

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
FACULTY OF HISTORY



POLITICAL THOUGHT AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
RESEARCH SEMINAR 2013-14

Series 1

Monday 20 January 5.00 - 6.45
Old Combination Room, Trinity College

**‘Art and Elevation: Distance and History Painting
in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Britain’**

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My current work seeks to re-think conventional notions of historical distance, while reasserting the value of distance when it is conceived in new, more nuanced terms. In common usage, historical distance refers to a position of detached observation made possible by the passage of time. Understood in this sense, distance has long been regarded as essential to modern historical practice, but these assumptions narrow the idea of distance and burden it with a regulatory purpose. I argue that distance needs to be reconceived in terms of the wider set of engagements that mediate our relations to the past, as well as the full spectrum of distance-positions from near to far. Re-imagined in the terms, the idea of distance sheds its prescriptiveness and becomes a valuable heuristic for examining the history of historical representation.

If temporality is conceived in relation to the range of mediations entailed in historical representation, historical distance is freed from its customary linearity. Rather, time is moulded by other distances that come from our need to engage with the historical past as (simultaneously) a realm of making, feeling, doing, and understanding. Thus for every historical work, we need to consider at least four basic dimensions of representation as they relate to the problem of mediating distance: 1. The genres, media, and vocabularies that shape the history's formal structures of representation; 2. The affective claims made by the historical account, including the emotional experiences it promises or withholds; 3. The work's implications for action, whether of a political or moral nature; 4. The modes of understanding on which the history's intelligibility depends. These overlapping, but distinctive distances -- formal, affective, summoning, and conceptual -- provide an analytic framework for examining changing modes of historical representation.

In earlier work (especially *On Historical Distance*, 2013) I tested this framework against a variety of forms and periods of historical representation, taking my examples from the Florentine Renaissance, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the latter part of the twentieth century. For the purposes of the Cambridge seminar I will return to problems of distance/proximity as a dimension of historical representation. My case study this time will be drawn from eighteenth and nineteenth-century history painting, the art form widely understood to be painting's most challenging and prestigious genre.

MSP: Selected Bibliography.

Francesco Guicciardini: the Historian's Craft. Toronto: University of Toronto Press and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977

The Memoir of Marco Parenti: A Life in Medici Florence. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987

Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740-1820. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000

"Histories, Micro- and Literary: Problems of Genre and Distance." *New Literary History*, 34 (2003): 211-29.

Questions of Tradition: Exploring the Concept of Tradition Across the Disciplines. Eds. Mark Salber Phillips & Gordon Schochet. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004

"Distance and Historical Representation." *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004) 123- 41.

"On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Sentimental History for Life," *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008) 49-64.

"Re-thinking Historical Distance," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 50 (Dec. 2011) 11-23

Re-thinking Historical Distance, with Julia Adeney Thomas and Barbara Caine. London: Palgrave 2013.

On Historical Distance, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.