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SPECTRALITY AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION. IN SEARCH OF A CATEGORY OF COUNTER-TIME

Abstract

In this article, I will sketch a particular way of thinking about existence in time, the consequence of which would be practicing historiography as a response to the voices of the dead coming from the past. This theoretical conception of history tries to understand history not so much as an unfolding process of succession over time but as some community of the living and the dead. If the voices of the dead, defined in terms of spectrality, are to be active somehow in the present, they cannot be prematurely suppressed by gestures of closing the past understood as blocking the transmission of these voices to the future. After analyzing the problem of false closures in history, I am trying to understand spectrality that would combine both past and present activity. The article aims to propose tasks for a historiography that would consist in regaining in contemporary culture the ability to hear the voice, the gaze, and the expectations coming from the past, present in various forms which can be grasped by an encompassing notion of spectrality. Reflection on spectrality brings us closer to the meaning of the concept of counter-time.

Key words: Historiography, theory of history, spectrality, evil, counter-time

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”

W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, VII¹.

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, transl. Harry Zohn, ed. and intr. Hannah Arendt, preface Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256–257. Cf. Maciej

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Historiosophical explanations which were trying to reveal the shape of all of history, from its imagined beginning to some end, understood or as the present moment of reflection, or as the end of every future, today seem to be *passé* in humanistic thinking². All-encompassing historiosophies are at most interesting exercises of speculative imagination, providing narrations which can be described as configurations not maintaining a real cognitive bond with their subject, also closed for an honest dialog with similar interpretative attempts. History as a totality is not available cognitively, not only because of its enormous immensity, not only because we do not know the future, which will influence making sense of the past. It is not interpretable as a whole also because the attempts of grasping it stabilize those activities which in real history remain dynamic and open to the pluralism of developmental lines and interpretative perspectives³.

This does not mean that historiosophical reflection stopped being inevitable today, neither does it have cognitive potential. Reinhart Koselleck is right when he indicates the pluralism of interpretation of the space of experience and anticipation of expectations, but at the same time, notices that it is impossible to bring to one figure the essence of the mechanism of bonding subsequent situations in a historical – undetermined neither causally nor teleologically – pluralistic developmental process⁴. The task of historiosophy becomes, in his perspective, the theoretical and concrete historical study of the pluralism of temporalization in creating historical bonds⁵.

Bugajewski, *Brzęmię przeszłości. Zło jako przedmiot interpretacji historycznej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2009), 128–157.

² The problems that I analyze in this article are presented in more detail in my part of the book co-written with Maria Solarska: Maciej Bugajewski, “Experiencing the Past and Historical Time,” in Maria Solarska, Maciej Bugajewski, *Experiencing the Past. Historical Cognition Toward Pluralism of Historical Time*, transl. Anna Topolska (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 2019), 75–155. This article takes up some of the formulations that were elaborated extensively in that book.

³ I understand my reflection as a particular implementation of Paul Ricoeur's postulate to understand history as a mutual questioning of the past and the present. Only then can the present renew its existence when it hears a critical voice from the past. Only then is the past fulfilled when the possibilities of existence that are unfilled promises of the past are realized in the present. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness,” in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 207–240.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, “«Space of Experience» and «Horizon of Expectation»: Two Historical Categories,” in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the semantics of historical time*, transl. and intr. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–275.

⁵ Nassim Nicolas Taleb, *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), 366. One aspect of the book is pose the problem of analyzing how events are interpreted as they happen, not from a retrospective perspective. “History and societies do not crawl. They make jumps. They go from fracture to fracture, with a few vibrations in between. Yet we (and historians) like to believe in the predictable, small

From my point of view, I would also include in the historiosophical reflection all the studies determining the relations between the spheres of time, conducted from the perspective of the question concerning the desired form of the relations between the living and the dead. If history is a kind of community of the living and the dead – we should analyze what kind of community bonds are made between them thanks to the specific practices of memory and historiography⁶.

I see then the future of historiosophical studies and the possible re-establishing of its disciplinary specificity not next to or above the pluralism of the discourses about the past. I rather see this future in the studies analyzing the assumptions of the interpretative pluralism referred to the past, directed towards the critique of these assumptions made from the perspective of the values which could give desirable shape to our bonds with the dead and those not yet born. It is therefore not about historiosophy as a spectacle of history presented from outside, but about critical analysis of how we as a society think about the past in the perspective of normative reflection over the place of the living and the dead in the historical community.

FALSE CLOSURES OF THE PAST

The differences between memory and historiography are not decided by the basic categories on which they are based but by their location in the space of social practices. It is that because historiographical knowledge is produced in the place institutionally constructed and formed according to the rules of that place. The consequences of the specificity of the social location of the historiographical discourse are numerous.

First of all, historiography pursues the truth about the past in the space of negotiations inside research institutions and communities. The voices of memory undergo objectification in historiographical research and are submitted to critical assessment. The historical narrative makes claims to substitute by historical narrative the messages of the memory of the past.

Next, the internal character of the historiographical dialogue, that is, the exclusion of memory as a full-fledged discussant through its objectification in the course of the research, is combined with a retrospective look at the past. Historiography performs structural deformation of the voices of memory (as it interprets them) from the point of view which, in the course of historiographical interpretation, acquires the function of a closed, already realized, already

incremental progression. It struck me, a belief that has never left me since, that we are just a great machine for looking backward, and that humans are great at self-delusion. Every year that goes by increases my belief in this distortion” (p. 11–12).

⁶ The problem of the relationship between the living and the dead is raised, for example, in a book by Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 524.

decided horizon of expectations, which the voices of the memory did not have when they were still open to the unknown future.

The third consequence of the institutional location of historiography is the inclusion of living memory (object of historiographical research) into the interpretative framework, allowing for the inclusion of diverse and non-agreed-upon memory phenomena into the narrative continuity superior to them. In the historiographical approach, discontinuities and conflicts of memory are abolished in a coherent continuity of the interpretative course.

Generally speaking, historiographical cognition aims to elaborate the closed synthesis of the past and its memory, closed in the sense that it is written so as if the open future, open and undecided, did not exist. In the historical study, the function of the future realized and closed is given to the point of view from which historians retrospectively interpret the past. Historiography thus refuses dialogue with memory on equal terms, deprives it of a proper, unknown future, and smothers it with patterns of coherence and continuity.

The cognitive closures introduced by historiography are similar to the analogous closures created by historiosophical reflection. There are two main faults of contemporary historiosophical thinking, which I will include within a common category of closing the past. I have already mentioned one of these closures – it consists of the immobilization of the dynamics of real pluralistic history in phantasmatic representations of the whole spectacle of history, encompassing what happened and what will happen.

The second type of such closure consists in the elaboration of an epistemological explanation of the possibilities of historiographical cognition having historiosophical consequences that mean not a less radical closure of the past, this time not in the image of the totality of history but through annulment of its subjectivity in the relationship between it and the present of historiographical study. According to such an epistemological reflection, the past does not have a total sense, that is, a sense encompassing the history as a whole. Thus, the meaning of the past would have to be established one-sidedly only from the perspective of the time of a historian. This position, as we can see, in some sense annuls the past, makes it – as seemingly devoid of meaning – doomed to our sense-building procedures, unable to ask us questions and to reply to the problems that we refer to it. This kind of presentism breaks mutual hermeneutical bonds between the spheres of time. The past is the object closed in the image of chaos; thus, it is annulled, as if removed from history encompassing, paradoxically, only contemporaneity establishing senses and anticipations of the future created in it. The first kind of closing the past in a complete explanation of history is replaced here by the second type of closure of the past by its exclusion from history understood as a space of sense⁷.

⁷ This way of understanding historical cognition is linked to the modernist phase of the development of our culture. Subjectivity was the source of meaning in her. Meanwhile, the problem of spectrality introduces the theme of the sovereignty of the past's voice in relation to the operation of historical cognition.

In this perspective, the only sense of the past and the totality of history is the one which is established by historiographical operation, that is, by the future cognition. Opposing immobilization of the past in a total spectacle, the second strategy of the closing of the dead in the historical narrative consists of closing it through its annulment and the gestures of separation from it. Both of these, thus, are the projects of amnesia of the past understood in one or another way.

In my further considerations, I oppose the strategies of closing the past in a spectacle or by depriving it of its sense. Instead, we need to open ourselves up to the voice of the past coming in its proper way. I am trying to capture this mode of self-expression of the past by expressing it in terms of spectrality. I am convinced that the past should remain open in the sense of recognizing it as active and creating conditions for its activity. The past will remain open, continually making us review theoretical and narrative interpretative propositions referred to it, if we try simultaneously: to aim at a form of reconciliation with the past and to maintain sensitivity to every signal of the past escaping our interpretations, its independence, difference and sovereignty in relation to our gaze. The past is not silent because we, the living, speak with a voice coming, partly, from the dead. There is a tension between the indicated tasks – reconciliation with the past and recognition of its sovereignty. Consequently, every attempt at reconciliation with the past will be undermined by new impulses coming from it and differentiating the retrospective influence of the future on the past.

SPECTRALITY AND OPENNESS

The problems of memory should be considered both in the context of historiographical claims to the truth, as well as in reference to the spectral presence of the past in contemporaneity⁸. In the area of discussion of the theory of historical cognition and historical writing, the spectral mode of the existence of the past in contemporaneity was indicated by, for example, Michel de Certeau and Jörn Rüsen⁹. They both explain their position by referring to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, particularly to the relation between the son and the appearing ghost of his father. The order of memory coming from the father's ghost transforms itself into an expectation, referred to the son, of undertaking specific actions in contemporaneity and the future.

Michel de Certeau was indicating that historiography creates a narrative about the past being a metaphor of absence, the role of which is an interpretation of the phantom of the past to separate the living from the dead and to reveal for

⁸ Cf. a moving fictionalized movie about a spectral presence of the past: *Ghost dance*, dir. by Ken McMullen (1983; United Kingdom: Ken McMullen) with Jacques Derrida as one of the film's characters.

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of history*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: , Columbia University Press, 1988); Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning. A Theory of Historical Studies*, transl. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

the former a space of freedom. It is done by placing the ghost of the past in a narrative “tomb” within the historical narrative. The presence of the phantom of the past can be compared to the presence of a trace of a barefoot on the sand on what seemed to be a deserted island, to the unclear sounds coming from the past or the sounds or feelings coming from the inside of one’s own body, and, in another optics, to sea waves coming to the coast. Historical narrative, according to de Certeau silences, calms and buries that otherness of the absent past, while at the same time honoring it. It is a work against death (freeing space for the living) and a work of death (placing the phantom in the narrative tomb).

For Rüsen, historiography is a cognitive activity directed towards the spectrally present past. Its cognitive and pragmatic effects are both that of understanding the change in time analyzed by historians, as well as providing, through historiography, an orientation for the social practices which take under consideration the change in time presented by historiography.

The category of specter seems essential today in the reflection on memory and historiography for several reasons. Firstly, spectrality allows us to oppose the category of separation in the reflection on the relation between contemporaneity and the past. When we are trying to think about the spectral presence of the past within contemporaneity, we realize how the past is present in contemporaneity. The category of specter explains the paradoxicality visible in the expression “presence of the past.” We all feel that we are not separated from the past, though we know that the past – if it is supposed to be the past – passed, that it is a completed and lost time. It is present, and at the same time, it is not there. The terms of a specter, of a phantom, of spectrality, can bring the sense of this paradox closer. Something spectral exists, and at the same time, is not there, or – looking from another perspective – we are not sure if that which is spectral exists or not.

Secondly, we will also understand the significance of spectrality for today’s reflection on memory and historiography if we link spectrality with the category of “otherness” and “the Other”¹⁰. Through the specters, the other, the different from us, emerges from the past and demands from us proper reference to itself. We are the heirs and debtors of the past as such, and also the past as appearing quasi directly to us, that is, through the sphere of spectrality.

How should we understand the category of spectrality? The reference to *Hamlet* of Shakespeare is misleading in this question as it suggests the “substantial” existence of the specter and its anthropomorphic character. The phantom would be, in this perspective, similar to the dead person appearing in his body: we can recognize him/her in it. Or possibly the specter is a spook in which the features of the deceased person are still recognizable despite the change of the dead person into the spook. In other words, the specter (phantom) is, in this perspective, a formidable returner haunting the living.

I want to try out another way of thinking about the sphere of spectrality that is devoid of the reference to the eeriness and figurative anthropomorphism. First

¹⁰ See the point below: “The scandal of evil.”

of all, spectrality would be, in my understanding, the third sphere between the past and contemporaneity, the sphere co-constituted by the dead ones and by the living ones. I think, moreover, that such a sphere should be co-constituted by the living as preceding the narratives of memory and historiography, and also that we should maintain consciousness of its existence at the time when we are already stocking the past with the narratives of memory and historiography¹¹.

The sense of this way of understanding of spectrality can be revealed by the example of photography. Let us imagine that it is a photograph – for instance, of the soldiers of the South or the North from the time of the civil war – that depicts people looking at the lens of the camera of the photographer. When we look at such photographs today, we may have an impression that the gaze of the depicted figures catches us and (in a sense) pierces us. This kind of initial impression can be, but I think that it shouldn't be immediately substituted by a belief that the figures belong only to the past and only cognitive relations between them and us are possible today. An unclear primal dialectics of mutual looks is substituted by ascribing activity only to one of the sides of the relation. The spectral presence of the past is eliminated for our interpretative constructions, stating the current non-existence of the dead ones and their gaze.

Going beyond the considerations of the narrow example of photography, we can most generally say that we deal with spectrality when we are referring to the remains of the past in the way in which they are for us, like a gaze of the voice of the dead ones (or absent ones) reaching us or directed to us. These remains can be everything that withstood the past, not only photographs, written texts, statements in the form of audio or audiovisual recordings. These can also be objects of everyday life, architectural artifacts, and even panoramas of a cultural, urban, or rural landscape.

Let us think of a saying that through it, the past remains – in other words: centuries of history, and finally our dead ones – speak to us and look at us. It is not necessarily an empty rhetoric figure. Recognizing the subjectivity or sovereignty of the past, expressed in its artifacts, is, as it seems, present as an assumption in the attempts of identification of the sense of practices of memory or the meaning of historiographical studies, indicating the fact that they consist in giving voice to the past, in expressing it by its voice, in creating possibilities for it to speak to us through contemporary constructed narratives of memory or historiography. These attempts enable posing an additional question, radicalizing the issue, concerning the obligations that the contemporaries have towards the passed if they are undertaking an attempt at interpreting the remains of the past as the gaze and the voice of the predecessors present in (only) a spectral way¹².

¹¹ See the dialectical interpretation of the relationship between the past and the present in Krzysztof Zamorski's book: Krzysztof Zamorski, *Dziwna rzeczywistość. Wprowadzenie do ontologii historii* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008).

¹² It remains to be decided whether listening to the voice of the dead should have the final conclusion of the gesture of bringing the deceased to the narrative grave in the form of a historical narrative, as Michel de Certeau would like.

THE SCANDAL OF EVIL

Emmanuel Lévinas, in his essay “Useless Suffering,” published in the volume *Entre nous*, formulates a thesis about the necessity of handing on the ethical message of the Bible to the future¹³. His analysis of the problem of the continuity in history is controversial in relation to the continuity presented by historiosophies, which include the evil of suffering in history within the total vision of the sense of history, as in Hegel’s historiosophy. The scandal of evil is on their ground explained and justified by a total image of history, which gives a dimension of sense to suffering. For Lévinas, evil is a scandal and an absurd thing impossible to be included in any structures of meaning and significance. The absurdity of suffering cannot be grasped by the sense-building activity of consciousness.

A reaction to the scandal of evil expected by the ethical message of the Bible is not explaining and justifying it in various constructions of sense of history but unconditional help and support to the suffering one. This reaction is at the same time the continuation of the Holy History interrupted by evil. This kind of continuation does not consist in reinterpreting the history of humanity based on the total concept of its course, showing the goodness which unfolds in history.

The meditation of Lévinas has a double consequence for the work of memory and historiography in the context of the spectral presence of the past. The most important is the category of the loyalty of the consciousness and of the conscience toward the voice (and the gaze) coming from the past, expressing the warrant of responsibility for the suffering one. This voice is coming, but it needs to be heard. It is coming from the dead, but it does not resonate when the living does not listen to it. In this way, the separation of the past and the present is abolished. The latter realizes its vocation when it pursues the calling coming from the past. Care about others in the past and their voices coming through time transforms into building a new continuity in history. The continuity of the Holy History understood in a new way.

Secondly, recognizing the absurdity of suffering influences shaping the cognitive reference to the past. If the past has to be interpreted, it would be in the way in which old sufferings, the old sense of the absurdity of the fate experienced by those affected by grief, should be articulated, and in this way, brought closer to us. Both memory, as well as historiography, should reveal the sense of incomprehensibility and injustice of the suffering in the past. Memory and historiography should break the totalizing narrative explanations of the sense of history.

¹³ Emmanuel Lévinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, transl. Michael B. Smith, Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–101. Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a guide to life* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 68–99 (chapter IV: “Levinas on What Is Demanded of Us”).

The consequence of it is a reinforcement of the spectral presence of the past within contemporaneity. This is because the historiosophical explanations of the history and the evil in history, refused by Lévinas, emphasize difference and separation between past and subsequent development of events, while gradually revealing, with the passing time, a developing and emerging sense of history as a totality. Asynchronism of the past moments pushes the previous moments into the abyss of time, which was left behind by the later moments. In the perspective of historiosophies rejected by Lévinas, the spectral character of the past is an illusion.

If, however, we extract and evoke the past suffering from the temporal distance, it becomes almost as painful as the current one. The sense of absurdity connected to the past suffering – recalled and interpreted by memory and historiography – haunts our sensitivity and may seem to be almost as real as the contemporaries' experience.

In solidarity with Levinas's perspective and as a consequence of my previous considerations about the need to resist false closures in history, it could be suggested a specific function of the work of memory and the role of historical narrative: it is regaining in contemporary culture the ability to hear the voice, the gaze, and the expectations coming from the dead, present in various forms which can be grasped by an encompassing notion of spectrality. Memory and historiography can bring closer the meaning of this formula when they are "actualizing" the past, as if "evoking" the specters of the past, and at the same time deconstructing historiosophical fictions of the total sense of the continuum of history. Sensitivity to the spectral character of the presence of the past is a form of completing "the task to brush history against the grain" (W. Benjamin) and thus acting against the natural flow of time. When we think about spectrality, we begin to feel the meaning of the concept of the counter-time.

Translation Anna Topolska

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