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**Historicity and Postmodernity.  
Towards the Positive Reflection of  
Contemporary Human Situation**

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**Abstract**

The thought about novelty of our time is already not very new. Everyone knows today about "postmodern condition", associated with the list of many deaths: the death of man, the death of subject, the death of author etc. We can also add to this funeral list the *historical consciousness* that was the attribute of the western human of XIX and the first half of XX centuries. Contemporary human doesn't feel himself a participant of *history* (although he may feel himself a participant or a victim of global changes, upheavals, *processes* etc.), and the dimension of historicity doesn't belong to his perception of the state of affairs. Sometimes this lack of historical consciousness is seen as one of the negative traits of our time. But I think that the actual problem of contemporary human is not a problem of crisis of former concepts and ways of viewing. Any new era begins with such a crisis. The problem is that we characterize our time almost exclusively in negative terms – as a crisis or damage of something, that used to be beautiful, deep, strong. Contemporary human lacks a *positive reflection* of our time. As a result he or she either attempts to "revive lost traditions" and so creates just simulacra, i.e. the likenesses without internal resemblance to what they want to be like; or otherwise runs without reflection, passively and uncreatively inscribed in the time trends. But is the end of historical consciousness not also the beginning of a new attitude to the past? I argue that it is so, and we can make this new attitude fruitful. For this purpose we must positively reflect the specificity of our time, we must work out a language for such a reflection. In my report I want to make a modest contribution to the solution of this problem.

**Keywords:** historical consciousness, postmodernity, contemporarity, rhizome.

## Introduction

Almost half a century European thinkers talk about the end of a previous epoch. A lot of things that were principal for the cultural and social life of Europe in XIX and the first half of XX century, are going away or are being questioned. European thinkers in their attempts to understand the contemporary situation obsessively reproduce the death-image: they talk about a death of man, death of subject (Foucault 1966), death of the author (Barthes 1967); however, the beginning of this trend was made much earlier by the "untimely" thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, who talked about «death of God» (Nietzsche 1887). Also the thinkers speak about crisis - for example, J.-F. Lyotard says about the crisis of metanarratives (Lyotard 1979), however seen as a positive phenomenon; M.K. Mamardashvili says about "anthropological catastrophe" (Mamardashvili 2011). Furthermore, the contemporary time is characterized by words with prefix post. The main of these words is "*postmodernity*". So, our new epoch is characterized as a rejection of the former, as a break with the past. The attempts to characterize the current situation not as the end of the former, but as the birth of something new, are not very common. We lack a positive understanding of contemporarity. Although at least one very bright attempt of such a positive understanding was still done. We mean here the dilogy by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari «Capitalism and Schizophrenia» (Deleuze, Guattari 1972, 1980). But unfortunately this book still has not found sufficient reader's reflection.

The historical consciousness is one of the things that go away or are in crisis today. Sometimes it is also perceived in morning light - as if in the place of the past remains only a gaping hole. But I think that now, as it says the film director Alexander Sokurov, «one goes away, but comes something other» (Sokurov 2011, p. 88), and this "other" is not worse and is not better that the previous, «the "other" is not a sign of quality, it is a sign of movement» (Sokurov 2011, p. 89). So we need to seek the understanding of such an "other" not in terms of death, crisis or catastrophic loss of something, but in terms of the positive, emerging opportunities of the new situation. Here we try to make this positive reflection only for one aspect, in which our situation is different from the previous — for the historical consciousness, which is going away in the contemporarity. What is the "other", that comes to its place? and what opportunities this "other" bears? That's what we'll try to understand .

## The Historicity of Historical Consciousness

However, the first thing we want to point out is that the historical consciousness is itself a historical phenomenon and historically is quite "young": it appears in the Europe of the XIX century and is held up to the 60s years of the XX century. So the end of historical consciousness is not the loss of an essential attribute of human being, but the loss of such a thing, that is historically local.

But what is a historical consciousness we speak about? Its description can help us better to reflect its appearance and its departure. I would venture to say that the *historical consciousness* is the consciousness of belonging to history as a process of *successive* changes taking place in the human world — i.e. such a changes, in which the *present is* conceived as a *result* of past achievements and as a *ground* for the future changes. The historical changes are thought herewith as having a *logical continuity*, whereby the present is possible to understand (and so it is understood) as a result of the history, leading to it. An individual thinks himself as a *participant of the history that is going from the past to the future*; he belongs to his time and is historically conditioned, but at the same time he is endowed with freedom and can make a contribution - even if a modest - in the future changes. The interrelation of historical determination and freedom, as it is seen by historical consciousness, perfectly reflects in the XIX century the historian L. Ranke, who is often referred to the German historical school. “We recognize, — writes L. Ranke, — that history will never be able to have the unity of a philosophical system; however, it is not devoid of coherence. We see in front of us a series of consecutive and each other causing events. When I say "causing" it certainly does not mean an absolute necessity. On the contrary, the greatness lies in the fact that everywhere is human freedom required: the history traces the scenes of freedom, and here is its greatest charm. With freedom is the force interrelated, namely the original force; without the force freedom ends, both in the world events and in the sphere of ideas. Every moment can start something new, what can be derived only from the first and common source of all human actions; nothing happens only for the sake of something else, nothing is completely dissolved in the reality of the other. But far and near takes place a deep inner interrelation; nobody is completely free from it, and it penetrates everywhere. The freedom goes along with the necessity, which is rooted in the already formed, irremovable things using to be the basis of any new rising activity. Something, that became, constitutes a relationship with the becoming. But this relationship itself is not something arbitrarily accepted or rejected; it exists in a certain way, so and not otherwise. It is also an object of knowledge. Long series of events, bound such a way, — taking place one after the other or simultaneously, — form a century, the era ...”. (Ranke 1888, p. XIV)

We see that the “already formed, irremovable things” L. Ranke conceives as a base of free acting — so, that “something, that became, constitutes a relationship with the becoming”. Here we have the idea of historical continuity, which is common to L. Ranke , J. G. Droysen and other representatives of the German historical school, but also for the historical consciousness of the XIX century human.

However, L. Ranke doesn't give voice to the idea of historical progress. He sees mankind as assaying different possibilities throughout the ages — so, that it's incorrect to say that the following epoch is better, than the preceding one. Each epoch, — says Ranke, — has a direct relationship with God; it can not be neither better nor worse than any other. The forces acting in the historical world are not unteleological: they seek the success of their endeavors, — but

none of these endeavors unconditionally improves the human world. Positive sense of new beginnings, in Ranke's view, is that they *enrich* the historical experience of mankind, but they don't *improve* human life.

In the XIX century the idea of *progress* is expressed not by L. Ranke or any other representative of the German historical school, but by G.W.F. Hegel. In his philosophical system Hegel thinks the historical process as a process in which the Absolute spirit comes from the self-alienation to the fullness of self-consciousness. Progress has, according to Hegel, supra-individual logic. According to Hegel, neither individual, nor any group of people are able to change the course of history: the logical sequence of historical process is absolutely immutable.

In the historical consciousness of XIX century human these lines, personified by Ranke and Hegel, are crossing. *On the one hand*, people think of themselves as active, endowed with free will members of the historical process; *on the other hand*, they see this process not just as a process of successive changes in the historical world, but as the progress, that is simultaneously *supraindividual* (common and universal) and *dependent from the free activity of people*. Human being, in other words, considers him- or herself an active participant of successive and progressive movement of the human world from the past to the future.

In the XX century some historical events, — first of all, the use of weapons of mass destruction in the World War I, — call into question the idea of progress. On the other hand, this idea in its Marxist interpretation becomes one of the key ideological ideas of Soviet society and reveals its totalitarian potential. But in general up to the 1960s people continue to perceive history as a successive process, in which the past and the present become the basis for future achievements (even if these achievements are revolutionar), so that the movement from the past to the future is thought as a logically continuous.

Now, after we have examined the historical consciousness in its main features, we can easily see its historicity. Obviously, such a consciousness is alien to the *traditional society* of any kind. In the traditional society people perceive the world not as changing, but as conserved and grounding upon the unshakable foundations. But even in the European society of Modern time, that is obviously not a traditional society, historical consciousness, — in the sense, in which we discuss it here, — does not appear immediately. XIX century precedes XVIII century, when the past is seen not as a basis for future changes, but rather as something that must be destroyed in order to build on its place a beautiful new world, based on reason. This new world is conceived not as such, that would constitute the *interrelation* with the former, but as *breaking* with it and generally *breaking with history*, in which could emerge only unfair and ugly existing world. But an attempt to build a new, rational world — the French Revolution, leads to bloodness, confusion and hesitation; the Enlightenment's reason reveals its impotence to build a new world from the wreckage of the old. And thus begins realization of the historicity of reason; historical consciousness begins to develop.

So, the historical consciousness is a quite local phenomenon in the history of mankind, and therefore we can hope that mankind, which has lived up many centuries for its appearance, will continue to live fully after its disappearance. Let us now consider this possibility.

### **Towards Positive Reflection of the End of Historical Consciousness**

Today the relation of European human to the history is quite another, than in the XIX and the 1-st part of the XX centuries. The very way of human presence in the human world is different. The historical consciousness today is going away. Contemporary human does not feel him- or herself a participant of the historical process as a process of succession — such one, that started before him, in which he entered, having been born and grown up, and which will be the same as a continuous course of history after him. Human being no longer feels him- or herself a participant of history as *continuously* moving from the past to the future. Rather, he feels himself today a participant of *processes (in plural)*, taking place in the world as an *a-centered system* (Deleuze, Guattari 1980). The world becomes a rhizomatic system, to use here the concept of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, — a system, in which the changes don't have a single topping center; in which there are only temporary centrations as an effect of the occurring processes. The prior and the subsequent states of such a system can not be connected with historical continuity; between them can exist a gap. Accordingly, people today can feel themselves participants of changes, sometimes very significant and sharp, but they do not perceive these changes as continually derived from the previous state of the world; people feel themselves included in the context of "global processes" but not in the history .

The separation of the present from the past is also associated with the phenomenon that the German philosopher G. Lübbe (Lübbe 1992) calls "the reduction of the present". Contemporary human being perceives as his or her *own*, directly understandable, *time*, a period that becomes shorter and shorter. Those, who are now 15-20 years old, are already quite separate from the time when there was no Internet, although it is not so long away past. That is, even the time about 30-40 years ago is perceived by them as so alien, that they need a special effort to understand how people lived thereat — without e-mail and cell phones, social networks etc. Today hand write letter is something special, is rather an unusual experience, and not so long ago it was still something common and usual. In this sense, the contemporary 20-years old human is separated from the quite recent past so as the older people are separated from much more distant past. For example, when I read, how J. G. Hamann rides in 1756-57 from Königsberg to London, leaving in October and coming in April, driving through the different towns and cities, staying in them, communicating with different people — and this despite the fact that he is not just a free traveler, but goes with the partly business and partly political request (Nadler 1949, p. 71-72), — I need to make a special effort to understand this situation, to feel the life of that time, to empathize it more fully. But this time is quite far

removed from ours. The modern man needs a similar effort to understand the time, that is rather recent. Changes, occurring in the contemporary world, although they may seem to have quite external nature, yet fast enough, and their speed is also one of the hallmarks of our time.

We can accordingly question about how contemporary human is able to relate history. We see that he does not feel himself the direct successor of the former in the past, does not feel himself rooted in the life that is former to him. Can we assume that it is unambiguously negative feature of our time? Or the position of the contemporary person has its own strengths, impossible at the time of historical consciousness? I think that the second is true. Catastrophic view of our time seems to me not justified even purely historically. If we look at the strong changes in the previous times, we can see, that often they were very rapid. For example, we see very rapid changes in cultural and social life of Europe in the XIV-XV centuries. Contemporary rapid transition of the world is not the first for the European humanity. But today's transition has features, different from previous transitions. It has its own face. And I don't think that this face is somehow exceptionally awful.

What is a strong side we can see in the position of human of our time? I think it is primarily the fact that contemporary human is capable easy to address to the very different times and cultures. This addressing is much more *free and independent*, than such an addressing for a person, which has a historical consciousness and looks to the past as to his or her own history continuing in his or her present, in his or her life. Contemporary way to address to history is much more an addressing *from the outside*. And thus contemporary person doesn't run in confusion, he or she can distinguish the boundaries of different times and cultures. Of course, there is the danger of uncritical projection of our own ways of thinking into the past. Everyone knows very well, how easy we quasi-understand without any true understanding, how easy we "grasp" everything with our ready methods and thought patterns — so, that we can see and hear nothing, going beyond the things, which we are ready to see and hear, nothing really *new* for us. We often can not see or hear anything transcending our ready interpretations and patterns. This missing of the hearing of *the other* is a real danger for the contemporary person, like it was a danger to humans of other epochs. Sometimes we see such a missing, for example, in the contemporary historical films: we see, for example, in the film not the Spartans or Trojans, but modern Americans in historical suits, with an American way of acting, thinking and perceiving. It is very significant, very symptomatic. In this sense, the developing of the ability to hear *the other as the other, than we are*, is very important to contemporary human, it makes him or her able to learn something really new from the past; and if the contemporary human becomes able to open his or her mind, his or her eyes and his or her ears for something other than he or she is, he or she can produce very unexpected and creative syntheses, resonances or contrasts of different historical lines of thought, culture, arts, which by themselves would never cross and never meet. Now are possible innovative, unexpected moves in the arts, literature and philosophy, that



interconnect and reconnect very different formations, that seemed before to have nothing common. And if we take the best examples of contemporary art and contemporary philosophy, we really see it.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We tried to show that the end of the historical consciousness today is associated with the new productive possibilities in relation to the past. The latter are based on the possibility of contemporary human to look to the past — with which he feels the gap — from the outside, with independency and creativity. But he or she should also attempt not to project his/her own attitudes to the cultural phenomena of the past, and to see this phenomena as they are. Then the learning of the past will enrich him or her with many unexpected and productive ideas.

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