

FORUM: HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

Introduction: Whose Present? Which History?

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins

College of Social Studies, Wesleyan University
E-mail: dsteinmetzje@wesleyan.edu

(Received 30 March 2022; accepted 30 March 2022)

Introduction

There can be little doubt that the history profession is experiencing a turn to the present. The post-2016 “crisis of democracy” has only dramatized it. Long-standing anxieties over presentism have crumbled under the weight of recent events.¹ They have proven little match for Brexit, Trump, the rise of strongmen in the world writ large, racial injustice, and the pandemic. The turn to the present, however, is at times marked by undeniable provincialism—one that consistently offers a narrow perspective for understanding new and emerging global realities. Some historians, for instance, have taken on the role of liberal watchmen ready to strike the tocsin against suspected fascism, but they regularly do so by focusing on Europe’s fascist past of the 1930s to explain the contemporary order.² Or consider the economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. In the search for solutions, scholars proved quick to make historical comparisons to the great war economies of World Wars I and II, but appeared little bothered by the possibility that taking inspiration from Europe’s age of extremes might “lead us to look for enemies and scapegoats.”³ So with the George

¹For discussions on how presentism is construed by the general history profession see Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives on History: The News Magazine of the American Historical Association*, 1 May 2002, at www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism; David Armitage, “In Defense of Presentism,” in Darrin M. McMahon, ed., *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford, forthcoming), available at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/armitage/files/in_defence_of_presentism.pdf; Alexandra Walsham, “Introduction: Past and ... Presentism,” *Past & Present* 234/1 (2017), 213–17. For an essay on the history profession’s turn to the present on account of the post-2016 crisis of democracy see Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Beyond the End of History: Historians’ Prohibition on ‘Presentism’ Crumbles under the Weight of Events,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Aug. 2020, at www.chronicle.com/article/beyond-the-end-of-history.

²See in particular Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2017); Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York, 2019); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York, 2020); Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley, 2017); Finchelstein, “Donald Trump Has Blurred the Line between Populism and Fascism in a Dangerous Way,” *Washington Post*, “Made by History,” 9 July 2021, at www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/07/09/donald-trump-has-blurred-line-between-populism-fascism-dangerous-way.

³See Mark R. Wilson, “The 5 WWII Lessons That Could Help the Government Fight Coronavirus,” *Politico*, 19 March 2020, www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-defense-production-

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Floyd protests: certain scholars and pundits likened them to the 1968 student protests in France and the United States, even as other scholars pointed out the historical shortcoming of the comparison.⁴

The Floyd protests transformed into an international protest movement, which embraced American nomenclature of “antiracism” and “Black Lives Matter” and led to the removal of monuments and statues around the world. But approaching the challenge of racism in non-American societies through the importation of an American understanding of antiracism might not map on well to the historical particularities of other national cultures.⁵ As Faisal Devji’s powerful essay in this forum explains, “Seeing what is happening in the US and elsewhere today as the struggle of fascism against liberalism or white against black conceals more than it reveals, because it is a view that refuses to look beyond America or the West in a historical context which has become global.”⁶ This refusal is even apparent in well-meaning critiques of Eurocentrism that nevertheless focus only on Western media outlets that are considered the most high-profile. There is something contradictory and misguided in thinking about the global in purely Euro-American terms.

Where the world is heading is unclear, but historians have not been reluctant to provide answers. The Cambridge historian Gary Gerstle has proclaimed that the age of neoliberalism is ending; it has been broken by the 2008 financial crisis, the Trump presidency, “Biden’s infrastructure success,” and the general economic fall-out of the pandemic.⁷ What, though, comes after neoliberalism, says the historian Nils Gilman, is “something yet to be named.”⁸ For one group of historians, that yet to be named is a new era of great-power competition between the US and China. To them China’s economic growth in the past two decades, its naval foothold in the South China Sea, and its Belt and Road economic development initiative in the global South all signal an unavoidable “Second” or “New” Cold War.⁹ This literature

[world-war-two-lessons-135814](#); Mark A. Goldberg, “Stop Calling Covid-19 a Foreign Virus,” *Washington Post*, 26 March 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/26/stop-calling-covid-19-foreign-virus.

⁴Niall Ferguson, “2020 Is Not 1968. It May Be Worse,” *Bloomberg*, 7 June 2020, at www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-07/floyd-protests-and-coronavirus-2020-is-not-1968-it-s-worse; David Frum, “Trump Is No Richard Nixon,” *The Atlantic*, 2 June 2020, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/trump-no-richard-nixon/612511; Max Boot, “Five Reasons ‘Law and Order’ Rhetoric Might Not Work as Well in 2020 as in 1968,” *Washington Post*, 1 June 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/01/five-reasons-law-order-rhetoric-might-not-work-well-2020-1968/; Thomas J. Sugrue, “Stop Comparing Today’s Protests to 1968,” *Washington Post*, 11 June 2020, at www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/11/protests-1968-george-floyd/.

⁵See, for instance, the essay by Alex Hochuli, “The Triumph of American Idealism,” *Damage*, 17 June 2020, at <https://damagemag.com/2020/06/17/the-triumph-of-american-idealism>.

⁶See Faisal Devji’s essay in this forum.

⁷See Gary Gerstle: “The Age of Neoliberalism Is Ending in America. What Will Replace It?” *The Guardian*, 21 June 2021, at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/28/age-of-neoliberalism-biden-trump; Gerstle, “Biden’s Infrastructure Success Is a Historic—and Sorely Needed—Win,” *The Guardian*, 8 Nov. 2021, at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/08/bidens-infrastructure-success-is-a-historic-and-sorely-needed-win.

⁸Nils Gilman, “A New Dawn, a New Day, a New Life,” *Small Precautions*, April 2021, at <https://nilsgilman.substack.com/p/a-new-dawn-a-new-day-a-new-life>.

⁹See Niall Ferguson, “The New Cold War? It’s with China, and It Has Already Begun,” *New York Times*, 2 Dec. 2019, at www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/opinion/china-cold-war.html; John Lewis Gaddis and Hal

too is rooted in a sense of crisis, in which authoritarianism is becoming the new international norm. Accordingly, China is regularly understood only through Western precedent. As Fabio Lanza explains in his contribution to this forum,

as during the “old” Cold War, in this New Cold War discourse China is depicted as having once again exited the normal temporality of liberal capitalism and having embraced an “alternative path” to modernization ... And in that context, China’s present must once again be explained (away) as an anomaly, a pathology, a replica/mimicry/product of its past—and/or the presage of an even worse future.¹⁰

The New Cold War discourse is a Eurocentric attempt to resist the decentering of the United States and to keep the West as the measure of modernity.

For their part, intellectual historians and historians of political thought have done much to offer their expertise in the service of helping general audiences come to grips with “the crisis of democracy.” Yet a myopic focus on the post-2016 crisis of democracy has left many intellectual historians vulnerable to the same blind spots that have marked the general profession’s turn to the present. There has arguably been an overemphasis, for instance, on parsing interwar European fascism and, in particular, the failed Weimar Republic, in an effort to understand contemporary politics.¹¹ The irony, as Udi Greenberg convincingly explains in this forum, is that the participants in this heated debate actually share more in common than not. “They all condemned the right’s racism, sexism, and plutocracy, and all hoped that it would be replaced by bold egalitarian policies ... they even echoed each other’s claim that the goal of comparing today’s right to fascism was to expose the evils that have long plagued liberal democracy.” In hindsight, concludes Greenberg, the debate turned less on the accuracy of making a historical comparison to interwar Europe and more on a polemical ploy or strategy for political mobilization.

Fixated on the post-2016 crisis, intellectual historians have used their knowledge to make public interventions on such topics as democracy and truth, conspiracy theories, the study of history, populism, and liberalism.¹² As helpful as these

Brands, “The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov.–Dec. 2021, 10–21.

¹⁰See Fabio Lanza’s essay in this forum.

¹¹See, for instance, Peter Gordon, “Why Historical Analogy Matters,” *New York Review of Books*, 7 Jan. 2020, at www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/07/why-historical-analogy-matters; Samuel Moyn, “The Trouble with Comparisons,” *New York Review of Books*, 19 May 2020, at www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/05/19/the-trouble-with-comparisons; Udi Greenberg, “The Weimar Analogy,” *Jacobin* magazine, 17 Dec. 2016, www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/trump-hitler-germany-fascism-weimar-democracy; Corey Robin, “Triumph of the Shill: The Political Theory of Trumpism,” *n+1* 29 (2017), at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-29/politics/triumph-of-the-shill>. Much of the debate has centered around the work of Jason Stanley, an analytic philosopher at Yale University, and his book *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York, 2018). For a comprehensive bibliography of the debate see Udi Greenberg’s contribution to this forum.

¹²On democracy and truth see Sophia Rosenfeld, “Is It Bad That Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Cares More about Being ‘Morally Right’ than Facts?,” *Washington Post*, “Made by History,” 10 Jan. 2019, at www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/10/is-it-bad-that-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-cares-more-about-being-

interventions have been, they often take the present for granted without interrogation. The very category of the present, as Joan Scott aptly observes in her new book, *In the Name of History*, is no more obvious than is the question of how to approach it as a historian. As Stefanos Geroulanos, Natasha Wheatley, and Dan Edelstein remark in the introduction to a recent volume dedicated to the subject of temporality, “The present time is not the same present across cultures, classes, nations, political or ethnic or social groupings, not even layered in some hierarchy. Historical and political actors do not perceive the extensions of the present, nor the relations of past, present, and future, in the same way.”¹³ What is the present understood to mean, then and now, not to mention in different cultures? How has it traditionally been connected to the past and to the future? Whose present? Which crisis? Essays in this forum—by Alaina Morgan (on African diasporic history), Faisal Deviji (on Gandhi’s thinking on the present and nonviolence), Fabio Lanza (on the denial of China’s coevalness) and Louise Young (on the overwhelmingly anglophone intellectual production of “Japan knowledge”)—offer readers valuable resources for understanding the global dimensions of temporality. In doing so, they effectively decenter the West.¹⁴

The new debate over presentism

The general profession has seemingly come a long way from Lynn Hunt’s famous 2002 jeremiad “Against Presentism.” Indeed, nearly two decades removed from it, Joanne Meyerowitz, then president of the Organization of American Historians, exhorted her fellow historians in light of the crisis unleashed by the pandemic to “study the present, to make the present historical.”¹⁵ But what does it mean to make the present historical? How can you teach something like the history of the present? From whose perspective? And what are the risks and rewards of so doing? Here again a sense of crisis is felt, but one concerning the future prospects of the profession itself: the much-discussed recent drop in history majors.¹⁶ There is a significant divide over

morally-right-than-facts. On conspiracy theory see Nicolas Guilhot, “Bad Information,” *Boston Review*, 23 Aug. 2021, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/bad-information>. On liberalism see Helena Rosenblatt, “Liberal Democracy Is in Crisis. But ... Do We Know What It Is?,” *The Guardian*, 27 May 2018, at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/27/liberal-democracy-history-us-politics. On using history for understanding the post-2016 crisis see Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Beyond the End of History”; on populism see Anton Jäger, “The Myth of ‘Populism,’” *Jacobin* magazine, 3 Jan. 2018, at www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy.

¹³Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley “Chronocenos: An Introduction to Power and Time,” in Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley, eds., *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago, 2020), 1–52, at 34.

¹⁴See, in particular, the following essays in this forum: Alaina Morgan, “Historical *Sankofa*: On Understanding Antiracist Violence in the Present through the African Diasporic Past”; Faisal Deviji, “Losing the Present to History”; Fabio Lanza, “Always Already and Never Yet: Does China Even Have a Present?”; and Louise Young’s “Past and Present in Japanese Historiography: Four Versions of Presentism.”

¹⁵Joanne Meyerowitz, “180 Op-Eds: Or How to Make the Present Historical,” *Journal of American History* 107/2 (2020), 323–35, at 335.

¹⁶See, for instance, Emma Pettit, “Why Are Students Ditching the History Major?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 June 2020, at www.chronicle.com/article/why-are-students-ditching-the-history-major.

whether the turn to the present can reverse this trend or is, in fact, is to blame for it.

The intellectual historian David Armitage, for example, sees history's diminishing stature in the university as being inseparable from relinquishing its responsibility to speak to the present. If the discipline is to thrive, or even just survive, it should contribute to the service of human betterment. Otherwise, "we put ourselves out of business by failing to justify our craft and our profession to publics starkly confronted with the challenges of the present."¹⁷ And if historians can say nothing about how history can enhance human life in the present "then we are at a loss," says Darrin McMahon, "both to ourselves and to our students, to say nothing of the public writ large." Today's undergraduates, however, are more likely to turn to the social sciences for answers to these questions. "Think of the massive courses on happiness or meaning offered by psychologists and behavioral economists," McMahon notes.¹⁸ Such courses seem to offer insight about problems the students confront directly in their lives or read about in the news, but, according to McMahon, "their wisdom is often the wisdom of the moment."¹⁹ McMahon might be onto something. Courses with titles such as "History of the Present," "The History of Now," "Understanding America Today," are growing in popularity in history departments.²⁰

Yet one aspect of Lynn Hunt's critique of presentism rings true for some: "if the undergraduates flock to 20th-century courses, and even PhD students take degrees mostly in 20th-century topics, then history risks turning into a kind of general social studies subject."²¹ Something like this opinion has recently been expressed by the Cambridge intellectual historian John Robertson, in light of what he describes as "the turn to the modern in the history of political thought," by which he means "studying the development of political thinking in the 20th and even 21st centuries."²² Robertson points out that by the late 2010s at the University of Cambridge, 50 percent of students enrolled in the M.Phil. focus on twentieth-century subjects.²³ Robertson not only fears the threat of "narrow thinking" descending upon the study of political thought, but also worries that given its presentist orientation, the history of political thought in the UK might be forced out of history departments to government or politics departments (as has happened, to

¹⁷David Armitage, "In Defense of Presentism," in McMahon, *History and Human Flourishing*. A draft of the article can be found at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/armitage/files/in_defence_of_presentism.pdf.

¹⁸Interview conducted with Darrin McMahon, 3 April 2020, based on his forthcoming edited volume titled *History and Human Flourishing*. Many of these arguments are on display in a recently published article by McMahon titled "The History of the Humanities and Human Flourishing," in Louis Tay and James O. Pawelski, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities* (Oxford, 2022), 45–56.

¹⁹McMahon interview.

²⁰On the growing popularity of history and the present courses see Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Beyond the End of History."

²¹Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 1 May 2020, at www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism.

²²John Robertson, "The Turn to the Modern in the History of Political Thought," Centre for Intellectual History, Oxford University, 7 April 2021, at <https://intellectualhistory.web.ox.ac.uk/article/turn-modern-history-political-thought#>.

²³*Ibid.*

some extent, in the United States). In this forum, the promise and perils of teaching the history of the present are addressed by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen and Patrick Iber, who, through narrating their own personal experience of teaching classes on the subject, offer counsel.

John Robertson's concerns about narrow thinking share François Hartog's dread of an all-consuming "presentist regime of historicity."²⁴ For Hartog, this new paradigm, to quote Aleida Assmann, "abolishes the ontological border between the past and the present and is exclusively focused on an enlarged present that is weighed down by the past and saturated with it, growing into monstrous proportions."²⁵ Here we are stuck in an eternal end of history in which, according to Hartog, "we are always looking both backwards and forwards, but without ever leaving this present that we have made into the limits of our world."²⁶ One possible way around this is a deconstructive or critical approach to the history of the present, which calls into question certain concepts, categories, and practices that are assumed to be "natural" and timeless (regarding gender, religion, nationalism, and so on). The goal here is not to account for the present in historical terms—to do contemporary history or the "history of now." Contemporary history, Ethan Kleinberg argues, often assumes a one-to-one correspondence between "the fantasy of a stable past" and "the fantasy of a stable present." On the contrary, a genealogical approach critically "interrogates the taken-for-granted understandings of the past."²⁷ As Stefanos Geroulanos notes, this version of the history of the present seeks to "demonstrate the instability and contingency of the present," and often for the purpose of unveiling the "paths not taken ... how they could well have turned out otherwise."²⁸

The "paths-not-taken" perspective on the history of the present is embraced in this forum by Emma Hunter, an intellectual historian of Africa.²⁹ Hunter affirms that the "burgeoning field of the intellectual history of ... mid-twentieth-century decolonization is serving to open up new vistas from another time when the world appeared to be in flux, in ways that are surely productive for understanding our present world." John Robertson expresses concern about this specific use of genealogy since it "tends to focus on concepts which have come to matter to us, foreclosing on alternatives, while enabling the expression of normative preferences."³⁰ He deems such an approach "presentist." But even if such a genealogical approach provides no assurance that the historian will simply reconfirm their own preferences, it does, as Geroulanos aptly points out, "oblige the historian to operate

²⁴François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York, 2015).

²⁵Aleida Assmann, "A Creed That Had Lost Its Believers? Reconfiguring the Concepts of Time and History," in Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, eds., *Rethinking Historical Time* (London and New York, 2019), 207–19, at 208. Many thanks to Ethan Kleinberg for pointing out this passage to me.

²⁶Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 203.

²⁷Cited in an unpublished paper by Ethan Kleinberg, "History and the Present: Promise and Paradox." My thanks to the author for letting me have access to the paper.

²⁸Stefanos Geroulanos, "History of the Present: Or, Two Approaches to Causality and Contingency," in Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile, eds., *Historical Understanding: Past, Present and Future* (London, 2022), 79–90, at 80.

²⁹See Emma Hunter's piece in this forum.

³⁰Robertson, "The Turn to the Modern."

without their own present as guarantee.”³¹ And for many historians disoriented by crisis, the present appears anything but guaranteed.

Interestingly, Quentin Skinner, who has done much to influence Robertson’s own thinking on contextualism, has expressed “regret” for having once “treat [ed] the past as a separate realm.”³² A major reason for this regret concerns his worries about contemporary politics. In a recent interview for *Global Intellectual History*, he observes that even as it proves nearly impossible to find concepts and arguments from the past that directly apply to the present, there is nevertheless an alternative way to grapple with the relationship between the past and present. “This stems from the fact that,” says Skinner, “in the case of some of our most important normative concepts, the way in which they used to be understood differs greatly from our current way of thinking about them.”³³ This leads Skinner to the conclusion that we can seek to explore how some of the ways “we used to think about our moral and political concepts may be more fruitful, and more helpful to our current purposes.”³⁴ This view of the history of the present, which Skinner explicitly calls the “paths-not-taken” approach, necessarily involves a volte-face, induced by Skinner’s felt need to provide political alternatives to the present state of affairs. Often it takes a crisis to reveal that some level of presentism is unavoidable: the work of historical reconstruction is always mediated by the present from which it is conducted.

Overview of papers and themes

The aim of this forum is to showcase how nine scholars are attempting to reconcile intellectual history with the present. However, what becomes clear in these papers, as already implied, is that there is no consensus on a methodology for doing the history of the present, nor general agreement on whose present is of concern. Regarding the latter, perhaps the bulk of these papers are informed by the 2016 crisis of democracy and remain inflected by the presidency of Donald Trump. For instance, Udi Greenberg has made a number of compelling interventions into recent and fiery debates on comparing Trump’s election to the doomed Weimar Republic.³⁵ In his contribution to this forum titled “Intellectual History and the Fascism Debate: On Analogies and Polemic,” Greenberg offers a retrospective piece on why the debate over Trump and fascism became and remains so contested. In doing so, he argues that heated polemics over it ultimately had less to do with differences between two camps on their interpretations of contemporary affairs, but more importantly concerned their approach to “polemic, its value for both intellectual exploration and political mobilization.” In this way, Greenberg helps

³¹Geroulanos, “History of the Present,” 87.

³²Filip Biały, “Freedom, Silent Power and the Role of an Historian in the Digital Age: Interview with Quentin Skinner,” *History of European Ideas*, 3 Jan. 2022, 4, available as an advanced electronic publication at www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01916599.2021.2020970?src=.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵See, for instance, Greenberg, “The Weimar Analogy”; Udi Greenberg, “The Myth of a New Nazism,” *Spiked* magazine, 10 Aug. 2018, at www.spiked-online.com/2018/08/10/the-myth-of-a-new-nazism/#.W23QddhKhCv.

his readers to understand the polemical function of analogies, which in turn can provide an alternative way to understand and judge their merits.

A rather different sense of crisis drives the presentist concerns of the thought collective centered around the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS).³⁶ The historian Brandon Byrd, in a seminal article, has narrated the rise of African American intellectual history, from its marginalized status throughout much of the twentieth century to its institutionalization with the 2014 founding of AAIHS. The organization's founders wanted to establish a space for scholars from a variety of fields to discuss black intellectual history. Byrd shows that one of the core concerns of African American history is "the study of the thinking of (not about) enslaved Africans and their descendants—of humans who were defined as chattel, not thinkers, and denied full inclusion in Eurocentric conceptualizations of humanity."³⁷ This concern is crucial, argues Byrd, since it can provide intellectual historians a window into understanding how ideas move in the world and in a manner that complicates Enlightenment ideas of linearity. Byrd stresses that this different understanding of ideas enables the historian to discern how the past might actually pertain to liberated futures. Something like this understanding of temporality is entailed in what W. E. B. Du Bois called, in the *Souls of Black Folk*, the "present-past," described in a recent book by the historian Gregory Laski as "the intergenerational obligation that emerges from a view of time in which the past [of slavery] does not recede, giving way to the future, but rather persists in and claims the present."³⁸ There are clear global implications to such an intergenerational understanding of historical time.

The global dimension of this past-present, as Alaina Morgan's essay in the forum explains, is to recover and make conscious the "connections between people of African descent on the African continent or in their locations of dispersal." Such a position, Morgan argues, seeks to "illuminate the deeply entrenched, *longue durée* history of racial violence and white supremacy, and the equally lengthy history of minority protest." It is for this reason that AAIHS and the scholars associated with it have embrace a global vision of black intellectual history, as demonstrated by the recent publication of studies on such topics as black women's internationalism, Haiti and the birth of black internationalism, African diaspora history, and the pan-African movement.³⁹ It is this different sense of crisis, of temporality, says Morgan—one marked by colonial and racial violence—that explains why black

³⁶The AAIHS website can be found at www.aaihs.org.

³⁷See the "About" section of the AAIHS website at www.aaihs.org/about. Brandon Byrd's article is "The Rise of African American Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 18/3 (2021), 833–64, at 863.

³⁸See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black* (Oxford, 2007), 26; Gregory Laski, *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress after Slavery* (Oxford, 2018), 38.

³⁹See, in particular, Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2019); Brandon Byrd, *The Black Republic: African Americans and the Fate of Haiti* (Philadelphia, 2019). On African diaspora history see Alaina Morgan's contribution to this forum; Russell Rickford, "African American Expats, Guyana, and the Pan-African Ideal in the 1970s," in Keisha Blain, Christopher Cameron, and Ashley D. Famer, eds., *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Evanston, 2018), 233–52. For general surveys of the field see, in addition, Brandon R. Byrd, Leslie M. Alexander, and Russel Rickford, eds., *Ideas in Unexpected Places: Reimagining Black Intellectual History* (Evanston, forthcoming 2022).

historians and historians of people of African descent are leading the movement to reclaim presentism in the historical profession.

The rise of the AAIHS has coincided with a general turn to global intellectual history, which sees “the possible formation of an intellectual history extending across geographical parameters far larger than usual.”⁴⁰ Many of these papers in this forum are influenced by this turn, and strategically highlight the post-2016 crisis of democracy in the United States and Europe in order to criticize histories of the present that are too focused on Euro-American societies. To this extent, their aim is to decenter “the West” and to offer a non-Eurocentric global intellectual history of the present. Faisal Devji, in his essay titled “Losing the Present to History,” faults the recent turn to histories of the present—historical attempts to explain today’s crisis of democracy—for having “little sense” of the novel political times in which we live. “The remarkable Eurocentrism of the genealogies invoked”—imagining our time as a new 1848, a new 1914, a new 1933, or a new 1947—observes Devji, “suggests an anxiety to reconstitute the West as the center of world history.” Devji’s paper shows that anticolonial histories from Asia and Africa allow us to understand the present as a break from the past and the historical narrative in which Europe is “the only real subject for good or ill.”

Sharing something near this perspective, Fabio Lanza argues that from the Cold War to the present, Anglo-American popular and academic opinion continues to be marked by the presuppositions of Cold War modernization theory, in which the West remained “the measure of modernity.”⁴¹ This has the consequence of negating China’s present, since its path to modernization remains linked to the Maoist revolution. “Even today,” says Lanza, “decades after that revolution’s end ... China’s present still seems to be haunted and overdetermined by that revolutionary past, so that that the present must be obscured in the service of once again negating the past revolution, a sacrifice to an ahistorical exorcism.” Instead, a proper historical analysis of contemporary China, affirms Lanza, must accept it as coeval. This involves recognizing that the capitalist system is not naturally geared towards democracy and human rights, and that what happens in China today is probably more connected to the global system than to a Confucian or Maoist past.

The significance of Cold War modernization theory also plays a pivotal role in Louise Young’s contribution to this forum, titled “Past and Present in Japanese Historiography: Four Versions of Presentism.” Young, a historian of modern Japan, in part aims to historicize the so-called “objectivity debate” of the 1960s. It originally pitted American “Japanologists”—defenders of the American liberal establishment, who embrace modernization theory, social science, and the label “area studies expert”—against their counterpart historians in Japan, who were committed to Marxist historical analysis and social revolution. The latter, observes Young, blasted modernization theory as an American imperial project, while the former criticized the presentism of the “Marxist-Leninist” historiography. This debate continued in various iterations, Young shows, until the end of the Cold War, when it went into memory as the Middle East and the War on Terror replaced Asia as a geopolitical priority. “When the political potency of current events

⁴⁰Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013), 4.

⁴¹See Lanza’s essay in this forum.

dissipated,” says Young, “both the critique of presentism in the name of objectivity, and the critique of the critique of presentism in the name of political transparency, became anachronisms in Japanese studies—a relic of the Cold War in Asia.” Young therefore shows that it is difficult to grasp the force of the prohibition on “presentism” without understanding the political backdrop of the Cold War and the liberal internationalism endorsed by most Anglo-American historians.

Emma Hunter’s paper also calls for a historical approach to the present that moves beyond the presumptions of American modernization theory, which presumed that colonies naturally transitioned to nation-states. For decades scholars have resisted this old paradigm, and Hunter does so here by showing how it was possible to pursue anticolonial politics while at the same time rejecting the nation-state form. Hunter, inspired by the work of Frederick Cooper, Gary Wilder, and Adom Getachew, argues that recovering these anticolonial struggles allows for “a sense that political communities other than the nation-state and radical projects of social transformation may have been possible in the past and may be so again. In some cases,” she concludes, “the recovery of radical ideas can be a direct resource for political action in the present.” She thereby embraces a “paths-not-taken” perspective on the history of the present.

One of Alaina Morgan’s observations is poignant for much that appears throughout this forum: that the profession can provide a valuable service to students and the educated public trying to make sense of the present. But recall John Robertson’s criticism that such an endeavor might lead to the outsourcing of the history of political thought to government departments. How is something like the history of the present to be taught in history departments, in light of both anxieties about the crises of the history profession, and the absence of any shared methodological consensus? At the level of pedagogy, Patrick Iber and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen address these questions in their essay, “The Present as a Foreign Country: Teaching the History of Now.” Iber and Ratner-Rosenhagen draw on their experience of teaching present-oriented history classes. They stress that there are dangers in such teaching, which can neglect topics that do not have relevance for the crises of our time, and prioritize source materials based on the whims of the news cycle. Most problematically, it encounters the problem that a history of now “appears instantly oxymoronic,” given that “history describes change over time in the past, and one thing that the present is not is the past.”

Nevertheless, both believe that courses of this nature are important given the resources that the profession has to offer the public, growing student demand, and public interest in the historical background of contemporary events—as demonstrated by the success of podcasts, such as *Throughline* or the *Washington Post*’s series “Made by History.” To this end, Iber and Ratner-Rosenhagen offer tangible advice for teaching students the history of now. Those engaging the subject, affirm Iber and Ratner-Rosenhagen, need not succumb to a presentism that has long made the profession anxious. On the contrary, they conclude that “it is precisely the ways in which a history of now can challenge, if not wholly upend, a presentist perspective that make it such an effective tool in the classroom.”

The discussion in this introduction of Joan Wallach Scott and Ethan Kleinberg’s work on critical or genealogical approaches to history must make mention of their

recent call for a “Theory Revolt.” Authored by Kleinberg, Scott, and Gary Wilder in 2018, the “Theses on Theory and History” castigates the history profession for its dismissal of theory and “critical history,” the absence of which results in “disciplinary essentialism,” a “methodological fetishism” with empiricism, and a refusal to interrogate its “commonsense” assumptions about what counts for evidence.⁴² In many ways, “Theory Revolt” constitutes a reiteration of long-standing criticisms of the profession beginning in the 1960s by Hayden White, and since by such notables as Dominick LaCapra and Judith Butler. The journal *History and Theory* has long defended this perspective, as well as the more recent journal *History of the Present*. And there is little doubt that this strain of thought has profoundly influenced today’s scholars committed to doing the history of the present.⁴³

A case in point, is Todd’s Shepard’s contribution to this forum, titled “Practices Make Pertinent: Prospecting and Histories of the Present.” The specific aim of Shepard’s paper is to showcase how an “emphasis on historical practice ... offers another way to allow ‘theory’-derived insights to change the ways historians do work.” The insight which Shepard embraces is the need for historians to maintain a critique of the “belief that certain categories of analysis or ‘identities’ always matter.” He seeks to combine this insight with an attempt to understand the institutionalization of the history profession’s long engrained practices—seminar training, study of archive materials and primary-source documents, mastery of the extant historiography, and so on. Such practices, affirms Shepard, govern the limits and boundaries of what counts as “good history.” He argues that a “sharper awareness of what these practices are, their possibilities, and their limits—what they cannot or tend not to reveal, what they in fact render more difficult to see—would make debates about presentism more convincing.”

This forum is far from exhaustive. There are many “presents” that it does not discuss. One in particular is climate change and the Anthropocene—areas in which intellectual historians have made important contributions.⁴⁴ *Pace* François Hartog’s worries about the eternal present, historians of the Anthropocene, in the words of Ethan Kleinberg, have “a call to history that is imbued with relevancy, purpose, and inspiration—no small thing for a discipline facing the crisis of its own obsolescence.” Kleinberg goes on to say that “Anthropocene time is one of a vast and enormous future but in this account the time of our present is one of immediate crisis with an urgent sense that something needs to be done.”⁴⁵ This sense of urgency also marks other approaches to the history of the present not represented in this forum, but which are of essential importance, including continued struggles around women’s rights, issues of sexuality around the globe, and issues of displacement and migration. And as I put the finishing edits on this introduction, Russia has invaded Ukraine, and in doing so has possibly upended the post-Cold War

⁴²A copy of the 2018 document can be found at Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “Theses on Theory and History,” *History of the Present* 10/1 (2020), 157–65.

⁴³David Armitage’s indebtedness to Hayden White is on display in “In Defense of Presentism,” 19.

⁴⁴Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021); Duncan Kelly, “The Politics of the Anthropocene in a World after Neoliberalism,” *Boston Review*, 9 March 2021, at <https://bostonreview.net/articles/duncan-kelly-politics-anthropocene>; Kelly, *Politics and the Anthropocene* (New York, 2019).

⁴⁵Kleinberg, “History and the Present.”

international order. What will come of Putin's war in Ukraine is difficult to discern. Has a new Cold War now definitively arrived? Will the war galvanize NATO and awaken Western Europe and the United States from their democratic slumber? And might it possibly usher in a new nonaligned movement if countries in the global South opt not to take sides? It is, of course, too early to discern what might come to pass, but what it does demonstrate is the unstable and precarious nature of the present, which makes some histories of the present appear prophetic, while rendering others obsolete.

Acknowledgments. I would like to acknowledge Victoria Smolkin, Tracie Matysik, Tiraana Bains, Darrin McMahan, Angus Burgin, Duncan Kelly, and two anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions on improving this introduction. I thank Ethan Kleinberg, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon for giving me early access to forthcoming publications, which greatly aided the conceptualization of this introduction. Finally, many thanks to the participants of this forum and for their contributions to it.