Abstract

Presentism is generally regarded as a necessary evil in historiography. This paper explores the upside of that inevitability. Using a philosophical approach to discourse analysis in the tradition of new cultural history, the paper distinguishes between a strategic use of presentism on the one hand, and a rationalistic approach to history on the other hand. The paper concludes by considering some political implications of rationalistic accounts and strategically presentistic accounts in historiography. Rationalistic accounts inscribe expectations of the past into visions of the future; they cast the historian in the role of prophet; and they perpetuate notions of ahistoric agency. In contrast, strategically presentistic histories incorporate an orientation that deliberately uses the lenses and perspectives of the present in order to bring current assumptions and perspectives into focus. When assumptions are examined in relation to presentistic perspectives, those assumptions loosen their reins on thought. Since presentism is unavoidable, presentism should not be dismissed outright, but ought to be subject to probing and critical examination. With such a focus, strategically presentistic historiography allows for a reflection on the limits of what it is possible to think.

Keywords

Presentism, new cultural history, genealogy, progress, determinism.