

THE TRAP OF PRESENT-DAY: PRESENTISM AS AN ISSUE AND ITS BOUNDARIES IN HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY

İbrahim YORGUN*

Abstract

Historical events and past actions often have long-term effects and distant consequences that extend beyond their immediate context. This article argues that historians must be entitled to consider these far-reaching impacts when analyzing historical events and actions, thereby enhancing their understanding of the past. By reassessing presentism, which is the anachronistic imposition of modern perspectives on historical analysis, the article seeks to address a significant challenge in the discipline of history writing. Presentism distorts our understanding of the past by projecting contemporary values and ideas onto historical events. To counteract this tendency, the study also emphasizes the importance of contextual analysis, advocating for a rigorous examination of the cultural, social, economic, and political environments in which historical events occurred. The study also found that extracting historical events and actions from their temporal, contextual, cultural, or geographical settings often leads to presentism, making it crucial for historians to maintain a disciplined approach to understanding the past within its proper context.

Keywords: *Anachronism, Presentism, Whig History, Objectivity, Racism, Slavery*

Öz

Günümüzün Tuzağı: Bir Sorun Olarak Presentizm ve Tarihsel Yöntemdeki Sınırları

Tarihsel olaylar ve geçmiş eylemler, genellikle uzun vadeli etkiler ve uzak sonuçlar doğurarak, hemen yanındaki bağlamın ötesine uzanır. Bu makale, tarihçilerin tarihi olaylar ve eylemler analiz ederken bu uzak etkileri dikkate alma hakkına sahip olmaları gerektiğini savunarak, geçmişini anlama düzeylerini artırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Anakronik bir şekilde modern bakış açılarını tarihi analize uygulayan güncelleme (presentist) yaklaşımı yeniden değerlendiren bu çalışma, tarih yazımında önemli bir zorluğu ele almaktadır. Presentizm, günümüz değerlerini ve fikirlerini tarihi olayların üzerine yansıtarak geçmişi çarpıtmaktadır. Bu eğilimi karşılamak için çalışma, bağlamsal analizlerin önemini vurgulayarak, tarihi olayların meydana geldiği kültürel, sosyal,

* Dr., Middle East Technical University (METU-ODTÜ), Ankara. E-mail: iyorgun@metu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0003-4716-4187

(Makale Gönderim Tarihi: 04.09.2024 - Makale Kabul Tarihi: 22.12.2024)

ekonomik ve siyasi çevrelerin titiz bir şekilde incelenmesini önermektedir. Ayrıca, tarihi olayların veya eylemlerin zamansal, bağlamsal, kültürel ya da coğrafi ortamlarından ayrılmasının genellikle presentism sorununa yol açtığı bulunmuştur; bu nedenle tarihçilerin geçmişi, kendi uygun bağlamında anlamak için disiplinli bir yaklaşımı sürdürmeleri kritik öneme sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Anakronizm, Presentism, Whig Tarihi, Nesnellik, Irkçılık, Kölelik*

Introduction

Presentism, the anachronistic introduction of contemporary perspectives into historical analysis, poses a significant challenge in historical studies. This study aims to analyze the impact of presentism on historical scholarship, emphasizing the need for contextual analysis to avoid modern biases. Such inquiry is crucial for defining the boundaries between objective historical analysis and the imposition of contemporary values, thereby preserving the integrity of historical narratives. Without a rigorous examination of presentism, there is a heightened risk of distorting our understanding of history, leading to interpretations that serve current agendas rather than accurately representing the past.

The concept of presentism has evolved significantly over time. In the early 20th century, historians like Herbert Butterfield (1931) critiqued presentism as a key flaw in historical writing, particularly in his discussion of Whig history, which frames the past as a linear progression toward modern ideals. Later, thinkers like H el ene Metzger examined how the historian's contemporary context inevitably influences historical interpretation. More recently, historians such as Lynn Hunt (2002) have argued that while presentism poses risks, it can also help make history relevant to modern audiences. This ongoing debate highlights the complexity of avoiding modern biases while engaging with historical narratives.

Some historians' methods, where contemporary values and attitudes are projected onto the past, frequently result in distorted interpretations and oversimplified historical contexts. For example, evaluating Thomas Jefferson solely by today's standards of equality neglects the vastly different societal norms and attitudes of his time. Additionally, presentism can reinforce contemporary biases and ideologies, shaping historical narratives to fit modern agendas. This misuse of history is also evident in nationalistic reinterpretations or selective remembering and forgetting of historical events.

To address these challenges, this study adopts a contextual analysis methodology, which involves interpreting historical events within their unique cultural, social, economic, and political environments. Furthermore, it proposes an analytical framework to categorize types of presentism and their effects on historiography systematically. This approach aims to provide historians with tools to assess their interpretations and avoid presentist biases critically.

While presentism has been extensively debated in English-language historiography, it remains underexplored in Turkish literature as well as in Turkish academic journals. Therefore, this study not only addresses a methodological gap but also contributes to Turkish historical scholarship by offering a structured analysis of presentism. This exploration is essential for fostering a nuanced and comprehensive

understanding of history that respects the uniqueness of past societies and enhances the integrity of historical inquiry.

1. Rationale & Setting the Borders of Presentism

Historiography has often harbored controversy and debate, evident in the works from Herodotus and Thucydides to Ranke and Hobsbawm, continuing into the last 50 years, mainly when they wrote about the past events in their present day. Presentism constitutes one of the significant issues and main topics of discussion in historical studies despite its increased visibility, especially in the second half of the twentieth century.¹

1.1. Definition and Challenges of Presentism

When the methodological problems in history are concerned, presentism is among the top-of-the-list themes constituting a position to escape or avoid² For scholars of historical analysis. However, unlike its visibility, defining the term is much more challenging,³ and a clear consensus among scholars hardly exists.⁴ The extensive range of perspectives underscores the significant disparity in our collective understanding and emphasizes the considerable distance we must traverse to achieve a unified stance. That is one of the main reasons for triggering this study.

1.2. Types of Presentism

To enhance clarity and provide a structured analysis, this study categorizes presentism into three primary types:

1.2.1. Moral Presentism

This involves judging historical events and figures through the lens of modern moral standards. For example, when evaluating Thomas Jefferson's involvement in slavery, historians like Wiencek (2001) highlight the risk of applying contemporary views on racism, which can distort the complexities of Jefferson's era.

1.2.2. Teleological Presentism

This type views history as a linear progression toward modern ideals. Butterfield (1931) critiques this approach, describing it as "Whig history," where historical narratives are framed to justify modern outcomes, such as the development of parliamentary democracy.

1.2.3. Anachronistic Presentism

This occurs when modern concepts or terminologies are retroactively applied to historical contexts. For instance, Tosh (2006) warns against projecting current notions of human rights onto medieval societies, where values and norms were fundamentally different.

By adopting this categorization, historians can better identify and mitigate the various forms of presentism that may distort historical understanding.

¹ Abadia 2008, p.194.

² Bashkow 2019, p.713.

³ Hunt 2002, n.p; Walsham 2017, p.217.

⁴ Barseghyan 2022, p.60.

1.3. The Need for Contextual Analysis

The study claims that while there is a consensus on the necessity to escape and distance ourselves from the trap of presentism, there is a divergence in the description, direction, methodology, and boundaries of this escape. Interestingly, in the debate in the academic circles of history, the descriptive boundaries of the issue range from a focus on how the past should be understood and interpreted with or without a presentist approach to whether it is unavoidable or desirable⁵ to be presentist or anti-presentist for the sake of ultimate objectivity.

Nevertheless, objectivity is just one of the characteristics that research is expected to possess; therefore, while explaining the historical account, the researcher may have a tendency, for the sake of convenience, to give the historical account with the terms and the mentality of their current time, which would distort our understanding of the past, unlike the idea presented in the sentence by a well-know fiction writer Hartley put in his novel: ‘past is a foreign country, they do things differently there’.⁶ This is the nearly iconic beginning of a 1953 novel by British author Leslie Poles Hartley (1895–1972). It narrates the tale of a boy who becomes an unintended witness to a doomed romance between an upper-class young woman and a tenant farmer in the summer of 1900, set in late Victorian England. This traumatic event marks the end of the protagonist's innocent childhood, causing long-lasting psychological damage and an inability to form close relationships for the next five decades, thereby dramatically highlighting the enduring influence of the past on the present. This underscores the vital role of historical inquiry and studying the human past, particularly within social sciences. The concepts and ideologies of bygone eras continue to influence our contemporary understanding, even as circumstances change.

Returning to the matter of this study, a researcher's time in history, in case the person is not fully aware of it, is no longer a foreign country, which reminds us that there may be some problems in presenting the past. This issue leads to a significant methodological problem of history, namely presentism. Presentism in the historical analysis involves interpreting past events, cultures, or individuals through the framework of present-day values, beliefs, or attitudes. This approach tends to project current societal norms onto historical contexts, potentially distorting the proper understanding of the past.

1.3.1. Contextual Analysis Framework

To address the challenges posed by presentism, this study advocates for a Contextual Analysis Framework. This approach emphasizes the need to interpret historical events within their unique cultural, social, economic, and political environments. Having outlined the key components of this framework, it is now useful to explore how historians have debated the boundaries and implications of presentism:

⁵Pickstone 1995, p.205; Jardine 2003, p.136

⁶Hartley 1953

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

A. Primary Source Validation

Historians should prioritize primary sources to maintain authenticity and minimize presentist distortions. As Hobsbawm (1999) and Tosh (2006) emphasize, archival research helps ground interpretations of the realities of the period being studied.

B. Comparative Historical Analysis

By comparing different historical contexts, historians can better appreciate the diversity of values and norms. For example, Tosh (2006) discusses how classroom discipline in 17th-century England—such as caning students—was socially acceptable at the time but would be considered unacceptable by modern standards.

C. Socio-Cultural Contextualization

Integrate socio-cultural factors like class, gender, and race when analyzing historical events. Wiencek (2001) highlights how understanding the socio-economic context of Jefferson's era deepens our comprehension of his attitudes toward slavery.

D. Source Criticism

Evaluating the authenticity, reliability, and context of primary sources is crucial for avoiding presentist biases. As Marwick (2001) emphasizes, historians should critically examine the provenance and intent behind sources to ensure they are not interpreting them through a modern lens.

E. Multi-Perspective Analysis

Incorporating multiple viewpoints—such as those of different social classes, genders, or ethnic groups—helps provide a more balanced understanding of historical events. Hobsbawm (1999) highlights that considering diverse perspectives reduces the risk of projecting modern biases onto the past and enriches historical narratives.

By applying this framework, historians can mitigate the risk of presentist biases and foster a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the past. To deepen this understanding, it is important to examine specific ways presentism manifests in historical analysis. It arises when historians or individuals assess historical events, figures, or cultures by imposing modern perspectives, often overlooking the intricate complexities and unique contexts of different historical periods. Doing so can lead to biased interpretations, oversimplifications, or misrepresentations of historical realities.

Historical narratives are often shaped by contemporary concerns related to national identity, race, gender, and class. For example, nationalist interpretations of history may glorify certain events while ignoring inconvenient truths, such as colonial exploitation. Discussions of race in historical narratives can be influenced by current debates on racial justice, as seen in the reassessment of historical figures involved in slavery. Similarly, gender roles are frequently reinterpreted through the lens of modern feminist thought, which can sometimes overshadow the lived realities of women in past societies. Class dynamics also play a role, as contemporary understandings of social inequality may influence how historians portray labor movements or peasant revolts. Acknowledging these influences helps historians remain aware of their biases and strive for more balanced interpretations.

Presentism tends to overlook the diverse socio-cultural, ethical, and moral landscapes of different eras. This approach undermines the differences and complexities of historical events and the individuals involved, as it evaluates them through a contemporary lens, neglecting the specific circumstances, values, and beliefs prevalent at the time. In essence, presentism obstructs a genuine comprehension of history by combining present-day ideologies with those of the past, blurring the understanding of historical realities and potentially preventing a deeper appreciation of the diverse and intricate tapestry of human experiences.

2. Historians' Debates on Presentism and Discussion: Fortifying the Boundaries

There exists no consensus on the exact definition of presentism, and there are still complementary and contradictory views on what presentism means. One of the views claims that evaluating past events and people by present-day values.⁷ This takes us to presentism. This suggestion adds that presentism is the application of current ideals and moral standards to interpret historical figures and their actions.⁸ To strengthen the discussion and provide a more robust analysis, incorporating data-driven methods can enhance the objectivity of historical interpretations. This involves:

2.1. Quantitative Evidence

Supporting arguments with statistics where applicable, such as demographic data, literacy rates, or economic conditions. For example, analyzing the prevalence of slavery in 18th-century America through quantitative records can contextualize the moral judgments of figures like Thomas Jefferson (Wiencek, 2001).

Another example of presentism can be seen in interpretations of the Vietnam War. Modern perspectives on military ethics and human rights often lead to judgments that fail to consider the political and ideological climate of the Cold War era. Similarly, the reinterpretation of women's suffrage movements in the early 20th century sometimes imposes contemporary feminist ideals onto historical figures who operated within vastly different societal constraints.

2.2. Case Studies and Archival Research

Using specific, well-documented examples to illustrate the impact of presentism. For instance, examining Yale University's historical ties to slavery through detailed archival records (Wiencek, 2001) provides concrete evidence of how institutions grapple with presentist interpretations.

2.3. Comparative Data Analysis

Drawing comparisons between different historical periods or regions to identify patterns and avoid presentist assumptions. Tosh (2006) emphasizes how such comparative methods reveal shifts in societal norms, such as attitudes toward corporal punishment or gender roles.

⁷Garg 2005, n.p.

⁸Garg 2005, n.p.

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

By integrating data-driven analysis, historians can ground their arguments in empirical evidence, reducing the risk of subjective interpretations and reinforcing the credibility of their findings.

However, this assertion fails to cover the whole picture available in history: the classical textbooks, events, processes, etc., are missing from the image. Like this lack, one of the prominent empiricist historians who follow a Rankean path, Marwick, staunchly asserts that understanding that past societies differ significantly from our own and are challenging to comprehend is a crucial skill for professional historians; therefore, presentism remains a standard error when individuals without proper qualifications, even those skilled in other fields, attempt historical analysis.⁹

Another attempt to fortify ‘presentism’ has put forth that modern historians sought to avoid presentism.¹⁰ In their work, they believed that presentism created a distorted understanding of their subject matter since present-day ideas and perspectives are anachronistically introduced into depictions or interpretations of the past.¹¹ To deepen the analytical discussion, this study presents a balanced exploration of opinions and counter-opinions surrounding presentism:

A. Opinion

Historians like Marwick (2001) argue that avoiding presentism is essential for maintaining objectivity. They believe that interpreting historical figures strictly within their own time prevents the distortion of historical narratives.

B. Counter-Opinion

Conversely, scholars like Lynn Hunt (2002) suggest that some level of presentism is unavoidable and can even be necessary for making history relevant to contemporary audiences. Hunt warns against excessive moral complacency, arguing that it’s essential to confront the ethical failings of historical figures.

Some scholars argue that presentism, while risky, can serve a purpose in making historical events relevant to contemporary issues. For instance, addressing historical injustices—such as slavery, colonialism, or gender inequality—through a modern ethical lens can inspire reflection and societal progress. Lynn Hunt (2002) suggests that avoiding presentism entirely might lead to moral complacency, where historians fail to critique the ethical shortcomings of the past. This perspective allows history to serve as a tool for contemporary ethical debates, ensuring that past injustices are acknowledged and learned from.

C. Synthesis

A balanced approach recognizes the merits of both positions. While it is crucial to avoid anachronistic judgments, applying modern ethical considerations can provide valuable insights, particularly when examining issues like slavery or racism (Wiencek, 2001). This balance helps ensure that history is neither whitewashed nor distorted by contemporary biases.

⁹Marwick 2001, p.63

¹⁰Davies 2003, p.29

¹¹Hunt 2002, n.p.

By structuring the discussion around these opposing viewpoints, historians can critically assess presentism's impact and develop a more nuanced understanding of historical narratives.

A striking depiction resembling Hunt's assertion comes from England. A teacher living in the last quarter of 17th century England might have caned students in his class. On the one hand, a historian of the 21st century with a presentist approach would tell in the historical work that the teacher had engaged in unacceptable violence against children. On the other hand, one with an opposing view would claim that since it was considered appropriate to hit children in class for the sake of teaching and discipline during 17th century England, the teacher could not be blamed for the action that happened then, because such punishment of children would be acceptable for the parents and society of 17th century England.

Returning to the framing of presentism, similar to the norm culture of 17th century England, when students in the class were caned, one would also encounter another type of normative culture in the to-be-founding United States, in the form of slavery. When we look at the views of some prominent scholars in the field, one of the well-known American historians on slavery, Henry Wiencek, makes an exciting contribution to the debate on what presentism means, and he claims that:

Presentism is very often advanced in defense of America's founders. It is comforting to think that their generation, so distant in time from us, lived in a condition of moral ignorance, and thus innocence, regarding slavery. But that is not the case. Even Thomas Jefferson, some of whose statements exhibit almost demented racism, could see clearly that slavery utterly compromised the nation: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever," Jefferson wrote. "The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us."¹²

There's a significant concern that in our efforts to confront and reject outdated and unpopular beliefs, we may inadvertently apply present-day perspectives, known as presentism, to historical contexts. Presentism involves evaluating historical figures and events through the lens of contemporary values and norms. This tendency arises from the belief that our current era represents the peak of social and intellectual progress, leading to judgments of past societies as inferior. However, such a viewpoint overlooks the complexities and limitations of historical contexts, unfairly judging people's actions within their time constraints. Just as we might anticipate future generations critiquing our practices, such as killing or hunting animals to meet our protein requirements, as primitive or unethical, researchers are expected to approach historical analysis with an awareness of the nuances and perspectives of the era studied.

Present-day knowledge is built upon the accumulated wisdom of preceding generations, enriched through extensive experience and thorough examination. Nevertheless, one would still ask whether it is reasonable to critique individuals from 200 or 300 years ago for not adhering to the prevailing attitudes of their era, given the limited knowledge available at that time. One should remember that societies evolve

¹²Wiencek 2001, n.p.

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

intellectually and emotionally over time, reshaping governance and expanding the capacity for empathy. This gradual evolution underscores ongoing progress toward greater societal maturity in understanding and compassion.

Time distorts humans' understanding of the past, and a striking example of this distortion relates to today's understanding of slavery in the past. Similar to the accusation directed at President Thomas Jefferson for his attitude towards slavery and racism, Wiencek also tries to indicate that even some of the most prestigious institutions in US history had links to slavery in the past, and their current stance towards the past is presentist as in the example he mentioned, an Ivy League institution. Wiencek asserts that Yale University administration's response to a report, which was released by three researchers that uncovers a deep entanglement of this university with slavery, contained a defense of presentism because Yale University administration, one way or another, claimed that those people, in the past who were related to slavery at the university should be forgiven because they were not aware of what they were doing.¹³

In other words, Wiencek's assertion would also be translated as 'presentism is benefited mainly by people of the present, not the past.' However, it would be inappropriate to criticize a writer for intentionally using presentism. This method may be used consciously or unconsciously in history and is closely related to anachronism. When used, the distance between past and present disappears, which may distort the depiction of events, actors, processes, etc. One of the efficient verification methods for the solution of the mentioned distortion would be complete archival and bibliographic research on the issue. In particular, a bibliographic search takes us to different uses of the presentism concept in history.

On these differences, Abadia, in his study focusing on the perspectives of two distinct writers, suggests that Herbert Butterfield and H el ene Metzger also talk about two prevalent meanings of presentism similar to his findings, which were the outcome of an examination of considerable bibliography. Abadia's claim tells that both significations are related to the relationship between the present and the past but refer to different dimensions of the problem.¹⁴ Butterfield and Metzger's debate on the concept of presentism is echoed in Abadia's study:

In the first case, presentism is generally used to define the kind of history that judges the past to justify modern science. In this sense, the term has been assimilated into expressions such as anachronistic, Whig, or Whigish history. In the second case, presentism is the term employed to designate the influence of the present on the writing of history. This influence is generally related to historians constrained by their time's perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic codes. In this context, present-mindedness or present-centeredness are often synonyms for presentism for several reasons.¹⁵

This dichotomy between Whig history and more modern interpretations of historical events underscores a broader tension within historiography: the challenge of balancing moral accountability with historical accuracy. As historians, it becomes

¹³ Wiencek 2001, n.p.

¹⁴ Abadia 2009, p.55

¹⁵ Abadia 2009, p.55

imperative to recognize not only the cultural norms of the period but also the ethical underpinnings that governed behavior at the time. Some scholars argue that while presentism often distorts the past, a certain level of moral inquiry is unavoidable when examining historical figures who wield significant power or influence. How do we reconcile the moral failings of influential figures with their contributions to progress? This balance between moral reflection and historical rigor is essential, ensuring that we neither unjustly condemn nor unduly exonerate historical actors.

Continuing with this discussion, Abadia, inspired by Butterfield and Metzger, lists those reasons and tells us that first historians used their current knowledge to make some aspects of the past scientists' work visible and ignore others. Second, due to the diachronic or teleological process in history, events move toward the present, and third and finally, historians have the privilege of retrospection. This gives historians superiority since they know what happened, avoiding the symmetry argument.

At this point, it is worth focusing more on present-mindedness and how it manipulates history writing. Besides, some authors assert that it may even result in the use of history as well as denial of disasters and the terrific events in the history of humanity, such as the Holocaust. John Tosh clearly explains and presents what these complications would mean by telling us that:

The problem, of course, is determining at what point present-mindedness conflicts with the historian's aspiration to be true to the past. The conflict is clearest in the case of those writers who ransack the past for material to fuel a particular ideology or who falsify it in support of a political program, as Nazi historians did under the Third Reich and supporters of Holocaust denial did. Such works are propaganda, not history, and it is usually clear to the professional - and sometimes the layperson - that evidence has been suppressed or manufactured.¹⁶

According to Tosh, present-mindedness has two forms. The first form is related to seeking the origins of the modern world, such as the first seeds of family households or parliamentary democracy.¹⁷ However, Tosh's suggestion has two side effects, one positive and the other negative: on the one hand, the first one provides a clear principle of selection leading to an intelligible picture of the past, but on the other hand, it also carries the risk of superficiality and distortion since the outcome would be predetermined instead of being the result of complex historical processes. Apart from what Tosh suggested concerning the problems of presentism, views from other scholars are worth mentioning.

A critical comment on presentism comes from historian David Hackett Fischer. D.H. Fisher tells us that "...the fallacy of presentism is a common failing in historical writing by men who have never been trained in historical writing in the discipline of history."¹⁸ Moreover, after reading Fisher's book, another historian, Peter Charles Hoffer, admitted he was guilty of historical presentism; still, he said, "I am comforted that the same charge can be laid against Jefferson, John Adams, and all of the other

¹⁶ Tosh 2006, p.189

¹⁷ Tosh 2006, pp.189-190

¹⁸ Fischer 1970, p.137

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

revolutionaries studied.”¹⁹ Fischer’s identification is also called the fallacy of *nunc pro tunc*, and he claimed that the classic example of presentism was the so-called Whig history.²⁰ This indicates that some 18th and 19th-century British historians wrote history using the past to validate their political beliefs.

In Whig history, historical depiction does not present an objective historical context; on the contrary, whig beliefs of the current time are prevalent. Whig history or whiggishness are often synonyms for presentism, mainly when the historical depiction is teleological or triumphalist.²¹ Whig historians of the 19th century were so obsessed with the origins of Parliament that they misinterpreted the structure of medieval English government. Similarly, most criticism was on the medieval and early modern history of family relations and sexuality.²² Returning to Tosh’s ideas, he took another step toward present-mindedness and presented an example from Butterfield in his *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931). Tosh asserted that Butterfield’s work has been among the most influential polemics ever written against present-mindedness history when telling us that:

The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history, starting with the simplest of them, the anachronism. Whig history tends to underestimate the differences between past and present – to project modern ways of thought backward in time and to discount those aspects of experience alien to contemporary ideas. In this way, it reduces history’s social value, which derives largely from its being a storehouse of past experiences contrasted to our own.²³

While Tosh focused on Whig history, Lynn Hunt contributed by claiming that presentism has some problems surrounding us. These problems, in turn, have been the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms and, second, the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.²⁴ In a similar discussion, Tosh tried to teach us the difference between the past and our time and said that “difference is recognition of the gulf which separates our age from all previous ages. Because nothing in history stands still, the passage of time has profoundly altered the way we live; the first responsibility of the historian is to take measure of the differences of the past; conversely, one of the worst sins is anachronism – the unthinking assumption that people in the past behaved and thought as we do.”²⁵

In parallel to Tosh’s view, Hunt also added that curiosity towards difference should apply to the past in general and presented us a soft provocative example by saying that:

¹⁹ Historical Presentism 2008, n.p

²⁰ Presentism_historical_analysis 2024, n.p.

²¹ Presentism_historical_analysis 2024, n.p.

²² Tosh 2006, p.190

²³ Tosh 2006, p.190

²⁴ Hunt 2002, n.p.

²⁵ Tosh 2006, p.9

The Middle Ages or Ancient World (themselves presentist designations when they appeared) are not just stepping stones to the modern present we know. As historians of those periods know all too well, we must constantly remind students that the Greeks and Romans did not think of themselves as ancient, and 12th-century people did not imagine themselves to be living in an in-between period (except perhaps in a relationship to the Second Coming of Christ in Christian Europe). Some of the interest of these early periods only comes from how people then thought and acted like us now. Much of it comes from how they differed from us, indeed, lived in almost unimaginable ways.²⁶

In her work, Lynn Hunt claimed that presentism led us toward moral complacency and self-congratulation and that we may find ourselves morally superior to those who lived in the past when she put forward that the Greeks had slavery; even David Hume was a racist, and that European women endorsed imperial ventures.²⁷ Moreover, Hunt ironically asserted that our ancestors failed to meet our present-day standards. This is not to say that any of the findings were irrelevant or that we should endorse an entirely relativist point of view. We must question the temporal superiority stance implicit in Western historical discipline.²⁸

In a more critical vein, it is important to acknowledge that presentism may not only obscure the historical record but also diminish our understanding of how cultural and moral frameworks have evolved. The focus on moral judgments that align with contemporary values can lead to a simplistic view of history, reducing the richness of past experiences to mere moral failings. This reductive approach limits the potential for nuanced discussions about how societies have grappled with issues like power, justice, and human rights throughout different epochs. By engaging with historical actors on their terms, historians can foster a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior and social change.

When we returned to the debate on the distance and difference between the past and the present, a significant discussion came from Hobsbawm. He asserted that one of the first things learned by a young historian in the field was to observe anachronism or differences in cases that may look the same at first sight. He gives the example of British monarchies in 1797 and 1997, which resembled each other, but great distance and differences existed between them.²⁹ Moreover, Tosh further contributed to this discussion and said that the difference was one of the mentalities: "Earlier generations had different values, priorities, fears, and hopes from our own."³⁰ His vivid examples were related to nature and marriage in England of the past:

We may take the beauties of nature for granted, but medieval men and women were terrified of forests and mountains and strayed from the beaten track as little as possible. In late eighteenth-century rural England, separation and remarriage were

²⁶ Hunt 2002, n.p.

²⁷ Hunt 2002, n.p.

²⁸ Hunt 2002, n.p.

²⁹ Hobsbawm 1999, p. 46

³⁰ Tosh 2006, p.9

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

sometimes achieved using public wife-sale. However, this was in part a reaction to the virtual impossibility of legal divorce for the poor, and it is hard for the modern reader not to dwell on the extreme patriarchal values implied in the humiliation of a wife led to market by her husband and held by a halter.³¹

It can be inferred that Tosh suggested historical empathy requires an imaginative effort to comprehend past mentalities, which are fundamentally distant from our own experiences.³² Expressing a similar sentiment, British novelist L.P. Hartley famously remarked "The past is a foreign country."³³ To illustrate the concept of historical empathy and its role in avoiding presentism, consider the following examples:

A. Classroom Discipline in 17th-Century England

As Tosh (2006) highlights, practices like caning students were acceptable within the norms of 17th-century English society. While modern perspectives might condemn such practices as abusive, understanding the educational and disciplinary frameworks of that era helps avoid presentist judgments.

B. Slavery and the Founding Fathers

Wiencek (2001) explores how figures like Thomas Jefferson wrestled with the moral contradictions of slavery. Applying historical empathy means recognizing the socio-economic and cultural complexities of 18th-century America rather than solely judging Jefferson by modern standards.

C. Medieval Attitudes Toward Nature

In medieval Europe, forests and mountains were often viewed with fear and superstition, as noted by Tosh (2006). Understanding this mindset helps contextualize medieval behavior, such as avoiding travel through wooded areas, which might seem irrational to a modern observer.

By engaging in historical empathy, historians can better appreciate the mentalities, fears, and values of different eras. This approach fosters a richer and more accurate understanding of history, helping to navigate the delicate balance between critique and contextual understanding.

Eric Hobsbawm echoed Tosh's perspective, asserting in his book *On History* that the most perilous misuse of history occurred not through falsehoods in narration but through the anachronistic portrayal and depiction of historical events.³⁴ Hobsbawm addressed the political tensions between Greece and Macedonia, highlighting how the histories of these states have been presented anachronistically. He noted that modern Greece has consistently refused to recognize the name Macedonia and does not acknowledge the country as a sovereign state. This rejection stems from the historical claim that the territories of modern Macedonia were once part of the ancient Greek nation-state. Additionally, since Alexander the Great's father, the King of Macedonia, conquered the region, the entire Balkan area has been considered under Greek

³¹ Tosh 2006, p.9

³² Tosh 2006, p.9

³³ Hartly 1953

³⁴ Hobsbawm 1999, p.12

influence.³⁵ These debates were not confined to academic circles, and it is deemed bold for a Greek academic to challenge this narrative. Hobsbawm demonstrated that such a unified Greek nation-state did not exist before 300 BC, and no singular Greek state encompassed all the small city-states within its boundaries. Furthermore, the Macedonian kingdom bore little resemblance to either ancient Greek states or modern nation-states as we understand them today.³⁶

Conclusion

By examining the methodological complexities of presentism in historical analysis, this study highlights the crucial but often overlooked impact of transposing aspects of the present onto past events. Presentism, a methodological problem within historical discourse, significantly influences interpretations and representations of historical realities. The challenge arises from the temptation to view the past through contemporary standards, risking oversimplification and distortion of historical truths. As seen from the contrasting views of scholars such as Wiencek and Butterfield, the debate goes beyond simply judging past actions through the current moral framework. Presentism hinders our understanding of historical events and blurs the complicated social, ethical, and moral landscapes that once defined different eras.

Thus, primary sources become crucial in this endeavor, as they offer direct insights into the past without distorting later interpretations. Furthermore, historians strive to develop historical empathy, which involves understanding the perspectives and experiences of people from the past within their contexts. This approach does not excuse or justify past actions by contemporary standards but acknowledges the complex factors that influenced those actions. By addressing the challenges of presentism, historians aim for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of history, approaching the past on its terms. Academics, like Butterfield, before the 1950s, presented illuminating perspectives, revealing a more considerable disagreement in historical studies.³⁷ Presentism is the historian's continual pursuit of objectivity in the face of evolving contextual settings; it is more than simply placing present moral standards on individuals from the past. More contemporaries like Hunt emphasize the importance of understanding historical eras as unique entities with distinct values and societal frameworks and the dangers of moral complacency.³⁸

For future researchers, it is essential to cultivate a reflective practice that continually assesses their methodologies and the potential biases they bring to their work. Engaging in peer discussions, interdisciplinary collaborations, and self-critique can further enhance the depth of historical analysis. Additionally, readers of this study are encouraged to approach historical narratives with a critical mindset, recognizing the ongoing evolution of historical interpretation and the importance of context in shaping

³⁵ Hobsbawm 1999, p.12

³⁶ Hobsbawm 1999, p.12

³⁷ Butterfield 1931, pp.13-21

³⁸ Hunt 2002, n.p.

The Trap of Present-Day: Presentism as an Issue and Its Boundaries in Historical Methodology

our understanding of the past. Such practices not only foster a richer comprehension of history but also support the integrity of scholarly work in the field.

In this context, the role of interdisciplinary approaches becomes increasingly significant. By integrating insights from sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, historians can enrich their understanding of the past and the diverse factors that shaped it. Such interdisciplinary collaboration allows for a more holistic view that transcends mere historical facts, fostering deeper engagement with the lived experiences of individuals from various eras. This broader lens encourages historians to challenge their assumptions and biases, leading to a more comprehensive and empathetic historical narrative.

The discussion emphasizes the delicate balance required in historical investigation, suggesting a nuanced approach that respects many epochs while rejecting the imposition of present values onto the past. Historians can unravel a more accurate fabric of human experiences by using a discerning lens that honors historical nuances and contextual variances. This balanced approach promises a more precise and profound grasp of history, supplementing present scholarship with a more thorough understanding of the past.

Furthermore, scholarly discourse reveals the multifaceted character of presentism. While it is associated with anachronism and a projection of current ideals onto the past, it also illuminates the historian's struggle for objectivity amidst contextual differences. Hunt's warning against moral complacency underscores the need to recognize historical periods as distinct entities with their own values and social structures. The study emphasizes the need for historical empathy and challenges historians to bridge the temporal divide by understanding the past's mentalities, fears, and priorities. Hobsbawm's poignant example of the Greco-Macedonian Historians' Controversy illustrates the misuse of history through the conflation of modern geopolitics with ancient narratives. It highlights the dangerous implications of anachronistic interpretations.

Finally, this study underscores the delicate balance required in historical analysis. While presentism presents a significant challenge, it also catalyzes critical reflection. By recognizing the complexity of different historical eras and resisting the temptation to impose modern values on the past, historians can unravel the rich tapestry of human experience. The call for historical empathy and a conscientious effort to capture the nuances of different historical contexts is a testament to the importance of preserving the authenticity and integrity of historical narratives. This study encourages a nuanced and contextualized approach to historical analysis to ensure a deeper and more accurate understanding of the past and enrich our knowledge today.

Future research on presentism could explore how emerging technologies, such as digital archives and artificial intelligence, are influencing historical interpretation. The digitization of historical records has made sources more accessible but may also introduce new biases shaped by digital curation. Additionally, examining how globalization and cross-cultural interactions affect the interpretation of history can provide fresh insights into presentism. As societies continue to evolve, understanding

İbrahim YORGUN

how presentism shapes contemporary historical narratives will remain crucial for preserving the integrity and depth of historical scholarship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abadía 2008 Oscar M. Abadia, “Beyond the Whig History Interpretation of History: Lessons on ‘Presentism’ from Hélène Metzger”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science. Part A, Volume 39, Issue 2*, pp. 194-201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2008.03.005>
- Abadi 2009 Oscar M. Abadia, “Thinking about ‘Presentism’ from a Historian’s Perspective: Herbert Butterfield and Hélène Metzger” *History of Science*. 47, pp. 55-77. 10.1177/007327530904700104.
- Barseghyan 2022 Hakob Barseghyan, “Selection, Presentism, and Pluralist History”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*. 92. Pp. 60-70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2022.01.003>.
- Bashkow 2019 Ira Bashkow, “On History for the Present: Revisiting George Stocking’s Influential Rejection of “Presentism”, *American Anthropologist*. 121(3), pp. 709-720.
- Butterfield 1931 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. G. Bell and Sons.
- Davies 2003 Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History*. Palgrave Macmillan. Basingstoke.
- Fischer 1970 D. Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Garg 2005 Anu Garg, “Presentism in A Word A Day”, *Wordsmith*. Retrieved from <http://www.wordsmith.org/words/presentism.html>.
- Historical Pres. 2008 Retrieved from <https://wigwags.wordpress.com/2008/02/08/historical-presentism/>
- Hobsbawm 1999 Eric Hobsbawm, *Tarih Uzerine*. Bilim ve Sanat Yayınları, Ankara.
- Hunt 2022 Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism”, *American Historical Association Perspectives*. Retrieved from <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>.
- Jardin 2003 N Jardin, “Whigs and Stories: Herbert Butterfield and the Historiography of Science”, *History of Science*, 61. pp.125-140.
- Hartley 1953 L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*. Penguin Books.
- Marwick 2001 A Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*. Palgrave.
- Pickstone 1995 J.V. Pickstone, “Past and Present Knowledge in the Practices of the History of Science”, *History of Science* 33. pp.203-224.
- Presentism 2024 Presentism_historical_analysis, Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentism_\(historical_analysis\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentism_(historical_analysis)).
- Tosh 2006 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*. Pearson Longman Publishing, London.

İbrahim YORGUN

- Walsham 2017 Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction: Past and Presentism", *Past & Present*. 234, pp. 213-217.
- Wienczek 2001 Henry Wienczek, "Yale and the Price of Slavery" on 18 August *The New York Times*.