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François Hartog
Chair of Historiography
École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, France

Marcin Rychter
Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw, Poland

Presentism and Beyond

François Hartog interviewed by Marcin Rychter

MR: Your academic interests seem to have shifted from Antiquity to metahistory and the problems of the present. Could you please describe this shift?

FH: I think that from the very beginning, since my first book, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, I was interested in addressing the question of holism. At that time, in the end of the seventies, there was a debate on the issue. So I was reading Herodotus, or trying to read him, and at the same time I was aware of the contemporary debates. Even when I was working on Antiquity, on Herodotus' or other ancient texts, there was always the idea not of being in the present, so to speak, but to address issues which were part of our intellectual environment.

MR: What was the dominating trend in that environment? Poststructuralism?

FH: It was not *post* at the time (*laughs*). It was more structuralism than poststructuralism. It was important for me, and Herodotus was important for me because he was presented, generally speaking, as the father of history in the West and at the same time as somebody still childish, so to speak, as real history was to start with Thucydides. This idea was staunchly promoted in the nineteenth century, especially by German historians. So at that moment, when anthropology was becoming the leading discipline, it was interesting to look at Herodotus not from the perspective of Thucydides (saying this is still something very new) but to see him as somebody who opened up a way of dealing with the different customs in the world which were important by themselves. So it was a proposal to read Herodotus for himself, not from the point view of Thucydides or from

the point of view of German historians of the nineteenth century. So my intellectual interests were always both historical and focused on contemporary debate. You can say then that this shift was not so drastic. At that time, when I was working on Herodotus and then on the French history of the nineteenth century, big questions surrounded the problem of writing history. It was, as you know, also a widely debated issue at that moment, when you had all these debates about the linguistic turn and all these kind of things that were talked about by people like Hayden White, for example. I wanted to reflect on the fact that history is something written, that it is not only a simple description of facts but that it uses rhetorical tropes and so on. Of course it was not a discovery, but something that was discussed at the moment.

MR: The idea of history as a kind of a discursive practice was typical for poststructuralism, wasn't it?

FH: Yes, absolutely. Even though I was never siding with people saying that anything goes as history. You probably know that historian, Michel de Certeau, who wrote this book entitled precisely *Writing of History*. I knew him and I started reading his work, however I was not in this trend or this perspective.

MR: Was De Certeau related to the protests of 1968?

FH: Yes, to some extent. He became known in 1968 because he wrote the small article; *La Prise de parole* [*The Capture of Speech*]. He claimed that in 1968 the students and the people had captured the speech such as people in 1789 did when they took the Bastille; there was this kind of analogy.

MR: Your last book is entitled *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. How would you define its key terms? What is a regime of historicity and what is presentism?

FH: So I moved from these kinds of preoccupations we were talking about to something different. The question of time and different experiences of time became more and more of an important issue for me. Actually, it was also the topic of Reinhart Koselleck's work and of the American anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins. I have read many of his books, but the one especially important for me was *Islands of History*, where Sahlins described the kind of history that you can find in the Polynesian islands. That is to say, all of us were still not far away from the world debate on people with history as opposed to people without history. Even at the end of the fifties and in the sixties it was still around. Sahlins said that the Māori people not only have history but that they produce history. The title *Islands of History* means that they completely produce their own history. That led me to the question, "What kind of history do you mean," and ultimately to asking, "What time... what experience of time do you have?" So with Sahlins on one side and Koselleck on the other, I arrived at this notion of *regimes of historicity* which is, by the way, not a Eurocentric category, by construction. It may be a bit of an awkward term or phrase, I agree. Let me explain it in a simple manner. We have these three categories: past, present and future, and I think we can acknowledge these categories and that they contend against each other as universal. The ways they are being experienced, organized, linked vary in different places and in different times. *Regimes of historicity* is the concept that helps us to look at the way the three categories are organized. The regimes themselves are only explanatory tools; they are not any kind of a metaphysical entity. They help to make it clear that if you are, for example, in the configuration where the past is the main category, then in order to know what to do with your own present (because this is always the question that history serves for), you start from looking at the past. The light comes from the past, so to speak. That was the great model in Europe which was called *historia magistra vitae*: history is there to give examples and by imitation (meant as the main instrument) you knew how to behave, how to address your own present situation. However, it does not mean you are reproducing the past. It means that the present and the future never exceed the past. This is what I mean by the Ancient Regime of Historicity, but the present and the future, by definition so to speak, are not supposed to go beyond what was before. This kind of experience of time lasted for a very long time. The idea

of *historia magistra* was introduced by Cicero and it lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. Of course, that does not mean that we did not have crises and questioning and other problems; and when this organization or configuration was no longer adaptable, the relation between the three categories changed. A big part of Koselleck's work is devoted to this moment of transition, to that big change at the end of eighteenth century that happened in Germany. In France, it was of course related to the revolution and from that moment the future became the main category. There is a very explicit phrase in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. At the end of the book (published in 1840) he said, "When the past no longer illuminates the future, the mind of man walks in darkness." It means that when the past illuminates the future, you know where you go.

MR: Would say, then, that Tocqueville still advocated the Ancient Regime of Historicity?

FH: No, he is precisely moving from the old one to the new one. When you had that light coming from the past, you knew where you were standing at and where you were going to. It is still the great model of *historia magistra*, but precisely with the revolution the light faded away. Forty years after the time of revolutionary millenarism Tocqueville had gone to America. By having crossed the Atlantic he looked at Europe, at the old world from the new world, and he understood that what was happening in Europe was exactly that great move toward equality. In a way, he travelled into the future which helped him to understand the old world. In my book I call it de Tocqueville's theorem, it gave the formula of the New Regime of Historicity. The future becomes the light and when you do not know what to do in your own present, you start by looking to the future. From then on we have what I call the Modern Regime of Historicity; which also means modern time – which had been experienced first in Europe and then in the United States from the end of the eighteenth century up to the middle of the twentieth. If the light comes from the future, it also means that you have to go as quick as possible toward this future and this is precisely the modern experience of time as acceleration. Most futurists of the that time, for example, believed in this reign of the future that we had to live up to. They wanted it to be as quick as possible and the present was not important for them – you have to sacrifice yourself in order to get it to move quicker. There are also all kinds of modern millennialisms and so on. This Modern Regime of Historicity had begun to be put into doubt in Western Europe at the beginning of the sixties and this process escalated in the seventies and eighties. People then began to doubt the future. The future was no longer open anymore; it was in the process of closing. In recent years, much has been written about this feeling. One of the political and economic expressions of that was the oil crisis of 1973; when the price of oil, for the first time, so drastically raised in such a short time. The Western and global economy was put into great difficulty. It was also the first time when a major political and economic decision was taken not by the West but by the organization of oil producers in the Middle East. This moment is important but I also think that the crisis came from far away. To put it very sharply, it comes from the impossibility to equate, after 1945, so called *progress* (technological progress, scientific, economic progress and so on) with the progress of humanity because of what happened during the Second World War; of the extermination of Jews, of course. Also, the First World War was still around. From then on, it became impossible to believe in the steady progress of humanity which was the main belief of the Enlightenment.

MR: This distrust in the ideas of the Enlightenment found its expression in the works of Lyotard and many other authors in the second half of the twentieth century...

FH: Yes, all these claims about the end of the great narratives and so on...

MR: So we ended up in some kind of an expanded present which is the Third Regime of Historicity?

FH: Yes, exactly. In the ancient regime, the past was the main and leading category. In the modern one, the future has taken its role. When both of these leading categories faded away or disappeared, so to speak, the

present remained and posited itself as the main category. But the question is, do we have now only one category? I think that we have experienced that this present failed to produce the past and the future it needs. In the eighties, we had the absolute valorization of the present, especially in Western Europe, whereas the United States remained a country with the religious idea of a special mission, of the founding fathers and also one with the very strong position of the Bible. So in the U.S. we had a strong stress on the present and at the same time they remained future-oriented; especially in public and political discourse. In Europe, I think, it was less the case as new capitalism, neoliberalism as it is called, is extremely presentist and, of course, the technological tools: computers, internet devices – are by definition presentist technologies. They offer the view where everything is simultaneous and instant, and now *instant* is measured in nanoseconds.

MR: So it seems that we have lost our relation to the other temporal dimensions. The past and future are inaccessible for us and we are locked into the present.

FH: As if in a kind of a bubble, that's right. This is what I call *presentism*, I use this word as an ideal type or a theoretical tool to describe the current regime where the historical past and future are absent.

MR: Is presentism related in any way to the recent popularity of the category of memory? There are many academic works that refer to this concept at the moment.

FH: Yes, I associate memory with presentism, although I am not saying that memory is by definition presentist. Memory starts from the present and you bring back some events, some memories, from the past into the present. You make this move and you select out some facts, especially sad or traumatic events. In this move from the past to the present, memory is not looking toward the future, I would say, except for the negative way. For example, the motto of Museums of Memory is the injunction “Never more!” or “Never again!”. It is a moral obligation but only a negative one, it does not tell what to do but only tries to prevent the repetition. There is, I think, an important difference between memory and history, especially the modern concept of history, the one that Europe promoted during the eighteenth, nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. This concept is based upon modern time, which is progressive, which conceals an active vector. By definition, this concept of history is open toward the future. Sometimes, however, people say “No, history is the science of the past.” It is because the historians decided, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, to present themselves as working on the past as if the past was their scientific domain. This was because they wanted to present history as a science, to pretend to work according to the model of natural sciences of the time, but by doing that, they forgot the very construction of the concept of history based upon this modern time and that is also the reason why all the histories written during this period were teleological. They had a goal and the goal defined the way so that you could tell where you stood on the way to a goal. All of the great national histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been written according to this pattern and if you did not write a national history, if the main protagonist was not a nation but proletariat or whatever, it is the same thing – you are fundamentally future-oriented. And the question for today is precisely what kind of history can you write if the modern regime ceased to be operational? And, can you choose to promote memory? Many historians are shifting their work toward memory and they try to take memory as a history. I would say that in the public sphere, in public discourse, and in the media, memory is the main category.

MR: Political discourse about memory is very widespread, in Poland we have a lot of political controversy surrounding memory. Even the closest social memory, the interpretation of what happened here in the nineties, is a subject of heated debate.

FH: That is a symptom. Earlier politicians had used history, and recently they have replaced history with memory. So this is the relation between presentism and memory. In the context of the relation between present

and past, memory is a way of escaping from this present. By looking at something at the past, you remain in the present but at the same time you escape from the present.

MR: I would like to inquire about a topic which seems to be crucial for every historico-philosophical framework. This is the problem that Michel Foucault was also asked about regarding his *épistémès*. What in your opinion is the mechanism of change from one regime of historicity to another? Why does our attitude toward time and history happen to change every once in a while? What is behind these changes in economy, culture, and politics? Are such questions important for you or do you prefer to remain on a purely descriptive level?

FH: There is nothing mechanical in these shifts. As I said before, the regimes as such never exist in their pure form; they are always mixed, but you can say that in a certain moment, among certain people, the main category is the past or the future or the present. You have always a mixture of the three. By the way, this is the reason I have deliberately chosen to use the word *regime*, because this word has several meanings. The first meaning relates to what you eat; it is a combination of different food you have. There is also the *regime* of an engine, it relates to the engine speed which changes continuously when you shift gears. And of course there is *regime* in the political sense; as a form of government or a combination of institutions. For example, in Aristotle we have the description of this mixed constitution which is part aristocracy, part democracy, and part oligarchy. The idea of *regime* conveys this idea of mixture, so in a way a regime is always impure. So the question of a change does not become an issue. You do not need a clear moment of break from one into another; a revolution. And even in a revolution you have people who share partly the same experience of time. For example, in my book *Regimes of Historicity* I refer quite extensively to Chateaubriand, the writer and politician of the French Revolutionary period. To me, it is interesting that Chateaubriand belonged to the old aristocracy, which was not an advantage during the Revolution, and he became a writer, which was not common at that time. And he wrote books trying to make his living by writing, as he always needed money. The interesting thing is that the strength of his writing is precisely that it comes in principle from this mixture of two regimes. He defined himself as being in between the ancient and the modern. In his *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* he continuously moved from one regime to another but he did not fully belong to any of them. I think it is a very good expression of what happened during the period of the Revolution and the Restoration. So, as I said, there is nothing mechanical in the way in which the three regimes are articulated and of course they do not come from heaven and you can introduce all kinds of dimensions; economic, sociological and so on. They surely play an important role but you are not obliged to point to any single factor as the main one no matter how many factors are involved. I may be wrong, but I think I am not obliged to produce an analysis of the interrelation of all these factors in order to say that the experience of time is subject to change. I can stop at giving a diagnosis and say that I am not going to explain everything and give the key and the last word on what happened. Without doing that I can still shed some light on this matter.

MR: In recent historiography there is a growing interest in non-Eurocentric perspectives which have their expressions in various *historical cartographies*; adopting the point of view of different nations or groups which have been marginalized by prevalent historical discourses. Do you think that Western or European culture needs these non-Western perspectives? Do they constitute a significant Other for us?

FH: That is indeed a debated issue and you seem to take a very sharp position. Some people claim, “Forget Europe, it is over.” And of course there are others who say, “No.” I think the question is not easy to answer. As I said earlier, the modern concept of history – the one which Europe produced – the one according to which Europe lived and which it dispatched all around the world from the sixteenth to nineteenth century, became an extension of Europe as it developed its colonial ties. Missionaries, businessmen, along with the other travelers

exported this concept outside of Europe. This modern concept of history gave an explanation to the native, indigenous people that they were in time and that they were somewhere back in time. So there were all these kinds of movements claiming that they have to catch up or accelerate in order to reduce the distance between them and us. At the same time, of course, we had to maintain the distance and I think that even after the fall of European empires, after the Second World War and the decolonization movement, there was that great theme or feud of development. On the side of the Western world, we had modernization and progress while on the side of the former colonies and the rest we had development. But *development* was a new way of saying, “Yes we are going to have a new way of allowing you to be closer to us, but we ourselves have something different. Development is for you.” In terms of history as a discipline, history *outside of Europe* also incorporated these regimes. They started to write their own history according to Western standards. You cannot simply say that we imposed our concept of history, even though we surely imposed the modern concept of history that was in perfect agreement with development. The difficult thing to understand is what ought we to do now with this concept of history which – because of this surge of the present – became no longer operational, even in the West, as it does not help one to understand what is going on anymore in our own society. What can you do with this concept in a country which has been colonized in the past? I think, nobody really knows and it is easy to say that these white old men try to colonize us in one way or another but it does not lead you very far. The difficulty or the challenge is to try to think of a new concept of history and I do not think that the solution is the concept of global history which has been very popular over the last ten years. I doubt that global history really addresses this question because global history is being presented as history after that colonial moment but, it does not change the very core of the notion of history, I think. In my view, we need a new concept of history if we think history is still something which can help us to understand our societies. But one of the necessary conditions for this new concept of history is to find a way to manage a circulation between the three categories without allowing a tyranny of one of them. We had a tyranny of the past, then a tyranny of the future – and we saw what consequences it could bring – and, probably for a short period, we had a domination of the present.

MR: For a short period? So what comes next? Return of the past? Return of the future?

FH: Of course, I am not a diviner. I say for a short period but I do not know. When I started to reflect on these matters, which was more than twenty years ago, what I call *presentism* was still new. It was fashionable, the present was fashionable and to some extent it still is. In advertising we often see the insistence on being now, just in time, but people began to realize the disadvantages of this domination of the present and we have also discovered that presentism is not the same for everybody. There is a positive one, the one in the interconnected world and digital media and there is also the other one which is not active, I mean the presentism of people who live from one day to the next and that is not a very nice kind of presentism. There are also the people whom we call today migrants. Their only definition as human beings is to be in the process of migration. So we have different presentisms and some are not nice at all. Presentism has become more complex than it used to be and we discovered what was called by Koselleck and first of all by Ernst Bloch *the simultaneous of the non-simultaneous*. It means that there are people who apparently live in the same time but in fact they are not; there is that discrepancy. It is probably also very clear in Poland; the difference between people living in the big cities and the ones in the country. In France it is the same, we still have people living in different regimes of historicity. This notion of the simultaneous of the non-simultaneous can be used to describe the temporal. The first experience of that was at the beginning of the sixteenth century, I mean the so called discovery of native peoples in the Americas by the Spanish. They met people who were obviously there, even though they were not supposed to be there because the Bible did not say anything about them. They are in the same time and they are not in the same time, so it was the discovery of the simultaneous of the non-simultaneous; it was a big shock.

MR: What do you think about the recent popularity of historiographies that want to replace the temporal framework (meant as old-fashioned and ethnocentric) with the new *spatial* or *cartographic* framework?

FH: As I said, we need a new concept of history and I do not think that global history is the answer that will address the deep issues. We have to find a way to articulate these three categories because I think people cannot live together in society; there is no common ground for people without the interplay of these three categories. I do not know what kind of articulation – what kind of new content we need to give to these categories – because I am sure that it is always changing, but I am convinced that without the three of them we have problems with maintaining a society and this idea of cartography in my opinion misses something important, namely time itself.

MR: So the idea of cartography would be another feature of presentism?

FH: Yes, I think so, and of course geographers are very fond of this spatial turn because they think they can get rid of historians. But contrary to what they think, it is a way to be in phase with presentism.

MR: For the last question, could you please say something more about the aforementioned idea that our epoch may be a very short one. It sounds very interesting to me.

FH: I said I do not know (*laughs*). When I started this kind of reflection, presentism was in its surge. That is no longer the case, however the present is still very much there and all the technologies are reinforcing it because they are all very presentist by construction. So that is one thing, but what we are facing now is something new. All these debates about the Anthropocene have begun only in the last fifteen or ten years, so very recently, and now everybody is talking about the Anthropocene and various catastrophic or apocalyptic scenarios. But, if we go back to the question of time, we face time and its experience – so it is the time of the planet; and more or less in the nineteenth century we decided, partly thanks to philosophy, to accelerate nature – the time of nature by linking it to the historical time of human progress. Our modern concept of history is based upon that and now we have rediscovered that there is a very different time, of a very different scale that is measured in millions of years and not in centuries. We discovered that the human species has become what is called a geological force and we do not know what exactly to do with that. We have found ourselves in that peculiar position to know that what we do or do not do has consequences for the far away future. So in terms of an intellectual process, it is difficult to even think what all that means and I think that people are not so far being confronted with this kind of problem.

MR: So will the next regime be future-oriented as we need to start to think about the future in order to survive?

FH: If we can do it. I think that presentism is a kind of an intermediary regime. But, we need to begin addressing this new issue when we are still in the presentist regime, even if the future-oriented modern regime is not able to properly address this question of the earth-system, to confront the time of the world.

MR: I see. It is all very fascinating, thank you very much for your time and for this great talk!