

Many Colors of History

Ricœur's *Third Time* as a Key to the Hermeneutics of Historical Time

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Abstract

In his *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur introduces the term of “third time” to designate the middle ground between human and natural time. This time is synonymous with historical time, which is the main source of historical discourse. The third time consists of inscribing human time onto the time of nature. While historiography must strictly follow this structure, works of fiction have the freedom to explore and even create *imaginative variations* of time. Despite the constraints this seems to impose on historical writing, this article shows that even within the tight structure of historical time, a palette of various colors and shades, akin to *imaginative variations*, can be observed. Historical time possesses depth and speed; it can contract and relax, motivate or prevent action, or gain various dynamics in relation to the ending it offers.

Keywords: Time; Historical Time; longue durée; Initiative; Historiography

Résumé

Dans *Temps et récit*, Paul Ricœur introduit le terme de « troisième temps », pour désigner un intermédiaire entre le temps humain et le temps de la nature. Ce temps est synonyme de temps historique et constitue la source principale du discours historique, en ce qu'il réinscrit le temps vécu dans le temps cosmique. L'historiographie est définie par le fait qu'elle doit se soumettre à cette structure, tandis que les œuvres fictives ont la liberté de la moduler et de créer des *variations imaginatives* du temps. Malgré les limites que cela semble imposer à l'écriture historique, le présent article montre que même dans le cadre fixe du temps historique, il existe toute une palette des temps. Le temps historique possède une profondeur et une vitesse, il se contracte et se relâche, entrave ou stimule une action, ou encore change de dynamique par rapport à l'issue qu'il nous propose.

Mots-clés : temps ; temps historique ; longue durée ; initiative ; historiographie

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 14, No 2 (2023), pp. 117-133

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2023.524

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



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I. Introduction

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricœur introduces a new way of thinking about historical time. While previous philosophical tradition tended to distinguish between two general categories of time –for the sake of simplicity, let us call them “the time of nature” and “human time.” Ricœur recognizes historical time as a third great realm of time, situated right at the intersection of the former two. In his conception, historical time inscribes human time upon the time of nature, combining both and thus creating an entirely new temporal experience.¹

Moreover, this particular experience is what defines historical discourse as such; in fact, it stands for our very experience of history. Historiography simultaneously manifests and makes use of this third time via “procedures of connection” or “connectors” such as the *calendar*, the *succession of generations*, *archives*, *documents*, and *traces*.² Since these “intellectual tools” (*instruments de pensée* as Ricœur puts it) define the basis of all historians’ work, it is implied that writing history (or doing historical inquiry) produces historical time. “What these practical connectors of lived and universal time have in common is that they refer back to the universe the narrative structure... This is how they contribute to the refiguration of historical time.”³

The *mélange* of human and natural time creates historical time, and historical time, for its part, becomes a major source of both historical inquiry and writing. At this point, Ricœur introduces yet another instance of interweaving: that of history and fiction. “By the interweaving of history and fiction I mean the fundamental structure ... by virtue of which history and fiction each concretize their respective intentionalities only by borrowing from the intentionality of the other.”⁴ Historiography, in other words, can communicate its message (its intention) only through the “imaginary,” i.e., through the tools of fiction: tropes, plots, and narration as such. In this way historical writing helps us understand who we are, where we come from, where we are headed

¹ Paul Ricœur’s innovation is, in this matter, double. On the one hand, he distinguishes historical time as “a third time –properly historical time– which mediates between lived time and cosmic time” and posits it among the major philosophical categories of time (*Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 99). On the other hand, in the mid-1980s, his idea of historical time offered a welcome alternative to both Hegelian philosophy of history and French historical epistemology (104).

² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 99, 104, 182-184 *et passim*.

³ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 104.

⁴ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 181.

and what we should do to fulfill (or to prevent) such a future. To put it briefly, history mediates our historical consciousness.

This brief sketch of Ricœur's great arc of thinking helps to contextualize and properly position the notion of historical time within the system of *Time and Narrative*. This "third time" (which Ricœur also coined) is the *condition sine qua non* of history, its temporal source, a guarantee of its objectivity (or, at least, of its "claim to tell the truth").⁵ This explains why history can never become pure narration (or just fiction): or more specifically, why its writers must resort to sources, documents and archives, why historical works can be mutually compared and contested – an attribute that novels do not possess – or why historiography can never *merely* narrate, but only *quasi-narrate*.⁶

At the time of *Time and Narrative's* publication, such conception of history or historiography presented quite an innovative response to an ongoing debate within the theory of

⁵ This "claim to tell the truth" manifests itself in many methodological techniques that history employs to *explain* past events, their causes and consequences. The use of explanation then defines history as part *narration*, part *inquiry*: "history is born as inquiry – *historia, Forschung, recherche* – out of the specific use it makes of explanation. ... For historians, the explanatory form is made autonomous [from narration]; it becomes the distinct object of a process of *authentification* and *justification*. In this respect, historians are in the situation of a judge: placed in the real or potential situation of a dispute, they attempt to prove that one given explanation is better than another. They therefore seek 'warrants,' the most important of which is documentary proof." (Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 175). Explanation can be further recognized in the "work of conceptualization," or the historian's use of concepts; in the "credo of objectivity," which constitutes conviction that facts can be linked together, set against each other, and falsified; and in "critical reexamination," during which professionals reflect on their own possible biases, social positions, and points of view. Ricœur further refined this dimension and gave a more detailed account in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), where he distinguishes the three epistemological phases of documentary proof, explication-understanding, and representation, which creates the outer edge of what we would call "explanation" in a strict sense.

⁶ A careful reader of *Time and Narrative* will have seen by now that I am reversing Ricœur's line of argument and putting time, instead of narration, at the forefront. In fact, the French philosopher labors towards an understanding of historical time through the entirety of the *Time and Narrative* trilogy. He begins his journey by identifying the genre of history as a narrative one. This allows him to understand it in terms of a hermeneutical circle made of three mimeses. The first is *mimesis₁*, standing for *prefiguration*, or the extratextual sources of a narration, such as the semantics of action or symbolic representations. Then comes *mimesis₂*, the configuration of various aspects such as events, characters, conditions, and so on, into a plot. Finally, when the text meets a reader, it is refigured in *mimesis₃*, reconstructed in the recipient's mind and turned into understanding: of the narration itself, of time, of the world. See Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 52-77. The originality of this conception lies in the fact that it interweaves both discursive and non-discursive elements: narration is mimetic, because it mediates (or shows us) human action and suffering, and the non-discursive enters the story as its building blocks, the prefiguration.

However, as mentioned above, history is not just a fiction, so when it narrates, it does so in a shifted, altered way. It not only relates, but also explains, and therefore introduces all the aforementioned techniques of explanation into the narrative (see previous footnote). It is only in the third volume of *Time and Narrative* where Ricœur gets to the ontological sources of history-narration and introduces the notion of the "third time" and its "connectors."

history, pivoting around the question whether the nature of history is more narrative or scientific.⁷ Instead of getting dragged into the narrativist quarrel, Ricœur changed the tone and embraced both sides: historiography is *both*, it narrates as well as explains.⁸ The main difference between a fictional story and history lies less in their formal structures than in the way they make use of time. While history always has to be a projection of the human actions on the linear axis of natural time, fiction does not succumb to this strong constraint. And while the former discourse is obliged to temporally situate all its objects somewhere between the Big Bang and the present, thus proving that what it narrates actually happened, the latter has the freedom to combine the real and the unreal, and to make up its own realities.

Ricœur's thesis offers an original and rather strong argument in favor of historians' "claim to truth." However, it appears to be somewhat constraining as well, since it gives novelists almost infinite possibilities to develop their fictional worlds, while leaving historians with only one option, that of inscribing human time on the axis of the time of nature. It seems to imply that history could not invent or discover its very own historical temporalities, its own differing approaches that would widen our esthetic horizon of time, as if there was only *one* historical time.

The aim of this article is to revisit Ricœur's thinking on historical time and to show that even within the framework set by *Time and Narrative*, one can develop a whole variety of diverse *historical times*. The second part of this article will show that historians and theoreticians of history already work with a colorful array of historical temporalities. Their works do not prove Ricœur wrong, but instead demonstrate his thinking can be a useful compass on the seas of historical time.

II. Historical time

What exactly is historical time? We have already said that it is an inscription of human time –Ricœur also speaks of phenomenological, individual, or psychological time– upon the massive surface of the time of nature, sometimes called objective, ordinary, cosmological or, in

⁷ While according to the narrativists (and their predecessors, such as Roland Barthes) historiography was mostly based on narration, an assumption that would push historical discourse too close to fiction and threatened thus its "claim to truth," adherents of the "nomological model" of historiography could only rely on scientific explication, if not on principles resembling the natural laws, excluding thus narration from the body of history. The debate between the advocates of the "nomological model" and the narrativists is resumed in Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 111-74. In this matter, Ricœur develops his arguments further in "La fonction narrative," *Études théologiques et religieuses*, vol. 54/2 (1979), 209-30; "La fonction narrative et l'expérience humaine du temps," in Marco M. Olivetti (ed.), *Archivio di Filosofia* (Roma: Istituto di studi filosofici, 1980), 343-67. His polemic with later narrativism, especially with Franklin Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, can be found in Paul Ricœur, "Philosophies critiques de l'histoire. Recherche, explication, écriture," *Philosophical Problems Today*, vol. 1 (1994), 139-201 and "Histoire et rhétorique," *Diogenes* (1994), 9-26.

⁸ "... history cannot, in my opinion, sever every connection with narrative without losing its historical character. Conversely, this connection cannot be so direct that history can simply be considered a species of the genus story." (Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 177). It is also worth mentioning that Ricœur often refers to Paul Veyne's famous dictum, according to which "to explain more is to narrate better, and in any case one cannot relate without explaining" (*Writing History. Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rivoluceri (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 93).

obvious reference to Aristotle, astronomical time. As its many names suggest, human time refers to the time that human beings can perceive. It is the time which is imprinted into one's psyche. This time situates us in the present, as we can reach the past only in our memory (or in Husserlian *retentions*) whilst the future can only be approached in our hopes, fears and expectations (in our *protentions*). Human time also signifies the time of our society, the temporality of the culture in which we are embedded. Astronomical time, for its part, is completely indifferent to human toils, since it relates to events of the natural world and happens on massive, non-mimetic scales of biology, geology, or cosmology.⁹ This time does not know any present, only an endless succession of instants. Unlike phenomenological time, it can be objectively measured, for example, by periodic movements of celestial bodies.

By introducing the phenomenon of historical time, Ricœur intends to reconcile both times, to offer a mutual mediation between human time and natural time. In other words, historical time is what allows people to project their *care* on the vast space of natural time, which, in consequence, becomes commensurable and mimetic.¹⁰ This mediation is done via the aforementioned "connectors" – calendars, the succession of generations, and traces. The way this transfer operates can be illustrated with the same simple mechanism that operates a sundial, that is, a *gnomon*: "... gnomon conjoins two processes in accordance with certain hypothesis about the world. One process is the movement of the sun, the other the life of the person who consults the gnomon." The movement of the shadow cast by the gnomon is dependent on the route and ecliptic in relation to the Sun, a star that is in itself completely indifferent to human actions. Yet the shadow that is cast possesses great significance for the human observer, since both individuals and entire societies can organize their time as indicated by sundial. Gnomon thus interweaves two temporal realms.

On the one hand, the sundial belongs to the human universe. It is an artifact intended to regulate the life of its constructor. On the other hand, it also belongs to the astronomical universe: the movement of the shadow is independent of human will.¹¹

To read gnomon is to consider two different temporal perspectives at once. It is this fusion that Ricœur calls historical time. Historians reproduce the same phenomenon in their work. When they employ a calendar –that is, when they ascribe exact dates to events or to objects– they follow the very same logic. Calendars, or rather intervals and the periods they designate, are extrapolated from the movement of celestial bodies –for example, from the circulation of the Earth around the Sun or from the various positions of the Moon. At the same time, calendars are an utterly cultural invention, as they were used throughout history to set the exact dates for holidays and

⁹ The entire section 1 of the third volume (or of part IV) of *Time and Narrative* is dedicated to this important distinction. The part dedicated to Heidegger's "ordinary time" is especially illuminating, see Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 89-96.

¹⁰ Historical time has a place "between phenomenological time and the time phenomenology does not succeed in constituting, which we call the time of the world, objective time, or ordinary time." (Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 104).

¹¹ Both quotations in Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 182.

accompanying rites. Calendar time, once again, plays a “mediating role between the other perspectives on time... It cosmologizes lived time and humanizes cosmic time.”¹²

If a calendar conjoins astronomical and phenomenological time, then the succession of generations reconciles the fact that humans are simultaneously part of an ever-changing society and a species limited by biological constraints. Our bodies allow us to live within a certain moment of history, but they gradually deteriorate to the point where they can no longer bear life. This physiological given has its imprint on society, since it leads humankind to a state of perpetual change, as one generation follows another, extending thus the memory of the successors further into the past. The idea of successive generations consists of both these times –of the biological time of our species as well as of our extended ancestral memory.¹³

The last type of connector, traces, is perhaps the most significant for the work of historians. A trace is what remains from the past and is still preserved in the present. Every historical document, fact, or piece of evidence can be broken down and recognized as a kind of a trace. Traces used to have their own meaning (or there was a reason behind the fact that they were left behind, even if it happened unintentionally), but are, at the same time, consequences of certain objective causes. A bronze vase testifies to a certain culture and is also a proof of a metallurgical process that turned ore into metal. A human footprint testifies to both a passage of an ancient ancestor and the fact that someone’s foot stepped on the soil and left behind its imprint. Hence Ricœur calls traces “sign-effects.”

So the trace combines a relation of significance, best discerned in the idea of a vestige, and a relation of causality, included in the thing-likeness of the mark. The trace is a sign-effect. These two systems of relations are interwoven. On the one hand to follow a trace is to reason by means of causality about the chain of operations constitutive of the action of passing by. On the other hand, to return from the mark to the thing that made it is to isolate, among all the possible causal chains, the ones that also carry the significance belonging to the relationship of the vestige to passage.¹⁴

The way traces combine human and cosmological time is reflected in the very nature of historical inquiry –in fact, in its methodology. Historians simultaneously seek causes and try to comprehend meanings. While causes are to be explained, meanings are to be understood. Here lies the ontological justification for the double nature of historical discourse; or, why it must contain both inquiry (to explain traces) and narration (to understand them).¹⁵

¹² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*. Volume 3, 109.

¹³ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*. Volume 3, 109-16, 183.

¹⁴ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*. Volume 3, 120. Ricœur returns to the notion of trace in Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 166-76, where he connects it both with the testimony and the constitution of historical documents and archives. His last book, however, is more concerned with the exchanges between memory and history than with the ontological sources of the trace and its foundation in time.

¹⁵ Cf. also Paul Ricœur, “L’histoire commune des hommes. La question du sens de l’histoire,” *Cahiers du Centre protestant de l’Ouest*, vol. 49-50 (1983), 3-16.

The structure of “sign-effect,” which defines the trace, is the ultimate manifestation of historical time.¹⁶ As the connectors become more specific, the interweaving of astronomical and individual time becomes more and more subtle. Calendars combine the cosmological and cultural dimensions of time, the succession of generations merges biological and societal aspects of humankind, and trace conjoins signs with causes. The golden thread of this gradual specification is the common presence of two great realms of time, which together become something new.

According to Ricœur, historical time, as *an inscription of human time on the time of nature*, constitutes a sort of an existential invariable (see below). It forms a framework in the background onto which history and fiction are written. The main distinction between the two is that while history must strictly obey this invariable, fictional tales have the freedom to alter it. “This phenomenon of reinscription [of phenomenological time on cosmic time] is the invariant with respect to which our tales about time appear as imaginative variations.”¹⁷ The variations in question are actually various temporal perspectives that deviate from the invariant of historical time. We can find them, for instance, in great modernist literary works.¹⁸

It is worth noticing that *imaginative variations* are defined in contrast to historical time itself. The latter is characterized as “invariable” or “invariant”, historians “need to conform to the specific connectors acting to reinscribe lived time upon cosmic time” whereas narrators need not. “In this sense, from the epic to the novel, by way of tragedy and the ancient and modern forms of comedy, the time of fictional narrative has been freed from the constraints requiring it to be referred back to the time of the universe.”¹⁹ The variety of fictional genres –and the temporal landscapes they create– is especially striking, while history always remains... mere history –as if historiography referred to only one form, one “color” of time.

However, I would like to question whether this is necessarily the case. I do not intend to dispute the definition of historical time itself, since such a move would undermine the Ricœurian approach towards history as such. On the contrary, I believe that even within the framework introduced by Ricœur, it is possible to find a rich variety of different historical times, allowing people to have different expectations of the future, to see different things in the past, and, as a

¹⁶ Another major trait of this “sign-effect” is the way it refers to the world. Instead of arranging communication between signifier and signified, or, as Frege would put it, between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, the sign-effect is an indirect bequest of its making, “taking its place,” “standing-for” it (*représentance*). “This function characterizes the indirect reference proper to knowledge through traces, and distinguishes it from every other referential mode of history in relation to the past.” (Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 143). The fact that the traces somewhat “stand for” the past, although indirectly, is yet another argument in favor of history as a discourse of its own, which cannot be simply subsumed into fiction.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 127.

¹⁸ Ricœur works with Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. See especially Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁹ All examples in *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 127-8 (italics mine). Elsewhere, Ricœur writes: “It must even be suspected that, thanks to the greater freedom it has with respect to events that actually occurred in the past, fiction displays, concerning temporality, resources not allowed to the historian.” (*Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 227).

result, to imagine different actions in the present.²⁰ In other words, even the inscription of human time upon the time of nature can be done in various ways. Just consider the examples Ricœur works with in the final chapters of *Time and Narrative*, for instance, the *modernist* time, which conceives becoming time as always new, always accelerating, and open to human initiative. Another example is the temporal “regime” of *historia magistra vitae*, consisting of ever-repeating models set by the past, suggesting that history always repeats itself.²¹ And since we are speaking of “regimes,” we cannot omit François Hartog’s *Regimes of Historicity*, which invents several more varieties of historical time, notably *presentism*.²²

An objection could be raised that these “imaginative variations” of history are rather part of historical consciousness and not of historical time strictly speaking. After all, they are mere descriptions of how people used to (and still) relate to history. However, (fictional) imaginative variations are also introduced in an immediate relationship to historical time, as its direct variations, although we could also think of them as contributing to a reconfiguration of historical consciousness, thus enriching our common perspectives on time. Therefore, we do not think it is illegitimate to conceive the following pages as meditations on variations of historical time. The traits of time that we are about to debate might be conceived as a halfway stage between historical time and historical consciousness –they enrich the former and open way to the latter.

III. Colors of History

Inscribing human time on natural time seems to be quite a straightforward operation –at least when it comes to historical praxis. Historians always have to submit to an immutable axis of linear astronomical time and can never depart from it. As if it could be this simple. At first glance, this approach leaves little space for any innovation. Nonetheless, both historians and theoreticians of history prove this first impression wrong, as they have developed a considerable repertoire of various temporal models –and have shown us how *colorful* historical time could be.

Let us begin with the most seemingly simple example of periodization. Delimiting the duration of events or of institutions is one of the most basic historical operations. Its relationship to astronomical time is fairly direct –for instance, when historians define a period of time based on

²⁰ Reinhart Koselleck would speak of “horizons of expectations,” fixed on the future, and the “space of experience,” setting our past. François Hartog would speak in the same vein of “regimes of historicity.” See the following notes.

²¹ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 208-16. Ricœur draws on Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Cf. especially chapters *Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process*, 26-42, and *Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution*, 43-57. Later, in his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur acknowledges different facets of history, again with Koselleck and his meditation on the nature of modernist time: “acceleration is a metacategory of the temporal rhythms that tie improvement to the shortening of intervals; it gives a historical touch to the notion of speed; it permits a contrario speaking of delay, advance, marching in place, regressing.” (297). Despite this, his distinction from *Time and Narration* between the use of historical time on the one hand and the *imaginative variations* on the other remains untouched.

²² François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

one hundred rotations of the Earth around the Sun as a *century*. What else could be said about a century other than the fact that it lasts hundred years? However, even the objective length of a century can quickly turn into something else. As Reinhart Koselleck reminds us:

While the *saecula* [centuries] at first were means of division, still marked in a chronological and additive manner and... deployed in the diachronic organization of a multitude of simultaneous domains, from the seventeenth century they increasingly assumed a historically independent claim of existence.²³

An initially neutral unit of time measurement gradually became signifier of qualitative change, as centuries developed their own characters and began to mark different eras. As early as during the Enlightenment, scholars perceived their epoch as the “*siècle des Lumières*.” This shifted perspective on time is clearly visible in the French historiography (or at least on the shelves of French bookshops), also distinguishing “*l’âge classique*” or “*XIX^e siècle*” which, despite its neutral name, serves more as a synecdoche for an ensemble of qualities such as industrialization, the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the twilight of aristocracy, the advent of capitalism, etc.²⁴ The idea of centuries as qualitatively different eras, Koselleck continues, precedes the emergence of the term *Zeitgeist*.

In fact, the usage of centuries as a dating unit is relatively recent. It became more common in the Napoleonic era, and was closely connected to a new modernist awareness towards time, according to which upcoming time was always *new*, unheard of –and not simply yet another variation of the past (as would be the case in the regime of *historia magistra vitae*).²⁵ Since the emergence of the modern sensitivity, each century is supposed to contribute to the qualitative change of time, as it should bring something brand new. A mere succession of centuries thus incorporates the idea of progress –but also of causality, since it suggests a seamless, continuous advancement of history.

With “century” being the bearer of certain intrinsic qualities, extending its duration even beyond a hundred years, we draw near the processes of long durations and the fact that history possesses different tempos. The most notable example here is, of course, Fernand Braudel’s concept of *longue durée*.

While the most renown application of the concept is without doubt *The Mediterranean*, published in 1949, Braudel only began to use the term “long duration” in the late 1950s. Until then, he had been using terms such as *almost unmoving history*; *history almost beyond time*; and *slow or deep history*. Later, he resorted to periphrasis such as “to think history from its immobility or from its

²³ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 237.

²⁴ This is accompanied by the peculiar fact that even the dating of the 19th century was extended, now spanning roughly from 1789 to 1914. In the same vein, the 20th century lasted, at least according to Eric Hobsbawm, from 1914 to 1991. And for Pierre Goubert, the “long” 17th century spans from 1600 to 1730.

²⁵ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 58, 241; Jean Leduc, *Les historiens et le temps. Conceptions, problématiques, écritures* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil 1999).

limits.”²⁶ It is obvious from the genesis of the term that it represents a certain speed of time, akin to the geological time of the tectonic shifts. The *longue durée* is well known as extremely slow, lengthy processes spanning centuries and even millennia –shifts of environment, for instance– but is also manifested in long-term habits or everyday routine.²⁷ The long duration suggests a certain rhythm, as it emerges in front of a historian’s eyes only through accumulation: that is, a cumulation of sources testifying to stable patterns that kept repeating for a very, very long time. The duration lasts as long as its object –superstitions, agricultural strategies, schemes of thought– keeps returning.

The “medium” duration compresses the extension of time to cycles of 10, 20, 50 years, and is represented by technical innovations, economic cycles and so on. This duration can be perceived even within an individual lifetime. Finally, the most visible as well as the shortest duration of time is manifested in the everyday rush, the episodic history, or the history of political changes. This history succumbs to a “rapid change” and is “moving fast forward.” It is, in fact, quite an innovation to recognize the flood of daily events as a certain speed, as possessing a certain rhythm.

Either way, if the case of centuries has shown that time –as a phenomenological quality communicated through the historiographical text– can contract or relax, accelerate and even suggest a certain seamlessness, then the addition of different durations endows time with speed, tempo, and rhythm. It can slow down to the point where it becomes almost immobile, or it can rush ahead, becoming dense and chaotic under the strain of daily news. Moreover, with the *longue durée*, historical time is not only gaining slowness but depth as well. Incredibly long durations stretch our present far into the past, towards time immemorial, up to the point where they break with our current times and become utterly *other*.²⁸

The *otherness* not only suggests a certain temporality, but also leads to an adoption of certain stances: that of distance towards the past, a lack of identification, even alienation, but *curiosity* as well. Therefore, a kind of exoticism comes together with the otherness –a sentiment of an unsurmountable rupture lying between the present and the past. In such perspectives, ancient Romans are no closer to modern day Europeans than the Tibetans or Nambikwara people of today would be. “Between the Romans and us lies a chasm that was widened by Christianity, German philosophy, technological, scientific, and economic revolutions, by everything our civilization

²⁶ In original: “une histoire presque immobile ; immobile ; presque hors du temps ; lente or profonde ; penser histoire à partir de l’inertie ; de ses limites.” (Fernando J. Devoto, “La ‘longue durée’. Usages et temporalités,” in Antoine Lilti, Sabina Loriga, Jean-Frédéric Schaub and Silvia Sebastiani (eds), *L’expérience historiographique. Autour de Jacques Revel* (Paris: EHESS, 2016), 120). Cf. also David Armitage and Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 14-9.

²⁷ Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences. The *Longue Durée*,” trans. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, vol. 32/2 (2009), 171-203.

²⁸ We are borrowing the term “other” and the term “same” (further below) loosely from Ricœur’s meditation on the nature of historical “reality.” (*Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, chapter 6). However, we use these terms in their most general, yet at the same time *metaphorical* meaning, as images or ideas of time, and not as great ontological categories, as Ricœur does.

consists of.”²⁹ The past becomes an object of anthropology, a faraway country, exotic and strange, showing readers of history what they are not, thus inciting them to think of who they really are. “And this is the reason Roman history is of such interest to us: it allows us to escape ourselves and compels us to highlight the differences that separate us from it.”³⁰ Exoticism offers an otherness that is not necessarily alienating or silencing; it does not have to render the past mute and unproductive. On the contrary, these differences may ignite curiosity and help articulate one’s identity, although inversely.³¹ In either case, the otherness bears a significant temporal dimension: the past becomes distant, somewhat concluded, and with little attachment to present, as though it lay within itself. The exotic past ceases to be an imminent source of the present (as would be the case for *historia magistra vitae*).

The opposite approach is, of course, history conceived as *same*. There are several examples of this. One can be found right in *Time and Narrative*. When discussing the sameness of history, Ricœur refers to R.G. Collingwood’s *Idea of History*, according to which history is to be rendered present, reenacted, or identified with.³² As Collingwood puts it, recognizing similarities between past and present should proceed in three steps. First, historians must discover the real nature of their documents (or of past events) –that is, their *inner thought*. Subsequently, historians reenact the past thought in their own mind, revive it and thus make it quasi-present. In the last step, they prove that the reenacted thought is identical to the past one.³³ What is the temporal meaning of all this? Such an approach renders past and present tantamount, as it shortens the distance between then and now, and makes them both quasi-identical, as if history could be re-experienced. This arc is not unlike “comprehending hermeneutics,” cultivated in a tradition stretching from Schleiermacher to Dilthey and Weber, which stresses the capacity of contemporaries to empathize and to somewhat resurrect people long gone (at least in our minds).³⁴

Yet another example of history perceived as *same* can be found in the historiography influenced by the “memory turn.” When tracking memory (of the past) and its imprints on the present, historians often find then and now as they overlay each other, as the former resurfaces, is brought back to life and lasts until today. Together, they create an uninterrupted temporal continuity. François Dosse writes on this matter:

This recent turn ... paves the way for a different kind of history, one that reflects upon the presence of traces from the past ... This new moment invites one to follow, in the historical

²⁹ “Entre les Romains et nous, un abîme a été creusé par le christianisme, par la philosophie allemande, par les révolutions technologique, scientifique et économique, par tout ce qui compose notre civilisation” (Paul Veyne, *L’inventaire des différences. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1976), 8).

³⁰ “Et c’est pourquoi l’histoire romaine est intéressante : elle nous fait sortir de nous-mêmes et nous oblige à expliciter les différences qui nous séparent d’elle” (Veyne, *L’inventaire des différences*, 13).

³¹ Another figures of exoticism can be found in Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 209-43.

³² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 144.

³³ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 144-6.

³⁴ Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

writing, metamorphoses of meaning, as they successively transform and shift between the [past] event and the current position.³⁵

In such an approach, the time passed ceases to be a mere point in the past and acquires its own access towards the present. The continuity with the present allows the past to continue existing and to last. To illustrate this movement, Dosse gives example of the “Square of the Three Cultures” (*Plaza de las Tres Culturas*) in Mexico City. The plaza contains a pre-Columbian pyramid, a baroque (i.e., colonial) cathedral, and post-war architecture. Aside from the fact the square *preserves* three important eras of Mexican history, it happens to have been the setting of significant events: of student riots and of an earthquake. All these artefacts and memories are piling up on each other, cumulating retentions, and retentions of retentions, and thus creating a chain or continuity of memory.³⁶

Once again, historians studying representations of past, continuity of memory, or various traditions and their mutual overlaying, render the past contemporary. History conceived as a continuum of then and now makes the past intelligible and comprehensible. It also allows readers to identify with eras long gone, for time becomes somewhat contracted. And while the *otherness* renders history distant and exotic, the *sameness* –either in the form of identification, empathy, or continuity– makes it familiar and close. It bridges the temporal gap.

Each of the “temporal colors” discussed so far has one important underlying element: an implicit encouragement (or discouragement) towards initiative. The *longue durée*, for example, can comfort victims of gloomy times and offer the solace of long-term justice.³⁷ Here, time itself becomes a source of inner peace –which is necessarily an ethical stance that can prevent or lead to certain actions. The otherness of history, as has been observed, cuts history off from the present somewhat, turning it either into a cabinet of curiosities, or making it a mirror of self-knowledge (since the differences highlight the qualities of the observers, showing them what they are, can be, or do not have to become). The sameness keeps readers of history closely attached to their past. This could be deadening, as the weight of history leans on its successors and forces them to act in accordance with the will of their predecessors. On the other hand, it can lead to the remedy of past injustices, since contemporaries are called upon to rectify, or not to forget the mistakes once made.³⁸ And, finally, all great “regimes of historicity” contain strong, although sometimes implicit, ethical guidelines: Modernism, Historicism, Presentism, *historia magistra vitae*, they all put stress on one temporal dimension or another and either incite action, sometimes even imperatively, or

³⁵ François Dosse, *Paul Ricœur, Michel de Certeau. L'histoire : entre le dire et le faire* (Paris: L'Herne, 2006), 99.

³⁶ François Dosse, “Michel de Certeau et l'écriture de l'histoire,” *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, vol. 78/2, (2003), 145-56.

³⁷ Braudel himself was seeking such consolation during his Second World War captivity. “Refusing events and the time of those events was a way of moving to the margins, to shelter, to look at things from further away, judge them better, and not believe too much in them.” (“History and the Social Sciences,” 198).

³⁸ Ricœur recalls the horrors of the Holocaust: “Horror *attaches* to events that must never be forgotten. It constitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims.” (*Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 187 [italics mine]).

prevent it. However, it is also possible to reverse the perspective. Instead of looking for the potential stimuli for action, hidden in different temporal layers, one can instead seek what time the action itself has to offer. This is what Ricœur is doing, in a way, in his reading of Nietzsche's *untimely meditations*.³⁹

Nietzsche successively distinguishes three types of relating to the past: monumental, antiquarian, and critical history. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Monumental history is meant for people striving for the greatness of the past. "History belongs above all to the man of deeds and power, to him who fights a great fight, who needs models, teachers, comforters and cannot find them among his contemporaries."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in the hands of mediocre people, a monumental history can turn into an anthology of examples, which, instead of inspiring great minds, suppresses every endeavor of grandeur, since none of them could ever surpass the monumental actions of the past. Then history seems finished, accomplished, and consequently, chokingly tight, for it allows no further initiative.

As for antiquarian history, it is destined for those caring for the past, coaxing the heritage of their predecessors. "By tending with care that which has existed from the old, he wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him conditions under which he himself came into existence –and thus he serves the life."⁴¹ Ricœur adds: "... to have roots is not some arbitrary accident, but to grow out of the soil of the past, to become the heir of its flowering and its fruits."⁴² The downside of antiquarian history is already hidden in its name. It threatens to petrify, to "mummify" the past and frustrate any initiative towards the present or future.

Critical history, finally, allows people of the present to free themselves from history, to get rid of it. As it has the capacity to reveal profane, commonplace origins of all that claims to be noble or sublime, all that positions itself over other things, thanks to the privileges bestowed by the past. Critical history gives space to the present and to initiative. Yet the over-abundance of critical history leads to an endless reflection on the past, which can, ironically, push out the present. History then becomes an obsession,

... for we moderns have nothing whatever of our own; only by replenishing and cramming ourselves with the ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discoveries of others do we become anything worthy of notice... walking encyclopaedias...⁴³

All three approaches towards history contain a certain basic opposition or paradox. On the one hand, history opens up opportunities for initiative and becomes, in this sense, productive,

³⁹ It should be said at this point that Ricœur only introduces Nietzsche in the third volume of *Time and Narrative* to show how history (in the broad sense of the word), or historical consciousness, enters the present, the now, and can influence human action. In the following paragraphs, I read Ricœur "against the grain" and use his own writings to show that there are passages in his own thought that open up to a more colorful conception of historical time.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche and Daniel Breazeale (eds), *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67.

⁴¹ Nietzsche and Breazeale, *Untimely Meditations*, 72-3.

⁴² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, 238.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 79.

allowing contemporaries to “live,” to exist. On the other hand, it positions itself as something already accomplished, achieved, terminated. As a dimension that cannot be extended in any meaningful way, one that cannot be succeeded by anything new. Such history puts itself as its hindermost limit. To quote Ricœur,

On the one hand, the historical present is, in each era, the final term of a completed history, which itself completes and ends history. On the other hand, the present is, again, in every era, or at least it may become, the inaugural force of history that is yet to be made.⁴⁴

Either we are late, and history has already been accomplished; or we are “firstcomers,” as the world is new and waiting to be (re)made. In either case, the impossibility and the chance to act both have their own temporal implications.

The entanglement of initiative and time can be found in manifold forms. For instance, Bernard Lepetit speaks of institutions that, despite having been founded a long time ago, have outlived the context of their instauration and yet still continue to exist, even to form our lives (he is addressing the institutions of *madness* or *unemployment*). When people forget that some institutions are in fact institutions and begin to take them for granted, or as something natural, these institutions become invisible and their presence tends to be perceived as given, even definite. This is how conventions emerge. Yet as people grow blind to some things, these become obsolete and subsequently lose their initial purpose. Then they enter the horizon again as their redundancy grows visible. Once this has happened, an action can take place, seizing the overlaying temporalities of the present and introducing new configurations. Stability or inaction causes a slipping towards temporal inertia, even when forgotten, while action disturbs the balance of time and whirls it up.⁴⁵

In extreme cases, action, or lack thereof, can even become a condition of the existence of time –or of history. It was Günther Anders who made this fatalistic conclusion when facing the challenge posed by the threat of nuclear warfare. The horizon this event presents is finite, with only nothingness to follow. With the emergence of weapons of mass destruction, all people began to live in their final times, in the final era that will hopefully be unending, since otherwise there would be no *afterwards*. It is imperative that humankind *acts* against a possible nuclear war. And while time might have traditionally been “the space of our liberty,” it has now become “the object of our liberty.”⁴⁶ The present and our possible futures are only lingering: once people cease to act, human time will vanish, taking history with it.

Anders’s warnings bring me to the last feature of time that I wish to discuss here, that is, endings. For it is often the conclusion of a narration that casts a light upon the whole of the story, providing it with some meaningful sense.

⁴⁴ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*. Volume 3, 239-40.

⁴⁵ Bernard Lepetit, “Le présent de l’histoire”, in *Les formes de l’expérience. Une autre histoire sociale*, ed. Bernard Lepetit (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) 273-98.

⁴⁶ Günther Anders, *Le temps de la fin* (Paris: L’Herne, 2007), 85.

[The conclusion] gives the story an “end point,” which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole. To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story.⁴⁷

A story’s ending gives the preceding events their point, their final meaning. Nowadays, when disastrous visions of the world’s end proliferate, either as an unending series of catastrophic films and fictions, or as a very tangible threat of the climate crisis, the endings also obtain a status of the ultimate judgement. However, this judgement is rather ironic, as it is not the souls of the individuals to be judged in heavens, but the entirety of human history, based on which story it will eventually tell or what shape it will finally take.

In their article entitled “Halt of the World,”⁴⁸ Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro assembled a kind of a catalogue of the world’s endings. They distinguish two major types of the world’s beginning as well as of its ending: either the world existed before humankind or emerged after (or with them); and humanity can either perish at the end of the world or survive it and continue living afterwards. The latter pair is especially interesting, since it can, as if retrospectively, explain human history –furnish it with its point, its binding meaning.

The “world after us” refers to the common apocalyptic imagination, where humankind vanishes with no survivors. No stories can be narrated about this emptied world since there is no one to either tell them or become their subject. Yet such a vision of humanity’s fate can motivate stories about what preceded to that end –and even encourage action. Günther Ander’s pessimistic account testifies to this, and various histories and warnings coming from those who have adopted the perspective of Anthropocene is yet another example.

The perspective of “us after world” is interesting in that it can actually be experienced. It is the temporality of post-apocalypse. Various fantasies of humankind surviving in the ruins of a destroyed world belong here, as well as utopic visions of the future, where man eventually overcomes nature and becomes emancipated from it. Nevertheless, the world can also be perceived as post-apocalyptic in a less fanciful background: for instance, when a nation undergoes a trauma, when it suffers a tragedy of catastrophic scale. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro give the example of Maya peoples, who, according to the authors, see their present as continuous with pre-Colombian times and thus perceive their present as post-apocalyptic; as a world that takes place after the tragic arrival of Europeans that happened some five hundred years ago.⁴⁹

These endings retell the story of history, provide it with new direction, meaning, and dynamics. They also offer their own incentives to act (and to suffer), thus adding additional shades to the palette of time.

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, 66–7. Cf. also Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending, Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁴⁸ Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “L’arrêt du monde,” in Émilie Hache (ed.), *De l’univers clos au monde infini* (Bellevaux: Dehors, 2014), p. 221–339.

⁴⁹ Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, “L’arrêt du monde,” 319, 321.

IV. One Historical Time, Many Histories

Let us return to the initial idea of this essay. In his *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur distinguished the *third time* as a dimension that mediates between natural and human time. Its other name is also the *historical time* –and the written history always refers to and operates within it. To anchor historical discourse in time is both bold and refreshing. It strengthens historiography's claim to tell the truth and liberates it from the paradoxes of narrativism; that is, whether history is just a genre of fiction, and, if so, why it so stubbornly continues to compile sources. However, it could seem that history swapped one trouble for another, since historical time only allows one temporal option: to inscribe social time on cosmological time. Its constraints become apparent especially when compared to *imaginative variations* of works of fiction, disposing of plentiful shapes and forms of time. The goal of this essay then was to show that even within the limits of historical time, a whole variety of different colors can be found.

It was observed that historical time can stretch and shrink, contract and relax; gain different speeds –from extremely slow, almost immutable, to headlong fast. Time has depth, thickness, or distance. It can be perceived as very close, intimate, virtually identical to the present, but also as distant and faraway, as a mere object of curiosity. Historical time may be inspirational, full of opportunities, and can motivate action –it can also seem too heavy to bear and already achieved, with deadening effects on the present. Historical time may be seen as a closed chapter, providing us with a fresh start and turning us into the “firstcomers”; or it might give an impression of something unrepeatable, leaving successors with only monuments of the past to be admired (and nothing else). Historical time and history altogether may also become quite fragile, on the verge of disappearing and dependent on our capability to act. Historical time, finally, can be perceived as already finished, leaving successors with an ironic afterlife and no redemption.

These are only the colors and shades that were explored on these pages, and without doubt there are many more. The point is, even historical time, which Ricœur defined as consisting of one operation (a majestic one, though it may be), can be expanded towards a wide range of meanings. This essay only wanted to show that, without leaving the framework set by Ricœur, historical time is not just one, but many. However, the perspective can be also reversed. Instead of widening the possible significations of the third time, it can be used as a point of departure, as a lens with which historiography can be approached. Such books as Norman Davies' *Heart of Europe*, a history written backwards, or Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*, a seemingly chaotic account of the history of forests and rivers, are downright inviting an attentive reader to unravel their temporalities.⁵⁰ And what about the current historiographical production, spanning from the everyday events of microhistory to the eons tackled by deep or big history? What other forms could historical time take here? To recognize the third time as manifold is just the first step.

⁵⁰ Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe. The Past in Poland's present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

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