# THE URGENCY OF THE ETHICAL: THE ETHICAL-POLITICAL TURN IN THE THEORY OF HISTORY AND IN THE HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Marcelo de Mello Rangel<sup>1</sup>

Federal University of Ouro Preto (UFOP) MG

Departament of History and Graduate Programs in History and Philosophy

Email: mmellorangel@yahoo.com.br

#### Abstract:

Our intention is investigate and describe what we can call an ethical-political turn inside theory of history and history of contemporary historiography. Besides that, we reflect on the hypotesis that a significant part of historians and theorists committed to these fields are increasingly concerned with thinking and/or intervening in the contemporary world and doing this from the problem of difference/alterity. In this sense, our ambition is to thematize and explain – even if we have to do it briefly – some of the categories elaborated and operated by contemporary historians and theorists who have also mobilized themselves within the ethicalpolitical turn, namely: François Hartog, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Hayden White.

**Keywords**: Ethical-political turn; presentism; presence; practical past

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Antônio Fernando de Araújo Sá for the invitation to the "Seminário Internacional Intercâmbios Historiográficos (Brasil, Argentina, México)", in November 2015, in which the first version of this text was presented.

## The ethical-political turn

We think that the theory of history and the history of hitoriography are becoming spaces that support: 1 – the careful reflection and understanding of contemporary world, which take place 2- from the problem of difference/alterity. What is at stake here is if, on the one hand, theory of history and history of historiography were most intensely devoted during the 70s and 80s to the: a- epistemological activity, understood here as an meta-investigative exercise towards the understanding of the conditions of possibility of historical knowledge, and b- to the specific analysis of the historians, with the intention of explaining the fundamental elements to the constitution of both their perceptions and narratives, taking as a starting point the constitution of what we might call a "disciplinary matrix". On the other hand, we are probably living an expansion, if not a reorganization, of these fields since the late 80s and the beginning of the 90s.<sup>2</sup> Or, according to François Hartog:

Into the framework of French professional history, for example, the appearance of a story that claimed itself from the 80s onwards, as a history of the 'present time', accompanied this movement. The profession was asked, and sometimes even summoned, to respond to the multiple demands of history. (HARTOG, 2006, p. 262. My translation).

Therefore, it is fundamental to bound and describe – although povisionally - why we are interested in working with the concept of an ethical-political turn. Next, we need to address the conditions of historical and epistemological possibilities themselves, the ones responsable by the constitution of this *turn* inside human sciences in general and, more specifically, in the theory of history and in history of historiography.

We think of an ethical-political turn because this seems to configure a significant movement, or a trend inside human sciences. It concerns the theory of history in general and therefore of contemporary theory of history and historiography. We made a choice for the term *ethics* because we are dealing with a movement towards the thematization of difference/alterity, and this implies the need to safeguard spaces for groups and specific ways of being and, also, due to the etymology itself.<sup>3</sup> The word ethics comes from the Greek *éthos*, which means men's abode. That means we are talking about the space where men mobilize in general, of men's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>About ethics from the problem of difference or otherness see DERRIDA, 2007, LÉVINAS, 1997 and KLEINBERG, 2007 and 2013.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See JENKINS, 2006; LACAPRA, 2001, p. 207-240 and 2008, p. 183-217; WHITE, 2012, p. 19-40, ARAUJO and RANGEL, 2015 e CEZAR, 2018.

world. Therefore, the ethical activity is – or could be – a theoretical activity concerned and dedicated to think the world within with it (this activity) becomes possible, at least more generally and in its most original sense.<sup>4</sup> In other words - words that bring us closer to a Heideggerian understanding – dedication to ethics can mean the concern about issues, limits and possibilities proper to the space or to the world in which we find ourselves, what we understand that is being intensely accomplished by historians, philosophers and contemporary theorists as François Hartog, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Hayden White, thinkers that will be brought to our reflections.

Finally, we choose to use the term *political* with a hyphen, and we do it because we understand that it describes a more specific type of ethical behavior, one that has been expanding within the discipline of history in general and in the fields that belong to the theory of history and history of historiography.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, we are dealing with ethical behavior concerned about thematizing the world itself, but more specific insofar as it is guided by an explicit objective (as it is possible), by a more systematic set of determinations. In this sense, we can name historians, philosophers and contemporary theorists as Achille Mbembe, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Christopher Hill, Edward Palmer Thompson, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Edward Said, Eric Hobsbawm, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, Paulo Freire, Raymond Williams, etc.

The historical and epistemological conditions of possibility of the ethical-political turn in the theory of history and in the history of historiography

When referring to the historical conditions of possibility for achieving this *turn* in the contemporary world, we understand that if, on the one hand, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were constituted on the basis of two sets of senses or key-words, namely, Nation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See RICOEUR, 1986, p. 403-406.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> According to the writing of Heidegger: "... if, then, according to the fundamental meaning of the word *éthos*, the name of the ethics wants to express that ethics thinks men's abode, then the thought that thinks the Truth of Being, as the fundamental element where man exists is already the original ethics" (HEIDEGGER, 2009, p. 88-9. My translation). Or, according to Olgária Matos: "First found in Homer, the word *éthos* means abode. Not being architecture or building technique, *éthos* means *Habitat*, 'den', but also the fact and the way of inhabiting it". (MATOS, 2008, p. 75. My translation)

State/identity<sup>6</sup> and science/truth in a strong sense (we are talking about the privileged and definitive statements), the twentieth century, on the other hand, sought its constitution on two specific senses. And it sought this from the negation of what the twentieth century understood as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which would be based on difference/alterity and a "controlled" truth. What is at stake for us is how the twentieth century produced the interpretation (more or less correct, although it doesn't matter here) that 1- the keywords identity and truth stongly determined the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that 2- the centuries in question, because of that specifical constitution, would have been responsible for the traumatic events experienced in the twentieth century, between which are two great wars, the forms of fascism, nazism and the totalitarianisms in general, the imperialism and the struggle for decolonization, the civil wars and so on. In this sense, it is interesting to look at the interpretations of the "Frankfurt School".7 In other words, we can thematize the hypothesis of a political ethical turn within the human sciences in general and, more specifically, in the fields of the theory of history and history of historiography. This happens because the turn itself – now driven by the question of difference – may have been, and still be, a necessity placed by the contemporary historical horizon, that has been rebuilt, since the first half of the twentieth century, from the keywords difference and "controlled" truth. (Cf. WHITE, 2012, p. 23).8

In this sense, a reevaluation of the discipline's own history is required, as well as one of the fields that we are discussing. And this happens because some of its specific developments also presented themselves as (epistemological) conditions of possibility for this we can call ethical-political turn.

First of all, we will treat 1- the constitution of history itself as an autonomous discipline within modernity. Then, we will look into 2- what we might call, as Foucault called it, the "crisis of representation". Or, as Gumbrecht put it, "a second-order observer crisis". We do this in the intention of 3- understand part of what the linguistic turn meant and, therefore,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See, also, LACAPRA, 2008, p. 183-217, and RANGEL, 2017a.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> What we call identity here concerns the understanding that we would have about specific human groups ("races"), that they would be qualitatively distinct, and organizable from a hierarchy. This argument supported Imperialism, for example, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Derrida and Judith Butler, for example, name this very 20th century movement, which is characterized by a significant thematization, or even needed, of the question of difference/alterity, now as a *democratization* process. Jacques Rancière gives this the name of "democratic historicity" (RANCIÈRE, 1994, p. 101).

understand what would be the ethical-political turn. We want to analyze the question of the thematization of the limits of historiography in the constitution of privileged and definitive statements that tell us about the past throughtout the twentieth century – and especial within the linguistic turn, where it would have been responsible for significant self-doubt. In other words, what happened was the generalization of one question: Why should the historian continue to investigate the past if his statements are much more related to his world, history, body/desire, etc., than to his object more properly? In the end, we propose that the ethical-political orientation responsible for the *turn* has proved - even if constituted itself - as a reasonable or sufficient justification amid what we might call a significant epistemological crisis. It is a crisis that the history, theory, and history of historiography went through during the 1960s and 1970s.

It is within modern temporality - from it and to respond to part of its challenges – that the discipline of history is born. And in our case, specifically, the fields constituted by the theory of history and the history of historiography. What we are addressing is that with the "acceleration of time" that constitutes modern temporality, the profound political, economic and socio-cultural instability experienced from the loss of immediacy or "hegemony" of the meaning of God, the investigation of history as a way from which it would be possible to reestablish this historical horizon, or even to restore a specific meaning to the condition of centrality. It is this understanding that drives us to the relevant role that history has come to play in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which made it possible for history to constitute itself as an autonomous discipline.

It was from the necessity of restoring historical time, of reorganizing it, that most of the illuminists (the philosophies of history) and historicists devoted themselves to the detained and methodical study of history. In general, and safeguarding the specific diferences between philosophies of history and historicism, we consider that its purpose was to describe and highlight the meaning(s) that are fundamental to history, which would be responsible for executing it in a more properly ideal (or perfectible) way, so that men could thus devote themselves to the meaning(s) that are fundamental to history and, consequently, rearrange the deeply unstable horizon in which they appear inserted.<sup>10</sup> What happens is that this careful

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See AGAMBEN, 2008, p. 111-128, KOSELLECK, 2006, p. 41-60, ARAUJO, 2006a and 2008, and ARAUJO and RANGEL, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See CALDAS, 2007, MATA, 2008, MARTINS, 2008, SCHOLTZ, 2011.

movement of the illuminists and historicists would not have been able to provoke a general mobilization towards this or that meaning. It turns out that this careful movement of the illuminists and historicists would not have been able to mobilize this or that meaning in general. In general, the investigations made by most of the illuminists eventually intensified (contrary to what they intended) the "acceleration" or temporal instability, as they presented different explanations and logics, thus accentuating the very dispute between senses or perspectives that also characterized modernity.

At this moment, we have what Koselleck calls "Sattelzeit", which is also a radicalization of "acceleration", or the instability proper to modernity (KOSELLECK, 2006). Illuminists are criticized by historicists because, although their purpose is considered adequate – the intention of reorganizing temporality from (a reenchantment) of history - they would have been careless about the constitution of rigorous methods sufficient to "suspend" the subject of knowledge from the determination of this world, such as history, body/desire, etc, (GUMBRECHT, 2011). This is how history emerges as a discipline and – at the same time – makes possible the constitution of the fields that we call the theory of history and the history of historiography. Firstly, this was based on the objective of highlighting fundamental historical meanings proper to the reorganization of its horizon based on significant methodological care. However, this effort also does not seem to have been sufficient, once again, for the (at least intended) restabilization of modernity. Thus, very close to the illuminists, this movement eventually reinforced the disputes for "hegemony", as it also liberated distinct and even competing meanings.

The consequence of this movement that takes place within the discipline itself, especially in the fields of theory of history and the history of historiography, is what Foucault called "the crisis of representation" and what Gumbrecht described as a crisis brought about by the emergence of "the second-order observer". 11 So, what we have left, as a thoughtless deployment of the efforts of the illuminists and historicists, oscillates between the radical questioning of the very existence of any meanings that are ideal to history and the constitution of a deeply "skeptical" understanding of the possibility that any science, including history, would be able to understand and evidence such meanings, thus making available and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> On the "crisis of representation", see FOUCAULT, 1999 and 2000, ALBUQUERQUE JUNIOR, 2007, and RAGO, 1993. On the emergence of "the second-order observer", ARAUJO, 2006a.

generalizing the epistemological perception that would be resumed within the linguistic turn. It is about the conception that any scientific statement would be determined by the world, history, body/desire proper to the announcer subject.

Now, taking as its starting point the considerations more properly related to the constitution of the historical discipline between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we can understand the origin of a problem that will be fundamental to the fields of the theory of history and the history of historiography throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, we can understand the very constitution of what we are calling an ethical-political turn, which is a significant epistemological "skepticism". The hypothesis we work with is that this epistemological position was intensified from the late nineteenth century and widespread by the linguistic turn. And that was how it became responsible for a crisis within the discipline. The crisis we are referring to happened during the 60's and 70's having especially affected the theory of history and the history of historiography. And the crisis weakened the justification that until that moment was sufficient for the accomplishment of the historiographical activity: the justification which afirms history as privileged space for the constitution of true and definitive statements about the past. In other words: "historians believed that their discipline was legitimized by its mere existence" (RÜSEN, 2011, p.27). Therefore, as we will see, the ethical-political justification would have found the conditions of possibility of epistemological ideals to strengthen and occupy the same space that today is fundamental within these fields.

In this sense, we can say that it is from the generalization of this epistemological perception, as well as the need for clarification of other sufficient justifications for the activity of history, theory of history and history of historiography, that what we are calling ethical-political orientation might have conquered more spaces within the discipline. Consequently, this achievement would have triggered what we consider to be an ethical-political turn.

#### François Hartog



François Hartog has been thematizing the contemporary world, understanding it as a space constituted from a certain hypostasy regarding the responsability and the task that would be the establishment of justice in relation to certain groups or identities that were victims of traumatic events proper to the twentieth century. What is being addressed here is the way we would be experiencing, since the late 1980s, certain temporal anomie. Or yet, a double reduction: of the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" (KOSELLECK, 2006. p. 305-309), what he calls "presentism". What we would have would be a significant loss of a certain desire regarding the reconstruction of projects and expectations (future), and also a decrease in the epistemological-pragmatic interest in the pasts in general. And this would happen from an investment that would happen from an investment that would be hypertrophied in the thematization and restitution (or justfication/justice) of certain more immediate traumatic events (proper to the twentieth century), so that "... the question of time became a strong issue, a problem: and sometimes an obsession" (HARTOG, 2006, p. 263). 12

Therefore, the guiding thread of our reading is the one that the French historian - starting and intensifying the ethical-political turn within the theory of history and the history of historiography - understands that the contemporary world, while at the same time dedicated to thematizing groups and identities hitherto denied or obscured with the objetive of justice, which it often does without an epistemological-empirical care that he considers sufficient, has also been guided by a kind of "blame" or "remorse" that seems excessive, to be faithful to the text, which would at the same time be responsible for: 1- the reconstitution of identities that would be, at the limit, arbitrary, violent and even deeply hierarchical, and 2- by the very obscuration of problems and possibilities that would be emerging on our horizon. (HARTOG, 2006, p. 266). It is in this same sense that the problems of "patrimonialization" and "museification"— taken today as an "obsessive" duty of memory — would be an obstacle for the possibility that other pasts show themselves, that new futures are provoked, and that the present can be properly differentiated of this more immediate past, "while we seem to take a step in the present and ruminate on an endless past" (HARTOG, 2006, p. 273. My translation). 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Berber Bevernage and Mateus Pereira, for example, argue that the nature of this past is that of "irrevocability". That means they are talking about a past that does not end, or that would always impose itself on any and all present constituted from that point, and that is because of its more traumatic character. Therefore, any movement



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See CEZAR, 2010 and 2013, p. 29-46, and NICOLAZZI, 2010.

#### **Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht**

When we approach the thinking of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, for example, our hypotesis is that his reflections on modernity and the contemporary world also point to a kind of temporal double-reduction, the reduction of both the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expecatation". For Gumbrecht, this double reduction would hinder the movement proper to the fulfillment (happiness) of men in general, and this is because it (the fulfillment, or happiness) would be closely related to the possibility of relying significantly on past and/or futures.<sup>14</sup> Thus, given that the contemporary world would make it difficult to produce meaningful confidence in specific pasts and futures and therefore the very possibility of realization or "happiness" more effectively, we would be observing the constitution of a kind of "culture of the selfishness" (and hedonism), from which much of scientific and practical behavior would be determined. So, what Gumbrecht has demonstrated is that: 1- if, on one hand, people are determined by "fascination", which means that they are anthropologically characterized by the need to want or seek more experiences, or to constitute new relations, and if 2- on the other hand, the historical horizon would have become a space that would hinder what would be the ideal path to an effective achievement – we are referring to significant confidence in past and/or futures. Then, what we would have would be: 3- a deeply arid and unpleasant world for people in general, within which "selfishness" and hedonism would be decisive. It is from this perspective that we can undestand his notion of "broad present", which we believe that points to a kind of obsessive investment in a limited and already available set of experiences, especially from the constitution of virtual spaces. This would, therefore, have caused a kind of "suspension" and even negation of the time understood as the possibility of transformation or reorganization of the past in the name of other futures.

In the innermost part of this "selfish" world (and hedonistic), in which people would be devoting themselves insistently to the pursuit of their own pleasure, the anthropological and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> On the anthropological question to which we refer, see the problems of the "life-world" and "fascination", GUMBRECHT 2011, and the problem of "pleasure", AGAMBEN, 2008, p. 127-128. Regarding the problem of happiness, see RANGEL, 2018a and 2019a.



of justice in relation to traumatic pasts is a necessary as it also carries the risk of causing a kind of "obsessive" behavior regarding its restitution. BERBER, 2012, and PEREIRA, 2015.

defining strategy of modernity, that of "producing meanings", which in his view is fundamental to the constitution of history as a discipline, for example, there would be a need to give some space to another also anthropological strategy (perhaps more or still significantly suited to the contemporary world) which is the one of "production of presence". In other words, still according to Gumbrecht, it would be very difficult for the humanities in general and for history in particular to produce an expressive interest and thus effective transformations in a world determined by the feeling of "selfishness" (and hedonism) only from the "production of meanings". Here we are talking about the construction of logicalformally constituted speeches, which are structured from the logic of causality and the Aristotelian effect and imperatives of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded third, leaving a secondary role to body, experience and sensibility. Taking the German Romantic tradition as a starting point, for example, Gumbrecht understands that the strategy – or the space most suited to denying "selfish" (and hedonistic) modes – is aesthetics, sensibilization and impression. Or, in his own words, of the "production of presence". This may also mean, as far as history is concerned, an openness to the possibility of experiencing denied realities or historicities that were little know from a descriptive rather than explanatory gesture. This would happen in order to constitute the ideal conditions of possibility for new experiences and emotions, and – from them – for the (intelectual) reworking of concepts and languages more suited to a complex reality.<sup>15</sup>

The path proposed to Gumbrecht, to which we refer, is founded on the understanding that any and all the intelectual-existencial transformation, in this case configured from and beyond "selfishness" (and hedonism), must be born of the enrichment and expansion of what I call experience (of sensisitivity). Also, as he approaches Heidegger, he understands that this also historiographical strategy – that of "production of presence" from the material reconstruction and from historical climates or specific and denied sentimental spaces (*Stimmungen*) – would be fundamental to the very possibility of expanding experience. And this would be so that it may also be possible to constitute new and more approprieated senses (*Gegenständlichkeit*) to/and other possible "worlds" (GUMBRECHT, 2011, p. 42). 16

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> In this sense, see the discussion of Valdei Lopes Araujo about the "analytical of historicty". ARAUJO, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> See ARAUJO, 2006a, 2006b and 2013, and, also, RANCIÈRE, 2009, with an emphasis on the Chapter 1.

### **Hayden White**

With regard to the thought of Hayden White, we understand that if, in one hand, we have a critique of historicist epistemology because of what he understands as a disinterest in the present and especially the perception that it would be possible to constitute privileged or definitive statements about the past, findings that would be beyond the determinations that are proper to the world, history, and to the body/desire that belong to the subject of knowledge – on the other hand, almost paradoxically, Hayden White himself makes an effort to constitute an ethical-politically oriented epistemological space within which it would be as possible as necessary to create true, appropriate and definitive statements. In this sense, Hayden White's fundamental concern would be to thematize (and also to make historiography thematize) an event proper to the contemporary world – Nazism and *Shoa* – based on a set of specfic procedures and also understanding that they would be boundary events capable of communicating their nature, namely evil (WHITE, 1992). Thus, historiography would be a field on which truth (adequate and definitive) could and would need to be made explicit, and this because of a responsability with regard to the victims of Nazism and humanity in general.

Recently, Hayden White developed a reflection on what he called "practical pasts", which is a notion that is also constituted from an ethical-politically oriented epistemological interest or position. Hayden White's hypothesis is that historiography has lost its power of orientation/intervention within the contemporary world. On the one hand, this would lead us to the realization that we would continue to be deeply guided by statements and discourses based on pasts from spaces of "historical culture", such as literature. On the other hand, historiography, especially because of its constitution – based on the need to suspend itself in relation to its time and produce statements capable of describing any and every past in each of its determinations – would have lost touch with the world that belongs to it, in this case with the contemporary world. In this way, historiography would have departed from specific demands of the contemporary world, and thus becoming uninteresting to the general public, losing much of its power to participate (WHITE, 2012, p. 19-39). This is how Hayden White also devoted himself to what we might call a reorganization of this space proper to the "historical culture" that is historiography, questioning it about the possibility of some

<sup>17</sup> See AVILA, 2018.

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reorganization based, for example, on formal strategies expensive to "modernism" in literature. (WHITE, 2006, p. 205).

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Recebido em 2019-11-18 Aprovado em 2019-12-19 Publicado em 2019-12-31

