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Working Paper 2

Embodiment, Empathy, Rituals What to Do with the Past after the End of History

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Few texts during the past fifty years have provoked so many and such passionate reactions in the academic "Humanities" and "Social Sciences" as Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History" from 1989. Inspired by a line of thought coming from Hegel and Marx, Fukuyama argued that what not only he identified as the progressive trajectory towards a democratic society and State had found its fulfillment in the end of the so-called "Cold War," marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union as a vanishing of the totalitarian alternative. "History" in the sense of a finite development with a clearly circumscribed goal, thus the implication of Fukuyama's title, must reach an end once its final vision turns into reality.

Two types of criticism tried to reject his position. In the first place and mainly based on ideological grounds, the insistence that the typical Western forms of society and politics by no means represented what Hegel, Marx, and others had imagined to be the ideal frames of human life. At the same time, there was a broad, internally heterogeneous, and frequently grotesque misunderstanding that confused Fukuyama's point with the indeed unthinkable disappearance of time's three-dimensionality between past, present, and future as it emerges from the structure of human consciousness. My own use of the words "the end of History" is different both from Fukuyama's and from that of his critics. I am presupposing that "History" as the academic discipline shaped since the early nineteenth century [first meaning] was epistemologically dependent on the matrix of "History" as the "historical world view" [second meaning] whose rise in the decades around 1800 scholars like Michael Foucault and Reinhart Koselleck have convincingly described. If it is true, however, that the historical world view has lost its formerly central institutional place in our everyday of the early third millennium[1] [first meaning of "end"], then the discipline will need to profoundly revise its premises, redefine its potential functions, and ultimately substitute itself [second meaning of "end"].

1 I have tried to trace the disintegration of the historical world view since the second quarter of the twentieth century in "After 1945. Latency as Origin of the Present." Stanford 2013.

Most professional historians, I believe, have actively ignored this challenge, although it may well concern the Humanities and Arts at large – who would likely never have come under way without the impulse of the historical world view. The question of what to do with the past today thus looks like a metonymy and condensation of the much more frequently raised problem regarding the future of the Humanities altogether. But historians, much more than colleagues from neighboring disciplines, have isolated themselves from any doubts about their institutional standards, and they have done so by de-historicizing the historical world view, in other words by elevating it to the level of the one, only, and ultimately truthful way of relating past, present, and future. Often historians condescendingly denounce other ways of configurating the dimensions of time either as a lack of scholarly sophistication or as sheer intellectual sensationalism. In my experience it is difficult, if not impossible, to try and transcend the realm of the historical world view and fully escape such accusations. For by asking "what to do with the past after the end of History," we enter a largely uncharted territory, that is a zone where elementary, sometimes even naïve-looking steps need to be made, instead of engaging with already formulated and well-honed positions or opinions. Whoever enters that zone becomes academically vulnerable.

At the end of a professional life mostly spent with thinking about new perspectives to conceive of the past, I find myself in a comfortable enough situ-

ation to accept that risk. My short reflections trying to reach the uncharted territory beyond the established borders of History and the Humanities will begin by invoking the contrast between the historical world view and the other "chronotope" [i.e. the other "social construction of temporality"] that I assume almost globally dominates our contemporary everyday[2]. The question of how our thinking might engage with the past under the conditions of the new chronotope will lead to the concept of "embodiment" in the sense of a hitherto academically neglected modality of mediating between past and present. On this basis, I will try to show how "empathy" constitutes a level of embodiment that has already begun to permeate our relationships with the past, mostly outside academia. "Rituals," finally, will come into sight as a possible focus helping us to imagine ways in which, counter to primary expectations, embodied approaches to the past might address at least some pressing shortcomings and problems of our present.

2 For a more extended version of the same historical description, see the first and the final chapter of my book "Our Broad Present," New York 2014.

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For a description of the historical world view as a background and starting point, I will use a five-step summary of its reconstruction unfolded in multiple essays that constitute Reinhart Koselleck's lifework[3]. For the first time ever perhaps, the historical world view presented the future as an open horizon of possibilities from which humans trusted they could choose and thus create different new worlds. The past, in the second place, seemed to recede behind the present and lose authority to the degree that its chronological distance to the present was growing (this is how the principle of "Historia magistra vitae" unraveled). Between the new past and the new future, the present was shrinking, from its traditional extension of one generation or approximately thirty years, to become, according to a formula cast by the poet Charles Baudelaire, "an imperceptibly short moment of transition." This brief present, above all, served early modern humans, who equaled their ontology with consciousness ("I think therefore I am"), as the site where, based on experience from the past, they tried to shape the future within a "field of contingency" (or of open possibilities) surrounded by necessity (that is conditions without alternatives) and impossibility (imaginations of life forms not accessible to humans). Time in general finally appeared to be an inevitable agent of change, implying both that no phenomenon was exempt from such transformations and that rules could be extracted from them in order to predict the future.

3 Most of them are accessible in "Futures Past," New York 2004. For an outstanding historical framing and epistemological reevaluation of Koselleck's work, see Thamara de Oliveira Rodrigues' introduction to Reinhart Koselleck: Uma latente filosofia do tempo. Sao Paulo 2021, pp. 13-52.

There continue to be sectors of society and culture in our present where the historical world view rules. One of them, as we have mentioned, is the discipline of History in the context of the Humanities with their surrounding layers of intellectually ambitious life. For different reasons, the practice of democratic politics also requires our belief that the future can be determined from the present. This notwithstanding, we have come to spend most of our lifetime today counting on a different future, a future occupied with threats that are irreversibly approaching the present ("global warming" probably being the most frequently referred to among them). Largely but not exclusively due to electronic storage capacities, the new past no longer recedes behind the present but inundates the present with knowledge, memories, and material traces (no document from the past is not potentially accessible on every laptop screen). Between the congested future and the aggressive past, the present has now entered a probably unlimited process of broadening towards including everything thinkable. Now if the imper-

ceptibly short present of the historical world view used to be connected to a human self-image coextensive with the mind, the new broadening present may account for the impression that physical dimensions of existence are returning into our views and desires (think of the impulse to do daily exercise as well as of hybrid new intellectual projects like “Neuro-Philosophy” – but also of Heidegger’s attempt, through the concept of “Dasein,” to bring space and the body back into our vision of human existence).

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As the new present tends to absorb and integrate much of the past’s impression of distance and difference, we may well return to consider segments of the past as possible models for our lives. Such a shift would bring back to the discipline of History modes of arguing that had long been banned as anachronistic[4]. At the same time, History as well as politics, if they take the chronotopical change into account, no longer really dispose of the future as a horizon of projection and planning but are reduced to managing the ever-new challenges with which a new future confronts us. From visionaries, the emblematic politicians of today have turned into problem-solvers, the more pragmatic and the more flexible the better – whether they admit it or not. But above all the changing human self-reference with its inclusion of the somatic side of existence holds in store new potentials of linking us to the past via embodiment.

4 More about this epistemological and practical shift in: “Instead of Comparing. Six Thoughts about Engaging with a Post-historical Past.: In: Jeffrey C. Goldfarb / Marci Shore / Stephen Naron (eds): On the Uses and Disadvantages of Historical Comparisons for Life. Yale 2020 (Portuguese translation in Revista de Teoria da História 24 (2021), pp. 4-8).

With scarce conceptual development so far, all these new angles are coming together in the notion of the “anthropocene.” Covering the time to elapse between the first damaging impact of human presence on the planet Earth’s ecosphere and the anticipated ending of this presence, an ending most likely synonymous with the vanishing of humankind, it is the most extended present that we can possibly imagine. Instead of a different, let alone better future to be constructed, all that the anthropocene leaves open for us is the hope to slow down the pace of deteriorating life conditions within its broad present. And as victims of their own ecologically irresponsible behavior (but how could stone-age tribes or medieval societies have really anticipated its consequences?), humans come into view in situations of physical suffering. Only the observer position that the anthropocene as a tendentially mythological narrative is suggesting, corresponds to the all-too familiar modern critical mind, as it becomes obvious from the moral judgment that it administers as if from ontologically outside. And exactly here, I think, lies the sensitive point for History and for the Humanities – if they finally dare to think through unfamiliar territory. What different ways of relating to the human past would an embodied position require? Could it become, among other things, a position of (not only imagined) participation rather than of observation?

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The true philosophical task lying ahead of us, as the groundwork for a self-substitution of the discipline of “History” and of the Humanities, would be the equivalent, for an embodied participant, of what Michel Foucault did, under the concept of “epistemology,” with the historical and systematic development of the aspects pertinent to a mind-based observer. Motifs from the Christian theologies of “incarnation” might become useful in this context. Needless to say also that this is a scope of intellectual undertaking

way too complex and time-consuming to be addressed in a first answer to the question of what to do with the past after the end of History[5].

To several essays by Marcelo Rangel[6] I owe the insight that the relation to the "victims of history" described in Walter Benjamin's famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from 1940 can be understood as an early, rather practical step in this direction. Facing Paul Klee's drawing of the "Angelus Novus," Benjamin had the "angel of history" turn his back to the future, which reads like an early version of the impression that the future no longer looked like an open horizon of possibilities from which humans could choose. Benjamin must indeed have died with the trauma of having lost the open future of the historical world view from the moment on when the Soviet Union, whose future he had adopted as his own, became an ally of Nazi Germany that had excluded him as a German-born Jew. Now the angel's only possible gaze went back to the past and became a view of empathy with the "victims of History", an embodied view, a view that presentified the pain of other humans, rather than attributing meaning to it.

By triggering an impulse of physical pain in the emotional participant, this gaze tentatively places him back into the physical environment that inflicted individual and physical suffering. Different from Benjamin's own speculations that started out from the concept of a "messianic" dimension, I will not try to directly connect empathy with any vision of the future. We may of course hope that somebody who has empathetically shared the physical suffering of humans in the past will be less inclined to cause pain among humans in the present and future. But I find this argument all-too functional and pedagogical. What strikes me as existentially and intellectually more productive is the aspect of spatial sameness and return that plays an important part, mostly outside the academic institutions, in new ways of relating to the past. We should ask why visiting the site of a World War II concentration camp like Auschwitz leaves, only half-metaphorically speaking, a scar on our souls, on our souls in the medieval sense of the word, that is on the intersection between our spiritual and our physical existence. I am aware that having been exposed to the reconstructions, from actual material remnants, of a local German and of a local Soviet concentration camp built during the 1940s in the Latvian capital of Riga has changed me forever – although I am still lacking concepts to capture this particular empathetic effect. Could the places where suffering really happened have a stronger impact on our imagination than any reading and listening from afar, a stronger impact on our imagination as a capacity that never leaves the bodies untouched?

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It certainly sounds wrong to say that we "learn" from such moments of an embodied relation to suffering in the past. But on the other hand -- and coming back to the intuition that "learning from the past" may become possible again within our broad present – we may ask whether there are any specific problems or shortcomings in our broad present that could and indeed should be addressed by gestures of an embodied relation to the past. For starters, I will point to some unresolved consequences coming from the use of electronic technology (that I otherwise appreciate) in order to tackle this question.

5 From my own work, "Production of Presence – What Meaning Cannot Convey," Stanford 2004, might serve as one attempt to prepare the ground for such an equivalent to epistemology. The concept of "presence" refers to the spatial relation between human bodies and their both material and corporeal environments.

6 Marcelo de Mello Rangel: "Rehistoricization of History, Melancholy and Hatred." In: Cadernos Walter Benjamin 1.22, 2019; "Justiça e História em Derrida e Benjamin." In: Sapere Aude: Revista de Filosofia , v. 4, p. 347-359, 2013; "O problema da ciência histórica em Friedrich Nietzsche e Walter Benjamin." In: Revista Urutágua , v. 23, p. 78-84, 2011.

We had said that within the historical world view shaping (or confronting) the future used to take place in a "field of continency." Now it is obvious that the poles of "necessity" and "impossibility" surrounding this field have been melting away under the impact of new electronic tools that can process formerly overwhelming amounts of data. Two examples. If there have always been humans who knew that they belonged to a sex different from the indication of the genitals with which they were been born, the only available reaction was to remind them of sex as a physical "necessity." But with the development of transsexual surgery under way, such necessity will be increasingly replaced by choice. If, likewise, we had a habit of attributing to Gods and to other transcendental beings those visions of behavior that we could imagine but not associate with humans, such as omnipresence or omniscience, electronic communication and electronic handling of knowledge have made those traditionally "divine" skills parts of our everyday life. Now the substantial increase of individual freedom and reach resulting from the melting of "necessity" and "impossibility" comes with the price of transforming our existential field of contingency into a universe of contingency, a condition that overwhelms us with more possibilities than we feel our intellect and our affects can manage.

As a prereflexive reaction, we sense a desire to "hold on to something" – and this feeling, I assume, does have more than a mere bodily connotation. It is a yearning for physical points of support in our existence. But while the impulse to have something to hold on to may only grow, our physical, especially our haptic contact with the material world progressively disappears. A plethora of different physical connections to the material environment in which we used to live have now been condensed in the multifunctional, one and only graspable object of the smartphone. And while the dream of "holding the whole wide world in one's hand" thus seems to have become a reality, our bodies, as a paradoxical consequence, are more individually isolated than ever. Even the new dominating status of knowledge about the world aggravates this situation of existential lack. For we experience the material world and we dispose of it through a thick layer of statistics. This layer makes portions of advice (like weather reports) more reliable than ever before while it dissolves the individual concreteness and palpability of a spring morning or of a summer evening in a specific landscape.

If we wish to recuperate layers of a world that we may hold on to, we must re-learn to inhabit it. But how could this possibly happen? Inhabiting the world means to be in a presence relationship with its components, in a relationship where we experience ourselves as a physical part of the world instead of observing and interpreting it from outside. As this outside position has become habitual since Early Modernity, we may assume that it contributed to the tendency of perceiving the world in a flux of permanent transformation that humans could try to influence and even control – and this would at least partly explain the emergence of the historical world view's open future. Inhabiting the world, by contrast, is a lifeform we mostly acquire through the mediation of rituals, defined as choreographies that assign positions and movements to our bodies in coordination with other bodies and objects. Rituals preserve continuity within variation.

This is why, starting out from our present-day desire to hold on to and to inhabit the world, a new focus on the past that emphasizes embodiment should try to bring rituals back into sight. We can simply point to them as

a now all too coherently abandoned dimension of life, but we may also try to fill and activate them with our own physical presence, as players within their structures and their rules so to speak, and not as spiritual outside observers. Three illustrations come to mind. The effort of reconstructing the spaces, of re-presentifying the interactive roles, and of reciting the speeches of early rituals from parliamentary democracy could turn into an alternative to the physically empty spheres in contemporary politics. It could become the contrast to a sphere where attending debates seems to have become a nuisance and where decisions are made inside an electronic "cloud" disconnected from the concreteness of our physical life.

In a similar fashion, we could re-learn to inhabit the spaces of the university. The corona years have provided academic administrations and their political superiors with a powerful illustration of how much cheaper remote teaching turns out in comparison to classroom presence, and this evidence gives momentum to promises of a broader and therefore more democratic inclusion of students. By contrast, it turns out to be much more difficult to pinpoint and empirically demonstrate how much of intellectual energy, sharpness, and potential innovation may get lost in the ongoing institutional transformation. This could be a moment, for those who cherish and believe in the irreplaceable function of the Western university tradition, to revisit and reactivate some of its core rituals. Reigniting and opening for participations the choreographies of small-group seminars, of public "defenses" of doctoral dissertations, or of collective graduation ceremonies may speak more convincingly for the presence basis of academic institutions and their events than numbers could ever do. Beside their concreteness and palpability, finally, rituals have a tendency of developing specific local forms and flavors. Instead of imposing global common denominators upon our life forms, emphasizing an embodied relationship to the past could entail a process of reinhabiting specific buildings, landscapes, and climates. This may help us rediscover how the overwhelming and necessarily frustrating effect of a world turned into a universe of contingency can be tamed without any feeling of loss if we let embodied life happen under local circumstances.

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There is no way how such a thought experiment towards the partial self-substitution of the discipline of History by emphasizing embodied modalities in our relationship to the past could avoid the usual academico-political critique of being conservative and potentially narrow-minded. A possible rejection of such accusations sounds equally conventional: we may of course say that being local and conservative in the literal sense of these words has become, for ecological as well as for intellectual reasons, a condition of collective survival. But this, I hope, will not be the kind of debate to decide about the value of first steps into new directions within the Humanities and Arts. We should stubbornly claim the right to design and to undertake projects that nobody has ever pursued before, and we should be able to do so without promising that they will be successful. The right to start something new, even something new with the connotation of being "conservative," should not depend on political judgments. Their time and the time of evaluations will come once we see where the energy of innovative steps really takes us.