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Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. x + 245 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$32.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-16506-6.

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Henry Rousso writes that while he initially envisioned *The Latest Catastrophe* as a manifesto, it morphed into an open inquiry. Originally published in France in 2012, Rousso's dense and illuminating work enters into a vibrant debate over the role of history and the historian in contemporary societies. Rousso's goal is to trace the genealogy of a branch of the discipline of history--the history of the present time (*Zeitgeschichte* in German)--by exploring its epistemological premises and actual achievements (p. 195). Historians have engaged in the most pressing issues of the day since the time of the Greeks, bringing their knowledge and methods of understanding to the time in which they live. Today, historians of the present time constitute what Rousso repeatedly calls a movement within the discipline. He explains it this way, "The imperative for truth characteristic of the historical method has turned into a social imperative for recognition, into policies of atonement, apologies, and expressions of 'repentance' directed at the victims of the recent major catastrophes. It is within that context that a new history of the present time has developed" (p. 13).

In asserting that contemporary history is vital to the discipline, Rousso counters the arguments of historians such as Antoine Prost and Gerard Noiriel, both of whom have expressed ideas that represent long-standing sentiments against the history of the present time. Prost, for instance, has called it a "pseudo-concept" (p. 6).^[1] Such statements, Rousso maintains, reveal two prejudices against which contemporary historians fight. First is the notion that historical objectivity requires the passage of time; history finishes and facts become historical, which provides the perspective necessary for the historian to analyze them with distance and hindsight. The second takes the opposite approach. Privileging direct testimony, critics of contemporary history claim that experience and eye-witness accounts triumph over the type of expert knowledge that produces historical narration.

Rousso confronts such skepticism to the history of the present time by exploring its evolution along the lines of three epistemological bases, each of which centers around how human societies conceive of time: contemporaneity, regimes of historicity, and the relationship between past and present. These concepts thread their way throughout the book's four chapters and are thus critical to understand. Rousso explains that "Historians of the present time act 'as if' they could seize hold of time as it passes, freeze an image, and observe the transition between past and present" (p. 4). Through conscious and unconscious action, people living in specific times confer meaning on events that they experience. In doing so, they create a time frame that constitutes contemporaneity, which Rousso explains, is "a term that applies to everything we recognize as belonging to our own time, including the tradition, the traces, the recollection of bygone eras" (p. 4).

Since conceptions of contemporaneity change, contemporary historians seek to understand how one era shifts to another. Such paradigmatic changes are subject to vibrant debate in recent French historiography over “regimes of historicity.” Rousso uses the concept of historicity in the sense that it “designates the specifically temporal—hence evolving, variable, limited, and mortal—character of human being and societies and implies that the knowledge they may produce about themselves also has a limit, a finitude...” (p. 7). The term “regime” is useful for historians who seek to analyze the relationship that a society has with its past: how they think about themselves, the cultural frameworks they use to produce and represent meaning, and variability in such ways of knowing. According to Rousso, different regimes “may follow one after another or may coexist in a single place or a single moment. To work on regimes of historicity is thus not simply to focus on historiography...but also to postulate that the way of envisioning time, in this case the present time, constitutes an essential element for understanding a given society at a given moment” (p. 8).

The third epistemological premise is at the root of the book’s title: how people and societies conceive of the concept of the past and present. Understanding contemporaneity and regimes of historicity enables historians to engage in periodization—an important goal of historians of the present time. And currently, such periodization centers around the idea of the catastrophe. This is Rousso’s primary thesis: “all contemporary history begins with ‘the latest catastrophe’” (p. 9). Since 1789, and particularly in the twentieth century, Rousso insists that it was war that determined how people thought about the past and present, as the massive death, destruction, and trauma constituted unparalleled tragedies. In this, historians of the present time place the event (more so than long-term structural forces) at the center of history.

In exploring how contemporary history evolved to the point where its critical mode of periodization became organized around the catastrophe, Rousso structures his book around four chronologically-based chapters. It examines Western historiography, beginning with the ancient world and ending with an inquiry into how best to periodize our present time. Rousso focuses on France, but includes Germany, Great Britain, and the United States in his account, while acknowledging that he was unable to discuss important historiographical traditions in the Italian, Spanish, and Latin American contexts. In this, Rousso states that his work explores one way of doing history, and is not intended as an assertion of the only way to engage in historical inquiry.

Chapter one offers a complex historiographical overview of the history of the present time during the ancient, medieval, and modern eras of European history, including shifts in methods, source bases, and ideas about contemporaneity. Rousso explores the origins of contemporary history by beginning with the Greeks and Romans. They generally organized history around eye-witness experience and oral testimony in order to understand the present. Rousso explains it this way, “History originally constituted itself as a gaze and an action directed at the living, not as a study or recollection of the dead or as a debt to be paid to them. Contemporaneity in the strict sense was not singled out, because it was inherent in the historical method itself” (p. 25). The rise of Christianity led to a shift from a cyclical conception of time to one that was linear. Throughout the middle ages, Christian thinkers imposed the idea of time as proceeding from creation to the end times. This notion was powerful, as historians used linearity in the service of the sovereign, deploying the past to legitimate the sovereign’s rule, and thus, preserve the established order.

A major change occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the Scientific Revolution, which offered new methods of observation and measurement. The first use of the term *histoire contemporaine* occurred at this time, in Pascal’s *Pensées* (1657). Celebrating the role of Jewish people in history, Pascal argued for the superiority of Jewish law (in contrast to alternate traditions such as Greek mythology), which survived intact across time and served as the basis for Christianity. Rousso states that “Pascal evokes the relation of a people to a sacred text, the question of its transmission, its translation, and thus its ‘contemporaneity’” (p. 32). Yet, thinkers were not of one mind. Voltaire, for one,

invented the term “philosophy of history,” claiming that classical historiography lacked credibility due to its political and theological biases (p. 42). During the Age of Reason, therefore, Rousso argues that authentic history was increasingly seen as noncontemporary.

The French Revolution accelerated these trends, ultimately leading to a break, as new categories of time arose (p. 187). Neither divine providence nor the sovereign’s actions determined how history progressed. Instead, in a new modern era, a variety of people and forces could drive history. Such ideas set the stage for the emergence of history as a scientific, professional discipline during the nineteenth century. This new history—the methodological school (*école méthodique*)—championed objectivity and centered around a systematic use of archives and texts that required the rigor and technical skills of experts rather than rhetoric or eloquence to tell a story. While Hegel and Kant practiced history in a philosophical sense, authentic history employed empirical methods, as professional historians studied antiquity or the Middle Ages at the expense of the modern (such a division between present and the past did not occur in the United States to the same extent it did in France, Germany, and Great Britain). Despite the dominance of the methodological school, paradoxically, contemporary history was nevertheless still important; for instance, the *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* was created in 1899, several chairs of contemporary history existed, and school curricula brought history into the nineteenth century.

Chapter two explores the role of war and contemporaneity in the twentieth century. Rousso argues that the extreme violence and brutality of World War I shattered the methodological school’s conception of history as an objective science based upon a rational understanding of a past marked by progress. As notions of contemporaneity changed so too did the role of historians in the discipline. Indeed, some historians blamed the discipline’s nineteenth century emphasis on detachment from the present and historians’ unwillingness to engage in political issues for abetting governments and militaries in waging war. “After producing propaganda in the service of the nation at war,” Rousso explains, “a new space opened for the history of the present time, marked by the memory and aftermath of the catastrophe...” (p. 67).

Practitioners of the history of the present time, however, found themselves in competition with the rise of the Annales school, as the first issue of *Annales* appeared in 1929. While the Annales project included space for the present, its practitioners lacked the urgent sense of activism that characterized the work of a handful of historians arguing for a history of the present time. Annalistes such as Marc Bloch helped undermine the powerful influence of the methodological school. They constructed their movement specifically against the older mode of historical inquiry, arguing that one must begin from the present to understand the past.

The engagement of historians in contemporary issues was all the more important with the devastation brought about by World War II and the Holocaust, which was beyond compare to anything that preceded it. Indeed, Rousso insists that the event “profoundly marks our regime of historicity” (p. 85). Historians became interested in new documents—diaries, letters, sermons—that revealed much about the everyday lives of people destroyed by the war. Archival and documentation centers arose to collect these sources, while new institutes were created in France, Germany, and Great Britain to organize scholars interested in the time period for purposes that ranged from documenting trauma to mobilizing history to bring Nazi war criminals to justice.

Chapter three, “Contemporaneity at the Heart of Historicity,” discusses the post-1945 historiographical landscape of the history of the present time, as contemporary history became institutionalized through institutes, archives, and journals by the 1970s and 1980s. While such acceptance in the French context was belated in comparison to Germany, Britain, and the U.S., the history of the present time not only overcame the skepticism of the methodological school’s emphasis on objectivity, but also the Annales’s rejection of the event in favor of *long durée* history. In 1958, Fernand Braudel articulated the concept of

the *long durée*, which conceived of the event as “the froth of history” (p.110). Instead, Braudel favored long-term structural analysis of economic trends and social history at the expense of political history. Despite the fact that Braudel lived through World War II, Rousso explains, “Far from being overwhelmed by the urgency of the catastrophe, which would lead Walter Benjamin to commit suicide, Braudel denied the tragic character of his time...where the lethal present had effaced the past and obscured the future” (p. 111).

In one of the most critical parts of the book, Rousso explores how René Rémond worked at the same time as Braudel, yet was one of the first post-war historians to insist upon the significance of the event and the political in historical inquiry. Rémond argued that France experienced an amnesia about the end of the Third Republic and Vichy regime, and that it was critical for the country to grapple with that tragic past. While acknowledging Rémond’s importance, Rousso is scathing in analyzing Rémond’s motivations, showing how Rémond ignored Vichy’s collaboration with Nazi Germany and the long tradition of French antisemitism. For Rousso, Rémond symbolized a dangerous objectivity, as he opted for neutrality in allowing Vichy ministers (for example) to describe their actions without challenging them on the ramifications of their crimes. Critiquing Rémond’s purported objectivity, Rousso asks, “Should one choose sides?... Should one opt for neutrality? That is morally untenable and can create the sense that one is playing down the crimes committed or even establishing a sort of balance between the ‘parties,’ which do not have equal merit in our system of values” (p. 120). For Rousso, historians must use their awareness of historical tragedies to intervene in contemporary issues by speaking out against abuses and wrongs.

In chapter four, “Our Time,” Rousso discusses the promises, achievements, and pitfalls of writing the history of the present time. For him, 1945 is especially critical because it marked a new regime of historicity, that of the great tribunal, the purpose of which was to collect documentation and testimony for juridical and judicial purposes. Prosecuting crimes against humanity, Rousso maintains, changed our relation to history by “obliterat[ing] the distance between the past and the present” (p. 144). This process was key to the triumph of contemporary history achieving the high degree of status that it currently enjoys in France. And yet, regimes of historicity evolve. Over the past few decades, the discipline has fissured, as transnational and colonial histories challenge national paradigms, the linguistic turn spurs new methods, and history becomes popular on television, in movies, and on other media. Moreover, the history of the present time can challenge our current presentist regime of historicity, which Rousso argues provides a disproportionate amount attention to the present at the expense of the future. The history of the present time can actually provide depth to current events and the near past, potentially bridging a current debate between memory and atonement (in the form of reconciliation, trials, reparations, or purges) and forgetting and moving on (amnesty). Rousso explains the movement’s current agenda in this way: “the matter at hand is to restore a genealogy, insert the event in a time span, propose an order of intelligibility in an attempt to escape the emotion of the instant.... That is one of the essential tasks of history and one of the most important missions of the history of the present time” (p. 156).

Rousso’s prescriptions for how historians can engage in the history of the present time—that they do so by recognizing when they live in tragic times (something Braudel was unable to do) and that they abandon any disingenuous pretenses towards objectivity (a fault that mars the credibility of Rémond’s work on the Right and Vichy)—is quite timely.^[2] As readers of H-France know, Rousso himself experienced what many historians fear is a growing authoritarianism and concomitant weakening of liberal democracy (and its imperfect defense of individual rights) throughout the West. In February 2016, he was detained improperly at a Houston airport for ten hours. His poor treatment included extensive interrogation, restriction from phone access, and being fingerprinted. While Rousso had been traveling to the U.S. for thirty years without problems, such harassment led him to write that the “arbitrariness and incompetence” that led to his detention spurred him to think that “The United States seems no longer quite the United States.”^[3]

This incident made international news, and many historians of France who followed the story believed that Rousso's ordeal symbolized the United States under Trump: triumphant xenophobic nationalism, growing suspicion and hostility toward foreigners, and an increasing acceptance that assumptions about security trumped the rule of law. On one hand, Rousso writes that "Historians of the present time are not historians of the instant, and their role is not to chase after current events" (p. 162). Indeed, the 2017 presidential and legislative elections in France dealt a blow to the far right National Front, although voters demonstrated scant interest in long-established parties favoring instead Emmanuel Macron's new La République en marche. On the other hand, one of the eras of periodization that Rousso suggests may define our contemporaneity is 2001. The September 11th attacks sparked U.S.-led wars of international consequence, although, he writes that "it is not certain that they constitute an inaugural catastrophe on a global scale" (p. 184). Such is one of the challenges of the history of the present time—it is unfinished history. Rousso wrote *The Latest Catastrophe* in 2012 before the rise of Daesh (ISIS), the civil war in Syria, and the ultranationalism that drove Brexit and Trumpism, just to name a few of the interconnected events whose genealogy could be traced to 2001 and the ensuing wars. For historians interested in engaging in these issues, Rousso's work is essential reading.

NOTES

[1] Rousso notes that Prost does mention contemporaneity in his *Douze leçons sur l'histoire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996), one of the key works on the epistemology of history (p. 15).

[2] See Kevin Passmore's sustained critique of Rémond's work on the Right, *The Right in France from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] For Rousso's account of his detention, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/is-the-united-states-still-the-united-states_us_58b4393ce4b0780bac2b778f (accessed May 17, 2017).

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