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## Presentism Redux

Harry Whitaker

Northern Michigan University, hwhitake@nmu.edu

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## Presentism Redux

Harry Whitaker  
(Northern Michigan University – USA) whit@nmu.edu

And

Tom Heinzen  
(William Patterson University – USA)

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### Abstract

George Stocking's (1965) editorial discussion of presentism alerted historians of the behavioral sciences to the problem of presentism, a.k.a. "Whig history", that was publicized in Butterfield's (1931) much-discussed text. However, it was Thomas Leahey's (1986) *History Without the Past*, a trenchant and critical review of Gregory Kimble & Kurt Schlesinger's (1985) two-volume *Topics in the History of Psychology*, that set the stage for many historians of psychology to examine historiography and in particular, the nature of presentist analyses. In the last 30 years, presentism remains center-stage in historiography, sometimes invoked as the classic mistake of the naïve and uninformed and sometimes praised as the insight of first-class historical analysis.

Howard Zinn's (2003) *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present* is unabashedly presentist, claiming that historical objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. Some of Zinn's harshest critics have themselves been criticized for the same failures that they attributed to Zinn (Hughes, 2008). It is fair to say that most historians, of any specialty, acknowledge what Butterfield himself pointed out: one cannot escape one's knowledge of the present. The question becomes, for most historians, how does one achieve a measure of objectivity, can one make use of present knowledge to assist in understanding the past rather than distorting it? Lynn Hunt (2002) then president of the American Historical Association, in any essay titled "Against Presentism" lucidly pointed out both the problems of as well as the difficulties avoiding, a presentist bias.

On the other side of the fence, there have been some equally persuasive, in fact elegant arguments that defend presentism as an historiographic technique to be exploited to the fullest extent. Christopher Orlet's two essays (2004a, 2004b), "A Defense of Whig History" and "Presentism Defended Part 2" present a fascinating analysis of the philosophical problem of failing to make a presentist critique of such giants of the past as Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson and John Milton. Frances Dolan's (2008) book *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*, revisits ...the supposed problem of "presentism"--that is, projecting the concerns and preoccupations of the present onto the past--in order to defend some version of presentism as a needed part of securing a future for the humanities. A perceived sense of connection between the present and the past, a conviction that the past matters and that it shapes whatever futures we can build, helps to motivate rigorous inquiry into the past. Without collapsing the difference between past and present, we can still return to the past fully aware of the ways in which present concerns shape the questions we ask. My particular focus will be marriage. I examine how figures for marriage in the seventeenth-century still structure and animate the stories we tell about marriage in Anglo-American culture today [from a conference paper presented before the publication of the 2008 book].

Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes's (2006) book *Presentist Shakespeares (Accents on Shakespeare)* articulates their "...use of the term "presentism" – which we've always distinguished from the pejorative usage of the term." (personal communication from Grady).

In the present paper we will anthologize the various usages of the term "presentism" which we hope will help distinguish that which everyone would agree is bad historical analysis from that which arguably is excellent history. We will also discuss a contemporary historical work (Marco Piccolino and Marco Bresadola (2013) *Shocking Frogs. Galvani, Volta and the Electric Origins of Neuroscience.*) which employs a presentist analysis to illuminate the remarkable and heretofore unappreciated insights of Luigi Galvani.

## References

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