

INTRODUCTION

History, Presentism, Bergsonism

We have been thrown into a time in which everything is provisional. New technologies alter our lives daily. The traditions of the past cannot be retrieved. At the same time we have little idea of what the future will bring. We are forced to live as if we were free.¹

—John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*

A “return to Bergson” does not only mean a renewed admiration for a great philosopher but a renewal or an extension of his project today, in relation to the transformations of life and society, in parallel with the transformations of science.²

—Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*

Time is what hinders everything from being given at once. It retards, or rather it is retardation. It must therefore, be elaboration. Would it not then be a vehicle of creation and of choice? Would not the existence of time prove that there is indetermination in things? Would not time be that indetermination itself?³

—Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*

1. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002), 110.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 125.

3. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (*La Pensée et le mouvant*, 1934), translated by Mabelle L. Andison (1946; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007) (hereafter CM), 75.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the “end of history.” The fall of the Berlin Wall and the failure of communism had, according to Fukuyama, ended a centuries-long, political-ideological evolution of mankind. Liberal democracy had prevailed over rival ideologies such as monarchy, fascism, and communism, and would soon establish a uniform political reality based on equality and freedom. To Fukuyama, the end of history was also a sad time. The world would now be free from irrationalities and there would be nothing left to fight for: “the worldwide ideological struggle that calls forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of consumer demands.”⁴

Fukuyama’s predictions have since been widely criticized and rejected. Now, more than twenty-five years after its proclamation, the end of history is often considered as a utopian symbol for the “happy ’90s,” when liberal democracy seemed like the “finally found formula of the best possible society.”⁵ The only thing left to do was improve liberal-democratic capitalism and make it even more just and tolerant than it already was. The ideological striving that had determined the course of the twentieth century appeared to belong to the past once and for all.

We could therefore maintain that Fukuyama was not all that wrong and that history did indeed come to an end after 1989. Yet this has not been the end of history as such, but of a very specific idea about the nature of history. What has come to an end is the notion that we as human beings are part of history as an all-encompassing process that we are collectively shaping. This idea came into existence at the end of the eighteenth century with the invention of the “modern” future.⁶ History, in this view, was the road upon which we collectively travel toward a utopian future, while the past represented the distance already covered, measuring how far we have removed ourselves from the traditional, premodern world that we have left behind.

Nowadays, we no longer consider ourselves historical beings. Of course, we still live in times of constant change. Technological innovations transform on an almost daily basis the ways we communicate, transport ourselves, and produce. “Just about everything” seems to accelerate, as James Gleick puts it, while paradoxically we seem to have less and less free time and collectively

4. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989): 1–18.

5. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 88.

6. Chris Lorenz, “Blurred Lines. Memory, History and the Experience of Time,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2 (2014): 43.

suffer from “hurry-sickness.”⁷ However, despite the continuous acceleration of time, it seems that history has come to a standstill. It is as if we have lost the ability to “make history.” The changes among which we live are overwhelming and appear without direction. In spite of our hectic daily lives, it seems that in contemporary society “nothing essentially changes anymore and nothing new occurs.”⁸

Commentators have therefore noted that twenty-first-century societies are no longer oriented toward the future, but increasingly to the present moment. Douglas Rushkoff even speaks of “present shock” to describe our current condition. He argues that while futurist Alvin Toffler spoke in 1970 of “future shock” to describe what happens to people when they are “overwhelmed by an acceleration of change,”⁹ the future that we were waiting for during the twentieth century has now arrived:

Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It’s not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It’s more of a diminishment of anything that isn’t happening right now—the onslaught of everything that supposedly is.¹⁰

With the waning of the modern future and the progressive notion of time that went with it, we now find ourselves trapped in an infinite present that has drawn the past and the future into itself.

The French historian François Hartog has related contemporary presentism to what he calls a “crisis of the modern regime of historicity.” Within the modern regime of historicity, symbolically operative between 1789 and 1989, the past and the present were illuminated by a “view from the future.” But since the fall of the Berlin Wall the future has lost its appeal. The future is no longer a source of enlightenment but, if anything, has turned into a threat, a location of uncertainty, the disastrous continuation of the present. Hartog’s diagnosis is confirmed by social surveys in the Netherlands that

7. James Gleick, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 16.

8. Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 15.

9. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971). Future shock describes, according to Toffler, “the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time” (2).

10. Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 1.

show time and again that people are convinced that future generations will be worse off than their parents.¹¹ Such expectations reflect the feeling that we are, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, “living in the end times,” that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zeropoint.”¹² Paradoxically, this apocalypse is not only conceived as a disaster but also welcomed as a relief. The destruction of the world almost seems like the only way out, as sociologist Hartmut Rosa states, “a kind of exciting antipode to the creeping apocalypse of an everyday existence that . . . appears rigid in virtue of its contingent openness and ubiquitous simultaneity.”¹³

Because the future has been drawn into the present, the same has happened with the past. The past no longer refers to “what lies behind us,” but instead refuses to “go away.”¹⁴ Symptomatic is the proliferation of heritage in the last decades, which shows how “confidence in progress has given way to a desire to preserve and save.”¹⁵ Under the flag of the UNESCO charter, it seems that anything can be declared heritage—not only monuments or cultural and historical sites, but also landscapes, animals and plants, know-how, languages, folk traditions, and even the gene pool.¹⁶ In the Netherlands, “consumer fireworks” have recently been declared immaterial cultural heritage.¹⁷ Without direction from the future, it has become impossible to determine what merely belongs to the past and what pertains to history.

The emergence of an eternal present has affected the social and cultural significance of history as a discipline. History is no longer considered crucial for our individual and collective self-understanding. Presentism implies “a fundamental change in the experience of time,”¹⁸ as a consequence of

11. “Volgende generaties slechter af” [Coming Generations Worse Off], Dutch Broadcast Foundation (NOS), accessed January 2, 2016, <http://nos.nl/artikel/236012-volgende-generaties-slechter-af.html>.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), x.

13. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 274–275.

14. Lorenz, “Blurred Lines,” 43.

15. François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 185.

16. *Ibid.*, 182–183.

17. “Consumentenvuurwerk is cultureel erfgoed [Consumer Fireworks are Cultural Heritage],” *De Telegraaf*, accessed October 20, 2016, http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/24812086/_Vuurwerk_is_cultureel_erfgoed_.html. Thijs Lijster relates this to a present-day “torpor of time.” See Thijs Lijster, *De grote vlucht inwaarts: Essays over cultuur in een onoverzichtelijke wereld* [The Great Flight Inward: Essays on Culture in a Chaotic World] (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2016), 105–130.

18. Lorenz, “Blurred Lines,” 46.

which the “motor of history(-writing) has stalled,” as Hartog puts it.¹⁹ This motor consisted in a conception of time as linear and progressive, a time that “passes irreversibly and annuls the entire past in its wake.”²⁰ History as a discipline is based on the idea that the past is distant and absent from the present.²¹ This has given historians the task of carefully reconstructing the past in every detail, before it would be forever consumed by time.

Simultaneously, historians themselves have also increasingly refrained from providing orientations for the future. During the nineteenth century, history not only professionalized and developed into a scientific discipline, it also became an important source of culture. Historians had an important political and cultural role. History books were being written for a broad and educated public and became of central importance to the formation of national and social identities.²² Yet because of the cataclysms of the twentieth century, historians became wary of speculation and entrenched themselves behind the high walls of Academia. Nowadays, history as a discipline, as Georg Iggers puts it, “is caught in an iron cage of increasing professionalization and specialization with all the limits they set on the imaginative exploration of knowledge.”²³

Recently, a number of attempts have been made to recuperate the existential task of history. In *The History Manifesto* (2014), Jo Guldi and David Armitage argue that history needs to restore its relationship to the public future. The authors register a “crisis of short term thinking” that has pervaded our whole society and culture, leading as a consequence to a retreat of history from the public realm. In a crisis of short-termism, Guldi and Armitage state, “our world needs somewhere to turn to for information about the relationship between past and future.” In their eyes, “history—the discipline and its subject-matter—can be just the arbiter we need at this critical time.”²⁴ *The History Manifesto* wants to restore the *longue durée* by bringing history beyond the biological timescales of individual human lives.

19. Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, book cover.

20. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 47.

21. Lorenz, “Blurred Lines,” 43.

22. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 25–30.

23. Georg G. Iggers, “Historiography in the Twentieth Century,” *History and Theory* 44 (October 2015): 471.

24. Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7. See also the website of Cambridge University Press, accessed May 14, 2016, <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org>.

Another historiographical approach that seeks to restore the public function of history is “big history,” which wants to unite “natural history and human history in a single, grand, and intelligible narrative.”²⁵ Big history does not start with the first human activity, but with the Big Bang some thirteen billion years ago. Instigator David Christian sees big history as a contemporary version of the ancient, but now rarely practiced, tradition of “universal history” that transcends existing disciplinary boundaries: “It will treat human history as one member of a large family of historical disciplines that includes biology, the earth sciences, astronomy, and cosmology.”²⁶ Big history wants to generate a sense of “global citizenship” by constructing “histories of humanity” that are “as powerful and inspiring as the great national histories of the nineteenth and twentieth century.”²⁷ Within the universal maps of the past, Christian argues, “it will be easy to see that all human beings share a common and quite distinctive history.”²⁸

The History Manifesto and big history are admirable attempts to recuperate the relevance of history in a presentistic society and culture. However, it is my contention that a merely wider historiographical perspective will not be enough to accomplish this task. We will need to start by “rethinking history,” meaning by critically assessing our ontological presuppositions regarding the nature of history. The way we understand history has been ontologically shaped by the modern regime of historicity. It is therefore no more than logical to suggest that historical thought has entered a state of crisis, given that the arrow of modern time is dissolving in an unending now.

In this book, I want to seize the contemporary crisis of the modern regime of historicity as an opportunity to critically reflect on the ontological foundations of the modern understanding of history. I want to examine whether we can overcome this crisis by adopting a perspective on history, and ourselves as historical beings, that is grounded in an alternative, nonmodern ontology of time. In so doing, I will turn to the philosophy of duration of the French philosopher Henri Bergson.²⁹ A Bergsonian approach, so I will argue, breaks with two important prescriptions of what Bruno Latour calls the “modern Constitution,” which have also shaped the modern view of history:

25. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), xv.

26. David Christian, “The Return of Big History,” *History and Theory* 49 (December 2010): 7.

27. *Ibid.*, 26.

28. *Ibid.*, 7.

29. For an assessment of the nonmodern character of Bergsonism, see Suzanne Guerlac, “Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life,” in *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 40–60.

firstly, the separation of the world into two purified ontological zones, that of Nature and Culture; and, secondly, a linear, progressive notion of time that supports this separation. Bergson's philosophy of life implies an approach to history that is based on a creative mode of time in which Nature and Culture are indissolubly connected. I hope to show that Bergsonism allows us to reconceptualize the categories of past, present and future, and that we may thereby regain an understanding of ourselves as "historical beings."



Henri Bergson (1859–1941) lived and worked in a world that in many ways resembled the beginning of the twenty-first century. He wrote the majority of his works during the Belle Époque, the quarter-century that preceded the outbreak of World War I.³⁰ This was a period marked by a "feeling of living in an accelerating world, of speeding into the unknown."³¹ As it is today, everyday life was transformed by a series of important technological innovations that reconfigured temporal and spatial experience, such as the telephone, the bicycle, photography, the cinema, the automobile, and the airplane.³² Artists, politicians, scientists, and intellectuals sought ways to deal with these changes. In the artistic realm, this resulted in a second wave of modernist innovation.

It was against the background of this "culture of time and space" that Bergson's philosophy of time gained an enormous popularity and influence. Bergson became a vital point of reference for the most important artistic and political movements of the day, such as cubism, symbolism, anarchism, and modernism.³³ Contemporaries considered Bergson the greatest philosopher of his era. The philosophical revolution of Bergsonism was compared with those of Socrates and Kant.³⁴ John Dewey stated that "no philosophical problem will ever exhibit just the same face and aspect that it presented before Professor Bergson." And William James, calling *Creative Evolution* in

30. Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 94.

31. Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Europe, 1900–1914* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 2.

32. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.

33. Alexandre Lefebvre, introduction to *Henri Bergson* by Vladimir Jankélévitch, trans. Nils F. Schott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), xiii.

34. By Edouard Le Roy in 1913. See Richard A. Cohen, "Philo, Spinoza, Bergson: The Rise of an Ecological Age," in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 18.

1907 “a true miracle in the history of philosophy,” posed the question of whether Bergson’s work marked “the beginning of a new era.”³⁵ Bergsonism was rejected equally passionately. Bertrand Russell considered it a dangerous form of anti-intellectualism and later wrote that it “harmonized easily with the movement which culminated in Vichy.”³⁶ The left-wing French writer Julien Benda even claimed that he “would have happily killed Bergson if this was the only way to destroy his influence.”³⁷

All the more remarkable, therefore, is the pace at which Bergson fell into oblivion after World War I. The dissipation of Bergson’s influence has been attributed to different causes. Some writers note that the themes that dominated the philosophical agenda changed and metaphysics fell out of fashion. Other interpreters point out that the Bergsonian worldview was so ubiquitous that its originality lost distinctiveness as its ideas were incorporated by movements whose longevity was more secure, such as phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism.³⁸

The famous confrontation between Bergson and Einstein that took place on April 6, 1922, in Paris—and that Bergson, in the eyes of the public, lost—also contributed to the demise of Bergsonism. This encounter has recently been described by Jimena Canales as a “debate that changed our understanding of time,” because it consolidated “a world largely split into science and the rest.”³⁹ During the meeting, Einstein remarked that “there is no philosopher’s time; there is only a psychological time different from the time of the physicist.” Einstein hereby denied the cosmological meaning that Bergson had attributed to his conception of time and space. What Bergson was after, according to Einstein, was nothing more than the subjective time of psychology, which had nothing to do with the “real world” with which science was concerned. Bergson came to be seen as a philosopher who had been unable to keep up with the innovations in physics. He was situated on the losing side of a dichotomy that opposed objective reality to subjective illusion.⁴⁰

35. Ibid.

36. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy, and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 791.

37. Robert C. Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France 1900–1914* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1988), ix.

38. John Mullarkey, “Introduction: La Philosophie nouvelle, or Change in Philosophy,” in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 1.

39. Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate that Changed our Understanding of Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 7.

40. Bruno Latour, “Some Experiments in Art and Politics,” *E-flux Journal* 23 (March 2011): 5.

Yet since the 1990s interest in Bergson's philosophy has increased, especially as a result of the popularity of Gilles Deleuze, who was profoundly influenced by Bergson; as John Mullarkey put it in 1999, "many now believe that the neglect of [Bergson's] work is both unfair to him and irresponsible to philosophy."⁴¹ In this book we will see that Bergsonism has also gained a renewed topicality in light of the contemporary crisis of the modern regime of historicity.

What was the make-up of the philosophical revolution unleashed by Bergson which provoked such strong and manifold reactions at the beginning of the twentieth century? Bergson himself remarks in one of his essays that the work of a philosopher can often be traced back to one very simple intuition, yet precisely because of its simplicity, this intuition is very hard to put into words, which is why the philosopher "went on talking all his life."⁴² With this statement Bergson certainly also referred to himself. If we wish to trace back through Bergson's entire oeuvre to a primary intuition, then this would be the intuition that time endures. We can experience duration, for example, when we want to mix a glass of water and sugar. This process can be captured in mathematical terms by a scientific formula, but this hides from view the fact that we have to wait until the sugar has dissolved. According to Bergson, "this little fact is big with meaning."⁴³

This example shows us that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to put duration into words or formulae. St. Augustine already realized this in the fourth century, when in book XI of his *Confessions* he posed the question "What then is time?": "If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not."⁴⁴ Already in his first book, *Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson remarks that we deal with the elusiveness of time by understanding duration in spatial terms. Think only of the spatial metaphors that we make use of when we speak about time: we say that something happened "long" ago, that our future is "in front of us" or that time "moves slowly." The time of the clock is also based on a spatial conception of time—it imagines time as a homogeneous and empty medium, in which temporal "units" are arranged side by side.

Of course, the measurement of time conveniently structures public life. Yet by quantifying time in this way, Bergson argues, we eliminate the

41. Mullarkey, "Introduction: La Philosophie nouvelle," 1.

42. CM, 88–89.

43. CM, 9.

44. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E.B. Pusey (1921; repr., Auckland: The Floating Press, 2008), 332.

qualitative aspect of time, which is its duration. This is problematic because it is duration that turns time into a positive and creative force that brings about change. Bergson describes duration as the “continuous creation of unforeseen novelty.”⁴⁵ In Bergson’s later works, he emphasizes that duration is much more than merely the psychological experience of time. Our own duration can disclose other durations.⁴⁶ In *Creative Evolution* (1907) Bergson states that duration is immanent to the universe. It is the universe itself that endures. Duration becomes the way in which Bergson conceives of the evolution of life as a non-mechanistic and non-finalistic creative process, “the continual elaboration of the absolute new.”⁴⁷

Although temporal change is also of crucial importance for history as a discipline, historians and philosophers of history have largely neglected Bergsonism.⁴⁸ One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly that historians feel that a philosophical reflection on the nature of time is not of any concern to them. The timeline in history is unquestioningly accepted as a “neutral” way to organize historical time and to “measure” the distance between past and present. Historians tend to neglect how the assumption of an empty and homogeneous time structures their understanding of history.⁴⁹ As Michel de Certeau puts it, “the objectification of the past has made of time the unreflected category of a discipline that never ceases to use it as an instrument of classification.”⁵⁰

Another reason why the implications of Bergson’s philosophy of duration for the study of history have rarely been interrogated is that Bergson himself seems never to have had a particular interest in history. Besides some scattered references throughout his oeuvre, history only makes a sudden and unexpected appearance in the final remarks to Bergson’s last book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). As Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted, “It is hard to understand why Bergson did not think about history from within

45. CM, 73.

46. Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

47. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution (L'Évolution créatrice, 1907)*, transl. Arthur Mitchell (1911; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998) (hereafter CE), 11.

48. There are of course exceptions, such as the universal historian Arnold Toynbee, who applied a Bergsonian ontology to history. See Christian Kerslake, “Becoming against History: Deleuze, Toynbee and Vitalist Historiography,” *Parrhesia* 4 (2008): 17–48.

49. See for instance Donald Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

50. Michel de Certeau, “History: Science and Fiction,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 216.

as he had thought about life from within.”⁵¹ Furthermore, interpreters have often set Bergson’s philosophy of life in opposition to historical thought. They emphasize that Bergson’s philosophy of life has to be conceived as an attempt to go “beyond the human state” and that human history is therefore not a primary concern for him.

In this book I will argue, nevertheless, that Bergson’s philosophy of life is not antithetical to history, but, on the contrary, has to be understood as historical through and through. One of the intentions of this work is indeed to establish Bergson as an important philosopher of history. The relevance of Bergsonism to history becomes clear once we understand that Bergson refers so little and inconsistently to history because his philosophy of life implies a fundamental revision of the conventional modern meaning of the term. Instead of isolating human history from the history of the natural world—or, in other words, evolution—Bergsonism implies an understanding of historical time within the broader framework of the time of life. Bergson’s conception of time unites the domains of Nature and Culture.

Bruno Latour has introduced the metaphor of a “modern Constitution” to show how the modern world has been divided into two ontologically distinct zones: on the one hand that of human beings (Culture), and on the other that of nonhumans (Nature). The modern Constitution warrants the transcendence of Nature, which is not made by human beings but only discovered by them.⁵² Simultaneously, it guarantees the immanence of society (Culture), where human beings freely determine their own destiny.⁵³ For the modern Constitution to function, the scientific representation of things cannot be confused with the political representation of human beings. Otherwise we would neither obtain objective knowledge of the laws of nature nor achieve the political emancipation of humanity.⁵⁴

51. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Bergson in the Making,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 187.

52. Joost van Driessche, “Muishond: Techno-wetenschappelijke, literaire en ethische bewegingen van taal” [MouseDog. Techno-Scientific, Literary and Ethical Movements of Language] (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2016), 127.

53. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 30. According to Latour there is a paradox at the very core of the modern Constitution to which the moderns are blind. The separation of Nature and Culture simultaneously causes a proliferation of hybrids of nature and culture. The division of the world into two purified domains of Nature and Culture hence is a modern myth.

54. Hans Harbers, “Van mensen en dingen: Bespreking van: Bruno Latour, wij zijn nooit modern geweest” [Of Humans and Things: A Review of: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*], *Krisis* 58 (1995): 7–8.

The modern Constitution separates and purifies the domains of Nature and Culture through a modern conception of time. Time passes, according to the modern Constitution, in a very particular way, as if it abolishes the past behind it. Because of the elimination of the past, the moderns experience time as an “irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress.”⁵⁵ The arrow of time sustains the modern Constitution by turning the asymmetry between Nature and Culture into an asymmetry between past and future: “The past was the confusion of things and men; the future is what will no longer confuse them.”⁵⁶ History, as the “science of men in time” (Bloch), sanctions this asymmetry by constantly confirming the break between a premodern past and a modern present.

Bergson, however, does not regard Nature as the “polarized opposite” of Culture, but as its “underlying condition.” Interestingly, this does not imply a reductionist sociobiology. Bergson does not merely understand social phenomena in terms of biological categories. Instead of a static domain “out there” that functions according to fixed laws, Bergson views Nature as imbued with a creative mode of time. Bergson associates life with an immanent creative tendency, which explains its evolution. According to this conception of life, as Elizabeth Grosz puts it, nature “does not contain culture but induces it to vary itself, to evolve, to develop and transform in ways that are not predictable in advance.”⁵⁷

Bergson’s nonmodern ontology hereby allows us to explore an alternative understanding of history, one that goes “beyond the human state” and that gives us a unique sense of history’s creative potential. I will argue that this perspective has significant topicality in the context of the contemporary crisis of the modern regime of historicity. While presentism has turned past and future into nonentities, parts of an omnipresent present, a Bergsonian ontology of time and history allows us to imagine the past instead as a living resource for the invention of the future.



In the coming chapters, the contemporary crisis of the modern regime of historicity forms the background for an exploration of the historical relevance of Bergson’s philosophy of duration. This is a wide-ranging topic for which I

55. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 69.

56. *Ibid.*, 71.

57. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 44.

have drawn upon a variety of sources. This is also reflected in the structure of the work. Although each chapter can be read and understood perfectly well on its own terms, in their sequence the different chapters may be imagined as stops on a journey. This journey strings together contemporary debates in the philosophy of history, Bergsonism and its contemporary interpretations, social and historical studies of modernity, and the philosophy of culture. We will also travel back and forth in time: from the twenty-first century to the period around 1900, and back again, toward the future. When we have arrived at our destination, I hope that we shall have obtained a glimpse of how an alternative perspective on time and history can help us to rethink the place of history in our presentistic society and culture.

We take off in chapter 1, entitled “The Case of the London Cenotaph,” with the evaluation of a current debate in the philosophy of history. While the philosophy of history for decades mainly focused on questions of historical epistemology, recently theorists like Eelco Runia (“presence”) and Berber Bevernage (“transitional justice”) have instigated an “ontological turn” with the objective to “rescue the past from its current status as a nonentity.”⁵⁸ In this chapter I will explore the idea of a “present past” by means of a case study, that of the history of the London Cenotaph. This is the most important war memorial in the UK, commemorating the British casualties of the First World War. I claim that the Cenotaph succeeded in turning the past into a “disquieting presence,” and explore how the memorial interrupted the official narrative of the war.

In chapter 2, “Historiography, Modernity, and the Acceleration of Time,” we will take a step back and see how the ontological turn in the philosophy of history is related to a broader crisis of time in contemporary society and culture. By discussing the work of such diverse authors as Martin Heidegger, Reinhart Koselleck, François Hartog, and Hartmut Rosa, I will show how modern historical consciousness has been shaped by a modern regime of historicity. Contemporary presentism can be understood as the crisis of this modern regime. In order to overcome this crisis, I will explore an alternative, nonmodern conception of time and history that is implied by Bergsonism.

We turn in chapter 3 (“Bergson and the Crisis of the Modern Regime of Historicity”) to a previous crisis of the modern regime, one to which the history of the Cenotaph also testified: the period around 1900. In many ways, these “vertigo years” resemble the “neue Unübersichtlichkeit” (“new

58. Michael Bentley, “Past and ‘Presence’: Revisiting Historical Ontology,” *History and Theory* 45 (October 2006): 349.

indistinctiveness”) at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁵⁹ These years were also marked by an acceleration of social life that dramatically revealed itself in the wake of World War I when international politics and diplomacy were overwhelmed by the sheer swiftness of events. We will see how Bergson’s philosophy of duration can be seen as part of a broader cultural response to a reconfiguration of time and space between 1880 and 1920.

This forms the cue for an introduction to Bergson’s philosophy of duration in chapter 4, “A World Made Out of Time.” I will argue here that Bergson’s metaphysics is paradoxically both non-systematic and empiricist. Bergson maintains that the systematic unity of the world may never be presupposed. Philosophy should always depart from concrete experience, which he designates as intuition. Intuition reveals, behind our perception of a stable world of “beings” that are placed in geometrical space, a reality of becoming, of duration. We will see that Bergson’s oeuvre displays a consistent effort to explore the intuition of duration. It will become clear how Bergson develops duration from a psychological and subjective notion in his first book, *Time and Free Will*, into a philosophy of life and an ontology in *Creative Evolution*.

Chapter 5, “The Survival of the Past,” is the next stop on our journey. It is dedicated to what I consider as the first of two contributions of Bergsonism to the ontology of history, namely, that Bergson can help us to reconceptualize the historical past. While historians tend to regard the past as an “absence” placed at a “distance” from the present, Bergson’s theory of memory introduces us to a past that survives as a vehicle for creative change. Bergsonism shows us that the historical past is not fixed—an “object” that can be studied on its own terms—but that the past is constantly being reshaped in the present. I suggest that a genealogical approach may potentially offer us a historiographical tool allowing us to account for “the new” in history.

This brings us to chapter 6, entitled “Historical Creation,” a second contribution of Bergsonism to historical thought: Bergson offers us a unique perspective on the creative nature of historical change. I compare Bergson’s philosophy to the ontological presuppositions regarding the nature of history in nineteenth-century German historicism. This reveals some remarkable similarities between Bergsonism and the historicist worldview. Yet while the historicists oppose human history to the natural world, Bergson argues that the vital underlies the social. This provides the foundation for a conception

59. See Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, and Jürgen Habermas, “De nieuwe onoverzichtelijkheid: de crisis van de welvaartsstaat en de uitputting van utopische krachten” [The New Indistinctiveness: the Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Forces], in *De nieuwe onoverzichtelijkheid en andere opstellen*, trans. Geert Munnichs and René von Schomberg (Meppel: Boom, 1989).

of history that goes “beyond the human state,” which is to say that human history, according to Bergson, unfolds within the ontological framework of the evolution of life. By comparing Bergsonism to Hegel’s holistic philosophy of history, I will show that a Bergsonian approach allows us to conceive of history as an open whole.

In chapter 7, “The Dream of Progress,” we come to the end of Bergson’s life. In 1932, Bergson published one last book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, in which he tried to understand the historical situation of the Interbellum through his philosophy of life. Bergson specifically addressed the problem of war and how to evade it. Hereto he makes a famous distinction, later popularized by Karl Popper, between the open and closed society, which allows him to rethink the modern idea of historical progress. I will expose the theory of history that underlies Bergson’s treatment here of the problem of war. Although this theory of history is a product of the Interbellum, we will see that its contemporary significance lies in its revelation of a historical dimension within Bergson’s philosophy of life. This confirms my hypothesis that Bergsonism can be conceived as a nonmodern form of historicism.

An exploration of the currency of Bergson’s philosophy would justify a critical approach that focuses on the shortcomings and contradictions that can be found in Bergsonism. Yet in this work I have chosen an approach that has more affinity with what Elizabeth Grosz calls an “affirmative method,” one that wants to “assent to” rather than dissent from, and seek out “positivities, crucial concepts, insights on what is of value in the texts and positions being investigated.”⁶⁰ A fundamental problem of the current presentistic regime of historicity is, so I claim, a lack of perspective, as past and future have been drawn into the present. I hope to bring out in the following what Bergsonism can still—or, maybe more accurately put, again—offer us, which at times may be more than Bergson himself envisioned.

60. Grosz, *Time Travels*, 2.