INTRODUCTION: THE METAPHOR OF HISTORICAL DISTANCE

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For Frank Ankersmit, on the occasion of his retirement

ABSTRACT

What does “historical distance” mean? Starting with Johan Huizinga, the famous Dutch historian who refused to lecture on contemporary history, this introductory article argues that “historical distance” is a metaphor used in a variety of intellectual contexts. Accordingly, the metaphor has ontological, epistemological, moral, aesthetic, as well as methodological connotations. This implies that historical distance cannot be reduced to a single “problem” or “concept.” At the same time, this wide variety of meanings associated with distance helps explain why an easily recognizable tradition of scholarly reflection on historical distance does not exist. In a broad survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical theory, this article nonetheless attempts to show that distance has been a major, if seldom explicitly articulated, theme in European and American philosophy of history. In doing so, it pays special attention to those few authors who in recent years have taken up the metaphor for critical study. Finally, the paper summarizes some of the main arguments put forward in the articles comprising this issue on historical distance.

Keywords: historical distance, historical perspective, metaphor, historicism, hermeneutics, Johan Huizinga

In the summer of 1931, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga was approached by a friend and colleague who suggested that he teach a course on contemporary history. This was quite a novel idea at that time: courses in *Zeitgeschichte* or contemporary history began to appear on academic history curricula only after the Second World War.1 Huizinga, however, had a keen interest in the physiognomy of his time. Chief demonstrations of that interest were his travel-based studies of the United States, published in 1918 and 1926, which offered a kind of Tocqueville-inspired analysis of secularized Puritanism, individualism, and capitalism in the New World.2 Huizinga’s students at Leiden might have appreciated a course on post-Versailles Europe conducted along similar lines of inquiry. Nonetheless, Huizinga’s response to his friend, the legal scholar Cornelis van Vollenhoven,
was outright dismissive. Rather than venture a course on contemporary history, he preferred to offer a seminar on eighteenth-century cultural history:

Lecturing on the recent past, no, I have nothing to say about that that they [my students] cannot read in the papers. What they need is distance, perspective, well-defined historical forms, and the eighteenth century is actually much nicer and more important, I do not say than the present itself, but than the imperfect and unreliable historical image [historiebeeld] that one can form of it.3

Distance and perspective: this is what historians have long regarded as indispensable prerequisites for historical interpretation.4 But what does “distance” mean? What sort of meanings does this metaphor convey?

In Huizinga’s colloquial formulation, distance seems to refer, first of all, to the possibility of recognizing in the past the contours of what he called “historical forms.” For such a highly visually-oriented scholar as Huizinga, understanding the past was a matter of recognizing lines and shapes, colors and contrasts, and dramatic patterns like the epic and the tragedy.5 Historians discover such “historical forms” in much the same way as museum visitors learn to discern visual patterns in a seventeenth-century oil painting: by standing several feet away, their heads slightly inclined, their eyebrows furrowed. For Huizinga, spatial distance is what makes both artistic and historical interpretation possible. Without a certain distance between one’s present and the past under investigation, the contours of one’s object of study remain vague and indiscernible. Consequently, distance also has a moral dimension: it is misleading to the point of irresponsibility to create an image of the past if the necessary epistemic conditions cannot (yet) be met. “Imperfection” and “unreliability” are not merely epistemic vices; they have moral implications as well.

Besides, as the word “nicer” in Huizinga’s letter suggests—expressing his penchant for eighteenth-century cultural history—there is an aesthetic dimension involved in the historian’s preference for the more distant past. At least for Huizinga, an aesthetic historian par excellence, the joys of immersing himself in a world long gone were far greater than those of analyzing present-day affairs. As someone who experienced his own time as grey, gloomy, and almost entirely devoid of the dramatic qualities that characterize historical forms,6 Huizinga preferred to dwell in ages when “the outline of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us.”7

7. J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in
Finally, it is impossible to overlook the metaphysical or metahistorical assumption informing Huizinga’s response to Van Vollenhoven. This is what William Gallois calls the linearity of “sequential time.”8 His mystical inclinations notwithstanding,9 Huizinga never challenged the dominant Western view that time is like an arrow, moving in one direction and leaving behind it the spaces it crosses. In this spatial imagery, the metaphor of distance between past and present seems so natural as to be almost unavoidable. In fact, however, it presupposes a view of time that would have been difficult to recognize by, say, the ancient Indian playwrights who, in the mid-1890s, had provided the young Huizinga with a dissertation topic (the vidūsaka, or jester figure, in Indian theater).10

Why was “distance” important to historians such as Huizinga? As the language of “well-defined historical forms” reveals, Huizinga identified with a historicist tradition of thought expressed in such texts as Wilhelm van Humboldt’s Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers (1821).11 According to this classic German treatise, “historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance.”12 Huizinga would have agreed that, by implication, the writing of contemporary history is a misty affair: one doesn’t see much with one’s head in the clouds. In turn, Humboldt’s dislike of historians acting as analysts of the present was part of a larger historicist aversion to the dominant manners in which they believed that history had been studied and written prior to the nineteenth century. Although this aversion found its most famous expression in Leopold von Ranke’s Zur Kritik der neueren Geschichtschreiber (1824), Friedrich Schleiermacher provided a most vivid illustration of the historicist preoccupation with distance when he declared himself unable to lecture on post-1648 European history. In his eyes, the Peace of Westphalia marked the boundary between past and present.13

Obviously, this emphasis on distance neatly corresponded to a methodological preference for written source material. If only the far-away past could be properly studied, written documents rather than eyewitnesses and oral testimonies would serve as the historian’s most important source material.14 Distance, however, was

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14. Although Ranke is often seen as embodying this “source-based” type of history, the German historian relied heavily on oral testimonies in a study of the Serbian Revolution (co-authored with Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a Serbian whose name did not appear on the title page, although he was responsible for most of the fieldwork). See Leopold Ranke, Die serbische Revolution: aus serbischen Papieren und Mittheilungen (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1829) and the probing analysis in Miodrag
more than a methodological imperative. It also was a key concept in how such historicists as Humboldt and Schleiermacher understood the nature of historical reality. If past and present have to be seen as stages in a grand-scale process of development, then past and present must somehow be different. Then any interpretation of any phenomenon would have to locate its object of study in the constantly flowing stream of history. Since this, in turn, would only be possible with some hindsight understanding of how the process had developed further, historians would be led astray if they projected their hindsight wisdom back upon the past. As Giambattista Vico had already warned: “[W]henever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand.” Only “by great toil,” Vico observed, could historians try to project themselves into the positions of older generations, at earlier moments in the stream of historical becoming.

As these remarks suffice to illustrate, it is not particularly easy to distinguish among the ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, moral, and methodological connotations of “historical distance” in the historicist tradition. As in Huizinga’s letter, distance had many layers and could refer at once to the nature of historical reality, the historian’s task, and methods considered most appropriate for execution of this task. This is why, in the title of this theme issue, we present historical distance not as a “problem” or as a “concept” but as a metaphor, that is, as a word that may convey a variety of meanings in a variety of contexts. At the same time, this metaphorical nature of distance helps explain why there is no recognizable “debate” on distance, with well-elaborated “positions” that are advocated and/or opposed by a particular canon of authors. In many cases—Huizinga’s included—distance rather seems to belong to a realm of dormant assumptions, implicit “metahistories,” and tacitly held beliefs about the historian’s position vis-à-vis the past. So where could we begin if we were to introduce the papers in this special issue with a survey of previous scholarship on the subject? Could we regard ourselves as engaged in explicating and evaluating what distance meant to nineteenth-century historicists and their successors in historical theory? Could we see ourselves as articulating and reviewing the latent meanings of the metaphor among historians in our time? Or does this theme issue rather aim to provoke a debate on historical distance, with sharper definitions and more explicitly articulated views than either Humboldt or Huizinga provided?


15. In Mandelbaum’s by-now almost classic definition: “Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development.” Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 42.

Two answers can be given. First, the papers in this issue follow Huizinga’s lead by focusing on the distance between past and present. More specifically, they focus on the relation between historians (in the present) and their objects of study (in the past). Their question is: what can such a spatial metaphor as “historical distance” illuminate about this crucial relationship? Second, although this restriction somewhat limits the playing field, there still is such a great variety of applications of the metaphor that this theme issue cannot be said to draw its inspiration from a single intellectual tradition. As a glance at the authors’ names reveals, the papers in this issue come from various backgrounds and draw their inspiration not only from nineteenth-century historicism, but also from contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of science. So, although the questions addressed in the papers are closely related—they all focus on what distance can possibly say about the relation between historians and their objects of study—the answers stem from rather different sources.

Although this implies that it is nearly impossible to map the terrain and specify how the arguments put forward in the papers that follow relate to previous scholarship on distance, it might be useful, by way of introduction, to distinguish, very roughly, between two ideal-typical attitudes held with regard to the metaphor of historical distance. At one end of the spectrum, there are the “minimizers,” who see past and present as separated by an (ontological) gap that ought to be bridged (cognitively) in order to achieve historical understanding. In other words, although the object of study is given, the problem for these minimizers is how to represent this object accurately, given the distance that separates them from their object of study. At the other end, we have the “maximizers,” who argue along opposite lines. For them, clear distinctions between past and present do not exist, if only because the present is so much a result of the past that it is hard to say where “the past” stops and “the present” begins. For these maximizers, then, historical understanding is all about creating distance, that is to say, about distinctions between past and present that allow an idea, a text, or an image to appear as a historical object of study.

Obviously, our aim is not to classify philosophers of history in binary terms. The distinction between minimizers and maximizers is an ideal-typical one. Yet, speaking about the historicist tradition, we cannot fail to notice that it strongly tended toward the minimizer end of the spectrum. Despite their commitment to what one might call an ontological difference between past and present—moments representing different stages in a large-scale process of development—many historicists took it as the historian’s task to overcome this difference. Basically, in very rough outline, such attempts to “close the gap” took two different forms. First, there were German historicists such as Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey, who expected historians somehow to lose themselves in the past. In their view, historical understanding (Verstehen) required a kind of empathy (einfühlen)
through which historians could put themselves in someone else’s shoes (see Herman Paul’s contribution on Ernst Bernheim, the famous textbook author, in this issue). The second strategy was advocated by Italian and English historicists, who did not attempt to lose themselves in the past, but rather tried to bring the past to the present, so to speak. In Italy, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile stated that the past could be brought to life by “reliving” it. Croce expressed this view in his dictum that “all true history is contemporary history,” while Gentile came to regard reality as an “eternal present.” Interestingly, not all Italian idealists agreed on this. Guido de Ruggiero emphatically rejected the views of his colleagues and stressed that “historical perspective” is possible only by putting the past at a distance: “[O]nly if I distance Pre-Raphaelite art from myself, that is, if I put it in its own times, I draw it nearer to myself.”

At first sight, the reenactment theory that R. G. Collingwood (the subject of Chinatsu Kobayashi and Mathieu Marion’s paper in this issue) developed under the influence of Italian idealism, seems a typical case of minimizing, because it reduces differences between past and present to such an extent that it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish the thought of a historical person from a historian’s rethinking of it. Actually, however, Collingwood was closer to the maximizer end of the spectrum, given that he saw a clear difference between a reenacted thought and the original one. To rethink a thought in the present, said Collingwood, amounts to an “incapsulation” that removes the thought from its original question-and-answer complex.

Moving further to an equilibrium between minimizers and maximizers is the hermeneutic philosophy expounded in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Inspired by his teacher, Martin Heidegger, Gadamer suggested that distance between past and present is not a barrier that must be overcome, but rather a precondition of all historical interpretation:

> Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity.

If this sounded like a full embrace of the maximizers’ dictum that distance between past and present is not a bad thing at all, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is in fact more subtle than that. While encouraging historians to approach the past with their own questions, stemming from their own historical context, Gadamer did believe that, in any interpretation worthy of its name, past and present find each other in what he called a “fusion of horizons.” The historians’ task, then, is neither to project themselves in the past nor to bring the past to the present; their task is


rather to engage in dialogue with the past so as to develop a conversational situation where both past and present are transformed.

Clear examples of maximizing strategies, finally, can be found among such philosophers of history as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. Whereas White emphasizes that historians cannot relate to “the past” without some assumptions about what counts as “the past” in the first place, Ankersmit argues that such concepts like “Industrial Revolution” and “Renaissance” are foreign to the past itself: they are present-day proposals for organizing the historian’s knowledge in ways that historical actors might not have recognized. Accordingly, both White’s “prefigurations of the historical field” and Ankersmit’s “narrative substances” or “historical representations” draw maximum attention to the qualitative difference between past and present, or the historians’ objects of study and what they say about them. Although Ankersmit’s more recent book on historical experience approaches past–present divides from a rather different angle, he remains a maximizer by identifying sublime historical experience with alienation and “dissociation of the past.”

III

If the foregoing shows, in broad brushstrokes, how distance between past and present has been a major, if seldom directly acknowledged, theme in nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical theory, we would like to conclude our introductory survey with some observations about three authors who in recent years have explicitly taken up the metaphor of “historical distance” for critical analysis. One of these is Mark Salber Phillips—author of the opening essay in this issue—who has examined various kinds of “distance effects” that are achieved in historical discourse. Not unlike Huizinga, whose letter of 1931 suggested four modes of distance—cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and metahistorical—Phillips understands historical distance to include formal, affective, ideological, and cognitive dimensions, each of which plays a role in historical representation, although often in varying degrees of intensity. Historical distance, then, is not merely shorthand for temporal distance, as in common parlance, but rather indicates a variety of strategies employed by historians to achieve effects of proximity and separation. As he put it in another article, “[i]n this expanded sense, I want to use the term to indicate possibilities for making past moments close and pressing—in order to intensify, for example, the emotional or political impact of an event—as well to mark the idea of stepping back from the historical scene—perhaps to emphasize the objectivity, irony, or philosophical sweep of the historian’s vision.”


historical genres and traditions. This, then, allows Phillips to suggest a historiographical research agenda, guided by the question of how historians in different times and places mediated between proximity and distance along the four axes distinguished above.23

Whereas Phillips focuses on distance effects produced in historical discourse, Carlo Ginzburg has subjected the metaphor of (temporal) distance itself to critical scrutiny, arguing that it stems from a historical tradition that originated from Christian sources. On his view, the metaphor is indebted not only to a linear conception of time found in both Jewish and Christian religion, but also, more specifically, to a Christian view of sacred history (Heilsgeschichte) that is deeply antagonistic toward the Jews, “Our way of knowing the past is imbued with the Christian attitude of superiority towards the Jews,” not because it assumes, as did early Christian theology, that the Old Testament finds its fulfillment or consummation in the New Testament, but because it still operates from the assumption that the passage of time allows for superior insight in the past than was available to contemporaries. “Metaphors such as perspective, point of view, and so on vividly express this attitude towards the past.”24

Finally, a thought-provoking strand of research is represented by Dominick LaCapra, who draws on psychological literature to challenge the conventional wisdom that the past is “over and done with.” Focusing on traumatic events such as the Holocaust, he argues that the language of “pastness” obscures the extent to which traumatic experiences can haunt the present in conscious and unconscious ways. Traumatic events are not relegated to a past that can be neatly distinguished from the present. “Presence” rather than pastness is what characterizes such events.25 Accordingly, at least for this category of events, a spatial continuum between “then” and “now” is as inappropriate as the professional mantra that historians ought to keep distance. In fact, LaCapra openly wonders how responsible it is for historians in such cases to prefer “distance” over “commitment.” Doesn’t distance language invariably proceed from the assumption of a “cold” past, unable to evoke such “hot” emotions as pain, fear, and anger?

Important as each of these lines of inquiry is for grasping what the metaphor of historical distance conveys, we think that these perspectives must be combined and expanded in order to answer the question with which we started: What, if anything, can historical distance mean to historians willing to reflect upon their work in a theoretically satisfactory manner? If we conceive of distance as rhetorical effects produced in the historian’s discourse, as Phillips does, we have effectively redefined historical distance in such a way as to put aside Huizinga’s concern about the unintelligibility of the recent past. Is this what Ginzburg’s wor-


\[\text{24. Ginzburg, “Distance and Perspective,” 155.}\]

ries about the origins of Huizinga’s problem require us to do? Or, better perhaps, does this concern disappear as soon as historians realize that they “live in different times,” that is, cannot rely exclusively on a modern linear conception of time? Yet, even if this is the case, didn’t Huizinga correctly envision that rhetorical distance effects—of which The Waning of the Middle Ages offers many brilliant examples—can be produced only by historians with a sufficiently well-trained eye to discern what is special and peculiar to the past under investigation? Doesn’t such training of the historian’s eye, in turn, require an ability to step back, to reflect, and to engage in second-order observation—which is not that different from what historians traditionally advocated? And if conventional past–present divides are challenged by the “presence” of a past that does not go away, then are such divides also untenable for non-traumatic events? To what extent can non-traumatic events be said to be “present”?  

IV

Although this theme issue does not answer all of these questions, it does examine the metaphor of historical distance from a variety of perspectives. In his opening essay, Phillips argues that distance needs to be reconceived in terms of a wide set of engagements with the past. Speaking about the realms of making, feeling, doing, and understanding as forms of engagement with the past, Phillips unveils four overlapping but distinctive forms of distance in order to provide an analytic framework for examining changing modes of historical representation. By contrast, Mark Bevir argues that historical distance is no longer a problem. Although concerns with distance arose along with modernist historicism, they disappeared with post-foundationalism.

Subsequently, Hans Kellner, Jaap den Hollander, and Eugen Zeleňák, each in his own way, try to specify what historical distance can possibly mean. Kellner’s contribution distinguishes between various forms of “horizontal” and “vertical” distance. Commenting on a historical painting by Botticelli, the author argues that horizontal modes of distance collapse in producing “chronoschisms.” Den Hollander also dissociates himself from simple, horizontal views of distance. Drawing on cybernetic theory, he argues that the meaning of the distance metaphor must be sought in the practice of “second-order observation.” Finally, Zeleňák employs the concept of “indirect reference” to argue that distance between text and referent depends, among other things, on the audience.

Some more specific aspects of the metaphor are discussed by Chinatsu Kobayashi and Mathieu Marion, in their article on Collingwood, Gadamer, and the possibility of recovering an author’s intention, as well as by Herman Paul and Rik Peters. In a detailed analysis of a classic manual of historical methods, Paul shows that German historicists around 1900 understood distance not primarily as a mapping of time onto space, but as a need for self-distanciation, that is, a practicing of such ascetic intellectual virtues as openness and impartiality. Peters subsequently argues that both “originalists” and “non-originalists” in the debate

over constitutional interpretation presuppose that distance can be overcome by reconstruction of original intentions. With the help of Gadamer and Collingwood, he shows that the meaning of constitutional texts depends on the direction of the questions asked by interpreters.

Frank Ankersmit concludes this theme issue by suggesting that “distance,” understood as temporal distance between historians and their objects of study, ought to be replaced by “function.” Like Bevir, but for rather different reasons, he argues that the time has come to abandon the metaphor of historical distance. If this is true, one might add, we should not ask what historical distance means, but rather what it meant, to Huizinga and to countless other historians who hesitated to lecture on the too-near past and told their students to keep a “distance.” In that case, historical distance must be historicized and considered as one of those categories that are no longer “present” but “past.”

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