Modern Intellectual History (2023), **20**, 651–662
doi:10.1017/S147924432200018X

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

FORUM: HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

The Present as a Foreign Country: Teaching the History of Now

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In recent years, historians have been in increased demand to use their expertise to help understand contemporary events. The forces that are driving news outlets and podcasts to enlist historians for their perspectives on the present are also drawing students into our college classes. This article explores how courses on contemporary US history can use students' desire for historical perspectives on their long now to teach them more broadly about the historian's craft. Working with and against the conceit of the "now," courses on contemporary US history can provide students a novel way to learn historical theories and methods, identify and work with primary sources, interrogate periodization, and challenge different modes of ahistoricism. Properly conceived and executed, histories of the present offer a challenge to presentism by denaturalizing the familiar.

On 4 August 1967, exactly one year to the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr warned a gathering of three thousand clergy and lay antiwar activists of the "fierce urgency of now."[1] The urgency of his now was longer and more excruciating than he had hoped. Four years earlier, at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King similarly invoked the "fierce urgency of now" to a crowd of roughly 250,000 civil rights activists and supporters, to remind them that the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism" would never undo the long history of police brutality, racial segregation, and persistent challenges to black franchise.[2] Four years later, in the face of the United States' deployment to Vietnam of 500,000 American soldiers, and with them "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism," King again underscored his theory of the "unfolding conundrum of life and history": "there is such a thing as being too late." For King, the possibilities of nonviolence in 1967 had an expiration date. "We are now faced with the fact … that tomorrow is today."[3]

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[1] Martin Luther King Jr, "Beyond Vietnam," 4 April 1967, at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam (accessed 23 Jan. 2021).

[2] Martin Luther King Jr, "I Have A Dream," 28 Aug. 1963, at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom (accessed 23 Jan. 2021).

[3] King, "Beyond Vietnam" (April 4, 1967).

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Roughly fifty years later, it seems that an increasing number of academic historians are feeling the fierce urgency of their now, too. Even the most casual survey of US newspapers, magazines, television news, podcasts, and Twitter suggests that they also believe that their contemporary moment is pivotal, if not also perilous. However, many historians today have a somewhat different orientation to the demands of their now. Feeling both pushed and pulled to turn to history to make our present more legible (if not more coherent), they seem to be saying, pace King, that we are faced with the fact that *yesterday* is today.

In recent years, historians have felt compelled to connect their professional knowledge to ongoing events, and to be interpreters of their own times as well as of the past. This "history of now" is not exactly a new concept. The notion that the historian's craft could or even should be turned into an analysis of the present is hardly a mysterious impulse. Historians, after all, are writers describing the complex relationship between human lives and social, political, and economic structures, and their effort to uncover those relationships can focus, and has focused, on their own time and place. Many historians, from Edward Gibbon, Lucás Alamán, and Jacob Burkhardt to Henry Adams, Mary and Charles Beard, John Hope Franklin, and Michel Foucault, have taken this bifocal approach to the presentness of the past. Even Hayden White, writing in 1966, argued that "the contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as 'an end in itself,' but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time."[4] But if there is a long history to the "history of now," it has, nevertheless, been enjoying something of a renaissance in the United States over the last few years.[5] The demand to turn to the past to explain the present is reaching wider and deeper into American academic historians' practice and self-understanding.

There are a number of reasons for this boom—probably most prominent among US historians—some of which are ephemeral and some structural. The first reason, not wrong for being obvious, is that many citizens of the US (and of the world) were stunned by the results of the presidential election of 2016. For many, Donald Trump's behavior recalled that of tyrants or banana republics supposedly foreign to the institutions and culture of US democracy. (Subtler analysis often revealed links to both.) This created demand for historical perspectives. But the experience of the 2016 election seemed to call for a dual rethinking: how could knowledge of the past inform an understanding of the present? And how could an analysis of the present inform our understanding of the past?

It was not only Trump's political ascendancy that raised these questions. The Movement for Black Lives, which pre-dated him, encouraged a reckoning with the longer histories of police brutality and other forms of discrimination and oppression faced by African Americans. Symbolically, public debates emerged around the pro-Confederate "Lost Cause" narrative represented by statues and Confederate flags exhibited in public spaces across the country, especially in the South.[6] Activists toppled symbols of the neo-Confederacy, forcing a reckoning with the unmistakable presence of the past—even if the story the statues told was a distorted one. While dramatically different versions of national history tied to politics are nothing new, the jangling dissonance between "Make America Great Again" and "Black Lives Matter" placed the politics of history at the center of national life. Historians were called on to help explain how, among other things, Americans could have arrived at such different understandings of their own past.

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[4] Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5/2 (1966), 111–34, at 125.

[5] Among the most prominent examples of this difference are the 1619 Project, edited by Nikole Hannah-Jones and published by the *New York Times* in 2019 with the goal of reframing US history around slavery and its repercussions in the lives of black Americans. The Trump administration organized a rival "1776 Commission," intending to offer a "patriotic" and anti-civil rights version of US history. After Joe Biden took office, he rescinded the commission. "The 1619 Project," *New York Times*, 14 Aug. 2019, at www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html (accessed 25 Jan. 2021); Caroline Kelly, "Biden Rescinds 1776 Commission via Executive Order," *CNN*, 21Jan. 2021, at www.cnn.com/2021/01/20/politics/biden-rescind-1776-commission-executive-order/index.html (accessed 25 Jan. 2021).

Technology, too, has played a part. Social media, and Twitter in particular, have placed historians in close contact with journalists. Academic historians could now be summoned for instant reaction and analysis, in a way that goes far beyond the few popular historians on retainer at major news outlets of a previous generation. Seemingly obscure historical specializations could have their days of relevance, and there was now a chaotic but free way for those with knowledge to reach the public, enabling an increasing number of industrious historians to begin carving out prominent careers as public intellectuals.[7] At the same time, longer-term trends in the academic job market ejected a generation of historians into precarious employment, forcing them to create audiences for their expertise beyond the academy.[8]

If the last few years have brought new opportunities to use the past to understand the present, the question remains whether this is an unalloyed good. While we agree wholeheartedly with Yale historian Timothy Snyder's claim that "greater knowledge of the past … allows us to notice and conceptualize elements of the present that we might otherwise disregard and to think more broadly about future possibilities," and that "the past enlightens the present," we also recognize that this affirmation begs thorny questions about precisely how to use the past to better apprehend and understand our here and now.[9] There are dangers that the pressures of the "history of now" will lead historians to neglect topics that do not have clear relevance for the crises of our times, to choose sources based on expediency in order to quickly historicize the "now" before the news cycle turns over and renders it "then," to lose the sense of proportion and perspective that temporal distance provides, or to commit the cardinal sin of presentism. Furthermore, when history and history education are featured prominently in political debate, professional judgment can become dangerously politicized, both by historians and by those who object to their findings.

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[6] For an excellent example of how the history of the "Lost Cause" can illuminate Trumpism see Zach Stanton, "How Trumpism Is Becoming America's New 'Lost Cause,'" *Politico*, 21 Jan. 2021, at www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/21/trump-civil-war-reconstruction-biden-lost-cause-461161 (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).

[7] Among the many who have carved out significant public profiles, Kevin Kruse has been particularly successful with Twitter, Ibram X. Kendi with trade (and even childrens') books, and Heather Cox Richardson with Substack. Emma Pettit, "How Kevin Kruse Became History's Attack Dog," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 Dec. 2018, at www.chronicle.com/article/how-kevin-kruse-became-historys-attack-dog (accessed 25 Jan. 2021); Jennifer Schuessler, "Ibram X. Kendi Has a Cure for America's 'Metastatic Racism'," *New York Times*, 6 Aug. 2019), at www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/arts/ibram-x-kendi-antiracism.html (accessed 25 Jan. 2021); Ben Smith, "Heather Cox Richardson Offers a Break from the Media Maelstrom. It's Working," *New York Times*, 27 Dec. 2020, at www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/business/media/heather-cox-richardson-substack-boston-college.html (accessed 25 Jan. 2021).

[8] The demand for magazine writing and podcasts favors issues with clear contemporary relevance. So while opportunities for historians have expanded in recent years, they have not necessarily done so evenly across fields and specializations.

[9] Timothy Snyder, "The American Abyss," *New York Times* magazine, 9 Jan. 2021, at www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html (accessed 9 Jan. 2021).

Nevertheless, this sort of work has become important to many historians—in their capacities as both professionals and citizens—and as such deserves serious thought. It is too soon to tell whether or not the history of now will or should become a more prominent part of academic historians' *oeuvre*. But having both taught versions of contemporary history at University of Wisconsin–Madison, we do not think that it is too soon to say that it can work powerfully in the college classroom. The same forces that are driving broader publics to the *Throughline* podcast or the "Made by History" vertical at the *Washington Post*, both of which have been created in response to people seeking greater insight into contemporary events through historical expertise, have drawn students into our classes. Students, too, feel the weight of the question "Why are things the way that they are now?" and they have a hunch—or at least a hope—that history can help them answer it. In response, we have developed courses to provide students deeper understanding of the conditions of their long now, and to see how history can provide them orientation in it—whether as historical subjects, moral agents, or even citizens.

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Iber has been offering a course called History of Now while Ratner-Rosenhagen has one titled History of Your Parents' Generation, and both teach current and recent history of the United States which is often omitted from other classes. But their aims go far beyond filling in historical gaps in the department's course offerings. Rather, they are designed to utilize both the promises and the challenges in trying to historicize the "now" (including the recent past and the present) as a way to teach historical theories, methods, and habits of mind.[10] Both courses draw directly on students' lived experiences, with the aim that recognizing themselves in historical processes can lead to profound self-knowledge, while also supporting a deeper understanding of how history is constructed. While we believe that trying to historicize the present is fraught and that efforts to do so should not consume the attention of historians to the exclusion of other kinds of research and teaching, we have seen that some of its potential drawbacks make it a particularly powerful tool for undergraduate teaching, where these deficiencies can be turned around to help students develop fundamental qualities of historical thinking. It is mightily hard for students to train the tools of history on themselves and their world, but in doing so they learn to wield those tools against anachronism, presentism, and other forms of ignorance born of ahistoricism. They learn, in other words—adapting the phrase used by historian David Lowenthal—to view their present as a foreign country.[11] Teaching the recent past can have the powerful effect of rendering the present strange and unfamiliar, so that it may be seen with the critical perspective a historical consciousness brings.

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[10] Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins identifies a variety of contemporary history courses offered at other institutions in "Beyond the End of History," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Aug. 2020, at www.chronicle.com/article/beyond-the-end-of-history (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

[11] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985). The phrase comes originally from a novel by L. P. Hartley.

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Whatever the broader public and our students may think, explaining the present by recourse to the past is only one of the jobs of the historian, and hardly a required one. But the desire to enlist history to provide orientation and succor during a destabilizing and disorienting present can be used to help students interrogate the very notion of "historic" times to see if it really does anything more than claw in vain toward incoherence. All times are of history, and are therefore in some sense "historic," and we don't know what the historians of the future, assuming they exist, will find to be significant about the moments that now seem important to us. To be generous, we could grant that historical times feature important conflicts and changes. And yet, however harrowing they may feel to people living through Black Lives Matter, the Trump presidency, or the global COVID-19 pandemic, their long-term changes remain to be seen. (Until COVID-19, for example, the 1918 flu pandemic had a comparatively small footprint in US historiography.)

But this is precisely why a creative interpretation of the history-of-now approach can be so generative in the classroom. Either responding to headlines in their social media feeds or simply being sensitive to rising pressure of their own internal barometers, students often intimately feel that they are living through unprecedented changes, and they turn to history in the hopes that it might provide them a measure of stability, if not understanding. History can produce this foundation and intellectual orientation. Indeed, certain "now" approaches to intellectual history are particularly well suited to utilizing historical records not simply as artifacts of a former day and age, but also as living sources that can give breadth and nuance to students' understanding of ours.

One way we have done this in the classroom is to get students to better recognize the limitations and untapped possibilities in historical arguments by setting them in the context of our long now. In an assignment titled "Great Debates in American Life: The Transcripts," Ratner-Rosenhagen has students bring the insights of thinkers they have read over the course of the semester into a conversation about a contemporary intellectual debate that most concerns them. Students are to imagine that National Public Radio has commissioned them to orchestrate a debate among intellectuals about a topic that has a long history in American life, and they are to serve as the moderator, and to produce a transcript of the radio discussion. (By some miraculous twist of fate, they are able to invite even deceased thinkers, which is a good thing, since all of the thinkers we read in the course are no longer alive.) It is not expected that students can or even should get their invited authors to agree or to resolve the issue they have been brought together to address. The student moderators are simply responsible for ensuring that the historical figures explain their thinking and make their arguments clear. NPR wants their listeners to know why these intellectuals' ideas are still relevant today and what the moral, political, and/or social stakes are in the questions.

The transcripts the students produce show how ready and eager they are to use ideas from the past to reformulate their understanding of their present. Some welcome Theodor Adorno's, Max Horkheimer's, and Hannah Arendt's warnings about the conditions that give rise to totalitarianism as they seek to assess whether today's populist persuasion has shaded into authoritarianism. Others invite Margaret Fuller, Margaret Mead, and Judith Butler to understand whether current notions of gender fluidity underscore or undermine today's feminism. Some students who warned their parents that they would only relinquish their iPhones when they pried it from their cold, dead hands fielded comments from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Thorstein Veblen, and were chagrined to discover that they had indeed become—against Thoreau's warnings in 1854—the "tools of their tools."[12] This transcript assignment in no way encourages students to believe that the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois, Randolph Bourne, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, or Madison Grant were intended to adjudicate claims for or against a border wall with Mexico. Nor does it set students up to think that Kellyanne Conway's "alternative facts" and Rudy Giuliani's "truth isn't truth" were what William James's, John Dewey's, or Thomas Kuhn's antifoundationalist ideas were leading up to.[13] Rather, the assignment lets students experience one of the greatest rewards of intellectual history: to widen our field of understanding, discern subtleties and distinctions in argumentative grey zones, and approach the demands of today with an expanded repertoire of intellectual possibilities.

While a history-of-now approach can open students' intellectual repertoire by bringing them into conversation on current issues with historical subjects, it can also help them to understand themselves as shaped by historical forces. If history is made up of the stories we tell ourselves about others in the past, history of now can be the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. One writing assignment in Iber's History of Now course asks the students to compose a short autobiography in which they try to explain how they arrived at their current self. The assignment has several pedagogical purposes, which are not immediately clear to the students. They do know that their autobiographies will be shared in small groups and read by peers. Almost universally, discussion reveals that students shaped their narratives carefully—that they left out things they knew were important because they were too private. In the same week, we are learning about the War on Terror and have read an assessment of the memoirs of Bush administration officials. In developing a critical perspective on their own autobiographies, they can think about what incentives these political officials would have had as they prepared their manuscripts, learning an important skill of primary-source analysis.[14]

At the same time, another part of the discussion of the assignments involves students getting a checklist of things they might have mentioned about themselves. Did they mention their nationality? Their race? Their gender? Their religion? Their social class? Areas that students did not see fit to mention might indicate positions of power. (Men are less likely to mention their gender than women, for example; straight students less likely to mention sexual orientation than their LGBT peers; and white students less likely to mention their race.) The point is not to castigate students for what they have missed, but to point out potential blind spots, and to show that absences can sometimes speak loudly; you can ask questions of primary documents that they are not intended to answer.

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[12] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (1854) (New York, 2004), 140.

[13] Kellyanne Conway first used the term "alternative facts" in a 22 Jan. 2017 interview on *Meet the Press*; Rudy Giuliani used the phrase "truth isn't the truth" in an 19 Aug. 2018 interview on *Meet the Press*. See www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643; and www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/giuliani-truth-isn-t-truth-1302113347986 (accessed 24 Jan. 2021).

[14] Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History* 37/2 (2013), 190–216.

A different objection to the possibility of writing a "history of now" would point simply to sources. We lack access to many of the crucial archives of private organizations, or the personal collections of individuals, that will allow us to describe this moment in time. This problem can be a real possibility, though, for exploring with students what counts as evidence and their selection criteria involved in those assessments. It is always the case that historians are working with limited pools of information. The enormous digital footprints that we now leave behind probably give us a larger database with which to work than we have about any time in the past. For many areas of culture or discourse, we have plentiful archives—perhaps the bigger problem would be that they are too plentiful, rather than too meager.

The challenge lies in shifting the way that students read and process information. They are often accustomed to the idea of "bias," and often believe some version of the idea that "everything is biased." It is not that historians disagree, but we do not stop there: instead, we ask what the text or other evidence before us does say. There are real opportunities to teach digital literacy—a basic civic skill, but one that research has shown remains a challenge for students and professors alike.[15] By building a different relationship to the sources in front of us, we can move beyond "bias" to a complex understanding of perspective.

Especially in a course on intellectual history, students may be accustomed to thinking of texts as the canonical form of primary sources, and are most comfortable reading them for what they say. But the very skills we teach students for reading between the lines of texts—looking for absences and unstated assumptions, and using them to reconstruct social structures and institutions—can be used to "read" material culture as well. Because students typically are more comfortable working with concrete things rather than abstract ideas, we can start them working from their comfort zones and nudge them to a place of (salutary) discomfort, of unfamiliarity, and the critical distance it can bring.

One way Ratner-Rosenhagen does this is to use a clip from the 1980 film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* where a fictional remote African tribe discovers a strange gift from the gods (an empty Coca-Cola bottle) and approaches it with an expansive sense of wonder. She, of course, warns students about the problematic stereotypes about an unlettered and ignorant dark-skinned clan, and asks them to focus for the moment on how something so utterly unexceptional and everyday like an empty Coke bottle can take on new meaning and possibility when seen through new eyes. The bottle serves as a metonym for the primary sources of the recent past—the photographs, the clothes, the cars, the words, the beliefs, the practices—even, and most especially, the ones most familiar to the students. This sense of wonder, curiosity, and novelty is just one of the habits of mind that the history of now offers in the classroom. And it is one that students recognize to have analytical as well as moral value: it gives them a sense of distance from their present, in order to see it with fresh eyes.

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[15] See Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago and London, 2018), 140–59.

In that spirit, one assignment for Iber's class in the History of Now, for example, asks students to consider a piece of culture (such a song, a movie, a toy, perhaps even a meme) from their childhood and to do the work of historicizing it. Rather than taking it for granted as a natural object, students can ask what values does it express? Whose values? What conditions made possible its creation, distribution, and consumption? Does this artifact tell the story of an individual, subgroup, or population? Does this piece of culture represent a continuation of, break with, or reconfiguration of longer historical and cultural trends? What marks it as belonging to a specific point in time? What does it tell us about the society that produced it? Has something already changed that makes it feel "dated"? The very fact that the object is so familiar to them can actually help students to begin to historicize themselves and their own lives, to see themselves as shaped by history as well as agents in it. Working with the "now" to make it a "then" lets students practice placing historical figures, ideas, and events in larger contexts, and use those contexts to think more deeply about their own position and how that affects how they see and experience the world.

But if the problem of sources can be overcome, at least for the purposes of teaching, there is the related problem of hindsight. In histories of now, hindsight goes out of the window, and this is no small loss because hindsight is undoubtedly a part of the historian's contextual repertoire. The ability to know where things are going is part of what helps historians to determine what was significant about the past and what was ephemeral. This is surely one of the insurmountable problems of the "history of now"—however clever we may be, the future is unknowable.

Zhou Enlai's answer to a question about the French Revolution—he said it was "too soon to tell"—has become almost a cliché, as has the observation that the common meaning of the quotation is a misunderstanding.[16] He was referring to the student-led uprising and general strike of 1968, not 1789. But this is a case where the incorrect interpretation contains the greater wisdom. We may know that it is too soon to render judgment about the events of last week, but it can indeed be "too soon" to render judgment about something that is hundreds of years old. The way that we understand the cluster of events denominated as the Industrial Revolution will likely be shaped by how successfully humanity manages the challenge of climate change in the decades and centuries to come. There are already people who think of the development of farming as "the worst mistake in the history of the human race."[17] One does not have to share that judgment to recognize that the way that our present will be understood as part of the past depends on what happens in the future. Consequently, anyone attempting a "history of now" would have to recognize the provisional nature of the effort. Yet this again may not be such a fatal flaw. Ultimately, the same is true also of works of more traditional history. However well researched and well documented, they, too, are subject to future revision—not simply by the accumulation of new evidence, but also by shifting understandings of how the world works and what about it deserves our attention.

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[16] Antoinette Sol, Catriona Seth, and Julia Douthwaite Viglione, *Teaching Representations of the French Revolution* (New York, 2019), 168.

[17] Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discovery*, May 1999, at www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/the-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race (accessed 25 Jan. 2021).

In teaching, we can lean into this unknowability. For example, the very idea of a course in the History of Now immediately raises the question of what counts as "now" and what needs to be included. Similarly, a course on the History of Your Parents' Generation begs not only for questions but also for trouble by focusing primarily on the United States during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and promising to provide students a view of the period by way of their parents' childhood and young adulthood. When students show up whose parents were born in the 1950s and early 1960s, or who were born in Bejing, Sarajevo, or a small village in Kerala, and not Boston, Sarasota, or a small town in Kansas (as they inevitably do), the temporal and geographical designation of "your parents' generation" can appear rather ludicrous. Rather than invite bitter protests from students whose backstories seem to be outliers of the course, this imprecision functions as an opportunity to investigate with the students how time and space can and should function in the demarcation of historical periods. Thankfully, these students do not drop the course. Instead, they stick around and welcome the role of the classroom superego, calling other students—and Ratner-Rosenhagen—to account, whenever the impulse to generalize or universalize gets a bit too tempting. Those discussions almost never land on clearly demarcated temporal or geographical borders to the historical event or issue under investigation. But they do invariably raise larger theoretical and even philosophical questions about historical framing, which is one of the abiding benefits of the course.

Similarly, in Iber's course, the students' desire to use the past to explain "contemporary" or "current" history, their "now," or the "present," raises all sorts of questions about the very definition of "contemporary" or "current" history, "now," and "the present." "Contemporary history" crops up in many textbooks referring to everything starting from 9/11, the "end of the Cold War era," the "Reagan era," and even the 1970s cratering of liberalism. One of the assignments asks students to name and periodize the present era and explain the logic guiding their choices. Does it begin with the 2008 global economic crisis? 9/11? The launch of the Internet? The 1994 Republican "Contract with America"? The end of the Cold War? The economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping? The publication of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)? This exercise proves to be a valuable entry into a discussion of how historians periodize and why. Students learn that there is no one final, correct way to do so (though some may still be worse than others), but that periodizing is one of the ways in which historians structure their narratives and come to terms with historical cause and effect. A simple exercise that requires students to think about the bounds of their "now" yields a high-level conversation that deepens their understanding of one of the key tools historians use to research and make sense of the past.

But the peskiness of periodization is in no way limited to history of "now" or "contemporary history." The fact that the history of now seems to be gaining popularity precisely when an ever-increasing number of historians are, by contrast, encouraging us to provincialize (or at least put in perspective) "Anthropocene time" invites careful scrutiny about the benefits and shortcomings of both timescales.[18] Students can be asked if a historical mode that focuses on such an itsy-bitsy speck of human history we call our "present" is a confession of hubris, or rather a way to understand why the notion of "Anthropocene" in recent years has gained such traction. Getting students to analyze the contours of their "now" or their parents' not-so-long-ago "then" invites them to consider some of the conceptual imprecision and analytic sloppiness of other terms for periodization in historians' toolkit.[19] For example, they can investigate some of the promiscuous and indiscriminate ways that "modernity" crops up in various historiographies. They are shocked (and even a little amused) to see the term used to define dramatically different timescales, regions, and developments therein. The point here is not to impress on students how shallow and uncritical our guild's terms of art can be, but rather to encourage them to be more rigorous and thoughtful in how they conceptualize and articulate periods of transformation and continuity.

Perhaps the most serious objection to the "history of now" is the charge of presentism. If the tagline for Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins's recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* on the proliferation of contemporary history is correct, namely that "historians' prohibition on 'presentism' crumbles under the weight of events," it immediately raises the question whether the history of the present is by definition presentist.[20] Our view is that it need not be, and that no mode of history is better equipped to challenge a pernicious presentism than the "history of now." Indeed, it is precisely the ways in which a history of now can challenge, if not wholly upend, a presentist perspective that make it such an effective tool in the classroom.

It is our experience that history of now is thus uniquely positioned to underscore the problems of presentism for the ways that it blinkers our understanding of the sources we use, blinds us to other sources we could use but do not, and fundamentally structures our notions of what is relevant and irrelevant. There are clear risks in assuming that ideas, experiences, or things which are so unquestioningly familiar are a result of nature or necessity. But, as teachers, we can take those obvious risks and work them to our advantage by training students to upend this naturalizing impulse whenever it rears its uncritical and ahistorical head.

To alert students to the ways in which presentism can deform awareness, Ratner-Rosenhagen has an exercise where she sends her students to the Wisconsin Historical Society to scout periodicals for articles that focus on their research interest, whether it is the trope of the "welfare queen" in the 1970s, the Gordon Gekko "greed-is-good" mentality of the 1980s, or the ascendance of "spiritual but not religious" in the 1990s. The students typically gather what they are looking for in no time, and proudly return to the classroom to showcase their booty. Then Ratner-Rosenhagen has them set aside their findings and has them read excerpts of sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel's *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance*

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[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene Time," *History and Theory* 57/1 (2018), 5–32. See also Grégory Quenet, "The Anthropocene and the Time of Historians," *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales* 72/2 (2017), 267–99.

[19] We can also question the value of periodizing altogether. For the classic statement on historians' use of periodization see Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (New York, 2015).

[20] Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Beyond the End of History."

(2015), which examines the social construction of human attention. "As William James aptly summed it up," Zerubavel writes, "'Millions of items,' indeed, 'are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience … *My experience is what I … attend to'* … we clearly need to pay more attention to the way we pay attention."[21] With his examination of "noticing and ignoring," "figure and background," "the marked and the unmarked,"[22] Zerubavel's study enables students to consider how the circumscribed nature of their habits of attention might be blinding them to the sources they use, the nature and possibilities of the ones they overlook, and a fuller and more nuanced appraisal of the thoughts and lived experiences of the subjects they study. After reading Zerubavel, they return to the archives, and go back to the very periodicals they previously pillaged, but with the encouragement to look at what topics, themes, issues—even in those now familiar pages—they may have missed hidden in plain sight. The results are astonishing, not least to the students themselves. Simply by calling attention to their attention, absences become presences, foregrounds become backgrounds, proportions change, and students' notions of what is important in history now looks like a distorted funhouse mirror. Such an exercise, when turned into a regular practice, renders students' presentism a thing of the past (at least for the duration of the course).

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One of the intellectual joys of history is developing an understanding of the wide range of human behaviors and social relations that the people of their times and places assumed both proper and natural. Studying ancient history provides one path to this insight, as does studying parts of the world other than where the student was born. We see the study of the recent past as an invitation to a larger course of study, and a larger intellectual project, not its end point. But the work of denaturalizing our own assumptions is part of the work of the "history of now," too. Students can be taught to approach the present—their reading of the news, their social media feeds, their political assumptions and moral views—as windows onto familiar worlds turned utterly strange.

We invite them to consider themselves and the people who inhabit their immediate present as historical subjects from a remote time and place who, in L. P. Hartley's words, "do things differently there."[23] This works almost effortlessly by simply encouraging students to suspend expectations, and to approach everything they encounter with a sense of curiosity, if not puzzlement. It might seem impossible for students to take heed of Jacob Burkhardt's anti-Hegelian warning about history and not view their contemporary "world and its history [as if it] had existed merely for our sakes!" or to regard the history of now as "fulfilled" in the now, rather than see it as "one of many passing waves."[24] But that's exactly what this way of thinking can do: make it possible to use history to understand themselves and their world without assuming that they and their world were what history was leading up to.

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[21] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (New York, 2015), 2.

[22] Ibid., vii.

[23] L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (1953) (New York, 2002), 17.

[24] Jacob Burkhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History* (New York), 358.

Whatever the problems with the "history of now," given its broad appeal for the public (and, by extension, our students), and the opportunities it allows academic historians to engage them, it is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Problems with "history of now," such as perspective, proportion, and periodization, notwithstanding, the notion that historians should not participate in fundamental conversations about the present would seem absurd. The past matters for the present, and to deny that would seem to remove one of the justifications for the study of it. Whatever historiographical turns might have been made by academic historians, history remains important to national politics, and selective and misleading accounts are not about to disappear. Therefore professional historians will, and should, have a role in informing the public.

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The way we see it, one of our primary "publics" consists of the students in our courses. When we are teaching varieties of contemporary history, those students arrive wanting a history of now. When we are teaching other courses, they arrive wanting history, now. The two are in no way conceptual equivalents, but as we have seen time and again, one can be used in the service of the other. Regardless of time period, our courses aim to help students experience the tools and practices of the historian's craft. There is value in deploying that craft to see both the past and the present, in Barbara Tuchman's words, as a "distant mirror."[25] But we have seen the rewards of teaching students how to do history by first learning to historicize themselves and their present—in Burkhardt's sense—as a proximate Other. History of Now invites a newfound critical intimacy with the strangeness of the way we do things, think things, in our here and now. And it opens up awareness that we might do them differently in the future.

Acknowledgments. The authors would like to thank Louise Young for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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[25] Barbara Tuchman, *Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York, 1978).

Cite this article: Iber P, Ratner-Rosenhagen J (2023). The Present as a Foreign Country: Teaching the History of Now. *Modern Intellectual History* **20**, 651–662. https://doi.org/10.1017/S147924432200018X