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We are all Presentists: Towards a critique of established notions of History

Todos somos presentistas: hacia una crítica de las nociones establecidas de Historia

Theodor Pelekanidis, Mariana Imaz

Abstract

The concept of presentism has been at the center of current discussions in the historical discipline. Among the efforts to define presentism, we face radically different approaches. On the one hand, we have scholars that see it as 'a cardinal sin' or as a vice, while on the other, there are many who recognize in it something that is unavoidable and should be understood and welcomed. In this article, we explore and discuss these contrasting positions and argue for three central virtues that presentism can bring to our understanding of the past. Through the analysis of narratives surrounding World War II and the founding of the United States, we argue that presentism: 1. allows history to be critical by motivating present reviews to established–mostly western--centric– accounts; 2. allows us to create new perspectives about the past by strategically using the tools of our present and finally, 3. welcomes pluralism rather than a single historical truth. These points allow us to defend a view of the past that is not static, fixed, and forever closed, but instead, see it as a place of debate, dispute, and constant renewal.

Keywords: presentism; pluralism; World War II; 1619 project.

Theodor Pelekanidis
Free University of Berlin | Berlin | Germany | theodor.pelekanidis@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0900-648X
Mariana Imaz
National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) | City of Mexico | mariana.imaz@boston.unam.mx
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3437-3038

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Resumen

El concepto de presentismo ha estado en el centro de los debates actuales en la disciplina histórica. Entre los esfuerzos por definir el presentismo, nos encontramos con enfoques radicalmente distintos. Por un lado, tenemos estudiosos que lo ven como «un pecado capital» o como un vicio, mientras que, por otro, hay muchos que reconocen en él algo que es inevitable y que debe ser comprendido y bienvenido. En este artículo exploramos y debatimos estas posturas contrapuestas y defendemos tres virtudes centrales que el presentismo puede aportar a nuestra comprensión del pasado. A través del análisis de las narrativas en torno a la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la fundación de Estados Unidos, argumentamos que el presentismo: 1. permite que la historia sea crítica al motivar las revisiones presentes de los relatos establecidos -en su mayoría occidentales-céntricos-; 2. nos permite crear nuevas perspectivas sobre el pasado utilizando estratégicamente las herramientas de nuestro presente y, por último, 3. da la bienvenida al pluralismo en lugar de a una única verdad histórica. Estos puntos nos permiten defender una visión del pasado que no sea estática, fija y cerrada para siempre, sino verla como un lugar de debate, disputa y renovación constante.
Palabras clave: presentismo; pluralismo; Segunda Guerra Mundial; proyecto 1619.

Introduction

The concept of presentism has been at the center of current heated discussions in the historical discipline; in the last two year several articles were published regarding this topic (Young, 2023; Sweet, 2022; Satia, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Scott, 2022; Armitage, 2023; Colla, 2021; Sessa, 2022; Past and Present special issue, 2017). On the one hand, we have scholars that see it as 'a cardinal sin' or as a vice, while on the other, recognize and understand it as something unavoidable that should be welcomed into the historical discipline. What is important to be noted in this context is that these two contrasting approaches have not had an equal status in the historical disciplinary universe: the anti-presentistic position is not just a tendency or an opinion. It has been established as part of the methodology that accompanies historiography from the moment of its birth in the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Questioning it, therefore, can be seen by many as heretical and in many ways anti-scientific (Walsham, 2017, pp. 213-214).

As critique in historiography has been increasing in the last decades, the fortress of anti-presentism has been under siege and more and more historians and theorists find weaknesses in it. As we will show, challenging these weaknesses has invited historians to get rid of certain features that reproduce old frameworks in historical thinking. By taking into consideration the current political debates on identity politics, racism, anticolonialism, and others, presentist approaches argue that history can move beyond its old-fashioned ways and criticize a western-centric approach that has permeated in the discipline.

It is in this constellation that our contribution arises. In the first two parts of this article, we will sketch the main lines of the debate and expose the central arguments of each of these positions. In the third and fourth parts, the article analyzes and proposes three specific virtues of presentism, which we call critical, creative, and pluralistic, that highlight the positive features and

potential benefits presentism can offer to contemporary historical understanding. While doing this, the article makes the case that a reconfiguration of the historians' understanding of presentism is not a back door to introducing an anything-goes approach. Rather, in our proposed version, presentism promotes a holistic understanding of historical time that goes beyond the western idea of historicity, opens new fields of interest to the discipline, and gives voice to historical agents that have been ignored or downplayed. In this sense, our contribution inevitably refers to the relationship between history and politics and how political conditions have determined the directions of historical thinking.

The Burden of Anti-presentism

James Sweet's (2022), opinion column, which has been extensively commented and criticized, denounced as president of the American Historical Association the role that presentism has played in the distortion of the study and the nature of the past. Interestingly enough, 20 years before him Lynn Hunt, serving in the same role in 2002, made a very similar claim. Both of them argued that presentism violates the uniqueness of historical times by not respecting the values, beliefs, and frameworks of people from the past. Thus, they hold that we should study the past for the sake of the past and do so with the tools and frameworks of each historical period. There is really not much difference between this claim and the Rankean affirmation of letting the past speak for itself.

It is interesting to note that in both Sweet and Hunt's antipresentist positions there are two philosophical commitments that have not yet been analyzed in depth. One is ontological and has to do with how past and present are of a different nature. The other is epistemological and reflects how the past can only be studied and known on its own terms.

Regarding the former, notice that in Sweet and Hunt's critiques there is some sort of split between past and present, and what historians do is study the past as an entity that has its own separated nature. This conception of the past as being an object that is distant and radically different from the present entails the idea that it is a phenomenon that is over and done, and because the past is virtually finished, critics of presentism defend the idea that the past is something foreign, distant, and separated from our present. As Ethan Kleinberg recently pointed out, they even refer to it as a "foreing country" where everything is "weird", "wonderful" and "strange" (Kleinberg, 2023, p. 271). In the name of objectivity and neutrality, they set a distance with the past, a past that is complete and discovered (White, 2022, p. 195).

As argued, this ontological position also entails an epistemic commitment. It holds that present epistemic tools should not be used to understand past actions because they distort the very nature of what needs to be studied. What becomes relevant to understand then is change, not continuity. Hunt, for example, argues that 'history should not just be the study of sameness, based

on the search for our individual or collective roots of identity' (Hunt, 2002). In a similar vein, Sweet holds that presentism is 'not an analysis of people's ideas in their own time, nor a process of change over time' (Sweet, our emphasis). Both Sweet and Hunt agree that historians should engage with change and transformation, not sameness or continuity. Thus, to use conceptual tools and frameworks from our present to study the past is not ideal because: 1. it creates continuity between two realms that are ontologically separated – past and present – and 2. it distorts the 'true nature' of the past. Critics of presentism argue for an idea of historical time in which there is a clear distinction between past and present and a unique way to study each of them.

Some may rush to argue here that nobody, neither pro- nor anti-presentists would actually put themselves behind such a simplistic view of the past. It might be argued that is a bit of a caricature to present anti-presentists as defenders of absolute borders between the past and the present when actually very few historians deny the fluidity of such a demarcation. But in our assessment, the problem lies exactly here: while the majority of historians and theorists can easily hide behind an allegedly open understanding of history and the fluidity of time, they too easily close the border between past and present when they feel that certain unbreakable rules of the discipline are threatened, i.e, using present concepts to understand the past or questioning rooted narratives with present concerns. By criticizing Sweet's article, we do not claim that Sweet does not understand basic consensi of contemporary historical thinking; of course he does. We just highlight the easiness with which supporters of established ways of historical thinking can selectively pick sides between being "open to new challenges" or "guardians of the discipline". The choice is not that simple. New challenges require thinking about the ways the discipline and its rooted compromises have been established.

Presentism Strikes Back

Although anti-presentism has been a central position of the AHA at least on two different occasions, this has not necessarily impacted the way historians have done or thought about history. Instead, several scholars have defended the use of the term and have tried to classify and define it.

First off and contrary to anti-presentistic commitments, presentistic efforts embrace the study of continuity. Among defenders of presentism there is a consensus that the only way that we can understand how we came to be what we are – as individuals and as a society – is to tell a story that traces certain present patterns into the past. In this sense, the past is not something foreign or radically different from us, rather it conforms and explains a lot of what is going on today. Hayden White explained this as conceiving the past as a presence that produces effects by virtue of its absence (White, 2022, p. 196). Because the past is not alien to the present, we can actually use our current epistemic tools to study it.

Defenders of presentism, therefore, are not necessarily committed to the idea that the past is over and done. When we study the past with our present epistemic tools, we construct new ways of thinking about it and, thus, we make the past anew. In this sense, the split or firewall between the past and present seems to be less harsh. There is an implicit understanding that the relationship is far more complicated and that maybe the idea of continuity, rather than rupture, helps to better understand the relationship with the past. As Kleinberg holds:

> History is ostensibly about the past, but it is the present in which this history occurs, both in the way it is constructed in our present and the way the past event travels forward in time so as to be of the moment in which it is taken up. (Kleinberg, 2023, p. 271)

Thus, the ontological split between the two realms of time dissolves with presentism.

Furthermore, advocates for presentism agree that because we are all products of our own time, it is inevitable to use contemporary epistemic choices (concepts, frameworks, aspects, or questions) to study the past. Many of the terms of historical engagement, as Miri Rubin argues, 'are determined by the historian's own choices: the definition of the archive's extent, of the period under investigation, of the points of view and actors to be considered' (Rubin, 2017, p. 238). Following this argument, it is only because of present considerations and new critical approaches that histories of women, subaltern groups, mental illness, infancy, etc., were possible.

Along the same lines defenders of presentism share the conviction that politics and history are undeniably intertwined. Joan Scott illustrates this when, as a reply to Sweet's article, argues that feminist history would not have been possible if history was not political. Scott claims that 'the study of previously ignored subjects requires the study of the politics of history' and by this, she means the understanding of the 'implicit operation of power (hegemonic belief systems, disciplinary orthodoxies) that appealed to difference to confirm its rule.' Scott's analysis concludes that 'eliminating politics' from history is simply impossible. In fact, we need to study and understand their relationship to use history with good purposes, i.e., recovering silenced subjectivities and their histories.

Our first example about different narrations of the Second World War engages more closely with this thought. As we argue, the idea of a "politic-free history" has been used against presentistic historical thinking to downgrade different cultural understandings about the past in the name of a pure historiography. Such different historical perspectives, however, are extremely productive as they can overcome established and rooted histories which have privileged certain narratives. We pay special attention to how presentism can be helpful to be critical and create new pathways for Western centric approaches of history.

In many regards, Western-centric views establish hierarchies where one interpretation of history is presumably 'more valuable' than another because it commits to the old fashion–nineteenth--century–view of 'value-free' historical analysis. We are actually suspicious of such logic.

This critique of old established narratives together with the questioning of the ontological distinction between the past and the present mentioned above can be read as a symptom of decadence in what Assmann calls 'cultural temporal order' or 'modern temporal regime' (2020, p. 10). Assmann argues that 'in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was frequently emphasized that a new relation to time was being established that broke with traditional cultural time regimes and turned linear time itself into the backbone of Western culture' (p. 31). It is this linear time - in contrast for example to a cyclical perception of time found in other civilizations - that allowed the separation of the present from the past (and the future) and promoted the idea of their ontological distinction and of discontinuity. The case of Japan analyzed in the next section is characteristic of this phenomenon. Thus, the struggle between a western-centric notion of time and other cultural temporal orders has always been a point of contention that is not irrelevant to our discussion here. In a later essay, Assmann repeats the same claim even more clearly:

> What is referred to today as the 'modern time regime' and functioned as the backbone of Western culture of modernization, has been revealed during the last two or three decades as a construction that privileges western politics and arts while devaluing and eliding other cultural options. (2019, p. 207)

There is, therefore, an entanglement between the modern temporal regime and Western culture that is reflected in major aspects of the latter, including its relationship with history and time. To this point, Armitage goes as far as suggesting that time 'should be the central concern of our discipline' (Armitage, 2023, p. 78). Following the analysis of François Hartog, he adopts the term 'omnipresent presentism', a form of presentism in which the present is overdetermined and defines what the past and the future are. Armitage brings this form of understanding of time in contrast to other time regimes in an effort to show that presentism does not claim to be a unique final solution, but that thinking on the realities of presentistic thought can help us get out of the western-centric framework of historical thinking and time (p. 68). By questioning the established relationship between history and linear-progressive time presentism views with skepticism the ontological commitment of anti-presentists, namely the independence of the present from the past and the western-centric models of thought that lie underneath it (Colla, 2021, pp. 30, 126).[1] The 1619 project is actually an excellent example of this because it establishes a connection between present day concerns on the life conditions of Black people in the US with the time of their first arrival in the continent in 1619. This view breaks through the supposed continuity that the happy-go-lucky narrative of the post-revolutionary "Land of the Free" has established in the last centuries.

1 For an example of a historical western devaluation of Indian concepts of time see: Thomas R. Trautmann, 'Indian Time, European Time,' in Trautmann, The Clash of Chronologies: Ancient India in the Modern World, Yoda Press (New Delhi, 2009). For an example on Japan, see: Sebastian Conrad, ""'Nothing is the Way it should be": Global Transformations of the Time Regime in the nineteenth Century', Modern Intellectual History (2017), 821 – 848.

Having this in mind, we present our analysis of presentism based on two main examples: World War II and the beginning of US national history. We argue for three central virtues of presentism: 1. it allows history to be critical by motivating present questionings of established views; 2. it allows us to create new perspectives about the past by strategically using the tools of our present and finally, 3. it welcomes pluralism rather than a single historical truth. Although these three virtues can be conceptually separated, in our analysis we combine the critical with the creative and the creative with the plural understanding of the past. The takeaway here is that to critically engage with rooted notions of history one has to also be creative about what is the proposed new version of history that we should embrace. A good critique is always welcomed, and creativity manifests in new questions, but presentism seems to move a step forward and bring along creative ways to not only question but rethink history and construct new narratives. Thus, the creative virtue is embedded in the critical and also in how to conceive of new a plural approaches to the past.

Our argument is not that certain historians are against pluralism: we are confident that the vast majority are for it. But we observe that despite this willingness, the established anti-presentism unfairly favors a certain idea of history over others, mainly and idea of history based on nineteenth century notions that look with suspicion new approaches and frameworks that challenge and critique these rooted understandings of the past.

Lastly, it is important to mention that these traits are not to be seen as necessary or sufficient conditions for a presentistic account. There can be more qualities to presentism than the ones we explain here. Our main goal is simply to bring attention to some of the ways that presentism works in historiography and why it is important to welcome it.

The Critical-Creative Virtues: The Anti-western-centric Essence of Reconfiguring World War II Narrative

Presentism allows us to dismantle misplaced certainties about historical events. It allows us to challenge existing interpretations of an aspect of the past 'brought about by new evidence, new arguments, new perspectives, or new methods (Banner, 2021, p. 16).

An interesting case to bring as an example is the placing of the beginning of World War II on September 1st, 1939. This is, of course, the common–Western– understanding of the event. Several historians, however, have started questioning this historical certainty. And not surprisingly, some of them have done it from a presentist motivation to reframe the past. Australian historian Richard J.B Bosworth published in the 1990s a series of texts (1993, 1996) in which he questioned the established narratives of the beginning of World War II by pointing out that 1922, 1933, or 1938 can be considered as equal candidates. His focus while claiming this was on how the evolution of the

two Germanies during the Cold War led to a narrativization and re-narrativization of the event according to the corresponding interests of the present (1996).

What presentism shows with Bosworth's work is not only that 'past history' and 'present politics' are inevitably intertwined – where present politics reconfigures national histories – but also how the constant challenging of the meaning of certain events is an essential part of the historical discipline. German identity after the Second Great War had to be reinvented and to do that Germans had to construct and reconstruct their own rooted certainties about how Nazism came to be a national avalanche. The German debate on World War II has been a particularly turbulent case also because of the unique position Germany – or rather the two Germanies that existed between 1949 and 1990 – had in the Cold War world. This constant reframing of the war memory and the reconceptualization of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the role of the German people before, during and after the war show that the concerns of the present inevitably affect the way history is done. Presentism in this sense cannot be disputed and we believe this should be a common basis for every discussion that begins on the topic.

In a recent article (2023), Andrew Buchanan also approached the topic of World War II from a similar critical perspective. In Buchanan's argumentation, WWII can be seen as a long world war that started in 1931, with the invasion of China's Manchuria by Japan and ended in 1953, with the armistice of July 27th between the two Koreas. This periodization does not only change the chronological framework of the war but more importantly it moves the center of gravity from Europe to Asia, where the war both started and ended according to this perspective. As Buchanan mentions though, 'the purpose of shifting temporal frames, of course, is not to determine a more "real" delineation but to establish a robust analytical scaffolding within which an interconnected series of events can be understood' (2023, p. 249). It is not, therefore, Buchanan's goal to establish a new dominant narrative on the war, but to revisit and critique the existing narratives of the period right before, during and after the war and reveal their global character through their integration in the existent narrative. From this perspective, there is a 'core' of the event named World War II, a 'central paroxysm' as he calls it, that lasts from 1941 until 1945 and during which stage the war was 'genuinely worldwide'; but there were also a series of events from 1931 to 1953 that were connected with this 'core', such as the 'German invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Italian occupation of Albania, the Spanish Civil War, the Japan–Soviet border wars and the Soviet–Finnish Winter War', and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia that show its true global scope (pp. 249-251, See also Buchanan, 2019, pp. 1-5)

Again, what is interesting about this analysis is not only the widening of the framework as such, which is a mostly known and also debatable argument, but the aspects in global–non Western–history that Buchanan is able to highlight throughout, as well as the conclusion at which he arrives. Regarding the former, he has the chance to comment on aspects of the war that - at least until recently - have not been dealt with analytically by historical scholarship as they remained

neglected by traditional historiographical narrations of the war. Such aspects include, for example, the almost arbitrary movement of people from their homelands to entirely unlikely destinations for the purposes of the war, the effect that this movement had to the lives of these people, the extensive role of women, the role of the colonial system and the effects the war had on global environmental issues. It is hard to fail to see how all these new aspects that Buchanan highlights through his analysis are directly related to presentistic concerns, be it globalization, gender equality, postcolonial discourse, and climate change respectively. So, presentism as such does not seem to be the problem in this case, as the analysis moves into legitimate corridors or historiographical discourse, not even claiming to reveal the 'one true narrative' but rather to provoke some thoughts on several issues that are worthy of consideration due to their contemporary relevance.

The reframing of the Second World War's periodization poses a problem for traditional historiography because it challenges the prevalent hierarchy of Western chronology and the corresponding prevalent position it secures for the western allies to the war, politically, ideologically and culturally[2]. The conclusion at which Buchanan arrives is relevant to this because it questions the present legitimacy of the American hegemony, which in many ways formed the dominant narrative of World War II, at least as taught in universities in Europe and the US and the areas of their cultural influence. Looking at the position of East Asia we can clarify the importance of this observation even more. Yukiko Koshiro, writing on the theater of the war in Asia calls it in his introduction by many names: the 'Greater East Asia War,' the 'Sino- Japanese War,' the 'Pacific War,' the 'Fifteen Years War,' 'World War II,' the 'US- Japanese War,' the 'Far Eastern War,' the 'Anglo- American- Japanese War,' the 'Soviet- Japanese War,' and the latest, the 'Asian- Pacific War,' invented in the 1990s' (2013, p. 10). It becomes clear from the variation of the names – some more than others – that World War II can acquire many different dimensions seen from different perspectives. The term 'Fifteen Years War', for example, shares similarities with Buchanan's and Bosworth's analyses. The main argument of Koshiro's book, like Buchanan's, is that terms like the US-Japanese War or the Pacific War, mostly coined by the US historiography, tend to put too much focus on the events after Pearl Harbor and downgrade both the Sino-Japanese conflict and the complicated Japan-USSR relations in favor of a Western-centric narrative. For these reasons, the author proposes the term 'Eurasian- Pacific War'.

The different names of the war are also presented in the volume A new modern History of East Asia (Fuchs et al., 2018) written by a multiethnic group of historians that tried to write a history of the region based on a consensual understanding of the recent past and away from nationalistic interpretations. Their analysis shows that there had been a total war between Japan and Chi-

2 In this regard, Dipesh Chakrabarty recognized in the early 1990s that: 'It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history-that is, 'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university-is concerned, 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe.' In this sense, 'Indian' history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.' D. Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?' Representations, No. 37, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories (Winter, 1992), p. 1

na starting on July 1937 (Marco Polo Bridge Incident) which cannot be seen separated from the conflict after 1941 (and, of course, 1939). Instead of making sense of the war in East Asia through Western-centric categories like 'Pacific War' or 'global war against fascism' (fascism was, after all, a European phenomenon), it would be enlightening to add and rethink through categories such as '[Chinese] War of Resistance against Japan' (September 18th, 1931- August 15th, 1945), 'China Incident' and even 'Greater East Asia War', a term that was given by the militaristic government of Japan on December 12th, 1941 and its use was prohibited by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, for being 'ultra-nationalistic' and 'racist' (Koshiro, 2013, p. 272).

Interestingly, the formation of the post-war historical consciousness and the new framings did not escape the tensions of the Cold War. American scholars based in Asian research centers in US universities focused on integrating the historical narratives of Japan and the US to demilitarize and democratize Japan while strengthening the US-Japan alliance. This effort of 'modernization' of Japan in the US political standards found opponents among the Japanese historians, who adopted another ideologically socialist narrative on the war criticizing the structures that led to militarism and imperialism, inevitably referring to the military adventures in mainland East Asia. In this sense, Louise Young argues that both of these groups, intentionally or unintentionally fighting on the big arena of the Cold War, used the present and its concerns as a guideline for their historical interpretations, but at the same time denied presentism by projecting the accusation to their opponents. 'The Japanese scholars blasted modernization theory as nakedly political and condemned the effort to introduce it to Japan as "American cultural imperialism", while the Americans derided Japanese "Marxist–Leninist" historiography for fighting present enemies in treating their past' (Young, 2023, p. 5).

The modernization argument can in general be regarded as heir to the Western ideas of constant evolution and progress that characterize the Western time regime. However, in the case of Japan it also created a break in the past, a discontinuity that separated the past from the present through a superficial narrativization of the war years, a feature that we saw in the first section to be a result of the ontological distinction between the past and the present that traditional historiography claims. In other words, in order for the narrative of a modern Japan to present itself as an ally of the US in the post-war period it had to be seen mainly as a war combatant in the Pacific - a war that remained civilized as far as war goes - while its atrocities and barbaric behavior in Asia - especially in the Chinese war front needed to be silenced. The only way for a continuity to be established was, then, the creation of a discontinuity in the form of undermining the importance of the Asian theater of the war.

The new narrative attempted to present the historical evolution of Japan in a light that hid the Japanese war atrocities in China, as well as the post-war dependence on the US imperialistic system and Cold War policies and highlighted its independent way towards becoming an enlightened – and thus quasi-western – modern state, starting from the Meiji Restoration in 1861 and ending in the post-war economic miracle. This is a clear example of how presentism can be

'westernwashed' if it serves western imperialist interests while it is to be anathematized if it provokes them. In this light, we can better understand the modernization debate between Japanese and American scholars and the accusations of presentism coming from both sides. The problem that arises is that we do not have to do with two equal historiographical perspectives: in the case of the American scholars, they saw themselves as carriers of a higher culture that would free Japan from its 'bad' pre-modern mentalities through rigorous scientific studies following the American model. Many Japanese scholars, on the other hand, rejected such western-centric logic and tried to build a narrative that was consistent with their previous forms of historical consciousness that did not give a prevalent position to westernized thinking, but followed Japanese norms, which also meant resisting the emergence of a narrative that put inconsequent emphasis on the Pacific War in relation to the war in China.

Based on this and following the logic applied above, it is not hard to understand why the main debate on the matter was about the 'modernization of Japan'. The historical contextualization of the war based on the US standards (and the US interests, of course) was supposedly pursued in the name of good science and functioning politics that was antithetical to the presumably inferior way in which Japanese scholars and public understood their relation to the past and, consequently, their future. Behind this, however, was a hidden belief in the superiority of the Western temporal regime, one that was confident that its own historical understanding was to be preferred by everyone else without further assessment.

The fact that the West, the US in particular in this case, won the war and was, therefore, in a position to force its ideological presuppositions into reality is not irrelevant to what happened, and it strengthened this belief even more. Although it would be unfair to judge the historians' intentions in handling Japanese history like this, it is still fair to state that their stance was a big boost to the purposes of US foreign policy in Asia, especially after the 'loss' of China to the communist revolution.

However, this is not the whole story. As Conrad argues, even though the time regime that underlies this historiographical explanation is influenced by western ideas of time, temporality, and progress, it was not something entirely foreign to the cultures that adopted it. On the contrary, by adopting the capitalistic way of development, East Asian nations (as well as other parts of the world) and primarily their elites (Conrad, 2018, pp. 5-10) needed to adopt such cultural interpretations to enhance their positions both in their respective societies and the global geopolitical order. Even so, adopting the Western time regime for their own good and not just because they were victims of cultural imperialism did not save these cultures from the actual western imperialism that dominated the world order during the 20th century. This means in our case that their place in the world and their right to interpret history through their own present was not recognized as legitimate because when imperialism saw that it lost the game, it simply changed the game (p. 10-16).

Based on the above remarks, which in no way exhaust the topic, we can claim that in the case of the Second World War and the role of East Asia in it, there is an entanglement between presentism on the one hand and westerncentrism on the other. While the interpretations of the war in its aftermath were in many, if not all cases, connected with presentistic political concerns that had to do with the Cold War and the position of the superpowers on the global chessboard, it was the narratives that denied the legitimacy of the US-centric - and consequently wester-centric - narrative that were rejected because of their 'presentistic intentions' and silenced. Antipresentism in this sense was not a methodological tool to enhance historical understanding but a political tool that was used in order to make certain narratives prevail over others. This is evident in the case of Japan but also in the cases of Germany, China and the USSR, to mention only the most prevalent. Although this form of antipresentism is still existing today, the change in the geopolitical balance has allowed for new narratives to emerge that challenge the westerncentric dominant one. These narratives are no less politically motivated, but at least they allow - whether they want it or not - a pluralistic viewpoint of history, a virtue on which we are going to focus our interest next.

The Creative-Pluralistic Virtues: How the 1619 project can liberate American history from established truths and… from itself

Presentism allows us to construct from new perspectives/arguments new narratives/understandings about the past that serve a present purpose. This becomes not only a critical effort to shake and question our rooted certainties but also to construct new perspectives about the past and start moving beyond western centric frameworks. The periodization of World War II and the understanding of the roles that nations played provide us with incredibly interesting examples of how presentism can expand our understanding of the past. Let us now look into one more case that illustrates how new perspectives can emerge in response to present contemporary concerns. This new example will highlight not only the recognition of the creative enterprise of history but the importance of having multiple interpretations of a historical event. In this sense, we argue for a pluralistic virtue of presentism.

The 1619 Project has opened a can of worms that has caught American academics, teachers and the general public debating about when we should place the beginning of US history and why. Part of the challenge and critique that the project invites is to question if 1776 (declaration of Independence) is the founding moment of the US nation. The typical origin story of the United States, says Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of The 1619 Project, begins with 'colonists inspired by noble ideals declaring independence and launching the American Revolution. In this version, the American Revolution is a timeless story of the defense of freedom and the rights of all humankind.' This well-established narrative, Jones continues, 'worked as a powerful source of national cohesion for white Americans.' But is that origin story the same for every American, Jones asks? (2021, p.

62) And, furthermore, does that origin story help explain the nation's persistent inequalities? Jones and the 1619 contributors think not.

Therefore, the 1619 project constructs a new perspective of U.S history. They argue that the arrival of the slave ship White Lion to the coasts of Virginia in 1619 should be the origin date of the U.S nation:

> Like all origin stories, this one seeks to explain our society to itself, to give some order to the series of dates, actions, and individuals that created a nation and a people. In doing so, we argue that much about American identity, so many of our nation's most vexing problems, our basest inclinations, and its celebrated and unique cultural contributions spring not from the ideals of 1776 but from the realities of 1619, from the contradictions and the ideological struggles of a nation founded on both slavery and freedom. (p. 61)

This thesis has steered enormous debates and passionate discussions. Sweet's article against presentism chose this case as a paradigmatic example that should be criticized and even condemned. Sweet's conclusion is that presentistic accounts of history, like the 1619 project, are not history, but dilettante efforts that view 'the past through the prism of contemporary racial identity' (Sweet, 2022).

On this note, defenders of presentism such as David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale have argued that part of the challenge of presentistic approaches is that they require 'that we think of the past as something other than an object of knowledge that is sealed off, separated from the present [...]' (2016, p. 87). Strategic presentism, they argue, invites us to think critically about the past in the present in order to change the present. If the past effectively and causally produces the present, then we need to understand how we got here.

The main point is that present frameworks are, in fact, crucial to understand and provide new narratives about the past. Critical race theory in the case of the 1619 project motivates us to explain how instances of present social injustice can be traced back to a past that still has consequences for us today. By changing the point of focus from 'founding fathers' to 'slavery' the project brings forth a historically marginalized narrative that allows us to recalibrate the place that slavery and black Americans had in forging the nation. Interestingly, rethinking American history through the use of critical race theory is frowned upon, but the classic narrative that reaffirms nationalistic myths about white men founding a Nation is not. One is viewed as a dilettante-presentistic effort, the other as history. Just as the non-western narratives of the Second World War were frowned upon and condemned as presentistic and politically laden, The 1619 Project is viewed with the same suspicious eyes. The intimate and undeniable relationship between politics and history cannot be more transparent.

Historical narratives are not just telling us a story about 'the past'. If we agree that historical frameworks are motivated and built within the present, then they not only allow us to think about the past in a certain way but also afford us the possibility to think critically about our present and how it came to be. Far from being careless with the past, presentism allows us to engage critically with rooted historical stereotypes that have shaped the ways that we think about ourselves today.

Again, Joan Scott has emphasized that scholars such as herself 'asked not only where the women were in what had passed for conventional historiography, but how and why they had been excluded for so long'. This is a question that is made from a present valorization of women having no apparent place in historical events. We may add that the questioning and retelling of history through feminist eyes would not have been possible without the several different waves of feminist movements and without several different concepts which enabled new analyses that started to dismantle certain sexist and misogynistic stereotypes. The concept of feminism itself, patriarchy, emotional labor, harassment, etc., but also the history of everyday life, microhistory, subaltern studies etc. opened up a whole new world of historical research and allowed us to understand women's involvement in history from a different approach.

Part of the motivation to reexamine the past in light of new perspectives and to create new narratives has to do with a preoccupation not only with the past and highlighting silenced subjects, but with the understanding of how present circumstances came to be. The 1619 Project is insistent on this: why is it that black people are more vulnerable in America than white folk? The answer to this question is to rethink and retell the history of the Nation.

Another important thing to remark is that the format of The 1619 Project is quite different from traditional history books. It is not a monographic presentation of an alternative view of American history, but rather it is a journalistic effort that has literary and poetic entries that seem quite refreshing to new generations. Thus, it is not only the creation of a new narrative of American history, it is the creation of a new mode of historiographic representation. In this sense, the creative virtue is two-folded: it not only creates new perspectives but it opens the door for new ways of presenting and communicating history.

Some of the critiques that the 1619 project has faced are anchored in the rejection of presentism and using contemporary frameworks – like critical race theory – to understand the past. But other sources and authors have criticized it because of its use of a 'single origin story'. This is not unique to The 1619 Project, national histories are charged with it. Marc Bloch called this way of approaching history an obsession with origins. The idea is that to coin a specific moment in time as the beginning of something and have that as the explanation for the event itself can be misleading. Bloch, for example, criticized etymologists for thinking that to provide 'the original' meaning of a word is to explain the word itself. This is indeed problematic because the way in which words – and historical events for that matter – are used or interpreted change with time. Their meaning

becomes socially grounded, not genetically determined. This is indeed something that our understanding and vindication of presentism seeks to overcome. There is no 'original origin'; historians transform events into causes and frame beginnings and endings depending on the moment they are writing and thinking about history.

But even more than that there is a second problem with the idea of a single or unique origin story. That is to make a story of a person– a town or a nation– the definitive story of that subject. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie argues in a very compelling piece that 'The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is [that they make] one story become the only story.' Adichie continues to argue that if you want to dispossess someone of their history:

> …the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story' (2021).

Thus, there are many different stories depending on where you place the emphasis of analysis.

It is in this line that Annette Gordon-Reed criticized The 1619 Project because it has a 'highly edited origin story' and this she insists, 'winds the Black experience tight, limiting the imaginative possibilities of Blackness—what could be done by people in that skin' (2021, p. 93). In other words, to place an origin as a single story hijacks people of their autonomy, it determines who they were and what is expected of them. Although the project is fundamental to understanding the place that slavery had (and its consequences today) it can run the risk of encapsulating the unique role that black people had in America.

If we agree that present motivations and frameworks allow us to criticize rooted views about the past and also create alternative narratives about it, then it seems that multiple interpretations of the past are inevitable. Because each interpretation serves different functions – like explaining prevalent injustice and racism in America – one cannot reduce historical subjects or events to their origin or to a single story. This 'flattens' historical experiences and neglects other narratives that are also important and constitutive of a subject. This argument finds ethical support in Hanna Meretoja's The Ethics of Storytelling. A story, she argues, has the potential to cultivate our sense of 'how subjects of action are not merely historically conditioned, but also capable of new initiatives; instead of being destined to simply follow dominant cultural narratives, they are capable of shaping those narratives and creating their own' (2018, p. 92).

In this sense, Emily Sclafani argues that The 1619 Project should also include stories of black colonialists 'that drew on talents they honed as participants in a broader Atlantic system to obtain

freedom, accumulate property, and demand the full recognition of their rights as citizens.' Stories like that of Anthony Johnson for example– who was captured in Portuguese Angola, survived servitude in the 1620s in Virginia and went on to compete freely and successfully with his white neighbors– dissuaded Scalfani 'from equating early Black American history exclusively with the experience of enslavement and reminded me that historical progress is not always linear'.

To say that a 'presentist history' is desirable only because it serves a particular present purpose is not the conclusion to be drawn here. Plurality and multiplicity of histories is what allows us to move away and avoid a single origin story that determines and defines historical subjects. Because there is not only one way to tell a story and because there are multiple present circumstances and epistemic tools that motivate the construction of a historical narrative, we should understand pluralism as a virtue of presentism. Restricting historical subjects to one story makes people that one story and nothing more. Present motivations and epistemic frames enable us to see the past and its subjects in new lights and thus, not constrain or determine them by one way of seeing. Presentist approaches, rather than conservative understandings of history, are more open to pluralism because they start with the commitment that the present influence the past and viceversa. This inevitably fosters the idea of multiple pasts rather than just one. In this sense, our understanding of presentism with its pluralistic quality enables freedom because, as Hayden White masterfully explained, we are free to choose who we are –our past – and what we can become –our future (1966).

An example of a different narrative of American history can be found in the recent book Indigenous Continent published in 2022 by the Finnish historian Pekka Hämäläinen. This book places native Americans and not slavery or the founding fathers at the center of the narrative. This account challenges the Western view that Native Americans were 'no match for the newcomers and their raw ambition; [were] their superior technology, and lethal microbes penetrated Native bodies with shocking ease' (2022, p. 12). In this version of American history Hämäläinen argues, Indians were doomed, and Europeans were destined to take over the continent. Nevertheless, he claims that even though by 1776 various European colonial powers claimed nearly all of the continent for themselves, it was Indigenous peoples and powers that controlled it:

> The maps in modern textbooks that paint much of early North America with neat, color-coded blocks confuse outlandish imperial claims for actual holdings. The history of the overwhelming and persisting Indigenous power recounted here remains largely unknown, and it is the biggest blind spot in common understandings of the American past. (p. 13)

It is from a multilayered understanding of Native American communities and through an analysis of kinship as a form of political power, diplomacy and war-making that Hämäläinen provides a new history of the US, one that does not reduce Native Americans to mere 'props in the United States' violent transformation into a global power' (p. 16).

The idea that we want to convey here is that embracing present motivations, frameworks and pluralism invites us to be epistemic skeptics and thus, not accept or give automatic privilege to certain historical accounts. The 1619 Project is powerful because it tells a story that recalibrates the place that slavery had in the forging of America and connects that to present injustice. But one thing that the project leaves out is Native Americans and their role in the construction of the nation. It is difficult, impossible one might argue, to include every perspective in one historical account. But it is because of this that presentism and its critical endeavor should always welcome pluralism and remind us that critical engagement with historical accounts also involves not giving them an automatic privilege. Presentism should be about vindicating plurality and not conforming with a single origin story. Understanding different views of history and what purpose they serve in the present is vital to not only appreciate new understandings of certain events, but also to recognize that multiple histories serve different present purposes. Understanding those purposes is vital to understanding how the past is constructed. Again, past and present are not separated, they both influence each other and allow us to understand circumstances of today and also ways that we can rethink the past to change and reimagine our present and future.

Conclusion

The appeal to specific historical facts is a vital element of every historical analysis, but it may not always offer solutions to political debates regarding the methods and uses of history. The reconsideration of the beginnings of World War II helps to dismantle rooted certainties and allows for new enlightening perspectives on the events in Asia, the Pacific, and elsewhere apart from Europe. Similarly, the year 1619 opens a new door for questioning the beginning of US history. These new approaches help us to critique, question and reevaluate the mainstream narratives that have prevailed for so long and start incorporating new and different perspectives.

Thus, what we attempted to do in this piece was to expose the main arguments for and against presentism to finally highlight virtuous aspects that we–and others–consider to be essential assets of presentism in historical inquiry. To serve this purpose, we proposed three main virtues of presentism: critical, creative and pluralistic. The first one urges historians to reconsider and be wary of the framework under which they look at and analyze historical events, questioning not just 'the facts' around them, but also the cloak of temporality with which they are endowed. The critical virtue that presentism entails reveals that the present is an important factor for historical understanding and enlightens the ways in which it affects it. In the case of post-war Japan, for example, our analysis shows how it was present interests that formed the respective interpretations of the past, but the denial of anti-presentism to even consider such an option opened the door to history being used demagogically.

Critical history is always accompanied by a creative virtue that turns the light on to new is-

sues, problems and questions and also new understandings based on the needs of the present. New perspectives and frameworks generate new connections by creating different continuities between events. What may seem unconnected at first becomes related by means of a narrative that relocates dates, events, characters and occurrences. As the example of the founding of the United States shows, there can be a narrative that builds the identity of America on the values of democracy and freedom. This narrative makes continuous the end of the Civil War and the signing of the Constitution with the present and current standards of the US. The 1619 Project, on the contrary, makes continuous the arrival of the first slave ship to the coasts of Virginia with the current injustices and inequality that pervades the US and thus makes this the founding moment. The relationship between times and events change depending on the frame that we use to explain a particular happening.

Thus, the creative virtue finds itself in a constant struggle with itself, promoting an interpretation that opens the historical field to new agents – descendants of African slaves in this case – only to re-question it as an opportunity to open it even more – to Indigenous people. Recognizing the constructive endeavor allows for the constant retelling of our past. The idea that we construct the past with present frameworks, motivations and using particular temporalities makes us realize that historical understanding as James Banner argues, is a fluid body of knowledge open to many readings that carries 'many varied meanings despite the normal human desire for stable, unchanging knowledge that can be relied on as indisputable. History is not and has never been inert, certain, merely factual beyond reinterpretation.'(2021, p. 8) In this sense, history is always anachronistic, or as Robert Doran puts it talking about White's work, it is literally chronological and figuratively anachronistic (2010, p. xxxi.) because it is always from the present that we assign and construct meaning about the past.

The goal here is not to establish a unique truth but to be able to understand that history is always political. It always gives voice to some and leaves others in the background because of the practical purpose that the story serves, being that the building of a nation or explaining contemporary inequalities. This is why plurality should be seen as a virtue of historiographical work. To say that the present always changes and gives meaning to the past because of present needs is also a way of saying that there is no god-eye view of the past. Rather it is always a construction that starts with what we are and know today. Tomorrow new needs will emerge and thus, new histories will be written that serve those needs. To recognize that our societies, our epistemic tools and our ways of seeing change is to start recognizing and accepting that our past changes as well.

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Authors

Theodor Pelekanidis. Postdoctoral Researcher. Ph.D. in History Humboldt University Berlin. MA Degree in Modern History, Aristotle University. MA Degree in Political Philosophy, Aristotle University. BA Degree in History and Archaeology, Aristotle University

Mariana Imaz. Postdoctoral Researcher. Ph.D. in Philosophy from UC, Santa Cruz. MA Degree in Philosophy from UC, Santa Cruz. MA Degree in Comparative Literature from University of Barcelona. BA Degree in History from UNAM

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