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## Is time out of joint? Rise and fall of the time regime of Modernity

*Is de tijd uit zijn voegen? Opkomst en neergang van het tijdsregime van de Moderniteit*

*Le temps est-il sorti de ses gonds ? Ascension et déclin du régime temporel de la Modernité*

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## Is time out of joint? Rise and fall of the time regime of Modernity

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Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2013, 336 p.

With her work on history and on memory, Aleida Assmann is now a major reference in Germany and elsewhere in Europe – except in France where only one of her books has been translated – as well as in the United States. In *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?*, she takes some distance with her regular object of study, thus marking an important new phase in her thinking. After publishing several monographs on memorial culture and the construction of a collective memory in Germany after 1945, namely *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (2006) and *Geschichte im Gedächtnis* (2007), Aleida Assmann indeed proposes in this book to answer a question which extends beyond this field of study. Is time “dislocated”, “disjointed”? It is firstly about putting into perspective our society’s relation to time, in other words to the present, past and future, and to consider this relation within a “culture of memory” (*Erinnerungskultur*). This approach was initiated by historians – Aleida Assmann namely makes reference to the work and the concepts of Reinhart Koselleck and François Hartog. Pierre Nora and Christoph Cornelißen have studied the causes of this “world-wide advent of memory” (Nora 2002) that we are currently experiencing, and which they situate within the historical, social and economic contexts of the 1970s. However, the angle of approach now comes from of a specialist of memory rather than of history. Aleida Assmann, through the variety of her references, broadens the reflection on memorial phenomenon to other fields, and specifically to literature, thus instigating an unprecedented shift within the debate, both cross-disciplinary and transnational.

The question here is not simply of Germany but rather of Europe, and also beyond, of this West which shares the same relation to time that appeared during the French Revolution. It permeated the entire modern period to the point that it actually became an essential characteristic of Modernity. According to Aleida Assmann, Baudelaire was the first to found modernity upon this new relation to time by establishing as one of its criterias, the positioning of the artist within the present. For Baudelaire, the artist “is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call modernity. [...] By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (1859). Yet if we are still the inheritors of a political concept stemmed from the French Revolution



– 1999. Advertising for Mercedes-Benz on a construction yard at Potsdamer Platz, which was bisected by the Berlin Wall during the Cold War. The billboard says: “Only those who have a history, can write history.”

and in which society as well as its interests prevail over the types of government, then it seems the Shoah has already replaced the Revolution in regards to its role as an ethical reference (i.e. Confino 2001). Furthermore, Aleida Assmann has defined “memorial culture” as resulting from an extension of our sense of responsibility in the face of mass crimes committed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is our relation to time not consequently altered by these events? Indeed, several authors such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Krzysztof Pomian or François Furet describe a future that has become increasingly uncertain since the 1980s, a “disoriented” time (Hartog 1995). Aleida Assmann sets about studying this change with François Hartog’s concept-tool of “historicity regime” – “time regime” – starting with the hypothesis of the birth, in the 1980s, of a new historicity regime and which she proposes to determine.

Aleida Assmann’s desire to frame her research on “memorial culture” within a tradition of thought about time that goes back to the foundation of the modern period, is reflected by the tripartite structure of her book. Indeed, she aims to retrace the genesis and the evolution of the historicity regime in the modern period (chapter 1 to 3), to shed light on the symptoms of the crisis of this regime (chapter 4), and finally to express critical stances regarding this regime as well as suggestions to rectify the current positioning of research on these questions, in an attempt to legitimize memorial studies beside historical studies.

We can see two main reasons why the author expressly chose Modernity as the subject for her book. The first reason, the most obvious one, is certainly because Modernity remains the system of thought and of values which precedes the current regime and which the latter is compared to. The second reason, which is less visible as it is not readily claimed, is undoubtedly that this period retraces the implicit path taken by history to reach an “epistemological autonomy” (Ricoeur 2000), in which developing “memorial sciences” could find their place. Furthermore, if time was not understood as an object within the history of ideas during Modernity, it was however at this period that time, memory and history were thought of in conjunction. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bergson and Heidegger thus renewed an existential reflection which still today serves as a frame of approaches for these subjects.

In her study of the time regime of Modernity, Aleida Assmann not once makes reference to modern philosophers nor to contemporary thinkers such as Ricoeur (2010), rather preferring to include literary references. We could question her bias, since literature and philosophy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. She begins by recalling Baudelaire’s concept of the present, for whom modern man was represented by the figure of the “flâneur”, without any memory of the past nor expectations for the future, unreservedly abandoned to the present moment. This stance amounts to denying the sense of self-consciousness such as Bergson defined it a few decades later when he wrote that “memory is there, or else consciousness is not. [...] All consciousness is therefore memory – the conservation and accumulation of the past within the present. However, all consciousness is [also] future expectation.” (1985, 5) To shake such an aporia, Aleida Assmann quotes Shakespeare (the title of her book is inspired by a line from Hamlet: “Time is out of joint”), Tolstoy or Virginia Woolf. These examples precisely allow to go beyond the problem of self-consciousness by giving the present time a length and a content. Although traversed by several movements after which the tension between past and future – between “experience” and “horizon of expectation” in Koselleck – may have varied, the modern period is characterized by recurring major traits. Aleida Assmann counts five such traits: the division of time (clear distinction between past, present and future, break of the new by contrast to the old, lived moments constantly renewed and unpredictable, distance taken with religion and traditions), the illusion of beginnings (continuous present, a clean break with the past in order to start a new beginning), creative destruction (utopias, revolutions, not turning around and only looking toward the future, capitalism and production, reconstruction), the invention of the historical (historicism, reconstitution, objectivity, conservation) and acceleration (speed, regularity and precision, space-time relation, experience of socio-cultural changes on the scale of a lifetime, expiry dates, modes). However, just as the ideal of the “flâneur”, these concepts reveal themselves to be too abstract and intransigent to correspond to experience (making Bruno Latour claim that “we were never modern” – including the Moderns). This is why supporters of the “compensation” theory, with Herman Lübbe and Odo Marquart at the forefront, rationalized the concepts of the Moderns to make them follow an anthropological rhythm. This “late Modernity”

namely affirmed the necessity for the future to find its origin in the past. Was this a first step toward the end of Modernity or, on the contrary, has it allowed the validity of modernist theories to last over time?

If the late Moderns set the foundations of Modernity within reality, one admittedly is forced to recognize that this reality has changed over the last few decades, in such a way that certain modern premises no longer seem valid. This is the case regarding on the one hand the invariable outlook to the future, and on the other hand the break with the past. After the 1960s, which marked the peak of modernist theses, we noticed a loss of confidence in the future, as it no longer was associated to the idea of progress. The border with the past no longer seemed impermeable, as it resurfaced in the present in an unprecedented way after the traumatic experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, Aleida Assmann highlights the emergence of three new categories: culture, identity – namely collective identity – and memory, which form the pillars of “culture sciences” (*Kulturwissenschaft*) as they developed in Germany. Memory has come to be on par with history as a means of reaching a past which flows into the present, and is no longer merely maintained at a distance as an object of objective science. Aleida Assmann takes the image of someone moving the cursor from the future to the past. Other authors such as Andreas Huyssen (“future present”) and François Hartog (“presentism”), see a recentering, as well as an intensification and a prolongation of the present. A certain number of historians, anthropologists, political scientists thus perceive today’s current society as inescapably heading toward a wandering fixed in the present. Aleida Assmann directly confronts the supporters of such a position, who are, according to her, troubled by the porosity between the historic past and the lived present created by collective memory, in a break with historiographic principles. In fact the conclusion of most historians, in France as in Germany, concord on two points: the inflation of the notion of memory on the one hand, which tends to be valued more than history for it is more direct, more accessible and diverse, and thereby more easily useable for identity purposes; on the other hand lies a fear in the face of the chaos potentially brought on by the coexistence of multiple memories and the subjective manipulation of the past they imply, which would thus confuse the idea of a common past and therefore of a common future. History is therefore distrustful of memory, which it uses nevertheless, seemingly forgetting that, it too, was and sometimes still is the object of such a distrust for it is manipulable or at least not independent from the conditions it is written in. This has in fact resulted in the birth of historiography: a critical look at the work done by historians, at history on itself. During this “historiographic operation”, Michel de Certeau was able to observe that “the objectification of the past, for three centuries, had undoubtedly not been directly thought about within a discipline which did not cease using it as a taxonomic instrument” (quoted in Hartog 2003, 11).

How can one not consider that this is precisely what Aleida Assmann is attempting to avoid with her book on our relation to time? In other words, the epistemological autonomy she negotiates for the thriving discipline of which she is the leader,



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– Jochen Gerz, “It is no mystery: your knowledge will kill you.” Paris 1982, Chambéry 1982, Tel Hai 1983, here in Kassel 1984.

seemingly acquires new tools in a way just as legitimate as history does. Precisely, basing her study on her own works dealing with collective memory in Germany after the Second World War, Aleida Assmann observed that not only did memorial studies not question the historical discipline, but that on the contrary, they profited from the discipline’s findings in order to respond to the society’s growing need to claim their past so as to be able to move forward (279). It is obvious that her goal is not to frighten people with an all-powerful memory, but to raise the debate so that the input from all disciplines may be taken into account. For Marc Bloch, the object of history is “men in time”. In a similar way, could the

object of memorial studies not be defined as the “present of things past” to borrow the term from Saint Augustine, or as a “past in the present”, which refers to the “now-time”, a term with which Walter Benjamin described the memorial process which makes the past present in the way we remember it, and not necessarily as it was? There are numerous possibilities of anchoring memorial studies within a diversity of traditions (philosophical, historical, social, political, literary...) and placing them lastingly within the scientific landscape.

This is the spirit with which Aleida Assmann responds, in the introduction, to the following sentence by Andreas Huyssen: “the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically” (Huyssen 2000, 21). The lack of responses from cultural sciences to such a question indeed motivated the writing of her book. But what about phenomenology and Heidegger’s heritage regarding time and historicity? Is Aleida Assmann part of a generation that is breaking with the controversial heritage of Modernity? The author thus becomes her own subject of study, or so can the reader think and wonder which memory Aleida Assmann wishes for memorial studies. Which traditions of thought should be revived and which ones should be forgotten in order to construct their identity? In France, Claude Romano chooses to focus on the conceptual contributions of phenomenology and in particular on the terminology specific to Heidegger so as to move beyond them. Romano introduces the *événementiel/événementiel* couple by mirroring the conceptual *existentiel/existential* couple, thus promoting a new approach to events. Yet the definition he gives seems fit to be applied to the tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in particular to the Shoah. The following quote taken from *L’aventure temporelle* namely shows the potential contribution for memorial studies of a research that would fully claim its philosophical heritage and allow a direct and head-on questioning surprisingly close to the ones presented in Aleida Assmann’s book:

[The] event disturbs all factual chronology at the same time as all self-coincidence of the present and all plenary presence of what is to come, it is merely present as the past, in the light of the future it opens onto. It opens to a dehiscence and a hiatus within time thus making it a disjointed time, “out of joint” to quote Shakespeare. (Romano 2010, 70)

This then raises a certain number of questions about the place of various scientific disciplines which today are studying the past, as well as the relationship which researchers, whether historians or specialists of memorial issues, entertain with the society they live in. Our society is indeed from now on made up of a handful of professionals and a multitude of memories, individual and collective, which reflect the division of intellectual conceptions. Without falling into the pessimism Aleida Assmann denounces, it therefore appears necessary to maintain a critical mind in regard to memorial studies so as to avoid an “all memory”, a memorial utopia, just as Nietzsche enjoined his contemporaries when he denounced the danger of an “all history” in the modern period.

Finally, within our context of globalization, we are experiencing today a fast and world-wide harmonization of the same technological means which created the conditions for Modernity to appear in the West. This should allow common reference points to be established in order to study the relation to time within various cultures. Each culture has yet to embrace this internationalization for transferring mechanisms to be set in place, namely through translation.

Aleida Assmann has adapted her approach to such a context. Although she retains a Western point of view because of the object of her study, her book *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?* has two noteworthy merits. Firstly, it proposes a synthesis of various theoretical contributions which allow an understanding of our own relation to time, by drawing on authors from various origins and time periods. Secondly, it points to an increasing complexity of patterns that have become too simplistic for this pluralistic society, marked with fractal identities gathered within a same world village. Behind a humble and methodical demonstration lies the ambitious issue for memorial studies of opening up a space of intellection par excellence in order to renew the conceptual frameworks of (post)modernity. ■

Translation: Sarah Voke

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