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The Last Catastrophe. The Writing of Contemporary History

Henry Rousso¹

This work focuses on the way that contemporary history, the history of the “recent past”, has been written and conceived in a long-term perspective. While historiography is the main topic, the epistemological dimension opens here onto a larger purpose, which is to understand part of what has been called a “regime of historicity”: how does a given society, at a give moment, see its own place within the global evolution of history, and how does it deal with past, present, and future, and more specifically with the question of what I call “contemporariness”. My analysis starts in Ancient Greece and ends in the present. It traces the development of contemporary history as a sub-discipline and a recognized scientific field in the XXth century, with examples taken from French, German, British and American historiography. This is a theoretical work rooted in a long and concrete practice of history in a European context: the history and legacy of a century of mass political violence.

What do I mean by “contemporariness”? When did it begin as a scholarly practice? Is it true that historians have always written contemporary history or that “*All history is contemporary history*”, to Quote Benedetto Croce’s famous statement? Is it different from other segments of historiography – from medieval history or modern history [*Histoire modern*]? Why are there so many different notions to describe what appears to be the same historiographic field: *Histoire contemporaine*, *histoire du temps present* *histoire immediate* in French; Contemporary history and Modern history in English; *Historia vivida* in Spanish; *Zeitgeschichte* or *Neueste Geschichte*, in German? The definition, the borders, the possible singularity of contemporary history form the core of this work.

To be or not to be “there”

At the end of 1989, the *Institut d’histoire du temps present* (IHTP), one of the first institutions created to work on contemporary issues in French history, prepared a colloquium on Vichy France which would be held the following year, in 1990 (“*Le régime de Vichy et les Français*”). In one of the previous meetings, François Bédarida, the founding father of this



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institution, on the one hand, and two younger researchers – Denis Peschanski and myself (we were around our 35) – on the other, disagreed about some issue. I don't even remember what the issue was. After a vivid exchange, François Bédarida, a little bit aggravated, exclaimed: “*Vous n'avez pas vécu cette période, vous ne pouvez pas comprendre !*” (“You didn't live through this period, you can't understand!”). The statement “not to have been there”, rather banal at a first glance, left us speechless. And it made me think for a long time about its paradoxical meaning.

Yes, indeed, not to have lived through a given period is by definition the position of most historians. This is even why history as an art, and later a discipline, has been invented: to talk about what came before us. But contemporary historians are in fact scholars who must deal with the recent past, sometimes finding themselves in a double bind, as both witnesses and scholars. So François Bédarida was absolutely right in 1989 to claim that he was the only one among the audience to have had a direct experience of living under Nazi rule, and thus to have a kind of “superiority” over us. But we were absolutely right to think he was absolutely wrong to deny younger scholars the capacity to understand this period—hence the capacity to understand his own experience.

Actually, this rather frequent situation encountered by contemporary historians expresses a tension between two different positions. On the one hand, writing history needs a certain distance from the events, even if we don't accept anymore the idea that this distance is mandatory as it was the case for many historians in the XIXth century, from Leopold Ranke to Charles Seignobos. For example, in 1893, Fustel de Coulanges wrote: “*les faits accomplis se présentent à nous avec une bien autre netteté que les faits en voie d'accomplissement*”, (“Historical facts are more comprehensible when they are over than when they are in process”). The establishment of contemporary history as a fully recognized field within the University is precisely a reaction against this view, and it is rather recent, developed mainly in the late XXth century. But the idea of a necessary distance remains, of course, as a basis of any historical knowledge. Then, the problem is to define the “good” distance”.

On the other hand, despite the fact that he was directing an institution whose aim was precisely to develop scholarship on recent history, François Bédarida expressed a very old idea which experienced a kind of a revival in recent decades, in the context of post---



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Holocaust memories: the idea that experience matters more than knowledge, and that the living witness, talking about his or her own experience, is more important and more reliable than any scholar – except the one who is also a former actor of the events described. This is a very powerful prejudice in our contemporary world, encountered by every historian who works on any important recent catastrophe. Let me quote here an extreme position, expressed this year, during the Holocaust commemoration, in January 27, 2012: “We, the last survivors of the Holocaust, disappear one after the other. Soon, history will begin to speak, at best, with the impersonal voice of researchers and novelists, at worst, with the deniers, falsifiers and demagogues”^{II}. From this survivor’s perspective, contemporary history is just the better part of an inevitable damage, an unavoidable loss.

How to define contemporary history?

Let me explain first the mysterious title of the book, *The Last Catastrophe*. It comes from a statement made by a German historian named Hermann Heimpel, a medievalist who was the director of the Max Planck Institut für Geschichte in the late 1950’s, and a former professor at the Reichsuniversität Strassburg – when Strasbourg was under German rule – during the Nazi era. Among his achievements, he is credited with having invented the famous and ambiguous notion of “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” – “mastering the past”. He 1 Samuel Pizar, « Auschwitz parle encore aux juifs et aux musulmans », *Le Monde*, January 28, 2012. Wrote in 1957 that “*any present time begins with the last catastrophe, the most recent one*”². This powerful definition expresses many different things all at once:

There has been a structural or a permanent way to define a “contemporary” period in history, whether you talk about the XIXth or the XXth century, or even before. 1789 or 1945 are two simple illustrations of this trend: both are or have been major events – *catastrophes*, in the Greek sense (an upheaval) – and then milestones for describing not only a new era but a new period in historiography known as “contemporary history”.

- As a consequence, what historians call “contemporary history” changes constantly. This is a basic but an important difference with the other three canonical periods in Western historiography (Antiquity, Middle---Ages and Modern Times) which were almost definitely



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established at the end of the 17th century by the German historian Cellarius, and which emphasize two major traditional turns: the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Of course, there are many debates about the relevance of this old chronology, but in this perception of historical times only contemporary history changes so often: first, because time is moving forward (a truism with a lot of practical consequences on how to teach recent history in schools, for example) and because the endpoint is unstable; second, because the starting point of contemporary history changes very often as well. In my book, I describe for example how a dozen different dates have been used subsequent to the XXth century to describe the opening of a new era of contemporaneity:

- **1789**: This date marks contemporary history in the French tradition since the third Republic. “Modern times” end with the Revolution, and we are still the “contemporaries” of Danton and Robespierre. This is of course both a political decision and a tradition that is rather difficult to break. The notion of “*histoire du temps présent*” was created in the late 1970’s to distinguish the study of the recent past from this sequel of French republicanism for which contemporariness has nothing to do with a Biological time.

- **1917**: This date has functioned as a starting point for Communist countries and for postwar Federal Germany as well. This was for example the definition of “*Zeitgeschichte*” as adopted by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, in 1949, following a famous analysis by Hans Rothfels, its first director: the Bolshevik Revolution and the involvement of the USA in WWI opens a new era. The choice of 1917 created much controversy because it effectively played down the importance of another milestone in German history, namely **1933**, a date which was preferred as a major starting point for the post-68 generation.

- **1945**: This is a very traditional date marking the start of contemporary history, especially in the Anglophone world with the creation of the first Centre of British Contemporary History in 1986, or in French high schools programs from the 60’s to the early 80’s (influenced by Fernand Braudel). This obvious date was nevertheless contested by my generation. When the Institut Histoire du Temps Présent was created, we wanted to establish a new break with the year “**1940**” – not to focus on victory, but to focus rather on defeat due to



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the position of France during the war. This pessimistic view of French contemporary history never prevailed.

- **1914**: with the eve of WWI, we are going back to a more *remote* past, and this is a starting point used by many historians in a more *recent* period, beginning with Erik Hobsbawm and his “short XXth century”, or by many other scholars, including those working on WWII, who moved back wards in their perception of the event after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Here again, the choice of 1914 as a starting point totally changes the meaning of “contemporary history”: it challenges, for example, the centrality of the Holocaust for understanding our own contemporary world.

- **1989**: this is the most recent possible date (with **2001**) used to mark a new period defined as “contemporary history”. Whether or not it will be accepted, I can’t know, but it fits rather well with Heimpel’s definition.

The fact that the notion of contemporary history can change in a short period of time, helps us to understand the more abstract notion of contemporaneity or contemporariness. To be the contemporary of someone else doesn’t mean only – or even, for some thinkers, doesn’t mean at all – to live in or to share the same time, despite common sense. Many historians, whatever the period on which they work, accept the idea that in a given society, at a given moment, several social times coexist. The particular sensibility of the historical craft is precisely to identify them, and this is probably a little more difficult for the historian who deals with the recent past than for any other historian.

All historians have to address the complex issue of distance: this is a basis for any knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences. But while a medieval historian will have *to reduce* the distance between the past he studies and the present into which he is working, *a contemporary historian, in order to talk to his own contemporaries, will have to do the reverse: create distance with proximity*. Here, contemporariness doesn’t refer to “real time”, that is, to biological time. It refers to a social and political construction of national history or collective memory. If we observe the recent importance of commemorations in Europe, WWI seems closer to our own time than was the case thirty years ago. There are plenty possible explanations for this situation, and most of them are not related to the past (what happened between 1914 and 1918), but tell us about the present. The history or memory of WWI



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became major issues after the fall of the Soviet system and the renewal of an old European order, and WWI is probably a better war to commemorate in European societies who are looking for a larger historical consensus after a broader unification, whereas the legacy of WWII emphasizes many differences between the East and the West. So, a remote event could be seen as more “contemporary” than a recent one. For instance, I found it much more difficult to work on Vichy France in the 90’s than it had been during the previous decade. Indeed, I had more archives and more opportunities to launch new researches in the field in the 90’s, but at that time, the memory of Vichy France was such a vivid issue and such a permanent public problem, that it rendered things much more difficult for historians.

Yes, indeed, as a Holocaust historian, I share(d) the same time, the same epoch, as a survivor of Auschwitz. That gives (gave) me the possibility to do oral history, the usual and very basic definition of contemporary history. But, by no means could I say without great hesitation that I am “a contemporary” of this witness because of the tremendous gap between his or her experience and mine. It would be a major mistake to consider his testimony as easily accessible just because I can talk with him. Here, if proximity can help me do my job (getting some primary information), I have to keep in mind the distance between us, just as I have to create distance to counterbalance the apparent proximity. That’s why there was such a misunderstanding between François Bédarida and the two young historians, of which I was one: he was trying to remember the past, to bring it from the past to the present; we were, albeit unconsciously, attempting to go the other way round, to talk about a remote past even if it was still present.

What changed recently and why contemporary history became an issue?

The idea of this book rose from a very basic question. Why did contemporary history in the most ordinary sense of the term – working on the recent past – became a normal scholarly activity from the 70’s onwards, and why was this not the case before? And why are contemporary historians, who were in the minority thirty years ago, now the most important part of the profession today, at least in Europe? When I began in the mid-70s as a young historian, I wanted to do contemporary history and to work on the Vichy period, for many



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reasons. I was a student at the *École normale supérieure de Saint Cloud*, and my professors told me that I was making two huge mistakes: first, to work on Vichy France: too hot and too painful a subject; second, to chose contemporary history as my field of research. If I wanted to have a prestigious career, I should choose medieval or modern history, or even the French Revolution, but not on the XXth century. At worst, it would be “journalism”, at best, “political science.”

In order to understand this question, I needed to look backwards. But as soon as I began to think about the *history of contemporary history*, I realized that practically nobody had ever worked on this issue. There were very few books to rely upon, and then, I was obliged to do it by myself, even in a very schematic way. And this has been the crazies thing I’ve ever done in my career.

According to thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck or François Hartog, for the Greek or Roman historians or even for scholars during the Christian Middle Ages, there was no real distinction between past and present. All history was actually “contemporary” history but in a different meaning than the one used in the XXth century. The main role of historians, who didn’t yet have a specific discipline, was to provide lessons for living: *Historia magistra vita est* (“history is life’s teacher”), following famous Cicero’s quotation. Things began to change with modernity and especially with the French Revolution: “*L’histoire modern occidentale commence avec la distinction entre passé et présent*” (“*Western modern history begins with the distinction between past and present*”), wrote Michel de Certeau. This distinction became more and more important all through the XIXth and the XXth Century, when history became progressively a scientific discipline whose aim was to provide a precise knowledge about a remote past, now rather far from the present. And because, after the French Revolution, there was now this new notion of a “distant past” (*un passé révolu*), known as the Ancien régime, there was a new need to identify a “recent” past as well. The very idea and the practice of contemporary history as a distinct period of history spread because of this split between past and present.

Nevertheless, during the establishment of the new historical profession, some prominent leaders like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Leopold Ranke, Charles Seignobos or Ernest Lavisse considered that writing “contemporary history” couldn’t be done according to the



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new disciplinary standards being established at the same time: looking carefully for the traces of the past, using written documents and archives, having a distant perspective, and respecting objectivity. For the recent past, there were no available archives; historians couldn't know the end of the story, and they couldn't be objective because of still vivid passions, like the legacy of the French Revolution. Of course, some refused this very orthodox view, and there are many French, English or German histories of post-revolutionary Europe written by prominent writers and thinkers throughout the XXth century. But at least officially, suspicions about contemporary history were legion in the academic world, and would remain so until after the Second World War.

In the 1960's, Braudel and the new *Annales* school (this was not the case with Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and the *Annales* before the war) still rejected *de facto* the idea of contemporary history according to the dominant concept of "*longue durée*", which disqualified the event, the short term, as "the scum of history." Actually, it is interesting to note that Braudel created the notion of "*longue durée*" when he was a POW in a German Oflag, in the middle of the worst catastrophe of human history. He did it, he wrote afterwards, precisely in order to escape the difficulty of his own time. From another tradition, Raymond Aron could write in 1964 that: "*L'objet de l'histoire est une réalité qui a cessé d'être*" ("The purpose of history is a reality that has ceased to be"). In other words, until a very recent period, a traditional conception of historiography enjoined the historian to deal only with the dead.

These conceptions rooted in the paradigm of objectivity slowly began to change after WWI and WWII. WWI meant the failure of objectivity as a master principle: French, German or US historians had involved themselves in the war to defend their nation, and abandoned all the standards they had promoted before 1914, that is a neutral conception of knowledge. More important, the magnitude of the catastrophes led to a deep need to understand what had happened, to count the number of casualties, to collect archives and testimonies – the so-called "era of the witness" began in 1918 not in 1961 –, to hire experts whether for the treaties of peace in 1919 or for the trials and policies of reparation after 1945.

The need for such narratives on the catastrophe was found everywhere in Europe, in the Warsaw ghetto, among the Jews or the Resisters in Occupied France. To give one famous



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example, Anne Frank quotes in her diary the Dutch Ministry of Education of the Government-in-exile, Gerrit Bolkenstein, asking to the Dutch people at the BBC, in March 1944, to collect diaries, memoirs, letters, to testify about the nature of the Nazi occupation: "History cannot be written on the basis of official decisions and documents alone," he said, "If our descendants are to understand fully what we as a nation have had to endure and 10 overcome during these years, then what we really need are ordinary documents." And, I should add, contemporary historians.

Between 1944 and the early 1960's, everywhere in Europe, governments created official institutions dedicated to the sole history of WWII or the Nazi period: the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Federal Germany, the National Institute for War Documentation in the Netherlands (RIOD, then the NIOD), the *Commission pour l'histoire de l'Occupation et de la Libération* in France – the ancestor of my own institution –, the *Istituto per il Movimento della Liberazione* in Italy. Most of these organizations became later, in the 80's, the basis for the development of a new kind of contemporary history, like the IHTP, created between 1978 and 1980. This is a part of a larger movement in Europe that saw a systematic institutionalization of this sub-discipline. Contemporary historians, marginal for almost a century, began to be the dominant members of the historian guild.

There are of course direct linkages between the two world wars and the eve of a new preoccupation with the recent past, which is rather new in history even if we can see some comparable situations after other major historical events like the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the religious wars, or the French Revolution and its aftermath. The importance of the World Wars, the growing concern with memory, and especially with the belated memories of the Holocaust, the ideology of victimization, all gave a very specific shape to this new contemporary history.

How define *contemporary* Contemporary history?

I will stress some major elements that characterize the practice and the problems of contemporary History in the present day, whether they are structural or contextual:



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- *The presence of the actors* of history, whether they testify or not about their own experience: contemporary history is an encounter with the living, and not only with the dead; and it is not the same thing to engage in a dialogue with a living person as to talk with the dead, even if the task of historians is to resuscitate the latter.

- *The question of memory*, not only as a source but as a major kind of narrative about the past, which became a value in the last three decades, probably even a new human right, at least in modern democracies.

- *The central question of the event*, and the necessity to rehabilitate the short term perspective: can we seriously admit that the Holocaust is nothing but a “scum of history” or that 9/11 is not a serious topic for historians? These ideas are obsolete but they still prevailed a few decades ago.

- *The importance of the public sphere*, I never thought as a young historian that my job would transform me into a public figure, immersed in controversies about the recent past and the best way to remember it. This situation created new roles for historians: there emerged the public historian, the member of an official commission, the expert on legal issues. Of course, we can find such situations in a more distant past, but never as much as during the last decade has history been such a public and legal issue.

- Last but not least, *the law and justice* became major vectors of memory and major narratives on the recent past, especially in the context of the “historical trials”, from Nuremberg to the Papon trial. The growing trend to frame the past with specific bills, like the so-called French “*lois mémorielles*” [i.e. legislation concerning the legal definition and the respect for the memories of certain events], created a situation without a real precedent. This profoundly altered not only the historical profession but the very meaning of contemporariness, as in the case of the belated trials against Nazi criminals and some of their accomplices, in Israel, France, and Germany.

A brief conclusion

Since the French revolution and its aftermath, contemporary history has always been declared at once impossible and necessary—a structural tension we cannot avoid.



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Contemporary history provides an unfinished story, and the contemporary historian, among his colleagues in the larger field, is paradoxically the one who is the closest to the traditional principle of objectivity: to write a reliable historical narrative, the historian must ignore the end of the story. While this is a methodological fiction for a historian of the Middle Ages, it is a real situation for a historian of the recent past. Eventually, the contemporary historian occupies a strange place. On the one hand, he helps the present to become past, through the process that German historians call “*Historisierung*”— historicization. From this perspective, he must accept the witness who says to him: “you’re taking my place, you’re an accomplice of loss, enabling the transformation of my own living experience into cold knowledge”. On the other hand, at least if we observe what happened at the end of the XXth century, the historian sees and must explain why the past is coming back into the present: for example, the anamnesis of the Holocaust, the exact opposite of the preceding movement. He must fight on two fronts: the front of history and the front of memory, or to paraphrase Hannah Arendt: he lies in a no man’s land between past and present.

Notas

¹ Esta publicação é uma transcrição de uma palestra feita pelo historiador Henry Rousso do Institut d’histoire du temps présent, CNRS, Paris Harvard & Yale, na universidade de Havard em 2012.

² Samuel Pissar, « Auschwitz parle encore aux juifs et aux musulmans », *Le Monde*, January 28, 2012.