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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Narrating events and imputing those responsible: Reflexivity and the temporal basis of retrospective responsibility

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**Abstract**
By showing how a number of temporal assumptions shape three mutually exclusive narratives, the article argues for a mediated and reflexive understanding of events, one that is more open and less likely to fall into the pitfalls of a confrontation between different versions of retrospective responsibility. The article begins by looking beyond the agency and structure debate and into the temporal dimension of narrative, mainly for the sake of understanding the relationship between continuity and change. The article covers three potential narratives, focusing on their influence on the study of events, policy, and retrospective responsibility. It then illustrates their impact on mainstream understandings of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Upon describing the problems of positing strict continuity and change, both of which impact accounts of retrospective responsibility, the outline of a more reflexive, mediated approach to events and temporality is introduced, based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. In doing so, the article demonstrates the disadvantages of *Erlebnis*, an approach that unreflexively applies a limited set of temporal assumptions, highlighting instead the advantages of *Erfahrung*, an approach that strives for a mediated understanding of events.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity; Temporality; Agency; Structure; Responsibility; Narrative

## Introduction

International Relations (IR) has from its very foundation been concerned with understanding events in international politics, such as wars and the beginning of peace, as well as actions that disrupt an era of perceived normality – the formation of alliances, interventions, the upsetting of the balance of power and revolutions.[1] While the shared aim of looking at certain types of events unites the discipline, little consensus exists in the study of events themselves. The causes, nature, and consequences of events, from a war to a commercial treaty, trigger major disputes among the scholars, students, observers, and participants of international politics.

One common area of discord is the question of accountability; scholars and analysts of international politics do not always agree on whom or what is deemed responsible for triggering an event. In many cases, disagreements of that nature are shaped by how depictions of change and continuity impact the narratives of particular events. To put it differently, the temporal basis of a narrative plays a role in shaping questions of retrospective responsibility

[1]Felix Berenskoetter, 'Reclaiming the vision thing: Constructivists as students of the future', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:3 (2011), pp. 647–68; Christopher McIntosh, 'Theory across time: the privileging of time-less theory in international relations', *International Theory*, 7:3 (2015), pp. 464–500.

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and of policy – whether the past offers an important perspective from which to decipher the present.

Although the issue of temporality may seem unrelated to questions of responsibility, recent contributions to IR show how time plays an important part in shaping the key concepts of the discipline. Christopher McIntosh gets to the heart of the matter in arguing that 'all scholars, regardless of method or question, inevitably address time in their work and thus are implicitly offering a conception of and approach to time'.[2] From this perspective, temporality influences everything, from the way in which sovereignty is conceived to the assumptions by which all IR theories are constituted.[3] Kimberly Hutchings shows how sundry IR theories are often based on two mutually exclusive readings of time: *chronos*, usually defined as homogeneous and deterministic time, and *Kairos*, which subsumes the ever-present potential for change in time.[4] Piki Ish-Shalom and Andrew Hom, on the other hand, take that claim even further, showing how specific assumptions about time mould the way in which particular events – namely the wars in former Yugoslavia and the Arab Spring – are interpreted, as well as the practical impact of these inferences.[5] This article seeks to contribute even further to this burgeoning field in IR. In fact, by focusing on matters of responsibility, it also speaks to ongoing debates about the nature of reflexivity in the discipline.[6]

In any case, matters of responsibility – let alone continuity and change – have often been approached according to the boundaries of the so-called agency versus structure debate.[7] IR theories have traditionally sought to deliberate on the question of who is able (or not) of triggering change in the face of (material and social) constraints, habits and conventions, that is

[2]McIntosh, 'Theory across time', p. 466.

[3]Andrew Hom, 'Hegemonic metronome: the ascendancy of Western standard time', *Review of International Studies*, 36:4 (2010), pp. 1145–70; Berenskoetter, 'Reclaiming the vision thing', pp. 647–68; Ty Solomon, 'Time and subjectivity in world politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58:4 (2014), pp. 671–81; McIntosh, 'Theory across time', pp. 464–500; Andrews Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Open horizons: the temporal visions of reflexive realism', *International Studies Review*, 12:2 (2010), pp. 271–300.

[4]Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 30–4.

[5]Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Time is politics: Temporalising justifications for war and the political within moral reasoning', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 19:1 (2016), pp. 126–52; Andrew Hom, 'Angst springs eternal: Dangerous times and the dangers of timing the "Arab Spring"', *Security Dialogue*, 47:2 (2016), pp. 165–83.

[6]On reflexivity in IR theory, see Mark Neufeld, 'Reflexivity and International Relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 22:1 (1993), pp. 53–76; Stefano Guzzini, 'A reconstruction of constructivism in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 147–82; Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, 'Reflexivity in practice: Power and ethics in feminist research on international relations', *International Studies Review*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 693–707; Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Theorizing politics, politicizing theory, and the responsibility that runs between', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7:2 (2009), pp. 303–16; Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'The "problem of values" and International Relations scholarship: From applied reflexivity to reflexivism', *International Studies Review*, 13:2 (2011), pp. 259–87; Piki Ish-Shalom, 'Theoreticians' obligation of transparency: When parsimony, reflexivity, transparency and reciprocity meet', *Review of International Studies*, 37:3 (2011), pp. 973–96; Daniel Levine, *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jack Amoreux, *A Practice of Ethics for Global Politics: Ethical Reflexivity* (London: Routledge, 2015); Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J. Steele (eds), *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016); Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, 'Rethinking roles: Reflexive role ascription and performativity in international relations', *International Studies Review*, 3:1 (2016), pp. 487–507.

[7]For a sample of the agency versus structure debate in IR, see Alexander Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem in International Relations theory', *International Organization*, 41:3 (1987), pp. 335–70; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (London: Clarendon Press, 1990), Walter Carlsnaes, 'The agency-structure problem in foreign policy analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36:3 (1992), pp. 245–70; Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr, *Agency, Structure and International Politics: From Ontology to Empirical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1997); Ted Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism in International Relations theory', *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 171–200; Andreas Bieler and David Morton, 'The Gordian Knot of agency–structure in international relations: a neo-Gramscian perspective', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7:1 (2001), pp. 5–35; Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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to say, in the face of the structures that surround, if not constitute, international politics. This article, however, seeks to look slightly beyond the confines of this debate. It takes instead a temporal perspective of retrospective responsibility, arguing that narratives are shaped by particular temporal assumptions, many of which are likely to affect how responsibility is ascribed upon actors. Looking beyond the debate is important, I argue, because even those IR theories that wholly evade the question of moral agency are not immune to claims of retrospective responsibility. On the contrary, depending on the temporal approach taken at the outset, a narrative is prejudiced towards a certain view of continuity that shapes the way in which events are understood, including the type of retrospective responsibility to be imputed upon actors. Moreover, because of distinct temporal assumptions, scholars may eventually narrate events in such a way as to preclude dialogue, insofar as distinct – almost irreconcilable – versions of responsibility are placed in confrontation with one another. So as to avoid that tendency, the principles of a reflexive and normative framework are introduced, the purpose of which is to assuage the effects of a singular, limited type of retrospective responsibility. It is a normative approach that could potentially be applied by anyone seeking to narrate international politics. Borrowing from the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the outline claims that accounts with a singular view of retrospective responsibility are based on a limited mode of interpretive experience, based on what Gadamer calls *Erlebnis*: a form of understanding characterised by the reproduction of one's initial prejudice. As an alternative, a more reflexive form of plotting a narrative is put forth in light of Gadamer's notion of *Erfahrung*. The latter claims that events ought to be assessed by way of dialogue among distinctive prejudices, a dialogue that allows alternative temporalities to be assessed, contributing to a more holistic understanding of retrospective responsibility.[8]

To make my case, I show how interpretations of events beg the question of change (and also continuity), which in turn requires an understanding of how temporality shapes narrative construction. I show thereafter how narratives are beset by three types of temporal prejudices to the effect of underscoring different types of continuity and change. These prejudices, I argue, pave the way for distinctive visions of retrospective responsibility. As such, I outline the main principles of Gadamer's reflexive and normative approach, showing afterwards the consequences of imposing subjective temporal assumptions in the absence of dialogue. I take a few mainstream interpretations of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 as an appropriate example.

## Retrospective responsibility and the case for temporality

Given just how much events influence the discipline, the question of what actually constitutes an event itself is of no small consequence to IR, not least because of its relationship to both change and continuity. For William Sewell, 'events may be defined as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures', which is to say that events themselves are constituted on the basis of whether they instil change – a major change for that matter.[9] And yet, while change can arguably be defined as making something different or else starting something new, continuity is not equivalent to the total absence of change. For Alexander Gerschenkron, 'it is precisely because continuity and discontinuity can relate to a certain kind of change that the two concepts may be expected to prove useful in historical research'.[10] Continuity is arguably coterminous with remaining the same as before, but also – at the bare minimum – with a process whereby someone or something is *relatively* consistent with prior positions, goals, or underlying trends. Hence, the influence of time, and especially how we come to view it, plays a substantial –

[8]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[9]William H. SewellJr, 'Three temporalities: Toward an eventful sociology', in J. McDonald Terrence (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 247.

[10]Alexander Gerschenkron, 'On the concept of continuity in history', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106:4 (29 June 1962), p. 196.

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albeit not always explicit – part in how we come to understand change and continuity, two concepts that are not necessarily mutually exclusive from a temporal perspective.[11]

At any rate, the question of change and continuity is often broached in IR through the so-called agency and structure debate. From that perspective, the capacity for change rests on determining whether individuals who operate in particular contexts trigger an event as it occurred in the present, or whether the event was determined by trans-historical structures over which people hold little sway. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that change and continuity are meta-theoretical categories that constitute the very concepts of agency and structure. Assessing structures, for example, implies looking at those rigid (more or less permanent) issues that *continue* to predicate international politics from past to future. The concept of agency, on the other hand, relies on the notion of present-day contingency, on the ability of actors to *change* events in discrete moments of time in such a way as to defy continuity.[12]

Meta-theoretical considerations aside, the point is not to claim that agency and structure bear no consequence, but to steer the conversation towards those notions that shape the way in which narratives are temporally constructed. Upon interpreting events, scholars, historians, and political analysts lay out a narrative, the contents of which provide an idea of who acted, what happened, and how such actors influenced an event in international politics (assuming, of course, they in fact did so) at a particular moment in time. Such narratives are built according to a certain view of time, as shown below, which in turn moulds (implicitly or explicitly) the question of responsibility. This nevertheless begs the question of what exactly constitutes moral agency in general and (retrospective and prospective) responsibility in particular.

### *Agency, theory, and narrative*

Agency is often connected to responsibility, for once individuals (and/or groups) are deemed able to act in a narrative, they are likely to be considered responsible for their actions (though not always).[13] Hence, matters of agency give rise to broader questions of *moral* agency, which are in turn related to prospective and retrospective responsibility. The former, according to Toni Erskine, pertains to an 'ex ante judgement regarding tasks that the agent in question ought to perform given certain conditions',[14] whereas the latter poses a different set of questions about how 'a particular event or set of circumstances' are such that the 'agent's acts of commission or omission' are deemed 'deserving of praise or blame'.[15] Retrospective responsibility is subsequently tied to accountability: it is about imputing admiration or fault after the fact.

The distinctions point to an important difference between constructing narratives of actual events and theory-making. The former task, unlike contemplating concepts in the abstract, cannot wholly escape the matter of responsibility. Indeed, from a purely theoretical point of view, the question of prospective responsibility can be brushed aside by way of a structural account of international politics; one may well put forward an abstract – albeit coherent – argument about agents' inability to act and thus to change the nature of international politics. Kenneth Waltz's seminal *Theory of International Politics* takes precisely that route, stating that in order 'to construct a theory we have to abstract from reality, that is, to leave aside most of what we see and experience'.[16] Waltz's argument relies, as a consequence, on a strict view of abstract continuity in

[11]For further understandings of change and continuity, see Robert Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[12]On temporality and contingency in IR, see McIntosh, 'Theory across time', pp. 464–500. On a telling and detailed study of agency in IR, see Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, pp. 177–225.

[13]Specific physical, social, and/or legal impediments may prevent a person from having moral agency.

[14]Toni Erskine, 'Making sense of "responsibility" in international relations: Key questions and concepts', in Toni Erskine (ed.), *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2003), p. 8.

[15]Erskine, 'Making sense of "responsibility" in international relations', p. 8.

[16]Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 68.

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which agency and prospective responsibility are precluded at the outset. But, when applied to practice, when actually narrating events, Waltz's view of continuity has something to say about retrospective responsibility, regardless of whether agency was theoretically excluded from his particular theory. It is thus important to revisit how assumptions of change and continuity affect narratives, and whether some sort of (reflexive and normative) approach is required in order to mediate potentially diverging versions of accountability.

### *Narratives and time*

Narratives, according to Margaret Somers, are 'constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment'.[17] Time, not least understandings of change and continuity, play a substantial role in shaping narratives:

> One cannot narrate a picture, or a person, or a building, or a tree, or a philosophy. Narration is a word that implicates its object in its meaning. Only one kind of thing can be narrated: a time-thing, or to use our normal word for it, 'an event'.[18]

By emplotting or integrating various heterogeneous occurrences into a temporal whole,[19] narratives are a means by which to assess events, including the retrospective responsibility of certain actors: 'when an action is linked to prior and subsequent actions in the narrative, one can comprehend its character and function in the entire temporal sequence; that is, how the action displays and furthers the unfolding of the event'.[20] While it is intuitive to argue that a narrative consists of a sequence of time-bound happenings, culminating around a certain event (or set of events), there are nevertheless several ways in which to assemble that temporal sequence. To name just a few, accounts can invoke the distant or recent past, focus solely on the present or switch between the present and past, and vice versa, through prolepsis and analepsis. Of course, this is not to say that temporality is the only issue that affects the form of a narrative (roles and settings also play a part, for example), but they are nevertheless a significant element of narrative construction in their own right.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the act of narrating is open to all, which is to say that most people, irrespective of their background, can emplot a sequence of events. Indeed, some proponents of narrativity go as far to suggest that 'social life is itself storied', in that narratives 'guide action' and that people construct identities 'within a repertoire of emplotted stories'.[21] From theorists to area study specialists to journalists, anyone can potentially offer his or her account of events, though each is likely to do so in different ways, especially were they to differ on which temporal 'prejudices' to deploy throughout the course of narrating.[22] This would imply that reflexivity with regard to the ascertainment of change and continuity is an endeavour open to all practitioners. I return to this point upon developing Gadamer's idea of 'prejudice' and reflexivity more broadly, but it is important to acknowledge that narratives – in particular the temporal prejudices by which they are constituted – are not just depictions of objective events, but also subjective constructs, shaped according to the narrators' distinct life experiences and preferred theories. As life experiences tend to vary from person to person, I focus mainly on how certain theoretical positions with regard to continuity and change shape the temporal emplotment of a narrative and especially its view of retrospective responsibility.

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[17]Margaret Somers, 'The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach', *Theory and Society*, 23:5 (1994), p. 616.

[18]Robert Scholes, 'Afterthoughts on narrative language, narrative, and anti-narrative', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1 (1980), p. 209.

[19]Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume I* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 65–6.

[20]Larry Griffin, 'Narrative, event-structure analysis, and causal interpretation in historical sociology', *American Journal of Sociology*, 98:5 (1993), p. 1098.

[21]Somers, 'The narrative constitution of identity', pp. 613–14.

[22]Ish-Shalom, 'Theoreticians' obligation of transparency', pp. 973–96.

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## Approaching events through three prejudices

Events are often emplotted and subsequently narrated with recourse to a host of temporal assumptions regarding the nature of change and continuity. I split those prejudices into three types: (1) teleological continuity; (2) continuity through cycles of change; and (3) radical possibilities of change. The synthesis is by no means exhaustive, but I focus on the types of temporalities that have been echoed by key IR theorists and theories, such as liberal institutionalism, structural realism, and critical theory.[23]

### *Teleological continuity*

Starting with theories of a teleological temporality, these perspectives, as propounded by certain strands of classical Marxism and liberalism, see events not as the result of actions 'and reactions that constitute the happening' but rather as an 'abstract transhistorical processes leading to some future historical state'.[24] On top of the way in which they affect our understanding of an era, such theories underscore an unassailable trend of accumulated change, which evolve through discrete stages and which supposedly lead to a given end goal. They impose therefore temporal linearity on international politics, that is, of ever evolving change towards a predetermined end state, such as democracy, a world state or a classless society. From Francis Fukuyama's conception of an end of history to Alexander Wendt's take on recognition as a process culminating in the disappearance of state sovereignty, there is no shortage of teleological interpretations in IR.[25]

As a result of temporal linearity, two aspects of continuity are imposed upon events, leading to a particular narrative of retrospective responsibility. First, such narratives are comprised of temporal path-dependency, underestimating the capacity of an event to break away from a preconceived aim; rather they usually presume that an event or issue belongs to one stage of history. Second, the idea of the future being inevitable instils a certain technical, if not instrumental, mindset by way of suggesting that history is capable of being mastered pre-emptively.

The matter of linear path-dependency has been subject to much criticism. One of the more important attempts at criticising the problematic repercussions of teleological readings of history was in the work of Walter Benjamin. In his classic essay, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin criticised social democrats in the 1930s for their unassailable belief (almost faith) in progress, a worldview that compelled many to dismiss the lasting dangers of fascism across Europe.[26] Likewise, in a critique of teleological readings of politics, Thomas Carothers declared the 'end of the transition paradigm' in order to question the liberal optimism of the 1990s, which – by virtue of assuming political change to be congruent with the rise of democracy – 'labelled any formerly authoritarian country that was attempting some form of political liberalization as a "transitional country"'.[27] So strong was this teleological tendency, argued Carothers, that scholars and analysts usually developed a host of categories and historical stages, such as 'iliberal democracy' and 'pseudo-democracy', to justify the continued influence of such theories. And yet, such 'qualified democracy' terms were used 'to characterize countries being stuck somewhere on the assumed democratization sequence', as if a sequence did in fact exist or as if no other sequence were possible. In other words, continuity trumped the possibility of any deviation from the supposed pattern of ever evolving change.[28]

[23]See Nisbet, *Social Change and History* and Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, for other ways of conceiving the time of politics.

[24]Sewell Jr, 'Three temporalities', p. 247.

[25]Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Alexander Wendt, 'Why a world state is inevitable?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 491–542.

[26]Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (Schocken Books: New York, 1968 [orig. pub. 1940]), pp. 253–64.

[27]Thomas Carothers, 'The end of transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 31:1 (2002), p. 6.

[28]Ibid., p. 10.

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The pervasive use of such categories is part of a broader tendency in the humanities and social sciences. For Arendt, the view of history as a linear process, characterised by distinct evolutionary stages, was an assumption borrowed from the study of the natural world. By adopting that vocabulary, intellectuals – argued Arendt – came to view the social and political surroundings as being run by 'necessities' and 'necessary causes', many of which could mastered by technical experts: 'it was unavoidable that necessity should be inherent in historical as it is in astronomical motion'.[29] Especially guilty of this propensity were a number of Marxist theorists who often propounded a whole set of innovative stages in order to come to terms with the changing nature of capitalist society, if only for the sake of justifying the unwavering continuity of the historical forces governing politics.[30] In view of those necessities, Lenin's classic, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, sought to demonstrate just how much Imperialism, as he defined it, was part of an advanced stage of capitalism. In doing so, Lenin managed to criticise those who had become increasingly sceptical of the main tenets of Marxism, particularly the path in which history was heading.[31]

By virtue of underscoring a continuous historical sequence, teleological theories evade the question of moral agency or responsibility – at least in the abstract, prospective sense. And yet, they cannot entirely avoid the question of retrospective responsibility for, upon narrating a sequence of events, the path is already being presupposed. This offers a sort of inducement with which to interpret the recent, empirical past. In the same way Lenin viewed the French Revolution as one stage of an impending Socialist revolution,[32] teleological explanations are likely to see the present as an evolution of a similar – albeit not entirely analogous – evolving stage of history. This in turn creates the basis for impelling change. Georgi Plekhanov, one of the fathers of Russian Marxism, saw the problem all too clearly: 'being conscious of the absolute inevitability of a given phenomenon can only increase the energy of a man who sympathises with it and who regards himself as one of the forces which called it into being'.[33]

By being aware of the path in which history is heading, as well as the stages by which it is characterised, narratives may push for change quicker than it is expected and criticise those who delay it. In terms of retrospective responsivity, praise lays in those who can observe the path of accumulated change; blame, on the other hand, is bestowed upon those who delay or else seek to prevent the trend of continuous, accumulated change. Such was the consequence of Lenin's leadership of the Bolsheviks, a self-ascribed faction of the Russian Social Democrat party that pushed for revolutionary communism.[34]

In sum, a teleological prejudice prompts a type of technical narrative inasmuch as interpreters take the event as part of an evolving historical trend. While on a purely theoretical level, such theories do not necessarily make a claim about agency or even about prospective responsibility, in practice they provide the 'narrative' means by which to blame those who undermine a path of accumulated change as well as to praise those who bring it forth.

### Continuity through cycles of change

The prejudice for continuity is not limited to a teleological temporality. Continuity through cycles of change privileges a stricter vision of sameness in IR and is for that reason reluctant to

[29]Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin, 1990), p. 55.

[30]Not all Marxists are strict determinists, nor is it consensual that Marx himself was a historical determinist. See a brief rendering over how to understand Marx and its adherence to structure in Richard Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), pp. 225–86.

[31]Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2010 [orig. pub. 1916]).

[32]Sewell Jr, 'Three temporalities', pp. 258–9.

[33]Georgi Plekhanov, 'On the Role of the Individual in History', available at: {https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1898/xx/individual.html} accessed 10 August 2017.

[34]On Bolshevik thinking and their ideas of vanguard, see Adam Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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take into consideration the possibility of a substantial change to international politics. In fact, that inability to account for substantial change springs from the default emphasis on continuity, a temporal prejudice that is often the main feature of systemic theories of international politics, many of which were scrutinised in the late 1980s and 1990s for their inability to account for the end of the Cold War.[35] Even though such theories suggest that changes in form exist, they end up arguing that structures will somehow 'work themselves out, irrespective of change "on the surface"'.[36] While such theories need not make any claim about agency and prospective responsibility, inasmuch as they rely on the determinacy of historical continuity, they still pave the way for a certain account of retrospective agency, blaming those who push for change when it is usually considered ineffective, let alone dangerous. Provided the world is regarded as something continuously governed by a particular reading of material power, for example, progressive visions of international politics only distract us from the actual state of affairs and should as a consequence be more or less rendered obsolete.[37]

To make such claims about unwavering continuity, such scholars, especially realists, presume that 'the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia'.[38] For Waltz, for example, changes from anarchic to hierarchic systems rest on an underlying structure of a system whose capacity for change is determined in accordance with the 'distribution of capabilities across a system's units'.[39] No other type of change is possible, although Waltz never concealed throughout his work that his assumptions were based on an overriding sense of historical continuity in which deep transformations were rare:

> structural change affects the behavior of states and the outcomes their interactions produce. It does not break the essential continuity of international politics. The transformation of international politics alone can do that.[40]

Waltz precludes the potential for any deep temporal transformation. In his classic, *Man, the State and War*, Waltz concludes that the system of states – or the 'third image' of IR as he calls it – resists substantial change, for it 'will be *perpetually* associated with the existence of sovereign states', most of which, according to him, reject and will continue to reject the creation of a world government.[41] To that end, a change in neorealist theories is only a small fraction of an otherwise repetitive cycle of continuity through time. Moving from an anarchic to a hierarchic system is, for example, undergirded by just as much continuity as it is by change, for the form altered, but the structure and the units by which it is constituted scarcely transformed in any substantial way.

Continuity through periodic cyclical change has deep normative repercussions for how retrospective responsibility is to be prescribed. Similar to teleological narratives, the lessons of the past are likely to be replicated onto the present. And yet, whereas a narrative of teleological continuity sees the present as an outgrowth of an evolving past, a stage of history which can be pre-emptively mastered (see above), a cyclical reading is far more likely to view the past, present,

[35]Wendt, 'The agent-structure problem in International Relations theory', pp. 335–70; John Lewis Gaddis, 'International Relations theory and the end of the Cold War', *International Security*, 17:3 (1993), pp. 5–58; Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Understanding change in international politics: the Soviet Empire's demise and the international system', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 215–47; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917; Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism in International Relations theory', pp. 171–200.

[36]Friedrich Kratochwil, 'History, action and identity: Revisiting the "second" great debate and assessing its importance for social theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:1 (2006), p. 10.

[37]See, for example, Hans Morgenthau's six principles of realism in*: Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 4–16.

[38]Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7.

[39]Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 97.

[40]Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, 25:1 (2000), p. 39.

[41]Kenneth Waltz, *Man, State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [orig. pub. 1959]), pp. 237–8, emphasis added.

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and future as more similar than different, as a large swath of history in which action and vanguard activism are rendered futile. As such, retrospective responsibility is ascribed on those who fail to understand the continuity of politics from past to future; regardless of present-day contingencies, those who look beyond continuity are blamed for their shortsightedness.

All in all, whereas a narrative premised on a teleological temporality pushes for some level of action on behalf of those who experience the event, mainly because the stage of history is identifiable and capable of being manipulated, cyclical temporalities tend to criticise those who are too keen on pushing for change and who are equally unable to account for the relentless continuity of history.

### *Radical possibilities for change in the here-and-now*

In contrast to assumptions that underscore continuity, either by virtue of linear temporality or as a result of continuous cycles, there are others that take a completely different stance, underscoring the possibility of contingency, of radical change beyond path dependency. In fact, it is precisely this vision of contingency, of manifold ways of constituting world politics at particular moments, which prompted some of the more incisive critiques of realism and liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s in IR, paving the way for the so-called constructivist 'turn'.[42] Drawing from a number of critical theories, linguistic and interactionist approaches sought to theorise about and account for radical change, though often with recourse to very different assumptions about how change could be ascertained in the first place.[43] Suffice to say that critical theories are intent on questioning institutions rather than on taking them for granted, which is precisely what makes them critical according to Robert Cox,[44] though they are often at odds on how to pursue that end. Differences between Habermas's communicative theory and, say, Derrida's deconstruction, two critical approaches to politics and language, imply that critical theory or, better yet, critical theories are not united on how to understand or even prompt change.[45] Ongoing debates aside, I point briefly to the core ideas of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, both of whom looked at the possibility of change through action beyond the confines of relentless continuity.[46] They offer therefore a stark contrast to theories of cyclical and teleological continuity as well as a view of change that is compatible with some of the main tenets of (sundry) critical theories.

For Arendt, phenomena like the American and French revolutions were taken to be 'genuinely new beginnings, political acts that disclosed *new* meanings on the political stage'.[47] Action, not unlike an event, is for Arendt deeply intertwined with the origin of something new: 'to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin … to set something into motion'.[48] Likewise, Benjamin pleaded for way of conceiving time that privileged the *jetztzeit* (here-and-now), seeing history not as a place 'in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled

[42]For theories that underscore the role of contingency, see Rob Walker, *Insider/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425; Karin Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Patrick Jackson, 'Making sense of making sense: Configurational analysis and the double hermeneutic', in D. Yanow and P. Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 264–80.

[43]Ted Hopf, 'The promise of constructivism in International Relations theory', *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 171–200.

[44]Robet Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

[45]See a detailed synthesis of this debate in Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 53–129.

[46]Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 78.

[47]Ibid., p. 58.

[48]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 177.

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by the here-and-now'.[49] Underscoring the possibility of radical change in the present is not only the outcome of a conscious commitment to action over history. It also captures the experience of an event as it is taking place. Scholars, analysts, or political activists caught up in the overwhelming energy of an occurrence sometimes experience it in such a way as to underscore the present over the past.[50] When being captured by the event as it occurs, there is an emphasis on change, on those who act in the present and on their ability to alter an otherwise (seemingly) stable state of affairs. Unlike scholars or analysts who look back at the event after the fact, or who are physically distant from the event as it happens (or happened), those closer to present-day experience can arguably be overcome by the possibility of change, tailoring the narrative away from the strictures of the past:

> Looking at the world from above and usually backwards in time implies that one is not directly involved in social action and does not feel the same proximity and urgency as agents do.[51]

As such, activists and analysts underscore how action is likely to break away from an underlying sense of continuity through time:

> Contrary to practitioners, who act in and on the world, social scientists spend careers and lives thinking about ideas, deliberating about theories, and representing knowledge. While social scientists have all the necessary time to rationalize action post hoc, agents are confronted with practical problems that they must urgently solve.[52]

Social scientists, not only practitioners, can also be swept away by the temporality of the present, the urgency of which emphasises the possibility of change. Carried to the extreme, however, a temporal assumption or experience of that sort carries the risk of ignoring past responsibilities. Rather, retrospective responsibility is ascribed upon those acting in that present time. To take an example, Harald Wydra's temporal assumptions about democratisation in eastern Europe differ little from those propounded by Arendt and Benjamin. He suggests that the 'the essence of politics is not in the constituted order of norms and rules but is found in the exception, where the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid through repetition'.[53] This point of view subsequently informs his analysis, to the effect of arguing for a perspective which goes beyond the 'linear statement that "history matters" or "history strikes back"' and for understanding that 'contentious memories and meanings of historical events influence transformative periods of reconstruction'.[54]

While Wydra's analysis privileges the inherent contingency of events, his many narratives focus almost exclusively on a discrete period of time – the time in which the event happened. With regard to retrospective responsibility, the interpretation privileges those actors in the present and the symbols of which they made use, whereas past actors, such as those constituted under the communist order, have little impact on explaining democratisation or even the rise of certain types of practices. His interpretation differs substantially from others who saw the fall of communism as the result of both continuity and change. Robert English, for instance, demonstrated how Soviet 'new thinking' in the 1980s sprung not only from radical contingency, but also from the gradual taking of ideas by a number of dissident intellectuals. For English, change came

[49]Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', p. 261.

[50]The premises of these theories are central to the practice turn in IR. From a broader, non-IR perspective into the pretheoretical bases of phenomena, see Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[51]Vincent Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality: a theory of practice of security communities', *International Organization*, 62:2 (2008), pp. 260–1.

[52]Pouliot, 'The logic of practicality', p. 261.

[53]Harald Wydra, *Communism and the Emergency of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8.

[54]Ibid., p. 34.

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about as a process of gradual learning 'on two levels: comparative-interactive learning, wherein foreign ties facilitate a shift in intellectuals' essential "self-categorization" … and social learning in which growing numbers of intellectuals, from diverse professions, are drawn into an informal domestic community.'[55] Unlike Wydra, English does not regard change to be entirely the product of transformative events, but also as a consequence of continuous learning through time. At any rate, a prejudice towards radical change somewhat conceals background conditions. It emplots a narrative in such a way as to focus almost exclusively on the participants of the event itself in contrast to those who laid out the basis for action in the present.

### *The three prejudices*

The three prejudices – (1) teleological continuity; (2) cyclical continuity; and (3) change in the here-and-now – lead to three types of narratives with their own understandings of retrospective responsibility:

- (1) An account that looks at comparable, often recent, historical analogies, or stages in order to pre-empt a given end, and that blames those who ignore the (supposed) underlying teleological continuity of international politics;
- (2) A narrative that tends to be primarily historical in nature, often deploying a long time-interval from which to interpret the origins of an event, and that often imputes responsibility on those who ignored the underlying cyclical continuity of international politics;
- (3) An account that highlights the urgency of the present, assessing almost only the retrospective responsibility of actors who enacted the event at the moment in time, ignoring past actions as well as downplaying the extent to which they can continue to shape the future.

### *The case for temporal reflexivity*

The three prejudices have particular consequences not only for how responsibility is to be imputed after the fact, but also for how policy is to be recommended thereafter. This evidently begs the question of whether a more open, multifaceted narrative is possible.

Before addressing the alternative, it is worth underscoring that temporal prejudices are unavoidable, as they constitute the way in which we experience – let alone recollect – any event or sequence of events. To that end, acknowledging whether an occurrence inspired change or continuity can lead to a host of disagreements. Robert Gilpin alluded well to this issue after surveying sundry interpretations of European diplomacy throughout the nineteenth century:

> Whereas Arthur Burns in his *Of Powers and Their Politics,* regarded many of these changes, such as the emergence of revolutionary France and the Bismarckian unification of Germany in 1871, as merely modifications within the European state system … Richard Rosecrance, in his *Action and Reaction in World Politics* (1963), classified them as changes of the international system itself.[56]

Gilpin also claimed that 'although a typology of change is largely an arbitrary matter, the classification used must be a function of one's theory of change and of one's definition of the entity that changes'.[57] Gilpin's diagnosis is perceptive – that alternative ways of emplotting a narrative depend essentially on the temporal assumptions taken at the outset. This has been the main argument of this article. But Gilpin's solution is hardly satisfactory. Conceding to a

[55]Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 7.

[56]Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 39.

[57]Ibid.

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subjective prejudice hardly guarantees dialogue among competing narratives, no matter how well a framework is formulated; nor is Gilpin's solution likely to provide a means by which to mediate distinct narratives, each of which may offer a complementary version of retrospective responsibility. To avoid such limitations and to bring the normative implications of narratives to the forefront, the alternative lies with fostering openness, with allowing more than one temporal perspective to dialogue with others. As shown below, the practice of accounting for the past with a closed set of subjective assumptions is associated with what Gadamer labelled *Erlebnis*, an approach characterised by a very limited form of understanding.

## Outlining a reflexive approach to temporality: Mediating *Erlebnis* through *Erfahrung*

Reflexive approaches in IR are centred on unravelling the social and historical context of research as well as their potential influence on politics.[58] They take the constructivist critique seriously, to the effect that the world is constructed not only by an interplay of agents and their surrounding contexts of meaning – language and symbols – but also by scholars themselves who have a role to play in reproducing or otherwise challenging their surrounding normative environment.[59] To that end, Jack Amoreux pleads for a critically reflexive approach that 'equips individuals, organizations and communities with attitudes and tactics to recognize, interrogate and potentially change the stories they tell – about the constraints of politics, the possibilities of relationality and responsibility, and visions of desirability'.[60] For Amoreux, reflexivity can ultimately be practiced by anyone.

Gadamer offers a promising way in which to conceptualise reflexivity, partly because it requires researchers, analysts, or scholars to be genuinely open to dialogue. It is thus hardly surprising that Gadamer's views about openness have been especially useful for dealing with pluralism and cultural difference.[61] His views have even been used as a conceptual framework for studying emotions through time in IR.[62] In conjunction with his ideas about political order, Gadamer's philosophy is a promising way of understanding the impact of temporality and how to mediate competing understandings of time and politics, the combined effects of which influence retrospective responsibility. Rather than imposing a strict set of (temporal as well as subjective) assumptions from the outset, Richard Shapcott points to how Gadamer's philosophy is oriented towards openness to the 'other's truth claims', that is, 'open towards what it is the other communicates'.[63] It is this self-aware attitude that makes Gadamer's philosophy relevant to reflexivity, in that it calls upon the narrator to make sense of his or her own prejudices, fusing them with potentially contrasting points of view.

In order to bring about dialogue, Gadamer's philosophy looks at how we understand ourselves in view of objective and subjective experiences across time. His understanding of the fundamental linkages between subject and object spring from Martin Heidegger's philosophy, a work with no small influence in phenomenology, continental philosophy, and even IR itself.[64] My

[58]For a comprehensive of the many aspects of reflexivity, see Jack L. Amoureux and Brent J. Steele, 'Introduction', in Amoureux and Steele (eds), *Reflexivity and International Relations*, pp. 1–20.

[59]Hamati-Ataya, 'The "problem of values"', pp. 259–87; Teles Fazendeiro, 'Rethinking roles', pp. 487–507.

[60]Amoreux, *A Practice of Ethics for Global Politics*, p. 19.

[61]Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations*, pp. 130–208; Richard Shapcott, 'Conversation and coexistence: Gadamer and the interpretation of international society', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23:1 (1994), pp. 57–83; Fred Dallmyr, *Integral Pluralism: Beyond Cultural Wars* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2010).

[62]Clara Eroukhmanoff and Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, 'Emotions and time: Approaching emotions through a fusion of horizons', in Maeva Clement and Eric Sangar (eds), *Research Emotions in International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 255–76.

[63]Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations*, p. 140.

[64]Louiza Odysseos, *The Subject of Coexistence* (London: University Minnesota Press, 2007); Ralph Pettman, *Intending the World: A Phenomenologly of International Affairs* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008); Daniel Jacobi, '"To the things themselves" … and back! International political sociology and the challenge of phenomenology', *International*

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focus, though, is on the notion of temporality and the way in which it conditions, if not shapes, interpretation and narratives. For Heidegger, hermeneutics, or the fundamental question of interpretation, springs always from our *fore*-understanding of 'facticity', namely how every being 'expresses itself before and behind every judgement'.[65] Put differently, we always approach any happening with a set of subjective presuppositions, implying that an event is *already* being objectified in a certain way.

In light of our often restrictive horizons, Gadamer develops Heidegger's core insight, demonstrating how it can be applied to and understood within the humanities (*geisteswissenschaften*). He claims that hermeneutics, or interpretation more generally, deals with 'how the historicity of being pertains to understanding historically situated consciousness'.[66] In other words, our position within history cannot but influence the way in which we make sense of events, which in turn begs the question of how we can become open to novelty or any experience for that matter. Gadamer nevertheless shows how that understanding is always possible through distinct types of experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The former understands events simply by replicating initial (subjective) prejudices, whereas the latter strives for a more open-ended and mediated form of understanding.

### *From* Erlebnis *to* Erfahrung

*Erlebnis* pertains to a mode of subjective immediacy 'which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication, and merely offers a starting point for interpretation'.[67] That instant experience to which *Erlebnis* alludes is as unavoidable as it is relevant, insofar as phenomena trigger some sort of experience read through our own set of prejudices.

For Gadamer, our understanding should always be mediated by 'historically effected consciousness' (*wirkunsgeschichtliches bewusstein*) in order to realise 'the preliminary relationship' that our understandings have with any 'subject matter'.[68] By 'preliminary relationship', Gadamer is alluding to our biases, assumptions, or 'prejudices', as he terms them, which always shape our initial interpretation of the present. When we make sense of any specific event, we are (however unconsciously) harking back to an array of historically conditioned assumptions, from ethical concerns to specific IR theories, in order to come to terms with their novelty or constancy. Should one neglect a historically conditioned consciousness by simply reproducing prejudices, by way of *Erlebnis*, one may well neglect the way in which those prejudices determine the questions we are posing and, by extension, the answers we are providing. Gadamer's concern with the manner in which our own *fore*-understanding shapes inquiry is therefore related to reflexive and critical theories, not to mention feminism in IR: 'the questions that are asked – or, more importantly, those that are not asked – are as determinative of the project as any questions that we can answer'.[69]

In contrast to immediate objectification, Gadamer argues that one of the main tasks of interpretation is to become aware of those prejudices with a view to allowing any event or object, such as an ancient text, to 'present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore meanings'.[70] In doing so, Gadamer does not imply that we can simply detach

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*Political Sociology*, 5:1 (2011), pp. 87–105. Gadamer's theories, particularly his concern with fusing different horizons of understanding, have also been applied to IR. See, for example, Shapcott, 'Conversation and coexistence', pp. 57–83; Chris Farrands, 'Gadamer's enduring influence in International Relations: Interpretation in Gadamer, Ricoeur and beyond', in Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands (eds), *International Relations Theory and Philosophy: Interpretive Dialogues* (London: Routledge), pp. 33–45.

[65] Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 93.

[66] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 8.

[67] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* , p. 56.

[68] Ibid., p. 40.

[69] J. Ann Tickner, 'What is your research program? Some feminist answers to International Relations methodological questions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:1 (2005), p. 5.

[70] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 282.

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ourselves from those 'prejudices' – which are the vehicles upon and through which we (fore) ground our understanding – rather that they ought to be mediated by a historically effected consciousness open to dialogue with alternative experiences.

By referring to an alternative mode of experience, *Erfahrung*, Gadamer conceptualises what he means by historically effected consciousness. *Erfahrung*, for him, is a form of hermeneutical experience that 'is concerned with *tradition*'.[71] Gadamer is nevertheless open with regard to the notion of tradition; rather than a singular and authoritative reading of the past, it is always a form of transmission appropriated and systematically reinterpreted in the present. It is not simply an object whose meaning is *there* 'inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves'.[72] It is precisely this attempt at reinterpretation – at interrogating one's own specific set of temporal assumptions – that is necessary during the course of narrating events. It resembles Jack Amoreux's notion of ethical reflexivity (see above), for it provides a means by which to open oneself to a different horizon of understanding. In doing so, scholars and analysts are likely to be more predisposed to dialogue, effectively opening their narrative to additional ways of conceptualising time and retrospective responsibility.

In short, Gadamer's hermeneutic principle of *Erfahrung* seeks to expand our awareness of temporality. It recognises that no matter how much the past affects our own prejudices, it is liable to be reinterpreted – that is to say, actualised – within the present. Gadamer thus positions himself against a mode of interpretation that merely imposes initial prejudices upon phenomena, as important as they are. Instead, the task is to allow other experiences to speak in conjunction with one's own. Provided the principles of a reflexive framework are applied at the outset, scholars and analysts alike can incorporate several temporal assumptions and thus arrive at a more complex narrative of retrospective responsibility.

## **Erfahrung *in practice?***

As already noted, the purpose herein was to outline a mode of reflexive understanding based more on *Erfahrung* than *Erlebnis*. Scholars and practitioners more broadly – anyone seeking to narrate events – ought to engage reflexively with temporality, precisely because of its impact on retrospective responsibility. When openness is fostered, different temporal assumptions can be placed in dialogue with one another, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of responsibility. To that end, Daniel Levine's s*ustained critique*, 'arranging multiple perspectives around a particular event or cluster of events in world politics', is relevant to narrative writing.[73] Levine refers mainly to the problem of reification, but his approach can also be extended to the imputation of responsibility. Different ways of sequencing events, contingent on a number of historical assumptions, are likely to lead to several versions of retrospective responsibility. Levine argues that 'polyvocal and highly pluralist narratives function like snapshots or sonar sounds: a means by which pre-existing political-social normative sensibilities are stretched and fitted onto a complex, indeterminate, vital world'.[74]

By the same token, Hutchings refers to 'heterotemporality' and an 'untimely approach to global politics'.[75] Postmodern views of narrative similarly push for greater heterogeneity in order to bring about more than one temporal perspective,[76] an approach that is appropriate to revealing distinct accounts of responsibility. Hutchings, following the postmodern current,

[71]Ibid., p. 366.

[72]Ibid., p. 305.

[73]Levine, *Recovering International Relations*, p. 232.

[74]Daniel Levine, 'Between "late style" and sustainable critique: Said, Adorno and the Israel-Palestine conflict', in Amoureux and Steele (eds), *Reflexivity and International Relations*.

[75]Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 173.

[76]See Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) and Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

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suggests that her temporal approach 'is opposed to the kind of normative arguments that assert their timeliness without regard for the co-existence of a multiplicity of "clocks" by which world-political punctuality may be measured'.[77] Her conceptualisation of time, not unlike Levine's plea for sustainable critique, alludes to various temporal viewpoints. Their approaches could potentially mitigate the experience of *Erlebnis* in contrast to *Erfahrung*, pushing for greater narrative openness.

At any rate, the aim is not so much to advocate a single method as it is to outline how several temporal assumptions can speak within a narrative in order to deepen the understanding of retrospective responsibility. Having set out the main premises of Gadamer's approach, it is worth understanding how *Erlebnis* can actually constrain our view of retrospective responsibility. In order to show clashing views of responsibility, I look at narratives of change and continuity in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

## Narratives of the annexation of Crimea

Crimea, a peninsula that had been part of the Russian Empire since 1783 before being transferred to the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 (an administrative – even if symbolic – endowment, as the territory still belonged to the Soviet Union as a whole), has been a source of major political contention between Ukraine and Russia ever since the former's independence in 1991.[78] Initial controversies aside, I focus on external interpretations of Moscow's unilateral annexation of the territory in 2014, following the Maidan events of that same year. Both the notions of here-and-now and cyclical continuity played an especially important role in this regard.

Those emphasising the here-and-now – partly because their timeframe rested almost exclusively on the impact of the present – underscored urgency and the existence of substantial change. They also blamed, as would be expected, the Russian government for triggering the crisis. Adherents of cyclical continuity, on the other hand, took a radically different stance, with John Mearsheimer providing a very different account of the reasons for Russia's annexation of Crimea, including those deemed responsible.[79] As a result, the narratives remained divided, unwilling to dialogue with one another, each posing their strict ideas of retrospective responsibility, with the reflexive practice of *Erfahrung* being scarcely adopted. Instead, *Erlebnis* was the main interpretive avenue through which the events were temporally structured.

### *Blaming the Russian government and 'new' Cold War analogies*

In the wake of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, some analysts were in the midst of the here-and-now, underscoring urgency, even a 'paradigm shift' in world politics.[80] Novelty and change were often underlined, particularly the nationalist slogans deployed by Putin, most of which were considered to validate 'a new kind of geopolitical adventurism'.[81] Some security experts argued that the annexation of Crimea was evidence of

[77]Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 173.

[78]For more context, see Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

[79]John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's fault', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:5 (2014), pp. 77–89.

[80]Anne Applebaum, 'War in Europe is not a hysterical idea', *Washington Post* (29 August 2014), available at: {http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-war-in-europe-is-nota-hysterical-idea/2014/08/29/815f29d4-2f93-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33_story.html} accessed 28 March 2015; Madeleine Albright, 'United front: Foreign policy', *Foreign Policy* (4 September 2014), available at: {http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/04/a-united-front/} accessed 23 March 2015; Peter Rutland, 'A paradigm shift in Russia's foreign policy', *Moscow Times*, available at: {http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/a-paradigm-shift-in-russia-s-foreign-policy/500352.html} accessed 15 October 2015; Dmitri Trenin, 'The crisis in Crimea could lead the world into a second Cold War', *The Guardian* (2 March 2014), available at: {http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/02/crimea-crisis-russia-ukraine-cold-war} accessed 6 April 2014.

[81]Marlene Laruelle, 'The three colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian nationalist mythmaking of the Ukrainian crisis', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32:1 (2016), p. 71.

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Russia becoming a 'revisionist power that plans to reverse developments from the past 20 years'.[82]

Moscow was to be held accountable, with some politicians and analysts going as far as to argue that Russia's President was also irrational, as if his behaviour was haphazard and scarcely consistent with what he had done or had promised to do in the past.[83] The annexation was rather the hallmark of a new conflictual era, regardless of the relations between Russia and many 'Western' states being frosty, to say the least, in the years prior to the annexation of Crimea.[84]

That said, those who emphasised the here-and-now often presented sophisticated narratives of the event and its present-day consequences. Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, spoke of a situation 'changing at breakneck speed', in that 'Russia has begun to act, decisively, even rashly'.[85] As such, 'Russia will no doubt pay a high price for its apparent decision to "defend its own" and "put things right", but others will have to pay their share, too'.[86] In Trenin's survey of the event, Moscow was deemed responsible for triggering the conflict, but the growing level of antagonism would have an impact extending beyond Russia. He later developed these points in a more extensive analysis of the annexation of Crimea.[87]

The sudden rupture, argued Trenin, gave rise to a new stage in conflict, one resembling, and yet not entirely equal, to the past. Trenin suggests the existence of a time before the annexation of Crimea and one after, as if a 'new' stage in world politics were there for all to see: 'even if there is no war, the Crimea crisis is likely to alter fundamentally relations between Russia and the west and lead to changes in the global power balance'.[88] This reading of a strong overhaul to international politics allowed him to underscore the here-and-now, to make the case of a 'new' Cold War and to plead for action.[89]

The notion of a 'new' Cold War has in fact become so pervasive that it panned out a debate on the plausibility of a new stage in international politics, one in which Russia ought (or not) to be deemed as dangerous as the Soviet Union.[90] Of course, the fact that it is a 'new' – as opposed to a continuation of the – Cold War suggests that the struggle resembles but is not equal to its

[82]Roland Freudenstein, 'Facing up to the bear: Confronting Putin's Russia', *European View*, 13:2 (2014), p. 227.

[83]Angela Merkel underscored the irrationality of Putin's endeavour. Peter Baker, 'Pressure rising as Obama works to rein in Russia', *The New York Times* (2 March 2015), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/world/europe/pressure-rising-as-obama-works-to-rein-in-russia.html?hpw&rref=world&_r=0} accessed 20 July 2017. Some analysts replicated this view by underscoring the rash, seemingly unpredictable nature of Putin's style of rule. See, for example, George Will, 'Vladimir Putin's Hitlerian mind', *National Review* (3 September 2014), available at: {http://www.nationalreview.com/article/386990/vladimir-putins-hitlerian-mind-george-will} accessed 20 July 2017.

[84]On the frosty and conflictual relations between Russia and the 'West', see Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Sakwa, Frontline Ukraine.

[85]Trenin, 'The crisis in Crimea'.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Dmitri Trenin, 'Ukraine and the new divide', *Carnegie Moscow Center* (July 2014), available at: {http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Article_Ukraine_Trenin_Eng_Jul2014.pdf} accessed 18 July 2017.

[88]Trenin, 'The crisis in Crimea'.

[89]See the following references to a 'new' Cold War and a 'new' Great Game: Trenin, 'Ukraine and the new divide'; Anne Applebaum, 'The new Cold War', *Slate* (8 February 2015), available at: {http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/02/saving_ukraine_and_stopping_vladimir_putin_the_west_needs_a_long_term_strategy.html} accessed February 2015; Trenin, 'The crisis in Crimea'; Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro, 'Consequences of a new Cold War', *Survival*, 57:2 (2015), pp. 37–46; Robert Levgold, 'Managing the new Cold War: What Moscow and Washington can learn from the last one', *Foreign Affairs* (July to August 2014), pp. 74–84; Matthew Kroenig, 'Facing reality: Getting NATO ready for a new Cold War', *Survival*, 57:1 (2015), pp. 49–70.

[90]For critiques of the Cold War and Great Game, both 'new' and 'old', see Ken Booth, 'Cold wars of the mind', in Ken Booth (ed.), *Statecraft and Security: The Cold War and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Matthew Edwards, 'The "new" Great Games and the new great gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder', *Central Asian Survey*, 22:1 (2003), pp. 83–102; John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, 'Contesting danger: a new agenda for policy and scholarship on Central Asia', *International Affairs*, 87:3 (2011), pp. 589–612; Richard Sakwa, 'The cold peace: Russo-Western relations as a mimetic Cold War', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 203–24; Andrew Monaghan, '*A "New Cold War"? Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia*', *Russia and Eurasia Programme* (London: Chatham House, 2015).

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forebearer. The comparison is benevolent if compared to other historical analogies that were revealed at the time, especially those likening Russia's annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany.[91] And yet, the 'new' Cold War analogy, based on a temporality of urgent transformation, lends itself to a teleological reading of politics; it provides a convenient argument for those keen to retaliate against Russia and whom view politics as a process of combined, evolutionary change. Madeleine Albright, the United States Secretary of State during NATO's initial expansion in the 1990s, demonstrated her own surprise when writing for *Foreign Policy*: 'who would have predicted that one of the main topics would be the Russian invasion of Ukraine?'[92] Albright's account rests on a plea for greater NATO unity with a view to curbing the Russian threat and to bring world politics back into the correct, progressive path. She argues that 'NATO's approach to Russia evolved', but that 'unfortunately, President Vladimir Putin chose a different path', as if he were now on the wrong side of history.

Teleological readings aside, Trenin later recognises the problems of narrating events with a sense of urgency and of advocating a 'new' Cold War. He admitted in an interview that the analogy instigated a level of mutual animosity that did not yet exist:

> I believe that historical analogies could be useful but only to an extent. It was important last March to sound alarm bells that Crimea and Ukraine were not just temporary transient phenomena, that there was something very serious happening just in front of our eyes … We are in confrontation. The bad thing about this confrontation is that it's held very much on the Russian side. I don't think that the US believes that this is a confrontation with Russia.[93]

In short, the urgency and sense of novelty underscored by the here-and-now tended to blame Russia and to revive recent historical analogies in order to underscore the lasting impact of the present and of potential antagonism. In doing so, it (sometimes) unwittingly reinforced the idea of an intractable conflict between two foes, the 'West' (NATO in particular) and Russia, and somewhat ignored past actors who may have compelled Moscow to take some form of action.

### *The prejudice of cyclical continuity*

In contrast to change and discontinuity, 'many long-time Russia watchers argued that we should have seen this coming'.[94] This was the other strict application of *Erlebnis*, of imposing one's strict subjective view of temporality. Soon after the invasion of Crimea, interpretations of that sort contested the notion of radical change, returning to the past in order to underscore continuity. In doing so, they show how Moscow's actions were more or less congruent with the policy Vladimir Putin had developed since he first became President of the Russian Federation in 2000.[95] John Mearsheimer, most especially, saw the Russian annexation to be in line with the continuity of the international system. He even acknowledges that the difference in worldview says much about why the two parties, Russia and the 'West', saw the crisis so differently: 'Putin and his compatriots have been thinking and acting according to realist dictates, whereas their Western counterparts have been adhering to liberal ideas about international politics.'[96]

[91]See, for example, 'Hilary Clinton says Vladimir Putin's Crimea cccupation echoes Hitler', *Guardian* (6 March 2014), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/06/hillary-clinton-says-vladimir-putins-crimea-occupation-echoes-hitler} accessed 28 August 2017.

[92]Albright, 'United front'.

[93]See interview with Robert Levgold and Dmitri Trenin in Ekaterina Zabrovskaya, 'Legvold and Trenin: How to fix the US-Russian relationship', *Russia Direct* (7 March 2015), available at: {http://www.russia-direct.org/qa/legvold-and-trenin-how-fix-us-russian-relationship} accessed 24 July 2017.

[94]Kroenig, 'Facing reality', p. 53.

[95]François Heisbourg, 'Preserving post-Cold War Europe', *Survival*, 57:1 (2015), pp. 31–48; Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, pp. 1–49.

[96]Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's fault', p. 8.

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Mearsheimer's understanding of the crisis is worth developing not only because of the consistency with which he applied his neorealist theory, but also because of the picture of unwavering continuity upon which it is rests. Central to Mearsheimer's vision is the prejudice of continuity, in that the lessons of the past can and ought to be applied to the future: 'our task, then, is to decide which theories best explain the past, and will most directly apply to the future'.[97] Having been an early sceptic of international institutions and their expansion across Europe, Mearsheimer underscored the underlying continuity of the international system after many had claimed the appearance of a new stage in history with the end of the Cold War.

Mearsheimer bases his theory – most of which synthesised in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* – on five unvarying elements: the anarchy of the system; the offensive capabilities of great powers; the uncertainty of intent; the pursuit of survival; and the rationality of all actors.[98] These supposedly recurring variables or determinants of international politics allow proponents of offensive realism, like Mearsheimer, to emplot distinct experiences across time and to brush aside any sense of underlying indeterminacy and contingency.[99] In short, IR is reduced to a cycle of more or less predictable changes.

Focusing on Moscow's annexation of Crimea, Mearsheimer propounds a narrative of continuity that does little more than apologise for Russian action: 'great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory'.[100] Following the main tenets of neorealism, he argues that:

> Putin's pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly. Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only because they subscribe to a flawed view of international politics. They tend to believe that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy.[101]

By way of continuity, Mearsheimer also finds solutions to present-day problems in the past: 'history shows that countries will absorb enormous amounts of punishment in order to protect their core strategic interests'.[102] Ukraine, like its forebearers, should therefore become 'a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia, akin to Austria's position during the Cold War'.[103]

Mearsheimer returns to history and in this case to the Cold War. But he does so not because the Cold War is regarded as a unique historical stage or as a means by which to advocate 'Western' unity. On the contrary, for Mearsheimer, the event is yet another example of the unwavering cyclical continuity of the international system, for, as already noted, great powers always act in the way they do. Hence, he blames Western encroachment, particularly NATO and EU expansion, for setting up Moscow's persistent set of grievances. To that end, Mearsheimer positions himself against beefing up 'Western' concerted action, particularly with regard to arming Ukraine.[104] Instead, he returns to the past and argues for those acting in the present to realise the existing differences between the 'West' and Russia, two blocs that, he suggests, were and are likely to remain adversarial by virtue of the continuity of great power politics.

[97]John Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, 15:1 (1990), p. 10.

[98]John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 30–1.

[99]Hom and Steele, 'Open horizons', pp. 271–300.

[100]Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's fault', pp. 4–5.

[101]Ibid., pp. 1–2.

[102]Ibid., p. 10.

[103]Ibid.

[104]John Mearsheimer, 'Don't arm Ukraine', *The New York Times* (8 February 2015), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/opinion/dont-arm-ukraine.html} accessed 18 July 2017.

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That said, Mearsheimer's prejudice for continuity, while consistent, leaves a key question unanswered: why would Moscow choose to annex territory over other forms of reprisal? Present-day actions, including the nature of Putin's belligerency, are largely neglected. Rather, the emphasis on continuity exculpates Moscow, offering the Russian authorities a *carte blanche* to act as they see fit. Furthermore, other actors who enacted the event in the present are barely considered, such as the Ukrainian citizens who first instigated the Maidan protests and who, in doing so, convinced Moscow to take action.[105] While Mearsheimer does show convincingly that the Russian government, in light of past positions, would probably not remain silent in the face of a more pro-Western – and increasingly unstable – Ukraine, other retaliatory measures were arguably on the table. Indeed, those who saw the events though the here-and-now do well to highlight the sense of underlying surprise, for there was little evidence to suggest that Russian armed forces would unilaterally annex territory from a neighbouring state. In the end, Mearsheimer's narrative does more to instigate ongoing acrimony with regard to the annexation of Crimea than to allow different types of retrospective responsibility to speak with each other. As Hutchings has argued, temporal assumptions of that sort, preclude 'novel solutions to the security dilemma in which any state perpetually found itself'.[106]

## Conclusion

Narratives are shaped by temporal assumptions, or prejudices, which contribute to distinct versions of accountability. Unless several layers of continuity and change are reflexively incorporated, narratives are likely to push for irreconcilable visions of retrospective responsibility, which in turn hinders the possibility of conversation between different versions of events. As shown in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, initial presuppositions give rise to what Gadamer labelled as *Erlebnis*, leading to alternative types of retrospective responsibility. A temporality of cyclical continuity appeals to the inescapable role of the past, ignoring the responsibility of present-day actors, not to mention the contingent issues that gave rise to the event itself. Those who underline present-day change, by contrast, often overemphasise the novelty of the event, imputing responsibility on those who enacted the event.

A reflexive practice of *Erfahrung*, as set out earlier, outlines a loose set of principles – based on dialogue – from which to engage in a broader discussion of responsibility by all those seeking to narrate international politics. It would contribute to further discussions of reflexivity in IR, especially those concerned with temporality, providing an additional perspective from which to converse about agency and structure, change, and continuity. On account of the differences between theorising international politics and narrating the concrete past, different versions of responsibility – prospective and retrospective – require additional clarification in IR. While theorists can and should obviously take a position on the role of continuities, as well as the possibility of change to the international system, the matter of assessing events retrospectively is not equivalent to conceptualising (and even simplifying) reality prospectively and in the abstract. Hence, the question to bear in mind during the course of narrating events is not so much about applying any set of assumptions to the detriment of others, for there is a normative dimension as

[105]See a critical survey of the complex motives which motivated Ukrainians during the Maidan crisis: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa (eds), *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (2015), available at: {http://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ukraine-and-Russia-E-IR.pdf} accessed March 2015; Elizabeth A. Wood, William E. Pomeranz, E. Wayne Marry, and Maxim Trudolyubov, *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Vsevolod Samokhvalov, 'Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle revisited', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67:9 (2015), pp. 1371–93; Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, 'The Maidan in movement: Diversity and the cycles of protest', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:4 (2016), pp. 556–87; Volodymyr Kulyk, 'National identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the war', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:4 (2016), pp. 588–608.

[106]Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 14.

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well. The point is to construct narratives that mediate as opposed to confront alternative ways of viewing the time of politics and, as such, impart the basis for a conversation on the responsibility of any actor within that temporal order.

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