The present and the history of the own time: an historical approach

Gonzalo Pasamar Alzuria
Universidad de Zaragoza

The expression 'History of the Present' spans over a diversity of trends different in their political birth, main issues, and historical traditions from which they have derived It is however true that from the nineties onward, the 'Zeitsgeschichte', the 'Contemporary History', and the 'Histoire du Temps Present', quoting only the most noteworthy, have underwent changes, and even have approximated to one another. Born in the period of Cold War, supported by institutions and journals, the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the globalization has obliged them to revise their former approaches, and provided them with new opportunities for research. Nevertheless, these all have coincided in being pioneers in signalling the importance of the twentieth century and recent times by claiming the importance that witnesses, memories, and proximity to events have for historians. Even they have shown highly aware of being breaking with clichés coming from the first generations of professional historians, who ignored the recent times because of an assumed lack of perspective, or influenced by the dictum that 'history must be about the past'. It is not coincidence that some authors had considered them, beyond designations, as a 'new history' (Aróstegui 2004, 19-61). To the members of the French Institute d' Histoire du Temps Present, for instance, this trend should be regarded as a 'démarche', as a way of representing the present in motion; a recent time –the time of the contemporary historian- where events, processes, and memories converge (Tresbitsch 1993, 65). Even some of them have not hesitated to assert that 'the historical study of the near past dates back to the own origins of history as an intellectual approach' (Rousso, 1998, 52).

It is true that the interest in the memory of the own time is by no means something new, nor is the expression 'history of the own time'. But the claim of remote antecedents should have into account that the aforementioned trends are modern historiography's sons, and the only one they have attempted to do is to provide an accurate methodology for the study of the twentieth century as soon as catastrophes and socio-economic and cultural changes have cast their influence all over the world, and public uses of history have highly democratized. It is however worth undertaking a historical analysis of the antecedents of the History of the Present in order to explain what categories such as 'present' and concepts such as the 'history of the own time' have meant for historians for centuries, and what the current differences with the earlier forms are. In that respect, we have adopted two hypotheses as starting point: first, that it is possible to establish a distinction between 'ancient forms' of the present time, on the one hand, and 'modern forms', on the other. Thus, the recent History of the Present, regardless the precise designations, may be considered as the most developed and conscious approach of all of those modern forms. Our second hypothesis would run as follows: the main difference between both categories –the ancient and the modern forms- does not only lie principally in direct contents. Nor does it consist of we could name, 'the method'. Without underestimating these factors, we defend that it also lies in the 'sense of the present' and therefore in the ways of tackling or preserving the past and of considering the future. What is more, we shall attempt to demonstrate that if we examine the changes of historiography over the centuries, focusing upon this topic, the existential and social sense of the time contained in historiography proves not less important than its themes, the methods with which had been made, and the political and philosophical objectives that have been bestowed to historical writings.

The ancient forms of understanding the history of the own time take root, as we shall see, in Greco-Latin authors, in the birth of history as a true account – even in the forms of fixing or

Navajas Zubeldía, Carlos e Iturriaga Barco, Diego (eds.): *Novísima. Actas del II Congreso Internacional de Historia de Nuestro Tiempo*. Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, 2010, pp. 9-18.

remembering the past previous to the invention of historiography. However, the full capacity to discern between the present and the past is something much more recent and only goes back to the eighteenth-century historians. Taken into account the function played by both memories and perception of historical change, historiography has had a constant for centuries - extended to philosophy and political thought - that one might name 'the confusion between the past and the present', even the confusion between the past and the future.

Needless to say, it is since the Renaissance when historiography has made progress in modern direction. It means that ancient senses of the present have slowly been eroded following cultural changes previous to the nineteenth century. According to Peter Burke, during that period sensitivity to anachronism increases and some intellectuals discover that in a way 'everything has a history' (Burke 1969, 21-49). However, rather than deducing that Renaissance historians were inventors of the modern discipline of history – perhaps some of its elements -, we could say that the ancient and modern senses of the present have been far from fixed categories. In fact, it will not be until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the aforementioned capability to distinguish, namely, the possibility to delimitate the present as different times, is completely raised. To say it with Reinhart's famous meta-historical criteria, the traditional senses of the present tended to link 'the space of experience' to the 'expectations'; the modern senses of the present, because of the experience of the acceleration of time, would instead be inclined to separate them, giving to the 'horizon of expectation' a remarkable projective character (Koselleck 2004a, 255-75). Therefore, modern thought has tended to reinforce closely the conscience that the present is a changing category, quickly transforms into past, remaining this as a different aspect of historical time. And this is reinterpreted, in turn, in accordance with such a changing present or, which it would be the same, an 'open' future.

The Tradition of the Stationary Present and the Interest in Recent Memories

Before anything it would be worth leaving aside the cliché that attributes the cyclic sense of history to ancient thinkers and the invention of linear time to Christian historians. In the last decades specialists have qualified much this impression, although there is not an only opinion, and debates remain open. There are no reasons to deduce that ancient historians regarded history as a repetition of pasts or a cycle of things always the same –except for some digressions which did not affect the narrative of events-. Nor did medieval historians see it simply as a sort of changing present to be unfolded, as though the enlightened idea of progress had been foreshadowed in those centuries (Bourdé, Martin 1983, 50-54; Momigliano 1993, 155-75; Pomian 1990, 60-65). To all of them was fundamental to fix the events of their own time or, as they said, to rescue great events from oblivion by maintaining memory alive, whether it was that of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, the chivalry, or that of the first courts of the kings. Yet, in the absence of a modern idea of progress, the aforementioned interest in the own time was only able to be developed if the past was considered as a present or future 'a priori'.

Historiography, as it is well known, emerges in the ancient Greece as a way of preserving the contemporary memory, and the first and most lasting function of historians for centuries has been just that of ancients attributed to it: to witness recent events, to be in charge of their memory; or using an expression from Pierre Nora -with a slightly different meaning-, to cultivate the 'histoire-memoire' (Nora 1984, 17-42). The so-called 'father of history' writes, for instance, in Book I of his *Histories*, 'the publication that Herodotus from Halicarnassus is going to expose on his history is aimed principally at not fade away eventually the memory of public events of great men, nor do the great and wonderful deeds darken, as much as that of Geeks as of Barbarians' (Herodotus 2007, 40). In fact, the interest in wartime exploits already had in Greece the antecedent of epic poetry. The function of this genre was, as specialists suggest, narrating for future memory the most noteworthy military events of a warlike aristocracy who wished their social status recognized; deeds showing how a heroic death and glory was supposed to be achieved (Bermejo Barrera, Piedras Monroy 1999, 176-77).

Unlike epic poetry, history was soon able to introduce itself as a much more sure and independent way of preserving memory. It is significant how Herodotus criticizes mythology, the

'unwise fables', or the biased opinion of those that all they wanted to do was to extol their heroes (Herodotus 2007, 40). On the other hand, the author introduces himself as a witness, an indefatigable traveller who, encouraged by a broad curiosity, exposes customs, observe remains and monuments, confirms news 'in situ', heard stories, and relates what he thinks is believable (Meister 1998, 24-25). A few decades later in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides also exposes his work as a narrative which avoids legends, which does not rely on the tales of poets, indicating in Book I that 'as far as events taken place during the war are concerned, I considered that I had not to write about them enquiring through a nobody, nor as it seemed to me, but I have rather accounted events where myself was present, or about which I was found out from other people, with rigour as much as I could on each one of them' (Thucydides 1989, 62). Despite the use of written sources, this intention is going to remain in Herodotus and in Thucydides 'successors. Roman historian Tacitus, who writes his *Histories* at about 104 AD by comprehending the period between the death of Augustus (14 AD) and that of Domitian (96 AD), is a clear example of the preference of the use of witnesses, and he draws, for instance, descriptions of the eruption of the Vesuvius from his friend Pliny 'statements, who was a teenager when this happened (79 AD) (Mellor 1999, 88-94). In fact, supported in the need to retain close events, the heard and seen is going to become a cliché in historiography for centuries, practically until the sixteenth century.

Yet, if to both ancient readers and audience were more faithful and worthy of confidence those authors that wrote on contemporary events rather than on remote past, the reason for that does not only stem from the method of witness they used, it also came from the topics they dealt with, about which they wanted to establish a public memory or to 'avoid oblivion'. In fact, the use of history consisting of preserving a memory of near events is narrowly linked to the exaltation of wars and military conquests. Herodotus writes influenced by the contemporary civil wars; those provoked by the Athenian imperialism between 341 and 411 BC, which gives him cause for narrating the efforts to contain the Persian expansionism by Greeks, the Medic Wars (560-479 BC), undertaken by the previous generations. To him the importance of such events lies in being the turning-point where the dichotomy between 'Greeks' and 'Barbarians' emerges. A few decades after Thucydides focuses his attention upon the mentioned civil wars by considering that if 'The Medic Wars achieved a rapid solution through two naval battles and two land battles, […] the length of the present war extended considerably, and miseries happened in its course in Greece so as never had others in the same passing of time' (Thucydides 1989, 62-63). And as far Roman historians are concerned, we do not lack examples to demonstrate the importance of contemporary events either. Livy, in his history of Rome *Ab Urbe Condita*, a narrative covering more than seven hundred years and perhaps the most remarkable single work from Roman tradition, adopts a chronological distribution which, according to his readers' tastes, mirrors likewise the importance given to recent events. If the first book spreads over 240 years, and the II-V books, 120 years, to narrate the last hundred years (167-9 BC) Livy devotes the last 92 books (a part of the work which is lost), from the 142 books that covered the work altogether (Mellor 1999, 53-55).

Nevertheless, to avoid confusion with modern forms of the history of the own time, there is need to emphasize that that historiography reflects an idea of stationary present where, despite the deeds it relates, there is no signs to deduce that the future was going to be considered as very different than the past related. It does not mean that ancient historians disregarded the educational character of history, quite the contrary. It is nevertheless true that the standards of historiography respect to others the forms of knowledge defined by ancient philosophers seem to indicate that the memory of the past had to be confined to focusing upon particular events. According to the Aristotelian analysis, poetry was 'more philosophical' and of 'graver importance' than history, since this could only narrate the particular, 'what did or happened to Alcibiades', but not the universal or the kind of thing that might be (Aristotle 1974, 157-158). However, classical historians – the premise remained somehow until well into the modern times - never renounced to consider history as a repository of 'exempla' on human nature, and therefore to regard memorable events as something worthy of memory for the future. Herodotus declares, for instance, that 'the instability of human power and the things of men never remain constant in their own being' (Herodotus 2007, 43). Thucydides admits having written his *History* for 'who wanted to know faithfully what has been happening, and what in a future is to be alike or similar according to human nature' (Thucydides 1989, 62). And Roman historians, although some of them criticized Roman customs,

and the length of Rome entailed a serious cause for concern, never foreshadowed its final within a short time. Still Ammianus Marcellinus, auto-proclaimed Tacitus 's successor and one of the last classical historians, in his *Roman History* written in the fourth century, was still convinced that Rome would last forever. Narrating in his contemporary part the civil wars waged between the successors of Constantine the Great and particularly the famous defeat of Adrianople due to the Visigoths (378 AD), he could not avoid describing the decay of the Empire, but he also showed himself highly optimistic by assuring that military virtues were going to prevail despite everything (Grant 1995, 23-24).

Formal aspects also contributed to enhance the political role of this historiography based upon the importance of recent memories. Moreover, they paved the way for historians for centuries to help them to establish the relations between politics and historiography. In this respect, there is also need to observe that the most of the works of classical authors were not only thought to be read, but also to be exposed for a public audience; and many of their narrative resources – particularly the disposition to introduce invented political speeches- were nothing but a reflection of mnemonic and dramatic skills. To ancients the capabilities of memory were considered as a tool for eloquence and thus a part of the *Ars Rhetoricae*. What is more, this field not only ended up by fixing the rules on how to organize the 'discourse' to be effective, it also helped to establish what the objectives of historical writings ought to be. Therefore, rhetoric served to rationalize the historical narratives, providing them tools for analysis beyond a mere annalistic and chronological exposition. Such purposes were, for instance, synthesized in the famous discourse *De Oratore* by Cicero (55 BC), when he recommended that the writer "must first point out what he thinks of the same endeavour; regarding the event, showing not only what said or done, but also the way in which it is said or done; regarding the result, 'developing the causes exactly, and pointing out the part corresponding to chance, and astuteness, and rashness' (Cicero 1966, 31-32). Yet, this interest in causes and in historical truth had little to do with the modern concept of 'research'. More than with accuracy, the ancient concept of 'historical truth' was related to the idea that, dealing with 'close' events, the lack of political prejudices and political ambitions, in addition to the seen and heard, should be the main guide for historians (Woodman 1988, 74). A typical example that can help to understand the relation between impartiality and political and moral use of history may be found in Sallust's contemporary *Conspiracy of Catiline*. Retired to his estates in his last years, after having developed a brilliant career –including a trial for corruption- under Cesar, Sallust confesses having written on the 'Catilinarian conspiracy' –an event happened a decade before writing his History- because 'I resolved to return to a cherished purpose from which ill-starred ambition had diverted me, and write a history of the Roman people selecting such portions as seem to me worthy of record; and I was confirm in this resolution by the fact that my mind was free from hope, and fear, and partisanship' (Sallust 2001, 107; Mellor 1999, 33-34).

The attribution to 'histories' of the interest in recent events was a criterion still maintained in the early Middle Ages. In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville, in his *Etimologías* (627-30), explains that the difference between 'History' and 'Annals' lies in the fact that whereas 'history has as theme times we have seen, Annals refer to the years that our times did not meet' (Isidore of Seville 1982, 358-61). But such a strict division was destined to disappear with the waning of classical culture. Despite the permanence of some of its formal aspects, the transition between the ancient historiography and the medieval forms of writing was going to be guided chiefly by a new genre, such as that of ecclesiastic or monastic histories, that disregarded the 'profane history' and the typical uses of classical writers. Such a genre, introduced itself as a chronicle of Christianity, not only was characterized by its timeless idea of present. It also entailed an eschatological scheme, stemmed from the Bible and Church Fathers that clearly conditioned the way of understanding the past: the idea that all events in the world history are aimed as much at the venue of Jesus Christ as aimed at the 'Second Venue', namely the Final Judgment. Therefore, the interest in the own time was subsumed in an indifferent to change idea of *perfectum praesens* or final era (Löwitz 1949, 182). This principle would soon find an apologetic work to openly be exposed as that of the Hispano-roman priest Paulo Orosio, author of *Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem* (418).

This work was composed to defend the Christianity before Roman authors's accusations of having pave the way for Alaric's sack of Rome in 410, an event considered as the most serious catastrophe in 'pagan' history. As his author writes in the Prologue, *Historiarum adversum paganos* was

in fact an assignment of his master Augustine to focus upon the 'strangers to City of God' (Orosio 1983, 27). The book was thought for a pagan audience, but its influence during the Middle-Ages among Christian writers was however remarkable (Merrils 2005, 39 ff). Found inspiration in Daniel's biblical book, who narrates his stay at Nebuchadnezzar's court to interpret the dreams of the King as a series of successive empires ending in with God Kingdom, Orosio begins with 'the world and human race's origins'; then also describes four Empires or epochs: Babylonia, Macedonia, Cartage, and Rome. However, it is in the last one where the author devotes six in the seven books of which the work is composed. The aim was to demonstrate that the Advent of Christ during the last period would not have been accidental, but God's will, and the influence of Christianity on the Barbarians converted to Christian faith would have operated as instruments to redeem the Roman Empire from its own sins, from its decay. What is more, one of the main efforts of Orosio's *Historiae* is to prove that as much as events approached contemporary times, and Christianity increased its influence, then war diminished and so bloodshed did. Therefore, the assault to Rome, 'caused more by God's rage than by foe's bravery', was to have an ambiguous sense: it would mean a negative event, because of destruction enhanced by invaders –but nothing compared to destruction carried out by Nero, the author adds-, yet its positive character would also deserve to be emphasized as an outstanding part of a plan in which the Empire, accepted Christianity, received 'God's mercy' (Orosio 1983, 336-36).

The consideration of the own time, subsumed in an expectant present, as preparation for the 'Second Venue', was in fact consubstantial to monastic histories, seminal genre in the Middle Ages. Its founder, Eusebius bishop of Cesarea had written the first *Ecclesiastical History*, one century before Orosio undertook his, by devoting five in ten books that the work is composed to the previous century and half, and particularly to the last three decades. Eighth book begins as follows: 'After having exposed in the whole seven books the succession of apostles, in eighth book we have thought that the contemporary events deserved to be related in an special way and one of most necessary thing was to transmit them to be known to those that will come after us' (Eusèbe de Cesarée 1993, 3). The work, as the subsequent ecclesiastic histories, goes back to remote periods and introduces itself as a 'universal history', a narration covering all the territory under Roman hegemony. In this case, it relates how the prophets heralded the advent of the Messiah as well as the birth, the preaching of this, and that of the apostles. But Eusebius, who had concluded his work at about 323, that is, ten years after the Catholic Church was legalized through the Edict of Milan by the Emperor Constantine, was also deeply concerned with how to legitimate the former Church. Therefore, in the part devoted to the history of his own time the bishop focus his attention upon the prosecutions of local churches or communities –giving aside the heretics ones which, according him, would not be worthy of memory-, the appearance of martyrs, the divine punishment against Emperors who unleashed such prosecutions, and finally the reign of Constantine as culmination of the divine plan. The need to legitimate the emergence of the Catholic Church by demonstrating that the Empire fell into decline because of its 'paganism' was still felt stronger in histories ever since.

The so-called 'narrators of the barbarian history', the Christian historians from the sixth century onward, are a good example of the representation of that *perfectum preasens*. Not only were they content to develop the idea that was the Church the main guarantee for the new Monarchies. They also emphasized the need for kings to accept Christian faith in order to prepare a Second Venue of Christ which, admitted the importance of contemporary prodigies and catastrophes, was not to be expected it happened too late. The interest in political events understood in themselves had completely disappeared. The most famous work from that tradition, the *Decem Libros Historiarum* –called *Historia Francorum* as well- written by the bishop Gregory of Tours at the end of the sixth century (594), is devoted to the period of his generation and the previous one. More than a half of such *Historiae* are concerned with contemporary events related as witness. Its theme deals with miracles, heresies, wars, famines, and diseases that ravaged his epoch. The author recognizes that he loathes remembering the contemporary vicissitudes of 'the civil war that exhausts the nation of Franks', but he also assures to feel obliged to it, because, quoting the Evangelist Saint Matthew, 'We already see how the time in which the Lord has predicted will be the beginning of hardships, and it is coming' (Grégoire de Tours 1975, 245; Goffart 1988, 183-197).

The Idea of Change and the invention of 'History of the own Time'

With the Low Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the idea of present as last times continued to be a crucial subject for theologians. The sixteenth century, for instance, knew a high number of commentaries of Prophet Daniel's Biblical book (Gilbert-Dubois 1977, 377 ff). But historiography stopped being subordinated to those representations of time or to conceptions indifferent to change, so that the influence of old chronicles or histories from monastic origin moved back as well. According to Ernst Breisach, the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries represents a stage of transition in which the erosion and eventual disintegration of medieval historical writings takes place (Breisach 1994, 153). Changes such as the development of monarchic States, the emergence of a class of urban patricians, the era of discoveries, the Reform, and the taste for Antiquity, had a critical effect over the importance given to the history of the own time. These all aspects and events helped to implement a transition to modern forms of the history of the present time by giving an unusual role to recent memories and histories, and to their public use. It was about the appearance of a humanist, political, and even civil history, antecedent of the philosophical history typical of the eighteenth century and of the period of European and American Revolutions.

It is however true that since historians and chroniclers were put under the influence or the dispute of an increasing number of political and ecclesiastical powers, the writing of the most recent histories and memories proved seriously hindered or distorted. A good example provides the *Historiae de rebus Hispaniae libri XX* published for the first time in 1592, at the end of Philip II's reign, by the Jesuit Juan de Mariana, the first 'History of Spain' properly. For political reasons Mariana decided to avoid the contemporary history, ending his narrative with the Granada War (1492). 'Learned and serious people' seemingly convinced him to continue until the death of Ferdinand of Aragon the Catholic King in 1516, for 'the most great events and worthy of memories, never before carried out and concluded by Spaniards, occurred' (Mariana 1848-49, II, 462); but he did not go far away so as not to be censored by certain nobility families. In fact, during the Renaissance and the following century, as far as the emergence of national identities takes place, the interest of historians is going to focus increasingly upon 'national origins'.

But despite difficulties, humanist historians also showed a clear need to approach their own epoch, avoiding the subjections of Eschatology. In Italy was the epoch of 'la calamitá', a stormy period of invasions and wars opened at the end of the fifteenth century, in 1494, with the fall of Medicis' s regime in Florence, which gave to its historiography a political and philosophical aim. The most striking example of this interest in the history of the own time is the *Storia d'Italia* that Francesco Guicciardini wrote between 1537 and 1539. The work is a history of political and military events that covers from 1492 to 1534. It develops the thesis that 'ever since the Roman Empire […] began to decline […] Italy has never enjoyed such prosperity […] as that in which it found itself at the rest in the year of Christian salvation, 1490' (Guicciardini 1969, 3-4). Therefore, Italy would have missed its 'state of felicity' since kings and rulers were to have made pacts with external powers, being carried away by their own animosity and individual passions (Cochrane 1981, 295-305).

In France, the Wars of Religion in the second half of the sixteenth century were also responsible for a pioneering interest in the history of the own time, and even for the invention of the expression itself. By mid seventeenth century the word 'Zeitsgeschichte' is also present in the German historiography (Koselleck 2001, 119-120). But the example for excellence was the *Historiarum sui temporis* (1604-08), by the French Jacques-Auguste de Thou, writer coming from a family of high civil servants, presidents of the 'Parlement' of Paris, who was at the service of monarchs Henry III and Henry IV. The work spans a period comprising from 1547 onward, namely, the Wars of Religion, including Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (24 August 1572), and its immediate antecedents. Its objective was a clear reflect of the political use of history promoted by the new absolutism: an exaltation of monarchy and its laws as unique institution capable of preventing the civil and religious wars (Gilbert-Dubois 1977, 172-85).

There is no doubt that these works announce the modern forms of representing the history of the present. As humanist historians, both de Thou and Guicciardini were aware of the importance of scholarship -the first exchanged correspondence with Joseph Justus Scaliger-. They

used likewise a considerable amount of documents which could have because of their political careers and narrow ties with power. To them the importance of seen and heard, as historical source, was subsumed into their own experience as politicians and high bureaucrats. Guicciardini held posts of governor of different Papal States with several Popes (1515-34), and De Thou was one of the famous Edict of Nantes's supervisors, granted by Henry IV to recognize certain civil right to Protestants (1598). Their high interest in political history, even their obsession to be impartial, already played a modern function: both of them defended a political model placed over factions (cities and territorial States in Guicciardini's case). The works were both surrounded in their own epoch by an intense controversy, which became a noteworthy feature of forthcoming histories of this type. Nor was there any interest in Catholicism understood as Eschatology in their Histories, although the importance they gave to Catholic Church was however remarkable. Moreover, their claim for Antiquity was not absolute. Nor even this happened in Guicciardini's case, which in this point showed much more elastic, for instance, than Machiavelli. However, to avoid anachronisms we should not forget that they were also 'traditional historians': Neither of them was interested in go beyond the 'annalistic' model of Livy, showing a more structured sense of wholeness, nor in renouncing to models where history was considered as a repository of 'exempla', such as that of Tacitus in de Thou 's case.

A clearer step to the modern expressions of the history of the own time is provided by *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) by Voltaire. The work also defends the importance to observe law under an indisputable sovereign authority, as does De Thou's. But the sense of wholeness that the work shows off has little in common with the aforementioned works. The History is introduced as an attempt to pain for posterity 'the spirit of men in the most enlightened century ever had', rather than the actions of a single man; being the 'Siècle de Louis XIV' the last age in the four into which it is possible to divide 'the greatness of human spirit' (Voltaire 2005, 121-23). What is more, the interest in modern and recent times is soon going to become hallmark of 'philosophical history'. While the most of scholars were still concerned with the study of ancient history, or origins, Voltaire developed –he reaches his own epoch in his book- an interest in recent times which is going to achieve a great fortune. It is not coincidence that De Thou was appreciated in that century as never seen before, including Voltaire himself.

But the discovery of 'philosophical history', the possibility to consider history under the idea of civilization, was only the first step; a necessary condition. The emergence of modern historical categories only takes place definitively during the 'era of revolutions' because of the experience of acceleration of time. Behind the inception of modern political thought lies the increase of 'social expectations' that led to consider the change of social and political institutions, and culture, as a part of a more global process towards an indeterminate future, distant increasingly of the own 'space of experience' (Koselleck 2004b, 126 ff). The narratives contained within the modern ideologies are based upon such an assumption as well.

Therefore, the modern division of universal history into Ancient, Middle Ages, and Modern Times, is a clear proof of such a change in the nineteenth-century way of representing the historical time. Unlike the Enlightenment writers, who still disregarded chronological limits, this tendency attempted to delimitate with precision such eras, since it was based upon the deep conviction that they were essentially different. The nineteenth-century historians, with their tendencies to erudition and professionalism, did do nothing but emphasize and apply sophisticated techniques to establish a division slowly emerged in the previous centuries. But, far from ignoring the differences with their own time, they began to use a series of expressions to refer to changes involved in it. These expressions, beyond terminology, which is going to depend upon the language, all meant 'the newest epoch'[1]. And its emergence seems to be independent from the idea of 'modern times', which had been transformed into a period of universal history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not surprisingly, the limits of such a 'newest epoch', its spread

[1] Koselleck 2004a, 234-36. In this analysis based upon German examples, the author distinguishes between 'neue Zeit' or 'Modern Times' and a 'neueste Zeit', or 'unserer Zeit'. This expression referred to a near or contemporary history are equivalent to the terms 'histoire contemporaine' and 'historia contemporánea' used by French and Spanish writers in the nineteenth century.

and use among nineteenth-century historians, depended greatly upon the political and cultural features of the different countries. Whereas the French and the Spanish writers did not hesitate in using the expressions 'Histoire contemporaine' and 'Historia contemporánea' to refer to their own time or their revolutions, others, such as the British ones, were content with the idea of 'Modern Times'. But whatever the terms were, such new interest had crucial political consequences; chiefly, to transform the classical dictum 'Historia Magistra Vitae', which definitively lost its ancient references to a static past, to gain others which led to study the changes in history in order to obtain from it 'analogues instructions to the needs it proves' (Guizot 1851, 8-9). There is no other meaning in Thomas Macaulay's words when he wrote in his famous essay 'History' (1828), 'No past event has any intrinsic importance. The knowledge of it is valuable only as it lead us to form just calculation with respect to the future' (Stern 1970, 83).

However, if ancient historians could justify the interest in close event resorting to the rhetoric dictum of 'daring always to say which is true' (Cicero), with the development of political uses of history because of the emergence of liberal society, modern historians could not. The proximity and existence of witness is going to transform the history of the own time into an awkward field for authors interested in the national history, finding it difficult to separate from political speech or essay. According to the most nineteenth-century influent Spanish historian, Modesto Lafuente, in his *Historia General de España* (1850-67), when reaching the events happened 'from 1788 to 1814', the main obstacle to maintain impartiality were not the historian, but rather the own readers. These, being many of them still witnesses, would not agree with the narrative, since they were going to be reflected in those events in a very different way than they had expected (Lafuente 1880, 316).

This contradiction between the increasing role of a history of close events, because of its increasingly democratic uses, and its difficulties to face it up to by historians has seriously conditioned the later vicissitudes of this field, until the twenty century. On the one hand French historians and politicians, aware of its importance for the French nationalism, soon undertook an institutionalization with the reforms of 1867 in the secondary education's curriculum promoted by the historian and Napoleon III's minister, Victor Duruy, which were attained during the years of the III Republic with the reform of 1902. This extended the teaching of the 'Histoire Contemporaine' to two years by comprising the period from 1815 to 1889, namely, from the end of Napoleon wars to the commemoration of the centenary of the breakout of the Revolution (Hery 1999, 85-93). But, this educational interest never matched the progress in historical methodology. Charles Seignobos co-author of a famous *Introduction aux Études Historiques* (1898), assured in his *Histoire politique de l' Europe Contemporaine* (1897), that it was so overwhelming the mass of documents for this epoch that 'it is physically impossible to write a contemporary history of Europe according to the principles of [historical] criticism' (Noiriel 1997, 18).

Not surprisingly, a big deal of the effort of historical studies during the twentieth century to be renewed had been aimed at claiming the importance of the present as an object of analysis, from which it was possible to develop different approaches. This may be the main acquisition of historical epistemology in the twentieth century. Was the French medievalist Marc Bloch who emphasized the importance of understanding the present as a way of studying the past (Bloch 1993, 147-58). With his essay *L'Étrange Défaite* (1940), a penetrating analysis of the French defeat by Hitler in 1939, he anticipated something that historians, institutions, and journals would put into practice during the forthcoming decades: that the study of contemporary events and processes, whether they were catastrophes, genocides, diasporas, or recent memories, have become a starting point to reinterpret the past. The idea exceeds all that had traditionally been the interest in the own time. This is why the current interest in the History of the Present can be considered as the most important expression of the modern forms of the history of recent events.

Bibliography

Aristotle, ed. 1974. *Aristoteloys peri poietikes. Aristotelis Ars Poetica. Poética de Aristóteles*, by Valentín García Yerba. Madrid: Gredos.

Aróstegui, Julio. 2004. *La historia vivida. Sobre la historia del presente*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Bermejo Barrera José Carlos and Pedro Andrés Piedras Monroy. 1999. *Genealogía de la Historia. Ensayos de historia teórica*, Vol. 3. Madrid: Akal.

Bloch, Marc, ed. 1996. *Apología para la historia o el oficio de historiador*, by Etienne Bloch. México DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Bourdé, Guy and Hervé Martin, 1983. *Les écoles historiques*. Paris: Seuil.

Breisach, Ernst, 1994. *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval and Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Burke, Peter. 1969. *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. London: Edward Arnold.

Cicero, ed. 1966. *De L'Orateur. Livre Deuxième*, by Edmond Courbaud. Paris: Société d´Édition 'Les Belles Lettres'.

Cochrane, Eric. 1981. *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Eusèbe de Cesarée, ed. 1993. *Histoire ecclesiastique*, ed. by Gustave Bardy, Vol. 3. Paris: Eds. du Cerf.

Gilbert-Dubois, Claude, 1977. *La conception de l´Histoire en France au XVIe siècle (1560-1630)*. Paris: A. G. Nizet.

Goffart, Walter. 1988. *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800). Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul Deacon*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Grant, Michael. 1995. *Greek and Roman Historians. Information and Misinformation*. London: Routledge.

Grégoire de Tours, ed. 1975. *Histoire des Francs*, ed. by Robert Latouche, Vol. 1. Paris: Société d' Édition 'Les Belles Lettres'.

Guicciardini, Francesco, ed. 1969. *History of Italy*, by Sidney Alexander. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Guizot, François. 1851. *Histoire des origines du gouvernement représentatif en Europe*, Vol 2. Bruxelles: Société Tipographique Belge.

Hery, Evelyne. 1999. *Un siècle de leçons d´histoire. L´histoire enseignée en Lycée de 1870 à 1970*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Herodotus, ed. 2007. *Los nueves libros de la Historia*, by Victor Lama de la Cruz. Madrid: EDAF.

Isidore of Seville, ed. 1982. *Etimologías. Libros I-X*, by José Oroz Reta and Manuel A. Marcos Casquero. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos.

Koselleck, Reinhart. 2001. *Los estratos del tiempo. Estudios sobre la historia*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Koselleck, Reinhart. 2004a. *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Koselleck, Reinhart, ed. 2004b. *historia /Historia*, by Antonio Ramos Mendoza. Madrid: Trotta.

Lafuente, Modesto, ed 1880. *Historia General de España, Desde los tiempos más remotos hasta nuestros días*, Vol. 5. Barcelona: Montaner y Simón.

Löwitz, Karl. 1949. *Meaning in History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mariana, Juan, ed. 1948-49. *Historia General de España*. Madrid: Gaspar Roig, Vol. 2.

Meister, Klaus. 1998. *La storiografia greca. Dalle origini alla fine dell E'Ellesnismo*. Roma: Laterza.

Mellor, Ronald. 1999. *The Roman Historians*. London: Routledge.

Momigliano Arnaldo. 1993. El tiempo en la historiografía antigua. In *Ensayos de historiografía antigua y media*. México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 155-75.

Merrills, A H. 2005. *Historiography and Geography in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nora, Pierre, ed. 1984. *Entre mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux. Les lieux de mémoire*. Vol. 1*, La République*, by Pierre Nora. Paris: Gallimard, 17-42.

Noiriel, Gérard. 1998. *Qu'est-ce que l'histoire contemporaine?* Paris: Hachette.

Orosio, ed. 1983. *Historia contra los paganos. Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem*, ed. by Enrique Gallego-Blanco. Barcelona: Puvill Libros.

Pomian, Krzysztof. 1990. *El orden del tiempo*. Madrid: Júcar.

Rousso, Henry. 1998. *La hantise du passé. Entretien avec Philippe Petit*. Paris: Textuel.

Sallust, ed. 2001. *La conjuración de Catilina. Guerra de Jugurta*, by Avelina Carrera de la Red. Madrid: Akal.

Stern, Fritz. 1970. The *Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*. London: Macmillan.

Trebitsch, Michel. 1993. *La quarentaine et l'an 40. Hypothèses sur l''etymologie du temps present. In Écrire l'histoire du temps present en hommage à François Bédarida*. Institut d' Histoire du Temps Présent. 63-76. Paris: CNRS eds.

Thucydides, ed. 1989. *Historia de la Guerra del Peloponeso*, by Antonio Guzmán Guerra. Madrid: Alianza 62.

Voltaire, ed. 2005. *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, by Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h and Sylvain Menant. Paris: Librairie Générale Fraçaise.

Woodman, A J. 1988. *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography. Four Studies*. London: Croom Helm.