



## Histories Beyond History

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**Abstract:** Reflecting on my motives for writing *The Concept of History*, I present three negative concerns that the book was directed against: namely, the notions that, firstly, history is teleological, secondly, that it is universal, and, thirdly, that a history so construed takes on a problematic role in political decision-making. The book thus looks for an alternative to the dominant mode of historical understanding in the modern West, and it finds several such alternatives by looking at the earliest Greek historians and the ancient tradition of catalogue poetry that predates them. By attending to these examples, I show that history is always multiple and intersecting, and that it is constituted by two elements: a fabula that briefly emplots (originally orally) the names and events, and the historical, which preserves (originally in written lists) the detailed names and events. The discussion of the book is further extended by responses to the thoughtful remarks of my critics.

**Keywords:** Historical being; fabula; the historical; ahistorical and non-historical; natural history; name and image; oblivion in history; teleological history; radical novelty; the truth of history.

In its concept, history is somewhat akin to time: one seems to understand what it is, but mostly one is at a loss when thinking about history. Being always historical, it is difficult for scholars, provided it is possible at all, to fully suspend engagement with history when reflecting on it. History still enwraps humans not only by way of inescapable transience (of which we are acutely aware), but also in mankind's constant attempts to become ahistorical by way of suspending one's temporality by extending existence beyond personal vicissitudes and social inheritances.

Yet, when thinking about history, one comes to realize that history appears differently in different temporalities and instills different modes of action and thinking in oneself. One such specifically modern mode is about beginning with negativity or dissatisfaction, with the assertion that the social, political, and even the natural world is not what it should be, even if it is not yet

quite known what it should be. Hence, in *The Concept of History*, before making any suggestions about what history is or might be, I began with a set of negative concerns about what history is implicitly taken to be and how it is explicitly understood to shape our lives.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, I wanted to argue against history as teleological or as moving toward an objective pre-established end, which would also determine the laws, or at least the trends of history, and which would then be needed to understand and to follow, in order to achieve this end that eventually would make humans free, happy, and ahistorical beings. In other words, in my account history is not a history for or of the future, it is not a universal history in which every particular history with its temporality and modes of action plays the pre-

<sup>1</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. [Henceforth cited as *CH*]

established role of an actor that is meant to carry on the general plot of the assumed all-encompassing history. Since achieving the end of such a teleological history is not easy but nevertheless somehow inevitable, the plot of its unfolding goes through a historically justifiable violence on a grand scale, where historical actors need to show up on stage, play their role, and then mostly disappear under the roller of the universal history. In response to such an understanding of history, I wanted to come up with an alternative to an all-encompassing totalizing history in favor of multiple different histories, which, however, would not make the historical enterprise contingent and relativist but would allow for commonly shared historical structures across times and cultures. In this way, I intended to demystify modern universal history and show that history is present and practiced by everyone in every instant.

The modern history understood as universal takes on an authoritative role in making political decisions based on presumably rationally accountable and thus justifiable historical tendencies. Evidently, history always plays an important role in politics, yet I was troubled by the way universal teleological history has been used to justify highly problematic colonial, imperialistic, and neoliberal claims. Hence, I wanted to argue against history as apparently inevitably serving the political interest of a dominant social or political group.

In order to address these concerns that come out of a specifically modern understanding of reason, action, and practice, I started looking into non-western and non-modern ways of doing and understanding history, since, as I assumed, humans have always been historical beings, even in what was later arrogantly deemed to be prehistoric times. To my astonishment, I discovered a great wealth of such thought, but I chose to focus mostly on the early historical tradition of ancient Greece, with which I am more familiar. Here again, contrary to the later account of Greek history as coming out of the pen (or stylus) of Herodotus as the proclaimed father of history, I found two very important, yet not very well understood early historians, Hecataeus and Hellanicus, both of whom did indeed practice the kind of history I was interested in. The resulting perspective on history presented in the book derives to a great extent from an interpretation of their historical practices, as well as from the interpretation of the ancient epic poetic catalogue tradition that predates them.

The result of a close reading and analysis of these ways of constituting and transmitting history

is a concept of history that is de-centralized and de-teleologized by the practices in which humans are always involved (though mostly without noticing), still being under the spell of the universal teleological history that has colonized all other histories. In modernity, one single artificially constructed history that is progressing (or regressing) toward an inevitable preset end is a customary presupposition, even if one always lives in, is constituted by, and in turn constitutes, many different histories, that humans inhabit differently yet simultaneously.

In *The Concept of History* I do not present a general theory of history or another philosophy of history. With Giambattista Vico, I take it that history is a construction, which is always a reconstruction of the past for the sake of the present in anticipation of the future. But then, history is about the past. Present is the relived past in the mode of memory, or rather, of commonly shared recollection. And the future is not a historical but an imaginary concept, constructed on grounds of the basis of our current interpretations of the past.

Since history is never given as a whole and is always a construction, there can be many different histories. Perhaps, there might even be a history toward which specific histories converge as their normative purpose. However, I do not attempt to restore either some sort of logic regarding a possible succession of histories or a development of one universal history. I am also not claiming that everything in history is entirely accidental and contingent and that one can never learn from it. Rather, I intend to establish possible invariants of different histories, the elements of which appear in a history but by themselves might not be historical despite their shaping of specific histories.

By "history" I understand not a universal history but rather the total sum of all the histories of past and present, even if they are never accessible in their entirety. A history is a particular set of stories in which actors, things, or events are present within a sequence or a list and are connected by a common corrigible narrative that tells what has happened and also possibly suggests what might have happened and what might be expected in the future to happen.

Thus, everyone can and does live in multiple histories at the same time: personal history, familial history, professional history, institutional history, ethnic history, gender history, religious history, local history, national history, and so on. Every person and any group of people always exists in a set of histories, which can differ individually as well as across any given group.

What is important is that there are many different histories that are inhabited at the same time, which, nonetheless, also change over time. Yet I do not want to claim that historical relativism is the way to understand history – saying either that any history is equal to any other one, or that they all are incommensurable and mutually sealed off. A critical argument should always be possible in order to show that a particular social and political approach in a history is better suited for the well-being of other living beings than a different one, even if the practice of such argumentation is itself historically embedded in a set of histories in which it has been developed, practiced, and transmitted.

In this way, I take a history as itself being not historical, or at least not historicist, but rather defined by its constitution. In contemporary usage, "historicism" has a whole range of meanings, often mutually incompatible ones. I take historicism to suggest that all knowledge, including the knowledge of the past in a history, must be understood strictly within the historical context in which it has arisen and has been transmitted. Understood this way, historicism remains forever self-enclosed, because it has to be its own product.

A story is a narration of what has happened. It can be brief, yet it is still a comprehensive account of events and peoples' perceptions, reflections, and reactions to a series of events that are central to a given history. This is what I call *fabula*, or the plot of a history. On virtue of its brevity, a *fabula* can be, and is, constantly told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted by people who share the same specific history. For this reason, first, a *fabula* can be easily preserved and passed on not only in writing but also orally. In ancient Greece, everybody knew that there was a Trojan War, and what its causes and results were. However, in order to tell the details of the war, to know exactly who took part in the action and committed heroic deeds, one has to preserve and transmit a detailed account of names and events. And second, the knowledge of a *fabula* constitutes the tradition within a history and as such is passed on from one person to another, from one generation to another. Hence, a *fabula* tells how people understand, interpret, and retell that which happened in a history. The *fabula* can be retold and reinterpreted, and a new *fabula* can always be told. In this way a new and different history is always possible, which might be hitherto unknown but still implicit in the previous narratives and histories. But there is no system or a finite number of histories that might converge toward a universal one.

The often succinct and oral *fabula* is complemented by another component or structural invariant of history, which I call the historical, which contains what is for the most part a long and written account of names, things, or events arranged in a certain order and in an established mutual relation. Such a comprehensive description of names, things, and events should be kept, transmitted, interpreted, and organized according to a certain principle (its *logos*), which can vary from one history to another, but usually, although not always, is that of a list. As a list of names, the historical may also contain descriptions of characters and heroes, which may be either condensed into an epithet or be more developed.

A history, then, is constituted by both a *fabula*, which is the rendering of what happened – and by the historical, which is an account of the things, names, and events that are referred and interpreted by that *fabula*. Drawing a parallel with drama, especially with comedy, *fabula* stands for the plot and action, whereas the historical represents the actors and characters.

One might say that the *fabula* stresses the "what" of a historical character as described or implied in narration.<sup>2</sup> The historical, which is often represented as a detailed list of names of people, things, or events, stresses their actuality (in the form of memory), thereby implying but not necessarily explicitly mentioning their specificity.

Contrary to the rather brief *fabula*, the historical is elaborate, detailed, and complex. The historical may be expanded by adding new names, acts, and facts. What is distinctive about the historical is that no part of it is itself historical: a minimum of the historical is a single entry, which cannot be reduced any further. While the *fabula* can be captivating, engaging, and intriguing, the historical, which is an account that involves a possibly precise enumeration of individual names and things, some of which might even appear irrelevant to the plot, is often perceived as long and boring. Yet, any list, even seemingly unimportant, may always be or become meaningful and important in conveying a history. The (long and detailed) list and the (brief and enfolded) *fabula* are thus mutually complementary.

Hence, each history is defined by its *fabula* and the historical. While it is prudent to accept moral responsibility for keeping the historical within a collectively and publicly shared memory, at the

<sup>2</sup> "What" stands for what a human being is, which cannot be defined as a finite essence.

same time one has to also take collectively shared responsibility for the rebuilding and rethinking of the fabula, which hopefully then might lead to important moral, social, and political changes.

History is thus built up from and by multiple histories, each one being constituted by the fabula and the historical. In any given history the relationship between the fabula and the historical may differ and cannot be established *a priori*. While every history can exist on its own, it is never isolated from other histories, as they are interconnected and interact in many ways. This perspective entails that there is no single and uniform history, and that there is no universal and teleological history either.

### Response to Jeffrey A. Bernstein's Critique

In his insightful reflections on history, Jeffrey Bernstein raises two important questions, one regarding the representative but non-representational character of history and history-telling, and the other regarding the compatibility of Jean-Luc Nancy's provocative account of history with the one developed in my book.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Ancients and Moderns*

Before moving to the discussion of Nancy, I will address several of Bernstein's perspicuous comments. Firstly, the concept of history I have been developing is not pre-modern, as Bernstein takes it to be. My intention was to provide modernity with a critique from the perspective of modernity itself. Since an integral part of the constitution of modernity is the specifically modern *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, which attempts to establish us as being moderns and against the historical construction of an imaginary other, the constitution of history in early Greek writers plays an important role for the overall argument of the book, which itself is a critical reaction to the modern concept of history as being universal and teleological. In doing so, I am not suggesting that one would need to return to pre-modernity or that one would have to overcome modernity in a post-modernity, but rather that we might come up with an understanding of history that would allow to rethink and possibly alter many contemporary social and political practices.

Following Benedict de Spinoza, Bernstein observes

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey A. Bernstein, "Can There Be History Without Representation?," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 69-72. [Henceforth cited as JB]

that the modern philosophical concept of history might be the result of mistaking imagination for reason, so that a historical *telos* might be in fact not a rational universal purpose but a projection of a desire or affect. This might very well be the case with the modern productive imagination, which, instead of mediating between reason (understanding) and sense perception, takes on the role of the sole director of actions in setting its purposes. Yet, indeed, in the book I do not use the concept of historical imagination or social imaginary, thus distancing my position from that of both R. G. Collingwood and Cornelius Castoriadis. In my account, the role of imagination is limited in history, for history does not reach into the future, which is mostly the province of the imagination. Rather, history is defined primarily by thinking that finds its transcription in a narrative that explains and interprets the historical. Imagination, then, is subsumed under discursive thinking but still plays an important role in mediating between a codified perception of a person or an event and its inscription into the historical and narration by the fabula, which Bernstein aptly calls the trans-historical "conditions of possibility" of history (JB 70). Besides, since the historical shared critical recollection, in either its short or its long range, is crucial for the constitution of a history, imagination plays a central role in it, although, again, regulated by the discursive narrative and the equally discursive structuring of the historical.

Here, I also need to remark that Bernstein's characterization of my approach worded thus, "For Nikulin, history is an inquiry that we undertake in order to gain perspective and knowledge through remembrance" (JB 69), should be further qualified. Particularly, I make a distinction between collective memory and collective recollection. The former stands for a set of practices that transmit and interpret a past event in such a way that does not allow for its critical interpretation, taking it as a fact of the past that justifies certain, often dubious, social and political practices. Collective recollection, which can and should be important for the constitution of a fabula, is, on the contrary, open to critical interpretation or reinterpretation of the "what" of an event, especially if one finds its current account questionable, or exclusive of and harmful to others. It is desirable to compare various accounts of an event and retell and reinterpret the currently dominant one, since not anything goes with respect to the interpretation of the past, and not all narratives are equal. In other words, one should always

be able to re-think and re-tell the past, while keeping the historical.

Bernstein also observes that the account of history developed in the book eliminates final causality, which is indeed the mark of the universal teleological history, in favor of formal causality, which defines the way(s) in which every history is practiced, transmitted, and structured (*JB* 70). Here, I would also add efficient causality to it, since not only do we tell and constitute a history, but a history also keeps defining and constituting humans as historical beings.

### *History as Narrated vs. History as Happening*

The first main question brought up by Bernstein is whether my non-representational account of history that stresses the primacy of names over images is congenial to Nancy's interpretation of history (*JB* 71). In "Finite History," Nancy claims that history has ceased to be the production of the Idea in the Hegelian sense,<sup>4</sup> which means that history can no longer be thought of as universal and teleological. Human time, therefore, has no direction or meaning (making sense, both of which are implied in the French *sens*). Throughout a series of reflections (which he calls "parentheses," to which one might respond with brackets), Nancy takes history as belonging not to an individual but to community as the mode of common existence or being-in-common (*FH* 156). As such, community is what happens (*FH* 166). This understanding of history is heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger's account of historicity in *Being and Time*, which takes history (*Geschichte*) as happening (*Geschehen*).<sup>5</sup> For Nancy, this means that history has already and irretrievably happened (*FH* 151–6). Happening is nothing else than the finitude of Being itself (*FH* 158), and this finitude is history. As happening, history is the history of the event (*Ereignis*, apparently, with reference to the *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, *FH* 164) that has traces in history yet is discursively rationally elusive.

Hence, history is not made by humans in a series of practices, conflicts, achievements, or reflections upon

them in past and present. History happens to persons, who then can realize themselves – presumably through its refined philosophical account – as finite historical beings, defined by historicity. Still, even if history for Nancy is the proper mode of common or communalist existence, community as such is not historical, nor does it unfold in history, but history is community, since history is happening (*FH* 154–6). As history, community is not achieved; it happens.

Community is happening by itself as finitude, as the "we" that announces (but does not produce or justify) the historicity of existence. This is history as community, or in Nancy's words, history is "happening as the togetherness of others" (*FH* 158). For Nancy, togetherness is the way of internalizing history as a mode of living through an event, which testifies to the finitude of being itself as the timelessness of time (*FH* 163). Togetherness happens as otherness. History as a communal or communist commonness, then, is togetherness that happens as otherness. But this happening cannot be grasped by a temporal succession or by causality, both of which denote change as a change in a subject or substance and as such belong to nature and not to history (*FH* 158, 161–2).

The otherness, therefore, is that of the "heterogeneity of community," which thus points toward, or hints at, the other itself. Because of the radical character of such heterogeneity, by being a community, humans are not a common being. Due to of the radical heterogeneity of people as community, which is nothing less than the being-other of Being, an origin of history cannot be achieved or be told about (*FH* 163). And where the origin has never been present, there is happening (*FH* 162), which is community, which is history, or whatever is left of it. Without an origin, there is only coming-into-presence in history, which is a constant re-coming without a second coming, and even without a first coming. Nancy's history thus cannot receive a meaning in a communally narrated history and cannot be transferred, because it is a happening without a beginning or an end – perhaps, only for a while, in order to be erased, suspended, forgotten, and enacted again.

History, then, is the shared heterogeneity, the communal missing of, inaccessibility to, or non-coincidence with a given community as possibly defined by a preexisting narrative in history that cannot even be thought to have an origin. Such a history is not a narrative or a statement, but the announcement of a

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Finite History," in *The Birth to Presence*, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, transl. Brian Holmes and others, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1994, pp. 143–66, here p. 149. [Henceforth cited as *FH*]

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, DE: Max Niemayer Verlag 2006, §74.

community that happens in and as history (FH 164). And yet, strangely enough, Nancy offers just such a narrative, even if it constantly tries to cancel out or suspend itself.

But in the happening of history nothing really happens, nothing takes place, and hence, there is no space for place but only "the spacing of a place as such" (FH 162). Time with its possible glimpse into being has abandoned history. History thus comes to an end without having begun, defined by a peculiar kind of temporality that has been suspended by being "spaced," which differs from temporality as succession, which belongs only to nature, and which is thus placed outside history (FH 150).

Nancy dubs history as happening in and as "finite history" of a community whereby finitude and history are the same. In history, "finite" is opposite to "finished" (FH 157). This means that history does not present anything as an accomplishment—but rather presents "the nonessence of existence" (FH 159). Yet, here my understanding of being radically differs from that of Nancy, for whom the finitude of being means that it is not a substance of a subject but that it "is being offered in existence and to existence" (FH 158), which clearly reproduces Heidegger's understanding of finitude as "our fundamental way of being."<sup>6</sup> Nancy's history has no origin but points to time as non-original or without an origin, which does not move or come to a stop and in which there is only finite existence without essence. Such is the historical being of Nancy's disparate communal "we" who have nothing to say to each other, silently and in awe experiencing an unexplainable suspension or "spacing of time, the opening up of the possibility of saying 'we' and...announcing by this 'we' the historicity of existence" (FH 163–4).

In other words, history is that which presents being as existence without a "what." Traditionally, it is God who is existence, which is his essence, or is the existence without essence, since there is nothing apart and beyond it. In Nancy's reading, or rather writing, the finitude of history denies any sense, any direction or accomplishment to history, but gives history back to us as community. In living out one's finitude as togetherness, we become a communal god with a finite historical presence but without a "what" or an essence

beyond happening that happens to us. Thus, trying to get rid of universal history, Nancy brings history back as universally, that is, non-historically, giving place for an inessential being that can never obtain an essence and that is placed in an inevitable communality and insuperable finitude, where the historicity of non-moving time becomes human destiny beyond any sense.

In my interpretation, however, community is a commonality constituted and shared by all who participate in a history as history-tellers in an attempt to overcome non-being within historical being, which is being present in a history to the extent of it being kept and told in it. Yet, contra Nancy, as I explain anon in the response to Garner, I take being as non-historical. Hence, Nancy's attempt to keep being as historically "offered" in existence, even if not to me individually but to me as a member of a historical community in a "historical communism," is beside the point. Most importantly, a single community that would have a single history is non-sensical for me, since I argued for the existence of multiple communities and many histories that we—each of us—inhabit simultaneously and that we share with others, although never the same "what" at the same time.

Thus, for Nancy we now live in posthistorical history, which stands for the exhaustion of history in its traditional universal and historiographic form. The time of human beings is no longer that of history but of time suspended in its temporal duration and hence not moving. History only happens, although one does not know why and how it comes about, as history is beyond cognition and knowledge—it is only a declaration for Nancy. Not moving anymore, for him, history should be understood as "enspaced" within the text about history itself being written as the testimony to such a history (FH 149–50).

Nancy is thus mainly concerned not with a historical narrative but with the historicity of the community of a "we," which apparently is itself not a historical process but an announcement of time itself in the suspension of the duration in a standing or paralyzed mode, where the pure existence of historicity is made transparent by being itself. Such a history is performing or happening without a script and never looks at the past as the scripted layers of the previous actors, which, unlike living beings do not and cannot occur again. In Nancy's account, history is not of the present, which is elusive to any effort of presenting or thematizing the happening of history

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, transl. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1995, §2, p. 6.

as finite (FH 165). History, then, is "the presentation of existence as it is," of current communities against previous ones in the announcement of futurity, which means that the present community stems always from the future (FH 159–60, 163–4). And although the future cannot be known, it does not present a problem for Nancy, for whom history is not the domain of knowledge or of a truth of correspondence or of coincidence with the past and perhaps a non-coincidence with the present. Future for him stands, or gets stood by history, for a pure difference in which time differs from itself beyond a discursive grasp, account, or narrative of such difference, which only announces humans as untimely yet "spaced" within the community of history (FH 160).

Thus, there is no other truth to history beyond this announcement of the future, which announces a current happenstance without a "what" that could be defined, known, or narrated. In this respect, my understanding of history differs strongly from Nancy's Heideggerian version of it in that, as I have argued, future is the province of the utopian historical imagination, which is not part of history although it may still play an important political and social role in opening up unanticipated modes of action. Most importantly, in my understanding the truth of history is possible, although not as apodictic or demonstrative but as a responsible truth-telling that bears on and responds to the past in an effort to narrate being not qua being but as historical being or being-historical (CH 37–9). The historical truth of the truth-telling is neither an existentialist truth about our finite being without an essence, nor an offering of being itself to us, whether individual or communal, regardless whether it is expressible or lying at the limit of language.

But although for Nancy history cannot be narrated, it cannot become a narrative or a statement, it is still being offered as being written, as the announcement of a community in the otherness of its existence beyond and apart from a historically accountable essence (FH 164). Such writing, then, is not a deliberate and careful story-telling but a spontaneous and unreflected *écriture automatique* that writes itself in and through Nancy, who, thus, modestly assumes the role of the prophet or a herald of history as happening *in medias res*, without a beginning or an end. In doing so, Nancy assumes the role of the Hegelian Spirit that has become forever finite. Since writing is spacing of history in Nancy's writing, so he writes history all over again without leaving one a chance to correct it without becoming an actor of the

past. For historical beings there is no way out of history, so Nancy's version of it is a peculiar version of modern historicism that wants to cancel itself out by suspending itself as coming to an end without an end, as coming without coming. Writing history as happening is thus not a history but a historicist account. For me, on the contrary, since a history is determined by its fabula, it should be narrated, not only in writing but even more so in live communication amongst the ones who are not classified as being a community, since the living ones share some histories but do not coincide in others.

### *The End of History?*

Nancy's written announcement oftentimes is rhetorical, depending on an only tangentially mentioned etymology, which supposedly points in the direction of the meaning of history, but he does this by deliberately withdrawing from a systematic argumentation that is meant to be in the traditional sequential order of things that objectify our finite historical being as intimated by Being itself. Of such nature is history as happening, or *Geschichte* as *Geschehen*. History, then, is meant to be suspended or is a suspense in that it no longer moves toward a realization of the Idea, remaining without a beginning or an end—an understanding that is inspired by the Greek *epoch* (FH 144, 150). And yet, *ἐποχή* is more than a pause, cessation, or the Stoic suspension of judgments: it is also draws on its proximity and derivation from the verb *ἐποχέομαι*, (*epochéomai*) that signifies to be carried upon, ride on, or float upon. Consequently, one could also come up with another etymologically driven story about history—for example—as hovering over communal practices in which a community rides shared yet unfulfilled expectations.

Since the grand narrative of history not only is impossible but also makes no sense—as there is no directional sense of and to history—history should be characterized as being the "end of narrative" (FH 145). In my view, if it is a grand narrative of building history as universal, then this claim can be accepted. Yet for Nancy history excludes any commonly shared narrative, for history, for him, is not about narration at all but about a communal living through the traumatic (or perhaps, annoying) experience of the end of any history as moving temporality. History, therefore, is meaningless: it has come to an end that is not an end to any historical expectation. There is nothing but historicity in and to history, whereby historicity means

not a narrative but a performance. However if this is the case, Nancy's attempt to narrate a history as post-history is performatively contradictory, so he would rather need to perform his understanding of history. Besides, his account of history amounts to saying that only those who live in the wake of modernity have history as community and togetherness, while nobody else had it before, or that there was no history before it eliminated itself in sheer performance.

Performance, however, is not performed by humans as historical actors with a preestablished purpose—it just happens, unwillingly and often unwittingly. But if there is no end to performance, which is not a drama but a happening, there can be no beginning of history either—only a self-supported and self-propelled act of happening that suspends duration and thus is rather here as being emplaced.

Ágnes Heller has argued that a determining *topos* of modernity by which it presents itself to itself is "the end of X," where X can be anything: history, art, narrative, subject, politics, and so on.<sup>7</sup> For modernity understands itself as being final without an end, seriously taking itself to surpass and fulfill the expectations of any other histories or epochs that thus are being turned into stepping-stones toward the summit of modernity. With modernity, history achieves its completion as being meaningless and boring, as having no other direction or time ahead of it, and thus only faces (and produces) nothing (*FH* 162). Nothing is the feature of history in modernity, where and when everything stops. Time has stopped and does not flow or move anymore. It has become a kind of space or spaced. Modernity, which comes to see itself as the end (as the purpose) of everything before it, comes to an end, after which there is nothing, as there is nothing that has not been fulfilled yet. Modern history empties itself and becomes nothing. It has moved and is now—and perhaps forever—immobile in its perennial suspension of the modern. For Nancy, happening is the finitude of Being itself (*FH* 158). This finitude is history. Happening is that where the origin has never been present (*FH* 162).

### *Natural History*

Whereas history for Nancy belongs to community and is the community as happening, which in the last

instance is offered by a mysterious act of Being itself that suspends itself in an unoriginal non-temporal way and only thus allows us to be historical, nature is excluded from history. Our present time is non-historical in that it does not disclose any Idea of history in the Hegelian sense—it is finitely historical. Yet nature is not even historical in this sense. The current history of a community who can even narrate and question it, is that of the suspended or spaced temporality of the bored and boring modern bourgeois life that does not and cannot know anything about other historical possibilities and temporalities.

Nature is therefore placed or, in Nancy's term, "spaced" distinctly outside of history (*FH* 144–6), and thus outside of a historical event or happening. The exclusion and othering of nature is something peculiarly modern. The ancient Greek polis is opposed to nature and yet is also inscribed into it, for political life always depends on natural occurrences, which often decide, apart from the intentions of the citizens of a polis, the outcomes of a planned event. Nature as *physis* has its own way of appearance, which presents the nature's immanent yet hidden *logos*, which is opposed to the law (*nomos*) that is intentionally established by a given community. Nature, then, is often included as an adversary, yet it is still an efficient agent in the political life of a community. Nature is thus part of history, which is why the early Greek histories all include accounts of natural events and surroundings, into which every history with its myths and narratives is concretely inscribed.

Nancy is right in claiming that nature is historically excluded from history. And yet, this should not be the case. The exclusion of nature from history comes as a result of intellectual progression in science and philosophy heralding opposition of nature to reason (in René Descartes), nature to freedom (in Immanuel Kant), nature to history (in G. W. F. Hegel), nature to culture (which resulted in the Romantics' attempt to dissolve nature in culture), and, in Nancy, of freedom to history, none of which contains any traces of nature (*FH* 157). However, by postulating human beings as belonging to finite history, in which common or communal finitude is being realized as historicity, Nancy excludes any possibility of considering nature as being part of common historical action. Such an exclusion of nature is deeply problematic, given the challenges humankind currently faces due to the ecological crisis and climate change, as well as those challenges that come from the genetic rebuilding of humans. It is paramount that we

<sup>7</sup> Ágnes Heller, *Von der Utopie zur Dystopie: Was können wir uns wünschen?*, Wien, AT and Hamburg, DE: Edition Konturen 2016, p. 60.



bring nature back into conceptual frameworks that allow recognizing it as an agent in our political, social, and economic life.

A major problem here is that we do not know anymore what nature is and what language we should use in talking about and to it. Modern developed societies do not have a satisfactory vocabulary to build a philosophy of nature, as nature is still being referred to under the Judeo-Christian imperative in terms of taking possession of the earth and subduing it, and the Cartesian imperative as a physical extended *res cogitans* devoid of any traces of subjectivity and historicity, thereby justifying the depletion of natural resources to feed a never satisfiable hunger for power and wealth.

Nature needs to be regarded as having its own history, natural history. This is a specific kind of history, which was known and practiced not only by Hecataeus of Miletus and Hellanicus of Lesbos but also by Pliny the Elder and well into early modernity as antiquarian history. Unlike humans as tellers and recorders of a history, nature is not reflective of and not responsible for its actions and does not tell or write them, even if it stores traces of them within itself. Nature's acts are thus not actions but occurrences. Who, then, can tell and write natural history? The modern scientist is decisively not a natural historian. It is all of humans as historical and political beings who share not only histories but also nature in common and who should be enabled to resume telling and practicing natural history, and thus bringing nature back to history through a renewed and reinterpreted history.

### *Non-Representational History*

In response to Bernstein's second question as to whether history is a "site of representative activity," I say that history is indeed a representative activity of the past events for the sake of the present, although it is not—but can be—a representational activity. In my conception of history, it is not an image but the name that is the "gravitational center," as Bernstein puts it (*JB* 70), or perhaps a point of history's condensation. History is a commonly shared and communal enterprise. In history, everyone carries on doing a history with others, for others, and of others, rather than making a history. Through a common effort of retelling, reinterpreting, and transmitting a history, it becomes our own but it is not internalized as one's defining existential moment, as it is in Nancy, for whom history is non-representable (*FH* 161), although it is still written all over again in

a non-ending writing without an end that it cannot have any longer. My understanding of history's non-representability is very different from that by Nancy, since I take it that history can be not only of people as a spaced and written community but also of things and events, and it can also be of nature. Every person, thing, or event can be represented in an image, and is also presented in a history primarily through the name. An anonymous image is free-floating, homeless, and abandoned by history: it belongs nowhere and everywhere at the same time. An image needs to find its name and a narrative, and only thus can it be included into a history. Of course, names and images are not mutually exclusive but can and should be tied together in a history. An imageless name can be lost, but, as a lost person in a big city overabundant with fabulae and stories, it can find its way home to its history, helped and supported by the communal effort of doing history by telling history, and not by a personal existential effort. Historical being is being in a history as being recollected and being told about. Keeping and giving an account of a name by putting it within the historical and accounting for it through a fabula is thus crucial for a history. Anonymity is the historical non-being, which, however, can be reversed by our effort of finding someone the proper name in a history.

My concept of history is thus iconoclastic, because a name can find its way into a history through a fabula and thus find its place as being etched into the historical. However, an anonymous image cannot be recognized and distinguished, and thus, remaining without a name, it remains ahistorical. The historical imperative thus demands the preservation of the name, which secures one's being in and for a history. By keeping names in a history the historical becomes a moral imperative. Preserving a name is especially important in cases of enormous traumatic events through attempting to narrate what can hardly be narrated, and thus they need to be told and thought by being constantly retold and rethought. Despite the pervasiveness of historicism, our time is hostile to history, which it wants to bring to a closure, saturated and overabundant in images that dominate the social and political interactions but mostly remain free-floating, without being attached to a specific meaningful historical fabula or narrative.

### **Response to John V. Garner's Critique**

Presenting an insightful discussion of history, John Garner raises three important questions regarding the

main theses of the book and the constitution of history in general: about the relation between the historical and the ahistorical; about the role of forgetting in history; and about the possibility of a radical novelty.

### *Historical and Ahistorical*

Throughout the book I have attempted to show that history is primarily concerned with historical being, which is the being in a history as being told about in a fabula while being kept within the historical.<sup>8</sup> Historical non-being, then, is a non-intentional disappearance or sometimes an intentional withdrawal from a history in the historical.

Thus, the historical being in Garner's example of Callicles (*JG* 79) is being remembered and told about in a history, which means that Callicles does exist to the extent of being rediscovered in an archive. I need to observe here that by "the historical" I do not mean an archive, as Garner assumes it in this example, but a structured account of people, names, things, and events, which is paradigmatically represented by a list which can also have many different forms, of which an archive is just one amongst many other such forms.

However, we need to distinguish between historical being and being qua being ( $\delta\nu \tilde{\eta} \delta\nu$ ), as well as between historical non-being and non-being ( $\mu\tilde{\eta} \delta\nu$ ) as such, which is a subject of ontology, rather than one of history. Being is not the subject of and to history but rather of thought, and although being can be thought about in a history, it is itself not historical. And non-being can be considered either as privation—or as non-being that is ontologically productive of being, if and when being makes itself transparent vis-à-vis non-being, which then is ontologically primary to being.

Moreover, if being is not historical, even if a history may depend on a specific understanding of being, being may not be thought of in the same way the historical is thought of, that is, in a non-discursive way. In this sense, being is the subject not to memory or recollection, which are built in accordance with a certain procedure, but to oblivion. Being needs no memory and thus no history. This is the importance of forgetting, which liberates us from the necessity of being only and exclusively historical—which we nevertheless still always are. However, non-being, in its utter negativity,

is not even the subject to forgetfulness, but rather of non-knowledge, since it cannot be known in any way, while still being productive of the constitution of being. In other words, contra Heidegger's yearning for the historically forgotten being, I argue being is better forgotten, and non-being is better to be not known and not acted upon.

Therefore, my account of being, contra to the one of Meillassoux that is brought up by Garner (*JG* 79), is not correlationist. If I am not mistaken, correlationism is a version of Neo-Kantianism (for example, in Ernst Cassirer) that suggests that only a relation, and not a substance of being, can be thought of and is primary for the constitution of cognitive and social activity. Yet, in my account, which goes beyond the discussion of history, being can be thought of, even if solely negatively and non-discursively. By "non-discursively" I mean an act of thought that is not structured according to the Cartesian procedural method of providing detailed accounts and enumerations of the movement of thought when it attempts to justify a particular truth about a property of a thing or a predicate in a subject.

One might make a further distinction here, which I do not make in the book: between the ahistorical and the non-historical. Ahistorical is that which does not properly belong to the constitution of a history but can be expressed in it and may affect its fabula or narrative. Such are, for example, mathematical and logical truths, which would also include the historical invariants discussed in the book. The ahistorical can be expressed historically in any specific history, for instance in a slightly different way by Garner's historian Eve (*JG* 80), depending on the kinds of narrative genres and the structures of the lists accepted in a history. A history can have ahistorical sources and inspirations, but itself always remains historical in the way it tells about and structures things past. There might be a specific history that first expresses a particular kind of ahistorical (for example, the Pythagorean theorem in ancient Greek mathematics) or there can be several such histories that can do it independently, diachronically, or synchronically. Yet, histories are not mutually sealed off, as Oswald Spengler takes them to be, and thus an ahistorical can be passed on across different histories or rediscovered independently.

But the non-historical would be reserved to ontology only, to the understanding of being and non-being, which, however, can be equally expressed in any history and shared with any other one, even if negatively so. A problem with the non-historical is that

<sup>8</sup> John V. Garner, "Creativity and Historical Non-Being in Nikulin's *The Concept of History*," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 78-83. [Henceforth cited as *JG*]

it comes at the limits of thinking, speaking, and writing, so every history needs to invent its own ways to face and cope with the non-historical. The non-historical resists being written but can be practiced in a lived and shared exchange with others. This means that the non-historical is difficult to achieve in a history and it might not be preserved or accounted for in its "what," given the non-discursivity of the understanding of being and of utter negativity in approaching non-being, but at least in its facticity, of its being possibly accessible to us, which might be different in different histories.

### *Oblivion in History*

In his second question with regard to the role of oblivion in history, Garner suggests that there seems to be a contradiction between what I call the "historical imperative" of preserving a name of a person, thing, or event within a history—and the possibility and even necessity of forgetting it. Beyond the obvious benefit of forgetting as a remedy against hypermnesia, or remembering too much (for instance, in contemporary social media) and hence being unable to remember anything, oblivion is also further important in two ways. One is that oblivion takes a community to the non-historical of being within and beyond a history, which the non-historical still can affect by shaping its fabula. The other reason why forgetting can be beneficial and important for history is that a history, especially in its fabula or the narrative of past events, is often based on a shared trauma, preserved in the shared memory and told by the history's fabula. The historical imperative urges one to uphold the names of those who were involved in a traumatic event. Forgetting in this case means letting go of the actual pain of the trauma while keeping the event in its specificity and facticity in a history, of which it might be formative and central. Therefore, contrary to Garner's suggestion that the art of forgetting might contain an "organic-sacrificial element" (JG 81), I intend to say that the intentional forgetting works toward maintaining the historical being of others.

History always struggles with and opposes the non-intentional forgetting. One kind of the intentional forgetting can be practiced as a *damnatio memoriae*, which means to exclude a person or an event from a history. As such, it goes against the historical imperative and should be opposed. But the other kind of intentional forgetting can also mean a self-suspension within a history that is pointing toward the non-historical, which does not

properly belong to a history, since the non-historical is non-temporal, whereas history primarily moves within a temporality. This type of intentional forgetting can be defined and negotiated very differently in different histories, and even if perhaps never fully achievable, it is a way of practicing non-temporality while still and always being in a history.

### *Radical Novelty*

The problem of whether radical novelty in history is possible is important but it is not really a historical problem. Besides, the problem of the possibility of the new in knowledge is broader than that of the new in history, for, in my account, a history is constituted by a fabula that relies on a specific kind of narrative. The problem of the novelty in knowledge would have gone beyond the scope of the book, but it might be noted that it was already addressed in the Socratic paradox of knowledge in the *Meno*: If we are looking for something novel that we do not know, how do we know that we have found it once we have found it? A possible answer to the paradox is that, without realizing it, what had been sought, was already known, and so no novelty is indeed possible. This means that in order to know the novel, one already somehow needs to know it—at least, implicitly, for example, in a practice on which one did not yet have a chance to reflect upon. In other words, the novel should make sense and we should be able to detect and recognize it when we come across it and start wondering what it is and how it can be. Therefore, the radical novelty cannot be thought before it has been already thought. But the novel cannot be imagined by the productive imagination either, which only mediates between the sensible multiplicity and the unity of thought.<sup>9</sup> The *ex nihilo* creation of the novel is only possible for an imaginary infinite productive divine imagination, which, however, goes beyond the scope of the study of history.

The fate of a true innovator is exemplified by Cassandra: nobody listens to her and understands her—perhaps, she does not even understand herself, if understanding means a shared experience. The predicament of a radical novelty is that it cannot be noticed, recognized, or understood, because everything

<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, "What is Productive Imagination?" in *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning and Significance*, eds. Saulius Geniusas and Dmitri Nikulin, London: Rowman & Littlefield International 2018, pp. 1–28.

we understand and say, including the novel, can only be realized, understood, and expressed within existing theoretical explicit and implicit frameworks and common practices—that is, when one is ready to understand and formulate it.

Since the radically novel is non-historical, it can hardly be accommodated within a history. However, once the ahistorical novelty is discovered and detected within a new theoretical and practical framework, it can find its way into a history and even reshape it, as early modern science did in changing many modern histories. But the historical novelty has to do specifically with a new kind of narrative that can be adopted. If the human narrative capacity is limited to a finite established set of narratives, then, perhaps, as Hayden White suggested, we might only draw on those that come from the literary and dramatic tradition. Yet, I take the repertoire from which we can draw our historical narratives to be much larger than the narrowly described traditional literary genres. The fabula of a history does follow a certain narrative or a number of them, and so to think and enact something new in history, to identify novel previously unexplored possibilities means also thereby rethinking and reinterpreting the way(s) in which we have been telling a history and organizing, preserving, and transmitting the historical. Rather than being trapped within the inherited thinking in a history, the rethinking of the historical narrative can be a novel and original act of its reinterpretation that eventually might also lead to important social and political changes.

The problem of the possibility of radical novelty has been brought up in a dialogue on history and the social imaginary between Castoriadis and Paul Ricœur, where Ricœur defends the position that everything novel is already inscribed into the existing hermeneutic contexts, whereas Castoriadis stresses the possibility of radical novelty.<sup>10</sup> Castoriadis finds this novelty in the ancient Greek invention of philosophy and of the polis with its political life, but he fails to recognize a rather obvious objection that these innovations have been prepared by the entire complex development of Greek culture, by its histories and the ways they have been told and interpreted as based on the tradition of the catalogue poetry in early historians. Trying to side with antiquity, Castoriadis unwittingly sides with

Byzantium's *creatio ex nihilo* tradition, which classical antiquity did not know and could not understand.

History is an account, transmission and interpretation of the past for the sake of the present, possibly with an anticipation of the future. But the past is always incomplete, and hence history is also ever unfinished and never exhaustible, both in its historical and the fabula. This means that every interpretation of the past is always a reinterpretation, because it faces an incomplete and unfinalizable past that is brought by a history into always changing and different social, political, and narrative circumstances. In my understanding of history, we can invent a new genre that might result in a new history, but then this genre will be inscribed in the already existing narrative possibilities. This means that history cannot accommodate the *creatio ex nihilo* or a Kierkegaardian leap toward the novel as the radical negativity. Every creation of the new in history is a novel and original reinterpretation, a way of telling and transmitting a history, which is not always better than a previous one. Freedom in history is the freedom to create a new history by providing new ways and means of thinking and telling the past. No wonder that social, scientific, and aesthetic revolutions are accompanied by the proliferation of original forms of artistic, and especially poetic and literary, expressions. However, the eruption of the new becomes only possible because it has been already contained within the possibilities of thought and language, which have then been translated into action and thought that thus finally become recognized and instituted in a history.

### Response to Adam J. Graves' Critique

In his thoughtful and elaborate remarks Adam Graves provides a criticism of the main theoretical presuppositions of *The Concept of History*, which he does from the perspective of a hermeneutical understanding of history.<sup>11</sup>

I

According to Graves' reconstruction, the theoretical framework of my book reflects Heinrich Rickert's Neo-Kantian distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (social

<sup>10</sup> Suzi Adams, ed., *Ricœur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Adam J. Graves, "Hermeneutics, Historicism, and *The Concept of History*," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 84-89. [Henceforth cited as AG]

sciences) as different in their very method and objects. The distinction between the *fabula* and the historical, then, appears dualistic and reproduces the distinction between the theoretical schema and the content that is primarily used in natural sciences, which, therefore, turns historical knowledge into an empirical scientific knowledge (AG 88).

I think, however, that this is a misreading and mischaracterization of my position, although a venerable hermeneutic intention might be to understand the author better than the author understands himself. The very opposition between natural and socio-historical sciences is highly problematic, for it appears and functions within a specific understanding of natural sciences as meant to organize the data of perception according to the *a priori* forms of understanding, perhaps mediated by imagination. This kind of opposition appeared as a result of a Kantian understanding of reality as purely phenomenal and as such opposed to the moral reality. Such a distinction did not leave space for the phenomena that pertained to history or to culture broadly speaking, which then led the Neo-Kantians to attempt to carve a special realm for social sciences (or the "sciences of the spirit") with their apparently specific objects and methods. I do not follow this line of thought: I do not argue that there is a special object of history that can be known in the same way as a scientific object, as Graves claims. To be more precise, I do not take an object of the past to have properties that can be subject to strictly formulable laws with clearly outlined properties and predictable behavior in the future. This is precisely the kind of universal historical knowledge that I intend to oppose.

Besides, as I repeatedly stressed in the book, my main interest in history is not epistemological—but ontological. My main question is not, "what can we know from and about the past?" but rather, "how can we be in history as historical beings?" Hence, I attempted to develop a historical ontology whose relation to ontology of non-historical being is also explained in my above response to Garner.

In my interpretation there is no specifically historical knowledge, or a mode of cognition that belongs exclusively to history, which would be then different from other kinds of knowledge, as both Rickert and the hermeneutic thinkers assume, although in different ways. Our knowledge of the past is concomitant with the keeping, reproducing, and retelling of the past within the historical, which

is simultaneously concisely formulated in—a non-scientific but narrative—*fabula*. I do indeed explicitly argue against both, historical positivism (attempting to establish how the past really was, as for example in Leopold von Ranke) and history as the knowledge of the mind of a historical actor (of the cognition based on imagining both the circumstances of the past and oneself in place of the historical actor, as for example in Collingwood).

## II

As for the imputed dualism of the distinction between the *fabula* and the historical that seems to reproduce the difference between theory and data used in natural sciences, the distinction is not that of form versus content, for (i) a *fabula* in principle can exist with an as yet empty set of the historical (with no entries on a particular list, which we might hope to come up with only later), or for (ii) the historical can in principle exist without a *fabula* or an interpretative narrative, or for (iii) the historical itself is not a set of raw data that might be taken as the material component of history, since any list has already been ordered and arranged by a particular *logos*. And in response to the doubt expressed as to whether actions and events can be included into the historical (AG 85)—yes, an event can be an element of the historical (for example, all the games in a World Cup) as interpreted by a *fabula*.

## III

In Graves' understanding, history is a "dynamic unfolding of the meaning of the past," since the past is not fixed but constantly "unfolds" through history from which we are always inevitably "alienated" (AG 88). Such an unfolding takes place not among the things, institutions, and events, as in Hegel, but in the historian's consciousness and perception of history based on the renewed hermeneutical interpretation of the past. Yet, the idea of the historical unfolding that needs to be understood by its practitioners who are also its interpreters, is a version of teleological history as constantly developing, now in the hermeneuticist's interpretation. Such a development is not determined by an objective end; rather, it is determined by the continuous yet always provisional understanding of the hermeneutically interpreted past, which, however, will have to be overcome in and by the ongoing (unfolding) endless reflection upon history as the end

of the interpretation. The "past itself" (AG 87) does not exist apart from the reflective self-understanding of the interpreter, which is related to the past yet directed into the future. This attempt at understanding the past that simultaneously is the understanding of oneself in whom this past is unfolding, then, is meant to be the overcoming of one's alienation from history, which, however, inevitably fails or succeeds only temporarily, for the process of rethinking the past always puts the interpreter of the past in the same position of being alienated from the past by being unable to understand it as the end result of the interpretation. The unfolding of the past in the consciousness of the hermeneutic historian never stops at a point of conclusive understanding.

In other words, the end of the hermeneutic history is its constant reflective overcoming in an ever non-conclusive understanding, which a historian either constructs into the past, or awaits as the coming *de profundis* of the Dasein as an inscrutable offering of a novel set of possibilities to be realized in and through the temporality of history. No wonder that Graves is mostly concerned with the historically "affected" consciousness (AG 88) as interpretative of the past, as it appears in historical understanding, which itself, in turn, is always circularly conditioned by the understanding of the past. Here the example from Anscombe is of no help (AG 88), for in her example the meaning of the past becomes established from the consequences of the action, once we know how the narrated has unfolded—but once and for all, and not in an ongoing reflection on the past without an end. This is the reason why Graves subscribes to the hermeneutical understanding of history, which, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer is precisely about "a truly historical consciousness [that] always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as well as the historically other, within the right relationships."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his critique, Graves uses "history" as a *singulare tantum*, which suggests that the kind of history he has in mind is a highly self-conscious and self-reflective version of the historical modern Western subjectivity, which has colonized other histories and understandings of history. History can be considered as that which scholars now understand as history.

Yet, it does not have to be the history of an individual or collective consciousness or perception of the past that changes in its renewed effort to reflect on and understand itself, thus always changing the "past itself" (AG 87).

The idea of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* to which Graves subscribes (AG 88) presupposes involvement with a tradition that is embedded in language and hermeneutical practices. It is the way, as Gadamer puts it, "to understand ourselves better" (TM 301). It is an analysis of the historical consciousness, rather than of the possible constituents of history and the ways in which history is being transmitted. Without going into a detailed discussion, one can say that Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* is itself a reaction against the Enlightenment idea of a universal rational history. The hermeneutic practices involved in such a history are strongly text-oriented, that is, are structured around the interpretation of texts of the alien past that—in some versions—also attempt to restore the *mens auctoris* of their authors, rather than non-textual practices of the past. But history does not consist solely of written texts and the reflective understanding of oneself as the reader of these texts—history also includes events, things, names, oral and written stories, and recollections.

The hermeneutic history of "understanding ourselves better" is always produced against a historical other: we understand ourselves only to the extent that we reflect in the historically constructed mirror of our other in and of the past, which for Gadamer is Greek antiquity in its artful yet artificial Romantic interpretation. The historical consciousness, then, is not a mediation between the past and the present in the overcoming of one's alienation from history, but an imaginary coercion of the past into the present.

#### IV

The hermeneutic practice of precise and perceptive interpretation of texts can be extremely valuable and in fact is indispensable both for the fabula and the historical within a history. And yet, my approach to history distances itself from the hermeneutic understanding of history for several reasons, some of which have already been mentioned above. Next, (1) hermeneutic history is subjectivist in that it is an overly reflective history, which is the history of the past the way humans understand it, apart from which the past has no meaningful existence. Besides, (2) the hermeneutic version of history advocated by

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall, London, UK: Continuum 2003, p. 305. [Henceforth cited as TM]

Graves excludes nature and explicitly opposes history to nature (AG 88), which is a general move since nineteenth-century historiography. As I explained in the response to Bernstein, although I did not develop it at length in the book, a natural history should be possible, however not as a scientific theory.

Moreover, (3) hermeneutic history is implicitly relativistic: for Gadamer a text cannot be interpreted correctly but always differently (*anders interpretieren*). A hermeneutic meaning of history, therefore, is always different, depending on the current—ever-changing—interpretation and understanding of the past. The hermeneutical history is also (4) a version of historicism, to the extent that it considers any phenomenon *sub specie temporis*: every understanding of the past is a product of its current understanding, which is itself conditioned by the epoch that suggests and accepts as meaningful only particular hermeneutical interpretations and understandings of history as meaningful.

Furthermore (5), in a hermeneutical interpretation, names are taken as secondary, while the contexts of their use are taken as primary. In a sense, the entire enterprise of hermeneutics can be understood as an attempt at clarifying the context of a name within which it can be understood. A bare name is meaningless for hermeneutics: the name has to be put into an elaborate context that itself needs to be understood from our current perspective of a refined and sophisticated thinking about ourselves as opposed to the past, but also from the perspective of the past that is absorbed into and processed by our thinking about the past. In this sense, in a hermeneutical interpretation the definite description ("the man who burnt the temple of Artemis") should take precedence over the personal name (Herostratus). In my account of history, however, as I also explained in the response to Bernstein, the personal name is primary and constitutes the core of the historical. The personal name belongs to the historical, whereas the definite description can also function within the fabula as the historical narrative. The personal name is not substitutable by the definite description in a history, if the name is lost: a person or an event can only have historical being to the extent that the name is kept and lives on in a history.

And finally, (6) hermeneutic understanding of history is emphatically historiographic and not antiquarian. As I explained in more detail in the book (CH 67-71), historiographic interpretation is always driven by a principal conception that needs to be ultimately established and clarified by such an

interpretation, which presupposes one chosen, mostly written, narrative read into the interpretation of texts. The hermeneutic meaning of the past is therefore heavily historiographic, to the extent that it selects only particular texts of the past that fit the interpretation of the past as constantly renewed and reinterpreted by humans with a hope to overcome their alienation from the past in and by their understanding of it that might have "lasting or widespread consequences" (AG 89), which, however, will be inevitably overcome by another renewed interpretation of the past. And yet, history, as already the early Greek histories demonstrate, is both antiquarian and historiographic, insofar as multiple histories preserve that which can be preserved and is worth saving from (to use Hannah Arendt's word) the "futility of oblivion" (as antiquarian), and can provide a meaning to the narrated events (as historiographic). History should not limit itself to one task only through one single narrative and explanation, such as the understanding of the past as continually unfolding through our reflection on it, but history should be open also to antiquarian accounts, paying attention to many different narratives or fabulae of the past, not shying away from non-written sources, including oral traditions of live transmission and fleeting interpretations of the past.

### Response to Sonja M. Tanner's Critique

In her perceptive remarks on the concept of history that tie it into a larger context of the dramatic narrative, Sonja Tanner raises three main issues.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Narratives and Grand Narratives*

The first issue concerns the end of grand narratives. One could say that the end to a grand narrative was intended to be its completion by its practitioners, but an exhaustion by its critics. Throughout the book, I indeed attempted to work out a novel understanding of history that would show why the modern narrative of history as universal and teleological is untenable. Rather than being subjected to one progressing history, we always live in multiple histories. This means that every history can have a different narrative. The multiple narratives are sometimes mutually exclusive and sometimes just

<sup>13</sup> Sonja M. Tanner, "Toward a Happy Ending: Memory, Narrative, and Comedy in History," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 90-92. [Henceforth cited as *ST*]

different, if they relate humans to different histories that each one of them always inhabits.

The grand narratives are still predominant and are not driven underground to become "subconscious beliefs," as Tanner suggests (*ST* 90). A current example of such a narrative is "Make America great again," which squarely falls within the understanding of history as teleological, in which one nation is destined by the universal history to play a distinctive role in the progressive universal movement towards the liberation of humankind. The kind of history I am arguing for excludes the idea of a universal inevitable historical progress, for in some histories progress is simply not a meaningful concept. Yet, I am not against the idea of progress as such—just against progress understood as a universal progress. There can be progress in various domains of human activity, such as science, technology, and even morals and politics. But in each case, the purpose or *telos* of such progress is put into a history by humans, even if at times unintentionally and without even noticing it, and occasionally even for a misguided reason. For example, if one decides to change the social and political situation of an underprivileged group of people, we need to recognize it, build corresponding institutions, provide a legal basis, and establish customary activities in order to achieve this goal. Nothing guarantees that we succeed in it, for we can always fail, or we can progress after many failures. Sometimes, the regress is enormous and hurtful, as with the current spread of neoliberalism and the ecological crisis. But sometimes communities actually succeed and progress, even if only on a minor scale. So there can be many mutually unconnected, or very loosely connected, progresses in which the aim is always established by humans, although its attainment is not guaranteed and, if achieved, is not forever, for there can always be a regress in any of the realms of human activity.

At the same time, as I have explained in the response to Bernstein, not anything goes in a history, for a history is organized around and driven by truth-telling. Any narrative or fabula of a history should be open to rational critical scrutiny not only within a specific history. This means that one can always argue that one fabula as the interpretation of an event and of the historical is better or more progressive than another one, but it still should always be possible to abandon or substantially revise a fabula while keeping the historical, in favor of a different narrative that humans would accept as a better interpretation of past events according to their standards of justification.

### *The Role of Oblivion*

The second question concerns the role of oblivion in history, which I have already explained in the response to Garner. Here, I need only to repeat that the historical imperative suggests the preservation of names in and for a history, even if the corresponding fabula could change subsequently. Yet, this indeed entails a seeming paradox: in order to remember, one needs to forget. But my argument is that a community needs to bracket the traumatic, in order to keep it in its history without reenacting it. This means to remember and to preserve the historical, and possibly to expand it. But the fabula, the narrative of history, is to be retold, especially in case of traumatic events, which amounts to forgetting the past narrative of a history by reinterpreting it, in order to do justice to a history. Forgetting is not an abandoning or a sublation, but a renewal of the fabula with respect to past narratives.

### *Comedy and History*

As I have argued in the book, drama is important for the understanding of history. Drama provides for the structure of what I called the "inner theater" (*CH* 59), which also finds its way into a history and which consists of interrelated stories about people or events that we share and that become ever more fine-tuned through the addition of new, often minor, entries (to the historical) and by the retelling and reinterpretation of the existing narrative (fabula), often based on anecdotal stories. However minor and seemingly insignificant these additional characters or events and the minor twists in the narrative might be, they still contribute to the fullness and complexity of a history as a dramatic piece that becomes richer in details but can never be complete; a history can only become more and more multifaceted and saturated.

However, the genre does matter in drama. Tragedy relates terrible and traumatic events that are remembered and preserved, and as such become central for a history. And yet, comedy is more important for history, not because it allows for the "suspension of belief" (*ST* 91) but because of the very structure of comic narrative, which is congenial to that of history. The fabula or the story told in a history can be considered a *mythos* (*ST* 92) not because it is untrue or mythological but because myth is the way something is told or narrated, and every history can be told or narrated in many ways. This, again, does not imply relativism, for,



again, there should be always a way to give a critical account of the tale and explain why it accounts for the historical better than another one.

Most importantly, as Tanner seems to agree, it is desirable to turn a history into a comedy, because comedy has a specific structure that is also constitutive of a history. Especially, a comedy's plot always starts with a complication, which, however, is resolved in the end not by a stroke of fate or an appearance of a *deus ex machina*—but by the thinking and acting of all the participants on a public stage. Comic thinking and acting are careful, complicated, often mistaken and convoluted, yet are capable of ultimately resolving the current conflict by a shared effort, thus coming to a good but not predetermined ending. In this respect, comedy is opposite to tragedy, which starts well but always ends badly, so that the tragic plot often ends abruptly with a fateful event that does not follow from the unfolding of the action. Besides, comedy always needs an important yet humble figure who is usually represented by a servant or maid but who in fact is the thinker of the common action and the master of its plot, steering it toward a good ending for all stakeholders. By allowing for everyone's—not just of one or a selected few—well-being, comedy acquires, as Tanner puts it, a "normative value" (ST 92). History too should be of such a nature, allowing for historical being as being in a history. The historical being is never guaranteed but should be achieved by and within a history by a communal effort of all the actors of a history. Hence, history is not the prerogative of a historian only but lives by being maintained and told by everyone who participates in it and who becomes a comic thinker on the stage of a shared history.

Therefore, the importance of comedy is suggested, first, by its plot and, second, by the comic subject, which allows for a communal action to move toward the universal equality and well-being, which are not guaranteed but can become possible. The comic subject differs from the tragic subject, which stands for a selected—oftentimes self-chosen—solitary and heroic modern subjectivity, which is exclusive of others and thus knows no other. The comic subjectivity allows for distributing and sharing the action among all the actors, as it also should be done in a history, and thus for the inclusion of others, always leaving room for them to enter and reenter the comic—and historical—stage. The humble thinker of comedy is the philosopher as the thinker of otherness and multiplicity, such as Socrates and Diogenes, rather than Descartes and Kant. The plot

of comedy can, and should, be adopted into a history, even if the fabula of history is usually less structurally refined and narratively less complicated than that of comedy. Tanner agrees that comedy provides a model for history as "an alternative to a grand historical narrative" (ST 92). Therefore, history in its fabula or narrative component should be a comedy, and not a tragedy. A history should be achieved as a commonly shared enterprise, as an attempt to reach a resolution, or understanding, of past events in a narratively reasoned way. As a comic figure in this sense, a historian or a philosopher of history has no privileged access to the interpretation or a meaning of history: rather, it is up to all who share a history, to tell and reinterpret, keeping and preserving it in a publicly shared and dialogically exercised critical discourse. That is why the drama of comedy is so important for the understanding of the functioning of history.

### Response to Massimiliano Tomba's Critique

In his illuminating remarks on history Massimiliano Tomba gives a brief yet persuasive account of the genealogy of the concept of history in modernity.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Universality and Temporality*

Tomba argues that the concept of universal history is a recent invention, so that the collective plural of "history" came into use only around the time of the French revolution. Such a history becomes the History, which straightens temporality into the Procrustean bed of one-dimensional universal historical time, and which in turn becomes the unique system of reference and periodization that also sets the pace and scale of historical progress. So Tomba's first major question, which he himself also discusses in his enlightening work on various temporalities in modernity, concerns "how it has become possible for the unilinear conception of time to become so dominant," and this is not at all an "ungenerous" question (MT 95) but a very legitimate one.

My short answer to this question, without going into a detailed discussion, is that modern physics, which started with Galileo Galilei's *Dialogue*, was spelled out by Isaac Newton in his *Principia*, and

<sup>14</sup> Massimiliano Tomba, "History and Historical Conceptualization," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 93-97. [Henceforth cited as MT]

received its philosophical conceptualization in Kant's first *Critique*, establishes the paradigm of the vision and understanding of the celestial (supralunar) world, the strikingly simple and invariable laws of which turn out to be the same as those of the earthly (sublunar) world. This new physical universe is then superimposed onto the human social world, which is also thought to have a universal uniformity and the rationally discoverable laws of its development and motion. But the possibility of novel physics as being mathematical does require a new concept of time, the Newtonian absolute or true time that flows as uniform duration, which can be measured with precision and which always progresses in one direction, best represented by the straight line.<sup>15</sup> Such a time is not established by humans and thus does not depend on a temporality that a particular group could establish or define by its activities. As Tomba observes, this absolute time that becomes an *a priori* form of our perception of things in the world in Kant is contested by Johann Gottfried von Herder. Yet, the idea of the universality of the modern straightened and smoothed out time prevails, which then gets transferred from the scientific-cognitive sphere to other realms of human action, including social and political ones. Since such action is taken in modernity to be thoroughly historicized, that is, comprehensible only within a proper historical context, this further allows for a new understanding of history as unilinear and universal. Different dissenting and diverging temporalities, convincingly conceptualized by Tomba in his work, are thus downgraded to Newton's only "seeming" and "vulgar" relative time, which is opposed to the absolute time and which has no existence of its own apart from the measured changes of things.

Therefore, the question of whether it is possible to abandon "the concept of universal history without questioning the concept of historical time that underlies it" (MT 95) is to be answered in negative. Tomba is right in arguing that modern history requires a new, radically different, understanding of time. Although I do not discuss it in the book, I agree with him that every history might have – although not necessarily – a different temporality and that the modern universal historical time is turned in its conceptualization into the dominant temporality of colonization and oppression of

societies and groups that are deemed "nonage," as Mill calls them, apparently "laying behind" and not using their time effectively enough to develop and catch up with modern "universal values" of "democracy, private property, and free market" (MT 95).

The modern universal unilinear historical time thus separates and places every history into a pre-history and, more recently, for those who are disappointed with the idea of progress, into a post-history, as in "pre-modern," "pre-state" or "pre-capitalist" (MT 95). This prefix becomes a stigma that suggests a lack of proper preferences. Yet this modern pre-history cannot grasp the historical being that becomes elusive for modern universal history, appearing utterly negative to it, as a lack of desire and initiative to get engaged in the construction of all things historically modern (state, nation, capitalism, finance, and so on). The inability of modernity to cope with historical being is well captured by Herman Melville's protagonist Bartleby who became known for his seemingly negative, vacuous, and repetitive response to the urge of being productive: "I would rather not to."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Bartleby is ahistorical, for he cannot fit with the modern concept of teleological linear temporality and history. Rather, he has his own temporality, his *kairos* (καίρος), his due measure of action, choosing the non-to as the particle to an indefinite of a verb, "not-to do." He suspends an action as inevitably inscribable into a universal temporality in favor of non-action, which neither negates nor responds to a particular action. Such an action is not an action from the modern point of view, since it does not have an object, task, agenda, or an end, and in fact suspends and eliminates the modern universal historical actor. Yet, this non-action has both its own logic and a different temporality that does not square with the universal linear one, in which a task can – and needs to – be laid out, planned, and directed toward its completion.

Thus, questioning the concept of the universal unidirectional historical time is an important and necessary but difficult undertaking, it is difficult either because such questioning is not a questioning at all, since most of the contemporary political and social discourse implicitly presupposes the same concept of universal time for the global expansion of political, social, legal, economic, and financial institutions. Or the critique of

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, eds. Alexandre Koyre and I. Bernard Cohen, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972, Scholium, Vol. 1, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street," in *Melville's Short Novels*, ed. Dan McCall, London, UK: W. W. Norton 2002, pp. 3–34.

modern universal historical temporality comes from a Heideggerian perspective, as, for example, in Nancy's account of history, which I discussed in my response to Bernstein. In the latter approach, temporality is understood as the manifestation of being itself, rather than of becoming. In a sense, this is a negative reaction to the Newtonian claim that time—as absolute time—is the expression of being, which for Newton is the divine being. From a Heideggerian perspective, historicity is tightly bound with temporality as a non-apparent transpiring of being qua being through *Dasein*, which might reveal itself to humans in a novel range of possibilities in a momentous moment of its disclosure, although we can never know when, why, and how. On such an interpretation of temporality, history happens (as Nancy explicitly claims) in an unpredictable and unfathomable event, which then radically changes our historical existence and establishes a new, formerly unthinkable, temporality. Yet, in my understanding of history, neither the concept of a universal temporality as underlying universal history, nor of temporality as suddenly and unpredictably erupting into a history, make sense. I am not arguing against the idea of universalism, but only against its totalizing modern conceptualization, which becomes an instrument of colonialism and Western domination.

Hence, if there is anything universal to history, it is its suspension of temporality by bringing the past into the present and by providing a place for particular kind of being—historical being—that, *qua* being, is not temporal and yet, *qua* historical, presupposes and refers to a temporality. I thus agree with Tomba that each history can have a different kind of temporality. Historical being thus exists not in an abstract absolute unilinear time of universal history but in many different temporalities occurring at the same time, for everyone as historical being, while being one, always participates in many histories.

### *Acceleration of History*

A further development of the idea of the modern universal temporality is its inevitable acceleration toward the progressive achievement of an end goal, a development that is spelled out by Reinhart Koselleck. In the universal linear modern temporality, as Tomba puts it, "historical times ran like trains along the same tracks" (MT 95), so that some historical temporalities are considered more advanced, and some backward, some accelerating, and some slowing down, which

in modernity is always perceived as a troubling sign of regress. In fact, Koselleck's claim of the historical acceleration comes from an interpretation of modern technical progress, which in the nineteenth century became palpable with the development of the train travel that considerably and increasingly shortened the travel time between cities. Metaphorically, history itself becomes a train driven ever further and faster by the locomotive of progress. As the early nineteenth-century historian Joseph Görres observed, the "great world train of history...steadily accelerates."<sup>17</sup>

So humans are doomed and destined to move historically forward ever faster, socially, politically, economically, scientifically, and technologically. The progressive ever accelerating motion of history, in which we are involved against our will, does not allow time to stop and think about where progress might be going, for any stop or even a steady sustainable movement is already considered a regress. Driven by a universal, mostly economic, force, the acceleration of history, becomes a historical representation of Newton's second law, happening in the universal historical time, which allows for and necessitates the deployment of the modern logic of constant growth in productivity and consumption.

The acceleration of history is embedded in the idea of the novelty, which comes with constant new discoveries and inventions and which makes progress not only possible but also inevitable. As I have explained in my response to Tanner, I am not arguing against progress in a specific sphere of human activity, but such a progress must not be considered universal, inevitable, and perennial. A progress may occur, although for a time being, and is thus finite in scope, speed, and duration.

The expectation of novelty in modern history is therefore not only excessive but also universal: everyone and every human community ought to succumb to it. In Tomba's succinct formulation, this leads to the "expansion of the political theater to the entire planet, and the consequent reduction of the ability to experience events that rapidly and repeatedly change the order of things" (MT 96). The result of the internalization of the idea of an accelerated progressive

<sup>17</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Is There an Acceleration of History?," in *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, eds. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2009, pp. 113–34; here p. 132.

motion defined by the linear universal time is the rise of history as a predictive social science, or as historiography, which claims to be able to predict the future based on a presumed scientific analysis of past and present events and tendencies, and even to establish and formulate universal laws of history, which emulate physical laws. Such a history, then, becomes teleological to the extent that it considers itself capable of expressing and conceptualizing a universal historical *telos*, which may be claimed to be achievable within a foreseeable and predicted future, or may be forever postponed beyond the historical horizon. But since this historical purpose is self-prescribed, it always remains an inescapable and inevitable *causa finalis* for universal history. Here, I agree with Vico that, as *homo historicus* one creates history by constructing it and thus coming to know what one has produced and thus put, often unwittingly, into history, projecting and imposing a purpose that one then takes to be its objective *telos*. In this role, the *homo historicus modernus* assumes the role of the creator and the lawgiver, although not of nature or the physical world, but of the social and historical world.

#### *Exemplarity and Repeatability*

For Tomba, two criteria that distinguish the Greek approach to history from the modern one are: (1) exemplariness of the instance, and (2) repeatability. The significance of an event indeed may make it morally, politically, and narratively exemplary and binding for anyone who participates in a history. Thus, if one does not know what to do in a specific situation, proceed by acting the way a historical character (for example, a hero) acted in a similar case, as a similar event may present itself. But in the modern account of a linear accelerating history, no event will ever repeat itself, or maybe, it will do so only in a sublated form. For each event is unique and immanent in the modern linear historical time, but not every event is exemplary – most are insignificant, and only very few are indeed historical. Yet, antiquity does not recognize the concept of a linear progressive temporality as meaningful, which is why several ancient authors suggest an inevitable cyclical change of political regimes, their constant revolving or revolutions (for example, Polybius in the *Histories*). As I tried to show, one of the paradigms for ancient history-telling and history-writing is travel (for example *Periplus*, which is based on eye-witness accounts), as well as heard and read stories about local social and political institutions, wars, myths, genealogies, and geographies, which are all

concretely inscribed and located in local histories). Each such history, then, narrates, preserves, and transmits the events that are unique to it and yet, despite their exemplarity, are also repeatable. Travel, like political unrest, may always repeat itself, and might even be inevitable as an expression of the human inability to come to an ultimately stable and just social and political arrangement. This thought is differently yet powerfully spelled out by many historically grounded thinkers from Plato and Diogenes to Karl Marx and Pyotr Kropotkin. Either travel or political conflict – outside or within a polity – is always marked by negativity, being invariably accompanied by danger and peril, and the possibility of death. Yet, in my account, history is the way to counter the negativity of non-being by allowing an actor or an event to become if not exemplary, then at least meaningful and significant through living on in a transmitted history.

The overcoming of the negativity of the crisis of travel and conflict, then, can be considered a comic undertaking in that its resolution or good ending is never guaranteed but can be achieved within a history by a common effort that becomes properly historical in telling and retelling the event, which then can become the *topos* of a history. For modern history, such an enterprise is rather meaningless, for the context of an event is taken as being unique and never repeatable in the progressive accelerating movement along the universal historical temporality. Thus, despite the claim of the predictability of the future based on a scientific social analysis of the past, the modern universal history can never really learn from the past, and thus it is only left with the possibility of projecting itself into the future.

Given that, I agree with Tomba that the two criteria of exemplariness and repeatability can be important for the constitution of a history. However, I also consider it possible for a history to be organized and function without exemplariness and repeatability, because the historical fabula can be also told about a seemingly insignificant yet memorable event that might become a crystallization point of a history (for example, of a group of friends), and being unique and unrepeatable, such an event might still be meaningful and important for a history.

#### *History as Political*

In my reading, the central problem that Tomba raises is: What political question is implied in the pluralization of histories (MT 96)? The belief in universal history

is still very much prominent in Western societies, transpiring in perceptions of various events and processes as being global, such as the global ecological crisis, which now has been historicized and politicized. Indeed, certain challenges are everyone's concern, as the example of climate change evidences, and thus need to be considered as a shared political concern and need to be addressed by everyone, by a multiplicity of communities and institutions of various degrees of influence. Yet for me, the primary political question implied in the pluralization of histories is the necessity of the decolonization of histories and their liberation from the domination of, and oppression by, one single narrative of universal political history, in which the political is put to the service of the constitution and functioning of the nation-state. Such a universal-historical colonization of other histories is always implicitly or explicitly teleological and imposes its own order, temporality and finality (as the promotion of freedom, civilization, and so on) onto other histories by euphemistically incorporating—when in fact destroying—them with their own temporalities and their own logic of organization, functioning, and transmission.

However, I do not want to claim, as Tomba takes it, that any history alternative to the self-serving and self-aggrandizing universal one is subjective. Every history, as I argued throughout the book, can be considered to have a specific structure, which always includes a narrative that organizes a history. Yet, such a narrative is not subjective, not the one that we choose or want it to be, since every history's narrative has been transmitted but at the same time is open to a commonly shared rational interpretation, reinterpretation, and critical scrutiny, and is thus always subject to being changed. The freedom of creating and narrating a novel history is not a "subjective narrative" that is meant to depoliticize universal history, which is oriented, since Hegel, toward the achievement of a universal freedom of, and its reflective consciousness in, the nation-state (MT 94).<sup>18</sup> As Lotze puts it, freedom is then located within history, while necessity is left to the now ahistorical nature. Yet, in my account, history does not have to provide one a place within a preestablished and predetermined historical order that realizes an

objective trans-historical end. History gives humans being as historical being. Human freedom may be achieved in a history as the freedom to create a novel history by recreating, rethinking, and reinterpreting it. Therefore, one can say that in a history the historical, which is arranged, kept, transmitted, and studied by humans, is the realm of necessity. But fabula, or the way one tells and retells, thinks and rethinks, interprets and reinterprets a history, is the realm of freedom.

At the same time, every history is always politically situated, for it is a shared history of a specific community, which is inevitably inscribed, qua community, into various shared practices, including a political one, even if not always making this inscription explicit. In the book, I argue against the apparent necessity of becoming subjected to the same modern political narrative, which is imposed onto a history by the universal history that projects itself into the future where its inevitable end will (has to) be reached and realized. But if the "mapping of the past" (MT 96) means telling about the events of the past from a particular narrative perspective, then the past is always incomplete, for, first, the narrative in principle can always be changed or corrected and, second, the historical is never complete and can never be completed.

### *Multiple Histories*

Arguing against a monolithic, teleological, and universal, and thus always politically ideological history, I am not opting for a relativistic history. I am not suggesting that any narrative for a history is as good as any other one, for it is always possible to argue, within and outside a history that one fabula, depending on the criteria of justice or consistency that we can rationally justify, that a particular narration and interpretation of a history is better than another one. As I attempted to show, we need to recognize a truth of history, which is neither that of the universal teleological history, nor that of the adequation of the past with one's current representation and understanding of it. It is the truth of the truth-telling, of *endoxa* that can always be retold and thus rethought, once one narrates the past events and their actors *bona fide*, to the best of one's ability making sense of the past through continually telling and retelling, thinking and rethinking it. But the rational interpretation and reinterpretation of fabula differs from the received transmission of collective memory, yet it is rather similar to a collective recollection, which can, and must be, critical of the shared and told past.

<sup>18</sup> "World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom." G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, transl. R. S. Hartmann, Indianapolis, IN: Liberal Arts Press 1953, p. 24.

Therefore, one can, and ought to, avoid a relativistic indefinite pluralization of histories in the "infinite dance around a historical material" (MT 97).

The infinite multiplication of histories is also prevented by the literary forms that humans use to narrate their *fabulae*. In general, modernity is poor in genres, so that the universal history, or even a non-universal history of a political event that becomes historically defining, is mostly told by using one particular ideologically charged genre: of the heroic epic of the travel and battle of reason throughout the entirety of history, of the tragedy of the failure, of the paean of success, and so on. Ancient history, as I have argued in the book, also has preferred genres, such as catalogue poetry or travelogue, which are important for the understanding of how history functions and how it is structured. For Hayden White, as Tomba puts it, history is defined by an "emplotment that produces meaning through rhetorical figures" (MT 96). For White, history becomes applied rhetoric, defined by only a finite number of systematically arranged literary genres (romantic, tragic, comic, and satirical) and rhetorical tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony), for apparently history as narrative has nowhere else to look for the forms of its organization and expression, style, and emplotment, except for rhetorical and literary categories.<sup>19</sup> History-telling thus becomes inscribed into a very narrow range of genres, which, however, do not universally exist in non-western traditions of history-telling. In this way, the narrow range of western literary genres implicitly and explicitly colonizes other histories that might use different narratives and forms of emplotment. Yet, contra White, I take it that in principle any genre can be appropriate for narrating a specific history, or we can invent or reinvent a new genre—which then becomes a manifestation of our historical freedom—for an existing or a novel history.

What I wanted to do in the book is to demystify and ultimately secularize the concept of history, which modernity always uses in the singular as the History, and which is implicitly sacred, to the extent that it drives all humans, mostly against their will or by usurping their will and making it into a general will, toward the achievement of its anticipatory ultimate end, however sublime it might be. There might be a global history that humankind is unwillingly and unwittingly involved in.

But there are also many other histories, historiographic and antiquarian, that are meaningful to each human individually and collectively, in which humans are involved, into which humans are inscribed, and which humans keep building, telling, and transmitting. There might a history of a nation—but there is also a history of a city, of an institution, of a group of friends, of a book one keeps reading and discussing with others, and perhaps of a fountain pen, of which one might be a sole historian. There can be also indistinctly formulated historical accounts of what one might call "lurking histories" that are not explicitly told; these might have a vague *fabula* or a loose historical or both, but in which many will participate without being aware of it. Such might be a history of a specific kind of dress or of its part (of the button). From the perspective of modern universal political history, such a history is ridiculous, unless it is implicitly political, or it must be subjugated and inscribed into a universal one. And yet, every human lives in such histories.

For Tomba, even if history is not teleological and universal, it is still defined by important political events, one of which is selected to become the event of and for a major political and social transformation, which is typically a revolution as the locus of the modern "birth of a nation." As this is a specifically modern event, Tomba still accepts the opposition between ancient and modern history. So even if history is not a universal history (*Weltgeschichte*), it is still, at least implicitly, universally expandable in its political appeal (*Weltgeschehen*). But I really want to say that there is no hierarchy in and among histories, and that in a political history of the French Revolution "revolution" should not be capitalized, since it is not in any way superior to the history of a small rural community in Senegal, or to the history of a Nenets family, or to the history of buildings in fourteenth-century Padua. In my account, every history counts.

This brings me to Tomba's last question: if "no one history is equal to any other, what then is the criterion and who is entitled to distinguish and differentiate among histories" (MT 97)? Since, in my account of history, histories are all equal, no one history, including a history founded on a nation-building event, should dominate over other histories. And yet, everyone inhabits multiple histories, which means that everyone should be able to decide about the preferences in treating and arranging one's multiple histories. Everyone thus is, can, and ought to be a historian as a narrator of a history. Only in modernity does being a historian

<sup>19</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

become a profession. Yet how many histories each one inhabits at the same time can never be determined a priori. The histories we live in are always finite and thus are not endlessly pluralized, as Tomba takes them to be (MT 97). Any history can always change and be told differently, and various histories follow different, sometimes even mutually incompatible, narratives. This means that one can always populate different or even conflicting histories (for example, a history of an institution and of a family) that might not be reducible to a single denominator. It is thus up to each one who inhabits a history, to be its historian, its critical narrator who defines its constitution and transmission, who can "distinguish and differentiate among histories" (MT 97). One can do so by transmitting and also by always critically interpreting and reinterpreting a fabula, so that a community is enabled to recognize a narrative as insufficient or oppressive of others, and thus it can change it, while keeping and trying to extend the historical. Therefore, there is no preferred position in treating histories, as each one must narrate it from a critically accountable position, which can collide with other interpretations of a history.

### Response to Alfredo Ferrarin's Critique

In his perceptive and thoughtful remarks, Alfredo Ferrarin discusses one of the central aspects of the book concerning the role of names and memory in the constitution of history.<sup>20</sup>

#### *History and Ontology*

As Ferrarin observes, history defines who human beings are and thus allows one both to be human and to understand what it means to be human (AF 76). Yet, "who human beings are" does not simply stand for the way or ways we think about ourselves within the currently recognized implicit and explicit practices that make human lives meaningful, or the various social and political structures that generate the respective contexts of such practices. "Who human beings are" is our very being, which is constituted within a history. History thus not only allows for one's very being as historical but also allows one to face and counter the negativity of non-being. Hence, history belongs to ontology.

Historical ontology, however, does not have to do with being *qua* being—but with being *qua* historical being, which, as Ferrarin observes, is a "transitional being" (AF 74), and yet is being nevertheless, which is being kept, remembered, and told about in a history.

As I have argued throughout the book, an imageless name rather than an anonymous image is the primary locus of history, because a name can in principle always find a place and a narrative in a particular history, whereas a bare image is out of place in history and can only be appropriated within a history that already has a pre-established agenda. I do not think, therefore, that one's living in a history as an imageless name is a bleak perspective. An anonymous image is free-floating and homeless, and as such is properly dead. But a name connects one with one's being *qua* historical being. In this sense, history is blind, as was Homer the historian, because it does not look at the images and appearances, which are historically deceptive insofar as they do not express the never fully expressible and extinguishable other of oneself. Such an other appears only through a voice that calls someone by a name that can then be part of a history. Moreover, the way I see it, historical being as being remembered and told about in a history is not just keeping a name at all costs—but keeping a person alive in a shared and retold, and thus reinterpreted, narrative.

The "how," or what happened to a person or in an event, requires the historical, which might be detailed and very elaborated, and which might often not be available. But the "what" is in the name, which must be kept in a history. And even if Socrates at a certain point wishes to completely withdraw from life and leave nothing behind (AF 75), he is still remembered many centuries after his death. Yet sometimes a person remains in a history not through an elaborate description but in a seemingly trivial anecdote from that person's life, which might even be reduced to a "minimal description" of an epithet (CH 81-3), and which, nevertheless, will allow the person's historical being to be preserved.

As for the *École des Annales'* concern with a long-lasting history, I take it that it expresses mistrust in choosing only a few favored names of honored actors as the main narrative centers of history, preferring instead the many who remain anonymous and who act under a collective name that stands for a singular identity. Such identity can also be non-human, such as a sea (for example, in Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean*

<sup>20</sup> Alfredo Ferrarin, "Please, stop at Zuckerman.' Names and Memory in History," *Existenz* 14/1 (2019), 73-77. [Henceforth cited as AF]

and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II), a city, or a field belabored by generations of farmers. But once—and if—this collective name gets pluralized and pulverized into many relevant names, these names can be kept and reinterpreted by the same kind of history that I have described.

Here, I want to further qualify Ferrarin's remark regarding the act of writing as predominantly determinative of what is left behind and how (AF 73) it is done. In my account of history, writing in history belongs much more to the constitution of the historical in its minutiae, which are meant to preserve every name and every detail of an event, doing so often to the point of pleonasm and duplication, preferring to write and remember more rather than less, in the hope that a minor detail of the excessive and sometimes loosely ordered account of the historical might later become meaningful and make a major difference in the preservation of historical being within a given history. But the historical narrative, or the *fabula*, although often written, is conceptually oral and it is passed on and reinterpreted mostly in an orally transmitted historical account, which is usually brief and concise. The historical being as preserved within a history lives on in an act of telling that is frequently being practiced in a personal oral dialogical exchange, in which everyone is a historian, rather than in the professional historian's solitary act of writing.

### *Oblivion and Fame*

Therefore, the living-on in a history is possible through a collective effort of keeping a history alive, and not only in the *kleos* of the ancients and the glory of the moderns (AF 74). Indeed, the epic bestows the immortal *kleos* onto worthy heroes by placing their names as bright new stars onto a sky that is completely remote from oneself, which can thus only be looked at in their exemplarity, producing a Kantian awe in the listener or reader. But, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and later Charles Taylor argue, modernity begins with the establishing of dignity over honor: dignity is universal, whereas honor is particular. Dignity is inclusive and should be recognized in all, whereas honor is exclusive and is bestowed only onto a few worthy individuals. Yet history should be possible and in fact necessary as the safeguarding of the dignity of every single person, at least if they did not mark their life and actions by a terrible infamy. To be able to do this, modern history has to invent and practice new means, and extend the

existing ones, in order to keep as many names of people (and of things and events) as possible within different histories (familial, municipal, institutional, and so on). This contributes to the overly historical consciousness of modernity, as not only those marked by the *kleos* or honor deserve a pass to a history—but everyone must have it, in order to preserve human dignity as being universally distributed.

Given that, I agree with Ferrarin (AF 77) and argue in the book (CH 142-9) that oblivion can be good, salutary, and beneficial. For forgetting not only helps to erase the superfluous and vain sediments of the pretentious and the unnecessary, which, as he notes, are all too widely spread in contemporary social media—but forgetting also assists in overcoming a trauma while keeping it in a history by maintaining the names of those involved in the traumatic event and by retelling and rethinking its story.

Oblivion thus can help rectify the injustice of an event, thus countering Virgil's spiteful *Fama* who not only disseminates malicious gossip but also embodies the narcissism of self-aggrandizement at any cost. By forgetting the evil *Fama* and suspending the heroic *kleos*, oblivion clears the way for preserving the personal names of doers and the definite descriptions of evildoers, as well as for retelling and rethinking a history, and thus keeping the latter alive.

The effort of remembering the immemorable is more akin to collective recollection than collective memory, a subject matter which I have explained in my response to Jeffrey Bernstein (JB 69). Bringing back the forgotten or the immemorable can only come through the practice of a careful story telling about seemingly insignificant events populated by the actors in an inner theater's history. In the ever-changing inner theater that is set on the stage of shared recollection, even a minor event can connect two apparently independent blocks within a history and assign a proper place for a voiceless name that is yet homeless. A "being of passage" (AF 74) can find dwelling in a history—but only if future generations keep telling and retelling it. No history is a fixed account established once and for all. Its historicity can grow or decay, adding and dropping names, and its *fabula* can change, depending on our effort of understanding, retelling, and reinterpreting it. A history can disappear altogether, if there is no one to tell and keep it.

Hence, the "memory of the immemorable," as Ferrarin calls it (AF 74), is not paradoxical and not impossible—but rather it is difficult, oftentimes



bordering on being impossible. There are many things that can be, but do not need to be remembered, due to their inconspicuousness and triviality, and there are few things that must be remembered. This is the distinction between memorabilia and memoranda: those things that can be remembered, and those that are worth remembering (CH 132).

Modernity, especially in its digital contemporaneity, suffers from hypermnnesia, since it wants to remember too much, often without a proper reason but mostly merely for the dubious reason of sheer vanity. Such is the case when one tries to secure *kleos* for a trifle, by taking a selfie in front of a celebrated monument in the hope that the posted image, often without a name or an accompanying description, yet illuminated by the glory of the immortalized background scenery, somehow will save the imaged person on the foreground from her or his ultimate dissolution in the waters of Lethe.

The forceful and perverse self-imposition onto a history comes in a heinous act of destruction or murder, in a futile hope to live on, even as an evildoer. Historical justice can be served to every Herostratus by demoting them to the historical exile of being remembered by a definitive description only ("the person who committed X") and not by a personal name. But a dear friend or an outstanding thinker should be named explicitly, rather than being exclusively referred to by the definite description ("the sharpest philosophical mind," AF 75).

Ferrarin notices a very interesting and important connection here, namely the one between committing a hideous crime against an object of beauty and iconoclasm (AF 76). Yet, destroying a work of art out of the vain hope to preserve one's name in a history and doing the same out of incapacity to embrace and accommodate its beauty within oneself is not the same. The former is an act that intentionally trespasses norms in order to forcefully establish a glory that does not recognize any moral limitations, for it asserts itself as the highest value beyond good and evil. The modern Herostrati kill famous people to become famous themselves, or more often they try to shock the common aesthetic perception by a radical gesture of its suspension, which by now has long been incorporated into such a perception. However, the iconoclastic gesture should rather be a symbolic act of the suspension of the beautiful, once it assumes the role of an intolerable and deeply disturbing sublime, whose very incommunicable name cannot apply to any material embodiment of the beautiful (as Ferrarin, for example, correctly point to Wisdom 14:21), yet

distracts from the beauty that always shines in the sensible yet never fully fits within it.

So when one hopelessly tries, for example, to embrace the beauty of the Duomo di Pisa or, on a minor scale, of the Santa Caterina church in Pisa, which unite many refined and complex components into a seemingly simple and almost ungraspable image of the beautiful, one can always recall the small and subdued, deliberately unpretentious yet equally impressive Pisan San Domenico church, which stands there stubbornly as a stern iconoclastic criticism, rejecting the excessive and even dangerously detrimental opulence of the beautiful.

### *Names and Images*

What is left from and after a person, then? The name: the loss of a name is the historical death and an absolute historical *nihil*. Names need to be given back to the nameless, in order to allow the poor, the dispossessed, the oppressed find their place in a history. But how can this aim be achieved? In *The Names of History*, Jacques Rancière has generously offered to lend his voice to all those voiceless ones who had disappeared from history. Yet, he did so from the perspective of a single modern history. Rather than bringing back the unique names of those whom modern political history has obliterated, his effort amounts to making himself the speaker and the oracle on behalf of the voiceless and the poor. In fact, this is an attempt of a generous historical Leviathan to abolish and pluralize its own universalizing, well-established, and educated voice that in fact only speaks for the historical tradition of the universal history that now unsuccessfully wants to suspend and radically transform itself.

I suggest that any way a name can be brought back and kept in a history is justified. It is important, however, not just to keep an isolated name but to find an appropriate narrative or fabula to go with it. It is better to have a name with an image, but an imageless name is already implicitly historical, and it is the very foundation of a history. A free-floating name without a narrative that can speak about it remains, metaphorically speaking, a soliton travelling through histories without interacting with them—until it finds its proper history, which can be more than one, as a name can live in many histories. An imageless name is akin to an untrodden road that might lead somewhere, if one decides to walk it. But an anonymous image is similar to the shining of a light on a ship in the night of

an ocean where no bounds are perceived and one does not know what this light might stand for. A name will not find its place in history on its own, however, unless humans seek to bring it about.

Keeping a name in a history can be understood as paying an unpayable debt to the dead (AF 74) that come back to life to the extent of being kept in a history. Perhaps, such a debt can be also taken as the one that the living ones pass on to the future generations, without ever fully redeeming it, and these future generations in turn will have to do the same. Yet, I prefer to think of it as a moral historical imperative that is being established, not autonomously by scholars as moral agents, but by others who make a claim on me in order to be historical beings, and continue being so. These must be kept in a history (of a family, a group of friends, an institution, a city, and so on), which one often also inhabits as a member of that history and group.

In this sense, the definitive description of a person might help, but is not quite enough. The imperative is to keep and preserve the proper name, which allows for one to be not just a type effaced in one's individuality (AF 77), but a unique person who is present in one's distinctive and never fully thematizable or extinguishable personal other, who is not a shadow or an *eidōlon* (AF 75) but a real other, even to oneself, that can only be revealed in full, yet on each occasion only partially in a non-finalizable historical dialogue with others. Here, survival is the precondition for having a life in a history, in the sense of being told about and being able to continue talking to others.

When we look at anonymous photographs by Nadar or Alfred Stieglitz, we know, or might be able to establish and interpret their context and the place where they have been taken. Remaining anonymous, they can become building blocks for a history (an aesthetic or a sociological one) in which they can be named anew, thus standing for something or somebody else than those originally portrayed. But knowing the context in which the pictures have been taken, one could also—although this might not be the task and the intention of the viewer—let the anonymous ones find or choose their names, and thus become properly historical. Yet, one is not obliged to keep all the names for posterity—but only those and within the histories in which one meaningfully participates oneself. For, as I have argued, there is no one single universal history but innumerable ones, a subset of which each one of us

populates by partaking in them. The same image can therefore be imbedded in many different histories, and not just one that Roland Barthes might have in mind when interpreting photographs, which then might be imperialistically extended and imposed onto every other history.

However, the constructive moment in a history, which comes as its logos, is not arbitrary. The inhabitants of a history are not being invited to "dress up for the occasion and sit still" (AF 75)—they interact with the living by talking to them. As the living ones we live with them in a history. Not only historical figures but also the living who tell, reinterpret, and transmit a history, live in it and exercise their historical being by keeping a history alive and going.

When taking sides with either the doer or the teller (AF 76), one wants to be the doer or the hero who will be told about and thus to be preserved in a history. But, as historical beings, humans are all—and need to be, if we are to follow the historical imperative—the tellers, the historians turned poets who tell about those who acted in a history. And by telling and retelling a history and by keeping the names of the doers in the historical, one makes sure, or at least hopes to become the doer at a certain point, or that there will be other tellers who will tell about us.

If this is the case, then the genre of autobiography (AF 76) is not primarily the one that is suitable for building and maintaining a history, which in its genre is simple, conceptually and performatively oral and usually not overly sophisticated in its fabula, but it is very detailed, complex in its minutiae and boring in the overall repetitive attempt at the grasp of the historical. In the end, a person, thing, or event can only be referred to and be in a history as a name that stands for the historical is (as "was" or "has been"), which, often lacking in any substantial account of its life, is accompanied only by a simple metaphor that stands for the "what."

So, in answer to Ferrarin's question (AF 76), preserving a name is paramount in and for a history, although not at any cost and not for the vainglorious purpose of being immortalized by a stop on the New Jersey Turnpike, where a name will be mostly remembered by being used outside the fabula in which it was meant to be preserved—but for the sake of the historical being in which all humans, dead and alive, participate in a shared history.