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DISTRACTION

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READING, WRITING, AND
POLITICS IN A HIGH-SPEED
NETWORKED ECONOMY

ROBERT HASSAN

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“For Kate, Theo, Camille, and for rooms full of books”



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Preface

So you will find here...only the figurations of the body's prehistory—of that body making its way toward the labor and pleasure of writing.
—Roland Barthes

Karl Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, wrote a remarkable and acerbic pamphlet in 1883 titled "The Right to be Lazy." For Lafargue, the right to time for oneself was the most important "right" that people should strive for. As he saw it, though, this fundamental human entitlement was being buried under the dead weight of industrial capitalism, a system that compelled people to sell much, if not most, of their time to the capitalist. An even worse assault on Lafargue's revolutionary sensibilities was that workers themselves had become complicit in the outrage. Instead of rising in rebellion, as his father-in-law had anticipated they would, they were willingly indulging in a kind of self-abasement by not demanding time to be "free," but demanding the "right to work," the right to become slaves to regular wages and to the rhythm of the machine.

By the late-Victorian era, it seems, we had already lost sight of the value of time—the value of time for ourselves at any rate. Time, in the more accurate predictions of Benjamin Franklin a century earlier, had become synonymous with money, and money was now the DNA of capitalism. The increasingly powerful and pervasive machine culture swallowed up the time that could be spent considering "The Greeks in their era of greatness." But in the culture of industry and capital the proletariat had dishonored themselves and allowed their consciousness and their understanding of the true value of time to be "perverted by the dogma of work." The solution, for Lafargue, was that machines must be brought under the control of people instead of people being the tools of an inhuman system. Only socialism could

only bring this about, he imagined, and under such an enlightened and democratic rule, an “iron limit” of three hours a day would be the maximum amount of toil for all.

“The Right to be Lazy” was possibly the wrong argument at the wrong time, and was received (outside of the prison house where he wrote it) with a deafening silence. The term “lazy” had and still has all the negative connotations that grate against the “protestant work ethic” that supposedly underscores capitalism. Moreover, he seems to have anticipated its less than rousing reception amongst the masses, and concludes with a weak and lamenting cry into the teeth of much louder winds of change: “O Laziness, mother of the arts and noble virtues, be thou the balm of human anguish!”

We never hear much of Lafargue these days. Maybe the ghastliness of the industrial way of life was too much for him. The proletariat seemed not to be listening to his warnings of time robbery and machine dictatorship. In any case he and his wife concluded a suicide pact and killed themselves in 1911. This was the very year, coincidentally, that Frederic Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* appeared, a book that revolutionized nature of the human interaction with machines and, some say, served fundamentally to harness people ever more tightly to the logic of machine-based production.

Today, the need to be free from the shackles of the machine sounds to many to be an odd and archaic notion. In the West at least we are often told that we have moved beyond the “dark satanic mills” that Marx’s compatriot Friedrich Engels wrote about in the mid-nineteenth century. Today we are purportedly far more progressive and far more civilized. Certainly, people are still brutally exploited in the factories that make our shoes and shirts and electronic gadgetry in Latin America, in wide stretches of Asia and elsewhere across the world. But the prevailing notion is that it only has to be pointed out to Nike or Gap or whomever, that such unpleasantness is occurring in their sub-contracted production lines, and the problem will be fixed. Local exploiters will be told to raise wages and shorten work hours. Slowly, slowly, things are getting better. Such things take time. And in the fullness of time the Chinese production worker will also have her trainers and her iPhone; paid for with her own money. She will have joined the global leisured class, the class that does different kinds of work, with greater rewards, and are freer than ever from what drove M. Lafargue to suicidal despair.

The trouble is none of this is true. Workers in sub-contracted factories will work hard and long until they become too expensive and by which time they will lose their jobs to others who are willing to work harder and faster and for less. The West benefits from this exploitation, to be sure, but only in a strictly material sense—cheap clothes and cheap electronics. Hyper-exploited Latin Americans and Asians may have little time to consider the meaning of life, but neither do the service class or “information workers” in the richer zones of the globalized economy have that particular privilege, either. *All* of us inhabit a networked society that is, in the phrase used by time-theorist Hartmut Rosa, an “accelerated society” (2003). It is a society made possible by machines that run faster than machines have ever run before.

The machines in question are, of course, computers; machines that process information at a rate of speed that only increases, whilst dragging individuals, communities, businesses, governments, societies, and cultures into its hurtling and erratic trajectory that is heading to no-one knows where. And Moore’s Law and new advances in “memristors,” quantum computing and chemical computing are combining to ensure that there are no known limits to how fast computers are able to process more and more amounts of information. Yet, hardly anyone considers whether this is actually a good thing or not. The computers that suffuse every nook and cranny of society also accelerate it ways we barely understand. Indeed, in what is becoming the irony of our digital age—we do not have the time to think about the consequences of speed because our society is moving and changing so quickly. Not many of us any longer has the time to be lazy by choice, and therefore few have that precious time to consider whether a Lafarguan laziness might actually have benefits.

This book seeks to take some small steps toward a greater understanding of our temporal enslavement to the very machines that are supposed to free us. A big problem for us is that we are weak when it comes to information. Let me explain that statement. It is true that many of us throw caution to the wind when the next piece of super widgetry from Apple Inc. hits the stores, and we buy it whether we can afford it or not, or whether we have any practical use for it. But that is not what I mean. Our weakness in respect of information goes much deeper, and much further back into our species’ history. Unlike other animals, we are unable to naturally filter out that which is not strictly necessary for our survival. As the philosophical anthropologist Arnold

Gehlen argues, we are prone to overstimulation by our surroundings because we lack the powerful instinct of most animal species that are able to ignore that which it does not strictly need to deal with. Uniquely, however, we are prone to *develop technology*. This facility for technology-building has enabled us to do something about information overload. It has allowed us to create material cultures, to construct habits and routines that allow us to focus our attention on certain things and the information they contain (or we impute to them). From the beginnings of our collective history, cultures, institutions, religions, civilizations have been assembled through technological development and these have served to focus our attention and allow us place emphasis on the forms of information (knowledge) and their application that best enable us (as we have judged it in our fractious and sometimes terrible estimation) to *construct* and *lead* lives instead of simply living them. In short, technology gives us the capacity to concentrate the mind or what we have deemed to be important, and prevents us from becoming lost in an ocean of information.

There is, however, a technology with which we have the deepest and most ancient of our relationships—which has now become a machine and yet we hardly know it: writing. Writing is a technology we barely recognize as such because it has so deeply entered into our consciousness and shaped who we are and the worlds that we have constructed. Tony Judt tells us that “words are all we have” (2010, 155). But we all too easily neglect and abuse this treasure because we take them for granted—and because we are awash with them. Today we swim in fast-flowing torrents of information and it is this digital overload that is causing us to regress to our infantile and weak state in terms of how we relate to information. We lived for thousands of years in the culture of print. And as mass literacy created the mass society with the rise of industrialism, print became a way of life. But we lost our respect for its power, and as it insinuated itself into our consciousness it ceased to be a tool for us, it seemed instead, as Walter Ong pointed out, simply to be a part of what we are as humans (1992, 293). The tool has now changed, but we do not realize what this means, we do not recognize the implications this change has—for just about everything.

Theorist of technology, Bruno Latour, tells us that technologies are enfolded with the heterogeneous temporalities that reflect the context of their creation (2002, 249). And so our “oneness” with writing meant that in its original form it was encoded with human and environmental

temporalities. The practice of writing and reading is fundamentally biological and organic and its rhythms constituted the baseline rhythms of early civilization right up until recent times. The processes involved in the practice of reading and writing “matched” the speed and physical capacities of humans and the lives they led. And Judt was surely correct in his summation of the value of words. Writing and reading made everything possible that we have today. Industrialization, Enlightenment thought, democracy, modernity-as-project—all were the “effect” of writing and reading and thus these large-scale social and cultural processes were themselves encoded with the human and environmental rhythms of time—with one pretty significant, not to say, *revolutionary* addition: the clock. This is another technology that we too often taken for granted, because it too has suffused its logic into the core of our being, individually and collectively. People born into modernity were born into the rhythm of the clock. One had to learn how to tell the time, but once inured to its infallible linearity, the individual was primed to synchronize with the wider tempo of society. Clock time as habit and as institution means that for the first time in human history, the world becomes plannable, schedulable, and organizable.

When the clock became an entrenched and institutionalized regulator, developing industry along factory lines thus became thinkable and doable. Capitalism could likewise flourish; and both in combination would give Adam Smith pause to consider the provenance of the wealth of nations in the late eighteenth century. Smith himself was an influential member of the world’s first information network. This was the circulation of ideas though what came to be known as the “republic of letters”; an information work of the highest order whose ideas on the nature of democracy, science, and philosophy constituted the basis of the Enlightenment. We can say, then, in a chain of causation that forms the principle arguments to come in this book, that a biologically and environmentally entimed technology of writing made possible the rise of organized and proto-rationalized societies. Rationalization in its turn was made possible with the adoption of the technology of the clock that sublimated organic and ancient rhythms (though not completely negating them) to the rhythms of machine and industry. Individuals and societies and civilizations could flourish within this fundamentally print-based ordering of human relations. Institutions could arise to shape cultures and polities and form the larger historical developmental trajectory of modernity. The pace of life would speed up slowly (and sometimes rapidly), but always inexorably, to challenge

the physical and cognitive capacities of humans. For most of our history we could cope with this pressure, just.

Times, however, have (literally) changed. The world has a new information network through which to conduct its business. And not just the business of business—but the business of almost everything we do. Indeed it is increasingly the case that everything we do is a form of business. Networks of electronic communication are supplanting much of the human interaction that formerly was conducted face-to-face. Not only that, whole new (and previously unimaginable) realms of relationship and experience are opening up—witness, for example, the rapid rise and vast scope of social networking. Virtual worlds of culture and politics and entertainment blur to form a common logic based upon the power of a new and invisible (to most of us) kind of writing: code.

Our transformed relationships are not simply confined to those that we have with each other. Underlying these changes are new experiences with temporality and with writing. The time that Lafargue wanted freed up to allow us to be human beings instead of automaton, has instead become commodified and compressed into what Ron Purser termed a “constant present” (2002, 13). In our accelerated society the demands of the digital network press in on our experiences of time, filling our time and shrinking its phenomenological textures down to the flat temporal horizon of the *now*. Past and future become more difficult to retrieve and project—because we have less and less time to indulge ourselves in our own time.

Not so long ago the primary media for information networks was still print. In newspapers, in magazines, in books, in libraries, words remained fixed in time and space. We consumers of words also wrote them in a form primarily set upon paper, either longhand or typewritten or mass produced through industrial presses, that would remain material and solid until archived—where its meaning fell silent until once more read—or it was discarded in some way for it to disappear. The mass media of television and radio for all their global and electronic forms were nonetheless “informed” at their roots by words on paper, and “conditioned” by the relative space–time fixity of the ultimate baseline media of the printed word.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have accelerated time and accelerated how society lives it. Crucially, ICTs have destabilized the ancient fixity of words and their meanings. Destabilized words have now created ontologically destabilized worlds. Writing has become liquid, and digital representations of meaning

have begun to pulse and flow at an ever-quickening pace that militates against the pause and the traction and concentration and the reflection that meaning-construction demands. Our weakness in respect of information is increasingly becoming pathological. Expressed in what I see as a ‘chronic distraction’ we are at risk (individually and collectively) of becoming disconnected from the rhythms of time and the technologies of time that have made the worlds that we still take for granted. When living in a constant present, and where knowing ‘less about more’ becomes the default position, the institutions that created our modern world begin also to slip their ontological moorings. Our chronic distraction is in many ways a *distraction from uncertainty*, an uncertainty that the unplanned trajectory of our late-modernity generates in its speed fetish. As Zygmunt Bauman notes in his *Liquid Modernity*, quoting Gerhardt Schulze, “this is a new type of uncertainty: ‘not knowing the ends instead of the traditional uncertainty of not knowing the means’” (2004, 61).

A lack of understanding of both “ends” and “means” is our lot today in the network society. Chronic distraction—caused by the entrenched logic of acceleration through ubiquitous computing and neoliberal ideology—is how we respond to this lack. And much slips through the crack in our collective attention span. The following pages will discuss what I see to be the most important effects of our collective uncertainty.

There are a couple of things we can be sure of, though: time and the technology of writing have been transformed at their heart. And like the network society more broadly, they have become digital and highly unstable. We are losing our grip upon the world at its ontological core, and the network system as presently constituted prevents us from regaining any sort of democratic control over it—at the local level as well as the global. What to do? Answers do not come easily, but we need to make a start and if words are all we have, then we need to use them to better understand our relationship with them.

President John F. Kennedy once said that Americans “must use time as a tool, not as a couch.” This could be construed as a sideswipe at Lafargue and his paean to the freedom found in idleness. Rather more likely it was meant as a straight invocation against the “wasting” of time. But to use time as a tool we need first to be able to control it, in our individual lives as well as at the collective level. We do not. Driven by the market and by the “dogma of computing,” a new *network time* is a tool that is spinning out of our control. This leaves us only with the couch, M. Lafargue’s couch. Why not take a seat?



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This Other Temporality

Do I Have Your Undivided Attention?

This is a book about a contemporary cultural cognitive condition called distraction. Attentive readers will have possibly noted the rather inelegant and overdone attempt at alliteration in that sentence, where five “Cs” collide, albeit quite gently, one after the other, causing a kind of speed-bump effect that serves, ideally, to slow the reader down a little bit. Longish sentences, like the one you have just read, can have a similar effect. There are a couple of points to be made in this observation. One is that advertising professionals (as well as book editors and publishers) tell us that to sell something to somebody, be it a brand of toothpaste, or car, or book, or idea, there must be a tactic employed, whereby the “hook” catches the attention of the reader and pulls him or her toward where you want them to go. The other point is that what is happening—and what is happening if you are still reading—is that a certain amount of cognitive traction is taking place, the effect of “interest” keeping you here on this page for a while longer. On the Internet, website designers routinely aim for something similar. They call it “sticky content” and it is the kind of stuff—and could conceivably be anything—that keeps eyeballs from wandering too quickly from Website to Website. The search-engine colossus Google has made a business out of tracking “stickiness” and selling advertising on the back of it. There will be much more on the Internet (and Google) later. What I want to do in this first chapter is to think from a different perspective about what is happening in the traction–distraction dialectic. The value of stickiness (or anti-distraction) to advertisers and booksellers is obvious. But what (commercial concerns aside) is actually happening when we are being distracted, or when efforts are made either by people in the world “out there” to get and sustain our attention, or when we ourselves make the conscious effort to remain

with the process of reading and writing a little longer, and resist the impulse for the mind and the attention to wander? Why, indeed, does the concentration tend to lapse? Are we innately shallow creatures who are easily distracted and endlessly diverted? Or can we see this restlessness in another way, as some do, where instead of terming it distraction we can put a positive spin on it and call it “multitasking”, something that is supposedly a useful, efficient, and industrious skill for today’s world? Does it actually matter very much?

Writing this book would indicate that I think that it does, and deeply. As children at school we all learned that distraction is a bad thing. For the eyes to stray out the classroom window to the clouds or the playing field, or for the mind to roam to untold realms of fantasy and idleness was always seen to be to the detriment of the purpose of schooling—which was to learn, to absorb information and knowledge, and to become more or less rounded and functional individuals and citizens. Doubtless, some of us continued longer in our visual and mental wanderings. But we could be trained to moderate this and learn the discipline of sustained concentration. Others could learn to be creative within a distracted state. And yet others, indeed, learned to be more flexible and develop the ability to move in and out of all three modes. However, that age-old problem for kids and for adults too has come up against the unprecedented challenges of the “network society,” where lightning-speed information processing and its application have transformed the contexts in which we relate to information and knowledge. The classroom has changed; the workplace and the home space have changed. The effect is that never has it been so difficult *not* to be distracted, and never has our resistance to it been so low and feeble.

Why this is so will not become clear, nor solutions thinkable, until the problem of our now-chronic distraction is properly identified. Accordingly, I want to locate the ground zero of the malaise of chronic distraction in the realm of *time*. At one level this is obvious. If we try to concentrate on something, such as reading another page of Wittgenstein on a park bench when your mobile phone is buzzing, or when an e-mail delivery icon pops up when we are trying to write an essay at home or a report at work, then we are dealing with a specific relationship with time, a contextualized one where different things are competing for your time (your attention). At this surface level of analysis, the problem may be brushed aside as simply a fact of our busy networked lives, examples of what Dale Southerton (2003)

calls the “time squeeze,” and is something that we all just need to cope with as best we can. However, unless we understand the nature of social time and our relationship with temporality, then not only will these problems become worse—which then becomes a political problem—but we will also *understand them correspondingly less*, because the network society, as I will show in Chapter 3, is one that is set on a path of open-ended *acceleration*, that is to say, if you think life today is getting faster, then you ain’t seen nothing yet. Today the imperative of needing to understand time as a changing social phenomenon is acute, because the new relationship with time—like the network society itself—permeates so much of our lives.

The first job then is to make clear and definite links between the experience of what may *prima facie* seem to be quite different phenomena. These are: *time*, *technology*, and the processes of *reading and writing*. I want to show how these have functioned together in a particular way to build the world as we have known it for nearly three hundred years. This has been the world of modernity. In very recent times, however, these interacting processes have been transformed at their core and are now building a very different world, a late-modern one where the sureties (such as they were) of the previous world are fast disappearing and being displaced by what I see to be a chronic and pervasive mode of *cognitive distraction* that is the expression of a world increasingly devoid of the Enlightenment impulses that gave it meaning and purpose in the first place.

The foregoing sentence reads like the beginning of a serious, if not familiar, tale. But this is not another whingeing critique of a dissipating late-modernity—nor is it just one more pleading case in support of an ossifying modernity. It is another way of looking at these ways of being and seeing through a very different lens. It is a perspective that is permeated above all by a *theory of time*, which, in its turn, throws a different light upon technological development, beginning with the invention of writing and the development of the skill of reading. Taken together, these will provide a unique view of the trajectory of modernity into a late-modernity, and illustrate how the arc of “progress” has been transformed into its opposite: that is to say, into a negative circle (or cycle) of presentism where past and future are compressing steadily into a constant now. It is here that new modes of time, new modes of technology, and new modes of reading and writing help create a faster and shallower world and more instrumental world where we know less about more—and forget what we know every more quickly.

Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, argued that reason and rationality had become “negative” and evolved into a “mere construction of means” where there was no way back to a logic of emancipatory reason (1986, 42). There is no doubt, as this book will show, that they were right and that a world obsessed with “means” has reached such heights of intensity that even Adorno and Horkheimer could scarcely have dreamed of. But that is not the end of the story. I am telling quite a different tale regarding the evolution of the Enlightenment-created world, one that suggests that if there is indeed a way back, then it will be through the finding of new intellectual, cultural, and *temporal* paths to follow. To do this it will be necessary, however, for the reader to persist with a challenging (challenging for me at least to think and write about) few opening pages, to then perhaps be rewarded by what I see to be a fresh perspective on our current reality. This new reality, a “temporalized” reality, is one that, *contra* Adorno and Horkheimer and their generations of adherents, is in fact full of promise and potential and ways of seeing that are not possible through the many current, and largely baleful, modes of analysis.

So to begin with some framing questions with which to consider the nature of and the relationship between the processes of temporality, technology, reading and writing: What is the “time” of a thought? Is it possible to measure thinking? Can we consider knowledge or information (a crucial distinction to be taken up later), or reading and writing, as having their own temporal “rhythms”? Can time move too fast for us? Questions such as these might seem akin to trying to grasp fresh air with your hands. So unfamiliar are we to thinking in such terms that such ideas sound (and feel) impossible. By contrast, so familiar are we to thinking and experiencing as “individuals,” that we assume, intuitively at least, that what goes on in my head, what I carry around as “thoughts” and “knowledge” may indeed have a generalized association—after all we share a common world, do not we? However, to borrow a phrase from the existentialist and psychiatrist R.D. Laing, “I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience” (1967, 16). To a significant degree, it seems, time, thinking, and many forms of knowledge are the fruits of subjective experience. These are ways of understanding, processes, and modes of being that we cannot *really* and *fully* share. We connect our experiences only at the most superficial level, where what you experience and what I experience may be objectively the same, but our interpretations will

always diverge in respect of the “reality” we confront. Like two friends experiencing a football match. They will likely see the game in very different ways, with a myriad of factors shaping each interpretation, be it boredom, or excitement, or knowledge of the game in general or perhaps a comparative lack of it. Never can we “match” exactly our subjective experience of the world.

At one register of consciousness this observation on the apparent nature of experience is banal and expresses something we all “know” to be the way of the world. Experience—so this reasoning goes—is singular and is a manifestation (or possibly cause?) of our innate individuality. And so to say that thoughts and knowledge can have rhythms, pace, and a particular *speed* seems faintly absurd. Consequently, in our western, modernist culture, the subjective nature of experience and the elusive nature of time make for a rather difficult dovetailing. Indeed, it is even more problematic to think of “measuring” such interaction temporally. Time’s intangible qualities and its capacious elasticity between past, present, and future are sunk deep into our literary culture and we can glimpse here the extent of the challenge we face to properly grasp the nature of time. The French novelist Marcel Proust made a career out of such an approach to time. Somewhat ironically, he guaranteed himself in the process the “timelessness” of being admitted into the Western modernist canon. In his *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust continually describes time as being an element of both social and individualized contexts. But he inscribes these with a special evanescent and dreamlike quality, ones that he is nonetheless careful to differentiate from the actual practice of sleep. In his discoursing on the subjective unconsciousness nature of sleep at the liminal portal of waking, Proust writes that: “... on those mornings (and this is what makes me say that sleep is perhaps unconsciously of the law of time) my effort to awaken consisted chiefly in an effort to make the obscure, undefined mass of the sleep in which I’d just been living enter in to the scale of time” (2006, 326).

Julia Kristeva has analyzed Proust’s approach to time and noted that his “style outlines *this other temporality*, which transcends measurement, space, and duration...” (1996, 233) (my italics). The philosopher’s perspective of time’s subjective essence continues with Elizabeth Grosz who, following the phenomenology of Husserl and Bergson, writes that “Time is neither fully present, a thing in itself, nor is it a pure abstraction, a metaphysical assumption that can be ignored in everyday practice. We can think it only in passing moments, through

ruptures, nicks, cuts, in instances of dislocation, though it contains no moments or ruptures and has no being or presence, functioning only as continuous becoming” (2004, 5).

The multifaceted, subjective, ostensibly elusive and *malleable* nature of time is pretty clear in these texts. But this essence also forms the unconscious—and largely unreflected upon—backdrop to our collective social and public lives too. We only have to consider how, in many instances in many social and political cultures, what time “is” is always up for grabs, and therefore not readily “measurable” as real-world temporal rhythms. For example, there is a common view of history which states or implies that it unfolds over the “passage of time,” down through a great chain of events involving particular people and places, armies, inventions, revolutions, and so on. In this view, “traditions” can form as a result of this temporal congealing through ritual and practice, and their relative fixity as facts and events in written records seemingly allow us to be in touch with our collective pasts. History, then, might seem to have its own temporal rhythms, punctuated by patterns and sequences that may act as the basis for a chronologically measurable, historical time. However, as Eric Hobsbawm observes in the opening to his collection, *The Invention of Tradition*, many of those reassuring social and cultural rituals “which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (1983, 1). Similarly, Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities* argued powerfully that the concept of the nation, something that is the very epitome of “tradition” and historical time, is a figment of our collective imaginary, something we agree to be true, because the scope and “substance” of a nation is impossible to appreciate as a individual, if only because he or she can only ever experience a tiny part of the larger totality: so we “imagine” it, so as to give “confirmation of the solidity of a single community...moving onward through calendrical time” (1991, 27).

The social dynamics of invention and imagination working upon our sense of time is a continuing feature of the contemporary world. In the former Soviet Union, for example, the forward march of progress through “calendrical time” was a *telos* set in concrete by the Communist Party and its particular ideology. Through its hegemonizing grip upon the educational, industrial, and media institutions, the past was able to be invented and imagined and projected toward the future in such a way as to place communism, Soviet history, and the Party itself, in the best possible light. Post-1989, however, the psychic structures

of history and tradition began to collapse and the institutions they formed began to crumble to reveal a sort of time void. New inventions, new traditions, and new perspectives [through, for example, the articulation of new historiographies (e.g., Brent 2009)] rushed into the space to give past, present, and future new shapes and textures and potential modes of experience. Accordingly, Russia's past is presently being rearranged and reordered in accordance with the changed exigencies of new Russian power formations. Today there is a largely subterranean (in that it receives little media attention), but hugely significant battle being waged in Russia over what might be called, to use Proust's title, "the remembrance of things past." It is a battle between progressive civil society groups such as Memorial and the quasi-totalitarian state that is now in the saddle. Memorial wants to reclaim or simply to discover, through free and open study of the State Archives and other sources, alternative pasts that had been expunged from popular memory through Stalinist repression (Figs 2007). However, the new regime in Russia, threatened by this challenge to their own twenty-first-century brand of soft-Stalinism, continues to invent and inscribe narratives of the past that suit their present and future projects.

An example of these ongoing time wars surfaced in the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. In an article published on his official website, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin described the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, which cleared the way for the Second World War, as "immoral." Such a statement was on the face of it highly significant, as it seemed to suggest a new candor on the part of the Russian leadership, one that might be open to a fuller accounting of the past. However, this was as far as the criticism went. Putin's article went on to throw a heavy obfuscatory blanket over the past by arguing that the "immorality" of the Pact was justified by the context of the times. The fact that the British had *also* treated with Hitler at Munich the year before, was held up as evidence by Putin that there were no innocents in the diplomacy of the late-1930s; and anyway, the root of the problem lay in the Allied *diktat* expressed through the Versailles Treaty of 1919 that placed an insurmountable burden of reparations upon Germany—something in which Russia played no part. And so a closer reading of Putin's essay reveals that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was something supposedly *forced* upon the Russians, through circumstances created by the West (Putin 2009). All this is debatable up to a point. However, the essay makes no mention (and this would have been significant) of the "secret protocols"