



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

REVIEW ARTICLE

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by Konrad Hauber

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIII, No. 1 (May 2021), 87-101

ISSN 0269-8552

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THE THEORETICAL PAST: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY AND TEMPORALITY

KONRAD HAUBER

ZOLTÁN BOLDIZSÁR SIMON, *History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), xiii + 209 pp. ISBN 978 1 350 09505 2. £85.00. US\$114.00

DONALD BLOXHAM, *Why History? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), xi + 396 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 85872 0. £35.00. US\$45.00

ACHIM LANDWEHR, *Diesseits der Geschichte: Für eine andere Historiographie* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020), 380 pp. ISBN 978 3 835 33742 8. €28.00

MAREK TAMM and PETER BURKE (eds.), *Debating New Approaches to History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), xiii + 371 pp. ISBN 978 1 474 28191 1. £75.00. US\$100.00

History is in crisis. At least this is what a number of reports and articles imply. They suggest that academic history is suffering from a decline in public relevance, if not in graduate numbers.¹ Historians such as Jo Guldi, David Armitage, and Niall Ferguson have made the

¹ Benjamin M. Schmidt, 'The History BA since the Great Recession', *Perspectives on History*, 26 Nov. 2018, at [<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021; Eric Alterman, 'The Decline of Historical Thinking', *The New Yorker*, 4 Feb. 2019, at [<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-decline-of-historical-thinking>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021; Bagehot, 'The Study of History is in Decline in Britain', *The Economist*, 18 July 2019, at [<https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/07/18/the-study-of-history-is-in-decline-in-britain>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

case for renewing the public role of history, especially in advising public policy.² Yet calls for a more engaged relationship between the historical profession and the public have met with resistance. For instance, a resolution on ‘current threats to democracy’ passed by the Association of German Historians in 2018 precipitated a debate on the legitimacy of the profession taking a political stand against right-wing populism.³ Criticism of the resolution, even from liberal historians and journalists, comes as no surprise given the ongoing debate on how to deal with the radical right in Germany. However, only one critical assessment of the resolution explicitly pointed out that the attempt to draw lessons from history seems to be at odds with the modern concept of history.⁴ According to Reinhart Koselleck, the notion of *historia magistra vitae* became increasingly implausible at the beginning of the long nineteenth century due to fundamental changes in the experience of time. Instead of being seen as life’s teacher, history came to be conceived of as a singular and irreversible process, implying at the same time a future open to human action.⁵ Thus the eagerness among some historians to draw lessons for the present from the past is remarkable, and might indicate changes in the temporal horizons of Western societies.

² Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014); Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, ‘Why the U.S. President Needs a Council of Historians’, *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2016, at [<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/dont-know-much-about-history/492746/>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021; Virginia Berridge, ‘Why Policy Needs History (and Historians)’, *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, 13/3–4 (2018), 369–81.

³ Association of German Historians, ‘Resolution on Current Threats to Democracy’, Sept. 2018, at [<https://www.historikerverband.de/verband/stellungnahmen/resolution-on-current-threats-to-democracy.html>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021; Thomas Sandkühler, ‘Historians and Politics: Quarrel Over a Current Resolution’, *Public History Weekly*, 18 Oct. 2018, at [<https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/6-2018-31/vhd-resolution/>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

⁴ Manfred Hettling, ‘Bedingungen möglicher Lektionen’, *FAZ*, 31 Oct. 2018, at [<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/resolution-von-muensterbedingungen-moeglicher-lectionen-15863786.html>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte’, in id., *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt, 1979), 38–66.

In the last two decades, scholars such as Aleida Assmann, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and François Hartog have detected a new way of connecting past, present, and future that they suggest emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Hartog coined the term ‘presentism’ to describe this new ‘regime of historicity’. Presentism is characterized by the all-encompassing dominance of the present in relation to past and future. In ‘our broad present’, as Gumbrecht calls it, the future is perceived not as an open horizon, but as a trap that is closing, while the past is no longer seen as an irreversible and limited space, but as something that haunts contemporary experience.⁶ While these assessments may sound exaggerated to some, the discourse on environmental risks and climate change shows that new concepts of time are currently emerging. This becomes clear when considering the debate on the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch marked by human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems. The concept turns humanity into a geological force, thus collapsing the distinction between human and natural history that was crucial to the emergence of the modernist time regime.⁷

Debates on the Anthropocene and attempts to reverse the rejection of the notion of learning from history indicate that profound changes are taking place in our experience of historical time. New approaches to thinking about temporality have also influenced research on historical cultures of time. In the last decade, research on the practices,

⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, trans. Sarah Clift (Ithaca, N.Y., 2020); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Unsere breite Gegenwart* (Berlin, 2010); François Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expérience du temps* (Paris, 2003); Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier (eds.), *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism* (London, 2019).

⁷ Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, ‘The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?’, *Ambio*, 36/8 (2007), 614–21; for the temporalities of the Anthropocene see Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L’événement Anthropocène: La terre, l’histoire et nous* (Paris, 2013); Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35/2 (2009), 197–222; Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘L’arrêt du monde’, in Émilie Hache (ed.), *De l’univers clos au monde infini* (Bellevaux, 2014), 221–339; Gérard Dubey and Pierre de Jouvancourt, *Mauvais temps: Anthropocène et numérisation du monde* (Bellevaux, 2018).

politics, and discourses of time and history has flourished.⁸ The new history of temporality has also turned towards the temporal practices of academic history. Several studies have shed light on the production of historical time in places and institutions such as archives.⁹ Thus the deconstruction of the modernist time regime in theoretical work and research on the temporalities of academic history have increasingly turned into a self-reflection on the practice of history.

The four books reviewed here all entail reflections on the practice of history in the light of changing perceptions of historical time. Their perspectives range from philosophy of history to historiography. In this Review Article, I ask to what extent these works demonstrate fundamental shifts in the temporalities of historical writing.

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, Assistant Professor at the Institute for History at Leiden University and Research Fellow at Bielefeld University, has made an ambitious attempt to reinvigorate the philosophy of history. His *History in Times of Unprecedented Change* starts from the assessment by Hartog, Gumbrecht, and others that the modern regime of historicity has ended. However, Simon differs in one crucial respect from his predecessors: he does not claim that the present predominates over other temporal horizons. Instead, he bases his account of the current predicament on the expectation of unprecedented change in the future. Simon's assumption references the debate on environmental and technological risks such as climate change, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering. Even techno-optimistic visions of the future centre on the notion of disruption, thus negating more incremental concepts of change. Simon's account focuses less on the reality of unprecedented change than on the public expectation of the

⁸ For a general overview see Allegra R. P. Fryxell, 'Time and the Modern: Current Trends in the History of Modern Temporalities', *Past & Present*, 243/1 (2019), 285–98.

⁹ Markus Friedrich, *Die Geburt des Archivs: Eine Wissensgeschichte* (Munich, 2013); Philipp Müller, *Geschichte machen: Historisches Forschen und die Politik der Archive* (Göttingen, 2019); Sina Steglich, *Zeitort Archiv: Etablierung und Vermittlung geschichtlicher Zeitlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 2020).

unexpected. To the author, the idea of unprecedented change represents 'a disconnection between the past, the present and the future' (p. 20). He suggests that nowadays even the past is perceived as discontinuous, representing unprecedented change that has already happened.

Simon argues that such discontinuous temporalities challenge narrative theories of history that have reduced history to historical writing. He therefore structures his work along the difference between history and historiography. In the first part of the book, he asks how to conceptualize actual historical change, proposing a 'quasi-substantive philosophy of history' (p. 39). This is an attempt to offer a philosophical account of historical change that takes seriously the post-war criticism of all philosophies of history exemplified by Karl Löwith and Arthur C. Danto. Simon suggests a notion of history bereft of a unifying subject or a telos. By analogy with negative theology, this means a negative philosophy of history. Therefore, in contrast to Koselleck's concept of history as a 'collective singular' that unifies heterogeneous histories, he proposes a notion of history as a 'disrupted singular' (p. 41) that he characterizes as a 'perpetual transformation of unknowable "coming" histories into dissociated, apophatic pasts' (p. 56).

In the second part of the book, Simon turns his eye towards historical writing and investigates the possibility of historiographical change in times of unprecedented historical change. Notwithstanding the contemporary context Simon describes, he essentially proposes a general theory of historiographical revision, highlighting the epistemological specificity of historical writing by comparison with other modes of writing. Thus he investigates modes of expression that mediate between non-linguistic historical experience and historical writing. Simon conceives of experience as a momentary collapse of meaning—a rupture giving birth to a new process of expression. Like those representing realist currents in contemporary philosophy, Simon seeks to transcend the linguistic turn. However, he writes about the 'expression of historical experience', with the strikethrough ruling out any mimetic relationship between expression and experience. His phenomenology of historical writing pursues a realist ontology, assuming the reality of historical processes, but eschews any realist epistemology. According to Simon, all experiences of the historical

start with a sudden aesthetic encounter with the discontinuity of the past. Such encounters happen, for instance, when a historian is confronted with a source in the archive that seems to be at odds with contemporary experience. This short moment of non-sense initiates a process of interpretation and contextualization and thus of historical sense-making. Simon's account of historiographical change mirrors his concept of dissociated pasts in the first part of the book.

History in Times of Unprecedented Change offers an intriguing reflection on the conditions that make history and historiography possible in an age that has ceased to believe in a modernist concept of historical time. Simon demonstrates a profound knowledge of contemporary philosophy; however, his engagement with current historiography remains narrow compared to his discussion of historical theory and political philosophy. Rather like Slavoj Žižek, Simon seems to prefer drawing on examples from pop culture, such as Harry Potter, to make his point. In the first part of the book, which focuses on historical change as such, there are some allusions to global history and environmental history. The second part makes even less reference to existing historiography, even though it explicitly deals with historical writing. Historians such as Robert Darnton and Carlo Ginzburg are occasionally mentioned to demonstrate the strangeness of encounters with the past, but it is questionable whether these references to microhistory offer a convincing account of the challenges facing historical writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Simon could have found more suitable interlocutors in environmental history – an absence that is all the more surprising given the interest in the Anthropocene he demonstrates in the first part of the book. What is more, from the historian's perspective, the sudden encounter with the strangeness of the past is hardly the only initiator of historical sense-making. Not every process of knowledge formation starts with shock, and in his focus on discontinuity and rupture, Simon ignores the more mundane aspects of historical research and writing.

The same cannot be said of Donald Bloxham's monumental account of historiography in *Why History? A History*. The author, who is Professor of Modern History at the University of Edinburgh, offers a history of the rationales for historical writing. In contrast to Simon, Bloxham favours continuity over rupture, and he identifies

several means of legitimizing history that have been used since the beginning of historical writing in ancient Greece. Bloxham distinguishes between history as memorialization, travel, entertainment, speculative philosophy, moral lesson, communion, identity, and method. In the book's last chapters, he adds the more recent modes of history as emancipation and therapy. Bloxham traces these arguments in the Western tradition from classical antiquity to the present day. In his focus on continuity, he is wary of strict periodization, and hardly any of Bloxham's rationales for history are exclusive to a single period. For instance, history as travel encompasses all kinds of arguments favouring history as an experience of alterity from Herodotus to R. G. Collingwood.

Bloxham's study is outstanding in its grasp of two and a half millennia of historiography, and he traces his subject through time and space seemingly effortlessly. Across the chronological narrative, Bloxham picks up specific methodological and theoretical questions of historical writing, such as the relationship between context and causality. Although the chapters are organized roughly by historical period, the author is eager to highlight continuities across the ages—for instance, when he reveals how far medieval historians shared the assumptions of their ancient predecessors and their Renaissance successors alike. Bloxham displays analytical strength when he develops surprising analogies between authors who seemingly have little in common, but struggle with similar problems and questions. For example, he shows how figures as remote as Michel Foucault and Lewis Namier both worked on the interplay of structure and discontinuity (p. 251).

Despite Bloxham's impressive erudition, however, there are some serious problems with his history of the legitimization for writing history. First of all, although the author arranges his work chronologically to make clear his ambition to historicize the different rationales for historical writing, his account is not free of essentialism. Essentially, in presupposing the transhistorical continuity of most arguments for history, Bloxham answers the question that gives the book its title—*Why History?*—before he even starts his investigation, by simply enumerating these arguments. The neatly distinguished rationales for history and the lack of any inflection points in the narrative make

the book repetitive. Bloxham's narrative only gains momentum in the chapters on nineteenth-century historicism and on current historical writing, in which he describes the advent of the political rationales of history as emancipation and history itself as therapy.

Nevertheless, *Why History?* is a remarkable contribution to the history of historical writing that transcends traditional accounts of historiography. Bloxham decentres the shift to the modern regime of historicity at the beginning of the nineteenth century by embedding it in a *longue durée* account of debates on the writing of history. Moreover, he is fully aware of the dependence of modern historical writing on theory. Although Bloxham's narrative is based on the actual work of historians, he shows a profound engagement with authors from Augustine to Derrida. Thus, *Why History?* is a highly recommended self-reflection on historical writing.

Achim Landwehr is even bolder in combining the theory of history, reflections on the writing of history, and the historicization of time and history. Landwehr is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Düsseldorf. In recent years, he has published a study on the construction of time in seventeenth-century calendars and a book-length essay on the theory of history.¹⁰ It therefore comes as no surprise that he has published a self-reflection on the relation of historians to time that might be of practical use for the writing of history. His new book, *Diesseits der Geschichte*, bundles several essays and arranges them in relation to three questions: how do established concepts of history function? What are their flaws and are there any viable alternatives? And what would an alternative historiography actually look like? These questions offer a good overview of the scope of the thirteen essays, four of which have not been published before.

In the first essay, 'Das Jetzt der Zeiten', Landwehr introduces the fundamental concept of 'Pluritemporalität' (p. 61) for the co-existence of multiple temporalities in the present. Following Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, Landwehr considers the present as the only perspective from which different temporal horizons can be conceived. Thus every past is necessarily the present's past; every future is the

¹⁰ Achim Landwehr, *Geburt der Gegenwart: Eine Geschichte der Zeit im 17. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 2014); id., *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit: Essay zur Geschichtstheorie* (Frankfurt, 2016).

present's future. In this respect, the present entails multiple pasts and futures, and the co-presence of temporal horizons is Landwehr's leitmotiv throughout the book.

In the following chapter, he gives an example of how to analyse historical cultures of time, explaining that during the seventeenth century, artefacts such as clocks and calendars shaped a new concept of time as an abstract resource that was open to interpretation. In the middle section of the book, Landwehr mainly deconstructs commonplaces of Western historical thought and proposes conceptual alternatives. For instance, in a masterful essay on the concept of the 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen', which is commonly translated as 'contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous', he traces the history of the metaphor from the art historian Wilhelm Pinder to Reinhart Koselleck. Landwehr then demonstrates how the trope of non-contemporaneity emerged in the wake of early modern European overseas expansion. Finally, he exposes the shortcomings of the concept in order to propose his alternative notion of pluritemporality. In other essays, the author delves into the concept of anachronism and the notion of the present, in each case examining them through the prism of conceptual history before exploring alternative uses of the term under discussion.

In the last section of the book, which mostly brings together hitherto unpublished material, Landwehr showcases experimental forms of historical writing that take into account phenomena of pluritemporality. He starts with a chapter on the concept of 'Chronoferenzen', referring to the entanglements between different temporalities and suggesting the concept of 'chronoference' as an alternative to linear models of historical time that have been predominant in the modernist regime of historicity and have come under attack in recent years. First and foremost, the term indicates the 'present absence of the past' (p. 245) from the present—the key concept of Landwehr's previous book on the theory of history. This present absence is mediated by historical sources and artefacts. In the following chapters, Landwehr sets out to sketch several exemplary cases of chronoference. A fascinating essay on the timescapes of Carlsbad, New Mexico, links the deep time of Permian caverns to the future of the nuclear waste repository nearby, proving the pluritemporality of every present. On

the one hand, the city's name intentionally refers to nineteenth-century spa culture, thereby erasing the alternative chronoferences of native Mescalero culture. On the other, the long-term nuclear waste warning messages at the repository represent an attempt to communicate with future generations. In a short postscript, Landwehr reflects on his approach to this case study. Starting from the problem of nuclear semiotics, he unearths the many and various chronoferences of a particular place.

Landwehr's essays display an incredible vigour in rethinking history and temporality. He makes use of theoretical concepts from systems theory, deconstruction, and semiotics with ease, but never loses touch with the actual challenges of writing history. Of course, it remains to be seen whether Landwehr's neologisms will stand up to scrutiny. For instance, it could be argued that the concepts of pluri-temporality and chronoference mostly cover the same phenomena. Furthermore, some of the paradoxes the author wilfully introduces might dissolve when put to the test. However, Landwehr's essays are outstanding as they tear down the implicit division of labour between history and the theory of history. He convincingly illustrates that theory without history is empty, whereas history without theory is blind. Given the intricate relationships between history and theory in Landwehr's writing, however, there is one small disappointment: it would have been particularly interesting to read his thoughts about the conditions governing his own vantage point, especially in light of current theories of presentism. Although the introduction speaks rather vaguely about the growing uncertainty of history in our culture, Landwehr makes only passing reference to Hartog and Gumbrecht. So the question remains whether presentism might be the condition that makes Landwehr's courageous historical-theoretical endeavour possible.

The introduction to *Debating New Approaches to History*, edited by Peter Burke and Marek Tamm, more openly assumes the crucial role of presentism and 'the demise of the modernist time regime' (p. 3) in enabling new perspectives on history and temporality. This volume is of particular interest to those who want to know how changing concepts of time go hand in hand with methodological innovation in the writing of history. It echoes the volume *New Perspectives on Historical*

Writing that Burke edited in 1991.¹¹ *New Perspectives* contains essays on microhistory, history from below, women's history, overseas history, oral history, the history of reading, the history of images, and the history of the body. Twenty-eight years later, *Debating New Approaches* reassesses some of these threads: women's history has become gender history, overseas history has merged into global history, and the history of images has turned into a history of visual culture. Further, as Peter Burke states in the conclusion, *Debating New Approaches* features at least six topics which have no precedent in the 1991 volume. History of memory, history of emotions, digital history, neurohistory, environmental history and post-humanist history are the newcomers to the 2019 sequel. Clearly, a comparison of the volumes reveals that historical writing has undergone some profound changes in less than three decades. These changes cannot be separated from a deeper understanding of temporality and historicity.

As Marek Tamm argues in the introduction, the current discourse on time regimes coincides with a profound rearrangement of the temporal and spatial scale of historical research. Whereas global history has broadened the geographic scope of history, several new historiographical currents have adapted to the vast timescales of the Anthropocene. For instance, Gregory Quénet's intriguing essay on environmental history and the comment by Sverker Sörlin both contain reflections on temporality. Quénet even proposes overcoming the distinction between natural history and human history in order to better connect the respective temporalities of human and non-human entities. He historicizes the exclusion of the natural world from historical writing. Similarly, in her contribution on post-humanist history, Ewa Domanska reflects on the timescales of histories transcending the human world. The essay on neurohistory by Rob Boddice and the subsequent comment by David Lord Smail also deal with the 'deep' temporalities of epigenetics and neural development that until recently would hardly have qualified as worthy of historical inquiry.

Apart from these contributions dealing with phenomena beyond human timescales, there are also essays that approach time from a somewhat different angle. In his contribution on memory history,

¹¹ Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991).

Geoffrey Cubitt makes an important point about how ‘memory as a medium of perception disrupts temporal linearity and only intermittently concurs with the kinds of narrative ordering historians are used to imposing’ (p. 142). This approach echoes Landwehr’s thoughts on chronofences and the present absence of the past. Moreover, Cubitt reflects on the changing media ecologies in which memory is produced and stored. Correspondingly, Jane Winters mentions in her essay on digital history that archival records ‘will increasingly only exist in digital form’ (p. 285). As Marek Tamm remarks in the introduction, digital technology will transform our relationship with the past. Yet it is open to debate whether the spread of digital media has played a particular role in the demise of the modernist time regime.¹²

Beyond its focus on temporality, *Debating New Approaches* provides an excellent overview of the state of the art in history. I will mention just a few of the insights to be gained from the essays in the volume. Jürgen Osterhammel, for example, reflects upon the current state of global history and makes some self-critical observations on the shortcomings of the field. According to Osterhammel, national history and Eurocentrism are ‘two bogeys whose despicability is too often taken for granted’ (p. 21) by practitioners of global history. Osterhammel then bemoans the lack of debate over concepts such as explanation, comparison, and circulation. Equally worth reading are Laura Lee Downs’s essay on gender history and the comment by Miri Rubin, which show how the debate in the field has evolved in recent decades. There is much to learn about the emergence of ‘the body’ and ‘emotions’ as key terms after the linguistic turn. They also discuss the gendered context of universities, thus demonstrating how practices and institutions matter for historical writing. Of course, not every contribution gives such a convincing overview of its respective field. For instance, in an otherwise flawless essay on the history of knowledge, Martin Mulsoy omits one of the most influential institutions in the field: the Center History of Knowledge at the ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich. Instead, he uses the essay mainly to promote his own work on ‘precarious knowledge’ (p. 170). Nevertheless, Lorraine

¹² Timon Beyes and Claus Pias, ‘The Media Arcane’, *Grey Room*, 75 (Spring 2019), 84–107.

Daston's comment offers an interesting account of the history of knowledge from the viewpoint of the history of science. In summary, despite some minor shortcomings, Burke's and Tamm's volume attests to the methodological and theoretical breadth of historical writing today.

History is far from being in crisis. A lively debate is going on about its role in relation to radically altered experiences of time in the age of climate change and digital media. I would like to highlight three aspects of this debate: the shifting timescales in historical research; the movement towards non-human subjects and non-linguistic sources; and the intricate relations between the theory of history and historical writing.

Historians and historical theorists have discovered the long term, and not only as a consequence of the debate on the Anthropocene. Environmental history, Daniel Lord Smail's 'deep history', and certain proponents of global history have all developed a renewed interest in the *longue durée*. Even cultural historians have become aware of time periods transcending the existence of the human species. For instance, Landwehr consciously incorporates geological timescales into his narrative on the temporalities of Carlsbad. The interrelationship between different temporalities—some of them reaching back well beyond the origins of humankind—which Landwehr has dubbed *chronofence*, is also present in environmental history, as Gregory Quénet remarks in *Debating New Approaches*. Quénet cites his own work on the environmental history of Versailles, which describes the interplay between the geological time of the place, the technological time of the castle's water supply infrastructure, and the short-term political history of the *ancien régime*. Such interrelationships between temporalities should be further explored.

The awareness of large timescales goes hand in hand with the discovery of subjects that cannot be reduced to human agency, such as cod, hurricanes, mosquitoes, volcanoes, or viruses. Similarly, approaches such as the history of emotions, neurohistory, and the history of the body explore the non-linguistic processes that were involved in

the production of written sources. The history of material culture—or, rather, the history of things, as the field is called in Burke and Tamm’s volume—even works with non-linguistic sources. These attempts to go beyond written records should not be confused with naive realism or ontological naturalism. If historians respect non-human entities, they by no means embrace a strict notion of necessity. As Bloxham remarks, even natural objects are contingent. ‘They are contingent on tectonic plate movements, volcanic activity, etc. Their ongoing existence is contingent, among other things, on their not being blown up by human-made explosives’ (p. 347). The last aspect also resonates with Landwehr’s reflections on nuclear waste. And the same thoughts on contingency hold true for the human body. Perhaps it is only in the Anthropocene that we have become fully aware of the contingency of nature, which opens up wholly new avenues in historical research.

Finally, we should reconsider the increasing convergence of history and theory, particularly in their shared perspective on temporality. In the conclusion to *Debating New Approaches*, Burke observes history’s growing engagement with social and cultural theory, as does Bloxham. This entails a deeper self-reflection on history as a discipline, as most essays in the book edited by Burke and Tamm demonstrate. One reason for the growing interest in reflecting on the possibility of historical writing is clearly the crumbling of the modernist time regime. This process may gain momentum with the Covid-19 pandemic that has changed the experience of time at the level of everyday life. Such a situation demands new ways of writing history, and the books reviewed give hints about what historical writing that is aware of the demise of the historicist time regime might actually look like. In particular, Landwehr’s essays demonstrate the playful character of historical writing that acknowledges the contingency of its approach to temporality. Or, as Gumbrecht stated at the end of a public debate on presentism in June 2019: ‘We have an experimental situation . . . and I think instead of complaining about it, we should just use it almost in a surrealist way.’¹³

¹³ Discussion ‘Against Presentism’, 26 June 2019, at [<https://www.leuphana.de/en/research-centers/cdc/events/summer-schools/stanford-leuphana-summer-academy-2019.html>], accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

THE THEORETICAL PAST

KONRAD HAUBER is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Modern European History at the University of Freiburg. He is currently completing a dissertation on optical telegraphy and the genealogy of communication in early nineteenth-century Europe. His research interests include media history, the history of knowledge, and the history of time and space, focusing on France, Britain, and Portugal.