



Speaking Truth to Power: Contemporary History in the Twenty-first Century

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Speaking Truth to Power: Contemporary History in the Twenty-first Century

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More than forty years ago, the *Journal of Contemporary History* (JCH) was created with a distinctive mission: to study and discuss Europe's recent past, even if this stirred up controversy in contemporary political debates. The editors were keen to overcome the fragmentation that had accompanied the professionalization of the historical discipline, in order to explore the big issues of the twentieth century, particularly those of the first half.¹ For any contemporary reader it would have been obvious that the critical events requiring explanation began with the Great War and the Russian Revolution and culminated in the second world war. The focus had to be on the violence and mass atrocities of the two world wars and the nature of the regimes that had brought about such unprecedented horrors.

The issues concerning the JCH were the same that had preoccupied the journal's German counterpart, the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (*VfZ*) since its inception a decade earlier in 1953. Hans Rothfels, the *VfZ*'s founding editor, was even more explicit about the distinctive nature of 'contemporary history', which derived from the significance of the period that had begun in 1917–18. Referring back to a predominantly nineteenth-century concept of '*Universalgeschichte*', he based his call for the study of the recent past on his assertion that with the Russian Revolution an epoch of universal import for humankind had begun. Rothfels's

1 Walter Lacqueur and George L. Mosse, 'Editorial Note', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1, 1 (1966), iii–vi.

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universal historical approach, with its rich connotations of Eurocentrism,² should not be equated with a global or transnational approach. Still, his concerns that ideological and social movements have had effects that cannot be understood by examining the individual nation-state alone demanded an approach that included, in today's parlance, transnational and global perspectives. Rothfels wanted to overcome the barriers between political history, socio-economic history, and the history of ideas and culture. Furthermore, he believed that contemporary history had a distinctly political mission. It should educate (West German) citizens with the lessons of the recent past, so that they could create and provide for a better future.³ By supporting the West German government's aim to build a democratic state and a liberal civil society, Rothfelsian contemporary history was in line *with* state power as much as it was speaking *to* it through its mission to make Germans – both political elites and ordinary citizens – learn from and 'master' the past.

Despite the apparent clarity with which historians defined 'contemporary history' (or '*Zeitgeschichte*') in the 1950s and 1960s, it is far from clear what it has stood for and whether or not it has been a meaningful category of analysis. The turmoil of fascism and the two world wars appeared to be particularly pressing problems for historical reflection in the postwar era. However, 65 years on, they appear to be less all-encompassing in their significance for the contemporary world. At the same time, for the past decade or so, many historians have come to emphasize the transnational context of any country's history, going back well into the early modern period. It is, then, hardly surprising that the profession has tended to consider contemporary history simply as the most recent part of modern history. For example, when the journal *Contemporary European History* (CEH) was launched in 1992, its editors sought simply to respond to a growing interest in twentieth-century history. In the preface to CEH's first issue, the editors pointed to the decline of the Soviet Empire as the dawn of a new epoch that gave rise to new and more intense historical reflection. There was little sense here that 'contemporary' history referred to anything other than 'modern history' from the twentieth century onwards.⁴ Nonetheless, this question of whether 'contemporary history' has any specific meanings is particularly acute now that popular and institutional demands for an understanding of the most recent past is higher than ever. cursory glances at the 'history' sections of public bookstores or undergraduate syllabi at universities worldwide provide the evidence. Indeed, even in countries like France or Spain where (for different reasons) 'contemporary' history denoted the history

2 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, 'Colouring Universal History: Robert Benjamin Lewis's "Light of Truth" (1843) and William Wells Brown's "The Black Man" (1863)', *World History*, 20, 1 (2009), 99–130, at 99–104.

3 Hans Rothfels, 'Zeitgeschichte als Aufgabe', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte (VfZ)*, 1 (1953), 1–8, esp. 6–7.

4 Kathleen Burke and Dick Geary (eds), 'Preface', *Contemporary European History*, 1, 1 (1992), 6–7.

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been a growing awareness of the need for a more sophisticated historical analysis of the immediate past.⁵

What, then, is 'contemporary history'? A closer look at the major tenets of 'contemporary history' as practised after the second world war does reveal a number of defining features. First and foremost, contemporary history has been closely related to the politics of nation-building in war-torn Europe. In France, for example, 'contemporary history' was seen as extending from the present right back to the French Revolution of 1789. This allowed the Fourth and Fifth Republics to be considered in the light of their republican predecessors, unblemished by the Vichy government or the colonial wars.⁶ Similarly, in Spain and Italy 'contemporary history' was rooted in the nineteenth century, with historians facilitating a social and political consensus to direct attention away from a divisive recent past.⁷ If in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), 'contemporary' referred much more specifically to the 'epoch' beginning with the first world war and ending in 1945, then this too reflected the self-understanding of the West German political and intellectual establishment. West Germany's democracy was founded on a desire to learn from the mistakes of the Weimar Republic and to take on responsibility for the second world war in order to ensure that military aggression (and ideologically driven, deadly expansionism) could never again emanate from German soil.⁸ Contemporary history became closely implicated in how the nation saw itself and how it constructed public memory. And this remained so even after 1990, when some of the focus broadened to include reflections not only on the nazi period, but also on the 'red' East German past.

Arguably, the major exception to the relationship between history and the self-identification of the contemporary Western European nation-state is Britain. In part this was, perhaps, due to the lack of an explicit drive to create a nation-state. Few historical reference points in Welsh and Scottish history have significant meanings for 'British' history. Moreover, twentieth-century Britain was not (or not as severely) affected by the ruptures of continental Europe. There was no need to legitimize a particular phase in the development of the polity. Britain did not endure a 'Vichy' period or suffer an illiberal political system. After the second world war it still enjoyed the status of a great power, even if its imperial might was waning. In this context, the British political establishment could keep the historical profession at arm's length, with no direct sponsoring of contemporary historical institutes, journals or foundations. Conversely, the British historical establishment

5 Alexander Nützenadel and Wolfgang Schieder (eds), *Zeitgeschichte als Problem: Nationale Traditionen und Perspektiven der Forschung in Europa* (Göttingen 2004).

6 Rainer Hudemann, 'Histoire du temps présent in Frankreich: Zwischen nationalen Problemstellungen und internationaler Öffnung', in Nützenadel and Schieder (eds), *Zeitgeschichte*, op. cit., 175–200.

7 Walther L. Bernecker and Sören Brinkmann, 'Zwischen Geschichte und Erinnerung: Zum Umgang mit der Zeitgeschichte in Spanien', in Nützenadel and Schieder (eds), *Zeitgeschichte*, op. cit., 78–106; Lutz Klinkhammer, 'Novecento statt Storia contemporanea? Überlegungen zur italienischen Zeitgeschichte', in Nützenadel and Schieder (eds), *Zeitgeschichte*, op. cit., 107–27.

8 Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, CA 2001), esp. ch. 3.

seemed to lack interest in the UK's recent past, and professional discussions regarding this field were, as Jane Caplan has put it, 'rather pallid'.⁹

A significant impulse to examine the recent past as contemporary history came from abroad. The JCH was founded in 1966 by two Jewish emigrés from Germany. The journal was closely linked to the Institute of Contemporary History (ICH) established at the Wiener Library in London, which originated from the personal library of another Jewish immigrant, Dr Alfred Wiener.¹⁰ By focusing on Europe's fascist past – and specifically nazism – the editors reinforced a historical tradition whereby British history was seen as distinct from 'European' history, just as Britain was distinct from 'Europe'. Even in Britain, we might argue, contemporary history reinforced public discourse and popular perceptions; it defined the UK as being outside the framework of contemporary (continental) Europe with its war-time legacy of fascism and communism.

An interest more specifically in the British recent past only arose in the 1980s, when, under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, historians wanted to engage the policy-making elites 'as a corrective to the interpretations of post-war British history being used in the public sphere by both the political left and right to explain then current issues'.¹¹ In this vein, Anthony Seldon and Peter Hennessy established the Institute of Contemporary British History (ICBH) in 1986. As in other parts of Europe, the British practice of 'contemporary history' was neither focused on trans- nor even inter-national developments, but on the national domain. Indeed, 'many of the contentious issues centred around the interpretations of the behaviour of the political parties and elites in relation to the setting up of the welfare state after the traumas of the Second World War.'¹² In effect, for the ICBH, 1945 became the temporal starting point for British contemporary history.

The close connections of contemporary historians to state-building and the construction of political narratives and their concern with the rise of fascism and communism had a methodological consequence. In spite of Rothfels' innovative emphasis on a universal historical approach, most articles published in the JCH or the VfZ were rooted in political and social history, reflecting a wider consensus that social and institutional factors could best explain this period.¹³ In France, too, even as historians inspired by the *Annales* School eventually turned their focus away from the second world war towards the *longue durée*, French contemporary historians remained wedded to conventional political history with its emphasis on explaining critical decisions and major events.¹⁴

9 Jane Caplan, 'Contemporary History: Reflections from Britain and Germany', *History Workshop Journal*, 63, 1 (2007), 230–8.

10 R.J. Evans and Stanley G. Payne, 'Editorial', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 4 (2004), 471–2. See also <http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/aboutus/ben.aspx> (last accessed 5 November 2010).

11 <http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/ccbh.html> (last accessed 5 November 2010).

12 http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/contemporary_history.html (last accessed 5 November 2010).

13 See for instance Ian Kershaw's reflections of the debate leading up to the mid-1980s in Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London 1985).

14 Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French* (New Haven, CT 2006), 4; Hudemann, 'Histoire', op. cit., 187–8.

The continued political and public interest in the second world war and the Holocaust has meant that contemporary historians have exerted unusual influence over public debate.¹⁵ Creating, as much as seeking, an attentive public is, of course, a prerogative not exclusive to contemporary historians. However, because their subject of interest has always been so closely related to the memories and often the founding myths of postwar states, and to unprecedented human suffering and violence, their debates have had particular resonance on politics and society. From scholarly debates about collaboration in Vichy France in the 1970s and the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s, to Polish discussions about Jedwabne, the findings of contemporary historians have had huge social and political significance.¹⁶ Indeed, on occasion their opinions have been actively sought by political leaders, even if – as at the famous Chequers meeting in spring 1990 – they have rarely been listened to.¹⁷

Contemporary historians have been well aware that much of their work was potentially in the limelight. This was not simply because of continuous public demand for history of this sort. Rather, in the first decades after the second world war, scholars themselves were keen to arouse public interest in their work; after all, the German *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*, the Wiener Library and later the ICH were created to educate and morally engage a wider audience and to enlighten public debate.¹⁸ In Germany Hans Rothfels was convinced that because contemporary historians could develop unique empathy with their objects of study, they could contribute to a higher public morality, and inform political and individual decision-making.¹⁹

In underlining the opportunity of empathy, Rothfels confronted a charge that all contemporary historians faced: that they were too close to the events they were studying to be able to assess them as historians and that they lacked sufficient archival material in order to form objective judgments. However, since they were interested in studying ‘totalitarian’ dictatorships, Rothfels held that the value of official documents as ‘objective’ harbingers of the truth was highly doubtful in any case.²⁰ Meanwhile, it was no accident that both the German and the British Institutes of Contemporary History were dedicated to the collection of historical documents. Since for the Holocaust there was never total access to the written

15 Hermann Graml and Hans Woller, ‘Fünfzig Jahre Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 1953–2003’, *VfZ*, 51, 1 (2003), 51–87.

16 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA 1991); Rudolf Augstein, Karl Dietrich Bracher and Martin Broszat (eds), *Historikerstreit: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse* (Munich 1997); Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbours Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ 2003).

17 In March 1990, at the British Prime Minister’s country residence, Chequers, Margaret Thatcher famously sought advice about the ‘Germans’ nature, as she tried to find a response to the unstoppable momentum towards German reunification. We are grateful to Dominic Lieven, who attended the Chequers meeting, for this observation.

18 Max Beloff, ‘Preface’, in Max Beloff (ed.), *On the Track of Tyranny: Essays presented by the Wiener Library to Leonard G. Montefiore*, *OBE* (New York 1960), vii–xi.

19 Rothfels, ‘Zeitgeschichte’, op. cit., 8.

20 *Ibid.*, 4.

documents of the recent past, and since the body of evidence was both deeply coloured ideologically and marred by purposeful gaps, both institutions also placed great emphasis on gathering oral testimonies and visual materials, notably photographs. Evaluating oral testimonies as such was not new to the historical discipline, even if Reinhart Koselleck's memorable assertion that Herodotus was the inventor and unsurpassed master of 'oral history' is perhaps exaggerated.²¹ Even so, in practice it is undeniable that contemporary historians in particular were acutely mindful of collecting and evaluating non-'official', non-governmental sources. This allowed them to turn the contemporary historian's closeness to her or his period of investigation into a unique advantage – though in the early days this was not accompanied by theoretical reflections about the methodological difficulties and pitfalls of using oral history, or of evaluating photographs and other visual sources.

The attempt to educate through empathy related to a further distinctive feature of contemporary history. Scholars wrote about periods that were still in people's personal and public memory and their findings were subject to criticism from those who remembered. In dealing with history that could 'be remembered as well as researched',²² contemporary history has been far more than simply a mediator between history and memory. As its practitioners have sought to influence the construction of both history and identity, they have been closely involved in the construction of public memory and national self-understanding. Yet, precisely because of this close relationship between contemporary history and public memory and its critical role in determining how governments, institutions and societies portray themselves,²³ contemporary history is always more than simply the most recent part of modern history.

To summarize, in the decades after 1945 the practice of contemporary history comprised several distinctive features. It related closely to the crafting of (postwar) national identity, and its debates were unusually 'political'. Contemporary historians were particularly concerned with the 'big' events of the recent past. This is explained by the pivotal role which the second world war and the horrors of the Holocaust have played in the analysis of contemporary historians. In dealing with recent events and with dictatorial regimes, contemporary historians always eschewed an over-reliance on official written documents, keen to preserve and evaluate as wide a source base as possible. Contemporary historians related to the memory of the living, and in this way also profoundly affected public memories and the public constructions of national identity. Finally (and crucially), the reference to the memory of the living also defined the period of contemporary history fairly neatly as history from the early twentieth century onwards.

21 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Begriffsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen zur "Zeitgeschichte"', in Victor Conzemius, Martin Greschat and Hermann Kocher (eds), *Die Zeit nach 1945 als Thema kirchlicher Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen 1988), 17–31, at 21.

22 Evans, Ferguson and Payne, 'Editorial', 471.

23 On the relationship between history and memory in this sense, see for instance Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (eds), *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana, IL 2002).

Almost six decades after the institutional foundations for contemporary history were laid in a politically very specific, postwar context, it is important to re-evaluate the nature and *raison d'être* of this historical sub-field from today's vantage point. The challenges are clear: does contemporary history continue to stick to its original periodization – and if so, how can more recent ruptures associated with 1989–1991 or even 2001 be related to this?

Moreover, as historians begin to examine the past two decades, they are studying a period which has been shaped politically and culturally by fewer and fewer members of the generations that experienced the second world war.²⁴ This has potentially very significant implications for our understanding of the Nazi era. Now that the 'long' twentieth century comes into full view, how does this affect our appreciation of the relative significance of the second world war as the defining episode of that century, and of the contemporary period?

Other problems abound. Firstly, whereas Rothfels's reference to universal history was neither taken up by contemporary historians in the UK,²⁵ nor by subsequent scholars in Germany, the last two decades have witnessed the growth of global and transnational historical perspectives.²⁶ This growth has hardly been confined to contemporary history – but if that is so, are there still ways in which the transnational significance of ideas and movements is distinctive to the contemporary period?

This issue points to the wider relationship between contemporary history and developments in the historical discipline over the past few decades, not least the cultural and the post-cultural turns.²⁷ Do these methodological and theoretical innovations affect and transform the nature of contemporary history? Contemporary history may be enriched by the post-cultural turn, but then it is far from clear what is left of a sub-field that has been characterized by its bias towards political, social and institutional history.

Secondly, if contemporary history has been distinguished by a particular approach towards sources, then its openness especially towards non-official sources

24 Geoff Eley (ed.), *The 'Goldhagen Effect': History, Memory, Nazism – Facing the German Past* (Ann Arbor, MI 2000); Harold Marcuse, 'Generational Cohorts and the Shaping of Popular Attitudes towards the Holocaust', in John Roth and Elizabeth Maxwell (eds), *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide* (Basingstoke 2001), 652–63.

25 Most notably, Geoffrey Barraclough's view that the contemporary period had a distinctive universal (or global) 'ethos' (following a watershed period [lasting from ca 1890 to 1960] between modern and contemporary eras) was very different from the concept of 'universal' history filled with meanings acquired over centuries. Barraclough made a point of the 'contemporary' label being colourless owing to its ambiguity and provisional nature, explicitly warning against taking European conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century as the hallmarks of a new 'post-modern era' where other aspects were of real importance. He postulated that it was the historians' business to correct the perspectives of contemporaries who were engrossed with and blinded by the significance of the 'end of the old world', and 'to draw attention to developments whose long-term bearing they could not be expected to see': Geoffrey Barraclough, *Introduction to Contemporary History* (London 1964), esp. 20–7, 34–5.

26 Cf. Adam McKeown, 'Periodizing Globalization', *History Workshop Journal*, 63, 1 (2007), 218–30.
27 Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn? New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, CA 1989). On the cultural turn, and a reflection of the historiographical innovations of the past 30 years, see Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI 2005).

has been affected in particular ways by recent technological developments – the internet and digitalization. The internet and the opportunities for digital preservation and representation challenge historians of all periods, albeit in different ways. In turn, bureaucracies and archivists are being put to the test as historians (and the wider public) demand ever more open access and freedom of information which affects the keeping and availability of present-day records. Often bureaucracies, ministries and private companies may have more interest in the destruction of revealing material than its preservation and presentation.²⁸ New technology also affects how ‘contemporary history’ is written, disseminated, and who defines and controls the definition of the sub-field. With the internet comes the potential to redefine – and democratize – the practice of contemporary history.

In light of these challenges, this volume explores how we can reconceptualize ‘contemporary history’ at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Collectively, the authors examine recent historiographical transformations, the challenges of technology, the thematic and moral concerns of contemporary historians, and the purview of contemporary history. In doing so, they suggest new perspectives on the possibilities – and the limits – of contemporary history.

The following articles in this volume aim not only to offer new insights into salient themes of contemporary history. Collectively, they also provide new approaches as to how contemporary history might be defined for (and practised in) the 2010s. Each contribution presented here is pointedly broad in scope, at times far beyond what one would normally have published in any journal of contemporary history, anywhere. We are very grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Contemporary History* for giving us this opportunity to explore new territories within the field and to stimulate discussion. Of course, we emphasize that the questions we raise, and the points we make, do not represent the official views of the Journal editors, or of the Journal.

We begin (in Part I) with a detailed reflection on the practices and the evolution of contemporary history in Europe. The contemporary period first attracted the serious attention of the historical establishment following the first world war, when, as Kristina Spohr Readman writes in her essay, the origins of the war – and who was culpable for its outbreak – became questions of critical public, political and diplomatic importance. The second epochal caesura of the twentieth century, the second world war, reinforced the urgency of investigating the contemporary period. The expansion of communism, the defeat of fascism (and nazism) and the sustainability of liberal democracy formed the defining – and definable – characteristics of a new epoch, which was to be subject to contemporary historical investigation. Yet over time it became apparent that practitioners had neither moved on from exploring the events and phenomena of the first half of the twentieth century, nor gone beyond inward-looking national approaches. This left little room for adopting new methodologies or examining a more diverse range of

28 Michael Moss, ‘Archivist: Friend or Foe?’, *Records Management Journal*, 15, 2 (2005), 104–14.

affairs, including the truly contemporary. In discussing how 'contemporary time' can be defined in today's post-Cold War era, Spohr Readman advocates a pragmatic approach whereby contemporary historians explain issues of the present – irrespective of how far back into the 'historical hinterland' a proper analysis of contemporary problems might force historians to go.

While Kristina Spohr Readman shows how 'contemporary history' in the post-war period acquired very distinctive connotations which it retained with remarkable tenacity, Richard Vinen argues that historians became much more relaxed about reflecting on contemporary events over time. Vinen quotes Pierre Nora as asserting that contemporary history was about 'investing the present with the consideration of the past'. In his wide-ranging analysis of autobiographical accounts, he explores the growth of autobiographical history, in France and in the Anglo-American profession. Historians in both systems have looked at a past that appeared irretrievably lost, with a particular emphasis on transformational moments, such as 1968 or (in the case of France) Algeria. However, the ways in which these moments are considered fundamentally differ. Whereas for Anglo-American historians they appear to define particular generational and political shifts, French autobiographies contemplate moral complexity and ambiguity. In both cases, however, historians' reflections on their own work in the recent past demonstrates not only a professional opening to contemporary history (even if subconsciously) – it also suggests that the history of the recent past is enmeshed with the historical profession *tout court*; and this has implications for the writing of history far beyond the field of contemporary history.

Richard Vinen's examination of the autobiographical memory of historians is followed by Geoff Eley's essay on the construction and articulation of collective memory. Eley points out that the end of the postwar era, which arguably lasted until the end of the Cold War, coincided with the growth of new forms of commemorations and history representations in the 1990s. These were spurred on in part by new generations articulating a demand for history and memory in very different ways (for example, European peoples who behind the Iron Curtain had not been able to remember or commemorate their past(s) as they had wished), and in part by new media enabling alternative publics to emerge. Contemporary historians, who in the 1950s and 1960s set out explicitly to help shape 'national' public memories in order to instil and strengthen liberal democracy throughout (Western) Europe, now face a dual challenge. First, the changing role of the second world war which, while maintaining its salience in assessments of the twentieth century, has lost its central position as *the* reference point for contemporary historians, as well as for the memory of younger generations. Second, academic historians have lost their pre-eminence in affecting the memory of increasingly complex and multiple publics, as they vie with non-professional historians, other analysts and opinion-formers of varying kinds for attention and influence.

Given that a moral concern for public education was at the heart of contemporary history during its postwar heyday, the three contributors to the first section raise the question of how this moral commitment can be redefined and articulated

today, as the internet, global broadcast news and mass travel have changed the face of public memory culture, the formative processes behind it, and the historian's relationship to it. Collectively, the three papers make a further point. In response to Spohr Readman's plea that contemporary history should explore issues of current interest in all their breadth, Vinen observes that historians interested in autobiography have already opened up to the significance of a range of historical watersheds since the second world war as pivotal moments that forced them to shape and justify their own moral commitment. Vinen therefore argues that in practice, contemporary history has been much more compatible with other historical trends than the traditional focus on political and social history would suggest. This is also highlighted by Eley. As he notes, cultural studies, oral history and other approaches became critical in determining the ways in which collective memory could be analysed. Given the significance of autobiographical and collective memories for the contemporary historians of the postwar era, it is difficult to see how these recent, wider historiographical developments could fail to affect our understanding and praxis of contemporary history.

The second section examines a range of methodological approaches and how they can improve our understanding of the most recent past. Jan-Werner Müller notes how the study of ideas, already a poor cousin of political and social history among contemporary historians before 1989, has been deeply affected by the political and ideological currents of the time. The major methodological innovations of intellectual history had left the analysis of the twentieth century largely untouched, in part because they were more suited to the long-term transformation of intellectual concepts, and in part because the implications of their approaches were never properly translated into works on contemporary intellectual history. Proposing that contemporary intellectual historians carefully integrate the advances of the Cambridge School and of Bielefeld's conceptual historians (historians of *Begriffsgeschichte*), Müller provides important direction for scholars in how a critical area of historical investigation can make a full contribution to contemporary history. *Pace* Rothfels, empathy is not always sufficient to make up for the lack of distance to the object of study, and Müller's plea for a more serious engagement with theory could provide for more sophisticated works of contemporary history more generally.

New approaches to contemporary history need to complement, but never replace, a focus on contemporary politics and society. Even here, however, it is important to take into account new methods of historical research in a digital age. In contrast with 60 years ago, the contemporary historian is challenged, for many topics, not by the absence of sources, but by their overabundance. To be sure, this is a distinctive advantage as contemporary historians are less reliant on prior decisions by archivists who determine what to preserve and what to catalogue. Still, the wealth of sources available on the internet and elsewhere makes questions of selectivity particularly acute – questions that can be turned to the historian's advantage by making innovative use of digital processing. Roderick P. Hart and Elvin Lim's article provides an illustrative example of how this can be done, and how new

insights can be gained from a quantitative analysis of language. By exploring the vocabulary of time and space used in speeches by US presidents over a number of decades, they can offer important evidence about the changing nature of American politics; they also make inroads into helping us to understand better how politics is communicated between the powerful and the 'many' who normally remain nameless in historical accounts.²⁹ Put differently, through digital processing Hart and Lim can offer fresh explanations of how community and memory have been constructed and understood in contemporary US history.

Sverker Sörlin provides further understanding of how contemporary history can relate to new and emerging historical sub-fields, in this case environmental history. Here contemporary history interacts powerfully with other disciplines in the natural and social sciences to develop not only transnational or global, but also truly interdisciplinary approaches. Clearly, while environmental history is a contemporary historical discipline, in existence only since the 1970s (when environmental and ecological awareness grew rapidly in the face of 'nuclear' fears), the period(s) it investigates is not. Arguably, the transformations, interactions and changes environmental historians explore do have an essential long-term aspect to them, as environmental change acquires its critical dynamic through the *longue durée*. Environmental history undermines the tendency of many contemporary historians to focus on the 'big' events of the twentieth century – the two world wars, the Cold War and so on. The critical caesurae in environmental history are not 1933, 1945, 1989 or 2001. Indeed, there are few single events that stand out and which attract disproportionate amounts of attention and public interest. Yet understanding the history of environmental change and the human choices that might have led to such changes is no less critical to human life than an understanding of events leading to political caesura and catastrophes. Expanding the field of contemporary history to all areas of contemporary concern widens our perspective away from the nation-state, and from single 'big events' to developments and processes.

When examining the recent past, historians have to take into account debates occurring within the political sciences. For the case of Europe, Jan Palmowski examines the arguments of historians and political scientists over the evolution of the European Union – easily the most significant transnational polity in the contemporary period. The EU not only helped shape the majority of laws passed within individual member states; it also became increasingly influential over trade policy and human rights standards beyond its own boundaries. When examined through the lenses of legal, commercial or cultural history, the history of the European Union and its member states raises important questions about the limits of investigating national actors in a globalizing context. In this particular case, Palmowski argues that the politics of the EU and its member states have become so entangled that it is no longer adequate to consider the history of the nation-state on its own terms. Even in areas where the EU has been relatively weak,

29 Alf Lüdtke, 'Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and Who are its Practitioners?', in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, NJ 1995), 3–40; esp. 3–4.

such as foreign policy, there has been an entanglement of national foreign policy with that of other EU countries, within the EU framework itself, and with the European Commission. The entanglement between the EC/EU and individual member states, which has evolved at accelerating pace especially since the early 1980s, shows not simply that national histories and the EC/EU cannot be separated. It also argues that in this instance at least, contemporary history is in essence not just transnational, but also trans-regional, supranational and international.

The second section, then, provides a range of examples of what we can gain by expanding the traditional purview of contemporary history beyond the realms of political and social history. Entering into a dialogue with other scholarly approaches and new methods of analysis will not only provide a fuller account of contemporary history, it will also generate a more complex analysis of power-construction and decision-making. Contemporary historians can provide a multi-layered evaluation of how ideas, contexts, artefacts and structures affected the decisions of the powerful – and of the social practice of the nameless ‘many’ on whose actions the exercise of power depended.³⁰ In the twenty-first century, contemporary history must be as mindful of diverse historical approaches, as it must engage with other disciplines including cultural studies, anthropology, the political sciences, and the physical and health sciences.

From these contributions, a number of conclusions emerge. Firstly, they reinforce, from very different vantage points, the importance of the transnational dimension in contemporary history. This is as important in practice as it is in theory. Despite the protestations of earlier contemporary historians such as Hans Rothfels that contemporary history was in essence transnational, the actual practice of historians of the recent past showed that this was hardly the case. Rothfels postulated in 1953 that to capture the nature of the new, ‘total’ epoch, interactions, interdependencies, transfers across borders, *and* forms of inter-relatedness within and between nation-states were central. And yet, over two-thirds of all articles in the *VfZ* to date have focused on German history (and not from a transnational perspective). Many of the remaining articles – which studied mostly other countries in Europe – considered history in a national or diplomatic context.³¹ The articles in this volume, by contrast, suggest that contemporary historians today ought to address the most recent past in a transnational and less Eurocentric way. In the contemporary world there is a particular need for historical perspectives that transcend national and inter-national confines, and this has distinctive implications for what we explore, and how we explore it.

Secondly, these essays challenge customary periodizations in twentieth-century history. Without denying in any way the significance of the second world war or the

30 For some seminal works which complicate our understanding of the nature of power, see Lütke (ed.), *History of Everyday Life*, op. cit.; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vols 1–3 (New York 1978–86); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT 1990).

31 Helga and Hellmuth Auerbach and Renate Biehl, ‘Inhaltsverzeichnis der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 1953–2007’, *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*: http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/images/Vierteljahrshefte/CD/vfz_alle_jahrgaenge.pdf (last accessed on 27 August 2009).

ensuing Cold War, the questions they raise about the present and recent past entail very different horizons. As Jan-Werner Müller points out, intellectual historians have been engaged in very different temporal categories, and the same is also true of environmental history. And whilst the origins of the European Economic Community are integral to the Cold War context, some of the most significant enmeshings of national and supranational history have occurred after 1989, as a result of changing political and especially economic circumstances. The traditional focus on the second world war and the postwar world is no longer tenable as the core preoccupation of contemporary history.

Thirdly, what links these essays is a particular consideration of matters of public – and political – interest. There is a distinctive closeness in these articles to these issues, ranging from the changing nature of US politics to questions of national sovereignty and the EU to the increasingly alarming state of the environment. To be sure, Jan-Werner Müller's work still focuses on intellectual historians' response to the second world war, thus highlighting that the second world war continues to be a central concern (without being the primary focal point) for contemporary historians. The link between contemporary history and public interest is in keeping with the emergence of contemporary history in the 1950s and 1960s. But, given the apparent proliferation of issues on which historians are called to speak, this raises the question even more acutely of how historians engage with the public, how they relate to broader political interests and what the pitfalls of these engagements are. These issues recall a question posed by Geoff Eley in the first section of this volume, one that has also been central to a number of other contributions here, about the relationship between historians and the evolution of memory. In Part III we will turn to these critical questions.

The essays in the third section all address the relationship between history, memory and a changing public, and the role of the historian in influencing the shifting dynamics between them. Juan Cole broadens our geographical and temporal perspective by exploring how the history of the present could be researched and written for the Middle East. What emerges from Cole's paper is the centrality of the internet. Inevitably, the traditional concern of contemporary historians to avail themselves of new sources has gained a qualitatively new impetus in the internet age and contemporary historians have scarcely begun to consider the implications of 'YouTube', blogs, Twitter, e-museums, genealogists' websites as well as videos, newspapers and even online government documents available to global audiences. However, there is a further dimension to the internet that is of particular relevance as scholars move beyond examining the contemporary history of the relatively stable countries of Europe or North America. The internet has become a critical tool, particularly where historians have been interested in a zone of conflict or an authoritarian regime, where the more traditional sources are difficult, if not impossible, for scholars to obtain.

Cole argues that for those interested in 'present' history, the internet has been and is transforming the field in three significant ways. First, historians can reach far more people than ever before. Second, it sets them free from the agendas of politics

and media interests, allowing them directly to 'speak truth to power'. Third, it provides historians with a new, global platform to engage with scholars and non-scholars, establishing new standards of review and professional engagement that complements more conventional printed publication outlets.

The capacity for historians to help reflect and shape public debates and frame the context for political action is highlighted by Richard Drayton. Contemporary historians often sought to influence public opinion and collective memory, as the work of George L. Mosse, Walter Laqueur or Hans Rothfels shows. However, Richard Drayton reminds us that the historian's engagement with the contemporary world can be fraught with danger. Given the tendency of historians to adapt to – and thus reinforce – the professional and institutional values around them, it is extremely difficult for historians to 'speak to power'. Drayton sets out two challenges to the contemporary historian. First, he advocates a truly global understanding of contemporary history. He questions definitions of the 'contemporary', especially older European or Western ones. Even the central role of the second world war in the twentieth century may be much less obvious from an African perspective than it is from a European one. Second, Drayton makes most explicit a theme running through these contributions, that of the political and moral responsibility of the historian. Contemporary history is not simply about consciously engaging with the public and with political masters. It is political through the questions one addresses and the ways one publishes one's findings. How we engage with contemporary history is also a function of how we are organized as a profession. Hence, how we operate is contingent upon the academic freedom we enjoy both vis-à-vis the public and private funders of academia and the commercial interests with which much of our scholarship is intertwined. Contemporary history is, in essence, political.

Having recognized the political and moral dimensions of contemporary history, we must refrain from avoiding our responsibilities to speak 'truth to power'. As Ian McBride demonstrates, contemporary historians can have a critical function in providing arguments or debunking mythologies, both for the powerful and for those who contest political power. He examines Ireland and builds on Michael Oakeshott's argument that it is impossible to write any history with detachment, as all history is a critical part of popular memory.³² This is particularly true for any historian attempting to write a history of republican violence, an endeavour central to both explaining Irish independence and examining sectarian violence in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s. In Ireland, writing contemporary history could be literally a matter of life and death. McBride argues powerfully that in their analysis, historians at one level did maintain a level of detachment from Republican or Unionist mythologies; yet in the process they helped establish new ones. They could not but be aware of the political and cultural significance of their analysis – and this made total detachment impossible. The conclusion is as critical

32 Michael Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', *Historical Studies*, 1, T. Desmond Williams (ed.) (London 1958), 17–18.

as it is banal: empathy simply cannot make up for lack of distance. Contemporary historians must try to some extent to detach themselves from their objects of analysis and 'speak truth to power', but they must be conscious that ultimately they will rarely succeed.

Contemporary History, as conceived by Rothfels or the *Journal of Contemporary History*, was clearly specific to the postwar era. Just as the meanings of contemporary history had evolved in the 50 years leading up to the 1950s, so they have changed in the five decades since. In this special issue, we argue that in order to reflect these changes in the world as much as in the historical discipline, our understanding of 'contemporary history' should be redefined in a number of ways.

To begin with, there is today neither the need nor the possibility for contemporary historians to self-consciously help stabilize the self-understanding of the state. In contrast to the situation of the 1950s and 1960s, the nation-states of Europe – and in the post-colonial world – appear to be far more stable. Moreover, the acute postwar sense that too little was understood about the origins, development and consequences of the War and the Holocaust may be less of a driving force for historians in the 2010s. Across Europe (including Britain), the second world war has certainly acquired a prominent place in popular culture and public education. As the Goldhagen debate or public disputes in the Baltic States about celebrating the Red Army's 'liberation' of Eastern Europe in 1945 on V-E day have shown,³³ historians now must increasingly concern themselves with developing more complex appreciations of complicity, guilt and atrocities. And this agenda needs to be pursued irrespective of whether it reinforces or undermines the identity of the postwar (and/or post-Cold War) state.

The Goldhagen controversy or other similar disputes demonstrate that engaging with public debate is not simply about speaking truth to political power. Reflections on the recent past are much more contested, as professional historians compete amidst a plurality of voices with media pundits and amateur historians on the internet and elsewhere. Moreover, the space in which contemporary historians engage with public arguments is largely transnational, owing to international ownership of media outlets and the global reach of the World Wide Web. Arguably, the growth in popular demand for representations and evaluations of recent historical events makes it all the more necessary for contemporary historians to be heard. Precisely because governments and politicians can derive (and on occasion actively seek) historical legitimacy for their actions from other, non-professional sources much more easily, there is a continuing need for historians, with their ability to conceptualize and contextualize the present against the historical background, to engage with political power. However, it is no longer enough for contemporary historians simply to seek to enlighten politicians and the public about the recent past (possibly even as part of a state and civil society building project, as was the

33 On the Russian-Baltic ideological dispute about the history of 1945 and beyond, see for example <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/alarm-in-baltic-as-kremlin-seizes-control-of-soviet-past-1702182.html> (last accessed 23 November 2009).

case after the second world war). In order not to be crowded out by competing voices as they speak *to* power, contemporary historians must become more mindful of *how* they engage in public debate – in ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics. In short, the need for contemporary historians to interact with political power and with different publics has never been greater, but the conditions and the presuppositions for doing so have changed completely over the last half-century, if not the last ten years.

A second critical point is that contemporary history can neither afford to be simply about ‘big events’ or ‘massive ruptures’, nor can its methods be mainly those of traditional political and social history. The past three decades have dramatically changed the ways in which we approach, research and write history, in any period. Following the (post-) cultural turn, it is clear that we can no longer think about power as being exerted from the ‘top down’ without reference to how the ‘many’ respond to and transform it.³⁴ On one level this is not particularly problematic for contemporary historians. As early as the 1980s, a time when debates about the value of ‘everyday history’ (*Alltagsgeschichte*) were in full swing in the German academic establishment, Martin Broszat wrote a path-breaking analysis of everyday life in Bavaria during the Third Reich. Yet the altercations about ‘everyday’ history demonstrated that in the 1980s, social and political historians maintained a firm institutional and power-political grip on the German historical establishment, with most ‘everyday historians’ continuing to operate from the institutional margins. It was not until the mid-1990s, when the German *Wehrmacht* exhibition and the Goldhagen affair caught the German historical establishment off guard, that the need to investigate the behaviour of individual citizens and groups, both at home and in nazi-occupied lands, gradually caught historians’ attention.³⁵

Given that the second world war has remained the dominant theme among the majority of scholars who specifically claim the label ‘contemporary historian’ for themselves, it can hardly be news to them that we cannot understand how power works by focusing only on structural changes and on ‘big events’. And yet it is still relatively difficult to find studies on individual subjectivities, local traditions and communal relations in so-called ‘contemporary history’ publications. It is critical, then, that contemporary historians embrace studies of the most recent past through the lens of, for example, historical anthropology, gender, or cultural history. This would allow not only for the development of much more sophisticated

34 Well-known examples include Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore 1992); Natalie Zeman Davies, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA 1984), and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou* (London 1979).

35 Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter and Ulrike Jureit (eds), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich 2005); Geoff Eley (ed.), *The ‘Goldhagen Effect’*, op. cit. Some of the seminal works on power at the level of the everyday include: Chris Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Cambridge 1993); Frank Bajohr, *Arisierung in Hamburg: Die Verdrängung der jüdischen Unternehmer 1933–1945* (Hamburg 2003); Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven, CT 2003); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten* (Hamburg 2003).

understandings of the recent past; it would also foster a much more fruitful engagement with other historical sub-disciplines.

While this volume argues that contemporary history has to engage more fully with other historical sub-fields, it also shows that there is greater need than ever for historians to note the particular nature of contemporary history in the twenty-first century. In studying the history of the present or the truly immediate past, we now have the opportunity to respond to very different sources and texts from even 60 years ago. Just as 'contemporary historians' in the 1950s turned to photographs and recorded interviews that did not exist a hundred years earlier, contemporary historians now need to come to terms rapidly with the advantages and the pitfalls of the internet, the computer and digitalization. This opens up important new perspectives in research methodology as contemporary historians come to terms with the opportunities of electronic searches of digital materials and as they struggle to cope with the ephemeral nature of the Web and the unstructured essence of its contents. Arguably, even after several decades of using photographs and other images (including film and video clips), historians still tend to be relatively unreflective about the essential qualities of this medium. It is therefore critical that we do better in our engagement with the internet and other digital materials as sources and tools.

The internet is undoubtedly central for the dissemination of information and knowledge. And here again contemporary history differs from other historical sub-fields. Since contemporary historians are often working on aspects of acute public and political interest, there is a particular need for some contemporary historians to publish their work without delay and in new, publicly accessible formats. This entails greater scholarly independence from publishing houses and from one's own peer group, who do not necessarily get the opportunity to comment on academic work before it is published. As a consequence of this immediacy of knowledge transfer and dissemination, historians and universities will have to find new ways of evaluating and supporting such work in non-traditional publication formats, adapting strict forms of quality control and academic freedom to entirely new contexts. The internet, then, has not replaced the need to work on archival sources where available, to conduct interviews and to collect and evaluate other tangible 'material' from everyday life. Nor has it replaced print as a critical record of academic debate. But it has added a virtual dimension, which we have barely come to understand as historians and which is of significance to contemporary historians in very particular ways.

Crucially, the internet challenges us to conceptualize categories such as the state, community, identity and citizenship in very different ways. Despite their emphasis on universal categories, contemporary historians such as Rothfels continued to think and analyse using late nineteenth-century categories of statehood, borders, identity and post-1945 categories of national civil society and civic culture. Fifty years on, it is simply impossible to think of national actors outside transnational contexts. The example of the European Union has shown that in many respects strong states co-exist with strong transnational political and financial actors.

Indeed, the recent banking crisis and subsequent global recession are further proof of this phenomenon. Through the internet, strong transnational identifications and communities exist alongside national and regional identities. In the twenty-first century the challenge for contemporary historians lies in analysing power, community and culture, in state and locality in an inherently transnational, globalized context – from ‘above’ and from ‘below’.³⁶

A fourth point that emerges is that, arguably, contemporary historians have a particular relationship to historical time. In the 1970s Reinhart Koselleck argued that one of the critical differences between ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ history consisted in the thinking of historical time. Accordingly, before the late eighteenth century the present and the past constituted part of a common historical dimension that contained no reference to the future. The early modern period witnessed a ‘temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) of history’, an ‘unconscious secularization of eschatological expectation’ which led to the acceleration of time as a distinctive mark of the modern period.³⁷ Here, technology and science speeded up processes and the nature of decision-making, transforming the relationship between time and space.³⁸

For contemporary historians, Koselleck’s reflections on time and space are even more relevant now than when he developed them in the 1970s. New modes of communication have brought a new quality to the acceleration of decisions and their communication. Whereas Koselleck defined the ‘Otherness’ of modern history compared with pre-nineteenth century history in the different ways contemporaries thought about sequencing past, present and future, we now also have to think about the instantaneousness of contemporary time: the internet and satellite television, for instance, provide for an acceleration of events and experience to the point of simultaneousness. Once again this forces us to assess in new ways how decisions are made, how power is transmitted, and how communities and identities are formed, and in which way records of such processes, if at all, are being produced.

When, then, is ‘contemporary’ history? As Geoff Eley and Kristina Spohr Readman point out in this volume, the second world war is still hugely significant for contemporary historians and the public, but it can no longer serve as the touchstone for this sub-field. If its formerly defining features have declined in significance, how can contemporary history then be periodized meaningfully? Geoffrey Barraclough’s definition, that contemporary history ‘begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape’,³⁹ provides a ‘hinterland’ that is easily misunderstood and that might just be too elastic for any

36 To assert that globalization is inherent to contemporary history is not to say that globalization is unique to the recent past. See for instance Adam McKeown, ‘Periodizing Globalization’, *History Workshop Journal* 63 (2007), 218–30.

37 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York 2004), quotations 11, 50.

38 *Ibid.*, 9–26, 93–104.

39 Geoffrey Barraclough, *Introduction to Contemporary History* (London 1964), 20. See also Kristina Spohr Readman’s article in this volume for an evaluation of Barraclough’s ideas.

useful application; Peter Catterall noted (approvingly) that Barraclough's definition would allow us to study same-sex marriages in the Middle Ages as 'contemporary' history. But this would not only entail a potential loss of focus, as Catterall warned; pursuing topics in other periods as contemporary history would surely render the concept absurd.⁴⁰ Instead, Barraclough argued that an interest in contemporary developments should not preclude us from investigating their origins in earlier periods – but that did not mean that these earlier periods had to be declared part of contemporary history; these remained fundamentally different from the contemporary period which had begun through the global economic transformation, social change and the new imperialism in the 1890s.⁴¹

There is considerable room for debate whether – and with what justification – the 1890s really ought to be seen as the turning point for contemporary history. However, alternative definitions have not been without problems, either. Defining 'contemporary' as strictly from the twentieth century (or from the Russian Revolution) onwards is equally contestable at a time when the lasting ideological impacts of communism and fascism are far from self-evident. More pragmatic solutions such as JCH's editorial policy to consider contemporary history as the history of those still living are equally problematic: the journal's reference to the memory of the living seems almost as arbitrary, as from year-to-year the temporal purview of contemporary history changes inexorably and mechanically as the eldest die.

Contemporary history, instead, might be defined through the instantaneousness of contemporary time, and those questions that arise from it. The environmental changes of the past few decades, which interlink the histories of nations and continents, is thus inevitably a concern of contemporary history, and understanding the evolution of environmental change is equally and essentially a contemporary concern. Exploring the historical roots of contemporary phenomena, by contrast, is not necessarily or essentially a concern of contemporary history if these are not directly linked to understanding a phenomenon linked to the instantaneousness of contemporary time.

In considering this issue of 'contemporary time', two issues need to be addressed. The instantaneousness of contemporary time does not preclude us from addressing earlier periods if these are critical for an understanding of the contemporary world. As Sverker Sörlin has shown, at times we need to go back centuries rather than decades in order to understand – without falling into any teleological traps – the particular significance of contemporary environmental change. Moreover, a focus on the 'instantaneousness' of the contemporary period reinforces the need for transnational perspectives. This does not mean contemporary historians cannot limit their study to individual states or local actors; but they cannot do so without an awareness of transnational and global contexts which force us to think about politics, economics and culture in ways that are very

40 Peter Catterall, 'What (If Anything) is Distinctive about Contemporary History?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, 4 (1997), 441–52, at 451–2.

41 Barraclough, *Introducton*, op. cit., 19–20.

different from how contemporary historians (with their largely Euro-centric perspectives) saw the world in the 1950s.

Finally, what has been distinctive about contemporary history, but ought to be noted much more explicitly as such, is its position at the intersection between history and memory. What makes contemporary history so important politically and socially is its close relation not to personal memory (as a link to the history of the living would imply), but to social and cultural memory. 'Contemporary', from the 1950s, was meant to affect how we remembered the War and its legacy, and also how we learned from it as community. Yet what contemporary historians today have to say about the Iraq War is important not because it affects individual recollections, or that by pointing to the mistakes of the past we can provide a blueprint for a better future. Instead, contemporary historians can affect collective memories of these events; and it is, amongst other things, these memories that politicians seek to affect or invoke in legitimizing future action. Without losing the distinctiveness of a 'contemporary time' as identified earlier, contemporary historians can thus engage on two levels with the past, which allows for remarkable breadth and flexibility. On one level, contemporary historians can explore the cultural, political, social, intellectual and economic history of the most recent past and present – a time which historians are living through and can actively remember. On another, contemporary history can also encompass events and periods that are central to the formation of collective memory in the contemporary period. In contemporary Europe, this would include the two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Bolshevik Revolution, and even the Cold War. For individual subjects and spaces, the definition would (and could) be much extended. In the Irish case, for example, the Irish Land Acts of the 1880s or the Tudor Plantations could be seen as a critical issue of contemporary history inasmuch as the history of this period affects public memory, the contemporary identity of Irish communities and current (Anglo-)Irish politics. Exploring how the legacy of historical debate and an understanding of historical truth have shaped current memories and affect current political arguments is a critical subject of any contemporary historical enquiry.

There is, then, a greater need than ever for contemporary history, especially as contemporary historians embrace fully the study of non-European worlds, and as they take seriously the fast-changing nature of the state, the publics, and of international trade and communication of the past few decades. It also provides a much greater need for an engagement with other disciplines and fields, ranging from the natural sciences in debates about environmental history, to political sciences for an understanding of the changing nature of states and localities. Contemporary history has moved far from the earlier intellectual and moral focus of the 1950s. But its greater breadth of intellectual and moral concerns also endows contemporary history today with the potential to be truly global and transnational in scope. And it allows practitioners to engage much more closely with historians from other periods, taking into account not just political and institutional, but also cultural and anthropological approaches. It is this openness that makes contemporary

history much harder to define. But it also provides it with much greater openness and dynamism to speak truth to power in a fast-changing, globalized world.

Biographical Notes

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