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Felipe Ziotti Narita*

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* Felipe Ziotti Narita received a postdoctoral training in the Social Sciences at the University of São Paulo (USP) and Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) and a Ph.D. in History from São Paulo State University (Unesp), where he is a lecturer in Public Policy. He is associate researcher at the São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp) and assistant professor at the Baron of Mauá University. Researcher of the research group Historiar (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development of Brazil, CNPq) and the Laboratory for the Study of Education of USP. Contact: felipe.narita@baraodemaua.br

RUNAWAY FUTURES, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE COLLAPSE OF UNDERSTANDING IN TIMES OF UNPRECEDENTED CHANGE

An interview with Zoltán Boldizsár Simon

Editor: Felipe Ziotti Narita

ZOLTÁN BOLDIZSÁR SIMON

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon is a research fellow at Bielefeld University (Germany) and assistant professor at Leiden University (Netherlands). He has recently been working at the intersection of historical thinking and societal challenges posed by technology and the Anthropocene in the contemporary world. His recent publications include *The Epochal Event* (Palgrave, 2020), *History in Times of Unprecedented Change* (Bloomsbury, 2019) and *Os teóricos da história tem uma teoria da história?* (Milfontes, 2019). The interview was organized and translated by Felipe Ziotti Narita.



Felipe Ziotti Narita: “Unprecedented change,” disruption and disruptive times – that feature in a central role in your book *History in Times of Unprecedented Change* (2019a) – are often used as marks of the strong sociotechnical transition of our times. The phrases in your book also express a kind of suspension and even future disorientation: instead of promises of emancipation contained in the ideologies of social evolution and progress (that dominated social imagination between the late 18th and the 20th centuries), the ideas of disruption and unprecedented changes open up a future that looks much more indeterminate and even frightening. What does it mean to live in a time of unprecedented change?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: It's hard to pinpoint the exact content of living in times of unprecedented change. Precisely because each day there seems to be a new kind of novelty, claiming to fundamentally uproot our previously held beliefs, and oftentimes our entire worldview. Digital technologies, AI, prospects of brain emulations, bioengineering and synthetic biology, the Anthropocene and anthropogenic changes in the Earth system, and many other prospects seem to defy all our belief systems and the reach of our concepts through which we make sense of the world. Each of these represent far more radical prospects and novelties than the exhausted political ideologies we inherited from the 19th century could ever imagine. In our scholarly projects, we typically try to make sense of them and their societal underpinnings one by one. And because we struggle to grasp the challenges even separately, we can hardly conceive of the complexities arising out of their interactions.

The word “unprecedented” is all around to describe such novelties – just listen to the news or the feed in your social networking sites. What I tried to do is to enhance the word into a concept – that of “unprecedented change” – in order to capture a mode of experiencing time and expecting today, and thus a mode of conceiving ourselves as historical in a new way.

Precisely because perceived radical novelty appears in so many shapes, I am less interested in the actual content of any individual novelty that claims to reconfigure our worldview, and much more in what binds all of them together. And it seems of course a big question to grapple with the sense of historicity of living in times of unprecedented change, but even this is only a tiny fraction of a larger picture that we don't understand. In the 21st century, we are realizing how profoundly we don't understand the world and what we created. And that's precisely what the notion of “unprecedented change” can capture: that the world overruns us, that it overruns our concepts and our means and modes of understanding. We are beginning to recognize that we witness

immense changes without being able to fathom what exactly those changes bring or mean.

Felipe Ziotti Narita: Since the 19th century, we perceive diffuse modes of acceleration of sociotechnical transformation. Alongside deep transformations in technology (transport, digital devices, communication structures, etc.) and social relations (family, gender, labor, etc.), the temporal structures of human relatedness and the regimes of change have also been reshaped. How do strong technological changes affect transformations in the temporal structure of contemporary societies?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: Well, if you ask about the temporal structure of contemporary societies, then I would say that the most spectacular transformation in this respect is the desynchronization of the temporalities underlying various domains of human endeavors. In the epilogue of the book I paid attention to one instance of such desynchronization, that of between the time of politics and the time of the ecological and technological prospects of unprecedented change. Desynchronization takes place today against the backdrop of the synchronized modern processes. Helge Jordheim (2014) recently showed how Western modernity was deeply engaged in synchronizing multiple temporalities through concepts such as that of “progress” or, for that matter, “history” itself. The historical process, at its largest, was supposed to unify and synchronize developments of the human world. Today, I think, regardless of whether we want it or not, we cannot even stand the chance to synchronize, because what we have are not processes with desynchronized different tempos as the otherwise insightful theory of social acceleration holds (ROSA, 2013), but desynchronized different kinds of changes, among which processual change (typically associated with historical time) is but one.

We have runaway emergent technologies with limited chances to assess their social implications after the fact. We have exponential change in computing power, which, if quantum computing becomes reality, becomes a sea change. Then, Earth system science tells us that we are facing abrupt changes in planetary conditions, due to our own doings. At the same time, rightly or not, we typically still make sense of these along telling developmental stories of how we get there, even though those developmental processes cannot account for the abrupt planetary changes themselves. Then there is the economic sphere, there are the social transformations, and so on. When modernity put technological changes to the service of political change – along ideologies with visions about what makes a good or desirable societal constitution – then the synchronization of change in the technological domain with visions of sociopolitical change brought about an effective complexity reduction. In today's condition of desynchronized temporalities, however, the complexity is out of leash. We see that all these desynchronized domains interact, but we struggle with comprehending how the interaction takes place.

This leads back to my previous point: we declare bankruptcy in fathoming what's going on. And this bankruptcy is actually the bankruptcy of our knowledge regime, inherited from modernity, in which disciplines had a certain distribution of work, each investigating a slice of a synchronized whole. But such disciplinary knowledges cannot comprehend the complexities of the interacting desynchronized domains, especially when it comes to the collision of the human and the natural worlds in anthropogenic planetary changes and their feedback loop on societal transformations. I think that we are witnessing an ongoing rearrangement of knowledge as a response to these complexities. We are learning to cope with them, with new knowledge formations, such as Earth system science integrating many natural scientific disciplines, or environmental humanities bringing together many former humanities and social scientific disciplines. From their

respective viewpoints, both are trying to understand the entanglement of the natural and the human worlds through technology. But even such knowledges may be still too much indebted to the modern distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. Can that be overcome? Can we have knowledges that understand the complexities of human-nature entanglements? Some of these questions about the rearrangement of knowledge I raise also in a second book entitled *The Epochal Event* (2020), coming out these days.

Felipe Zioti Narita: But what does this rearrangement of knowledge mean for history? The humanities, as a research field established since the late 18th and the early 19th century, depends on a historical conception of the human grounded in some distinctive features (language, labor, morality, body and history). It is the Foucauldian empirical-transcendental double, which is to say, the human being is simultaneously a subject and the condition of possibility of an object of knowledge. You have been arguing for a new notion of history that displaces some classical assumptions of the humanities. How does your proposal address the relatedness of the human with nonhuman milieu, especially with the pervasive logics of automation and technology in contemporary lifeworld?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: Indeed, together with Marek Tamm, we have been trying to address the question of what all this means for history and historical thinking as boiled down to a new notion of history (TAMM; SIMON, 2020). We tried to understand the human-nonhuman relatedness you mention, and again, to somehow indicate that the Anthropocene, the critical posthumanism of humanities, the transhumanist project of enhancement and beyond, the discourse on technological singularity, and so on, do not represent separate challenges. We tried to place technological change within this larger picture of a rapidly changing overall worldview, to see how it demands us to rethink

history on the largest scale. That's also why we teamed up. You can be a genius, a polymath, or a great synthesizer of knowledges, but you just physically cannot keep track of all these changes – for sure not to an extent of profundity comparable to joint work. You need to collaborate today, even in the humanities, and find a good balance between relying on the work of your fellows and challenging received views. This is how we ended up joining forces with Marek and arguing for the notion of history that we think can tackle the overall challenge, a notion of history that is multispecies, multiscalar, and non-continuous.

Felipe Ziotti Narita: You argued that technological change demands us to rethink history and maybe even construct a broader notion of history itself. Since the 2000s, many debates about a presentist era have emerged in the humanities. The inflated present would be a sign of the erosion of traditional values (passadism) and the crisis of utopias since the 1980s (futurist political projects). Instead of an inflated present, are we moving towards new utopias and future-oriented visions grounded in technology? Can this utopia turn a new dystopia?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: These are many complex questions at once. Let me begin with presentism. Aleida Assmann (2013) and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2014) have developed fascinating insights in this respect, but I personally find François Hartog's views the most elaborate (HARTOG, 2015). This does not necessarily mean agreement, but I was lucky enough to have the chance to discuss many things with him during the two months he spent in Bielefeld as the first Koselleck-professor in 2018.

The idea of presentism is inseparable from Hartog's category of "regimes of historicity," referring to configurations of past, present, and future. Presentism, according to Hartog, is the reigning regime of historicity in the Western world, one in which the present dominates over the past and the present. Since about the 1980s, it

is overtaking the reign of a future-oriented modern regime of historicity. I have a complex relationship to this idea. To begin with, I find it illuminating concerning the political domain, where the future indeed ceased to structure experiences of time. Ideologies aiming at sociopolitical betterment against a background assumption of a historical process loomed large in Western modernity, but their appeal is lost. As “historical” ideologies, they are dependent on the idea of a future-oriented historical process structuring experiences, which looks far less feasible today. Hartog thinks that discourses of memory and heritage (with respect to the past) and precautionary thinking (with respect to the future) filled the place of a future-oriented historicity, and I tend to agree with him on how this rearranges the sociopolitical domain. But I don’t see how the overall regime of historicity would be presentist today. I think, and in the first book I spend quite a lot on this, that runaway technological and ecological prospects entail a future more radical than ever. The radicality of such future lies, to a large extent, in their posthistorical character: they do not come about as results of a historical process, and they do not aim at sociopolitical betterment. The typical framework to discuss technological, ecological, and environmental futures is, as you note, indeed dystopian. It seems now tremendously easy to launch catastrophes on ourselves by runaway technologies, in an instant even. And that really does not look anything like a historical process slowly heading towards better ways of living together. Some prospects, however, still appear utopian to their advocates. Transhumanism, for instance, comes out as betterment for those who would escape their biological limitations. Some versions of transhumanism are even explicitly politically oriented and try to link to past ideologies. Yet their primary aim is biological transformation, that’s what defines them, and everything else comes afterwards. What I usually point out in this respect is that there is an extent to which even these prospects, although utopian in their self-perception, are inherently dystopian. I do not doubt that remnants of utopian thought are still with us, but I see a

structural transformation of utopian thought, in which it escapes the sociopolitical realm and becomes inherently dystopian due to fact that the changes it envisions are unfathomable to our limited human cognitive abilities.

Felipe Zioti Narita: Transhumanism is a good example on the relationship between technological change and contemporary historical sensibility, at least in its most prominent authors like Nick Bostrom and Mark O’Connell. They claim for the potentiality of the emerging technological devices as forms of applied reason for something beyond and better than the human condition and its inner limitations. It seems, thus, that transhumanism introduces processes that are not properly conceived as developmental change, like historical stages and cumulative processes (modernization), right?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: Yes, with a crucial modification. Even you phrase your question by referring to processes introduced by transhumanism, which clearly testifies how deeply rooted the assumption is that historical change happens through developmental processes. What I try to emphasize by pointing at the transhumanist vision of the future is that when it aims at delivering a condition that it not simply a better human condition but one that is better-than-human, then it is directed at a future other-than-human. And inasmuch as the future is other-than-human, we have a clear disconnection between the human past and the other-than-human future. You cannot tell a historical narrative of a developmental process that leads from one to the other because the change is not a change in the condition of a subject. Transhumanist futures are not developments in the condition of a human subject; they imagine the supersession of the human subject by another subject (Simon 2019b).

When you write a history in the modern mode, then you write the history of something, and that “something” stands for any possible

subject. You tell how that subject developed over time, but you preserve an extent to which you recognize that subject throughout its entire course of development. This is the point at which the radicality of the transhumanist future kicks in: its other-than-human subject cannot be recognized as a continuation of the previous human subject. I hope it's more or less clear what I mean, because typically even transhumanist themselves do not understand sufficiently what they are up to. They keep on branding themselves as simply taking forward the project of the Enlightenment. But the bringing about of an other-than-human condition – even if we, humans, conceive of it as better in one sense or another – could not possibly be farther away from Enlightenment ideals of perfecting an already assumed and always recognizable human essence.

Felipe Ziotti Narita: In the wake of the pervasive effect of digital technologies, platforms and networks, we have been discussing digital humanities and the way we do research in the field. As a last question: how do you envisage the epistemological developments and the challenges for research and teaching humanities and social sciences amidst this sociotechnical change?

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon: That's a very difficult question and there is an entire scholarly field devoted to exploring it. I wouldn't claim any expertise in digital humanities, so what I can share is my general impression on the adoption of recent technologies in research in history in particular and in the humanities in general. To begin with, the humanities seem to be conservative in this respect as compared to the sciences – and even as compared to the social sciences. If you focus only on small questions such as new forms of publishing or peer-review as accommodated to digital technologies, innovations typically happen in scientific publishing. And history is likely one of the humanities disciplines that typically

are not at the forefront of pushing novelties. When ten years ago Ann Rigney (2010) wrote the article “When Monograph is no longer the medium,” she probably didn’t think that ten years later the monograph still reigns and you are simply not taken seriously without a monograph in historical scholarship (not to mention that such a monograph still dominantly means a printed book). Other disciplines may be more responsive and there are of course many ways in which humanities scholarship is immensely transformed by new technologies. It’s only that history seems to lag behind – not only behind scientific research but also behind popular modes of history.

If you ask larger-scale questions about research, then the picture is completely different. Science and technology are already transforming humanities and social scientific research in ways that mean much more than taking digital photographs of documents in the archives – and perhaps in ways even more profound than the transformative potential of big data. With respect to history, what I mean is more like what John McNeill (2016) points out, namely, that new technologies and new modes of scientific research address the past of the human and the natural worlds in new ways by new means, generating kinds of evidence that historians have no expertise of consulting as of yet. McNeill focuses especially on microbiology and genetics. What’s more, Julia Adeney Thomas (2014) addressed the former issue even in the main venue of the profession, in the *American Historical Review*. As to the latter, Jerome de Groot (2021) will have a short essay about it in a chapter for an upcoming volume on the current shape of historical understanding I co-edit with Lars Deile. He will argue that a DNA archive is being generated today in institutional and commercial contexts that historians are yet to come to terms with: they are yet to develop the methodologies to be able to engage with such a genetic archive and yet to develop the kind of understanding that enables them to make sense of such information in the first place.

Again, these are only but a few examples of a larger challenge that we struggle to comprehend. And the challenge is of course not confined to history. For instance, remaining with the issue of genetics, you can also see the emergence of sociogenomics (BLISS, 2018). We are beginning to develop expertise that brings together previously separated fields of knowledges, gesturing towards a transdisciplinary knowledge regime that I mentioned earlier and I deal with more extensively elsewhere (SIMON, 2020). And this means not only the coming together of disciplines of a natural scientific or a humanities platform respectively as is the case mostly with Earth system science and environmental humanities, but also knowledge formations that bring together expertise from the natural and the human sciences. Needless to say, should this happen on a large scale, our disciplinary epistemologies will be replaced by epistemologies attuned to investigate the entanglement of human and natural phenomena. Yet, precisely because the transformation of our knowledge formations happen all around us today in incredibly many ways, the overall challenge remains largely ungraspable. When no one really has the overview of all potential modes of transformation at the intersection of the social, the natural, and the technological, no one really can have the clear overview of how all these changes affect our modes of knowledge production.

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