



## Presentism, alterity and historical thinking

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**ABSTRACT:** "Presentism" as the non-recognition of fundamental otherness of the past ("historical alterity") is often regarded as ultimately flawed, but at the same time as a kind of innate form of historical thought (Wineburg's "unnatural act"), which must be overcome through history education. The premise of the otherness of the past does however, also have its pitfalls and limitations. Using an example of a problematic diagnosis of historical thought as "presentistic", the article outlines the challenge of a more comprehensive concept of historical thinking and learning.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical Thinking; History Education; presentism; Jörn Rüsen; Sam Wineburg; Stéphane Lévesque;

### Introduction

Among the core concepts discriminating proper and improper forms of what recently constitutes a common goal of history education on both sides of the Atlantic (cf. Wineburg, 1999; Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas, 2016; Körber, Schreiber, & Schöner, 2007), "presentism" is a prominent one (cf. Sandkühler, 2017). It is based on a specific premise of the general relation between the past and present. In older as well as in recent examples of addressing this subject however, a problematic over-generalization of the concept and the premise can be found. This article reflects on this usage of the concept and its premise with the aim of arriving at a different understanding of historical thinking beyond merely avoiding presentism and of historical learning to curb that bias.

In an article in the Australian History Teachers' Journal *Agora*, Stéphane Lévesque refers to two decidedly different epistemologic stances towards the nature of history. The first one – in the form Lévesque uses it – reads: "History is the past for the sake of the past. What the historian is interested in is a dead past; a past unlike the present" (Oakeshott, 1993, p. 81; cf. Lévesque, 2016, p. 4). The other one reads: "History is a meaningful nexus between past, present and future – not merely a perspective on what has been ... It is a translation of past into present." (Rüsen, 2005, p. 25).

Starting with the quote from Oakeshott, Lévesque elaborates on how historians have to be careful not to view the past with their "presentist" glasses, which would hinder them to understand the past in its alterity. He underpins these reflections with two different assertions:

- An elaboration on Oakeshott's stance referring to our predecessors living in a different historical context, "with distinctive values, attitudes and behavioural that might appear completely foreign to us", and
- An even stronger assertion by David Lowenthal – famous for his "The Past is a Foreign Country" – that "the past [...] was not only weirder than we realize; it was weirder than we can imagine" (Lowenthal, 2000, p. 74; cf. Lowenthal, 2015).

All in all this amounts to what in German historiography would be referred to as a position of "Historismus," often illustrated with a quotation by Leopold von Ranke, that it was the historian's task to find out "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (neglecting the philosophical position in the Term "eigentlich"). The consequence drawn (or rather reproduced) by Lévesque is, of course, a warning against "presentist" glasses, which hinder the cognition of the true, the real past, as it were.

There are, however, some points debatable in the way "presentism" has been both conceptualized, and used in research and debate on History Education in the past decades. The current article ventures to address some of these by taking up Lévesque's (and other researchers') examples.

### **A student's non-understanding of Primo Levi – An Example of Presentism?**

In his article, Lévesque illustrates the problem of presentist dis-insight into the alterity (to use a term by Jörn Rüsen, the author of the other position) of the past, by recounting a situation in a school which was reported by Primo Levi in his "The Drowned and the Saved" (Levi, 1989, p. 4). After a witness account on his experiences in the extermination camps, covering among other aspects also about the complete de-humanization of the inmates which deprived the inmates not only of their human grace, but also of their very abilities to muster energy and will to withstand and fight or even flee, a young student did not grasp or accept these explanations and asked Levi to outline the surroundings of the camps and the fences, after which the boy explained to him and the class how an escape could have been operated. Lévesque's (2016) interpretation on this is that:

this school encounter illustrates remarkably well the complexities of understanding the 'dead past'. We are clearly visitors in a 'foreign country' [...] We carry our own cultural luggage, full of commodities ill-adapted to this strange world, and that we use to make judgements about our predecessors. (p. 5)

This interpretation is, however, only valid at first glance. Sure enough, the young student projects his own youthful confidence and his "contemporary views on survival and escaping as a moral duty" into the scene and situation, and he in fact misunderstands all circumstances. But is it really a good example of the situation being weird, totally alien and incomprehensible to him *because of it being "past"* – as Lowenthal and Oakeshott suggested?

Lévesque's application of Oakeshott's and Lowenthal's concept of the past being incomprehensible to this example would be valid only if we supposed that to the people in those days, the situation was not weird at all in the way that it is weird to us. But is that supportable? Was the total dehumanization in the camps normal to the people in those days? Surely not. It is weird not only to us later-born because of it belonging to some other time and culture, but also in general. Its weirdness is not due to effluxion of time, but to intentional dehumanization within that past time. Lévesque's interpretation therefore misreads the situation, too. The Holocaust is surely the wrong example to illustrate Oakeshott's and Lowenthal's assertion of the fundamental alterity of the past. There is a difference between the weirdness we perceive of the treatment Levi experienced, and for example, the premodern practice of applying torture as a means of collecting evidence and proof and its consideration as being not only an improvement but also a kind of progress over earlier practices of trials by ordeal in continental Europe (cf. Langbein, 2006).

However, the mistaken application of the concept of presentism does not originate from Lévesque. In 2001, Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby already made this connection (Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 27), referring to an early article of what eventually would constitute Sam Wineburg's

seminal "Historical Thinking and other unnatural acts" – an article under the same title in *Phi Delta Kappan* (Wineburg, 1999; 2001).

Surely enough, Wineburg does discuss the concept of presentism, however not in the context of the Levi incident (p. 498), but some pages earlier (Wineburg, 1999, p. 492; cf. also Wineburg, 2001, pp. 12, 30 and 90; the Levi-incident on p. 23). What Levi's experience provides, is a quite different lesson to the historian than to avoid presentism. It calls upon us not to 'understand' others in the light of one's own experience *only*, but rather to transgress our own horizon of experience. Wineburg writes: "Our 'inability to perceive the experience of others' as he [Levi] put it, applies to the present no less than the past" (Wineburg, 2001, pp. 22–24).

### **The deeper problem behind the usage of "presentism" as a concept**

Is this all just a question of Lee and Ashby, and – in their wake – Lévesque selecting the wrong example for discussing presentism? Oakeshott's and Lowenthal's assertions that the past is a foreign country, as well as Lévesque's reference to it, merit a more general reflection.

It surely is a good and necessary assumption for historians that the past is not just equal to the present, and that there is an "alterity" between the two. But to assert that the past is fundamentally incomprehensible, is equally problematic as the denial of any such difference and alterity. Two reflections may assist this suggestion:

- The past may (and most often does) look weird to us, but it was not to the people living in those times. The past *was* not weird, it *is* weird to us and therefore it must have *become* weird, strange, alien. When and how did this happen?
- The world a second, a minute, an hour, a day ago is also already past. To say that it is equally weird would muster much less support than to claim the same for, say the middle ages. So where is the limit?

'Weirdness' therefore is not a feature of 'the past' in general nor of any randomly taken specific past (although it might be of certain past circumstances), but rather a characteristic of the *relation* between any given past and the present from which it is addressed.

Lévesque's combination of Oakeshott's position that history is "the past for the sake of the past", and Lowenthal's dictum of the past being weird can therefore not be a sound basis for historical research and learning, because they contradict each other. If we acknowledged Oakeshott's position that history as (the study of) the past were for the sake of the past only, we would have to conceptualize, understand, interpret and write this past in the concepts, terms and by application of the criteria of the past itself. However, considering it is fundamentally incomprehensible to us because of its alterity, or 'weirdness', this would be impossible. So, even if we subscribed to Oakeshott's idea of what history is about, and if we conceived ourselves as 'heirs' who are called upon by the past itself, who have to answer to its call by merely "continuing", "keep it alive", unchanged, as a result of responsibility towards the past only (as has been claimed recently by the French philosopher Bérénice Levet; (cf. Levet, 2017)) – we would be doomed to fail, for we could never understand these calls because of its "weirdness".

But then, both Oakeshott's and Levet's claims that the historian's, as well as the layman's sole obligation in his historical thinking were to 'the past' itself, is wrong. 'History' never is 'the past', but an ever-present relation to a spectrum of pasts (in the plural). The criterion for its validity is not its concordance with this past, but its function for today's individuals and society, by providing temporal orientation. This is not to claim that history could be written *ad*

*libitum*, dependent on present free decisions. Temporal orientation in a real world – not a fantasy – is only possibly when reflecting about a real past.

"The past for the sake of the past" then does not provide good guidance for the historian. In addition, the degree of 'Lowenthalism' needs to be contained. The idea of the past being a "foreign country", where people "do things differently", is indeed insightful and a good warning against presentism. The postulation of its total weirdness, however, would amount to rendering every effort of historical understanding and insight pointless.

Therefore: The historian may neither presuppose the structural identity of past times with her/his present, nor their absolute alterity. What she/he has to do is to reflect on their interrelation. Historical thinking must be understood as a *relational* venture, namely the effort to construct a meaningful relation between what we can know about the past and us who carry this knowledge.

Marc Bloch's conceptualization of the relation between past and present is much more apt for historical thinking, e.g. as illustrated by Alex Ford quoting and interpreting him:

He [Bloch] believed it was a necessary prerequisite for history to accept that 'there are states of mind which were formerly common, yet which appear peculiar to us as we no longer share them' (Bloch, 1949/1992, p.67). As such, he believed that historians needed to reconstruct those lost mentalities through evidential reasoning and the use of social sciences (Ford, 2015, p. 19, quoting Bloch, 1992, p. 67).

This is why I take the other of the two disciplinary positions quoted by Lévesque to be far more plausible – the one by Jörn Rüsen: "History is a meaningful nexus between past, present and future – not merely a perspective on what has been ... It is a translation of past into present." (Rüsen, 2005, p. 25).

## Consequences for research and teaching

Supporting Lévesque's classification that his concept of 'disciplinary-history', referring to the teaching of concepts and methods of historical thinking not only to future historians but also to school students as 'necessary', I'd nevertheless like to question one of his further considerations. Paraphrasing Sam Wineburg's classification of historical thinking as "unnatural" (Wineburg, 2001), "because it runs against the practical, intuitive ways we approach the past in our contemporary life," Lévesque asserts that everyday forms of learning about the past "do not in and of themselves represent 'historical thinking' because historical thinking is a disciplinary-specific process of investigating the past through the 'canons of evidence and rules of argument'" (Lévesque, 2016, p. 6).

What is supported in this position is that the standards and criteria of historical thinking are indeed not only elements of "common sense" in general, but disciplinary. It is indeed necessary to stress this point. The specificity of orientation, of identity and motivation of action through temporal argumentation and thorough interpretation needs to be upheld. What needs to be questioned though, is the idea that these concepts, criteria and procedures, which need to be taught to everybody, constitute something unnatural, or alien, because such an opposition would devaluate everyday historical thinking, endangering it of being overruled by 'expert' thinking, knowledge, and methodology.

In my view, it would be much more apt for educational as well as for theoretical reflections to conceive the relation between "everyday" historical thinking and that of expert historians not as two strictly separate modes but rather as a continuum. The terms "discipline" and "disciplinary" then would not refer just to the academic community and its rules, but to a general purpose of accessing, exploring and charting the world – namely the temporal dimension. *Expertise*, then, is not an alternative and superior way of knowledge production within this

discipline, but rather a the mastery of a specific methodical and quality-controlled form of generally available logic of temporal orientation – ‘quality controlled’ by methods and criteria developed and reflected upon in the academic discipline (Körber, 2015, p. 27). I am quite confident that many (if not all) the operations which historians perform in doing history are being performed by ‘laypersons’ also, even though not (necessarily) in a methodically controlled form. If, for example, someone finds a letter of his/her grandmother directed to the grandfather (to be) in the attic, they will surely try to establish the context the letter was written in. We experience the same when showing photographic slides of the old times to family. In this sense, then, historical thinking is a 'natural' act, something people do and have to do in order to understand their life in its temporal situatedness.

Such a conceptualization has at least three advantages:

- To teach history would then neither mean to endow the students with some standard narrative, hoping that it will suffice for the rest of their life, giving them identity, orientation, and motivation, nor to train them in some estranged expertise, but rather as the elaboration of procedures which they perform in their life anyway. It opens up a perspective into a specific logic of progression.
- The relation of academic and the broader ‘history culture’ can be conceptualized in a non-binary and opposing way, marking the place and function of the former within the latter.
- Within democratic societies, especially heterogeneous and pluralist ones, historical debates can be conceived of as encompassing both laymen, witnesses and professionals.

This is the mode in which the German model of competencies of historical thinking by the FUER-Group conceptualizes different ‘niveaus’ of historical thinking (cf. Körber et al., 2007; Körber, 2015, p. 27):

- A basic niveau is defined as historical thinking without being able to refer to accepted and recognized concepts, procedures, methods, etc., which renders the individual thinking and its results compatible with that of other members of society (individuals and groups);
- the intermediate niveau then is defined by being able to perform individual historical thinking (pursuing individual questions as well as such relevant in society, understanding and forming new interpretations) with such reference to conventional standards and criteria, rendering it visible in society but also enabling the thinking person to use other people's ideas, narratives, etc. in the first place;
- an elaborate niveau as the ability to not only use such concepts, categories, methods etc., but also to reflect on them and their conventional nature, that is to be able to actively participate in the reflection on the nature of history and historical narratives.

Such a model enables schools and teachers to formulate aims in history teaching which both address students at their everyday ventures of navigating the history culture of their society, and can define their next level.

Furthermore, such an understanding would allow for putting students to the task of perceiving alterity of past conditions and circumstances, not as relating to cognitive aspects only, but to also include their emotional and affective reactions (abhorrence and distancing as well as fascination) into the (still cognitive) task of clarification. In this sense, ‘disciplinary history’ is and must be the focal point of history education, but neither as an ‘unnatural act’, nor as something which refers to the past for the past's sake, only, but as methodically controlled reflections about our relation(s) to the past.

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