

# It Takes Three to Tango. History between the 'Practical' and the 'Historical' Past Chris Lorenz<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that the present 'burdensome' condition of important parts of the past is overstretching the 'normal', professional concept of history. I interpret White's recent introduction of the 'practical' past next to the 'historical' past as his way of addressing the same problem. I reconstruct his conceptual work and come to the conclusion that opposing the 'historical' and the 'practical' past is not enough, because this opposition leaves unquestioned the positivistic presuppositions upon which the distinction itself rests. I develop my argument in four steps. First, I signal some ambiguities in White's formulation of the distinction and trace them back to Michael Oakeshott who first theorized it. Second, I identify two problems shared by Oakeshott and White concerning the unity of 'the past' and 'the present' and the 'break' between them. Third, I argue that the pluralisation of pasts and presents formulated by Preston King represents a convincing conceptual solution to the first problem, and John Searle's speech acts theory provides a solution to the second problem. Lastly, I conclude that the very distinction between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past is rooted in empiricist and positivist assumptions long discredited by the work of W. V. Quine and T. H. Kuhn, and thereby suggest that the present state of the philosophical debate should have consequences for our thinking about the distinction between the historical and the practical past.

*The fallen angel shivers underneath the august moon  
The lady of the house goes up in ashes  
He crawled out through the future but the past came back too soon  
And the present just occurs in sudden flashes*  
John Hiatt, *Smiling in the rain* (1975)

THE BBC-News of November 3, 2004 contained the following amazing report under the title "130-year-old Chinese fire put out" concerning the Liuhuanguo colliery, near Urumqi in Xinjiang province:

A fire that broke out more than 100 years ago at a Chinese coalfield has finally been extinguished, reports say. In the last four years, fire-fighters have spent 12 million dollars in efforts to put out the flames [...] in Xinjiang province. While ablaze, the fire burned up an estimated 1.8 million tons of coal every year. [...] Local historians said the fire first broke out in 1874.<sup>2</sup>

The burning coal had emitted 100,000 tons of very harmful gases and 40,000 tons of ash every year, causing momentous environmental pollution. In 2003, when the fire was still burning, a Chinese newspaper had provided another mind-blowing detail:

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank the Gerda Henkel Foundation for its financial support of my Marie Curie Research Fellowship at the Institute for Social Movements, Ruhr University Bochum.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3978329.stm> and [http://quickstart.clari.net/qs\\_se/webnews/wed/cq/Qchina-fire.RjOh\\_DIV.html](http://quickstart.clari.net/qs_se/webnews/wed/cq/Qchina-fire.RjOh_DIV.html). Accessed on April 1, 2014.

“Even if the fire-fighters are eventually successful [...], it *could take 30 years before the ground surface is cool enough to allow mining to go ahead*”. I found this news fascinating for at least three reasons. The first reason seems obvious: a ‘normal’ fire is not supposed to last for 130 years, just as a birthday party is not supposed to last for a year. The second reason for my fascination has to do with the thirty years that the cooling process of the mine will need before the coalmine can be entered again. This means that the mine cannot be entered before 2034! What amount of heat can explain a cooling down process that will take some thirty years? The third reason is the incredible amount of environmental pollution that this fire had produced since it began. Millions and millions of tons of poisonous gases and ash have been spat out of the earth since 1874. That must have been very bad for people’s health; that much is certain.

Such an extreme fire simply stretches our normal idea of what it is to be a fire. It scorches not only the surface of Western China, but also the very *concept* of what it is to be a fire. Such a fire is literally beyond our imagination – and it may be interesting to realize that there are thousands of burning coalfields on *all* continents – except for Antarctica. In this article I hope to clarify that there is a deep analogy between this burning coalmine in Western China and the ‘hot’ state of large parts of history since the end of the Cold War. With ‘hot history’ I mean a past that does not ‘cool off’ by itself and that remains present because it is toxic, contested, divisive in a political, social, moral and, sometimes, even legal sense. So ‘hot history’ is essentially “a past that will not go away” in Ernst Nolte’s formulation.<sup>3</sup> Or, one may also label it ‘post-traumatic’ history, as Aleida Assmann does, or ‘catastrophic’ history *à la* John Torpey, or the ‘terror of history’, as Mircea Eliade named it long ago.<sup>4</sup> Or one may call this type of history, ‘haunting’, as Henri Rousso and some anthropologists do, because the ghosts of the past keep on visiting the living in the present. All these notions refer to the kinds of experiences that White has connected to “modernist events”.<sup>5</sup>

Whichever label one applies to this present ‘burdensome’ condition of important parts of the past I want to argue that this burdensome kind of past is overstretching the ‘normal’ concept of history as professional historians use it. Therefore the concept of ‘history’ is in need of renewed theoretical reflection. Historians wrongly presuppose that the hot present ‘cools off’ and transforms into a cold past *by itself* over time, just like normal fires extinguish and ‘cool off’ by themselves over time. So, an unspoken assumption of history as a discipline is that we all live in Antarctica, so to speak, without ever providing arguments for this idea. White has introduced the concept of the ‘practical’ past next to the ‘historical’ past in order to identify and solve

<sup>3</sup> E. Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1986.

<sup>4</sup> J. Torpey, *Making Whole What has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: Beck 2006); H. Rousso, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). For Eliade see A. Dirk Moses, “Genocide and the Terror of History”, *Parallax*, 17, 4 (2011): 90-108.

<sup>5</sup> H. White, “The Modernist Event”, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1999), 66-87. One could argue that Eelco Runia has proposed to extend the category of ‘modernist’ events back in time to *all* catastrophic events that were beyond the scope of imagination at the time when they occurred. See E. Runia, *Waterloo, Verdun, Auschwitz: De liquidatie van het verleden* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1999).

this 'professional' misunderstanding concerning the (ontological) character of 'the past' (at least if I understand him correctly).<sup>6</sup> In contrast to White, however, I think that opposing the 'historical' and the 'practical' past is not enough, because this opposition leaves unquestioned the positivists' presuppositions upon which the distinction itself rests. This, at least, is the argument I will develop in this article in four steps.<sup>7</sup>

First, I will reconstruct White's distinction between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past and contextualize it. In my reconstruction, I will signal some ambiguities in White's formulation of this distinction that deserve attention. Second, I will analyze the differences and similarities between White's use of the distinction and Michael Oakeshott's, who formulated it in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> I will identify two problems shared by Oakeshott and White concerning 1) the unity of *the* past and *the* present and 2) the *rupture* between the past and the present. Third, I will argue that the pluralisation of pasts and presents formulated by Preston King represents a convincing solution to the problems that I identify in sections I and II. In this third section, I will also take up John Searle's theory of performative speech acts as providing an alternative path to conceptualizing how historians produce ruptures between the present and the past through the breaking up of time. Fourth and last, I will argue that the very distinction between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past is rooted in the (foundationalist) presuppositions of empiricist and positivist philosophy of science, especially the distinction between fact and theory and between fact and value.<sup>9</sup> Because empiricism and positivism as philosophical positions have been thoroughly discredited since Quine and Kuhn have argued the case for 'semantic holism', their fundamental distinctions are no longer plausible. I will suggest that the present state of the philosophical debate should have consequences for our thinking about the distinctions between the historical and the practical past. Now let's first have a closer look at White's view.

## I. WHITE AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE 'PRACTICAL' AND THE 'HISTORICAL' PAST

The conceptual distinction between the 'historical' past and the 'practical' past was a latecomer in White's intellectual career – the concept only popped up after 2000, in a discussion with Dirk Moses in *History and Theory* in 2005, and in two articles

<sup>6</sup> H. White, "The Practical Past", *Historiein*, 10 (2010), 8; H. White, "Politics, History, and the Practical Past", *Storia della Storiografia*, 61, 1 (2012): 127-134.

<sup>7</sup> I have developed my arguments before in "Historical Knowledge and Historical Reality: A Plea for 'Internal Realism'", *History and Theory*, 33, 3 (1994): 297-327; "'Hete geschiedenis': Over de temperatuur van de contemporaine Duitse geschiedenis", *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 120, 1 (2007): 5-19; "Unstuck in Time: Or, The Sudden Presence of the Past", *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, eds. K. Tilmans, F. van Vree, and J. Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 67-105; "Geschichte, Gegenwärtigkeit und Zeit", *Phänomen Zeit. Dimensionen und Strukturen in Kultur und Wissenschaft*, ed. D. Goltschnigg (Tübingen: Staufenberg Verlag, 2011), 127-135; *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, eds. B. Bevernage and C. Lorenz (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen 2013), and especially "Blurred Lines: History, Memory and the Experience of Time", *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 1, 2 (2014 forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> M. Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 86-169.

<sup>9</sup> The distinctions between the analytic and the synthetic, and between the context of justification and the context of discovery have also been undermined by 'post-foundational' philosophy, but I will not go into them in this article.

published in 2010 in *Historein* and in *Storia della Storiografia* in 2012.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as Herman Paul has acutely observed, this distinction can be seen as an attempt to integrate several important strains of argumentation that White has developed from *Metahistory* onwards:

moral deliberation *vis-à-vis* a burdensome past, the inability of professional historical scholarship to provide moral orientation in the present, and the need for modernist-inspired alternatives that help us cope with our attitudes, emotions and responsibilities towards the past”.<sup>11</sup>

So there seems to be something at stake here.

Like many of White's other ideas, the conceptual distinction between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past is a polemical one directed against the putative 'scientification' of history. According to White the 'historical past' is *only* the past as professional historians have constructed it, who, since the beginning of the nineteenth century began to claim that their only interest was the disinterested study of the past 'for its own sake'. They backed up their scientific credentials by contrasting the new science of history to rhetoric and literature (where history was formerly located). White's definition is as follows:

The historical past is a theoretically motivated construction, existing only in the books and articles published by professional historians; it is constructed as an end in itself, possesses little or no value for understanding or explaining the present, and provides no guidelines for acting in the present or foreseeing the future. Nobody ever lived or experienced the historical past.<sup>12</sup>

In White's view the interest of professional historians in the past is very limited. After they have answered questions of factual truth they have no further questions and they rest their case:

The historical past is made up of discrete events the factuality of which has been established on deliberative grounds and the relations among which are more or less contingent [...]. Above all, the historical past taught no lessons of any interest to the present.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever it is, the 'historical past' has no practical function according to this definition. By contrast, the 'practical past' is basically the past as most people who are *not* professional historians perceive the past. Again in White's own words, it refers to:

those notions of the past which all of us carry around with us in our daily life and which we draw upon, willy-nilly and as best as we can, for information, ideals, models, and strategies for solving all the practical problems – from personal affairs to grand political programs – within whatever we conceive to be our present situation. This is the past of memory, dream and desire as much as it is of problem-solving, strategy and tactics of living, both personal and communal.<sup>14</sup>

Whether in a negative or in a positive sense, the practical past is meaningful to those who address it with the question "what is to be done?" In contrast to what is the case with the 'historical past', with the 'practical past' questions of meaning precede and

<sup>10</sup> See note 5 and H. White, "The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses", *History and Theory* 44, 3 (2005): 333-338.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 144.

<sup>12</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 8.

<sup>13</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 16.

<sup>14</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 8.

dominate questions of truth. For White questions of meaning when dealing with the past have always been of paramount importance, as Herman Paul has argued beyond any reasonable doubt.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, subscribing to an ideology in White's view is not a problem to be solved, or denounced, or unmasked, but simply an existential fact of life. The only choice people have is which ideology they choose and whether they have clarity about their ultimate ends. With respect to the domain of 'last values' White has clearly remained a pupil of Max Weber, who had argued with Nietzsche that the question which ultimate values one subscribes to is not a matter of argument but of a *decision* that cannot be rationally justified.<sup>16</sup> However, he is definitely *not* a Weberian in holding that politics, religion and law are the fundamental spheres of value and cannot be dealt with without taking a value position oneself. Furthermore, for White, no 'value-freedom' is possible in studying the fundamental domains of value which was his Mannheimian position towards studying the past in *Metahistory*: "The political, legal and religious pasts therefore can seldom be approached except by the way of ideology or *parti pris* of some kind" according to White.<sup>17</sup> Establishing facts in a neutral-methodical way does not work here, although professional historiography did not acknowledge this fact and instead "retreated into a kind of commonsensical empiricism as justification for the neutrality and disinterestedness with which it composed its ideologically anodyne pictures of the historical past".<sup>18</sup>

So, surprisingly, on closer analysis, the 'historical past for its own sake' is, according to White, restricted to very *specific domains* of professional history, *not* including political, religious and legal history (although White's use of the word *seldom* in the sentence quoted above implies the existence of exceptions about which he remains silent). We will see in a moment that he would also exclude Holocaust history explicitly from the 'historical past', albeit on different grounds than political, legal and religious history, and locate it somewhere *between* the 'historical' and the 'practical' past. However, for the moment let us remain with the 'practical past' in order to notice that this is also the domain in which the burning questions of 'the past in the present' are posed – exactly the questions of meaning that professional historians have abandoned in White's view. They did so, one could add, by forcefully driving the past out of the present – at least at the level of theory – by means of the doctrine of 'historical distance', leaving 'the past in the present' to the writers of the realist novel, poetry and drama. Especially novelists now became the experts in the 'historical present', according to White.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Paul, Hayden White.

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" (1919), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946): 77-129. For the origins of White's relation to Weber, see H. Paul, "A Weberian Medievalist: Hayden White in the 1950s", *Rethinking History* 12, 1 (2008): 75-102.

<sup>17</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 16. As to White's adoption in *Metahistory* of Mannheim's ideas about the 'sociology of knowledge' in general and about 'ideology' in particular, one should notice that here too his adoption was selective. Where Mannheim posits the possibility of a "value-free" point of view for the "freischwebende Intelligenz", White was not following him. See K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936).

<sup>18</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 17.

<sup>19</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 11-12. White does not *explicitly* refer to the doctrine of 'distance' but it is implicit in his critique of professional history. For the constitutive function of the doctrine of 'historical distance' for professional history, see the Forum "Historical Distance: Reflections on a Metaphor", *History and Theory*, Theme issue 50 (2011); M. Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), and my "Blurred lines".

In his recent article “Truth and Circumstance: What (if Anything) Can Properly be Said About the Holocaust?” (2012), White has revisited the topic of the historical and the practical past, asking the question of whether we require the same kind of truth from witnesses of the Holocaust as from its historians. As was to be expected his answer is negative:

We must undoubtedly demand that the person bearing witness to some experience at least wishes to tell the truth, but is a correspondence model of truth our principal interest in the testimony of survivors? [...] But when it is a matter of giving voice to what it felt like to be subjected to the kind of treatment that the victims of the Holocaust experienced, a correspondence ideal of truthfulness would seem to be an improper demand. Even the coherence model of truthfulness would seem to have little relevance in the assessment of the authority of the testimony of a victim. Here the question “Is it true?” should only be posed as a “rhetorical” one.<sup>20</sup>

This time White has provided a justification for the distinction between the ‘historical’ and the ‘practical’ past in terms of Austin’s speech act theory – which is remarkable because usually John Searle’s development of Austin’s ideas is seen as the present point of departure in speech act theory. White identifies professional history with what he calls Austin’s ‘declarative mode’ of (the use of) language – in which the question of propositional (‘factual’) truth reigns supreme, while in so-called ‘novelistic history’<sup>21</sup>, by contrast – in, for example, Primo Levi’s testimonial memories of Auschwitz – ‘non-declarative’ modes of (the use of) language – like “the interrogative, the imperative and the subjunctive” – are most important (although novelistic history also states plenty of historical facts).<sup>22</sup> So White still seems to be looking for distinctions between professional and novelistic history on the level of language (use), just as he had been locating the similarities between ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ ways of dealing with the past in their common narrative form before.<sup>23</sup> Fully in line with *Metahistory*, White argues that non-declarative modes of language use cannot

<sup>20</sup> H. White, “Truth and Circumstance: What (If Anything) Can Properly Be Said About the Holocaust?”, *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. D. Stone (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2012). Note here that White is not questioning the correspondence and the coherence theories of truth *as such*.

<sup>21</sup> White, “Truth and Circumstance”, 196: “I wish to suggest that both the historical novel and novelistic history are instances of non-declarative discourses, that their truth lies less in verisimilitude than in the way they *wring* the papers, you or with myself; the first is certainly not true...sense or leave you wit in what they *assert* in the mode of factual truth-telling than in what they *connote* in other moods and voices identified in the study of grammar: which is to say in the *modes* of interrogation, conation or coercion, and the *voices* of action, passion, and transumption”.

<sup>22</sup> Although the notion of the ‘declarative mode’ is missing in Austin, it is clear from White’s phrasing that he is referring to ‘assertives’ in Searle’s vocabulary. Austin does distinguish the category of ‘declaratory’ speech acts – “I declare war”, for example – but this does not seem to be the category that White intends. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Note, however, that White’s adoption of speech act theory for history implies a new, *analytical* view on history writing – ‘breaking up’ history writing into its constitutive parts – while his earlier narrative approach implied a clear *synthetic* or *holistic* point of view, centred on the notion of emplotment. Compare Frank Ankersmit’s continuing insistence that narratives (alias ‘narrative substances’ or ‘historical representations’) are defined by *all* the sentences they contain: F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*, (Groningen, Krips Repro Meppel, 1981); F. R. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012). Also see C. van den Akker, “Mink’s Riddle of Narrative Truth”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 7 (2013): 346-370.

be reduced to the declarative mode, as this would boil down to a reduction of the fictional use of language to its factual use.<sup>24</sup> Yet, apart from his statement that the notion of truth involved in witness literature cannot be reduced to declarative, factual truth, White does not provide any further discussion or conceptual clarity.

We may want to observe, instead, that White contrasts witness literature to professional history because in the professional view the 'cooling off' of the past in time is *the change from memory to history*. According to professional historians, it is the progress of time that causes the passions of the witnesses to cool off by producing temporal distance. And it is this temporal distance that enables professional historians to develop their superior insights over testimonial evidence by using the benefits of hindsight.<sup>25</sup> White typically *inverts* this mainstream claim to superiority by professional historians in comparison to their memorial and/or literary competitors.<sup>26</sup> In his view there can be no doubt as to who is giving us more important insights into the past and the human condition. No wonder then that White has developed arguments in defense of the existential priority of the practical past in comparison to the historical past. And no wonder too that White has used the occasion to *upgrade* philosophy of history once more *vis-à-vis* professional history, just as he had done in *Metahistory*. This time he has done so by connecting philosophy of history to the practical past. "Whatever else it may be," he writes, "philosophy of history belongs to the class of disciplines meant to bring order and reason to a 'practical past' rather than to that 'historical past' constructed by historians".<sup>27</sup> So, the professional historians who criticize authors like Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Spengler and Toynbee for deforming the historical past are told by White that they are simply barking at the moon.

There is another reason for White's privileging of the 'practical' over the 'historical' past, and this is the increasing existential importance of the practical past in White's view since the occurrence of 'modernist events' like the Holocaust. This is so, White argues, because modernist events lack meaning and refuse proper narrativization by emplotment. Therefore they defy normal historical interpretation and can only be represented in the dispersive modes of fragments<sup>28</sup> – as the exceptional Holocaust-historian Saul Friedländer has understood and shown in practice in his seminal *Nazi-Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination*.<sup>29</sup> Confronted with modernist events, professional historians less sensitive than Friedländer remain helpless in White's view. They resemble people who try to stare at the sun without protecting their eyes properly, as the Dutch historian Lou de Jong once formulated the "post-Holocaust condition".<sup>30</sup> Professional historians don't understand that modern-

<sup>24</sup> White, "Truth and Circumstance", 201.

<sup>25</sup> See my "Blurred Lines".

<sup>26</sup> I have elaborated on the general role of "conceptual inversion" in the history of ideas in the introduction to my book *Between Philosophy and History* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> White, "The Practical Past", 18.

<sup>28</sup> In this light, it is extra ironical that the faked Holocaust-autobiography of "Binjamin Wilkomirski" was praised before its disclosure as a fake exactly because of its presumably authentic, fragmented character. See L. Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> S. Friedländer, *Nazi-Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). For the debate on this book and the controversy between Friedländer and White, see *Den Holocaust erzählen. Historiographie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Empirie und narrativer Kreativität*, eds. N. Frei and W. Kansteiner (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> De Jong, cited in D. Diner, "Negative Symbiose: Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz", *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, ed. D. Diner (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1987), 186.

ist events are “suspended in between” the historical and the practical past because it is impossible to put them at a distance due to their supposedly “sublime” and “overwhelming” character.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the question of truth cannot be addressed here without addressing the question of meaning at the same time – and according to White this is a task that professional historians abandoned long ago when they restricted the historical past to matters of propositional truth. It follows from this that, with the exception of Friedländer, all of the authors indicated by White as exemplifying a successful dealing with the practical past *qua* modernist events are *not* professional historians but thinkers who address the problem of representation itself while performing a representation (a topic dealt with before by White under the heading of “the content of the form”). Therefore, there is a deep analogy between modernist history and modernist art. White’s modernist heroes are authors of Holocaust-witness literature like Primo Levi and Art Spiegelman, and modernist historical novelists like W. G. Sebald. This means that White is basically – although not completely – leaving the historical past *exclusively* to professional historians while claiming the practical past for *all* those who are not.<sup>32</sup>

I want to question this neat division in the rest of this article and would like to begin by pointing out three ambiguities in White’s argument. The first ambiguity concerns White’s statement that the historical past possesses *little or no value for explaining the present* and for *providing guidelines for action*. If the explanatory and guiding power of the historical past is “little”, how is this possible? Isn’t all professional history ‘for its own sake’ after all? And how is the idea of the ‘historical past for its own sake’ related to White’s claim in *Metahistory* that *all* textual forms of history have ideological implications – not to mention the very rich track record of professional historians championing overtly partisan history?<sup>33</sup> Of course White knows very well, and also explicitly states, that most professional historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were paid by the nation-state and served their nation-states “to help in the work of creating national identities” in evidently *practical* ways.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, this observation simultaneously questions the separate *existence* of the historical past, a question that is not eliminated by White’s clarification that “these two kinds of past are rather more ideal typifications than descriptions of actual points of view or ideologies”.<sup>35</sup>

The second ambiguity is related to the first and concerns the claims of professional history to be a science, which, as we saw, is presented by White as the precondition and origin of the historical past. Here White wavers between taking the claims of professional history to a ‘scientific’ status seriously on the one hand and debunking

<sup>31</sup> For a critique of the recent rise of notions of “sublimity”, see E. Domanska, “Frank Ankersmit: From Narrative to Experience”, *Rethinking History*, 13, 2 (2009), 175-196.

<sup>32</sup> Maria Inez la Greca’s hunch that White’s late embrace of the ‘practical past’ is somehow connected to his continuing disappointment with the profession that handles the ‘historical past’ is well founded in my view. See her “Narrative Trouble” in this issue.

<sup>33</sup> See for example *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, ed. S. Berger and C. Lorenz (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), and *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, ed. S. Berger and C. Lorenz (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> White, “The Practical Past”, 16.

<sup>35</sup> White, “The Practical Past”, 16.



them on the other.<sup>36</sup> He seems to take the scientific claims in question seriously when he identifies the historical past with empiricism, defined as the construction of methodically controlled singular factual statements, and when he identifies the historical past with the 'declarative mode' of language. He criticizes the 'scientific' claim, instead, when he characterizes this same empiricism as ideological. White here seems to move between taking history's attempts at *scientification* somehow seriously and regarding these attempts as ideological and as doomed *a priori*, as argued in *Metahistory*. How, then, can there be a historical past distinct from the practical past if *all* history writing is somehow ideological?

The third ambiguity is also related to the other two and concerns the *scope* of the historical past – assuming that it exists. We have seen that *en passant* White quite surprisingly has excluded political, religious and legal history from the historical past. The only other exclusion that he has argued for extensively concerns Holocaust historiography.<sup>37</sup> Now, presupposing we accept White's distinctions, the important question in my view is: how is it possible that substantial parts of the historical profession – meaning the political, religious, legal and Holocaust-historians – are dealing with *both* the practical and the historical past? Doesn't this position imply that the distinction between the historical and the practical pasts must, at best, be seen as *relative* – maybe in terms of two different *aspects* of representing of and dealing with the past – rather than referring to two separate 'worlds' and thus separate ontological *domains*?<sup>38</sup>

## II. TROUBLES AT THE SOURCE: MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE 'HISTORICAL' AND THE 'PRACTICAL' PAST

However ironic this may be to White, I believe that to unravel productively the three ambiguities outlined in the first section we must begin from a professional historical act: the examination of White's *reading* of his source of theoretical inspiration: Michael Oakeshott.<sup>39</sup> And ask: what was the direction of Oakeshott's argument when he introduced the distinction between 'historical' and 'practical' pasts?

At first sight, Oakeshott's definition of the 'historical past' looks the same as White's: "History" he writes,

<sup>36</sup> White ("Truth and Circumstance", 190) calls professional historians "cultivators of a putative science of history" and White ("Practical Past", 14) notes that "the ways in which history in the early nineteenth century succeeded in constituting itself as a scientific (or para-scientific) discipline was by detaching historiography from its millennial association with rhetorics".

<sup>37</sup> In the context of the discussion about Friedländer's work, he stated that "the historiography of the Holocaust over the last half-century or so can be legitimately constructed as having been suspended between at least two different conceptions or ideas of the past, one historical, the other practical, between which there is little possibility of cognitively responsible reconciliation" (Hayden White, "Historical Discourse and Literary Theory: On Saul Friedländer's *Years of Extermination*", *Den Holocaust erzählen*, 53).

<sup>38</sup> This is the position that Jörn Rüsen, Emil Angehrn and I have been arguing for, based on the interconnection of 'historical' and 'practical identity'. See J. Rüsen, *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013); E. Angehrn, *Geschichte und Identität* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1985); C. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> On the general problem of 'borrowing' and establishing 'influence' in the history of ideas, see G. Browning, "Agency and Influence in the History of Political Thought: The Agency of Influence and the Influence of Agency", *History of Political Thought*, 31 (Summer 2010): 345-365.

is the past for its own sake. What the historian is interested in is a dead past; a past unlike the present. The *differentia* of the historical past lies in its very disparity from what is contemporary.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, as Preston King remarks, it is far from clear whether Oakeshott's description of 'the historian' here is meant to be descriptive or normative. As a factual description it is clearly untenable: Charles Beard, E. H. Carr and all other 'presentist' historians can be marshaled up as its empirical refutation because they all argued that their interest in the past was firmly rooted in the present.<sup>41</sup> In case the interest of the historian in a dead past were meant as a normative claim, its meaning is at best ambiguous and the claim remains without the support of any argument.<sup>42</sup> William Faulkner was not the first, nor the last to question the very *meaning* of the commonsensical notion of 'a dead past' when he wrote: "The past is never dead. It is not even past".<sup>43</sup> But, of course, Faulkner was a novelist and not a professional historian. Upon closer analysis, however, Oakeshott's characterization of the 'historical past' does not sit comfortably with White's description of the same concept, nor with White's thesis that professional history is only focused on propositional truths: "No distinction whatever", Oakeshott argues,

can be allowed between the raw material of history and history itself, save a distinction of relative coherence. There is no fact in history which is not a judgment, no event which is not an inference. There is nothing whatever outside the historian's experience.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore "the historical past does not lie behind present evidence, it is a world which present evidence creates in the present", according to Oakeshott.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, for Oakeshott, the historical past includes the narrative explanation of the facts, which, in White's view is a fundamental *poetic* act – as he argues from *Metahistory* onwards – which certainly is *not* how Oakeshott sees it.<sup>46</sup>

So, although Oakeshott's concept of the historical past is clearly meant to refer to 'the past for its own sake', sought after by the historian independent of any 'commitment to present purposes', it simultaneously turns out to be thoroughly *contemporaneous*. The question of whether or not this contemporaneity of the historical past fits

<sup>40</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 106. This substantial claim – that excludes similarities between the historical past and the present *by definition* – is what King has labelled Oakeshott's "historical particularism", a position usually seen as one of the fundamental tenets of *Historicismus*. See P. King, "Michael Oakeshott and Historical Particularism", *Thinking Past a Problem: Essays on the History of Ideas* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 84-120.

<sup>41</sup> See E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 24-26: "We can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present. [...] The historian belongs not to the past but to the present". The function of the historian according to Carr is "to master [the past] as the key to the understanding of the present".

<sup>42</sup> See King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 56: "Historians do not attempt to study 'the past' as such. They only concern themselves with those stretches of it – and from such perspectives – that interest them. [...] The past is never exclusively past, and the historian cannot in part avoid 'anachronism' of assimilating past to present".

<sup>43</sup> W. Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 92.

<sup>44</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 100.

<sup>45</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 108.

<sup>46</sup> Oakeshott was arguing that narrative explanation is produced by the historian by describing events as constituting a process of continuous change. Narrative explanation thus requires "descriptive continuity" in his view. See Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 125-145.

with the *intuitions* of historians is not explored by Oakeshott.<sup>47</sup> Conceived as a form of *experience* history could hardly *not* be contemporaneous. As Oakeshott does not get tired of emphasizing:

Historical fact, I take it, conforms to the general character of fact. It is a conclusion, a result, an inference, a judgment. And consequently it belongs to the world of present experience. Historical fact is present fact, because a merely past or future fact is a self-contradiction.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, this argument does *not* establish that there is no independent past, or that we have no access to it, as Oakeshott mistakenly thinks it does.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to the historical past, Oakeshott distinguishes the 'practical past', which he defines as follows:

Wherever the past is merely that which preceded the present, that from which the present has grown, wherever the significance of the past lies in the fact that it has been influential in deciding the present and future fortunes of man, wherever the present is sought in the past, and wherever the past is regarded as merely a refuge from the present – the past is a practical, and not a historical past.

And then he immediately adds: "this practical past will be found, in general, to serve either of two masters – politics or religion", which are two of the three domains of value that White also excluded from the historical past (almost) by definition, as we saw above.<sup>50</sup> Once again, Preston King is certainly right when he concludes that the distinction between the historical and the practical past basically serves Oakeshott "to draw a line between such writing (about the past) as he favors (which supposedly betrays no moral commitments and serves no broader purposes) and that to which he is antipathetic".<sup>51</sup> Oakeshott, however, does not answer the crucial question of how to distinguish between a 'moral' commitment *vis-à-vis* the past and an 'impartial' commitment to the past *for its own sake*. In the final analysis, Oakeshott's elaborations fail to establish a *conceptual* distinction between the 'historical' and the 'practical' past. The circumstance I highlighted above that White is also facing a problem making this distinction work *conceptually* should therefore not come as a surprise.

Along with this conceptual problem inherent in Oakeshott's position, White is also facing another basic problem. When White directly connects the practical past to (especially Kantian) ethics and when he suggests a positive, existential role for it concerning the fundamental practical questions in life, he is definitely *not* following Oakeshott's track, because, as King remarks, the latter conceives of the practical past basically as something *negative*. For Oakeshott the practical past is the past of *make believe* and of an illegitimate, and primitive search for meaning, unconnected to the search for truth. For him the practical past fundamentally represents the world of *ideology* – in a clearly negative sense – as opposed to the world of historical *science*: "in practical experience," he writes,

the past is designed to justify, to make valid practical beliefs about the present and the future, about the world in general. [...] The practical past, then, is a past alien to that of history. [...]

<sup>47</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 86.

<sup>49</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 110.

<sup>48</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 111.

<sup>50</sup> Oakeshott, "Historical Experience", 103.

Wherever the past is seen in a specific relation to the present, that past is not the past of history.<sup>52</sup>

Oakeshott's distinction is thus a strictly binary one (deriving from the fact/value divide of empiricism, as we will see in section IV): it presupposes *one* – unitary – historical past, based on factual evidence produced methodically in the present, and *one* practical past, based on present practical beliefs, alias values, and other forms of wishful thinking. For Oakeshott the *world of history* and the *world of practical experience* therefore are literally worlds apart because in his view they are “wholly and absolutely independent” of one another.<sup>53</sup> This is because he presupposes an unbridgeable abyss between the world of facts and that of values. From “incursions” into the other terrain in his eyes nothing but “error” can arise.<sup>54</sup> For the (Mannheimian) White of *Metahistory*, who argued forty years ago that what is ‘realism’ to one historian – say Ranke – is ‘ideology’ to another – say Marx – and *vice versa*, Oakeshott remains quite an unlikely intellectual companion. So much for the relationship between White and Oakeshott. Now it is about time to have a closer look at the plurality of the historical past and its relationship to ‘the present’.

### III. OUT OF ANTARCTICA (1): THE PLURALITY OF PASTS AND PRESENTS AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF TEMPORAL DISTINCTIONS

Assuming for the moment that my arguments above have established 1) that the conceptual distinction between the historical and the practical past as developed by Oakeshott and taken over by White is not unproblematic, and 2) that this distinction is paying tribute to the presupposition of ‘disinterested-ness’ and ‘distance’ so fundamental to the idea of professional history as such. Assuming I am right on this score two major remaining problems with White’s ambiguous distinctions between the historical and practical past must be highlighted: 1) that ‘the past’ and ‘the present’ both still seem to be conceived of as *unified*, that is: they come in one piece, and 2) that this characteristic of past and present presupposes that the construction of the ‘historical’ past *cannot also be* ‘practical’ *in itself*. I think both (interrelated) presuppositions are not tenable, and White himself has hinted at the way in which the second problem can be tackled. Yet, the question remains: what can meaningfully be said about the past/present distinction in history, and about the relationship between the ‘factual’ and the ‘normative’ aspects of dealing with the past?

In order to move beyond the presupposition of a unified ‘the past’ and a unified ‘the present’, the ideas of Preston King are highly relevant. King differentiates between four distinct notions of present and correlative notions of past, on the basis of a chronological notion of time as abstract temporal sequence on the one hand, and a substantive notion of time as a concrete sequence of events on the other.<sup>55</sup> Relying on chronological time and depending on duration, two senses of ‘present’ can be dis-

<sup>52</sup> Oakeshott, “Historical Experience”, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Oakeshott, “Historical Experience”, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Oakeshott, “Historical Experience”, 157.

<sup>55</sup> King (*Thinking Past a Problem*, 40), however, explicitly denies that his past–present distinctions are exhaustive.

cerned: the first he calls "instantaneous present"; the second, "extended present".<sup>56</sup> Both presents are boxed in between past and future and have a merely chronological character. However, while the first defines itself as the smallest possible and ever evaporating instant dividing past from future, the second refers to a more extended period of time (for example, a day, a year, a century) whose limits are arbitrarily chosen but give the present some "body" or temporal depth.<sup>57</sup>

Because of the meaninglessness and arbitrarily chronological character of these presents and corresponding pasts, historians often use a more substantive frame of reference based on criteria that are themselves not temporal. The first of these substantive notions is that of the *unfolding present*. As long as a chosen event or evolution (for example, negotiations, a depression, a crisis, and a war) is unfolding, it demarcates a present. When it is conceived of as completed, the time in which it unfolded is called past. King concludes that this is the only sense in which one can say that a particular past is dead or over and done with. Yet, he immediately warns that any process deemed completed contains sub-processes that are not. So, it is always very difficult to exclude any actual past from being part of, working in, or having influence on an unfolding present.<sup>58</sup>

The second of the substantive notions of present King names is the *neoteric present*. Drawing a parallel with the dialectics of fashion, he notes that we often distinguish phenomena that happen *in* the present but can be experienced as "ancient", "conventional" or "traditional", from phenomena we view as being characteristic *of* the present, which we designate as "novel", "innovative" or "modern".<sup>59</sup> The neoteric present assumes a distinction within the substantive, behavioural content of the present, as between what is new and what is recurrent.

While every notion of the present excludes its own correlative past, this does not hold for non-correlative senses of the past. The present can thus be penetrated by non-correlative pasts that in a substantive sense stay alive in the present:

The past is not present. But no present is entirely divorced from or uninfluenced by the past. The past is not *chronologically* present. But there is no escaping the fact that much of it is *substantively* so. It is only from the substantive perspective that one may remark that the past remains alive in the present.<sup>60</sup>

King's analysis is important because it offers an intellectual defence against arguments that posit or, as it is often the case, simply assume, the existence of a neat divide between *the* past and *the* present and portray the past as dead or entirely different from the present – as 'the past is a foreign country' topos suggests.<sup>61</sup> On the basis of King's conceptual inquiry into the nature of past and past-ness and his critical analysis of the notions of present, present-ness and contemporaneity, we are able to counter both arguments that represent history as entirely *passeist* and arguments that represent history as entirely *presentist*. In other words, King's arguments on the one

<sup>56</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 28-36.

<sup>57</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 55. The recent phenomenon in the media to pinpoint similarities between the political crises in Europe in 2014 and those in 1914 illustrates that a seemingly 'dead' past – the outbreak of the First World War – can be 'reanimated' in both political and in historical discourse even a century later.

<sup>59</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 41-44.

<sup>60</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 55.

<sup>61</sup> D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

hand dispose of claims that the writing of history is solely *about* the past, and, on the other hand, also dismantle claims that historiography is exclusively based on present perspectives or, *à la Croce* “all history is contemporary history” – a problem we encountered earlier on with Oakeshott, who saw no other solution than to locate ‘the past’ in ‘the present’ because he had located historical evidence, and thus historical experience and historical facts, all in the present.<sup>62</sup>

King’s pluralisation of presents and pasts enables us to conceive of ‘the past in the present’ and thus understand why catastrophic experiences don’t automatically disappear by a growing distance in time. In other words, King’s conceptual distinctions do not only clarify why the past does not go away automatically in time but they also enable us to make sense of the practical relevance of the past, *including the ‘historical past’*, and of public, ‘non-professional’ ways of dealing with catastrophic pasts, like the “politics of regret” and “reparation politics”.<sup>63</sup> By implication King’s analysis also dispenses with the idea that when the past has a practical meaning, this must concern another type of past than the ‘historical past’, as both Oakeshott and White presuppose.<sup>64</sup>

King’s pluralisation of historical time is genuine because it does not presuppose that there is *one* flow of time of which all histories are part and in which all histories can be located. This is important because all attempts – from Ernst Bloch to Reinhart Koselleck – to introduce plurality and complexity in linear time with the help of the notion of the “Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen” (“the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous”) have failed. They have failed because they have all presupposed one timescale that is regarded as *zeitgleich*, as both Achim Landwehr and Berber Bevernage have recently argued.<sup>65</sup> So much for the idea that ‘the past’ and ‘the present’ both come in one piece, that is the presupposition of unity.

Concerning the second assumption, namely the problem that the distinction between the historical and the practical past presupposes that the construction of the historical past is not practical in *itself*, I think John Searle’s theory of performative

<sup>62</sup> King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 49-55. Also see B. Bevernage and C. Lorenz, “Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between the Present, Past and Future”, *Storia della Storiografia* 63 (2013): 48-49, and L. Hölscher, “Mysteries of Historical Order” and P. Osborne, “Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of Historical Time”, *Breaking up Time*, 69-85, and A. Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?* (München: Hanser Verlag, 2013), 281-304.

<sup>63</sup> Fundamental reading on this topic is B. Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*. Also see J. K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> So King was basically right when he wrote “That there is an ‘historical past’, as distinct from a ‘practical past’, seemed a bubble of muddled water” (King, *Thinking Past a Problem*, 16).

<sup>65</sup> See A. Landwehr, “Von der ‘Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen’”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 295 (2012): 2-34, who argues that “das grundsätzliche Problem” is the following: “Man muss nämlich immer wissen und sagen können, wo denn nun die Gleichzeitigkeit steckt und wer an ihr teilhat, sobald man von Ungleichzeitigkeit redet” (10). As Landwehr shows since the Enlightenment “zeitgleich” has basically been identified with “being modern”, that is “being European”. Also see Bevernage, *History, Memory and State-Sponsored Violence*, 110-130: “What we need and what is mostly lacking [...] is an explicit deconstruction of any notion of a time that acts as a container time of all other times” (130). Both Landwehr and Bevernage hark back to Johannes Fabian’s anthropological classic *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). In contrast to Landwehr and Bevernage Helge Jordheim attempts to “save” Koselleck from this fundamental critique in his “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities”, *History and Theory*, 51 (2012): 151-171.

speech acts is highly relevant. The basic idea of performative speech acts is that by saying something one is performing an act at the same time: this kind of speaking is a form of doing or acting. Well-known examples of performative speech acts are promising, ordering, marrying, divorcing, and so on. These acts only exist when they are performed in speech and in this respect their ontological status is fundamentally different from, for instance, tables and mountains. Searle therefore makes a distinction between "raw" facts that are independent of speech acts – the existence of tables and mountains, and so on – and "institutional" facts that are dependent on speech acts – the existence of promises, orders and marriages, and so on. For Searle, the social world consists of institutional facts based on speech acts, and I will now argue: *the same goes for the historical world.*<sup>66</sup>

Quite recently some theorists have proposed to analyze the breaks or ruptures between present, past and future as the result of *performative speech acts* – an idea that was first proposed and explored by both Michel de Certeau and Constantin Fasolt.<sup>67</sup> Their argument boils down to the idea that the past is basically distinct from the present *when* and *because* "past-makers" – and especially historians as the specialists in time – *say so* and are successful in *convincing* their readers by reasoned argument. The question of whether '9/11' or the banking crisis of 2007-2008 will be regarded in the future as breaks in time, for example, is *only* dependent on the question of whether historians and other 'past-makers' will represent them as such and argue for their proposed breaks (and for the resulting periods). So the basic idea here is that because the past and the present do not automatically break up by distance in time – as professional history has postulated for a very long time – they only do so as a consequence of the performative speech acts. This Wittgensteinian idea is fully consonant with the localization of pasts and presents proposed by Preston King and can be seen as its logical elaboration.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, I think that White's identification of the historical past with Austin's declarative use of language is running the risk of obscuring the performative role that historians are playing *themselves* in separating a past from a present.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, White's identification of the historical past with Austin's declarative use of language runs the further risk of supporting the *disinterested* self-image of professional historians, writing 'factual history for its own sake' from an 'observer's point of view' and not from the point of view of a – speaking or writing – actor.

What is needed here is a full elucidation of the historian's truth claims in terms of performative speech acts, as Marek Tamm has recently provided with the help of Searle's notion of "assertives".<sup>70</sup> According to Searle the (illocutionary) point of

<sup>66</sup> John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, (London: Penguin, 1995), 1-127. Because the major thinkers in social theory (with Jürgen Habermas as the most famous exception) have taken language as an institution for granted – although language is the precondition for *all* other social institutions – Searle has criticized the sociological tradition for its "Mickey Mouse view on language".

<sup>67</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); C. Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> See Lorenz and Bevernage, *Breaking up Time*. Compare with M. Sabrow, *Die Zeit der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013), who argues for the "objective" existence of "breaks in time".

<sup>69</sup> In "Truth and Circumstance" White only shortly mentions the possibility of analyzing "historiography" in a performative light (illocutionary in Austin's terms).

<sup>70</sup> J. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

assertive speech acts is “to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something’s being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition”.<sup>71</sup> In line with recent narratology, Tamm proposes to analyze truth claims in history in pragmatic terms: as a truth pact between the author and the reader, and no longer in semantic terms, like truth as correspondence or coherence. This pragmatic notion of truth pact has evolved from the insight that the truth claims of narratives – and thus also the distinction between factual and fictional texts – *cannot* be fixed as characteristics on the narratological level and thus must be located outside the text: in the relationship between the author and the reader.<sup>72</sup> This kind of analysis would also enable us to conceive of the *politics of time* that professional historians are pursuing while claiming to study the past for its own sake. The simple opposition between the historical and the practical past diverts attention from the *practical-political* aspects that go into the construction of the *historical past itself*. For Oakeshott the political dimensions of history are excluded from the historical past *by definition*. Following his trail, as we have seen, White himself faces problems in making sense of the political dimensions of the historical past in, for example, political and religious history. He could only adapt them by introducing *ad hoc* exemptions, thereby weakening his general line of argument.

#### IV. OUT OF ANTARCTICA (2): MOVING BEYOND THE ‘HISTORICAL’ AND THE ‘PRACTICAL’ PAST AND BEYOND THE ‘IS’ / ‘OUGHT TO’ DISTINCTION

Ultimately the distinction between the historical and the practical past was and is motivated by the wish to differentiate between the ‘world of facts’ from the ‘world of values’ concerning the past, that is between the domain of the ‘is’ and the domain of the ‘ought to’. This is crystal clear in the binary intellectual cosmos of Oakeshott, but the distinction gets seriously complicated in the non-binary intellectual cosmos of White, who pays a price for the many fuzzy boundaries of his ‘definitions’ with unclear extensions. The question now is whether there is a way out of this conceptual unclarity, and if so, in which direction we should be looking. I think the surest and simplest way to solve this problem is to argue that it is rooted in presuppositions that can no longer be upheld. This can be done because as Hillary Putnam and John Zammito (and I) have argued, the very idea that facts and values must be located in two different and closed domains is rooted in mistaken ideas about the foundations of knowledge held by both empiricism and positivism.<sup>73</sup> Traditional philosophy of

1969), 54-71; M. Tamm, “Truth, Objectivity and Evidence in History Writing”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 8, 2 (2014): in press.

<sup>71</sup> Searle cited in Tamm, “Truth, Objectivity and Evidence”.

<sup>72</sup> Tamm, “Truth, Objectivity and Evidence”. Also see Kalle Pihlainen, who speaks of the “pact” existing between readers and author as well as of the “communicative space” that this pact defines: K. Pihlainen, “The Confines of the Form: Historical Writing and the Desire That It Be What It Is Not”, *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, ed. K. Korhonen (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 55-67 and “History in the World: Hayden White and the Consumer of History”, *Rethinking History*, 12, 1 (2008): 23-39.

<sup>73</sup> H. Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); J. Zammito, “The ‘Last Dogma’ of Positivism: Historicist Naturalism and the Fact/Value Dichotomy”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012): 305-338; J. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of*



science going back to Hume, Kant and the Vienna Circle has always been contrasting the purity of scientific knowledge to the impurity of ethics in terms of rationality. There was no bridge possible between the two domains, and trying to bridge this gap in illegitimate and covert linguistic ways came to be seen as the very hallmark of 'ideologies' (as Oakeshott also saw it). Therefore, empiricists and positivists invested much intellectual energy in constructing a *cordon sanitaire* between science and ethics, or, in other words, an unbridgeable gap between factual propositions and evaluative statements. Now what both Putnam and Zammito have argued in great detail is that since the path breaking contributions of Willard Van Orman Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, and Thomas Kuhn in the 1950s and 1960s, *all* ideas concerning the philosophical foundations of pure scientific knowledge – like the distinction between facts and theories, the possibility of a neutral language of science, the distinction between the context of discovery and “the context of justification,” and, last but not least, the distinction between analytical and synthetic judgments – have collapsed. With Putnam we should ask the question: “But if the whole idea that there is a *clear* notion of fact collapsed with the hopeless restrictive empiricist picture that gave rise to it, *what happens to the fact/value dichotomy?*”<sup>74</sup> And, following Putnam and Zammito, we can answer that

the fact/value dichotomy cannot really survive the demolition of the other ‘dogmas of empiricism’, because *fact* must now be recognized to be thoroughly impregnated with theory and values. Science cannot be “value-free” since science itself presupposes values [which] are in the same boat as ethical values with respect to objectivity. [...] It is time we stopped equating *objectivity* with *description* in a manner which ascribes to the description/prescription distinction and ontological grounding in separate ‘natural kinds’.<sup>75</sup>

When we follow the above-mentioned consequences of post-empiricism and post-positivism we can no longer define the historical past as supposedly produced by the science of history, as the domain of value-free factual statements, isolated from and located opposite to the practical past, like Oakeshott did and White tries to do. Inevitably theories enter the stage simultaneously with facts, and so do values: in the post-foundational world it takes *three* to tango! Therefore “post-positivism in the philosophy of science implies, in that light, a radical revision towards a naturalist normativity”, meaning a conception of ethics firmly connected to the domain of facts.<sup>76</sup>

All things considered, White was surely right when he stated that the historical past is a *theoretical construction* of historians – and, one could add, of a couple of philosophers of history too. What White forgot to consider is that the same goes

*Epistemes. Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2004); Lorenz, “Historical knowledge and historical reality”.

<sup>74</sup> Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 30. Introducing Austin’s speech act theory White quotes Austin stating that his theory was aimed to undermine the idea that all statements can be categorized as “true/false” and as “value/fact”, but he does not elaborate on Austin’s insight (White, “Truth and Circumstance”, 196).

<sup>75</sup> Zammito, “‘Last Dogma’ of Positivism”, 326, quoting Putnam. Also see J. Searle, “How to Derive ‘Ought’ From ‘Is’”, *The Philosophical Review*, 73, 1 (1964): 43-58. I have dealt with empiricist remains in White’s position in C. Lorenz, “Can Histories be True? Narrativism, Positivism and the ‘Metaphorical Turn’”, *History and Theory*, 37 (1998): 309-329.

<sup>76</sup> Zammito, “‘Last Dogma’ of Positivism”, 327.

for the practical past because from the beginning it has functioned as the normative counterpart of the – supposedly strictly factual – ‘historical past’, to begin with in the guise of *Geschichtsphilosophie*.<sup>77</sup> This is, of course, not to suggest that there are no differences between factual and normative statements, only that they can no longer be stated in the ways that empiricism and positivism suggested for at least two centuries. Since Quine and Kuhn, we know that *all* statements – both factual and normative – are packed in ‘webs of belief’ (Quine) and in theoretical networks and therefore can only be judged *within* these contexts. “Semantic holism”, just like Stephen Hawking’s famous turtles, “goes all the way down”.<sup>78</sup> The best trick the Devil of Professional History has played on us was to mask the theoretical construction of the distinction between the practical and the historical past as *the product of time itself* and to formalize it in the dogma of distance, which posits that the practical present transforms into the historical past *by itself* – in due time. I have argued here that it is about time to undo that trick and to start analyzing both the practical past and the *practical construction* of the historical past in all their complexities and interrelations.

Talking about complexities it is time we go back to the burning coalmine in China, to close with the words of an American researcher who visited the place in 2008. He reported in *Time*: “I decided to go to see how it was extinguished. Flames were visible and the entire thing was still burning [...] They said it was put out, and who is to say otherwise?”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> As H.-G. Gadamer remarked long ago. See his *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960).

<sup>78</sup> S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books 1988), 1. Compare with Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, 89-91, who rejects Quine’s holism concerning indeterminacy for *natural* languages although he accepts it for *scientific* languages.

<sup>79</sup> S. Q. Andrews cited in the March issue of *Time* 2008; “Is Beijing Manipulating Air Pollution Statistics?” at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1722450,00.html>. Accessed on April 1, 2014.