


## Present time, history and the silence of memory in textbooks

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### ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 21st Century we have observed an infinity of reflections about the Teaching of History, mainly from the implementation of the National Textbook Plan. However, the relationship between history, present time and memory is still absent in discussions about Basic Education textbooks. The present text does not seek to deepen an epistemological discussion that is present in the formation of the historian, but to lay discursive bases of approximations between memory and the history of the present time as propelling bases of meanings of continuity of life.

**Keywords:** History of the Present Time, Teaching and Memory.

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## INTRODUCTION

Often theorized under distinct and contradictory aspects, the relationship between history and memory is still absent in textbooks when it comes to sociocultural and epistemological dimensions. It is evident that in the production of the textbook, it should not prioritize discussions about the theoretical and methodological issues of history, however, such absences allow to obscure the distinction between history and memory, and this relationship, when it becomes obscured, contributes to the history of the present time, when treated in the textbook, silencing the importance of memory as a defining element of the meanings of life.

History has permanently undergone a series of elaborations, especially after the fall of the Enlightenment paradigm that sought the legitimacy of the act of making history based on the search for a scientific truth. In this way, the teacher was nothing more than a middleman of knowledge, being concerned with passing on these truths to his students. This contributed to the construction of a historical knowledge based on the idea that the past could be constructed and reconstructed, so that one could, in fact, understand what really happened.

In the meantime, the form and teachings of the making of history had as their main mission to bring the truth of the facts to the students, a truth transmitted from generation to generation by a group of intellectuals who ensured their knowledge from the sources that legitimized this truth. Thus, the student/teacher relationship was characterized by a teacher who explained the causes and consequences of what happened, while the student was responsible for apprehending these events.

Recently, the critique of historical making has come as a contribution for historians to begin to be concerned with the current configuration of the discipline of History. In this sense, narrative, discourse and literary criticism are elements that can help to understand what it is and what it is to make history today.

History is a narrative of the past. Such an assertion has become a maxim for historians. But what is the past? Does this really exist? If history is what we affirm of the past, is it discourse? And if the past does not exist, if what exists is what we affirm about it, what could we affirm about the present? Does the present exist in history, or is what we say of the present?

We know that the most remarkable thing about history is that the facts it describes are past, and past facts are no longer accessible to direct inspection. That is, we cannot test the accuracy of historical statements simply by verifying whether they correspond to an independently known reality. Although the past is not directly accessible to us, it has left us a series of traces about itself in the present, whether in the form of documents, buildings, coins or other intangible elements.

The historian's duty is not only to base all his claims on existing evidence, but also to decide what the evidence is, as he seeks to reconstruct intelligibly the past. Thus, from the past, memories



are sought, the conceptual elements that contributed to the present making of individuals, historical subjects.

That history is the study of the past, everyone agrees. But what past? The human past? If that's the answer, there are areas of the past that history doesn't take notice of—for example, the areas that preceded the evolution of man into the kind of creature he is today. Therefore, it would not be our intention to say that history is the study of the past: of the human past.

If our role is to narrate the past, we must be sure of this literary genre. Chroniclers criticize historians and, certainly, historians do not know how to make history, as they also do not know how to narrate history, or at least, do not have the theoretical framework to understand the importance of narrative to tell the past. It should be noted that the fact that we say that we are going to tell what happened in the past does not make us chroniclers. However, the knowledge of the chronicle, the literature and other elements that help us in our writing is of immense value.

We are certainly not literate. Because we are not, we are concerned with signs that, if not true, have at least tended to be. What will differ the historian from the chronicler is the fact that the latter works with the event and has a sense of truth. However, working with what differentiates it from another field of knowledge does not mean that we cannot use the techniques of this knowledge. Thus, when the historian narrates the past, he must limit himself to what happened, constructing what can be called a direct narrative, or in addition to saying what happened, he must also at least try to explain why it happened. So, should our narrative be "meaningful" or direct?

Should we make history what "precisely happened" or can we mean the event? This is a singular choice, given that each one, in their writing, chooses – arbitrarily – the best way to narrate the past. What cannot happen is the forgetting of the rules of narrative, in the sense that we historians must have as a defining element a great security of what distinguishes us from chroniclers, writers, journalists and anyone else who also uses the past as a work tool.

If history is past, what is the role of the present in history? The past can be a this is an extremely important element for us to perceive, not in a prophetic way, some characteristics of the present. It should be noted that we do not have the role of elaborating certainties about what is and what may still happen in the present, but we corroborate the way of thinking that we approach, or at least try to approach the past, because this past is interesting to us in the present. So, is the present an object of the historian? Can the historian make a history of the present?

## **MEMORY AND HISTORY OF THE PRESENT TIME**

Nothing is more important than the act of telling one's life. The tale, the narrative and the representation of the past can only be made from remembering, a mnemonic act that can be



elaborated within the possibility of the sensible. Thus, what is seen, what is sensible and appreciated are indispensable conditions for the prospection of memory.

The condition of remembering is a current subject within the human sciences, which has given rise to a series of debates about memory spaces, the place of memory, collective memory, individual memory, resentful memory and even counter-memory. Could we know that we have forgotten something if that something is forgotten? Can we recognize what lies outside of sensible experience?

The objective of this work is not to show the limits of theoretical approaches that dispute primacy when focusing on memory – even because our operationalization of mnemonic knowledge is crossed by the notion of the sensible. Despite this, other perspectives on the study of memory can never be discarded in the course of the work, since these will serve as a substrate for the enrichment of the research.

Memory and sensibility are inseparable conditions of living. We have not been able to establish a notion of memory outside the sensible, outside the outside world. Man's sensibility and its reflections in the earthly world are essential conditions for not becoming victims of a collective amnesia, since in the times of the postmodern condition, the past seems to be exhausted in its own passing. Everything is ephemeral, everything is destined for oblivion, even if we forget that we are forgetting.

The arrogance of the present finds in memory a reaction against the fleeting, against becoming nothing, because if everything passes away permanently, we become nothing. In this way, nothing remains and we are nothing. Memory would be, therefore, the safeguard of a time that lives in constant evaporation, it would be the possible reaction against the irreversible loss of our identity. Thus, the act of remembering and the seduction of memories become resistance to the purge of our experience that is constantly thrown away into oblivion.

Faced with this conjuncture, memory has become an effective weapon in the struggle against the imposition of immediacy, against the temporal void imposed by the erasure of what has been experienced, it is the effective way to keep memories alive, turning on the lights of the past, even if this turning on is done with a mere act of pressing a button in the present. Thus, memories must be an evocation of life, or even a summoning of life, because the act of telling is to experience memories and to celebrate, even in pain, what has been remembered.

The act of remembering is one of the ways of being: we remember and then we exist, we feel the palpable. That is why, even though the return is the worst of the burdens to be carried, within a Nietzschean conception, we do not share the assertion that man can be happy without memory.

Remembrance is an ineffable condition of existence, it may be a product of the elaboration of sadness, but just as life can be impossible without forgetting, it is also impossible without the act of



remembering. Even if this act of remembering, in Derrida's (1994) perception, can be compared to the pain of the one who watches over a body that no longer exists. This cannot be shared by Ricouer's (2007) point of view, since for him, there is no better access to the past than through memory.

Sharing Rousso's premise (2007, p. 97) when he states that "the ritual question of the differences between history and memory seems to be outdated", we conceive that the creation of places of memory is elaborated from the moment in which collective memories are no longer shared, when social rituals and rhythms have been violated. It is noteworthy that for Albuquerque Júnior (2007, p. 199) we are manipulators of memory "whether written or oral, individual or collective memories have become one of the increasingly important sources for the gestation work of History".

Thus, we have the operationalization of the memory of the past, whose failure may be the forgetting of data, the substrate used for the making of this work. As memory, according to Albuquerque Júnior (2007), is a multiple being, we corroborate the author when he takes into account the different levels that make up the "individual memory".

And, knowing that these sensitive signs go beyond the limits of temporality, we highlight the ideas of Albuquerque Júnior (2006, p. 201): "involuntary memory, which we will call reminiscence, is a level at which 'individual memory' is violated by shocks coming from sensitive signs".

Thus, we agree with Rosa (2007, p. 54) when he states that "history is a form of memory, but not all forms of memory are history". History is an epistemic practice that, when organized, documented, and told, starts from the principle of truth. We tell the story of something that happened, and in order to tell this event, we start from an operationalization of a rationalized knowledge based on the mastery of the art of reinventing the past (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2006).

Margareth Rago (1995), in the article "The Foucault Effect in Brazilian Historiography", states that from one minute to the next all our fragile, worn-out, but comforting securities, had been radically shaken by a theory that displaced the intellectual from his spaces and organic functions, questioning his own instruments of work and mode of production.

According to Rago (1995), the Foucault effect was so overwhelming that it provoked different reactions: on the one hand, it led to the revitalization of Marxism, others more or less timidly surrounded themselves with Foucault's conceptions trying to understand where they came from and where they pointed. It was, therefore, a new way of problematizing history, of thinking about the event and the categories through which the historian's discourse is constructed. Not a discussion about narrative per se, but about the epistemological bases for the production of narrative as historical knowledge.

Foucault (1996) questioned the study of history centered on the desire for social transformation in an emotional bet on revolution. In questioning this assumption, Foucault asserted



that history is nothing more than a discourse. Paul Veyne (1988), in this direction, showed that history is a cultural form through which contemporary men relate to their events and their past. For this reason, according to Veyne (1988), history is a form of knowledge, a writing and not an action.

Therefore, based on the Foucauldian conception, discourse is materialized together with a social construction, with its own rules, norms, knowledge and powers. It is not the mirror of society, it is not neutral, and it should not be considered as absolute truth. For this reason, the written historical document should not be considered as a source of absolute and impartial truths, making it necessary to have an external analysis of its discourse. That is, who speaks, from where they speak, and for whom they speak. Thus, Foucauldian sayability attempts to restore the freedom of the word, recovering the continuity of practices that can inform differentiated knowledge; for this reason, Foucault seeks to highlight the discontinuities, the beginning and not the origin. Thus, history, from Foucault's point of view, is nominalist, a discursive practice that participates in the elaboration of the real, because the real for Foucault is materialized from discourse, since it does not exist outside language.

Based on these assumptions, history can be considered as a narrative art, close to science, but distant from the scientific elaboration of the nineteenth century. Experience, from Foucault's point of view, "is not a voice from the past that needs to be forgotten and needs to be saved, but a fissure in the silence, the silence to which most human beings and their experiences are conditioned" (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2008, p. 139). In this way, Foucault breaks with the silence of the past and, based on the conditions of knowledge in the twentieth century, manages to contribute to the elaboration of a new subject: the historical subject. Therefore, the past is configured, within Foucault's elaboration, as a great war that the men of the present wage in order to give, in this present time, new explanations in the sense of trying to break with the historical truths established about the subject man in the present time.

Another exponent who affirms that all the great historiographical traditions have lost their unity, fragmenting into diverse, often contradictory, proposals, is Chartier. For Chartier (2002), the challenge posed by a new history of societies of which the Italian microhistory can be considered as an exemplary modality consists, therefore, in the necessary articulation between, on the one hand, the description of the perceptions, representations and rationalities of the actors and, on the other hand, the identification of the unknown interdependencies that, together, delimit and inform their strategies.

Throughout his work "The Edge of the Cliff", Chartier (2002) discusses the importance of the notion of representation, demonstrating, among other aspects, that the history of the construction of social identities is thus transformed into a history of symbolic relations of force.



Chartier (2002) confirms the idea of historians who consider that the writing of history belongs to the genre of narrative with which it shares the fundamental categories. However, he affirms that only by becoming aware of the distance between the past and its representation, or as Ricouer (1994) states, between what once was, and is no longer, can a reflection on the modalities, at the same time common and singular, of the narrative of history be developed.

It is important to point out that Chartier (2002) does not share Hayden White (2001), since the latter does not identify in the discourse of history anything other than a free play of rhetorical figures, but one expression among others of fictional invention. Against this dissolution of the status of knowledge of history, Chartier (2002) confirms that history is commanded by an intention and a principle of truth; that the past that it establishes as an object is a reality external to discourse; and that their knowledge can be controlled.

For Chartier (2002), the historian's work is divided into two requirements. The first, classic and essential, consists in proposing the most adequate intelligibility possible of an object, of a corpus, of a problem. The second forces history to engage in a dialogue with other philosophical, sociological, literary, etc. questions. Only through these encounters can history invent questions and forge more rigorous instruments of understanding.

## **THE CONTEMPORARY, MEMORY AND HISTORY OF THE PRESENT TIME IN TEXTBOOKS**

To think of the present in history, or the present of history, is to fall into the uncertainty of time. Time does not belong to the historian. Time, as Augustine (2000) had rightly stated, is a psychological conception, time does not exist, it empties itself into our hands. Time doesn't really belong to us, that is, what we do is an attempt to time time, we give it a meaning, but we can't make it concrete.

So, does the present exist in history? What are the criteria used to cut out the present tense? When does contemporaneity begin? How far will the postmodern, when it comes to time, survive? These questions are extremely important for the historian who uses what they call the history of the present time, because, if the past does not exist, the same can be said of the present? If this present tense does not exist, what, and how is it treated in the textbook? Is there a reason for memory to be forgotten in textbooks?

When the present is narrated, it is no longer present, so "Thompson states that it would be up to the historian to work on the past, the present would be pertinent to sociology studies" (MÜLLER, 2007, p. 17).

It will not be our concern here to define what is the object of sociology or history, or what differentiates the object of both; Our concern, in fact, is to try to understand the place of memory and





history of the present time in the production of textbooks. For this, we chose two works that were approved by the 2011 National Textbook Plan. Among several works, we opted for the books by Gilberto Cutrim, *Saber e Fazer História* and *Viver a História* by Claudio Vicentino, because we believe that these works are framed in the framework developed by Fabiana Almeida and Sonia Miranda (2012) when in their research they state that the concept of memory appears in only 25% of the textbooks approved by the PNLD.

According to Ameida and Miranda (2012), the absence of discussion of the concept of memory in most of the books approved by the PNLD is striking, even though it has achieved some progress for them. What caught our attention is that, if the concentric of memory stands out in most of the textbooks, when it comes to the work of Gilberto Cotrim and Mário Schmidt, they are also absent. In addition to the absence of a concept of memory, we realize that the treatment given to the present time also does not take into account the discussion of this new approach to history.

We reiterate that we do not want the high school student to be an initiate in history, much less a historian, however, certainly if these theoretical and methodological issues are absent in these works, the learning of certain subjects is impaired.

This is still a tenuous aspect, because if history is the narrative of the past, the present is only narrated when that same present has become the past. The present is immediate, it is constructed, it is passage, it is movement. Therefore, we can say that it is practically impossible to narrate the present, as it is extremely ephemeral. In order for it to be narrated, at least in the eyes of historians, it must become the past, not because the past is our object of study, but only because we can only say something, from the historical point of view, of what has already passed, not of something that is happening. This "happening" may even belong to historical knowledge, however, we can only narrate about what happens when it becomes the same. Even so, even in the treatment of what has passed, it does not mean to affirm that the elaboration of the past can be constructed as it actually was, because what we do is a discursive signification about events that occurred in the past, whether it is close or distant from our earthly time, whether it is remembered or remembered, collectively and individually, because even though it is collective, memory is an individual faculty. In this way, history is an object of construction whose place is not the present time, but the elaborations made by men of their time and on events that occurred in the past – whether recent or distant. Since history is an object of construction, based on the sensible and on memory, only with a sure assessment of these dimensions of culture will the high school teacher be able to make use of a teaching of the history of the present time based on memory

If we take into account those who define history from a modern paradigm, giving it a place of progress, the Second World War would be "the mark of distinction between what would be the past and the present time in historical research" (MULLER, 2007, p. 18). In this sense,





We call attention to two institutions that have been working with the notion of History of the Present Time. They are the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent (IHTP), created in France in the 70s and linked to the CNRS, with a body of researchers and publications mostly dedicated to studies on post-war French history as well as on theory and method; the Institute of Contemporary British History, linked to the University of London, which has been organizing conferences and seminars on twentieth-century British history, especially after World War II. (MÜLLER, 2000, p. 19)

Present These are some of the concrete examples of institutions that have been concerned with the present time as an object of study of history and, if the present is for these institutions an object of history, it is up to us historians to inquire what is the criterion that could define what can be considered as the history of the present time.

Thus, Muller (2007) defines the present time in history as intertwined with questions: When does the present time begin? With the First World War? With World War II? Or with the Fall of the Berlin Wall? In addition to these elements that may define the beginning of this new field of history, another no less significant question would be: what is the method used for the construction of the history of the present, or can the history of the present time be a discipline? What is the importance of memory for the resignification of the history of the contemporary? Is the present time a time of post-contemporaneity or is it part of the contemporary world?

Certeau (1988) can contribute to the direction of such questions when he asks us what the historian manufactures when he "makes history". Providing elements for the diagnosis of such a question, it affirms that the historical operation is a combination of a social place and its scientific practices. Thus, the "organization of history is relative to a place and a time" (CERTEAU, 1988, p. 28). For this reason, each society must think historically according to its own instruments.

The gaze on the past is crossed by the present, to the extent that this past is "first and foremost a means of representing a difference" (CERTEAU, 1988, p. 40). Thus, the gaze on the past never ceases to be a datum according to a present law that can define this same past, but such a definition is constructed concomitantly with a distance maintained by the historian, since this distancing in relation to the known makes a lived situation present.

From this perspective, we could incur an infinity of thoughts and we do not want to fall into the uncertainty of the inexplicable. What we can point out is that this is a singular choice. We cannot fail to criticize Muller (2007) and the Institute of Contemporary British History, since both are concerned with the definition of methods and the temporal framework of the Present Time, as an element of temporal framing, the facts that occurred in the European world. All the examples cited by the author were Western European events. Thus, we could ask: wouldn't such an assertion, of the existence of a history of the Present Time, be a way out for the attempt to continue a pseudo-supremacy of Western European historiography?



In addition, to write about what happened is to write about the difficulties of what we are witnessing – as Hobsbawm (1995) reminded us in his book "The Age of Extremes". Thus, Heller (1993, p. 333), when writing about the present in history, states that: "History is not simply the history of our past, but the history of the past, of our present and also of our present". In this sense, the distinction between present and past is very tenuous, it is something that depends fundamentally on our theoretical and practical choices.

This is an arbitrary choice. In addition, since Thucydides, the history of the Present Time has been practiced, as we can cite several historians of the Present Time, from Classical Antiquity to the said present time. Was Thucydides making history of the present time when he wrote about the Peloponnesian War? Like this

To evoke Thucydides is to recall, regarding a work that was not only written in the heat of the event, but also by a person notorious for the course it followed, that the historical operation aims, above all, at the search for a line of intelligibility, a relationship of cause and effects, means and ends, noise and meaning. (LACOUTURE, 2005, p. 290)

Was Trotsky, to give an example, closer to the Present Time, making history of the present time when he wrote about the history of the Russian Revolution? What we can share is with the view that to make the history of the present time is perhaps to break with the notion of time that has been constructed from modernity. That time of progress in the science of certainty. However, from a historiographical point of view, even when we are writing about the present time, we are narrating the past, for that present has already passed. For this reason, perhaps the best definition of the History of the Present Time is "that written in our time, based on knowledge, ideas, and the culture of our time" (MULLER, 2007, p. 28).

### **FINAL THOUGHTS: WHAT HISTORY TO TEACH?**

The historian, when writing about history, makes his own the image of the work of a craftsman of the present, always looking for new forms of art in order to be able to build new products in search of new markets. Thus, historians and history teachers must seek new forms of approaches so that they can build their knowledge. But, from the perspective of teaching history, what is the relationship between the history of the present time and memory? Can we think of the present as a new way of constructing the teaching of history? If so, one of the tools for the construction of this knowledge should be concerned with the prospection of memory. Thus, the use of memory is of vital importance for understanding the current world.

This is a coherent idea in characterizing the task of history. Not because it is accepted as a mission crossed by the commitment to the construction of a current history, but, above all, because, like a craftsman of the present, the historian needs to work with the elements that constitute the



current world. In this way, remembering a recent past can be a more pleasurable task for students who are often not interested in subjects that are not part of their context, which, in fact, is not part of their history.

From this perspective, the historian and teacher must never forget that we are objects of history, and as such, we are influenced by the environment in which we are inserted. Thus, recent memories will be our sources that will allow the understanding of current conjunctures to the extent that we are violators of memory and manipulators of these sources, even though these are often not present in the books approved by the PNDL

On the other hand, a series of elements serve as an obstacle to thinking about a teaching focused on the present, ranging from the need to follow a curriculum imposed by educational institutions, as well as the ineptitude of most professionals who still think about a history that has as its objectivity the understanding of the past. Certainly we are not questioning history as a past, however, we do not share the idea of the possibility of understanding past facts as if they could come to light from the historian's writing.

In this way, the present here was treated as a recent past, which is still past, but not with the looks and perspectives that were given to the past as an object of history. For this reason, the retreat from the past treated here as present should be one of the tools used to build a history that is truly concerned with the changes that are to come.

How many times do we take the idea that we are builders of a more critical and coherent society! Historians and history teachers often claimed to be responsible for building a conscious society. Hence, there is nothing more plausible and coherent than to think and use the present so that one can reach a certain level of consciousness.

If history is a discipline that has as an element of concern the knowledge about the past, so that a more critical and conscious society can be built, there is nothing more coherent than to think about this recent past, treated here as present and as memory. If we can understand the present, treat it as an object of history, and be able to diagnose problems and even try to find some solutions to the social chaos in the new millennium, then we will have achieved the true goal of historical knowledge. Knowing that also needs to be addressed in Basic Education.



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