Historical Understanding

Past, Present, and Future

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tomorrow is the Question: Modernity and the need for strong narratives about the future—and the past

Franz-Josef Arlinghaus

"Somebody says 'make America great again'.[1] But when has America ever been great?" The question raised during the funeral of George Floyd by his niece Brooke Williams[2] was weeks later taken up in a town hall meeting in Philadelphia by Pastor Carl Day. Day, directly addressing the presidential candidate of the Republican Party in the room, asked: "*[W]hen* was that great? Cause that pushes us back to a time we could not identify with such greatness." Day then said that there has been no change in the situation of the Black community during recent decades, while the candidate claimed that during his time in office people of color had never done better until the coronavirus came, and that they will do better in 2021, and in the future too.[3]

This is but one instance to show how important the relationship between past, present, and future is, even in everyday life, and how strongly it is debated at times. This controversy also shows that the question about *how* yesterday, today, and tomorrow are related to each other is basically the question of change over time and what the present has to do with it (Day

accused past administrations, just as well as the actual one, that they failed to deliver change, the candidate claimed that during his time in office there was change, and that there will be more change in the future).

This raises a question that may sound familiar to readers of Reinhart Koselleck (2004): Is the future (still) perceived as open, or was this idea just an episode that dominated "classical modernity" only during some decades in the twentieth century? And what does "open" mean, anyway? Does the past still matter when a lot of people are convinced that the whole planet is in danger? Astonishing enough, different as the perspectives of politics between Brooke Williams, Carl Day, and the candidates are, their attitudes toward time seem to be similar.

In this essay, I want to make five suggestions in this regard. First, I try to show that even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, like in modernity as a whole, the future is still perceived as open. Second, I will argue that this openness is specified by looking to the past. Third, the narratives that emerge by linking past and future conceptualize time as a *process*, in which the present occupies a privileged position. Drawing on Koselleck's ideas, the fourth point (leading back to point one) is that these narratives, different and even contradictory as they are, have in common that they are an answer to the need to hedge in the openness of the future. Here I rely on the argument of Zoltán Simon (2019a) regarding modern history's function of domesticating novelty. While some chapters of this volume—just like recent Koselleck interpretations or Simon's argument on narrative domestication as a shortcoming of historical understanding today—focus on the extent to which historical understanding as we know it was challenged, my chapter emphasizes the other side of the coin: the continuing relevance of modern history and historical understanding. This leads to my fifth and last point: counterintuitive as it seems, turning points, breaks, and ruptures have been an integrated part of processual history since the beginning of modern historiography in the eighteenth century. What is more, stories that draw on history and aim to display breaks, new epochs even, also contribute decisively to taming the openness of the future.

History of the future

The future has its own history, as is very well known. Other epochs dealt with "tomorrow" differently than our age. Considering medieval time perceptions seems to be essential to formulating the question of

the problems (and solutions) surrounding modern ideas about the past, present, and future. Concepts of time in the Christian Middle Ages are based on solid information on how the world started, who started it, how it will end, and even what will come afterwards. To fear that humanity is endangered by an ecological or military disaster in, say, 2070, *if the present* does not deal with the problem *now*, would not make too much sense in medieval Christian thought, since a) there is an end to this world anyway and the present cannot do much about it; and b) people, like Martin Luther, for instance, typically believed that the end was very near. 2070? Not really a concern.

The certainty that this world is only a kind of "interplay" prior to the eternal life with the Lord in heaven (or the Devil in hell) had an immediate impact on everyday activities and relations to the future. This does not mean people did not prepare for "tomorrow" and its contingencies (see Bernhardt 2016); on the contrary: even a far-reaching future beyond individual life was taken into account, and not even death was the "end of story." The last wills of kings, courtiers, and simple folk alike left money for church services and prayers with the aim of shortening their years in purgatory. The foundations established to provide the money are, by earthly standards, designed for eternity, and some of them still exist today (Borgolte 2018).

Although planning for decades, even centuries ahead was common in the Middle Ages, "whenever medieval text talk about 'futura', they always talk about 'future events', but never about future as a space of time," as Lucian Hölscher (1999: 20) argued. The repeated prayers and masses one provided are events, just like death and resurrection. Moreover, what we do *not* see here is an unfolding of time as a "development" or "process" of any kind.

From event to event: Medieval historiography

Medieval historiographical and life-writing texts display occurrences like pearls put in line on a blanket, without connecting the thread. The "Deeds of Emperor Frederick," written by bishop Otto of Freising, reports mainly on the activities of Frederick I, Barbarossa. While Otto's philosophical view on history is that of constant changes in this world (*mutatio rerum*), he attributes these to the fact that all things in this world are composed of different entities. This is especially true for the human being, who is, more than anything else on Earth, a combination of units

opposed to each other (*ex opositis compactus*). Given the constancy of changes and their very fast flow, one can hardly lay hand on time, he argues (Ehlers 2013: 89ff.). According to Otto, "since the passage of time follows this swift course of forms, time passes so rapidly that its present moment can scarcely, if ever, be perceived" (Schmale 1965: 140; Mierow and Emery 1994: 39). Time is given no "space" where things can develop, it has no "agency." Rather, time itself falls under the rule of the ever-faster change of the forms of things themselves, incorporating "fluxus" by virtue of their composed nature. (Little wonder that worldly time is the opposite of eternity, and the mundane world of opposing things is the opposite of heavenly harmony.) The medieval view of time is not only derived from the Bible; instead, it is rooted in a specific view on the world (Descola 2005).

To give but one example of the way this affects Otto's writing, consider how "Gesta" reports on Frederick's campaign to Rome in order to become emperor. After crossing the Alps, the knights almost constantly had to fight adversaries, both on the way to Rome and in Rome itself. It comes as no surprise that Otto typically attributes success in the military campaign to the wit or courage of the title character of the book, Frederick. However, withdrawals of the army are explained by unfavorable polluted air, the unbearable heat, or the like (Schmale 1965: 12–43). Altogether, the campaign took about a year, and while Otto gives reasons why certain events turn out the way they did, the year "abroad" as a considerable time span as such is not much taken into consideration. He could have mentioned the exhaustion after a month-long journey, a decrease (or increase?) of armed forces during that year, and the like, but that is not how this learned man wants to write history.

One is tempted to attribute Otto's view on time to his position of being a high medieval bishop, who may have been more interested in the coming world than the earthly one. However, a quick glance at late medieval laymen underlines that even merchants do not deal with time in a different way.

Burkhard Zinck was only eleven years old when, in 1407, he was sent a thousand kilometers away from his family in Memmingen to his uncle, a priest, in Rebnica (Slovenia), to get educated. Following the death of both his uncle and his parents, he remained on his own, a young traveling scholar who, despite earning some money as a private tutor, had to beg for bread to survive. Later in life, following a few setbacks, Zinck eventually settled in Augsburg, worked his way up and

died as a wealthy merchant around 1475. All this can be read today in the chronical of his adoptive home, Augsburg, written by Zinck himself. In the text, Zinck combines the history of the city with his personal "autobiography" (Moeglin 1997; Arlinghaus 2020: 97ff.). But there is no "and during these years I saved enough money to buy a house" or the like. Rather, one event occurs after the other, introduced by an *item*, without assuming a development that prepared for the following occurrence, without any time-consuming transitions.

These observations are in line with Gabrielle Spiegel's analysis of the characteristics of medieval concepts of temporality. Spiegel (2016: 26) singles out three points: "(a) a strict series of events, paratactically presented without causal connection between the events that make up the *series temporum*; (b) a cyclical view of history, … ; and (c) a far-reaching typological construction of events … in which antecedent events become prophecies of later ones, which represent their fulfillment but which are not connected to the earlier events in any direct, causal manner." In the end, as Spiegel continues, "the overall effect of such organization is to produce a non-developmental episodic narrative informed by a theme that is continually re-expressed in separate events."

To sum up: In the Middle Ages, the future has no "space" (Hölscher), and time is not linked to "developments" (Spiegel); it is not conceptualized as a process.

Modern historical writing to take away

In a 2011 article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Michael Hüther commented on the consequences of the 2009 financial crisis in Europe. Reading Hüther, the director of the German Economic Institute, an influential think tank financed by big German companies, one would expect suggestions concerning state, company, and European Union strategies in facing the crisis. Instead, Hürther (2011) points at history: "Over centuries, the cultural union of Europe grew together. Romanesque and Gothic art, … Baroque and the Enlightenment are European phenomena. At the same time, it was always Europe, where 'Reason' was expressed always in new forms—be it Ancient philosophy, medieval scholasticism, … the Enlightenment or modern science." After mentioning some political events, the emergence of the nation-state, and so forth, Hüther argues for the necessity of forming a European nucleus around Germany and France as part of a greater geographical space of integration.

This is not the occasion to question the open Eurocentrism and the optimism of the text. More important is that the chief concern of Hüther, who received education both in economics and history, is the future: the future of Europe. To retain the core strength of Europe, Hüther argues that the center of the continent has to work together. According to the well-known story, *throughout the centuries*, Europe *developed* a special set of achievements. Despite differences between medieval and modern forms of reason or law, which Hüther is certainly aware of, he sees century-long processes at work. *If* the continent manages to stick to those achievements *today*, *then* tomorrow's problems can be dealt with. The future is not simply open, but also portrayed as manageable via conditional clauses that point to the present. The basis for this narrative is time conceived as a process; and this concept is so "natural" that there is no need to address this explicitly.

In my view, a cornerstone for the success of interpretations such as the above one, regardless of all criticism, lies in the way they link past, present, and future. In the midst of a severe debt crisis, Hüther insists that Europe has developed strong tools over centuries which, *if* applied today, will solve tomorrow's problems. However, he does not tell a story of *developments* that led to the financial catastrophe. Precisely because he points to general values that are not linked to the event, the crisis remains an unexpected rupture. Through the back door, Hüther underscores the unexpected fracturing of the global economic system caused by the 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc., precisely because he drew on the supposed general achievements of Europe instead of portraying the crises as part of a process.

A and B futures

Optimism is not the soundtrack of "The Global 2000 Report to the President," published in 1980. The famous memorandum, commissioned by US President Carter during his Environmental Message to the Congress on May 23, 1977, compiled a vast amount of data by leading scientists. Presuming a 2 percent fossil fuel combustion growth per year, the study predicted "a 2°–3°C rise in temperatures in the middle latitudes of the earth" and an "increase of 5°–10°C in polar temperatures" which could "eventually lead to the melting of the Greenland and Antarctic ice caps and a gradual rise in sea level, forcing abandonment of many coastal cities" by the middle

of the twenty-first century. The old predictions sound very much up to date, even today. However, out of the roughly thirty pages of the summary only one page (!) addresses possible changes in climate and only a third of that page deals with the growth of atmospheric carbon dioxide as the main driver of global warming. Instead of climate change, the report gives priority to population growth, food production, and the management of resources, especially farmable land and water (Barney 1980: 37). In essence, the major concern of the report was how to fill the refrigerator in the face of an ever-growing family, and not how to deal with the overspill of the wastebin and its consequences.

While the report's priorities seem somewhat outdated, the red thread of the narrative is not. The first sentence below the headline "Major Findings" reads: "If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, … less stable ecologically, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now" (Barney 1980: 1). Today's environmental analysis surely emphasizes other threats. However, the world of tomorrow will be much worse or even impossible to live in "if present trends continue," as research on climate change and the proliferation of nuclear arms rightly keep on warning us about.

Whether the future of Europe will be bright because of its brilliant century-long past or whether the future of the world will look gloomy because of decade-long environmental misdeeds is not the question I want to answer. My focus lies on the shared concept of time these narratives are based on. Both the optimistic and the pessimistic "stories" present us with *how* "tomorrow" will look, if … Both futures come with such an "if," meaning that the present is confronted with two alternatives and today's decisions will pave the way to future A or future B. Instead of multiple futures, most narratives—although not all—talk about only two. Their expectations are based on strong assumptions about the past. This is especially true for the debate on climate change today, which, more than the discussion on population growth in the 1960s and 1970s, regularly refers to long, and often very long, time spans (see Chakrabarty 2018).

The success of such narratives, the reason why they receive so much attention and why they are always produced anew, lies, in my view, in the need to channel the future. A radically open future is the *horror vacui* of modernity, it seems, and the sciences and the humanities fill this void with strong narratives that provide us with a compass for navigating through time. Now, this does not mean that climate change

or population growth are just narratives. However, the very real concerns they express do not simply address the problem they draw the attention to. In doing so, they also provide the modern mind with an urgently needed response to a future that is perceived as radically open and thus difficult to cope with.

Processes and breaks

"Processes that lead to a certain outcome" seem to be the red thread of the modern concepts of history; and this, it seems, is the story needed to counterbalance the open future (Simon 2019a: 17–27). But what about turning points, ruptures, and breaks? Simon (2019b: 80), distinguishes "between a processual and an eventual understanding of historical time," the latter one informing immense ruptures and bringing about previously non-existent worlds in the outburst of momentous events. While Simon suggests that this view is linked to a quite recent perception of the present world that now supposedly is undergoing—and will undergo—unforeseen changes, this paper proposes that the unforeseen has been part of processual history right from its start in around 1800.

As for a start, please remember Hüther's article, which, on the one hand, surely tames the future in a time of crisis by suggesting that we have the capacity to get over it. Yet, on the other hand, Hüther's article does not play down the level of damage the 2009 financial crises wrought on the world. On the contrary! While it tries to minimize the fear of the consequences that might follow, it does not try to relativize the exceptionality of the world economy's troubles.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led a number of authors—journalists, doctors, and historians alike—to compare the disease with the cholera epidemic of the nineteenth century or, more often, to the 1347–51 European plague. The historian Volker Reinhardt (2021) sees striking similarities between COVID-19 and the fourteenth-century pest. Reinhardt (2021: 1) underlines that both diseases were completely unknown, that nobody knew anything about them, and that they changed society, culture, and religious practices dramatically. To be fair, Reinhardt's book also highlights the many differences between the situation today and "back then" (advances in medicine, differences in mortality rates, etc.), although it claims that the difference between the extent of changes they brought about remains an open question.

Aligning the famous plague of the Middle Ages with modern events—and modern ruptures—is nothing new. After the First World War, J. W. Thompson (2020: 565) pointed to the fourteenth-century disease because "historians and students … have been searching if possibly they might discover a precedent in the past for the present order (or rather disorder) of things." Searching history for parallels to the "disorders" of the present has a long tradition and is certainly not limited to pandemics. The motive for this surely is, as Thompson's phrase indicates, to smoothen the turmoil society is confronted with in the present or the future. Nevertheless, in doing so, ruptures and breaks are highlighted. The analogies that are looked at are *first* of all analogies of the unexpected new that brings unforeseeable consequences. Smoothening such events by saying "we already survived other unpredicted ruptures" comes second.

Emphasizing that something unexpected, unforeseeable happened (and may happen again) is, it seems to me, the second red thread of historical narratives. The two threads—narrating processes or narrating analogies—are linked together because the openness of past, present, and future is not plausible without it being conceptualized as a consequence of possible developments *and* possible ruptures alike. And the two red threats are linked together insofar as both offer a way to deal with uncertainty, although in different ways. The new, the unexpected is and has been part of historical understanding and writing since the development of modern historiography. Hence the fact that the proclamation of different epochs during the *Sattelzeit* went hand in hand with the "discovery" of an open future and is itself a new thought. In contrast to the Six World Ages, in which the Middle Ages periodized time, the concept of epochs, in my view, combines developments that lead to breaks that open unforeseeable worlds.

To conclude

In this chapter, I argued that while "make America great again" and "Friday's for future" point in opposing directions in terms of politics, they are very much alike with respect to their shared concepts of time and their combination of past, present, and future. This also applies to optimistic and pessimistic views on the future, which, in general, share the same basic narrative: that the future has to be "modeled" on decisions taken today, that narratives about the past inform decisions about the future. Modern utopias and dystopias offer a solution to the

same problem: they provide *strong narratives* that "channel" the radical openness of time in all three directions (past, present, and future). In doing so, they provide the present with an enormous power not only over times to come, but also over the past.

However, modern historiography since its early days has written about breaks, about new epochs, even, and establishing analogies is its favorite way of doing so. "Analogy" does not mean that history repeats itself, but, so the story goes, ruptures do. In a way, they become less intimidating, because something similar already occurred "back then." Nevertheless, the event as such is exposed as a rupture, and if "the present" is in the middle of a rupture or an epochal shift, phrases like "we do not know how the world will look tomorrow, after the event" are often heard. No comfort here.

In the course of argumentation, I made three points: first, within a fractioned society, history is becoming increasingly important, inside and outside academia. Second, from a medieval perspective, and in line with Simon (2019a), I discussed how modern historical time considered as a process tames the future. Third, with a processual understanding of time during the *Sattelzeit* comes the break, the rupture, the epoch, even, and what follows is not the outcome of a development. There is some taming here, too, by pointing to analogies in history. However, even analogies underline that unexpected ruptures have taken place and will take place again, without foreseeable consequences.

Notes

1 The title of this chapter, "Tomorrow is the Question," is borrowed form Ornette Coleman's music record.

2 Speech of Brooke Williams, in "Live: Funeral for George Floyd Held in Houston | NBC News," YouTube video, 2:11 minutes. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mufpOyoFrrg (accessed September 30, 2021).

3 "Trump on ABC News Town Hall: Trump Responds to Questions on US's Racial Inequalities," YouTube video. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wop7fEvcAf8 (accessed September 30, 2021).

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