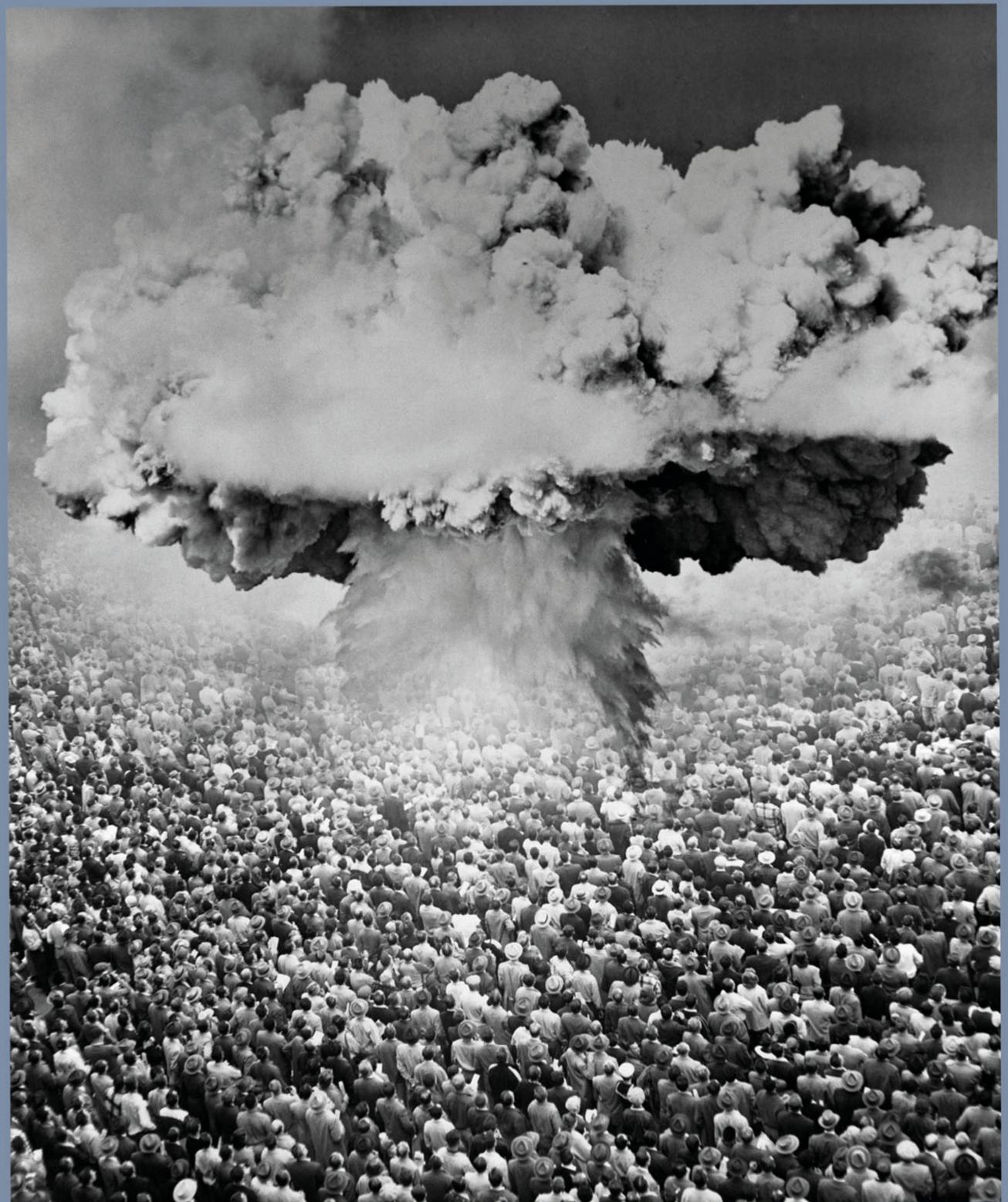


# History in Times of Unprecedented Change

A Theory for the 21st Century

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon



B L O O M S B U R Y

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# Living in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Prologue

## Postwar historical sensibility

The premise of this book is embarrassingly simple. It states that the modern historical sensibility – the one that makes sense of the world and human beings in terms of developmental processes – has been radically challenged by another one that has increasingly come to prominence since the early postwar years. Yet this emerging postwar historical sensibility has not been explicitly addressed, explicated and conceptualized as such in a coherent theoretical manner. Accordingly, the challenge that I wish to respond to seems just as embarrassingly simple as the premise of this book: to gain an understanding of the altered historical condition of Western societies by articulating and conceptualizing it in the shape of a more or less comprehensive theoretical account.

Recently, theories of presentism have come nearest to such an endeavour. Together with philosophies of history, they are the closest associates of this book. The idea of presentism was developed by François Hartog (first published in French in 2003, 2015) and advocated shortly afterwards by Aleida Assmann (2013) and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2014). What these theories understand as presentism, nevertheless, is not what most historians mean when referring to the term. Whereas the common understanding of presentism is the interpretation of the past in light of the values of the present, the idea of Hartog (2015) is a neologism that concerns a specific way the past, the present and the future are conceived of as hanging together. Hartog coins the analytical category ‘regimes of historicity’ in order to examine the various ways the internal relation of past, present and future are configured. Or, to phrase it differently, the category is designed to enable the investigation of the potential organizational structures imposed on experiences of time. In Hartog’s view, one of the triad of past, present and future tends to dominate the other two in different arrangements. In a wonderfully original and strong

thesis – which I believe is the heart of theoretical work regardless of questions of agreement and disagreement – Hartog claims that a future-oriented regime of historicity of the modern world has been giving way to one that focuses on the present. Assmann and Gumbrecht share this view inasmuch as they claim with Hartog that the present point of view became, so to speak, omnipresent after the Cold War, when the future ceased to structure historical time.

Theories of presentism attest to a shared sense that something is going on with the way Western societies conceive of themselves historically. Gumbrecht even claims that ‘the ways the horizons of the future and the past are experienced and connect with an ever broader present give form to the as yet unnamed chronotope within which globalized life in the early twenty-first century occurs’ (2014: 73). Talking about such a new chronotope, as well as talking about a new ‘regime of historicity’, most certainly connects with the aforementioned task I wish to carry out. At the same time, as much as I admire the originality and the intellectual scope of the scholarship behind theories of presentism, the cultural criticism according to which Western societies witness the extension of the present – its terms and concerns – over the past and the future, and thus lose track of expecting change in the future, is fundamentally at odds with the main contentions of this book.

I will address disagreements in more detail shortly. At this point it seems more fundamental to introduce the second close associate, having been around much longer than theories of presentism and making the undertaking of the coming pages look just as suspicious as simple. For conceptualizing an emerging historical condition and a novel historical sensibility may resemble the work of modern philosophies of history of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. In attempting to understand their own times, these philosophies of history invented the modern notion of history as a conceptual tool to gain such an understanding. It might sound like I am attempting to do something similar with respect to a broadly construed postwar period, stretching from the mid-1940s to today.

But has the entire enterprise of the philosophy of history (history understood as the course of affairs) not been abandoned precisely during this period? Yes, it certainly has. Has it not been abandoned for good reasons? Yes, it has been abandoned for excellent reasons. Nevertheless, the reasons for continuing to theorize or philosophize about history are just as good, and nothing compels anyone to do so in the same way modern philosophies of history do. This would even contradict the task of conceptualizing an emerging postwar historical sensibility. Simply returning to the abandoned enterprise of modern philosophy of history with its conceptual tools and resources would only mean a return to the modern historical sensibility invented by those very conceptual tools and resources.

The task requires a theory and philosophy of history with qualities other than those of the modern one. Yet, however differently such an endeavour may proceed, it cannot but define itself in relation to that which it wishes to supersede. Hence the exposition of what constitutes the core and significance of this book must begin by sketching how it relates to the modern philosophy of history. This significance, I think, has already become visible as the price Western societies had to pay for the abandonment of those philosophies of history. Unfortunately, it is hardly ever mentioned that this abandonment left Western societies without a concept of history, that is, without a theoretical-conceptual account regarding change and novelty in human affairs. Furthermore, the abandonment did not merely leave Western societies without a feasible account about how change in human affairs takes place; it also left these societies without the possibility of change.

The reason for this lies in the operative function of abandoned philosophies of history, mentioned earlier, namely, the conceptualization of change over time in human affairs by seeing the past, the present and the future together *as* history. As they opened up the future, as they postulated a future different from the past and present and, nevertheless, saw that different future together with the past and the present as constituting a *course*, philosophies of history created the possibility of change in the human world that is supposed to take place within and as history. Given that the modern concept of history, the possibility of change and a vision of the future (different from the actual and past state of affairs) are closely tied to each other in this way, abandoning the concept of history might easily mean abandoning too much. As a necessary (and deeply unrecognized) entailment, it means abandoning the possibility of change and the idea of a better future too.

It is not just an accident that the postwar abandonment of the idea of history resulted in the emergence of two main intellectual themes, both intended to describe our 'historical' conduct since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first is the idea of 'the end of history' as the arrival of the idea of liberal democracy. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992), in arguing that the idea of liberal democracy cannot be improved upon, abandons history by fully engaging with it and claiming that it has already come to its ultimate fulfilment. As a potential fulfilment, however, it means nothing other than the denial of the possibility of further change. Because if we actually were at the end of history, it would mean that no further change can take place. Fukuyama claims precisely this, although with the important qualification that this does not mean that no minor change whatsoever will even happen, but the 'ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on' (1992: ix). In other words, Fukuyama's thesis concerns large-scale historical change as a developmental improvement on the human

condition, and it relies on the very idea of history to which it claims to put an end.

The second main theme is the idea that our age is best described as presentist. As mentioned earlier, theories of presentism also represent one of the two closest connections of this book's endeavour in mapping the changing configurations of past, present and future. Yet, all affiliation aside concerning the nature of the inquiry, the idea that the currently reigning regime of historicity is a presentist one seems questionable to a crucial extent. To begin with, it shares with Fukuyama's 'end of history' theme the deep conviction that future change as large-scale historical change can no longer take place. Not because the modern idea of history is finally fulfilled, as in Fukuyama, but because it is no longer in effect. Hartog claims that the modern future-oriented idea of history has been overtaken by another regime of historicity characterized by a 'crisis of the future', which 'unsettled the idea of progress and produced a sense of foreboding that cast a shadow over our present' (2015: 196). Although Hartog's main focus lies in the altered relationship to the past in terms of an emerging memory culture and reigning discourses of heritage and debts to the past, the 'foreboding' he refers to concerns visions of the future. Hartog claims these visions are structured around a 'precautionary principle' that produces another sense of indebtedness (not to the past but to the future) to regulate and mitigate threatening environmental and technological risks (198). Accordingly, presentism rules due to a dual indebtedness that merely extends the present both to the past and to the future.

The problematic aspect of such a diagnosis is its sole focus on the sociopolitical domain. I believe that the cultural diagnosis of presentism does not do justice to the visions of the future in the technological and ecological domains (in artificial intelligence, transhumanism, biotechnology, human-induced environmental change, biodiversity loss, the Anthropocene debate, and so on) as future expectations. It does not engage with them as visions of the future in their own right but only as correlates of the sociopolitical domain that demand precautions. In doing so, theories of presentism conceive of such visions in terms of the very agenda set by the modern future-oriented concept of history that aimed at sociopolitical betterment of the human condition. Contrary to this, my approach in this book is designed to make sense of the historical sensibility – of the vision of change over time – that underlies the technological and ecological domains, and it attempts to investigate their relationship to the sociopolitical domain not merely in light of the agendas of the latter. What we need to understand today is the emerging historical sensibility in those domains, and *what we need to conceptualize is the way in which those domains, in their own right, conceive of change over time.*

We can attempt to raise the most crucial sociopolitical concerns and their transformation only when such an understanding is achieved, only when the underlying historical sensibility of the technological and the ecological domains is conceptualized as a rival historical sensibility (and that is, as you will see, anything but presentist). This is what I wish to do in the coming six chapters and the Epilogue.

But let me dwell on the issue of presentism a bit more by asking the question: what sort of 'historicity' would not entail change? It is not hard to see how the question hints at an unintelligible situation. For if we were truly presentist, we could not even have a future postulated as different from the present. And if we did not expect such a future to take place in one way or another (as the technological and ecological domains pretty much do expect those changes), and if we were truly living in a 'world so enslaved to the present that no other viewpoint is considered admissible' (Hartog 2015: xiii), then change over time in human affairs would be impossible. And not having a sense of such change would mean precisely that we had no sense of 'historicity' and no historical sensibility at all. If we were truly presentist, what we would have would be a 'regime of ahistoricity', a time regime of eternal changelessness (much like Fukuyama's 'end of history' as fulfilment).

Yet, just because the idea of a presentist 'regime of historicity' is terminologically questionable, it does not mean that the cultural analysis of presentism is not right to one extent or another. Thus the question to ask is whether this really is the case. Do we really lack visions of the future we consider *plausible*? Are we really presentist, are we at the end of history, are we left without any sort of historical sensibility both in visions of the future and in relation to the past? Have we really ceased to conceive of ourselves and the world as 'historical' in terms of changing over time on a large scale? Well, I don't think so. We have undeniably grown sceptical about a *certain* historical sensibility. In many respects, we no longer deem a *certain* concept of history, a *certain* notion of change and a *certain* vision of the future feasible: to a large extent we have lost the concept of history that configures the course of affairs as the development of one single subject (freedom, reason or humanity), we have lost the notion of change as the stages of the development of this subject and we have lost the vision of the future as the potential fulfilment of this development.

As indicated in the brief discussion of Hartog's idea of presentism, this *certain* concept of history is at its core a distinctly sociopolitical concept. I agree with Hartog that it is of diminishing significance, but I do not think that what has challenged the modern concept of history is a presentist regime of historicity. The idea of presentism seems to work in the very same political register as the modern concept of history it claims to supersede. In order to

understand our recent condition, in order to comprehend an entire historical sensibility in its emergence in the technological and ecological domains, we need to significantly broaden our scope. I will shortly come to what this exactly means.

As to the question of a politically focused historical sensibility of diminishing significance, I will refer to this in various ways throughout this book. Whenever I happen to mention modern, processual or developmental historical sensibility, or whenever I talk about the Enlightenment invention of history, I mean or imply this one. It more or less covers what Hartog means by the modern regime of historicity. It is not really news, however, that Western intellectuals became sceptical about the modern idea of history. Accordingly, the fact that the Western world lost this peculiar historical sensibility does not actually mean a *loss*. There is, in fact, a long tradition of criticism of the modern idea of history running parallel to the very idea itself, the latter, nevertheless, appearing as the dominant one throughout the nineteenth century. Hence the question to answer goes as follows: from what time is it plausible to talk about *the dominance of a sceptical attitude* toward history and other related ideas?

Raymond Aron's *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, originally published in 1938 in French, opens with the following sentence: 'The title of this book runs the risk of misleading the reader who might identify the philosophy of history with the great systems of the beginning of the nineteenth century, so discredited today' ([1938] 1961: 9). But even if 'the great systems' of philosophy of history already occurred to Aron and many others as largely discredited before the Second World War, it does not mean that by then the entire modern historical sensibility had become questioned. As Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 will argue, the dominance of a sceptical attitude towards the modern idea of history – a general sceptical attitude that includes not only philosophy of history but ideologies, utopian thought and any kinds of metanarratives in postmodern thought – took root only in postwar times.

Leaving behind a certain kind of historical sensibility, however, does not equal the disappearance of any sense of considering the world and ourselves as 'historical' in other terms. I believe what is happening instead is that Western societies are shifting from an appeal to the developmental modern idea of history to an appeal to a non-developmental one. The traces of this ongoing shift, the traces of an emerging new historical sensibility, are unmistakably present in current sociocultural practices of everyday life as well as in academic practices: *on the one hand, our postwar future vision – in the technological and ecological domains – is increasingly taking the shape of what I call unprecedented change; on the other, the way we relate to the past is shifting from an associative approach to a dissociative one.*

All in all, the claim I wish to argue for is that Western societies are not presentist but are living in times of unprecedented change, meaning that present relations to both the past and the future are increasingly *conceived of* in terms of such unprecedented changes. In order to bring clarity and concreteness to the issue, on the coming pages first I introduce future prospects of the unprecedented, then present a few sociocultural practices that imply the same disconnection with respect to the past. These concrete instances attest to the significance of the overall endeavour of the book: to provide a conceptual understanding of such phenomena within the frame of an emerging historical sensibility. Finally, I will also briefly discuss the more technical issue of how such theoretical work relates to the formerly dominant approach of narrativism in the theory and philosophy of history.

### The prospect of unprecedented change

Over the last couple of years, I have argued in a series of essays that postwar Western societies gave birth to a vision of the future that characteristically differs from the vision of the future of the Enlightenment (Simon 2015a, 2017, 2018a). Whereas the Enlightenment vision of the innate perfectibility of human beings and human societies made sense against the backdrop of the coeval invention of history as the continuous developmental process of the expected fulfilment, postwar visions of the future do not promise to fulfil anything like an already assumed past potential. Instead, in the shape of nuclear warfare, anthropogenic climate change and technological visions of artificial intelligence, bioengineering, transhumanism and radical enhancement, the postwar Western world increasingly conceives of its future as changes that do not develop from previous states of affairs but bring about something unprecedented.

But what exactly does it mean to subsume such visions of the future under the category of unprecedented change? In what sense do postwar visions of nuclear warfare, anthropogenic climate change, and artificial intelligence qualify as unprecedented changes? At the most general level, *all these prospects revolve around the possibility of the radical alteration, and even the extinction, of the human being as we know it.* All these visions of the future share the ultimate potential of pushing humanity, by virtue of its own activity, beyond a point of no return. This point of no return is the anticipated singular event, after which human beings are assumed to lose control over engineering their own condition. The most apparent anticipated singular events are a quick and devastating global nuclear war (the most familiar catastrophic prospect after the Second World War); a climate apocalypse (Oreskes and Conway 2014) as a

result of passing critical ‘tipping points’ (Lenton et al. 2008; Nuttall 2012) after which nature takes over anthropogenic climate change; and a technological singularity (Vinge 1993; Chalmers 2010; Shanahan 2015) followed by an ‘intelligence explosion’ – that is, the point when a greater-than-human intelligence becomes able to upgrade itself and design even greater intelligence in a supposedly quickly accelerating fashion.

Whether any of this will actually take place is not a question that matters for my argument about an emerging postwar historical sensibility. What matters is that all these prospects are considered as possible and appear as feasible visions of the future in postwar Western societies. Similarly, in the late Enlightenment and throughout the nineteenth century, what mattered for conceptualizing change in human affairs as history was simply the assumption that human beings and human societies are perfectible, and not the question whether it can plausibly be claimed that societal and human perfection have really been played out over time. Utopian socialists, for example, most certainly acted upon their belief that such perfectibility can be carried out over the course of history, even though in retrospect the actual purposeful achievements in the desired ‘perfection’ can be questioned. On this ground, what matters for an explorative work on contemporary Western historical sensibility is simply the question of the existence and dominance of a *vision* of the future that is widely considered to be feasible, and not the question of its actual realization.

What sets novel visions of the future apart from those typical of Western modernity is that postwar prospects of existential catastrophes and dystopian visions are hardly conceived of as desired future outcomes of a developmental process. Unless you are building your private Death Star and planning to destroy Earth, there is a strong chance you do not consider human extinction as a prospective *achievement*. You probably do not consider human extinction as a *fulfilment* of a process within which humanity itself stages its own disappearance, and you do not take action to facilitate such an outcome. Unlike the future visions of the modern historical sensibility, postwar dystopian prospects are not *desired* outcomes. Or, for that matter, they are not even *outcomes* in the sense that such prospects are not imagined as end results of processes.

Chapter 3 will elaborate on all this in much more detail. At this point the important aspect to flesh out is that instead of appearing as utopian promises to live up to, postwar visions of the unprecedented are conceived of as threats that call for action in order to *avoid* the worst prospects of human extinction. But even if human extinction can be avoided, the complete alteration of the human condition as we know it remains a dominant prospect. In fact, even Hartog is perfectly aware of technological visions and postwar

catastrophic future prospects. However, instead of conceding that visions of climate and nuclear catastrophe and visions of runaway technological change contradict the overall cultural diagnosis of 'presentism', instead of considering these prospects as structural changes in expectations of the future, Hartog accommodates them into his theory of presentism by claiming that calls for precaution in case of catastrophic prospects only extend the present into the future (2015: 193–204).

This compels me to briefly consider whether such accommodation of technological and ecological prospects into a theory of presentism is a plausible intellectual operation. To begin with, it seems to me that Hartog takes for granted two things: first, that all future prospects are catastrophic and, second, that avoiding future catastrophe equals changelessness and means only the preservation of what there already is in the present. Both are, I believe, false assumptions. Colonizing Mars and making humanity a 'multi-planetary species', as recently envisioned by Elon Musk (2017), or being able to cure presently incurable diseases by genome editing and genetic engineering (Gordijn and Chadwick 2008), likely do not come out as overwhelmingly catastrophic prospects. The case is rather that the *potential* of technology is deeply ambiguous in appearing both as the greatest promise and the most critical existential threat to humanity, as best illustrated by the recent discussions on artificial intelligence, especially following Nick Bostrom's book *Superintelligence* (2014). Thus, although it is true that the momentous changes technology promises might result in a catastrophe for what we consider today as human lifeforms, profound changes are expected to take place in the human condition even when existential catastrophe is avoided.

Inasmuch as such prospects are conceived of as unprecedented changes – say, the creation of greater-than-human intelligence that, in principle, remains inaccessible to the human mind – they cannot really appear as extensions of the present simply because by definition they are perceived as having no precedent in the present and the past. Accordingly, conceptualizing visions of the future as unprecedented change is of the complete opposite effect than of Hartog's presentism. Instead of emptying prospective threats and taming the future in general as the notion of presentism does, the notion of unprecedented change fosters the recognition of novelty without downplaying it. It aims at coming to terms with such prospects *as* visions that even alter the way we think 'historically'.

Now, all this leaves us with unprecedented change as the expectation of an epochal transformation. Yet, even 'epochal transformation' may be a misnomer inasmuch as it hints at being just another stage in the gradual development of human affairs. This could not be farther away from expectations of unprecedented change. Instead, either as worst-case scenarios of human

extinction or as complete alterations of the human condition as we know it, *future prospects of the unprecedented revolve around a vision of the birth of posthuman beings and a vision of an upcoming posthumanity.*

But what exactly does unprecedented change mean as the prospect of a posthuman future? Perhaps in a surprising way, it has little to do with 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism', notions by now quite commonly used within the humanities and social sciences, in the shape of a critical posthumanism (Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013b). Critical posthumanism has grown out of a philosophical criticism of humanism and humanist assumptions about knowledge and the self, challenging what it perceives as human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism in humanities scholarship. Typically it intends to do away with the division between nature and culture, or renegotiate the boundaries between human and non-human animals (Haraway 2008), although it oftentimes considers the technological non-human (Hayles 1999; Braidotti 2013b). However, its primary concern is to establish a new knowledge regime of 'posthuman humanities' (Braidotti 2013a), or of a closely related 'ecological humanities' (Domanska 2015b). What this means is that critical posthumanism stays within the confines of envisioning a future as a next step in human development, where human beings extend their intraspecies sensitivities into an overall inter-species sensitivity that transforms human knowledge.

Contrary to this, what I mean by posthuman is a potential new-born subject of history that is no longer or never has been human. It is a subject that is expected to outperform the human subject and may replace or supersede the human as the subject of a postulated historical transformation (Simon 2018c). Accordingly, by posthumanity I mean *the prospect of a condition that is no longer or has never been a human condition.* Such an understanding of the posthuman as a non-human being that is about to be created reflects the sense in which posthumanity appears in debates on technology. Debating the prospects, merits, shortcomings and threats of human enhancement (Agar 2010; Cabrera 2015; Clarke et al. 2016), bioengineering and biotechnology (Fukuyama 2002; Sharon 2014), transhumanism (Bostrom 2008b; Hauskeller 2016), artificial intelligence (Bostrom 2014) and related technological prospects (Chalmers 2010; Coeckelbergh 2013; Shanahan 2015) is nothing other than debating the very question of whether technology inevitably leads to the bringing about of sentient non-human beings, and whether the prospective beings still can be considered human.

To avoid misunderstandings, this is not to say that critical posthumanism and the prospect of a technological posthumanity are completely unrelated. They are, in fact, intertwined and overlap in multiple ways that simply lie outside

the scope of this book, because the difference in their defining characteristics seems more pertinent: whereas humanist posthumanism debates the latest human condition, ecological and technological posthumanity discusses the prospect of a condition that has never been or is no longer human. And again, this is not to say that there is widespread agreement that the coming posthumanity as a condition escapes the confines of what we have previously called the human condition. This is only to say that the potential and the possibility of the prospect of posthumanity is at the core of (debates on) visions of the future, and that the prospect of the unprecedented ultimately boils down to the prospect of such posthumanity.

### The unprecedented in retrospect: A dissociative relation to the past

Perceived unprecedentedness is not merely the question of postwar future prospects. The same temporality and the same configuration of change over time underlies the way Western societies began to relate to the past in the last half-century. Whereas visions of the unprecedented take the shape of singular events, in certain retrospective cultural practices it can be recognized as dissociative relations to the past in terms of identity. Whenever you claim an identity-dissociation from the past, you disconnect your present condition or the present state of affairs from past conditions or past states of affairs. What you claim by such a disconnection is not merely a radical temporal break but also a radical change that has already taken place, separating what you think you may be from what you think people have been in the past. Differently put, in an identity-dissociation from the past you conceive of the past in terms of an unprecedented change that has already happened, that is, an unprecedented change that brought about what you think you may be now, disconnecting you from the times before.

The retrospective conception of change as unprecedented provides further explanation for a crucial aspect that is an integral element of the prospect of the unprecedented too: the question of the subject of change. Who and what exactly is the subject of a change that is unprecedented? Unlike processual and developmental change, unprecedented change does not mean change *in the condition* of a subject; instead, it means a change *of* the subject. Whereas developmental change is conceived of as a change that an otherwise definite and identifiable subject goes through, unprecedented change displaces the subject itself. As a future prospect, it entails either extinction prospects or the replacement and supersession of the human by the posthuman, while the unprecedented in retrospect is about a replacement and supersession in terms of dissociated identities in the human world.

As my first example, the sense of being disconnected from the past – that is, being after an unprecedented change – is precisely what underlies the recent phenomenon that Anton Froeyman called *moral anachronisms* in a few conference talks I witnessed. Unfortunately, Froeyman has not turned these talks into papers. With his verbal consent, however, I would like to hijack the term and reinterpret it as follows. Briefly put, moral anachronisms are remnants of the past – institutions, customs and habits, objects, practices, traditions – with continuing existence in the present, despite the fact that the moral values they were once erected upon are no longer held. Whereas Froeyman, being inspired by Derrida (1994), considered moral anachronisms as remnants of the past that ‘haunt’ the present and do not want to go away, I think that they are objects (institutions, traditions, habits and so forth) on which present communities exercise dissociative measures. For moral anachronisms are not held dear or celebrated deliberately by a certain community; they are targets of heavy societal critique and social protest, directed *against* the survival of the past in the present.

Consider the examples of the Rhodes Must Fall protests to bring down the statue of Sir Cecil Rhodes in university campuses in South Africa and Oxford, or – as one of Froeyman’s original examples – the efforts to ban the comic book *Tintin in the Congo* in Belgium (Vrielink 2012). Underlying the many possible interpretative grids that can be applied to these phenomena (mostly in terms of identity politics), there is, I think, a shared sense of a dissociation from the past. Although dissociation may concern only one single aspect of the *Tintin* comics and the ‘historical’ figure of Rhodes, and although there may be a hundred other aspects in which an associative relation to them may still be effective, that single dissociative measure overpowers any possible associative measures and eventually results in an overall dissociation and the demand of complete erasure. Therein lies the novelty of the situation: not in the fact of claiming dissociation from the past but in the fact of the immediate and harsh *overall dissociation* that emerges out of the breakdown of *a single aspect* that previously has been one among the many aspects of association. The sheer act of demanding removal and the sheer act of demanding the ban tacitly implies a sense that ‘we’, in the present, are no longer those people who could reasonably erect a statue to Rhodes and write or read a comic book like *Tintin in the Congo*. Such moral anachronisms could have been introduced at a certain time by certain people, but they could not have been introduced today by ‘us’. And this ‘us’ is an identity that denies association with people of the past who actually erected statues to Rhodes and wrote or read *Tintin in the Congo*.

Exercising dissociative measures on the past in the shape of moral anachronisms is paralleled by an intellectual inability to positively define

associative and affirmative patterns. The present appears today simply as *post-past*, which is the second major example that I would like to mention. Western societies were under the postmodern condition, structuralism was displaced by poststructuralism, whereas post-truth politics seem to rule today when posthumanity looms on the horizon as a vision of the future (or, according to some, as already present). To be clear, I am not exempt from giving in to the tendency to define new phenomena as simply post-past phenomena. The earlier discussion of posthumanity already testified to this, and Chapter 3 will testify it again. What I wish to point out is that the inability to define novel sociocultural phenomena in any other way than defining it as post-past phenomena attests to the fact that the present appears in the most elementary manner. It simply appears as anything but the past. Whatever post-times we live in and whatever post-activity we are engaged in, its primary meaning is nothing other than a sheer dissociation from whatever has been before. At the most general level, if there is a condition of Western societies, it is neither postmodern nor post-truth or, for that matter, posthuman, but the common denominator of all postism: it is a post-past condition, a condition of an overall dissociation from the past, a condition of which the only thing to be certain of is that it is something other than any past condition that has ever been.

Jörn Rüsen (2016) has also remarked on postism recently. It seems important to point out that even though Rüsen has a keen eye for observing the tendency, his poignant understanding of postism as a cultural phenomenon is far from my interpretive framework. Rüsen thinks that postism means ‘losing the ground of history’ and attests to the emptiness of the future. Contrary to this, in my understanding the post-past condition is not the loss of a meaningful relationship between past, present and future. Rather, it is one of the most apparent sociocultural indicators of an emerging new configuration between past, present and future as unprecedented change.

If you wonder how all these general societal tendencies boil down to historiography, think of Samuel Moyn’s book *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (2010), which is my third example. The entire book is devoted to the justification of why human rights are an invention of the 1970s, despite any appearance that would point to a longer ‘history’. Moyn’s central thesis is that human rights came to prominence at the time when utopian thought collapsed, offering an alternative to already discredited grandiose political visions as ‘the last utopia’. To prove the thesis, Moyn challenges what he calls church history in the following way:

Historians of human rights approach their subject, in spite of its novelty, the way church historians once approached theirs. They regard the basic cause – much as the church historian treated the Christian religion – as saving

truth, discovered rather than made in history. If a historical phenomenon can be made to seem like an anticipation of human rights, it is interpreted as leading to them in much the way church history famously treated Judaism for so long, as a proto-Christian movement simply confused about its true destiny. (2010: 5–6)

What Moyn here calls church history is of course nothing other than the modern historical sensibility put to work, looking for origins of present-day phenomena in the deep past and sketching its process of development. And what Moyn offers as an alternative is an entire book on what a particular present-day phenomena – human rights – is not. Each chapter of *The Last Utopia* is an exercise in proving how anything before the 1970s is not a preceding, underdeveloped state of what later became known as human rights: human universalism in ancient Greek philosophy, in Christianity or in the Enlightenment, or anticolonialism. To Moyn, none of these appear as predecessors of what today we understand as human rights. As a result, as odd as it may sound, Moyn devotes an entire book to argue for the thesis that human rights emerged as an alternative to collapsed utopian visions without actually arguing for the functional supersession of utopia by human rights. *The Last Utopia* has little to say about modern utopian thought and the ways human rights may relate to utopianism by replacing it. What it does have a lot to say about is how human rights do not relate to anything else.

Moyn's operation might not be as exceptional as it first appears. The take-away message of the closing pages of *The Last Utopia* sounds at least strikingly familiar: 'instead of turning to history to monumentalize human rights by rooting them in the deep past, it is much better to acknowledge how recent and contingent they really are' (225). The reason why this may sound strikingly familiar is that Moyn's contention echoes the basic general contention of social constructionism as applied to the particular case of human rights. If you can disregard Moyn's phrasing about the contingency of human rights as if it was 'really' the case, what this contention shows is that the occurrence of human rights, as a historical subject, is anything but inevitable. It did not arise out of a processual improvement on previously available conceptual schemes but came to exist as a product of a certain sociocultural and political environment at a certain time, and might vanish at another time as well.

As Ian Hacking's wonderful analysis of constructionist thought demonstrates, considering something to be a social (cultural, linguistic) construction claims precisely that the thing in question is not inevitable (1999: esp. 1–34). This core constructionist claim is the next example I would like to mention as a present-day sociocultural phenomenon that already exhibits a dissociative relation to the past. On the one hand, the constructionist claim of

non-inevitability relies on an evocation of 'history' that is supposed to testify that the socially (culturally, linguistically) constructed subject has no essence or nature. On the other, what the constructionist claim means by this 'history' is not the past (and assumed future) development of a subject that retains its self-identity amidst all changes but the creation of a new subject that comes into being by replacing an old subject it does not associate with.

Social constructionism is, I believe, an alternative view of history and an alternative historical sensibility – an alternative historicity, if you like – that we have not yet understood and recognized conceptually. The almost exclusively epistemological focus of the discussion of the last decades around constructionism veiled the deeper structure of an emerging sense of historicity that the much debated epistemological claim of constructionism rests upon. In other words, the constructionist appeal to history was mistaken for an appeal to history as we know it, history as business as usual. Even Hacking's analysis regards history as something unproblematic when it describes the most basic, 'historical' grade of constructionism: 'someone presents a history of *X* and argues that *X* has been constructed in the course of social processes. Far from being inevitable, *X* is the contingent upshot of historical events' (1999: 19). However, by relying on the modern historical sensibility, presenting the history of *X* amounts to nothing other than presenting how *X* developed into what it is today. History in the modern condition would sketch a historical trajectory of *X*, which is far from being a means of showing up the contingency of *X*. Because the sketched trajectory is an associative measure applied to *X* that binds the present understanding of *X* to its past and thereby determines the present of *X* by the past of *X*. Contrary to this, the historical sensibility underlying constructionism turns to the past in order to testify how *X* did not develop from it, much like Moyn did in the case of human rights.

The question of constructionism is not how *X* got here and become what it is now, but when *X* (which, according to the modern historical sensibility, is usually considered as being around for quite some time in different shapes) was invented. This is why the historical sensibility of social constructionism is occupied with 'inventions' and 'births'. The archetypical constructivist book or academic article title – if it is not the most conventional one announcing *The construction of X* – features *The Birth of X* or *Inventing X*. Whatever is presented to be born in all these cases comes into existence as a subject that does not appear as the result of a process of unfolding from the deep past; instead, it is presented as coming into existence due to human efforts under certain conditions that make it possible to construct that subject in that very shape. When those conditions disappear, the constructed subjects disappear with them and get superseded under new conditions by new subjects, which have no ties of association to the past subjects they supersede.

Considerably in line with the core constructionist claim, Michel Foucault (1984) even explicitly attempted to theorize a novel sense of historicity that he called 'genealogy', which is my last example. Foucault's genealogy is of course not what we commonly understand as tracing the lineage of a present-day family to its supposedly still effective roots. This would only be an instance of the developmental continuity of modern historical thinking. Instead, Foucault refers to 'the genealogist' as a synonym for 'the new historian' and claims that one of the uses of genealogy as a novel history is 'the systematic dissociation of identity' (93–94). What's more, Foucault calls this history 'effective history', which 'differs from traditional history in being without constants', as 'nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition' (87). The way change over time may take place without constants, the kind of historical change that lacks a self-identical subject of change that can be identified as the very same subject before and after the change, is an instance of what I wish to conceptualize as unprecedented change. This is not to say that Foucault intended to design a theory of unprecedented change in his genealogy or in his account on shifts in the *episteme* – loosely speaking, in conditions of possibility of knowledge regimes – in *The Order of Things* (2002). Nor is it to say that Foucault wished to sketch an overall philosophy of history. This is only to say that Foucault's historical endeavour is one of the most powerful deliberately offered alternatives to the modern historical sensibility. It is not something that I would like to elaborate on but something that interests me as the most explicit of those sociocultural practices of the postwar period that already attests to an emerging historical sensibility that I try to conceptualize.

All the above cultural practices, including that of Foucault's intellectual enterprise, are instances of a dissociative relationship to the past. Together with the earlier discussed prospects as instances of the unprecedented future, they form the background of the endeavour of understanding a distinctly postwar historical sensibility. So far so good. There is, however, a rather obvious question that follows from this self-assigned task: how exactly should the work be done? Would the narrativist mainstream of theoretical work on history be helpful in coping with unprecedented change? This is the question I would like to discuss in the remaining pages of this chapter.

### The inadequacy of narrative philosophy of history

Understanding an emerging postwar historical sensibility is not confined to the question of a novel conception of historical change. It also entails the exploration of how historical writing operates under the altered conditions. To

the extent that history as a conceptualization of change in the course of human affairs is reconceptualized, historical writing as the study of change in the course of human affairs needs to be reconceptualized too. Accordingly, attempting to understand an emerging postwar historical sensibility implies the challenge of bringing together the two main senses of the word history again: the course of human affairs and historiography.

As odd as it may sound, the biggest obstacle to meet this challenge is the mainstream orientation of the theory and philosophy of history in the postwar period: narrativism. The reason for this is easily guessed by anyone keeping an eye on theoretical debates concerning history. With the demise of classical philosophies of history, postwar theorizing about history has been reduced to an almost exclusive focus on historical writing. Following the heyday of analytical philosophy of history in the 1950s and 1960s (where the question of narrative in history received theoretical attention first), the publication of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) opened an era of theorizing history as historical writing in terms of historical narratives as literary artifacts – just to allude to another famous essay of White (1978: 81–100). Whereas historians remained suspicious about Whitean narrativism to a large extent, the approach quickly achieved an all-too-dominant position within the theoretical field, mixed with various insights of phenomenology, deconstruction, poststructuralism, literary theory and so forth.

Having said this, I must be clear that I do not wish to run an argument against particular narrativist insights. Nor do I wish to claim that Whitean narrativism in general was a failure. It was not. In fact, for decades it explored the most pressing questions and themes in the theory and philosophy of history in the most excellent way. Not to mention that the potential of White's work for future research is still a divisive issue (Rigney 2013; Kuukkanen 2015; Simon and Kuukkanen 2015; Pihlainen 2017). What I wish to claim is only that although narrativism was well suited for certain purposes and greatly enhanced our understanding of how modern Western historical writing functions, it rather seems to me that the entire narrativist framework is incapable of coming to terms with the newly emerging felt concerns of postwar Western societies. This claim, I reckon, may sound bizarre, considering that in the previous paragraph I have just talked about the all-too-dominant position of narrativism exactly in the postwar period. How can it be, then, that narrativism appears as both incapable of attaching to such felt concerns and nevertheless manoeuvres itself into a dominant position?

The answer I would like to give is that narrativism became dominant not as a comprehension or a recognition, but as a counterweight of the felt concerns of postwar Western societies. Note the qualification 'newly emerging'. Narrativism was still perfectly attuned to older emancipatory concerns in the political domain, which gained a new life in the shape of the social

liberation movements of the 1960s. As an experiential horizon, this accounts for the extent to which narrativism has been attuned to societal concerns by providing stories of empowerment. But this is only one side of the coin, to which I will return in a short while. The other, and much less known, side is what I am more interested in and what I wish to emphasize, namely, that, at the same time, narrativism has intervened and downplayed novel concerns of the unprecedented that have arisen from the increased human capacity to alter the human condition beyond recognition or simply erase it.

But again, what exactly does it mean that narrativism became dominant as the counterweight of such concerns? And, more importantly, how could this happen? As a point of departure in trying to outline an answer, it seems reasonable to begin by considering the question of the specificity of history. Whitean narrativism recast what had been thought previously about the operations of historiography on the premise that history writing is no more than a subcategory of the wider category of literary writing. By subsuming history writing into such a wide category, Whitean narrativism sacrificed any specificity-claim of history writing to literary meaning-making, which, in turn, was associated with the linguistic meaning-making practices of Western culture. Oddly enough, associating history writing with literary writing did not come together with the appreciation of the literary qualities of historical studies. On the contrary, White argued in an essay entitled 'The Burden of History' that unlike literature, historical studies lost contact with the wider audience (1978: 27–50). He claimed that the public status of the discipline is considerably lower because the literary meaning-constitution of academic histories failed to keep up with the culturally relevant literary meaning-constitution of novels of their own time. Accordingly, the remedy that White offered looked like this: professional history writing may become relevant for our contemporary life only insofar as it properly lives up to contemporary ways of literary meaning-making.

It is necessary to point out that White's overall argument is more nuanced inasmuch as it claims the same about the relation between historical studies and scientific practices of their own time. According to White, history writing is stuck with late nineteenth-century conceptions of science and mid-nineteenth century art, and thus it necessarily remains bad art and bad science by contemporary standards. Nevertheless, science plays a minor role in 'The Burden of History' and hardly any in White's general understanding of historiography over the following decades. Moreover, the role science plays in the argument of 'The Burden of History' concerns only the extent to which historians claim to be engaged in an activity that is both artistic and scientific and not the intention to elevate historical studies into being good science. In light of all this, it seems safe to claim that what White and

White-inspired historical theory advocates generally is turning historical writing into good literature.

This narrativist recommendation was, needless to say, devastating to the question of the specificity of historiography. Recommending more literary orientation for the sake of wider societal relevance on the basis of being a subgenre entails that the more relevant history wishes to be, the more literature-like it has to be, and thus the less autonomy and specificity can be attributed to it. Within the narrativist framework, what makes history relevant is not what it can claim on its own. Or, to phrase this in a more thesis-like fashion: narrativism simply could not elevate historical writing to prominence on the ground that it is 'historical' writing; instead, it had the contrary effect of rendering the 'historical' of historical studies insignificant.

As a consequence of the over-reliance on what historical writing shares with other kinds or all kinds of 'writings', narrativism *inadvertently* even rendered insignificant the question of what makes historical writing 'historical' in the first place. Under the spell of narrativism, even theories of history typically reflected on history inasmuch as it appeared as something other than what is specific to history. Strictly speaking, history was the most interesting for narrativist research and narrativist theories to the extent that it was *not history*. Ultimately, all this attests to the inability of Whitean narrativism to explain why anybody would bother specifically with 'historical' writing. No wonder that Keith Jenkins, inspired heavily by Whitean narrativism and postmodernism, came to the conclusion that we better just forget history (both as historical writing and as the course of human affairs) once and for all (2009: 54–63).

Although narrativism is of limited use in identifying the specificity of history, it can still account for what makes historical studies specific *within* the wider category of literary writing (cf. Pihlainen 2017). But it is simply badly suited to address the question of the specificity of history as a distinct way of making sense of the world and ourselves. To repeat my earlier point, this is not to say that narrativism is a failed project of uninteresting insights. This is only to say that certain questions cannot be answered within a narrativist framework, and in order to answer them it is necessary to step out of it.

Stepping out of the narrativist framework, however, must not come as a militant opposition or as a full-blown refutation of decades of theoretical work on historical narratives. Nothing prevents the possibility of integrating many narrativist insights into another, much wider framework (even if this probably entails the reconceptualization of those insights in a way that narrativists themselves may find overly inappropriate) or the possibility of establishing another framework as a supplement to the narrativist orientation. What both these otherwise not irreconcilable scenarios call into question

is only *the dominance and integrative force* of narrativism within the theory and philosophy of history. They call narrativism into question not by a deep engagement with narrativist arguments and not by giving different answers to the same questions, but simply by asking other questions that appear as the most demanding in our current sociocultural environment – questions that, by a strong chance, cannot even be posed by a narrativist approach.

(No more) narrative domestication of the new

I believe that the most urgent and demanding questions concerning history stem from the manifold phenomena introduced in the previous sections. Current concerns of Western societies revolve around what I conceptualize as perceived unprecedented changes, in the shape of both future expectations and dissociations from the past. In both cases, the unprecedented is conceived of as a change that brings about *a disconnection between the past, the present and the future*.

This situation poses many questions that beg answers. To begin with, would it even be possible to make sense of the unprecedented in its very unprecedentedness – especially when it takes the shape of a vision of the future – if, by definition, it disconnects from everything prior to it, that is, everything we may know (whatever we mean by knowing)? If you turn to the modern historical sensibility, it will tell you that obviously there is no such thing as radical novelty anyway. Since its invention and institutionalization, the function of history (both in the sense of the course of affairs and historical writing) was to make sense of the new. Whenever the modern Western world encountered something new, history intervened and integrated the freshly encountered novelty into a long-term developmental pattern, thereby creating the sense that whatever appears as radically new is actually nothing *substantially* new. History showed how the freshly encountered new was already present in the past in an altered, undeveloped form. It showed how the new has its origins in the old and how a current state of affairs grew out of a previous state of affairs, in which the potential of what seems to be current has already been traceable. It did not deny novelty as such but tamed the profundity and radicality of any newness, by conceiving of it as part of a deeper continuity, by conceiving of it as the latest development of an old and already known phenomenon.

Of course, this fundamental operation is not merely the defining characteristic of academic historical studies but concerns the entire modern historical sensibility. Various instances of it can be found both within and outside the narrower disciplinary confines. As a paradigmatic example, you can think about Max Weber's ([1930] 2001) thesis on how capitalism (the

current state of affairs for Weber) grew out of a protestant work ethic (the previous state of affairs). Or, as an example closer to the theme of this book, Karl Löwith's secularization thesis may be just as illustrative. What Löwith (1957) claims in the end is that classical philosophy of history (the newer phenomenon) is nothing other than a more current secularized version of Christian eschatology (the older phenomenon). Finally, by the very same logic, the latest aspirations of transhumanism concerning the possibility to enter a posthuman condition are prone to sense-making by the invocation of the modern historical sensibility. Hence the claim of the opening sentence of the essay by Shelia Jasanoff on posthuman imaginaries, that 'religious or secular, humanity's dreams of the future have always been posthuman' (2016: 73); and the claim of the opening sentence of the historical sketch of transhumanism by Nick Bostrom, that 'the human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself' (2005: 1).

To a large extent, the operation is well known. In making the case for his investigations into discontinuity, Eelco Runia notes that 'historians are amazingly smart, and brilliantly creative, in chasing monstrous discontinuity away and establishing continuity' (2014: xiii). Although such characterization of historical work is a recurring theme in Runia's book, the deepest exploration into exactly how and why historical writing functions like this has been carried out by Hayden White in an essay on the politics of historical interpretation. In the essay, White talks about the 'domestication of history' and the 'domestication of historical thinking' in the context of the aesthetic categories of the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime' (1987: 58–82). Whereas subsuming human affairs under the category of the sublime would be the recognition of chaos, meaninglessness and formlessness, White argues that historical studies have been established on the premise of relegating the realm of human affairs into the category of the beautiful, which he associates with the domain of 'sense'. In White's view, historical studies give shape, sense and meaning to the human world by de-sublimation, by beautifying the sublime meaninglessness and disorder of history understood as the course of human affairs.

Runia and White touch upon something crucial here, although White's account of historical sense-making requires an equally crucial modification, for the domestication in question cannot be the 'domestication of *history*' or the 'domestication of *historical thinking*'. White simply cannot consistently hold the following two claims together: first, the explicit contention that modern history was born under the aegis of the domesticating function of de-sublimation; and second, the implied claim that it somehow existed out there before and became de-sublimated and domesticated in Western modernity. The only consistent claim is that history itself (again, understood both as a concept that unites the world of human affairs in a postulated course and professional historical

studies) performs the work of domestication, and what history domesticates is the perception of radical novelty in the human world. The only consistent claim, and also the claim I wish to advance, is *that the modern concept of history is nothing other than a way of making sense of the world and ourselves through the operation of domesticating experienced novelty, and the domestication itself means the incorporation of the new into a pattern of deep temporal continuity, thereby configuring novelty as developing out of the old.*

This, I believe, is how Western modernity transformed human existence and things of the world into 'being historical': by creating a trajectory of constantly changing but essentially self-identical subjects. Since the invention of the concept of history and the institutionalization of the discipline of history, the operation of domesticating the new can be carried out on practically every particular subject. What's more, the work of domesticating the new has been carried out precisely by the means and in the form of historical narratives that White studied. If White is right that modern historical writing is essentially a narrative exercise, and if it is also the vehicle of the domestication of the new, then it follows that narrative itself is the vehicle of the domestication of the new. Moreover, to connect all this to the contention of the previous section, if (1) White is correct regarding the domesticating function of historical writing, (2) historical writing is essentially a narrative exercise, and (3) the domesticating function of historical writing is today an obstacle to making sense of current societal concerns, then it follows that White's conception of history as essentially a narrative exercise is the biggest obstacle to theorizing another notion of history that could be able to recognize unprecedented novelty.

But to be clear, domesticating experienced novelty by crafting historical narratives has been a feasible and instructive enterprise in times when visions of the future concerned only perfections of that which has been conceived as imperfect but already existent in the present and the past. When philosophies of history explicated the gradual betterment of human societies and human beings, when emancipatory visions dominated the political domain, when nation states were yet to be built, the gradual development of the new from the old was extended both into the past and into the future. The perceived and desired new (be it nation state, human freedom or anything else) that was made to be already present in the past as an assumed potential in an altered and undeveloped form, was considered as the very same subject that was supposed to develop further in the future.

All in all, the narrative domestication of the new was a perfectly legitimate and instructive operation in times when the concerns of the Western world took the shape of developmental visions of the future, deep continuities and associative measures. But it no longer seems adequate in times when these

concerns take the shape of unprecedented change. In times when present communities conceive of those who erected statues to Cecil Rhodes as people 'we' have never been, and in times when beings created by enhancement or artificial intelligence research are regarded as beings who we expect to be anybody but 'us', the modern historical sensibility of domesticating the new – the modern historical sensibility of narrativism – no longer seems to be able to comprehend current sociocultural phenomena. This is the sense in which narrativism appears today as a counterweight of the newly emerging concerns of postwar Western societies.

### What about narrative in times of the unprecedented?

Two clusters of vital questions arise out of the above picture. First of all, anybody may ask, is all this actually a bad thing? Should we not celebrate counterweighing felt concerns as a much needed moment of critique? Should we not welcome this as an intervention that tames all the crazy tech-enthusiasm, extinction-talk and catastrophism that have pervaded public discussions recently? And if, in times of unprecedented change, narrative domestication still comes out as an obstacle to overcome, then the second question is as follows: would this entail the end of narrative? Would this mean that we no longer need historical narratives to make sense of ourselves and the world? Would this mean that we no longer need historical narratives in White's terms, that is, to impose meaning upon reality 'in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning'? (1987: 24).

To begin with the first question about the evaluation of the function of historical narratives in times of unprecedented change, it is of course possible to regard narrative domestication as a critique of felt concerns. However, if counterweighing felt concerns qualifies as a good thing, then regaining historiography's status of public prominence must qualify as a bad thing. For achieving public prominence in wider society requires not a counterweighing of but an attunement to whatever that wider society deems to be of great significance.

As discussed earlier, the public prominence and relevance of historical studies in the nineteenth century was due to such an attunement to the sociocultural concerns of contemporary life in the shape of nation-building processes and emancipatory thinking. On the one hand, it is true that the discipline of history was institutionalized as claiming to be a 'scientific' practice; but, on the other, as Chris Lorenz (2008) argues, it could not cease to serve practical purposes all along. If the postwar decades witnessed White-like

complaints about the loss of the public relevance of historical studies and if more recently we have witnessed calls for its re-establishment both in academic publications targeting the profession (Guldi and Armitage 2014) and magazine entries addressing policy-makers (Allison and Ferguson 2016), this is precisely because historical studies ceased to be attuned to the societal concerns of *their own times*. Whereas the most urgent felt concerns of the Western world have changed and taken the shape of unprecedented change, historical studies in general continued to be engaged in the operation of narrative domestication, *tacitly* approved and supported by Whitean narrativism in the theoretical field.

Nevertheless, when – in the ‘The Burden of History’ – White took notice of the loss of the public status of historical studies and recommended keeping up with contemporary ways of literary meaning-making, he touched upon something important. I believe that White was right in detecting that the ties of historical writing to contemporary life had been loosened. Yet, he was wrong in assuming that the reason behind loosened ties was that professionalized historiography got stuck with nineteenth-century modes of literary meaning-making. Rather, it seems to me that what made historical writing lose its prominent public status was the diminishing societal relevance of the meaningful temporal pattern of developmental continuity that history kept on offering even in times of unprecedented change. What became more and more irrelevant in the postwar period was not history as a literary artifact still engaged in outdated modes of *literary* meaning-making, but a specifically modern ‘historical’ way of *temporal* meaning-making. Historical writing kept on offering a scenario of change over time in human affairs that resonated less and less in Western societies. While relations to both the past and the future had begun to convey a sense of disconnection, historiography insisted on finding connections. It kept on offering its service of narrative domestication even when societal concerns began to demand a recognition of *untamed novelty*.

But to return to the main question about critique, would being attuned to felt concerns necessarily entail the lack of history’s critical function? No, of course it would not. Critique is instrumental in targeting long-held inherited attitudes and taken-for-granted conceptual schemes wherever it detects them. Yet, automatically applying such critique to newly emerging concerns before even attempting to understand them by developing novel conceptualizations may be more damaging than beneficial (which is precisely what is currently happening to the notion of the Anthropocene, as humanities criticism rather habitually started to project its long-established categories over a novel category emerging from a natural scientific discourse). A more fortunate critical function can be performed under the condition of being attuned to societal concerns. In fact, this is what modern history has been standing for since its

invention. In making sense of the world and ourselves in terms of processes, the modern historical sensibility challenged inherited attitudes and taken-for-granted conceptual schemes of an eternal and changeless constitution of the mundane world of human affairs. It enabled and supported collective human endeavours to achieve a future that has been conceived of as 'better' by being attuned to felt concerns of emancipation. Besides, the affirmation of developmental emancipatory concerns was a critique of inherited ideas like that of a constant human nature, challenged by the idea of the perfectibility of human beings and human societies over the course of history.

All in all, in Western modernity, crafting historical narratives of changing states of affairs and domesticating new sociocultural phenomena appeared both as an affirmation of sociocultural concerns and a critique of inherited schemes. Today, I think that it is still necessary to fulfil this dual function. It is just that the modern concept of history is no longer capable of doing that, because what has changed since the invention of history is precisely that the modern historical sensibility became the inherited pattern of thought that is out of touch with newer sociocultural concerns: *today one could not find a more taken-for-granted conceptual scheme that could be subjected to critique than history and historical thinking*. With historical narratives of temporal domestication becoming unable to cope with the challenge of making sense of what Western societies came to perceive as unprecedented changes, the modern historical sensibility is no longer a solution to current problems but itself is a problem. Instead of asking over and over again how our modern understanding of history can contribute to the solution of current sociocultural problems, it is time to face the task of approving what those problems demand from historical thinking.

This contention leads right up to the second question about the possible end of narrative. Would the recognition of societal concerns of unprecedented change entail the utter insignificance of historical narratives that domesticate the new? Well, the answer is yes and no. It certainly entails that historical narratives are of little or no use in grappling with unprecedentedness. Yet this does not mean that historical narratives (and scholarly research on them) have already vanished. Nor do I advocate that they should vanish in the near future. It must be clear that I do not wish to argue that the modern historical sensibility and its operation of domestication by historical narratives are completely over, have already disappeared without a trace, or have entirely been superseded by a postwar historical sensibility.

What I wish to argue for is that there is a postwar historical sensibility that we do not yet understand, and that the chief task of the theory and philosophy of history today is to come to terms with this. The characteristically postwar sociocultural endeavours of the Anthropocene, nuclear weaponry

or technologies of human enhancement and artificial intelligence research demand us to conceptualize a novel way of conceiving of ourselves and the world as historical, attuned to these endeavours and able to make sense of them. At the same time, certain contemporary sociocultural undertakings, like that of emancipatory politics (which, in each of its forms, requires continuity as gradual empowerment), are still made sense of and supported by a persisting modern historical sensibility. Which is fine and necessary.

What I think has truly gone is the *dominance* of the modern historical sensibility in the Western world. Today, historicizing present-day phenomena of perceived unprecedentedness by narrative domestication (making sense of the new by integrating it into a trajectory of deep developmental and processual continuity) does more harm than the good it may achieve. However, projecting a postwar historical sensibility of disconnection onto concerns that emerged at earlier times may be just as damaging. Subsuming (ongoing) emancipatory projects that were launched a long time ago under the perception of unprecedented changes may have the undesirable consequence of resulting in the sense that Western societies are done with empowerment and emancipation. Despite the most obvious persistence of discrimination and wrongdoing, it may reinforce an already existing tendency to conceive of the Western world as the one that is done with evils of past committed by people other than 'us' (Bevernage 2015; Van De Mieroop 2016).

Both possibilities are equally undesirable, while the present coexistence of two historical sensibilities that convey the sense of two different temporalities is a source of serious inconveniences, troubles and misuse. Separately, neither the modern nor the postwar historical sensibility can comprehend the concerns the other is attuned to, while their domains may all too easily be conflated. Yet, the way we perceive sociocultural concerns is our own choice, and therein lies the importance of attempting to conceptualize the emerging postwar historical sensibility (and recognizing it as such is already a step in that conceptualization). Whereas the modern historical sensibility and the modern concept of history is and has been a subject of discussion for at least two hundred years, the temporality that informs postwar concerns of unprecedented change is yet to be explored and understood as historical in its own way. Having an insight into how they intersect must be preceded by the exploration and preliminary conceptual understanding of the latter. It is only in achieving a preliminary conceptual understanding of *both* historical sensibilities that it becomes possible to discuss questions of how they relate to each other.

Once the postwar historical sensibility is explored, it becomes possible to discuss whether the temporality of the technological domain as the most powerful instance of the unprecedented necessarily intrudes into the sociopolitical domain by introducing newer forms of inequalities, whether

this constitutes a threat to emancipatory endeavours, or whether the technological and the political domain can peacefully coexist, both minding their own business. Then it would be possible to pose the question of which, if any, domains of human life we would still keep as being of an emancipatory temporality (that narrative domestication captures the best) among domains of the unprecedented.

Finally, I am aware of how all this may appear as monumentalizing otherwise diverse ideas on history. But I think that this is a necessary feature of any theoretical-conceptual understanding worthy of its name. Such an understanding aims at the general that binds together particularities, which can be considered as a shortcoming only by assuming that a perfect and full account of anything is possible, compared to which the lack of certain aspects can be noted. Every research has its limits, and the limits of this research includes an inattentiveness to particular varieties and nuances. Yet, just because a theoretical understanding is a genre on its own and just because this book talks about two apparently monumental historical sensibilities, it does not mean that it is incompatible with research interested in exploring non-Western 'historical' temporalities (Meinhof 2017). Nor is it incompatible with investigations into the multiple temporalities in different domains of human life and endeavours in Western societies (Jordheim 2014). What this book wishes to explore is a deeper level of shared configurations of change over time that underlie a plurality of historical time, regardless of the varieties concerning the tempo or pace of change in multiple temporalities.

### The outline of the book

All that said, I would like to offer the following summary of the above introductory thoughts and considerations. At the gravitational centre of the coming pages, there will be the question that I think enquires into the fundamentals of the constitution of Western societies today: how can we conceive of the world and ourselves as 'historical' in times when both future prospects and past affairs are perceived in terms of unprecedented change? Unlike the central tenets of narrativism, this question is not reduced to an understanding of history as historical writing. Furthermore, the question is not about what history – in all its possible senses – shares with anything else; the question is not about what history is as something other than itself. The question of the book is about what history is unlike anything else, about what can be considered as specific to history.

The autonomy of history lies in the necessary connection between history understood as the course of affairs (and thus philosophy of history as the

enterprise that conceptualizes such a course of affairs) and history understood as historical writing, both being integral parts of the very same conceptual invention of the period between 1750 and 1850 that Koselleck (2004) calls *Sattelzeit*. It is the overall conceptualization of history that exhibits a specific temporal organizational structure – that is, a specific configuration of change over time in human affairs – as a specifically historical way of sense-making. This temporal organizational structure, however, is not immune to change. If today we still conceive of the world and ourselves as ‘historical’, then the chief task is to explore the change in the way Western societies configure change in human affairs as history. Then the main challenge is to conceptualize history today, to conceptualize history in times of unprecedented change.

I attempt to meet this challenge in the shape of six chapters and an epilogue. The chapters are distributed into two parts: the first three chapters of the first part conceptualize history understood as the course of affairs, while the chapters of the second part supplement this with a theory of history with respect to history understood as historical writing. Although the two parts have their respective focus, discussing history as the course of human affairs is hardly possible without any reference to history as historical writing. In a similar vein, sketching a theory of historical writing requires occasional recourses to history understood as the course of affairs. Even though these casual gateways already establish a connection between the two parts of the book, the task of pulling the threads together on a tighter basis will be the task of Chapter 6.

Chapter 1 opens the conceptualization of history as the course of affairs by paying dues to the already effective intellectual resources of the enterprise of rehabilitating philosophy of history – in an appreciative tone but also in a critical manner. This rehabilitation, despite recent tendencies, can in no event constitute a return to already discredited conceptual schemes and old patterns of thought about history. Accordingly, if postwar criticism of the idea of history and bitter denunciations of philosophy of history are of value, then the question is whether (philosophy of) history is possible under the condition of taking its postwar criticism seriously. By outlining a *quasi-substantive philosophy of history* that postulates movement and conceptualizes change over time in the course of human affairs without invoking ideas of directionality, teleology, substance and overall meaning, Chapter 1 gives an affirmative answer to this question. The notion of history emerging out of the investigations is *history as a disrupted singular*. Whereas the notion of history invented by classical philosophies of history configure change in human affairs as the development of a single subject along a temporal continuum, history as a disrupted singular configures change in human affairs as the supersession of ever new subjects.

The next two chapters elaborate on the enterprise of a quasi-substantive philosophy of history and on the notion of history as a disruptive singular. In sketching the conceptual consequences, Chapter 2 focuses on the question of the relation to the past, while Chapter 3 investigates the role of the future in a quasi-substantive philosophy of history. Proceeding on the basis of the issues addressed in this prologue as features of living in times of unprecedented change, these chapters address, respectively, the issue of a dissociated past and the issue of a catastrophic future as integral parts of a comprehensive theoretical undertaking.

With respect to the relation to the past, Chapter 2 argues that even when the past is conceived of in terms of identity-dissociations, studying it is inevitable and has a constitutive role in making sense of ourselves and the world. True enough, this constitutive role no longer means the possibility of positively rooting identities in the deep continuity of a historical trajectory. Rather, it means that in times when the past is dissociated and positive answers to identity questions are impossible, studying a dissociated past is the best tool we have to negatively indicate who and what we no longer are. I argue that under these conditions historical writing functions as a provider of *essentially contested knowledge of the past*, tightropeing between what I will call an *apophatic past* and a present past.

As to the role of the future in a quasi-substantive philosophy of history, Chapter 3 tracks a change in the structure of Western future-orientation. It turns to the past to investigate the utopian visions of the future of Western modernity in order to make sense of a characteristically dystopian vision of the future of postwar times. Whereas utopianism was the necessary entailment of a processual and developmental historical sensibility directed toward a future fulfilment, postwar dystopianism comes as the expectation of the unprecedented, transformative singular event. The historical investigations into Western future-orientation provide the basis of characterizing the emerging historical sensibility as *evental* and exploring 'the temporality of the event' or an 'evental temporality' as opposed to the processual and developmental temporality of the modern period. Keeping that in mind, Chapter 3 closes the first part on history understood as the course of affairs.

The three chapters of the second part sketch a theory of history in the sense of historical writing. What links this second part about historical writing to the first part about history as the course of affairs is the common theme of change and novelty. Whereas the first part of the book investigates how Western societies configure change in the course of human affairs as history, the second part accounts for historiographical change. The two changes are heavily interrelated, and the main objective of the second part of the book is to bind them together. In this spirit, Chapter 6 – the last chapter – attempts

to re-establish the connection between history in the sense of the course of affairs and history in the sense of historical writing, by sketching how change in history understood as the course of human affairs and change in history understood as historical writing inform each other. In the final analysis, the three chapters of the second part outline a theory of historiographical change that reflects how Western societies conceive of change in human affairs in times of unprecedented change.

Chapter 4 takes its point of departure in a dilemma that paralyzes recent theoretical approaches to historiography. The dilemma stems from the rather exclusive linguistic focus of postwar theoretical work on history, which reduced the understanding of philosophy of history to be solely a philosophy of historical writing. The dilemma concerns the relationship between experience and language, and claims that either you have one or the other, but you cannot have both. It claims that you either have an immediate experience that is doomed to remain mute and ineffable, or you have language, linguistic conceptualization and narrativization without an experiential basis.

Although this dilemma has recently become a dogma, I believe that it is a false one. Separating the domains of the linguistic and the non-linguistic and claiming their mutual hostility and exclusivity is neither a very illuminating idea nor a particularly useful one. Insofar as you maintain the separation of the linguistic and non-linguistic, you remain unable to account for the occurrence of new insights and change in historiography. Accordingly, in order to be able to account for historiographical change, Chapter 4 tries to put language and (historical) experience into a productive interaction by bringing the notion of expression into the equation. In conceptualizing a process of sense-formation and meaning-constitution in historical writing, the chapter condenses a theory of historiographical change into a struck-thought 'of' as the expression of historical experience.

Chapter 5 digs deeper into the question of novelty and change in historical writing by focusing on an initial moment of experience, that is, an initial moment of an encounter with the world. This moment of a sudden encounter with something non-linguistic (experience), something that makes no sense, something that resists conceptualization and something before which pre-existing conceptual schemes break down, is the moment that renders possible the entire process of grappling with language and looking for ways of expression. Conceptualizing this moment as an encounter-event with (a remnant of) the past and the external world results in a position that is neither full-blown realist nor full-blown irrealist. The encounter-event attests to the existence of an external reality but does not claim epistemological access to it. Instead, Chapter 5 interprets the encounter in aesthetic terms, as a moment of non-sense, as a moment that cannot be subsumed even under the aesthetic

category of the sublime, because that would already imply a certain sense attributed to the encounter. At best, the encounter-event qualifies as less than sublime, that is, as proto-sublime.

Encountering with the world, however, does not necessarily lead toward expression. Inasmuch as nothing arises out of the encounter, it does not even qualify as an event and remains insignificant. Many times we are content with having experiences that do not make sense even for ourselves and we just leave things like that. There has to be yet another step, a moment of impulse that pushes us towards expression, a moment that pushes us from non-sense toward sense-making. Chapter 6 investigates this moment as an ethical demand. The main contention of the chapter is that the ethical impulse to take the step towards expression in historical writing stems from our vision of the future – the vision that informs our notion of history understood as the course of affairs. Hence, historiographical novelty is ultimately linked with the prospect of novelty in the course of affairs, and historiographical change is tied to historical change.

Finally, the Epilogue offers some concluding remarks on the emerging evental historical sensibility in two respects. First, it elaborates on the scope of the possibility to configure change over time as unprecedented in different domains of human life and human endeavours, with special attention paid to the political domain; and second, it asks the question whether the emerging evental historical sensibility can – in a reasonable manner – still be called ‘historical’ in the first place.