

History's responsibility, historian's responsibility: the 'CNV moment' as a turn point in the historiography of history of the present time and its new challenges

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History's responsibility, historian's responsibility: the 'CNV moment' as a turn point in the historiography of history of the present time and its new challenges¹

Abstract

This essay is based on the assumption that, in the Brazilian context, the 'CNV moment' has allowed the temporal turn in history to surface more explicitly, which has led historians of the present time to think about epistemological responses to define the field and the ways of working in it. The proposal is based on Hannah Arendt's idea of responsibility for the world, seen herein as a responsibility of history. In its second and largest part, the text goes through the idea of historian's responsibility, based on the triad proposed by Bedárrida (critical, ethical and civic), pointing out and reflecting on some issues of method and theory, such as multidisciplinary work and reflections on temporalities. As for the ethical and civic axes, which I now name social, the central analysis goes through the discussion of truth, unfolding into reflections on factual truth and truth of the method as a way of differentiating oneself from opinion, seeing these and other challenges for a historian who sets out to think through and write about their time.

Keywords: history of the present time; CNV moment; history's responsibility; historian's responsibility.

Responsabilidade da história, responsabilidade do historiador: o “momento CNV” como *turn point* da historiografia da história do tempo presente e seus novos desafios

Resumo

Este ensaio parte do pressuposto que, no contexto brasileiro, o “momento CNV” permitiu vir à tona de maneira mais explícita o giro temporal na história, que tem levado os historiadores do tempo presente a pensarem respostas epistemológicas para definir o campo e as formas de nele atuar. A proposta parte da ideia de responsabilidade pelo mundo, de Hannah Arendt, aqui entendida como uma responsabilidade da história. Na segunda e maior parte, o texto percorre a ideia de responsabilidade do historiador, a partir da tríade proposta por Bedárrida (crítica, ética e cívica) apontando e refletindo sobre algumas questões de método e teoria, como o trabalho multidisciplinar e as reflexões sobre as temporalidades. Quanto aos eixos ético e também cívico, que passo a chamar de social, a análise central perpassa pela discussão sobre a verdade, desdobrando-se em reflexões sobre a verdade factual e a verdade do método como maneira de diferenciar-se da opinião, entendendo esses e outros desafios do historiador que se propõe a refletir e escrever sobre seu tempo.

Palavras-chave: história do tempo presente; momento CNV; responsabilidade da história; responsabilidade do historiador.

¹ This is a heavily modified version of the text presented at the 5th International Seminar on History of the Present Time (2023). I would like to thank the CNPq and the FAPERJ for the grants that allow me to carry out my research. I would like to thank Alexandre Avelar, Francine Iegelski, Julián Fuks, and Renata Schittino for their discussions and reflections, which contributed to this paper. Special thanks go to the class of the course I taught at the PPGH UFF in 2024.1, “How to make History of the present time? Reflections on theory and method.”

"The poet is the dog of their time"
(Canetti, 2011, p. 14)

We live in a time of accelerated changes that are incited by and favor a neoliberal rationale. We live in a time, as Harmut Rosa (2019) says, in which people must run faster and faster, accelerate and innovate continuously just to stay in their place, and this leads to an 'existential impossibility.' We live in a time of burning climate crisis. We live in a time in which religious issues are increasingly entering the secular State. We live in a digital age in which information, false information, and instant content proliferate at an ever-increasing pace and are forgotten the next second. We live in a time of profuse interpretations of the past, sometimes denialist. All of these factors are major components for us historians to diagnose that we have experienced a change in the perception of the temporal structure. For historians who work with the military dictatorship and the transitional justice process, or more generally with authoritarian regimes, this transformation still constitutes a change of key from 'a past that does not pass' to the building of a 'past of multiple narratives, sometimes disconnected and untimely.'

These characteristics, among others, are representative of a 'perpetual present,' as Jérôme Baschet (2018) says, or of an 'actualist' present, in the proposal of Brazilian historians Mateus Pereira and Valdeir Araújo (2019), or even, through the well-known formula of presentist regime, by François Hartog (2003)². In this way, how can we make history of the present time that does not fall into the 'traps of the moment' and that is not reduced by the simplifications of an 'official or militant history'³, nor reduce a historian to the role of 'memoirist?' How can we think through a presentist present time? If we observe a change in temporal perception, can we also think of epistemological responses to define our field and the ways of acting in it?

I propose this reflection based on a major point that defined the creation of the field, back in the 1970s: the idea that history of the present time's

² Obviously taking into account that the three proposals have their particularities, but that they all affect the issue of changes in temporal perception and the ways how they are understood.

³ The initial part of this question has been inspired by Baschet's (2018, p. 21) formulation on the social role of a historian.

witnesses are alive and, therefore, it is provided with a temporal marker by the living and the survivors. It seems to me that in order to account for this 'new moment,' in which the excess of memorials and the uses of the past have overflowed into the multiple versions of history, which, *a priori*, is not an issue; history of the present time could start from the assumption that a historian is the very witness⁴, an observer of their time, since their perspective is a tributary both of their life experience – their convictions and their commitments – and of their method and, therefore, they are also its player. In this case, those temporal markers fall by the wayside, because the present to be observed by a historian starts from what is current to them. Thus, this essay aims to initiate a dialogue to think through these issues based on canonical ideas such as 'responsibility for the world' by Hannah Arendt (1954) and 'historian responsibility' by François Bédarida (2003). The purpose is to demonstrate how a historiography of the present time 'seen from the South' (Arendt; Lohn, 2019) has worked to respond to these challenges that have arisen, in the Brazilian case, especially since the 'CNV moment,' and how a new history of the present time, which has been created by means of our concerns and reflections, can contribute to opening up future perspectives in this scenario.

History's responsibility

The diagnosis is clear: in a presentist time, the 'horizon of expectation' is blurred and closed, although we recognize that the way of experiencing time is not uniform (Müller; Jegelsiki, 2022, p. 17). The French historian Jérôme Baschet, who has been studying the Chiapas movement in Mexico for years, is categorical: "if the perpetual present bases its domination on forgetting the past and denying the future, history must strive to reestablish, in the same movement, the memory of the past and the possibility of the future" (Baschet, 2018, p. 29, our translation). The author adds: "rejecting the tyranny of today

⁴ Without disregarding the importance of a historiography of the 'age of testimony,' in the great expression by Annette Wieviorka (1998), herein I am grounding myself in the lexicography of the word *witness*: a person who certifies or can certify what they saw or heard; a person who, through their words, ideas, or actions, testifies to some thinking, in our case, historical: an observer and creator who, through their work, provides a specific image of the period in which they lived.

presupposes an indispensable historical consciousness to break the illusion of the end of history and reopen the perspective of a future that is not the repetition of the present” (Baschet, 2018, p. 29, our translation). And I add: of the past as well.

In a short text entitled *The history to come?*, François Hartog (2018, p. 75-78, our translation) argues that historians must strive for the ‘openness of history.’ According to the historian, this openness involves liberating the possibilities of the past that were not able to come true. The past is not (only) the past; it is the unrealized future of the past that feeds the future and, by linking the past and the future, it can allow for effective transmission and meaningful action in the sense of an effective movement between past, present, and future.

Although there is pessimism in the context introduced by Hartog (and in many of the other authors who developed, and based on him, their concepts about an extended present), the historian points out that one of the possible keys to opening up the future is history’s responsibility. Hartog is an attentive reader of Hannah Arendt (one of the bases for thinking of the concept of regimes of historicity). And the German philosopher, in a post-World War II world, where the threat of an atomic catastrophe would implode the existence of a future, begins to reflect on the care that we must take with the future and how we must fight for it, since “action in the present has to do with a future to be chosen” (Schittino, 2022, p. 16).

In her text “The crisis of education,” included in the famous collection *Between past and future*, Arendt's concern with the subject shows that adults take a responsibility for the education of children that can be seen as a responsibility for the world. This process is inherent to the human condition, since “each generation turns itself into an old world” (Arendt, 2011, p. 226), in such a way as to prepare a new generation for a new world. Taking responsibility for the future is taking responsibility for the past. Grasping the notion of responsibility not from a liberal viewpoint, since it is not a responsibility for oneself, but rather a responsibility in connection with the world.

An expert in Arendtian thought, Renata Schittino interprets this collective responsibility for the world as a historical responsibility. For the historian, historical responsibility is this new connection with the future and the past: “responsibility is what can be glimpsed between the past and the future – ‘as if’ in a temporal gap. Becoming aware of the past, as past, but not for that reason, seeing oneself as disconnected from it” (Schittino, 2022, p. 16).

Therefore, it is not an automatic process towards the future (as from a modern perspective of temporal experimentation), nor towards the past. According to Schittino, the notion of responsibility requires the perspective of history as a path in its continuities and discontinuities: “a process that is not autonomous, nor automatic, nor has a meaning in itself and, for this very reason, requires people to take the consequences of their actions, think about them, break with them.” (Schittino, 2022, p. 17).

If history has a responsibility for this ‘becoming,’ what would be a historian’s responsibility? To be more specific: the responsibility of a historian who sets out to look at their time and help translate it?

Historian’s responsibility

In the texts collected in the book *Histoire, critique et responsabilité*, the French historian François Bédarida structures the issue of historical knowledge around the idea of historian's responsibility based on three axes:

Critical Responsibility - the way the profession itself is practiced;

Ethical Responsibility - the values it advocates;

Civic Responsibility - what I name a historian’s social role.

In a history of the present time, these three axes are not only inseparable, but it is in the practice of their *métier* that the historian goes through a constant process of (re)elaborating them. This constant re-elaboration takes place precisely because a historian of the present time deals with a history that is still open, “before our eyes” (Müller; Jegelski, 2022, p. 12). The critical responsibility pointed out by Bédarida comes from the very methodology used by a historian (which includes the choice of their multiple sources and checks, in addition to

the theoretical basis, which enables criticism to constitute a narrative). It is through this method that we elaborate our work and this serves as an analogy in the epigraph of this essay, written by the Bulgarian Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti. An analogy that he himself makes between the poet (the writer, the historian) and the dog that:

[...] runs through the domains, stopping here and there; arbitrary in appearance and yet tireless; sensitive to the whistles of its master, but not always; ready to be instigated, rather hard to be restrained, its is driven by an inexplicable depravity: it sticks its wet snout into everything, leaving nothing aside; it turns back, starts again: it is insatiable (Canetti, 2011, p. 15).

And it seems to me that in this regard, Latin American historiographic making, and particularly Brazilian historiographic making on history of the present time, has been active, proposing various methodological and theoretical resources. In this topic, I would like to highlight two points: the use of an interdisciplinary methodology as a key resource for the making of history of the present time and the view that the temporal turn⁵ in history has guided the reflections and the way in which historians have been working on the issue of the present time and temporalities. I notice, of course, that this is not an exclusive domain of activity of historians of the present time. It seems to me to be a movement within historiography itself, but in the HPT there is fertile ground for these discussions and elaborations to emerge with force.

A preponderance⁶ of the 'new political history' in the historiography of Brazilian present time – whose fruits are highly recognized through a consistent literature – led historians, for some decades, to work with short time intervals, sometimes making it hard to see deeper processes and slower changes. There was also an incidence on very restrictive themes and perspectives to the detriment of a rather plural view of the situations. However, I recognize that it is key – and necessary in many cases – to look at “day-to-day” facts, which are sometimes missing in our studies. My main point of reticence is when ‘politics’ begins to be seen as a sphere autonomous from other spheres (social,

⁵ As the 1960s *linguistic turn* in science and philosophy (Clark, 2019, p. 17).

⁶ Claiming a predominance does not mean that I fail to recognize the many contributions of other theoretical matrices in studies on the themes that affirmed the field, with an emphasis on studies on the military dictatorship in their cultural and Marxist history aspects, for instance.

economic, cultural), tending to the risk that a historian pays little attention to the interactions, tensions, and overlaps that exist between these dimensions. The (ab)use of certain concepts that served to justify a certain objectivity of historical work seems to me to have helped, at times, in the making of a descriptive history of sources, but not very reflective, thus contributing to detaching the 'historical subject' from other human and social sciences.

Recognizing this drawback does not mean that the place of politics is not key in our analyses. Quite the opposite. Pierre Rosanvallon's reflections, for instance, show us the importance of making history of politics in conjunction with other social sciences. Rosanvallon proposes a method for thinking through history of social science by seeing that the study of political practices and strategies existing in civil society are also linked to a closer study of language and the making of discourses and their vocabulary. In this way, a historian removes politics from a contingent field to see it as the epicenter of multiple dimensions in life. According to the author, the goal is to make a conceptual history of politics a resource for understanding the present (Rosanvallon, 1995, p. 18), because it is seen that grasping the past and asking about the present participate in the same intellectual endeavor.

Thus, it seems to me that this historian, who began his career working in French trade unions, also has another political objective: that of his own political action in the present through ideas. In this sense, historians of the present need to prioritize analyses that seek to problematize the historicity of politics and society as a whole, since their critical view – their reflection – is a contribution to public debate.

The realization of a crisis with multiple variants that challenges the place of the university and knowledge directly affects human and social sciences – a place where the world is questioned. It is true that the idea of crisis is linked to the very establishment of history as a subject. However, the crisis described herein, which is linked to this temporal experimentation of a perpetual present, takes place through the intersection of two factors already highlighted by Gérard Noiriel (1996): 1- a practical aspect, linked to a neoliberal economic project that not only diminishes but also seeks to nullify the importance of human sciences

for the development of societies; 2- an epistemological aspect of the crisis of historical knowledge itself and, even more so, of a crisis of knowledge *tout court*.

A continuing resource in recent decades has been claimed, or rather reaffirmed, by several historians: Noiriél (1996); Droit and Reichherzer (2013); and Jablonka (2024); and also by political scientists like Yves Déloye (2023) and Diogo Cunha⁷: the production of a socio-history or a social science history. Müller and Jegelski (2022) reinforce the idea of interdisciplinary work, which should not be done through decontextualized theoretical and/or methodological borrowings, but through dialogue and incorporation of reflections from other areas, thus strengthening our specificity as a social science of time and, at the same time, reinforcing the broader idea of interconnected human and social sciences. Therefore, carrying out history of the present time today is part of this imperative that becomes interdisciplinary work⁸.

Since we are living in a period of change in the relationship between societies and their time, a new methodological attitude must be sought by historiography, as stated by Reinaldo Lohn and Emerson Campos (2017, p. 100), in view of the problems faced “and the need to formulate reflections that seek to encompass society and human interactions that no longer fit into a historical map drawn by the 19th century.” In this sense, it is key to break the idea of a linear (Newtonian) time focused on progress, which founded the historical subject. Thus, a univocal idea about time that, in fact, is plural in our societies. The historians from the Santa Catarina State University (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina [UDESC]) reinforce: “to think about time in its plural dimensions, in its various strata and layers that coexist in the present” (Lohn; Campos, 2017, p. 109), making it possible to provide the present with temporal thickness.

⁷ Contribution to the Central Seminar of the Observatory of Present Time (OPT), in October 2023.

⁸ At the OPT, a multidisciplinary laboratory that I coordinate at História UFF, its researchers have made a continuing effort to carry out multidisciplinary work at the intersection of history and literature; history and medicine; history and law, as well as history and other social sciences. An example of a successful study in this way is the dissertation by Matheus Moreto Rodrigues (2023), which sought to analyze the political dynamics and electoral results in the city of Londrina in municipal and presidential elections during the New Republic, proposing a historical narrative based on dialogue with Electoral Geography, a subject that systematizes issues such as context and spatiality, and with Political Science, to interpret electoral dynamics, both with the purpose of analyzing the electoral result. This study had the participation, in its submission, of a political scientist and a historian.

Speaking both of plurality and multidisciplinary, the category time has increasingly been the object of reflection in various areas of the human and social sciences (Muller; Legelski, 2022, p. 12). And if the idea of linear time was crucial to the foundations of historicism, it is worth recalling that, already at the end of the 19th century, the young Einstein showed that Newton's idea of space and time was a little different. Although our idea of time in the human sciences is ordinary, in the physical world the elementary laws that describe the mechanisms of the world are of a different order. But if it is true that history, when it was first formed as a subject, was inspired by the laws of physics, why don't we look at the discoveries of the 20th century in this field and see, for instance, what Hugo Fazio Vengoa named the phenomenon of "Einsteinization" of historical time, as time and space cannot be thought of separately?

The discoveries of quantum mechanics show us that this theory, according to physicist Carlo Rovelli⁹ (2017, p. 132), does not describe things "as they are," but rather how things "happen" and how they influence each other. Thus, quantum mechanics does not describe objects: it describes processes and events that consist in interactions between processes. Therefore, time has aspects of probabilistic indeterminacy (Rovelli, 2018, p. 172, our translation): it has a different duration in each pathway, different rhythms depending on its place and pace, thus showing an aspect of the dynamic field (Rovelli, 2018, p. 109, our translation). The idea deepens even further when we study quantum gravity, as for some physicists, like Carlo Rovelli, the idea of time ceases to exist because change is omnipresent¹⁰.

⁹ One day I was walking past a bookstore and saw the title *Order of time*. I was immediately enchanted, obviously remembering Hartog's work. But then I discovered that he was a physicist, and I was enchanted by reading Carlo Rovelli. I started buying all of his books and using them in the classroom in my courses on History of the Present Time. The result is that, at first, the students are surprised when they hear me talk about quantum mechanics, but little by little, the questions, inquiries, and connections that emerge are extremely interesting.

¹⁰ "The absence of the quantity 'time' in the fundamental equations does not mean that the world is frozen and immobile. On the contrary, it is a world where change is omnipresent, without it being ordered by 'Father Time': the innumerable events are not necessarily arranged in a good order, neither according to the long line of Newtonian time, nor according to the elegant Einsteinian geometries. Nevertheless, they are events, a change, a future. The future is diffuse, dispersed, disordered, but it is becoming, not stagnation" (Rovelli, 2018, p. 116, our translation).

Herein, it does not come to investigating physical theories, but simply showing that even readings that completely escape our disciplinary domain can contribute to the gaining of insights in our work. This is not about transplanting (or transmuting) ideas from one area to another. Because, if on our macroscopic scale, we have the impression of seeing time passing – and the current sensation is of a time different from before; which passes faster and faster –, why not take the laws of physics into account (or inspiration) again to think through other possible ways of thinking about our relationship with time? Is it possible to abolish the temporal structure of the world that governs historical knowledge, or should we think of it in other dimensions, as physics itself might suggest? In this way, would it be possible to abolish the distinction between past and present, as some considerations already suggest? Wouldn't abandoning this distinction mean denying that there is change? And furthermore: wouldn't abolishing this distinction reinforce presentism? If we abolish it, do we need to build a new grammar whose verb declensions are in the past, present, and future? How can we think through temporal intertwining?

There are many questions that we can ask, and I believe that the field of HPT has contributed to this. To give a concrete example: Silvia Arendt and Reinaldo Lohn (2022) show how the UDESC program has conducted studies taking into account “the intense cultural mutations that govern the new meanings of ‘historical time’.” As in the study by Colombian historian Hugo Fazio Vengoa (2009) on the 1960s and their traces in the present. In 1983, Marina Franco (2023) demonstrates that that year, considered “the year of the transition to democracy” in Argentina, went far beyond those 365 days. Or the study by Francine Ilegelski (2021), who has thought of ‘magical realism’ as a category to see the Latin American present. In turn, Rodrigo Turin (2023) has investigated the relationship between the Anthropocene and the possible regimes of historicity that emerge in the present. Or even in my attempt (Müller, 2021) to outline an “68 epoch” of the Brazilian student movement (SM) through the idea of a cyclical time, with a descending and an ascending phase. I could also highlight the studies by Mateus Pereira, Alexandre Avelar, Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, Walderez Ramalho, among other historians. Another major Latin American reference is the study by Maria Inés Mudrovic. It was the Mexican experience of Chiapas that

led the historian Jérôme Baschet to see that in the Zapatista discourse there are four preexisting times (the cyclical time of the communities; the linear time of modernity and Marxism; the perpetual present of the neoliberal world; and a final time to come).

Introducing studies that seek to think through the temporal issue in this topic, of critical responsibility, is due to the effective centrality that it has come to occupy in our present, given the diagnosis presented initially. Obviously, working with various temporalities is not inherently original in history of the present time¹¹. The originality lies in how a historian today comes to see this issue to conduct their study (which did not necessarily appear in previous studies read in this key), since the historian is working with unfinished events and phenomena, with pasts that reverberate in the present or even with “issues that seemed forgotten or that were purposefully erased, but that resurface claiming their place in the present” (Lázaro, 2022, p. 56).

It is worth recalling that this historian also deals with the singularities and originalities of a time that is in the gerund. Thus, history of the present time – itself – subverts the historian's craft in its modern register: because it is not necessarily a matter of thinking through the past from the present, but rather thinking through the present from itself. And this operation takes place through the analysis of various temporalities, thus contributing to the dilution of temporal boundaries or to the establishment of others. Furthermore, as Elias Canetti wrote: “the true poet, as we see them, is at the mercy of their time – subject to it, servile, they are its most humble servant. They are tied to their time by a chain, short and indestructible, which holds them with the utmost firmness.” The historian is always subjugated to their time. It seems to me that in the work of a historian of the present time, there is a tension of its own, arising both from the desire and eagerness to see their time and from a rejection of the excesses of the present. Tension because it is not a given resolution, a concrete fact.

¹¹ The dossier “Fake news in the modern era,” coordinated by Andréa Doré and Luís Filipe Silvério Lima (2023), stands out..

It is no coincidence that Bédarida (2003, p. 325) claims – pretentiously – that a historian exercises a mission as “regent of time”. As a mediator between the past and the present, they work on and in time, ordering it and aiming to give it meaning (p. 305). To this end, they operate a mass of data and traces that constitute the common heritage of humanity. And here lies the weight of ethical and social responsibility. I would like to highlight a point in the author’s discussion that seems important to me for the diagnosis I am trying to find: the notion of truth.

Without disregarding all the subjective burden that a historian carries and, more profoundly, the postmodernist debate, Bédarida maintains the commitment to the objectivity of historical facts, above all in contexts of ‘abdication of reason’ and denialism. It is no coincidence that the French historian seeks support in Hannah Arendt. In her famous essay “Truth and politics”¹², the German philosopher wonders why lying is ‘justifiable’ in the public space and truth in power is instrumentalized. Thus, they engage in several considerations about the concept of factual truth, understanding that this and many other issues are inherent (and pertinent) to the “Historical Sciences”. However, she states that: “they do not constitute an argument against the existence of factual matter, nor can they serve as a justification for erasing the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and interpretation or as an excuse for the historian to manipulate the facts at will” (Arendt, 2011, p. 296). Mateus Pereira, Thiago Nicodemo, and Valdei Araújo (2022) recognize, albeit shyly, and problematize that a historiography “guardian of a certain realistic conception of truth is necessary” (Pereira; Nicodemo; Araújo, 2022, p. 170)¹³. To do this, they use the arguments contained in the German philosopher's 1972 essay, *Lying in politics*, in which she analyzes the secret reports of the *Pentagon Papers* case,

¹² This text was first published in *The New Yorker*, in February 1967, and was included in the book *Between past and future*, published the following year. For this reading: Arendt (2011, p. 282-326).

¹³ This is not the case of Joffily and Ramalho (2024, p. 7) for whom: “[...] the epistemological postulate of commitment to the truth, even when it is uncomfortable, is non-negotiable.” It was only during the final review period for the publication of this text that I came into contact with the publication by Mariana Joffily and Walderez Ramalho in the journal *Tempo* in 2024, which ends up dialoguing at various moments with my proposal presented herein. Some of them are stated in the footnotes.

showing how the organized manipulation of lies could corrupt democracy, leading to a defactualization of reality (Pereira; Nicodemo; Araújo, 2022, p. 175).

Arendt, in turn, was a friend and maintained elective affinities¹⁴ with Walter Benjamin, who carries in his practice and in his writings, according to literary critic Susana Lages, a double concept of truth: in addition to the Greek concept *aletheia*, relating truth to the process of knowledge, there is the Hebrew meaning of the word *émet*, which may be translated as *faithfulness*. As Lages (2019, p. 117) says: “the Hebrew word for truth means, above all, faithfulness, in the sense of ethical adequacy to precepts aimed at a practical action, historically situated.” According to literary criticism, Benjamin, whose context of writings is known, “was faithful not to tradition, not to truth, but to his memory.” Lages also points out that, although the Latin designation *veritas*, of adequacy that defines truth as an attribute of knowledge, has prevailed in Western culture, it is disconnected from experience, from practical action, a dimension dear to Benjamin¹⁵. That is why I come back to this reflection herein, because I believe that this ‘faithfulness to memory,’ or faithfulness to the historian’s practical action, was key to the turn of historiography in our field, an indelible mark of the ‘CNV moment.’

By ‘CNV moment’ I see the period that extends from the creation of the Access to Information Law (Law No. 12,527-11) and the one that created the National Truth Commission (Law No. 12,528-2011), in 2011, until the delivery of the final report of the National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade [CNV]), in December 2014. This ‘moment’ encompasses the set of actions, characters, and movements, including the activities of all the other commissions that were created within the period, which worked towards transitional justice in our country. It seems to me that this ‘CNV moment’ was a turning point not only in our historiographical literature on the present time in Brazil, but also in the reflection on our practice (in addition to being a central point of a change in

¹⁴ As introduced by Maria Francisca Pinheiro Coelho in: Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin (2020, p. 817-836).

¹⁵ Lages (2019, p. 116-121) discusses this issue at greater length and does not shy away from introducing the contrast between the various views and discussions attributed to Greek and Hebrew grammars. Thus, just as for her argument, for mine the importance is to highlight the sense of faithfulness to memory and to the practical action of a historian.

recent Brazilian history itself, which includes other political, economic, and social issues).

I see that before this 'moment,' historians operated mainly from the key "of a past that does not pass"¹⁶, typical of transitional justice processes, and, to do this, I take into account the memorial scenario about the dictatorial past in the New Republic introduced by Marcos Napolitano (2022). The historian shows that, although the liberal memory was hegemonic, the period coexisted with other memorial constructs (on the left-wing and also on the far right) around that recent past, which end up coming to the surface in the public debate after the CNV.

Thus, it seems that up until that moment – and here I am only sticking to a diagnosis – historians of the present time lived close to the dilemma posed by Bedarida: between a neopositivist *Charybdis*¹⁷ and a postmodernist *Scylla*¹⁸. This dilemma can be seen in the discussion between historians at the time preceding the establishment of the CNV, as I showed in some texts (2020, 2021): can a historian participate in a Truth Commission or not? Can we be committed to a 'historical truth,' since we create a representation of the truth? A historian is not a judge. And even issues related to the commitment (or not) to social needs. This 'clash' of ideas seems to me to have been purposeful for our historiography, as we began to pay more attention to these debates that refer to ethical issues and social engagement in our work.

Historians Alexandre Avelar and Mateus Pereira conducted a survey of discussions on memory, present time, and ethics in Brazilian academic history journals classified as Qualis A1 between 2010 and 2014. Just to mention the quantitative result (which serves as a demonstration of my argument), out of a total of 2,575 articles surveyed, 120 were related to memory; 10 were about present time; and only 4 articles had the word *ethics* in their titles. In other words, even though we are showing a very restricted universe herein, we have the idea that we did not make many reflections focused on the axis of ethical

¹⁶ For a seminal reference, see: CONAN, Éric; ROUSSO, Henry. *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*. Paris: Fayard, 1994.

¹⁷ Sea creature, in Greek mythology, protector of territorial boundaries at sea.

¹⁸ Beautiful nymph who turned into a sea monster.

responsibility. It would be a pertinent research study to complete and deepen this panorama for the period, even to deepen the idea of an ethico-political turn proposed by Marcelo Rangel and Valdeci Araújo (2015).

However, even if it comes to 'impressionism,' we can observe that this situation has changed. A quick search on the website of the journal *Tempo e Argumento*, using its search engine, reveals that the word *ethics* does not appear in any article before 2011; 9 articles were published between 2011 and 2014; and there were 11 articles between 2015 and 2023. In a 2018 article published in *Tempo e Argumento*, Marieta de Moraes Ferreira provides us with further data on the significant increase, since 2014, in the number of theses and dissertations on History of the Present Time, including studies on the military dictatorship. With this, Ferreira (2018, p. 89) points out "the relationship between the establishment of the Truth Commission and the Access to Information Law as responsible for creating a new dynamic for research on history of the present time."

After the 'CNV moment,' which obviously includes other social, political, and economic circumstances that Müller and Jegelski (2022) point out in an essay on present time in the New Republic¹⁹, we have made great strides and have seen with some astonishment the building of a "disconnected, untimely past established through multiple narratives," often denied or, as Jofflily and Ramalho (2024) say, distorted. As Bédarida (2003, p. 307) stated: "a pressing and hurried social need requires historians to simultaneously draw 'lessons' from the past, illuminate the present, and open paths for the future."

In light of this new moment, it seems that the controversies of the previous period not only no longer made sense, but we began to work from the perspective of finding ways to interpret our recent past and our present, as I have tried to shed some light on. Our present, which is hard to see because it is opaque and permeated by multiple pieces of information that often make our context illegible to many. And here the contribution of history of the present

¹⁹ In "O tempo presente da Nova República: ensaio sobre a história do político brasileiro," we propose a reading of the period, based on bibliographical discussion and some sources, by means of key issues that are addressed throughout the Brazilian republican history. See the book organized by us: *História do tempo presente: mutações e reflexões* (2022).

time can come in, which is seen as a social science: a writing that tells the truth and changes the world (Jablonka, 2024, p. 15). In this context, our methodological, ethical, and social commitment to the truth comes into play. As Ivan Jablonka (2024, p. 74) claims regarding the historian's work: "my work consists of asking questions about the world in order to be able to tell the truth about it," since the historical text communicates not only material evidence (including archives of various natures), but also the reality to which it bears witness (Jablonka, 2024, p. 115)²⁰. The aim here is to consider factual truth as a principle and use it as a historical method to ask about our present and, in this way, make it public.

To say this does not mean to deny the important postmodernist debate. On the contrary. It seems to me that the history of the present time that has been made incorporates certain reflections postulated by the various theories that are affiliated with this moment, since it sees and deals with a view of the historical record that is fragmentary and incomplete, and that is also attentive to the social forms of presentation and representation of truth; which sees that writing creates the possibility of subjectivation. It also recognizes its narrative and, therefore, literary potential, since it is aware that the precepts of scientificity and objectivity, linked to the origin of the subject, are already (or should be) overcome in our field. These precepts were criticized throughout the 20th century, having a highlight moment in the *Annales* or, later, in the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans Gadamer in his critique of historicism²¹. As Antoine Prost (2012, p. 257) mentioned, to designate a constitutive contradiction of our subject, "history affirms what is true; however, its truths are not absolute."

²⁰ It is worth recalling that Ivan Jablonka's work, with regard to the historical method, is strongly influenced by the writings of the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, his evidentiary paradigm and his reflections on distance, which are also considered herein, although they are not revisited. And speaking of influences on his work, we cannot fail to mention writers such as Annie Ernaux and Georges Perec.

²¹ "The naivety of the so-called historicism lies in the fact that it avoids such a reflection and forgets its own historicity by relying on the methodology of its procedure. At this point it is advisable to set aside this misunderstood historical thought and turn to another, which must be better understood. A truly historical thought must at the same time think of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to pursue the phantom of a historical object, which is the object of progressive investigation, and will it learn to recognize in the object what is different from its own, and will thus know both one and the other. The true historical object is not an object, but the unity of one and the other, a relationship in which both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding remain" (Gadamer, 1999, p. 448).

Therefore, the truths of history are relative and partial, as it is typical of a writing of the history of a present time that is unfolding. Furthermore, they rely on a load of subjectivity on the part of a historian (to 'see-read and interpret' the reality they observe) and this can become a major force in the method itself, since, inserted in this reality, they position themselves in this context and shows the pathway of their reflection²².

That is why, in this scenario, a historian can enhance their role as observer and player of their time. A player is someone who interprets; they can also be seen as persons who play a major role, who take an active part in a given context. Not with the naivety of thinking of this action as protest and complaint against the hoax. But because this can be one of our contributions in the public arena, in a time of global rise of the far right, which uses and abuses defactualization. In a present time where personal opinion about everything has become the normal, our reflection starts from critical, ethical, and social work. A contribution, as Rosanvallon demonstrates, seen as the possibility of our action within the political arena through critically construed ideas, because this is our academic/technical education and what differentiates us from those who express opinions. This academic/technical education, in fact, is something that we have fought for years to be recognized.

We live in a world where various meanings about the past are growing – and this can be read in a positive light – and where memorial reconstructions are sometimes disconnected from historical facts, which poses a problem for us. We live in a world where Artificial Intelligence (AI) makes any of us believe in possibilities that were previously unimaginable. Our view of the world – this fragmented, multiple world that often seems catastrophic to us – can contribute to the reflections that have thought of and sought to open up our time. And they can contribute precisely because we engage in a type of knowledge making²³ that, although discredited, we can contribute to preserving

²² For instance, "Je de méthode", as said by Jablonka (2024).

²³ As Caroline Bauer and Fernando Nicolazzi (2016, p. 819) show: "a historian is someone who, exercising a certain profession, is recognized and legitimized by the social, institutional, and epistemological forms that determine this profession: a diploma, a regulated profession, the authority conferred by peers, respect for the theoretico-methodological protocols that define the practice, etc." Or, as Tatyana Maia (2023, p. 28-29) claims: "historians do their work based

and renewing. Carlo Rovelli (2021, p. 11) states that the core of science lies in its ability to explore new ways of thinking of the world: "it is the ability we have to constantly ask about our concepts. It is the visionary force of a rebellious and critical thought capable of modifying its own foundations and redesigning the world from scratch." A way to contribute, in the same way, to the democratization of history, as Gerard Noiriel stated in the wake of Marc Bloch, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and other thinkers who were important for his development: "I immediately shared the key point: the desire to tell useful truths" (Noiriel, 2003, p. 5-6).

And if in this HPT a historian is both a witness and a player, that is why the meaning of the Hebrew word *émet* makes sense in this argument; because we, historians, begin to show with greater emphasis our faithfulness (in the sense of truth taken by Benjamin) to our practice and our reflections. And here it seems to me that we can make a greater effort to share with our readers the assumptions that guide our work: not only theoretical assumptions, but the path taken to reach the sources, the reason for the dialogue with certain authors and how we arrived at the interpretation of certain realities expressed in our narrative operation. Finally, we arrive at a doing by explaining what we have been doing. And this process can bring us closer to our readers, since they begin to see and follow our path.

Thinking of one's own reflection seems to me to be a path that many of us have pursued and that aims to sound like an important and informed voice in a world of production of parallel realities without support. As Hayden White himself said about the lack of distinction between "good and bad historiography": "to define this issue, we can always resort to criteria such as *responsibility* before the rules of evidence, the relative completeness of narrative detail, logical consistency, and so on" (White, 1994, p. 114, author's emphasis). Responsibility, as Arendt reminds us, has an intention and an action.

on sources and evidence, construe logical thinking and, above all, dialogue with pre-existing knowledge through debate with peers." Joffily and Ramalho (2024) also advocate the criticality of the method.

Thus, I believe that the 'CNV moment' was relevant for us to get here. It seems that our "lost treasure" (Müller, 2021) needed to be rescued. And we, historians, began to have a greater concern – would it be a greater responsibility? – with the practice of our *métier* and to think through it. In this way, the studies aforementioned by Avelar and Pereira, Marieta Ferreira, Caroline Bauer, Fernando Nicolazzi, Tatyana Maia, Mariana Jofilly and Walderez Ramalho, and a series of other historians, stand out. It seems to me that we began to think more of the public action in our work and our responsibility as intellectuals who operate a certain type of knowledge: historiographical knowledge. I refer to it in this way – in the public action of a historian of the present time – since the field of Public History has practices of its own²⁴. The two dimensions are not exclusive. They are often juxtaposed. And there is no contradiction in this.

Final notes

Paulo Knauss, thinking through historiography as a moral fact, tells us that ethical discussion leads to a consideration of the process of knowledge making. He reveals that it is necessary to take into account that the various moral forms surrounding knowledge reveal distinct identities of the social group that has the craft of History as its mark. Asking about the role of historical knowledge implies, among other things, recognizing historiography as a moral fact. In these terms, according to Knauss, addressing historiography as a moral fact means characterizing history as a collective value that is translated through the writing of history and its authors" (Knauss, 2008, p. 146).

Therefore, we can see history itself as a moral fact in the sense of understanding historical responsibility as the openness of a project for the future. The engagement of historians of the present time lies in the concern to look at their time when providing interpretations of a recent past, of a present that is unfolding, and these interpretations start from adjectives about a reality,

²⁴ In addition to the most common understanding of public history as historical literature, there are a number of historians who recognize shared authority as a method for the making of intersubjective knowledge recognized as valid by historical subjects (Mauad, 2018, p. 39).

and the path taken to reach them must be expressed. This demonstrates ethical engagement in the face of dilemmas posed when addressing, for instance, the proliferation of information and also when a historian seeks to see the various layers of the past in the present. And when I speak of this engagement, I am thinking of it from the perspective of the historian's triad of responsibilities – critical, ethical, and social – which, in fact, is unified. An ethics that shows itself as the unifying core of both the making of its criticism and its social engagement.

In a turbulent, troubled, and increasingly accelerated present, it seems to me that history's responsibility and historian's responsibility are the basis for thinking through the making of a history that is to come, of our future, because the time of responsibility is the future. Responsibility, by the way, is a feminine noun. And historiography has sought to think of this responsibility and provide paths worthy of the challenge.

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