Backwardness: Rethinking Modernity, Conceptualizing Change

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Abstract

Modernity is commonly associated with progress and future-direction. But from the early modern period onward, backwardness was an integral part of the modern. As modernity came to be tied up with a Western, and often a particularly (U.S.-)American positionality, backwardness just as persistently served to mark modernity's others—both within and outside the West. The dynamics of turning toward or looking back at the past are complexly woven into the thinking of modernity and change, yet the critical discourses of modernity tend to balk at acknowledging them as pivotal elements of the modern. While current critiques of global disparity, capitalist accumulation, or anthropogenic climate change advocate concepts such as degrowth, sustainability, or deceleration, nobody promotes backwardness. At the same time, backwardness, together with its concurrent epistemic modes of retrospection and repetition, manifests itself as a steady undercurrent of ambivalence in today's cultural debates around social change, and the imagery of a return to what came before operates as a staple trope in hermeneutical methodological reflections and phenomenological thought. This forum seeks to critically engage with a paradox that is at the very core of modernity. To foreground the principle of backwardness serves to highlight the messy temporality of the loop, the revision, the recursion, or inversion, and to rethink modernity and conceptualize change in terms of the past—as a manifestation of presences that are *still there* rather than newly emergent, and that need to be *reviewed* rather than optimized and overcome: remnants, traces, leftovers, unfinished business. We thus go up against teleological narratives of the modern, using backwardness as a tentative signal of recalcitrance to the idea of modernity as relentless optimization and material improvement. Backwardness may serve to indicate alternatives to such teleological narratives of the modern, as it allows the foregrounding of loose ends, blind alleys, failed starts, and buried knowledge together with the affective stances of mourning, shame, or regret which tend to get short thrift in forward-oriented research.

Key Words: modernity; change; backwardness; progress; time

Nobody promotes backwardness. It seems to stand in fundamental—and exclusively negative—opposition to the modern. To be modern, at least in common parlance, is to be up to date, ahead of one's times, *au courant*. It is true that in the last decades the tacit association of modernity with novelty and progress has been contested, when critical terms like degrowth, sustainability, and deceleration have entered contemporary social theory, academic self-reflection, scientific knowledge-formation, the vocabulary of economics, and everyday language. But while the lexicon of moderation and correction is continuously growing, backwardness has no part in it. Retro aesthetics may be cutting-edge, but backwardness signals just…datedness. The concept does not lend itself easily to the representation of productive agency, and it is only matched in its negativity by the term "regression," which is firmly in the grip of psychology in its common usage (Geiselberger). Backwardness suggests indecision, retardation, uselessness, and a disconnect with the energetic forward thrust of progress—a refusal or incapacity to fully take part in the system at large. Even conservative movements that advocate a return to the values, grandeur, and perfection of the past do not readily employ the trope of backwardness.

Rhetorically, backwardness may appear as modernity's other, its underside or adversary, but as a phenomenon it is actually complicatedly entangled with modernity, functioning as an integral, though often neglected, element of the discourses of the modern. Just as the ancient and the modern are mutually dependent concepts (DeJean; Taylor), so are backwardness and modernity. The many beginnings (and the often-proclaimed endings) of the modern hinge upon ascriptions and figurations of backwardness, disclosing that it is not situated *before* the modern but inscribed in it. And while modernity as a quality came to be tied up with a Western and often particularly (U.S.-)American positionality, backwardness just as persistently served to mark modernity's others—both within and outside the West. Most often, backwardness figures as the subdominant to modernity's dominant, yet these relations are far from stable. But regardless of all shifts and changes, in all of its inflections backwardness is a profoundly negative term. It is not conducive to celebratory statements or programmatic claims, and it certainly has little potential to become an academic catchphrase.

As a phenomenon, backwardness is problematical. As an epistemic approach, however, backwardness manifests productively in hermeneutical methodological reflections and phenomenological thought. Storytelling and narration, in particular, seem strongly invested in backwardness. Paul Ricoeur insists in "Narrative Time" that, to understand a story, any story, we need to move backwards from its end to its beginning: "It is as though recollection inverted the so-called natural order of time. By reading the end at the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences" (180). Picking

up on this logic and extending it, Lauren Berlant identifies revision as a basic condition of storytelling (*Female Complaint*). Change, in this understanding, emanates from the backwards movement ingrained in the very activity of reading. In consequence, change is not seen as a clear-cut linear movement ahead but as the import of confusion and disorientation: "events are never exhausted, and […] most revision and adaptation *is* the activity of making change take place, even if it is also usually the opposite of that, and a mirage" (31; emphasis in original).

As an epistemic approach, then, backwardness can signal recalcitrance to the idea of modernity as relentless optimization and material improvement because it foregrounds loose ends, blind alleys, failed starts, and buried knowledge together with the affective stances of mourning, shame, or regret, which tend to get short shrift in forward-oriented research. To endorse the principle of backwardness and to adopt it as a mode of historical reflection and social analysis serve to highlight the messy temporality of the loop, the revision, the recursion, or inversion, and to rethink change in terms of the past—as a manifestation of presences that are *still there*, rather than newly emergent, and that need to be *reviewed*, rather than utilized and optimized: remnants, traces, leftovers, unfinished business. This corresponds with the thrust of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), in which remembrance and backwardness are juxtaposed to the future-oriented logic of capitalism and its utilitarian imperative, for which the past is of interest only in its function as a "usable past" (see also Giles 149-74). Backwardness also serves to question the idea of the present and the future as the inevitable focal points of epistemological inquiry or research trajectories. The emblematic figure of this approach is Walter Benjamin's apocalyptic "angel of history," with "his face […] turned toward the past," which "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (257). This figure of retrospection or "backgazing," as Paul Giles puts it, aligns with the mode of repetition rather than evoking the triumphalist gestures of "making new."

Referencing Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, queer theorist Heather Love calls backwardness a "figure of figuration" (5) at odds with the larger parameters of meaning-making and the normative imperatives of any given time frame. This figure is pulled by desires and fascinations that point away from the future into a muddied, disturbing past of lost chances and deviant impulses: "Lot's wife turning to look at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Orpheus turning back toward Eurydice at the gates of the underworld, Odysseus looking back at the Sirens as his boat pulls away; Walter Benjamin's angel of history turning away from the future to face the ruined landscapes of the past" (4). In a somewhat different inflection of the same idea, in *No Future* (2004), Lee Edelman exposes a heteronormative ideology of "reproductive futurism" at the core of the institutionalized social order. Similar articulations of

skepticism toward the future as a linear extension of past and present structures of organization inform other major critical theories of our time: decolonial critique, critical race studies, and ecocriticism.

The discourses of backwardness reverberate with the discourses around memory and recollection, belatedness and trauma, nostalgia and obsolescence, which have swept over from psychology and psychoanalysis into cultural and social theory and the debates of the arts and have informed the humanities and social sciences profoundly in the last decades. Backwardness touches upon much of what is also at stake in these discussions, but it shifts the attention away from the human psyche to larger assemblages comprising human and non-human agents, and it points to an engagement with history that acknowledges the past's tenacious hold on the present in terms that go beyond individual or collective experience and control. The backwards perspective does not primarily seek to secure meaning or provide instruction; it serves to question our ideas of knowledge and orientation, usefulness and purpose.

Our interest is in backwardness as a phenomenon *and* an epistemic mode. In this forum section, we have invited scholars to think backwards with us and to explore the research potential of backwardness. This means to reflect on the problematical ascriptions of backwardness, the ways in which this term has long served to marginalize and exclude, putting people and communities in spaces and categories that deny them agency and self-determination. More precisely, backwardness in this sense has been used to describe positionalities at a remove from what is imagined as central, dominant, up-to-date. It sketches a state of being that is—in spatiotemporal terms—both marginal and belated, often emphasizing allegedly backwards sites, scenes, and settings that seem to be part of modernity but are not acknowledged as altogether modern: *hinterlands* and peripheries; ruins, tenements, ghettoes, projects; colonies and enclaves. Such connections with time and space point to the productivity of a critique of "metronormativity" (Halberstam) and the need to take pockets in time and spatial niches into consideration when thinking about historical change. At the same time, backwardness requires us to engage with modes of thinking and feeling that are not part of the routine repertoire of the humanities—foregrounding doubt and lack, uselessness and failure. Seen in this way, backwardness can question the paradigm of knowledge production and the very ways in which we conceive, conduct, and communicate our research. When historian Saidiya Hartman, to name one prominent protagonist of a current trend of speculative history, employs her technique of "critical fabulation," she aims to pinpoint aspects of a past that have not made it into the archives—marking (not making up) what is lost by means of conjecture, intuition, and projection in what could be called techniques of circumscription ("Venus"). Similarly, Marisa Fuentes explores the history of the Middle Passage with an "impossible" focus on the irretrievable loss of testimony and witnessing.

As the following contributions to this forum demonstrate, backwardness is a multi-faceted subject matter, and it discloses unusual research perspectives—discarding the rhetoric of supersession, outbidding, and novelty that dominates our abstracts, research proposals, and syllabi in favor of the argumentative and conceptual figures of revision and speculation. By engaging with backwardness in this forum, we thus also want to give space to critical reflection on the modes and practices of academic communication. We start with a response by Frank Kelleter, who has been involved in our research discussions for a long time and lays out a critical theoretical perspective that broadens the scope of this undertaking. In his contribution, he sounds out what it means to think of backwardness as both a negative historical ascription and a conceptual tool to come to terms with modernity's political asynchronicities. The following authors all take a backward perspective with regard to their own current research projects, which all engage with the past and the present as interlaced configurations of latency, uncertainty, and contingency. First, Katerina Steffan offers a perspective on American Puritanism that troubles the long-standing research paradigm of the Jeremiad mode and presents backwardness as an underlying motif of Puritan colonial America. Drawing on her current research project on gossip in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S.-American culture, Katrin Horn then reflects on how the queer women she studies and her scholarly approach to their lives and writings have required her to rethink queer historiography and the very idea of modernity. Next, Ilka Brasch turns to the Constitution of the United States and discusses its paradoxical status as a historical document that is both considered totally binding and radically open—arguing that as a foundational document, the Constitution calls for a backward epistemology that has yet to be fully established. In a similar vein, Abigail Fagan investigates the affordances of backwardness in the context of postcolonial, decolonial, and anti-colonial discourses, accentuating the Enlightenment idea of a social contract as an imaginary foundational moment "back then." Simon Strick then turns to what he considers a blind spot in German American studies, juxtaposing the continuities and cross-fertilizing dynamics of fascism in Germany and the United States against an idea of a new beginning after World War Two, in which German American studies, inspired by American popular culture, plays a central and wholesome role. Maria Sulimma, finally, investigates the tensions between a fashionable rhetoric of retro-fitting and the less attractive implications of backwardness with regard to the discourses of urban planning. And this is only a beginning, an inspiration for research on backwardness that is still in the future. With this forum, then, we are not promoting backwardness, but we do want to promote a different perspective on modernity and cultural change, inviting our readers to think backward instead of ahead to review our future options with close regard to the burdens and affordances of the past.

Brand New You're Retro, Or, Do You Remember When Pope Francis Condemned the "Sin of Backwardism"?

Frank Kelleter

"Nobody promotes backwardness." Is it *time* to do so, then? Temporalities are beautiful things, because they are no things at all but, I don't know, feelings perhaps that call for words to make them intelligible. When was the last time I felt *backward*? Maybe yesterday when my seven-year-old phone suggested it was time to save my 45,000 pictures on it to the cloud because it needed storage space for the next system update. Or was it this morning when an article I seem to have come across by chance (but probably did not) made me think that my work about a somewhat related topic was out of touch with current scholarly vocabularies? Falling behind on some latest style of description, not keeping up with technological protocols…. Clearly, Kathleen Loock and Ruth Mayer have a point when they say that "backwardness," as a word that names a temporal condition that is made to feel a certain way, is "an integral part of the modern."

But time words are tricky, too, because *the moment* you turn them into instruments of perception, or concepts, they tend to spin off into institutional conversations with temporal dictates of their own. Perhaps this is what is implied in the question of "promoting"—or "not promoting"—backwardness now, in our tipping-point age, as a new research paradigm. When Ruth Mayer and Kathleen Loock first asked me to comment on a prompt they had written on backwardness, prior to this forum, my initial impulse was accordingly, predictably, academic: distinguish conceptual planes, quote related or alternative paradigms, historicize—but all quite generally, without having done any real research on backwardness myself. I am afraid that for this forum my thoughts and my knowledge have not advanced much beyond this early stage of peer-reviewing cleverness, even though Loock and Mayer's ideas obviously have. In fact, I fear that my comments may *lag behind* the present state of their project.

But here we go. I think the term "backwardness" in the current discussion is primed to refer to two things simultaneously—and while they are related, they are not the same. This difference warrants our attention because it invites different modes of research too. Basically, I think this forum asks us to consider backwardness both as a worthwhile object of study and as an epistemological perspective to be adopted when studying modernity. On the one hand, we have "backwardness" as a historical ascription or attribution, a comparative evaluation, usually a negative one (all kinds of psycho-political discourses of retardation and underdevelopment come to mind, but also more affirmative usages, as I will emphasize below)—and on the other hand, we have "backwardness"

as a conceptual tool to "rethink" modernity, perhaps even to queer the difficult semantic history of backwardness, repurposing its repertoire, inverting its assumptions (Heather Love's work is an obvious model in this regard).

I think the first of these projects can be usefully situated within a larger research field that is interested in what, after Ernst Bloch, is sometimes called "die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen" ("the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous"). But there is an important twist now, not unconnected to that other, more activist usage of backwardness. While Bloch said in 1932, "Nicht alle sind im selben Jetzt da" (104; "not all people exist in the same Now"), this sentence is best read in 2023 as stressing that things that are felt and proclaimed to be anachronistic—remnants, residues, holdovers from some past that by rights should be over and gone—are precisely *contemporaneous* with whatever is felt and proclaimed to be up-to-date, modern, or novel. *Ungleichzeitigkeit* ("non-simultaneity")—as a feeling and a finding—appears to be the condition of possibility for any modern present to recognize itself as such, to declare itself as current, advanced, new, or necessary. I think this is why it makes eminent sense to study backwardness as an ascription or attribution: who has been using which terms, or figures of thought, or narratives, or pictures, for backwardness, in which historical contexts, for which purposes and with which implications and material effects? Such a semantic history of backwardness can greatly improve our understanding of *competing* norms of modern temporality.

I stress *competing* because I have some qualms about an epistemological call for backwardness, which almost inevitably evokes a certain inversive logic. Do we need a concept that names and advocates the suppressed methodological other of teleological progress narratives? Liberal triumphalism is a disastrous attitude, no doubt, but does it require us to think of backwardness (or retrospection or retrieval or whatever name you elect for such a method) as its dissident alternative? What would it mean for backwardness to become a paradoxically innovative, advanced, cutting-edge epistemological selling point? Who knows, perhaps this would be a timely corrective within whatever academic conversation concerns us. But perhaps it would also invite a foreshortened model of modernity: a model that assumed one normative imposition of historical *progress*, essentially the liberal one, and one teleological mindset that accompanies it, with backwardness acting as its irritating counterforce. Some historians of liberalism might disagree with such a model; some might even point out that not all liberalisms have been "progressive" or that they have not been "progressive" in the same way. I am not sure I entirely agree, but the argument is out there (see Anderson).

The history of words encroaches on their conceptual affordances. If temporal semantics organizes social complexity, as Niklas Luhmann holds, what differentiations are involved in the schema of progress vs. backwardness (a question not discussed in great depth by "classical"

semantic approaches, e.g., Koselleck, Luhmann)? The mere fact that certain individuals or groups have been labeled backward or that they have been labeling themselves backward—as in: temporally eccentric, out-of-time, perhaps even in its spiritual version, living in *kairos*—does not tell us much about the concrete politics of their (supposed) counter-modernity. The abstract for this forum recognizes this by pointing to "a paradox that is at the very core of modernity." But if it is a paradox, why can the same theory of modernity distinguish so readily between politically pernicious affirmations of backwardness (conservatism, nostalgia, restitutions of an older order) and more estimably "recalcitrant" ones (the lingering presences, missed opportunities, forgotten knowledges)? Of course, there are dramatic differences between, say, German *Reichsbürger* and Indigenous conservation activists. Is this not the reason, though, why the *con*-temporaneity of progress|backwardness emerges as a real research problem? Would it make sense to think of these terms as semantic complements—with histories, "messy" but identifiable, that play out across a wide but not random field of competing political imaginaries? As the abstract stresses, "teleological narratives of the modern" need rejecting, and I think most contemporary historians would agree. In fact, most historians have long abandoned teleological or unitary notions of "modernity," a word that is rarely used in the singular without someone asking that we address its multiplicities and entanglements. That is a good starting point to investigate the politico-historical ambiguities of affective stances such as "shame, depression, and regret," which Love associates with backwardness (8). These are relatively new and urgent historical topics, I agree, but not tethered to any specific political epistemology (either harmful or healing).

This, then, is my key take-away from the perspective proposed here: to think of the progress|backwardness complex as a political problem of modern asynchronicities rather than an epistemological constellation of suppression and obstinacy. "Die Ewiggestrigen"[1] are anything but. And while "progressive" liberals may see them as backlash-y forces of postponement that in the end still will not bend the arc of history away from where it is supposed to be bending towards, the neofascists themselves typically claim to be some kind of avantgarde, executing another natural course of history or burying a dangerously obsolete globalism. One party's progress can be another party's backwardness. Even the Vatican has its inner retrogrades to warn against. This alone—and then the massive *contemporaneity* of fascist anti-liberalism in our time—should caution us not to set up backwardness as an epistemological counter-term to progress.

Put more theoretically, one of the promises of a project on backwardness is that it encourages us to think of the progress|backwardness complex as something other than an opposition of action vs. reaction, because its history also continues supposedly pre-modern temporal distinctions such as passion vs. action, aeternitas vs. tempus, etc. (see

1 "Die Ewiggestrigen" ("people who are caught in an eternal yesterday") is a German phrase that usually refers to postwar Nazis as temporal anomalies in a liberal democracy. But an earlier usage was in the 1930s when Nazi youth organizations used the term to ridicule their bourgeois counterparts (see Sternheim-Peters 254-59).

Luhmann). Recognizing this means forgoing the logic of philosophical inversion. It also means that the progress|backwardness complex names no quasi-psychoanalytic constellation of manifestation and latency. Searching for an appropriate language to capture the paradox of a modernity that exists by false temporal self-distinctions and yet is identifiably real, identifiably *modern*, we will probably always be tempted, as moderns ourselves, to ponder some interruptive "return of the repressed." But we can investigate these impulses, these stories, as *ours*: as self-descriptions of modernity which affect any continuing desire for new or alternative paradigms. Rhetorical history, including good old stylistic analysis (a counterclockwise method if you will), allows us to examine modern literatures of obstinate persistence themselves as highly mediated. I mentioned psychoanalysis as an important agent and lexicon in the modern history of affirming epistemological backwardness, but its ripple effects, branch-offs, and conceptual contestants reach all the way to, say, Derridean hauntology and other gothic romanticisms of otherness in the late twentieth century. Or think of the twenty-first century's proliferating philosophies of temporal transcendence, our competing phenomenologies of the nonhuman, the posthuman, the prehuman, maybe the preorganic. My hunch is that the mystical empiricism of the *pre* currently shapes cultural studies more powerfully than any remaining relic of teleological historiography does. Meanwhile, the popular intellectual figure of historical "afterlives," which seems to have inspired many key interests of the present discussion, does not necessarily have to be conceptualized in terms of a metaphysical—re-assertive or disruptive—*force*, as Saidiya Hartman's archival practices arguably demonstrate (*Lose*). Taking stock of the rhetoricity of these modern self-descriptions might bring some real benefits to historical research (as the original, methodologically rich mode of looking backwards to the past).

But perhaps the need for a practical language of "'degrowth,' 'sustainability,' or 'deceleration'" is too urgent to let the related recommendation of "backwardness" fizzle out in such a scholasticism of academic concepts (hauntology and all that). One important counterargument to everything I have written here is that some attributions, narratives, temporal norms—and certainly some modes of production and mediation—are powerfully hegemonic. Herein lies the political relevance of the proposed perspective and herein lies its polemical charm. I would simply add that this undertaking might be aided by thinking about hegemony as something that is never established fully or once and for all, never upheld without transformative contests, never transformed without evolving semantics, never real without rhetoric—and, on closer inspection, perhaps rarely declared without its own claims to *subversive backwardness*, its own ambitions of temporal counter-conduct, out-of-timeness, eccentric truth, or unsettling recalcitrance. Many foundational texts of anarcho-capitalism, neoliberalism, or paleo-libertarianism from the 1930s and 1940s (think of Ayn Rand, F. A. Hayek, Ludwig

von Mises, and others) are more radical in their temporal imaginaries—more "liquidationist," as they might phrase it—than is captured by any merely sentimental critique of 24/7 capitalism. Hence: a *rhetorical history of "backwardness,"* reconstructing conflictive communications about evaluative ascriptions and counter-ascriptions, would be an excellent way of studying modernity's political asynchronicities as ours.

Recovering an Estate Lost: Backwardness in Puritan Culture

Katerina Steffan

Puritans are known to have been avid diarists. Lay people like farmers, goldsmiths, and tailors recorded their past feelings, thoughts, and actions, as did ministers and magistrates. Page after page, individuals used their diaries to assess whether or not they had followed God's commandments and whether they found sparks of saving grace within them. Conserving, reviewing, analyzing, evaluating, and using the past is thus integral to Puritan identity, as Puritan studies have not grown tired of emphasizing. In my contribution to this forum, I want to point out some ambiguities inherent in the Puritan relationship with the past. I am particularly interested in the aspect that, on the one hand, Puritans prized an active and productive engagement with the past to improve their futures, while, on the other hand, they warned against a mere passive and unproductive dwelling on the past. Two diary entries by John Winthrop, second governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, shall serve to illustrate my point.

In 1612, Winthrop wrote: "Gettinge my selfe to take too muche delighte in a vaine thinge […] I was […] drawne to make shipwracke of a good conscience and the love of my father, […] yet I longed after reconciliation, but could not obtaine it; […] and God knowes whither ever I shall recover that estate which I loste" ("Experiencia" 166). To Puritan scholars, Winthrop's diary entry is hardly surprising. His fear of backsliding and of lukewarmness immediately evoke two commonplace analyses: First, and most conventionally, his state of mind could be read in the context of conversion. Countless scholars have pointed to the anxieties, fears, shame, and regret that Puritans emphasized when looking at their past.[2] Like Winthrop, who grieved that he was too engaged in worldliness, minister Peter Thacher bemoaned "yᵉ Coldnesse[,] deadnesse & wandring of [his] heart in meditation & prayer" (24); judge Samuel Sewall "sadly reflect[ed] that [he] had not been so thorowly tender of [his] daughter" (159), and minister Joseph Green lamented his "sinfull bashfullness and backwardness to perform [his] duty" (255). Pu-

2 To cite just a few examples: Edmund S. Morgan argues that Michael Wigglesworth's guilt-ridden diary lets him appear "more plausible as a satirical reconstruction than he does as a human being" (313); Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe shows how the process of sanctification invariably requires guilt, shame, and fear to incite sincere repentance and thus "[o]ngoing anxiety […] was one way that Puritans felt God leading them on to the ultimate end of their pilgrimage" (91); and Patricia Caldwell suggests that *the* defining element of the American Puritan conversion narrative is "discontent […] a kind of grim, gray disappointment" (31).

ritan scholarship has long focused on these negative affects, and in doing so has suggested that for Puritans the past was something that needed to be overcome. In this logic, past selves were seen as flawed and subject to a continuous process of self-improvement, reaching from the present into the future. Theodore Dwight Bozeman summarizes the debates in the field by pointing out that many early scholars, like Max Weber, Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Michael Walzer have painted Puritans as harbingers of future-oriented modernity, restlessly striving for improvement, progress, and steady self-optimization (4).

The second, yet less customary, interpretation of Winthrop's diary entry is to read it as following the logic of the Jeremiad. Bercovitch described the Jeremiad as "a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, [and] public to private identity" (xi). It was a political "strategy designed to revitalize the errand" to New England (xiv). Despite the private nature of Winthrop's statement, his fear of regression and deterioration echoes what Bercovitch called "cries of declension and doom" (xiv). Indeed, what is central to the Jeremiad and Winthrop's statement is that the present is said to require *re*newal and *re*vitalization, which points to a better, purer, and more devout state in the past. While Winthrop "longed after reconciliation," and yearned to "recover that estate which [he] loste" ("Experiencia" 166), Thomas Shepard, in the preface to Samuel Danforth's famous Jeremiad, *A Brief Recognition of New-Englands* [sic] *Errand into the Wilderness* (1671), emphasizes Danforth's exhortation to work for a "recovery of their affections," of former "chastity, vigour, and fervour […] by a thorough-Reformation" (n. pag.). In both statements, it is not simply any state in the past that needs to be reinvigorated but it is "affections" that have to be "recovered," "revived," "reformed," and "reconciled" in the present. Puritans believed that every action was incited by an emotion. Human, or carnal, emotions led to sinful actions, whereas spiritual or godly affections led to devout actions. To distinguish one from the other was vital when attempting to follow God's commandments. Thus, humans had to evaluate whether their past emotions had been carnal or spiritual. They then had to revive and relive these affects so they left a bodily impression that would in the future help them to discern which feelings should be cultivated or avoided.

This productive engagement with the past, be it in meditation, prayer, discourse, or diary writing, was contrasted with a perceived unproductivity of a mere dwelling in the past which only sought to revive feelings for *personal* and not spiritual gain. When Winthrop arrived in New England, he wrote that "such as fell into discontent, and lingered after their former conditions in England, fell into the scurvy and died" (*Journal* 58). While mere nostalgia was seen as problematical, an *active* backwards turn to a past golden age with the intent to revitalize it in the present was employed as a rhetorical strategy to further the migration enterprise. When Thomas Hooker preached his farewell sermon before departing for New England, he thus pointed out that "England

hath seene her best dayes," and that these former times could be rebuilt in New England (15). Similarly, William Bradford hoped that in New England they could "reverte to […] anciente puritie, and recover […] primative order, libertie, & bewtie" (1). The yearning to revive this golden age also resonates in the name *New* England and in the English village names the settlers chose for their towns, like Ipswich, Boston, or Rowley. Yet, what distinguished this from individuals who "lingered after their former conditions," who felt homesick and grew "discontent" (Winthrop, *Journal* 58), was that such people really considered returning to England in an attempt to *undo* their actions and turn back time. To Winthrop, they were incapable of rekindling the godly affections that had moved their hearts to move to New England in the first place. Now, instead of patiently bearing the hardships they encountered on their godly mission, they questioned God's plan. Thus, when looking to the past, they failed to identify which of their emotions had been godly and only revived carnal emotions that served no spiritual end.

As a result, even though the past could be both troubling and comforting, it invariably was what Puritans had to return to when making decisions in the present. Puritan pasts were never fully over; they could not be left behind but had to continuously ooze into presents and futures. Indeed, Puritans followed a long tradition of "walk[ing] with face[s] turned backward" (Lois Whitney qtd. in Bozeman 19). The diary becomes a case in point as it served as a link between past, present, and future. Winthrop, for example, was not only emotionally engaging with his writing, "penninge" his experience "in many teares" and vividly recording his emotional state, his sorrow, his helplessness, and his pain, but he also hoped that by "readinge" his notes in the future "when occasion shalbe," he could revive these feelings ("Experiencia" 167). By actively infusing the present with the emotions of the past, Winthrop believed that his affective state would influence his present and future actions—in this case he hoped its influence "may be a stronge motive unto sobrietye" (167). Hence, backwardness emanates as an overarching Puritan master mode of meaning-making, *entailing* the logic of conversion and the Jeremiad. Pasts, presents, and futures were intimately linked, and only when the emotions of the past were heart-felt in the present could true change and refinement happen in the future.

A Look Back to Queer Histor(iograph)y

Katrin Horn

Why look back? And is looking back the same as turning backward? That question has plagued queer studies since its inception. While its academic predecessors, feminist and gay and lesbian studies, have suggested a relatively simple connection to the past, matters have become more complicated at least since the late 1990s. Endeavors to "expand the canon" and recognize historical figures as other-than-straight were always going to be finite—even though we might not yet be done. More importantly, this earlier form of looking back has been recognized as a project that risks uncritically bolstering a narrative of progress from the hidden to the visible, from isolation to community, from shame to pride. One of the key interventions into queer engagement with the past has come from Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007), which acknowledges that as "queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them" (8). Concerned with modern texts that refuse to succumb to a logic of modernity and progress, Love invites us to instead consider the value of looking towards a history of pain and other negative affects not as that of "abject multitudes against whose experience we define our own liberation" (10) but to "develop a politics of the past" (21).

My own current work on gossip in the nineteenth century looks to queer women (among others) at the cusp of "modernity," before the so-called invention of sexuality and long before gay liberation. My digital work on this project (the establishment of a database of letters, articles, autobiographies, and images) is partially supported by The Recovery Hub for American Women Writers, which "supports projects recovering the work of women writers by providing digital access to forgotten or neglected texts" ("Mission"). Despite my enthusiasm for this larger project and gratitude for their support, it would be disingenuous of me to claim that my objects of study are in need of recovery—for at least the past twenty years they were not hidden *from* history (see Duberman et al.; Markus) nor were they obscure in their own historical moment. Many of them were what we would now consider celebrities.[3] Nor, to return to Love, do I consider them in need of saving. From what I can gather from their remains in records,[4] they were doing just fine, sometimes even thriving. Granted, they were all immensely privileged in terms of race and social status. In some ways they also seem decidedly ahead of their time. The women I look back to exhibited sexual self-determinacy, economic independence, geographic mobility, and playful performances of gender—and they did so between the 1850s and the 1880s. Yet at the same time, they were invested in marriage, domesticity, morality, class distinctions, patriotism, biological family, and cultural

[3] A recent biography of one of my subjects is titled *Lady Romeo: The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America's First Celebrity* (by Tana Wojczuk, 2021). "First," here, works better as a marketing strategy than a historical claim.

[4] I am hesitant to say "archive," because of the term's fraught connection to recent interventions in queer studies (see Edenheim).

heritage—exuding a backward-orientation that resists any attempt to claim them as modern in ways that call to mind later reconfigurations of sexuality and gender.[5]

This tension is not, of course, unique to my subjects. Going further back in history, Chris Roulston analyzes Anne Lister's diaries to assert that she "stages the peculiarly modern tensions arising between pride and shame, and conformity and rebellion" (268). The equally iconic Ladies of Langollen are discussed by Fiona Brideoake for "the way in which they both contravene heterosexual norms and resist the ascription of lesbian identity avant la lettre " (xix). The matter of identity in historical perspective is itself problematic, regardless of whether we turn to past subjects to save ourselves—seeking either affirmation or [dis]identification (see, for example, Shahani 16-18)—or to save them. A historicist "common sense"[6] requires us to consider distinctions and ruptures among queer subjects in different socio-historical contexts that outweigh trans-historical similarities arising from non-heteronormative sexual object choice.[7] How far into the past can we apply (project?) terms like gay, bi, lesbian, trans, queer, LGBTQ+? To complicate matters further, Valerie Rohy reminds us that this understanding of history as "noncontinuous" is itself "a hallmark of modernity" (69)—thus suggesting yet another form of historicizing queer readings and even sexual identities as we not only look back but turn backwards.

Insofar as my engagement with nineteenth-century queers has necessitated a continued rethinking of queer historiography, my research exhibits the same tension between backwardness and modernity that marks many of its objects of study: the turn to the past feels backward, belated in light of the decades of work done by other scholars on such core issues as romantic friendships (Faderman), queer indeterminacy (Vicinus), and same-sex marriage (Marcus) even as the recovery via digital methods (see "Mission") presents itself as modern (as in: state-of-the-art) and future-oriented. Turning backwards in this context is thus a conscious turn away from the teleology of progress not only of history, but also of historiography.[8] The backwardness of "my" nineteenth-century queers and that of my scholarly approach to their study enforces an attention to the dual tensions, overlaps, and repetitions of historical eras and scholarly disciplines, to how things can exist side-by-side rather than supersede each other. Looking back as turning backwards then offers different angles (see Rohy) on what we might already know rather than bringing to light what has remained in the shadows of history (or the closet of our disciplines), and it thus might produce a "politics of the past" less invested in radical breaks than the slow accumulation of waste and value.

[5] Not to forget the backwardness inherent in many of my sources: diaries, letters, ephemera kept by authors, recipients, loved ones in a refusal to let go even after betrayal and death.

[6] For a complication of that common sense see the debate about "(un)historicism" between Freccero, Menon, and Traub in PMLA.

[7] Or allegations of it. Any discussion of queer women's connection to modernity would be remiss not to mention Jodi Medd's insightful study of how the "suggestion of lesbianism functioned as a figure for unrepresentable cultural and artistic anxieties in early-twentieth century Anglo-American modernity and modernism" (4). Medd thus relies on queerness to better understand modernity, while Love and Roulston rely on queerness to question the concept of modernity.

[8] See also Scott Herring's dedication to "antirevelatory readings" of queer slumming literature of the turn of the twentieth century (21).

(A)Historicity and the U.S. Constitution's Ties to the Past

Ilka Brasch

If backwardness describes a complication of the conflation of modernity and progress, in the sense that recourse to the past always was a building block of modernity, then the Constitution of the United States is very much a harbinger of the retrograde. The Constitution is frequently invoked as a catalyst of change, as the beginning of an ongoing "project" of U.S. democracy, yet it is also a dated document that itself insists on a correlation of today, or any other point in U.S. history, with the founding era. I argue that current debates about the Constitution entail a tension between a forward momentum and a backwards drift that are rooted in the inaugural decade of the United States and in the text of the Constitution itself. I will show that the Constitution is both an ahistorically meaningful and a historically dated document that wires the present to the past.

In the July 5, 2022, episode of the *New York Times* podcast "The Ezra Klein Show," Klein engages legal scholar Larry Kramer in a conversation about changing approaches to reading the Constitution. The episode charts a long history, from the refutation of the courts' sole authority to interpret the Constitution during the Jefferson presidency to the Warren Court's embrace of judicial authority in the mid-twentieth century. Today, Kramer argues, both sides of the political aisle champion the right of the court, rather than the people, to expound the foundational text ("Liberals"). Indicating that politics is a hermeneutic practice, Klein and Kramer identify the conservative interpretive method as an originalism that equals "bad history," and they lament the liberals' lack of an "animating vision" of what the Constitution was meant to achieve.[9] Neither party nor the podcast conversationalists question the foundational text as such; they just turn to the past in different ways. I see the lack of a liberal interpretive method exemplified in a comment by Jill Lepore in the *New Yorker* two months earlier. Lepore dismantles the assertion of the Supreme Court's majority opinion that the right to an abortion is not implicit in the Constitution by pointing out that "women are indeed missing from the Constitution. That's a problem to remedy, not a precedent to honor." However, Lepore cannot offer a way to update the document for present-day purposes and thus provide remedy. The lack of an interpretive method locks politics in the past.

Coupled with a current inability to pass certain bills in Congress, the lack of a method to interpret the Constitution seems to tether the United States to 1787. The foundational era saw a debate about the function of printed text that foreshadowed both originalism and its refutation, setting in motion the backward / modern tension. This era was

[9] Interestingly, Klein and Kramer turn to Franklin D. Roosevelt as an example of a politician who had such a vision, paradoxically finding an approach to update the Constitution in the past.

informed by what Michael Warner has termed "the republican ideology of print," in which anonymous authorship assigned a text public virtue and posited that it was free of an author's personal interest (108). This reasoning followed the Enlightenment ideal that a rationally superior argument could be objectively identified. Such an assumption of disinterested writing was critiqued at the time, for instance in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's satiric fiction *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), which offers a self-reflexive narrator as an antidote to the disembodied vantage points of authorless texts like *The Federalist* or the Constitution itself (Rice 266; see also Koenigs 318).[10] Today's originalist championing of the Constitution's self-sufficiency thus rests on a reductive historiography. An unredacted look at the foundational era shows that at the time the means of textual interpretation were contested in a way that places the Constitution in a tension between actualization and arrest.[11]

The Constitution's historical context established a relationship between a modernizing actualization of the text understood as open and a reductive conception of a closed, self-sufficient textuality. However, the Constitution itself is both open and closed; it itself embodies the backward / modern tension. In her close reading of the U.S. Constitution, Suzette Hemberger identifies the "United States" as an open signifier, used in lieu of listing individual states, which would have required full ratification and limited the addition of new states (292). This openness signals modernity's mindset of American expansionism and settler colonialism. But the Constitution also practices closure: "framers […] made no provisions for popular opinion changing the Constitution" (295), and amendments are to be passed by Congress, not by the populace at large (298). Regarded in this way, the Constitution itself animates the progressive openness and regressive closure of the modernity-backwardness complex.

The Constitution's openness, which allows for its continuous actualization, renders it ahistorical, whereas closure historicizes it. Warner argues that each citizen ceases their individual sovereignty and acquiesces to the Constitution's rule in the act of reading "We the People." As a result, the text loses its historical specificity: "the ongoing consumption of the preamble in print makes the moment of foundation perpetual and socially undifferentiated" (111). Warner stresses this ahistorical quality by referencing Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist argument that "the People" come into being through the signature that ceases their sovereignty (105). This suggests that the United States has "no other origin than language itself" (Barthes 170), which explains the refusal on either side of the political aisle to outright reject the Constitution.

The Constitution is both open and closed; it is at the same time indicative of the "act as performance" and of the "act as archive" (Warner 104). In its idealized function to legitimize and conserve the nation-state, the archive signifies a permanent record, a consolidation of what has been (Assmann 328). In today's political understanding, the Con-

10 In an ongoing project, I investigate the ways in which *Modern Chivalry* envisions the function of literature as part of the public sphere and the tendency of later editions to change the text's political meaning.

11 The conservative, originalist approach is backwards in the true negative sense of the term; it clings to a long-outdated understanding of textuality.

stitution appears closed, which surfaces either in a conservative appreciation of closure or as grounds for a liberal search for an interpretive approach to counteract closure. The Constitution is thus retrospectively assigned an archivally sanctioned closure that ensures the continuation of the nation, although it is *also* an open text. Its simultaneously open, ahistorical, and closed, historical character places the Constitution at the center of the multidirectional tensions described with the terminology of backwardness. If the Constitution were not ahistorical, it would simply exist as archival remnant, but because it is *also* ahistorical, it continuously ties the present moment to the past.

Asking for Consent

Abigail Fagan

Content note: I reference the violences of colonization, racialization, and unwanted sexual advances and contact.

What would it mean to bring a concept like backwardness to postcolonial, decolonial, and anti-colonial discourses? An initial gesture may be to participate in a critical stance toward the prefix "post" in postcolonial. The prefix both naturalizes a teleological progression from a precolonial to colonial to postcolonial status and suggests that decolonization is as basic as the physical removal of the colonizers from the colonies. Decolonial and postcolonial scholars and activists have long been speaking back to these assumptions, indicating at length the profound impact of colonization and its afterlives on both the psychology and material wellbeing of formerly and currently colonized peoples and their colonizers.[12] Backwardness could be interesting within this context, because it undermines a naturalized progression of time and a deeply colonial understanding that events occur along an established, singular, and linear timeline. I worry, however, that the term backwardness cannot consistently be used in a just or ethical way in respect to postcolonial or decolonial work. "Backwardness" is so charged by a long history of colonial violence that I am unsure whether it can contribute to conversations that are about and must be led by Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color. Jennifer Morgan, Daphne Taylor-García, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and Glen Sean Coulthard, to name just a few, have deconstructed the methods by which colonizers used and use accusations of backwardness to justify egregious acts of physical and ideological violence against peoples Indigenous to Africa, North and South America, and Oceania. But backwardness may be a useful term with which to reconsider central axioms of Enlightenment thinking and liberal modes of governance.

12 My use of the term "afterlives" here originates in Saidiya Hartman's discussion of the afterlives of racial hereditary enslavement in *Lose Your Mother* (2008). Frantz Fanon's work is my primary point of reference for the psychological (and material) impact of colonization, especially *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" (2012) is an important intervention in work that undermines the significance of ongoing material theft of land, resources, and livelihood to discussions of coloniality today.

What happens, for instance, if we think about backwardness in relationship to founding liberal concepts, like the social contract and consent? In major Enlightenment thinkers' conceptualizations of the social contract, the contractual moment at which humans consent to the restrictions of social life is placed on a linear, imaginary timeline. Thomas Hobbes's social contract occurs *after* humans recognize the terrible anarchy of the state of nature.[13] Despite its other differences, John Locke's social contract also formed as a solution to problems of the individual's subjective understanding of offense in property disputes:

> Thus, there is a political (or civil) society *when and only when* a number of men are united into one society in such a way that each of them forgoes his executive power of the law of nature, giving it over to the public. […] This takes men out of a state of nature into the state of a commonwealth, by setting up a judge on earth with authority to settle all the controversies and redress the harms that are done to any member of the commonwealth. (7.89; emphasis in original)

But when did *I* as an individual consent to social contracts like these? Because Western thought is founded on the notion that time is linear and progressive, my (in this case imaginary) ancestors and not I myself become responsible for having issued this consent "back then."

Is it even possible that others issue consent for me? What does it mean to consent? The answer to this question has primarily been composed in recent history in respect to sexual violence. Women's rights advocates on university campuses have played a major role in defining consent as an active and clear "yes" over the last few decades. While the United States has no comprehensive policy regarding the legal status of consent in cases of sexual violence, the International Criminal Court does. In Rule 70 of the *Rules of Procedure and Evidence*, consent "cannot be inferred by reason of […] silence […] or lack of resistance" or by acceptance under conditions of "force" or the incapacity to speak or signal consent, refusal, or the revocation of consent (24-25). This definition indicates that consent is issued by an individual in overt and active ways.

This definition of consent as an active, cognizant articulation suggests that Locke and Hobbes are talking more about compulsion than consent when they address the social contract. If the moment of each individual's contractual entrance into social interaction is imagined as taking place in a long-since-past historical moment, then the individual did not consent at all. My aim here is not to belabor the point of our compulsion to exist as social bodies in the ways in which liberal theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, anti-liberal theorists like Louis Althusser, and psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva[14] have already done at length, but rather to point to a hypocrisy or backwardness within Western thinking on the individual's relationship to consent.

Decolonial and Indigenous thought on consent provides alternatives to Enlightenment formulations of the social contract, which help me describe the backwardness of these Western conceptualizations. As

13 In *Leviathan*, Hobbes notes that upon understanding that the state of nature provides "man" no protection, "man" intuits the necessity of a covenant with other men (64). There is some problem with this timing: to relinquish the state of nature's law against the protection of "man's" bodily sovereignty would be to subjugate oneself (65-66). Therefore, the social contract arises through intuited understandings that the contract must be agreed upon simultaneously.

14 I am thinking specifically of the false dilemma that is the "decision" to refuse subjectivity in psychoanalytic theory; see Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, as well as Judith Butler's discussion of the maternal semiotic in *Gender Trouble* (107-27).

many Indigenous people and theorists have written, said, and taught, active asking and listening for consent is integral to interaction with human and non-human kin. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) writes, for instance, that

> [r]eciprocal recognition is a core Nishnaabeg practice. We greet and speak to medicinal plants before we pick medicines. We recognize animals' spirits before we engage in hunting them. […] When I make an offering and reach out to the spirit of Waawaashkesh before I begin hunting, I am asking for that being's consent or permission to harvest it. If a physical deer appears, I have their consent. If no animal presents itself to me, I do not. (182)

Graduate of the Dechinta Centre and the University of British Columbia, Kyla LeSage (Vuntut Gwitchin and Anishinaabeg) notes that liberal notions of property ownership are antithetical to an ethos of consent: "I've learned from elders first hand at Dechinta that we need consent from the land. We will never own the land. We will never have this as property, because we are all at the same level with the land and animals." Both Simpson and LeSage indicate that much of the conceptual power of consent is in the asking.

In Western traditions surrounding the social compulsion to participate, the moment at which individuals are asked to consent is undermined or imagined to be historical. Individuals thereby indicate their consent by simply functioning within the system—an indication that, according to the International Criminal Court, is not legally sound. In contrast, the moment of consent that LeSage and Simpson discuss is ritualistic, cyclical, and often repeated, and the actual action of consent itself is requested rather than presumed. A key difference between these two moments of consent is the difference in epistemological understandings of how time works. As Simpson writes of the stories told within Nishnaabeg society, such as the story about the discovery of maple syrup, "[i]t is critical to avoid the assumption" that stories occur "in precolonial times because Nishnaabeg conceptualizations of time and space present an ongoing intervention to linear thinking. This story happens in various incarnations all over our territory every year in March when the Nishnaabeg return to the sugar bush" (152). This foregrounding of cycles also inflects the process of asking for consent, in that consent must be requested at every moment of harvest, at the beginning of a new process and during moments of human interaction with the land. Within an epistemology ordered by cyclical time, consent can therefore be revoked at any moment—or, to put it differently, an event to which human or nonhuman kin consented yesterday does not indicate that the same kin will consent again tomorrow. It is therefore integral to repeatedly ask and actively listen for consent.

The focus that LeSage and Simpson place on the necessity of actively *asking* for consent also reveals how Enlightenment formulations of the moment of contractual exchange are reversed, if they even occur at all: Even if liberal subjects articulate consent, their articulation does not

occur in direct response to a question. The request for the individual's consent is never actually expressed, whether in the texts that deal specifically with the social contract itself—as in the writings of Hobbes and Locke—or with the compulsory nature of the individual's participation in society—as in Kristeva's formulation of abjection and the semiotic. If, as Charles Mills puts it, "[c]ontract talk is […] the political lingua franca of our times" (3), what do we make of the consistent obfuscation of the contract—or, in this context, the question? Perhaps when it comes to consent, in particular, we ought to begin again (and again and again) at the beginning: at the question.

Feeling Backward: Untimely Remarks on Fascism and German American Studies

Simon Strick

The kind editors reached out to me to contribute to this forum, mainly I think because I have done work on contemporary fascisms. In common parlance, such fascisms seem to signify what the abstract calls "a return to what came before"—a *Wiederkehr*, as German journalist Patrick Bahners titled his recent book on the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland*. To speak of fascisms—and I advise using the plural—in the twenty-first century seems to indicate a nasty revisionism, a return of the repressed, a backward movement at war with social progression. The f-word inadvertently signals a shift to that which was overcome, put in gear by malicious political agents who in Germany for the longest time figured as *Ewiggestrige* (read: eternally backward).

Is this how contemporary fascisms align with this forum's topic of *backwardness*? The public likes to answer this in the affirmative: the clear-cut distinction between "progressives" and "traditionalists"—or "deplorables," in Hillary Clinton's fateful coinage—seems to indicate that one is moving forward, the other backward. It is the easy answer, meant to ensure everyone's temporal orientation and directional unequivocality: Fascists are the backward ones, the ones who truly personify the "others of modernity," which means they should be "left behind" by forward-oriented forces. But this forum asks for the "paradox at the heart of modernity" and eschews easy answers. So let me be frank: To me the question of fascism's relation to backwardness—well, the question itself feels *untimely*, to say the least.

First, fascisms never just signal a return to whenever, but they produce confusing time warps not easily subsumed under the notion of "revisionism" or clear claims to "moving back." Such suspensions of linear temporality are tangible in the racist time loop contained in

MAGA, or that premodern Christo-European futurity the Identitarian Movement branded as "Reconquista Germanica." It is the sci-fi primitivism of the QAnon-Shaman, it is Ron DeSantis outlawing Black history and gender studies in the Florida curriculum for a renewed focus on the colonial times of "Western Civilization" (Florida Senate). Such time loops are not putting progress on hold but work as accelerants: Fascisms these days enact what could be described as an energizing progression towards the known worst cases of the past. Common speech likes to warn about the "spread" or "creep" of fascist ideologies, and thereby obscures precisely fascisms' energy and momentum as socially, politically, and culturally transformative movements.

In many regards, "contemporary fascism" constitutes an oxymoron: fascism is never contemporary, but always entices an "archeofuturism" as French fascist Guillaume Faye succinctly called it. Film scholar James Snead pointed out similar temporal upheavals in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the iconic film that imagined Black terror after abolition to legitimize a white supremacist modernity: "[It] re-enacts what never happened, but does so in an attempt to keep it from ever happening" (148). As Snead writes, the film depicts "no longer history, but anxiety" (148), providing a blueprint for the historical and futuristic irrealities produced en masse in contemporary neofascist agitation. Relentless conjurings of fictitious near-disaster (white genocide, transgender-socialism, *Umvolkung*, cultural marxism, wokism, decline of the West, destruction of manhood, yadda yadda yadda), of phantasmagorical pasts and present injury—these fascist unrealities dream up a bottomless demand and desire for symbolic and material redress in the future. History, present, and future are submerged; temporality is bent to modes of white anxiety. Fascist operations aim less for a reversal of historical continuity, but for the destabilization of temporal markers and linear orientations per se. I have argued that present-day fascists excel at molding such paradoxes into memes (Strick, "The Meme War"), the digital condition's signature aesthetic that clashes disparate temporalities and incommensurable data to make affective points.

Such a rough analysis of fascism's temporalities, which I have extended elsewhere (Strick, "Reflexive Fascism"), render them ill-fitting examples of the "time loop" as critical method, as suggested in Ruth Mayer and Kathleen Loock's introductory conceptualization of backwardness. Or does it? This is the second reason why I find the question of backwardness, asked in a German American studies forum, somewhat *untimely*: Simply because in my experience, German American studies has for a considerable amount of time evaded and backlogged these fascist temporalities.

Consider the following anecdotes of awkward simultaneity. When the DGfA's annual meeting in 2021 took place under the heading "Participation in American Culture," I felt a temporal mismatch with U.S. realities. The year had begun with thousands of MAGA activists par-

ticipating in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6. The event provisionally culminated a long-brewing rift in U.S.-American timelines, and precisely revolved around whether civic participation—in a presidential election, no less—is still possible or meaningful in the United States. At the same time, the event ushered in new forms of unruly participation, similar to the *Querdenker* protests experienced in Germany.

Unsurprisingly, the cultural conclusion to January 6 was twofold: a lengthy congressional hearing trying to reinstate linearity, accountability, and simple causality to Trump's rhetoric and the MAGA movement (unsuccessfully); on the other side a hypermediated onslaught of "alternative facts" screaming election fraud, conspiracy theories, and everything else people and pundits could regurgitate from the 2016 campaign ("so much winning"). That Americans (and German American studies with them) currently live in radically irreconcilable timelines was perfectly illustrated by these concurrent presidential scenes in March 2023: Biden shakily stated exceptionalist resolve against Russia in Kyiv, Ukraine, and the same day alternative president Trump energetically threw bottles of clean water at the residents of polluted East Palestine, Ohio.

Of course, such big-boy moves are not the only timelines, nor the most important ones, as this forum's introduction reminds us. American and global presents are a conflation of countless temporal movements and designations I can only gesture to: echoes of slavery, excavations of colonial continuities, crip time, timepockets of Indigenous survival amid global extractive acceleration, all framed by the apocalypse clock of climate change. But while these latter figurations and alternate temporalities have begun to register in German American studies curricula, protagonists of the discipline have remained by-and-large silent on the many U.S.-American faces of fascism. In my understanding, the only exception to this silence came from the colleagues at *COPAS* (Essi et al.)

To deal with such disciplinary silences, I propose that "backwardness" might help, not as descriptive category, but as epistemological tool. According to Heather Love's pivotal work, feeling backward means also to sense around for obstructions and impasses—for an archive of bad feelings and awkward silences where progression or a general "getting better of things" are announced. To feel backwards in German American studies might mean to probe foundational scenes of the discipline and the relations to its objects inscribed therein. I occasionally teach Winfried Fluck's article "California Blue: Americanization as Self-Americanization" to U.S.-American students learning about German popular culture, and to me it would provide a succinct entry point for a project of feeling backward (that I can only signal here). Fluck begins with a memory, himself feeling backward to his childhood in Berlin, 1949. He recalls how superhero comics, bestowed to him by a neighbor who "entertain[ed] American GIs on weekends," instilled a sense of wondrous color in him: "the strong presence of an intense blue in Super-

man's dress as well as in the sky through which he moved, a blue that gained an almost magical quality in our dreary, colorless surroundings" (221). German American studies are defined by memory operations like these: via unspoken sexual transaction or "romance with America," U.S. popular culture brings magic color to Germany.

It is hard to disassociate German American studies from such foundational scenes where U.S. culture magically enlivens Germany, where *color* signifies *progress*. Expressed most prominently in the tradition of the Salzburg Seminar's motto "education for democracy," West German American studies itself began in 1947 as the temporal project of progressing an only nominally post-fascist country through the study of "democratic culture." In the Federal Republic of Germany, the disciplinary trajectory is precisely the project of cultural progression from fascism to Americanization in order to "leave it behind." The German Democratic Republic's differing program—extracting both critiques of imperialism and the legitimacy of communism from images of America—remains scrapped and left to die (though it incidentally led to W. E. B. Du Bois's 1958 honorary doctorate that Humboldt University still prides itself on in 2023). It is in this transatlantic relation condensed in Fluck's "magic color"—West German American studies needs American popular culture to extract progression from fascism—where I feel a profound impasse, preempting the discipline's engagement with American fascisms, present and past.

Since 2017, I have worked on gestures that mess with Fluck's magic moment: how decidedly American brands of populism and fascism fertilize with others in Europe and Germany. I wrote a book on how these fascisms bloom (Strick, *Rechte Gefühle*). One argument was that digital fascists and their green cartoon frogs contributed to Trump's election and the mess of hypermediated agitation a lot of us inhabit now. It was a book on feverish populism after the "opulist" Obama era, as Lauren Berlant so beautifully called it ("Opulism"). It was a book on that Americanized affect-scape called social media, largely ignored by German American studies. I thought my discipline (and the German public) needed to see what 4chan calls "meme magic," maybe to understand better why the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the CDU party (Christian Democratic Union of Germany) now trash-talk things like "Wokismus" or "Critical Race Theory." Or to understand why German *Querdenker* paraded historical images of the "iron muzzle"—a facemask used in American slavery—to protest against masking mandates. I wanted to show that *other* transatlantic endeavor of a rightwing culture war—to show those *other* comics that promise shrieking whiteness as a magic color from America, amid the rainbow-totalitarianism these fascists rage against (purportedly also "Made in USA"). So far, it feels like my work has been largely inconsequential in my disciplinary home.

Granted, a "white supremacist Atlantic" promises no joyful seminar or conference topic for German Americanists, who frequently access

American culture for that very diversity that German culture continuously denies and that university administrations seem to fight at every turn. Dealing with fascisms from America requires engagement with that *other* popular archive, those *other* temporalities that do not exactly diversify your syllabus as Ocean Vuong might, particularly not in a predominantly *herkunftsdeutsche* university and discipline. One can follow the trail from William F. Buckley to 1980s talk radio to "fashy" counterpublics on YouTube; read *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) as precursor to J. D. Vance's racist political career; study fascist lifeworlds in *The Turner Diaries* (1978) via Kathleen Stewart; engage with fascism-adjacent effects like Kanye West's exploits or Candace Owens's success; or one can follow Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande's work on Black Women Activists' depression in dealing with the internal racism of European antifascist initiatives. It is not exactly uplifting stuff, and it is not easily consumed or discussed in a by-and-large *herkunftsdeutsche* discipline, practiced as a *Fremdsprachliche Philologie*, and frequently looking for the "magic color" of a diverse curriculum.

Again, I can only insinuate here the kind of thinking *backwardness* and *fascism* might require in order to work productively in an American studies context. To begin, one necessary movement might be to feel backward into these structural avoidances, visible in the field and its object-choices. It might mean to think about the silences that American studies upholds when German publics talk about race, gender, identity politics, American or German fascism, or the state of the United States for that matter—or to think about American studies' role in sidelining traditions of German-language antiracist work (e. g., Steyerl) with U.S. terminology, thus also fueling current attacks on "Wokismus." It means to think about the increasing diversity of curricula versus the non-diversity of academic employment, and what the "diversity-formula" itself displaces. *Feeling backward* forces one to assess how much future the old promise of German American studies holds now for young scholars: the promise that the study of "democratic culture"—now revised to consist in Black, Indigenous, Queer, or environmental studies, still conducted chiefly by *herkunftsdeutsche* scholars—that this study of this culture promises some sort of betterment, some way forward, some job, some bluer sky, some color.

Urban Backwardness: Fantasies of the Village in the City

Maria Sulimma

What is backwardness in relation to the U.S.-American city, a space often characterized by future-oriented progress? There are multiple ways to conceptualize backwardness in urban studies and specifically urban American studies, for instance, in terms of temporality and cultural heritage, anti-capitalist dynamics such as deceleration and de-growth, as well as its particular intersectional dimensions regarding race, class, gender identity, or sexual orientation. I want to home in on one narrative that demonstrates several of these contradicting and ambiguous understandings of backwardness or backward orientation in urban space to begin thinking about the interconnections of such debates: the urban village.

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams explored the powerful narratives that gathered around two seemingly opposed spaces, the city and the country throughout most of Western recorded history. They are either idealized, as sites of "learning, communication, light" (the city) versus "peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (the country), or demonized: "the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation" (9). These two spaces, their lifestyles, and inhabitants were thought of as incompatible in persistent cultural narratives. Not surprisingly, it is the country, the village, and the rural space that Williams identifies as tied to backwardness. However, as Williams shows, these categories are much more complicated and connected than the binary has them appear. The contemporary concept of the urban village merges many of the oppositions Williams also deconstructed in his work.

Often, large cities are perceived by their inhabitants as a collection of neighborhoods, a series of individual, self-contained urban villages. Without such an understanding of the neighborhood, "people would all get swallowed up by scale. The city is only manageable—and appreciable—in slices" (Rhodes-Pitts 165). Such urban villages serve as sites of connection and disconnection, creating clear boundaries between inside(rs) and outside(rs) in a geographical, social, and affective sense. The urban village can be a convenient means to brand neighborhoods for real-estate purposes and a strategy of urban preservation as cultural heritage. However, fantasies of the village can also respond to a desire for alternatives to current urban transformations and challenges (gentrification, deindustrialization, global warming). When confronted with different challenges, urban dwellers tend to look to the past to develop ways to make sense of the present and imagine their future city.

Richard Sennett distinguishes between "ville" and "cité," between the overall city as a built environment shaped by business and politics and the particular place people dwell in, a site of everyday life. Valor-

izing ideals of immediacy, connectedness, and familiarity, the cité functions as a kind of urban village whose design is reduced and measured against the everyday needs of its inhabitants. Sennett upholds an ideal of an open city that develops without (professional) planners or architects, the result of an improvised, community-oriented urbanism. He is interested in "how, on a large scale, urbanism [could] be practiced in a modest spirit" (15). Recalling Jane Jacobs's famous defenses of local communities and their improvised "sidewalk ballet" just as much as Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city," this kind of urbanity denotes a spectrum between self-organization, civil society, and participation with little outside mediation.

The imaginative construction of urban villages depends on what we think cities of the past may have looked like. This is not so much the case when it comes to urban infrastructures and technologies (who would want to do without plumbing, electricity, or transportation technologies) but in terms of ideals of communities, immediacy, and interactions that many feel are threatened by the anonymous city of the present. Despite references to an urban past, the fantasy of the urban village is less about a concrete historical period but an idealized state desired by inhabitants of a neighborhood. This past is constructed, contested, exploited, obscured, the source of a shared identity, and a means to obstruct others' claims to parts of a city. Whether called postindustrial, post-Fordist, or deindustrial, formerly industrial centers exhibit a particular need for reinventing narratives related to the past. Sherry Lee Linkon understands deindustrialization as much more than a nostalgia connected to such sites: it is "not an event of the past [but] an active and significant part of the present" when working-class communities (including communities of color) "struggle with questions about their identities and their place in a global economy that has devalued workers and their labor" (2). In a forthcoming publication, we explore such negotiations of temporalities in connection to urban spaces through storytelling as "city scripts" (see Buchenau et al.).

Another dimension to this conception occurs in queer understandings of the city as an urban village. We see this, for instance, in Mark W. Turner's notion of the erotically charged "backward glance" of male street cruising as a particular means of experiencing the city: such an urban experience means "to rely on the ambiguities of urban modernity, on the uncertainties that linger in the fleeting experience of a backward glance" (66). Through this perspective, different queer experiences with urban space overlap—including not only the construction of possible queer connections, but also the conscious, possibly pleasurable refusal of (cis) heteronormative conceptions of temporality, productivity, efficiency, and modernity as discussed in this forum. Rediscovering queer urban histories and constructing queer urban communities in the present through them (see Love; Turner) has become so connected to the city in gestures of urban "metronormativity," to use Jack Halberstam's term (36), that rural queerness and the queer periphery are pushed to the margins.

Even though urban dwellers of all gender identities and sexual orientations utilize conceptions of the urban village as a means to negotiate history, space, and their everyday lives (see Sennett's cité), the urban village may also be evoked and commodified in a much narrower sense to brand real estate and further processes of gentrification and appropriation. The urban village may, on the one hand, serve to highlight the attractive past of a place, while, on the other hand, it may be closely fenced-off and contrasted with other villages deemed less attractive and worthy of investment or maintenance.

Drawing attention to the hierarchy of some urban villages over others in the gentrifying city, writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts asserts that urban villages (and the spatialized notions of backwardness connected to them) are always "fruits of segregation or identification, shaped by the churn of developers' schemes and capital's march, some of the places now called 'villages'—those cubic blocks called projects—evince the city's old will to push those it doesn't wish to see to the margins" (170). The margins that Rhodes-Pitts refers to are not physical, since public housing tends to be located in the center of the U.S.-American city. She draws our attention to how the backward-oriented urban village results from a racialized history of dispossession taken to new extremes in the contemporary city under conditions of gentrification and deindustrialization. Paradoxically, the aspirational "backwardness" of the gentrifying urban village seeks to displace populations derogatively framed as "backwards" due to their lack of social and economic capital such as the inhabitants of public housing. Contesting the practices of urban commodification and gentrification, Rhodes-Pitts suggests an understanding of public housing as an urban village that resonates with the ways in which sociologists understand the practices of its inhabitants. For instance, Hunter et al. conceptualize former public housing developments in Chicago and the African American communities that commemorate the history of these spaces as an example of what they call "black placemaking." Related to Sennett's cité, the notion of Black placemaking refers to "the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance […] to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics" (4). What Rhodes-Pitts writes about urban African Americans could also account in different ways for the experience of Indigenous and queer urban dwellers. Describing the practices of marginalized urban villagers, she concludes: "When building on unsteady ground and stolen territory, perhaps the most important material is time, and the ability to inhabit an expanded idea of history" (170), including in particular spatio-temporal conceptions of urban villages as the sites of urban backwardness, in particular.

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