of memory become important.<sup>28</sup> Writing steps past the narrow sphere of oral communication, which is bound to rites and formulas, and the potentials of repetition as means of maintenance. With its tremendous power to record, it makes the improbable probable and ensures

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26 Ibid., 576.

27 Luhmann: “Kultur als historischer Begriff,” 41, and idem: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 587, citation 593.

28 On the undermentioned, Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, and Esposito, *Soziales Vergessen*.

the connection of the communicational events that are just beginning with those that preceded them. If time can no longer be organized by acts committed eye to eye, then “previous” events can be taken from the most distant past if a written trace of them has survived. *Concrete* time, which comes into being in the duality of events transpiring and events completed, point-like and continuous, and is considered essentially spatial, is succeeded by the *abstraction* of the distance between eternity and temporality: the increasing validity of the increasingly distant texts thus creates transcendence. In the wake, however, of the process by which the revival from the archives of contents that were recorded earlier (in other words memory) becomes increasingly independent of the circumstances of their birth, not only do untouchable canons come into being, but, ever more distant from the sacral centers, the arbitrary application of the written word becomes possible. In recent times, the increasingly independent systems of the mass media have realized this potential, which was always inherent in writing, amidst circumstances of increasingly open access. Since everything that ever happened and is now happening can be present in an accessible manner for anyone in timeless simultaneity, the past counts exclusively as re-presentation. The communications that exist in a continuous present increasingly distinguish the information of “novelty” from the redundancies of that which is “old,” which is why it is increasingly difficult for the past to find any settled form.

Naturally, the logic of differences does not leave the *deliberate* observer (the participant in and observer of events) untouched. What was once “man” proves to be a plethora of systems: the internal life of his consciousness separates from his social participation in communicational systems on the basis of principle. Only the self-interpretations of eras that were built on less efficacious differentiations (up/down, us/them, man/world) could cling to the idea of the unified consistency and continuous content of people and groups.

### *The Committed Remembrance of Significance*

Turning now to one of the characteristic recent versions of *some internal order and unity of events*, amidst the newest precepts of thinking concerning the possibilities of cognition, even the project of “cultural memory” can no longer abandon the perspective of the present. In an era of intensifying differences, however, the overview of the present can be ensured not only by the pragmatics of systemic persistence but also by passing the temporal paths that lead to us. By abandoning any unconditional cognition for its own sake, we make the past that

is significant for us the object of our own perspectives. The designated objects are selected by interest that is alleged to be shared from the endless quantity of material. We mold the phenomena that surround us into some kind of unity with regard to their antecedents. In our time, with its eminent interest in history, the things that are thus uncovered also play a role in the memory of the world that lies beyond the scientific world, namely as a story built into the present. The present acts of memory in this approach evoke historical determinations or at least conditions. Jan Assmann opposes his own project of “cultural memory” with the presentism of forgetting, on the basis of the “non-simultaneity of that what is simultaneous”.<sup>29</sup>

“Tradition” is one of the antecedents of the search for historical continuity, i.e. the notion of preserving and passing on the bequeathed. The modern project of education and refinement (*Bildung*) as omni-sided self-development establishes as its goal both reception of the broadest register of cultural phenomena and the creative transformation of the world, seeking a balance between the two that is not defined from up close.<sup>30</sup> For philosophical history, which in the end strives to seize the indispensable whole of past, present, and future, “self-conscious rationality” is nothing other than the setting for rational development, “the saint chain that crosses events past.” Tradition understood thusly gushes onward across shared material and intellectual/spiritual edifices.<sup>31</sup> However, this totality, though in motion, proved impossible for humankind to carry.

For the doubts concerning the transfer of what has been entrusted to us and the questions of content concerning balance continue to proliferate if transience assails the reliability of the processes of cognition at the roots. The clarification of knowledge, which is to say the movements of the modern era that seek to lay its general foundations, throw into question first and foremost the original prestige of ancientness and the higher value of historical developments, in the midst of the external breaking of the old orders. The fundamental operation of reliable foundations and at the same time free self-determination will be an abstraction increasingly independent of contexts. However, at almost the same time, adherence to transformations characterized as “organic development” and the consciousness of crisis, which because of the uncertainties has come to rule, raises the value of the ideal of tradition. The counter-movement of

29 Assmann, “Nachwort,” 400–14.

30 See for instance Friedrich Schiller’s letters on Humanism and aesthetic education in: Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education*, 53–57.

31 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie 1*, 21.

historical Romanticism in the end undertakes the creation of tradition, expecting an artificial stability even from invented traditions.<sup>32</sup> In the end, however, the consequentiality of dehistoricization can unveil every order of historical interconnection as mere construct.

With the reappraisal of the techniques of hermeneutics, a lastly philosophical project came into being that—reckoning with the inaccessibility of “the world as it is in itself”—seeks knowledge amidst the recent conditions of mediatedness. In accordance with the genuine interpretedness of our manner of relating to the world, the interconnections of meaning or “webs of significances” (C. Geertz) end up in the competencies of man analyzing the stock of historical tradition, and himself mirrored in it. The art of hermeneutics, which presupposes ambiguity, developed into a comprehensive interpretive culture. For Gadamer, the last stop of the search for a path in multiplicity, which could be reached by the bypass of “foreignness,” was the “fusion of horizons”: “even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and combines with the new to create a new value.”<sup>33</sup> The culture of hermeneutics, the roots of which lie in the sacred texts of the Western world (and which became a proper way of life because of continuous and inevitable translation work), presents connection with the ever increasing rows of traditions and the bearers of tradition as unavoidable.<sup>34</sup> The fact that even reason becomes first historical and then linguistic shows the enormous power of history over our thinking.

“Narrated” or “remembered” pasts strive ever more to compensate for the present’s loss of orientation.<sup>35</sup> Disenchanted history in singular proliferates into histories of meaning. Identity must draw its limited substance from stories that establish a future, at the risk of untranslatability and un-interpretability. Both anxiety and foresight motivate the manner of relating to the world (which is increasingly resigned, even in despite of any engagement), which takes on the particular having-become as its own past. Time is not a constant category of human reason, but rather a form of meaning with varying rhythm and density

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32 See for instance Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions,” and idem: “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” 1–14, and 263–308.

33 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 286.

34 See Reinhard, “Die hermeneutische Lebensform des Abendlandes,” 68.

35 On the notion of compensation see Ritter, “Die Aufgabe der Geisteswissenschaften in der modernen Gesellschaft,” 105–40.

which, against the background of intended and unintended events, is formed by common interpretations.<sup>36</sup>

For the memory paradigm of coherence, the adequate manner of relating to the past is a continuous reconstruction of the interconnections of meaning of events bearing on us. According to the memory sociology of Maurice Halbwachs, which became something of a project paradigm itself, this task, which is indispensable from the perspective of the present, was always guided by the prevailing demands of groups. Time, born as social reality, is organized by the present, commonly lived and inhabited by the members of the group: thus everything falls out from it that, lacking meaning, does not settle within the actual referential frameworks of group life. The force of memory derives not from the past, but from the need for belonging. The place won in the community of memory, which is born as a community rooted in common sentiments and dispositions, ensures everyone who belongs to it spatial substance and temporal content.<sup>37</sup>

Jan Assmann regards the past that is embedded in face to face contact, i.e. the vistas of communication that can be seen for three generations, as the broadest possible accessible situation of “culture.”<sup>38</sup> The present of cultural memory can relate not only to the recent past of which account is held in immediate social interaction, but also to the “groundwater-deep”<sup>39</sup> past that is preserved (or, even on the contrary, not preserved!) in memory.<sup>40</sup> With the passing of the participants in conversations about things lived as experiences, the process of the condensation of meaning begins, a process that never comes to a close: “there is no such thing as original memory.”<sup>41</sup> “Objective” culture, which has been placed in formed configurations (in other words, culture that has been objectified and institutionalized, the historicized successor to the “objective spirit” of philosophical history), is not an unambiguous message, but rather an intricately manifold world of symbols. The ever changing horizon of meaning

36 See Rüsen: “Was heißt: Sinn der Geschichte, 17–47. Assmann touches on this: Ägypte, 11.

37 Assmann on Halbwachs for instance, “Erinnern, um dazuzugehören. Schrift“ 101–23. Halbwachs on time, *La mémoire collective*, Chapter 3.

38 In his last book touching on this Halbwachs also makes this step, which covers some two-thousand years: *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte*.

39 Cf. Thomas Mann’s famous opening sentence in his Joseph-tetralogy: „Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit.“

40 Assmann devoted a separate book to Thomas Mann’s religious theory “book of time,” *Joseph and his Brothers*.

41 Assmann, *Exodus*, 101. Also Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 40.

of a given life (acts and experiences) comes into new connections again and again with past events in order to nourish the present with (his)stories of origins, i.e. history made into myth by memory. Acts and experiences take place within the frameworks of the historical world of meaning, which are always in motion.

The memory of the most ancient groups, preserved in rituals and linguistic formula, connected experiences to the foundational mythical ancient time with little more than a few mediatory chain links, thus creating and maintaining their ties and engagements.<sup>42</sup> Festive gatherings lend the significant cadence, which is significant because it always returns as common experience. Writing lends true depth to time, which thus passes less and less in the spirit of the eternal and unchangeable repetition of everything. In contrast with the bards, who are interested in memory literally repeated, the faith of the literate man insists not on the unerrability of what is recited, but rather on some kind of meaning in what is written. Instead of volatile words, re-readable writings contain the treasure chest of meaning, which for groups comprised of individuals is opening to be ever more broad: the contents that can be revived, i.e. that are hoped to be alive. The administrative tool of writing, which in all likelihood was created for everyday storage, becomes a tool for orientation in the cosmic world, which is identified with its own world. In other words, it becomes the setting for culture, understood as cultural memory. This is how writing dons the sanctity of a solemnity that goes beyond the everyday.

Regarding the new manner of relating to time, the fact that writing can be resumed, continued, or forgotten and lost of course induces change, and makes us more sensitive to change. In the emerging written culture, a veritable stream of texts begins to flow in the ceaseless rewriting, writing anew, and continued writing towards inundation. While the ever growing distance of what has been recorded makes it possible to step out of the direct bonds, it also sanctifies unmoveable and inviolable canons. In other words, it designates obligatory points of reference for every cultural practice, which then, driven in part by the fear of the passing of the community of its origins, are taken in hand by the activity centered on the cultivation of meaning, which is tailored to the exigencies of the changing present. The sharpness of the borders drawn in the world of the mentality depends mostly on the intensity of the external or internal threats to the culture perceived as one's "own" and the experiences of

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42 On the following see Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 29–160, and idem: "Was ist das 'kulturelle Gedächtnis?'" 11–44.



rupture. Actual conflicts and sharper differentiations can be projected on each other with increasing intensity. And if history begins to become temporal, the counter-realities that are excluded with counter-concepts can be characterized as belonging exclusively to the past, which from time to time degenerates into their expulsion from the present.<sup>43</sup>

In the end, however, it is not the “spirit of writing” that decides our relationship to events. Slowing the pace of change and maintaining momentum are both cultural accomplishments. One of the functions of the Egyptian list of kings was to show that over the course of the millennia that had passed since the end of the era of the gods nothing worthwhile had happened. The need for power to rest on descent or inheritance could find a strong buttress in the notes of the initiated specialists of memory, notes which were intended either to give an impression of timelessness or to serve forgetfulness. In contrast, individualities and particularities that were considered significant gave impetus to the institutionalization of movement: this intellectual attitude, which served essentially as the foundation for historical consciousness, can be tied most adequately to expectations and hopes of oppressed situations.

The newest form of a genuine relationship between memory and identity is the attempts to draw ourselves from historical time: immersion into ourselves is also immersion into histories. Our culture has thus widely become a culture of memory, in which the self-image of the people and collectives remembering is formed by the events that have taken place involving them and the narratives of these events. Historical memory has become the primary forum for self-assertion and self-preservation, which makes historical developments (which always demand reconstruction) internal. It is not simply that “we are what we remember,” but rather, according to the consequentiality of the idea of historicity, because of the fundamentally temporal nature of our being, we strive to acquire knowledge of ourselves first and foremost by narrating histories. In the orderly system of narratives, we assure ourselves again and again of “our own roots and goals, truths and dreams.”<sup>44</sup>

Historical memory borne in communities of meaning is thus called on to mediate between “facts” and “reconstructions”: to create, through rereading, the order of common experiences. Giving up on grand narratives, it strives to look both forwards and backwards in histories that can be narrated, driven by

43 On the latter idea see Koselleck, “The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts,” 155.

44 Assmann, *Exodus*, 10.

the compulsion for ever-changing re-narration. Today, historical scholarship is also taking part in the debates concerning the work of memory, with greater sensitivity to ruptures instead of continuity and plurality instead of unity. This distinctive positive reassessment of history is tied to precursors from cultural Protestantism. Christianity understood as cultural history seeks to convince itself of its own absoluteness in the face of the relativizing force of history: we should become that which the fertile forces of the West enable us to be.<sup>45</sup>

However, according to Assmann's exemplary case study, the more distant socio-cultural precursors of our preeminent culture of memory are to be sought in the biblical narrative: the primal model and foundational story for our historically based culture of memory is the story of the exodus from Egypt.<sup>46</sup> For Israel, the meaningful form of time is determined by the significance-rich stories of the wanderings with God. The anthropological-cultural factor of memory here is filled with significant contents not by the closedness of a cosmic order, but rather by a process guided by the divine. The compactness of culture, in which power and salvation, truth and righteousness come together in a unity that in principle cannot be broken,<sup>47</sup> breaks open in ancient Israel. The plethora of inscriptions recording the behavioral prescriptions in the late Egyptian temple protect the ancient Egyptian regulations of life from change, even in the midst of threats and experiences of foreignness.<sup>48</sup> In contrast with the community that has been anchored in the cosmos and with its self-image, which in the end has become iconographically stabilized, the notion of continuity developing in created and creating time is an achievement of world-historical importance. The narrative books of the biblical redaction draw the bearings of the own essence and proper action not from some unhistorical primal time, but rather from the datable past. The commandment to remember in Deuteronomy is a paradigm of unity and belonging that is drawn from the events of this world (significant time-myths). In the soil of political vicissitudes and historical traumas, in the wake of the unraveling of the framework-precepts of the old order of meaning, they recall the memory of a covenant that was reached with a divine party but

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45 In one of the most determined projects of prevailing over historicism *within* history, theologian Ernst Troeltsch claims to find the indisputable superiority of Christianity in his comparative study of the whole of history. At this point, Christian theology becomes cultural scholarship. See Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, and Graf-Hartmut Rüdiger, "Ernst Troeltsch: Geschichtsphilosophie in praktischer Absicht," 128.

46 Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 196–228, most recently in idem, *Exodus*.

47 Idem, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, 177, and idem, *Herrschaft und Heil*.

48 Idem, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 177.

which in the meantime has been forgotten.<sup>49</sup> God remains faithful to the people led out of the counter-world of Egypt and keeps his promise to its descendants. According to the account, which is of dubious historical credibility, the book of the covenant, which unexpectedly rises from oblivion, prompts the shaken king Josiah to return to Yahweh. The powerful stories of sinfulness and liberation become symbolic figures of memory, which originally were born by a kingdom striving to assert legitimacy and a small monotheistic religious movement. In opposition to the terror of forgetting, it becomes necessary to develop a technology of memory that chisels into the heart.<sup>50</sup> The history is made theology by the counter-stories of figures of commemoration of liberation. The event of the covenant between God and his people demands ceaseless “chiseling into the heart, confirmation, and teaching”:<sup>51</sup> the prophets read the twists of fate as consequences of faithlessness; the everyday order of reviving memory is canonized by the continuous editorial work of the priesthood.

At the same time, Assmann performs a backtracking of the memory traces which are often beneath the surface, unconscious, or simply suppressed, by ascribing them to the primary differentiations of our own culture. Thus, light is also cast on their unfortunate consequences, consequences which intellectual attempts were made again and again to interrupt, for instance by appealing to a counter-history. The very influential counter-memory of the cosmo-theist unity set in opposition to the monotheist unity, the figure of the “Egyptian Moses,” always reemerges from memory,<sup>52</sup> which then seeks a broader Ecumene than the Mosaic distinction between true and false religion. The outlines of the structural intolerance lurking in monotheism’s demand for exclusiveness emerge out of the contrast of a counter-world based on a divergent principle (compactness in the absence of differentiation), the serious precondition of which is that the conquered are willing to correspond to the dominant pantheon, organized according to similar functions.

The theoretical withdrawal from a history highly significant for us (taken backwards in time) leads to a fundamentally different world, the time structure of which presents a different model. For the order of time valid for the world that preceded and surrounded the biblical world (i.e. for the traditional consciousness of time in ancient Egypt), the present was nothing more than the past, present

49 See for instance Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 257.

50 See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*.

51 Assmann, *Exodus*, 117, cf. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. 79, 196, and 272.

52 Idem, *Moses der Ägypter*, and idem, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung*.

in the present.<sup>53</sup> In every ruler, the predecessors continued to function in that the ruler kept both the country and the world as a whole in momentum, linking tomorrow to yesterday. The individual human life takes place with its back to the future, gazing towards the past. Gratitude felt for good deeds links it to the community, while with its acts it builds its own monument. According to morality inherent to time, the real sin is not breaking the promise concerning the future, but rather forgetting the past.<sup>54</sup> The distance from the era of mythic ancient images does not grow smaller with the passing of time. A past, strictly understood, is only supported by an unexpected break of what was, until it was ruptured, a whole. For Egypt, the foreign rule of Assyria and Persia meant the intrusion of chaos.

With regards to the aspects of time of the cultural memory of the West, in its biblical framework, the impossibility of ever bringing retrospection to a close implies a past that is always to be understood in the plural. Myth “is renewed together with every shifting present, which wins a new tinge of meaning out of it.”<sup>55</sup> Myth wins its uninterrupted renewal from the wealth of versions of memory and counter-memory, since in this wealth old and new, disclosed and obstructed, built and buried, canonical and apocryphal, orthodox and heterodox come into tension with one another.<sup>56</sup> Fundamental dualities run throughout the biblical text itself: the desert in contrast with the city, Israel in contrast with Judea, the state in contrast with religion, prophets in contrast with priests, the exclusiveness of Exodus in contrast with the universality of creation. If the subversive and excluded remain part of memory (which is often beneath the surface), then the articulation of contents bursting from the unconscious and the vanishing of narrative contents into the background never come to an end. “Even that which is new can only appear in the form of the reconstructed past.”<sup>57</sup> The alternative past, which creates a contrast with the present, creates non-synchronicity, in which the primary present can be turned out of its corners with “saving” counter-stories.<sup>58</sup>

As a countermove to the overly strong demand for coherence, the work of drawing nigh and distancing is constantly underway: in the process of narrating

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53 On the following see idem, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 261.

54 Idem, *Herrschaft und Heil*, Chapter 7.

55 Idem, *Exodus*, 101.

56 See idem, “Was ist das ‘kulturelle Gedächtnis’,” 38.

57 Idem, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 42.

58 Ibid, 78, and 222, with reference to the concept-formation of Protestant theologian Gerd Theißen, “contra-present memory”.

ourselves, we present ourselves as if in a mirror in a new history again and again. Although the project of “cultural remembering” speaks about and to the person living the present together with others as it unfolds in histories, our validities are always tied to given groups and their narrations of history, which immediately throws their origins into uncertainty. Origin as some kind of “other” who can and should be addressed is always, superfluously, at our disposal, as it were. In this model, this is the legitimate place for the intrusion of novelty. In spite of the openness to the future, this future, which structures itself through memory, is not the future of the promises of progress, but rather the future of conjurings of the past. Here, the weight of presentism rests on the present concerning things past.

The paradigmatic story of Exodus, of course, is also the Western story of the shared search for freedom.<sup>59</sup> The flight from the symbolic space of “Egypt” is the break from the bad order of servitude and the entry into the order of freedom. This revolutionary story, which is always available for retelling, is the tradition of self-liberation, the roots of which lie in tradition.

In front of finitude, commemoration pulls lines of origin towards its plans, which with regards to the handling of time is a strategy of deceleration.<sup>60</sup> The present, which bears histories, can become overburdened at any time, of course: sometimes with the tremendous compulsion of the past, sometimes with the contingency of its handholds. As a possibility that lies outside the inner-worldly transcendence of the past, the step from the changes into a transcendent state above or beyond time remains. This is an allegedly unbounded project with an existentialist self-projection into the future, in a religious or a secular manner.

### *A Concluding Remark*

On the basis of a still usable typology of G.W.F. Hegel concerning the writing of history in modernity, we have discussed two systematic theoretical attitudes to memory with very opposite relations to the past. The first one is centered preferably around forgetting for the sake of a functional efficacy, while the second draws on significant pasts for the sake of creative stability. Both theoretical programs are marked by a high grade of intellectual consistency and can thus serve even empirical investigations into our modern stance, as

<sup>59</sup> See Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*; Menke, “Die Lehre des Exodus: Der Auszug aus der Knechtschaft,” 47–54.

<sup>60</sup> See A. Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition*.

consistency, according to Max Weber, “has and always has had power over man, however limited and unstable this power is and always has been in the face of other forces of historical life”.<sup>61</sup>

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61 Gert and Mills, ed., *From Max Weber*, 324.

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