theories and methodologies

Facts, Faction, Anachronism

RUSS CASTRONOVO

TEMPORAL CONCERNS ARE BAKED INTO THE MATTER OF FACTS. FROM AN ETYMOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW, FACTS ARE MOMENTS OF MAKING and doing that are no longer alive and kicking. Coming into English and other modern Western languages by means of both the past participle of the Latin word *facere* ("to make or to do") and the Latin noun *factum*, whose senses include the "result of doing" and "something done," *fact* denotes an action that has happened and is now preserved like a fossil in the accumulated sediments of history ("Fact"). Etymologically speaking, facts are safely removed from the vicissitudes of the present and the whims of our leaders. So it makes sense that there should be some hand-wringing over facts that have become so thoroughly destabilized that they no longer seem to be based on anything. The defining moment in this distressing development occurred when the Trump administration, not content merely to put a spin on facts, dismissed quantifiable facts by summoning "alternative facts" to deny that the low attendance at the 2017 presidential inauguration was real. A dictionary, not the renowned one from Oxford but *Urban Dictionary*, offers the following definition of *alternative facts*: "an attempt to gaslight the population in an effort to control the media and create propaganda" (Mozzy-o). If only we could take refuge in etymology and remind ourselves and anyone else who will listen that facts are veritable faits accomplis, over and done with, past participles that stand as linguistic monuments to a bygone event beyond alteration.

But the security implied by the term's origins is undone by a thicker set of semantic concerns. The association with making and doing reveals that, even before becoming lodged in the past, *factum* and fact bear the marks of human invention, accomplishment, and deeds. Facts may have stood since time immemorial, but the trace of materiality in the origins of the word belies this temporal fixity. When in his *Facta et dicta mirabilia* (*Memorable Doings and Sayings*) Valerius Maximus set out to "arrange the deeds [*facta*] and sayings [*dicta*] worthy of memorial" in the first century BCE, he implicitly

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held that actions, like speech, are the result of making, both human and divine. Valerius acknowledges his own hand in curating this compendium that collects noteworthy examples found "too widely scattered in other sources" (13). The compendium discloses not just the hand of the chronicler but also the influence of gods, tyrants, and demagogues as the making and doing in the present become past events and settle into facts. The notable *facta* of the Roman world that Valerius compiles all have their subsets, among them superstition, omen, and deception. These sorts of fact are instrumental to securing politico-theological hegemony. Valerius provides the example of Numa, an early king of Rome who, "wishing to bind the Roman people with rituals, tried to make it appear that he had meetings by night with the goddess Aegeria" (41). According to this rendering, facts have never been what we take them to be, a sturdy bulwark against the appearance and show, not to mention manipulation and lying, that undergird the rule of those who would be king.

Instead, facts have long been connected to faction, sedition, organized dissent, and party politics, which are of course the same forces that threaten the objectivity and truth-value of facts in the first place. Sprung from the same source, fact and faction share enough history that the notion of making innate to each (one archaic sense of *faction* is "the action or process of making something" ["Faction"]) suggests that facts were politicized from the start. Books about the United States Civil War, the Illuminati, UFO's, Richard III, and global energy policy have paired fact and fiction. Notwithstanding the usefulness of alliteration (e.g., *Fact, Fiction, and Flying Saucers*, by Stanton T. Friedman and Kathleen Marden) as a marketing strategy, such uses are imprecise and usually do little beyond noting the porousness of the border between the two categories. While facts are thus commonly made proximate to fiction, what I call the fact-faction circuit more aptly describes how the transformation of facts from instruments of disinterestedness, objectivity, and accord into the weaponized means of party politics upends historicism and opens the door to anachronism, not only as a historical trespass but also in a generative way.

Even though Latin is thought of as a dead language, the making and doing associated with *facere* still resonate, as they do when Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics "as a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making" (*Politics* 17). Rancière's original French for "ways of doing and making," "manières de faire," captures the ancient connections among making, doing, facts, and temporality, because *fait* is both a past-tense form of *faire* and the word for fact (*Le partage* 30). The paths that radiate outward from *facere* lead, on the one hand, to established, proven, and stable bits of truth known as facts and, on the other, to a more dynamic zone of artistic practice and fabrication. Although they seem to diverge, the paths in fact share a commonality, which is commonality itself. Aesthetic practices matter because of "what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common to the community" (Rancière, *Politics* 8). Likewise, facts hold sway because they are commonly agreed on—except, of course, when they are not. The connections between facts and *facere* grow stronger in an 1818 notebook entry by Samuel Taylor Coleridge—included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of *fact*—in which he complained about philosophical disputes that were rich in "[d]icts but feeble in facts" (4425). His formulation recalls and reorders Valerius's *facta* and *dicta*, here setting the two in opposition so that what is said appears as airy rhetoric devoid of truth-value when compared with the solidity of fact-based discourse. Yet the reason for the dictionary's inclusion of this snippet from Coleridge's *Notebooks* among the historical uses of *fact* is not as straightforward as it might seem

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("Fact"). Coleridge connects the weak showing of facts to "rabious Polemics," a move that makes fact uncomfortably close, etymologically as well as conceptually, to faction (4425).

While the aesthetics of *facere*, *faire*, and fact are attuned to the common, so is the aesthetic of faction. This convergence seems contradictory: how can partisanship and universal accord each revolve around the common? It all depends on which part of the fact-faction circuit is emphasized. For James Madison, faction brings citizens who are "actuated by some common impulse of passion" together in a combustible setting (78). If facts are in motion, sloshing about in a soup of word origins and historical uses that can veer toward faction, this movement poses a problem for attitudes about historical temporality. As an intellectual endeavor, history gains its coherence, to say nothing of its authority, from notions of logic, causality, and sequence. Facts are important in establishing the continuity that strings together "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary," to invoke Walter Benjamin's famous image from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (263). Benjamin urges us to abandon our devotion to this sort of narrative and instead experiment with an alternative historical sensibility that distributes facts and events differently with respect to past and present. He describes this sensibility as a "constellation" that has the potential to fuse the past and present into a single formation (263). Any method that could be adduced from this philosophy of history would likely be grounded in anachronism, which is hardly stable ground at all, since it jumbles the logic of chronology. "Anachronism is the mistake that consists of putting a fact too early," writes Rancière ("Concept" 22). It is also the mistake that unmoors facts from the narrow purview of dates and allows them to resonate beyond their immediate temporal locations. If facts are fossils, then anachronism makes a mess of the orderly strata that lodge their meanings in an immutable past.

Not simply a mistake like, say, putting Julius Caesar in an Elizabethan doublet, as Shakespeare did, anachronism represents a grievous imposition of present attitudes on past events, a sort of moral trespass. For Lucien Febvre, one of the founders of the Annales school of historiography, the historian's prime directive is to "avoid the worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven—anachronism" (qtd. in Rancière, "Concept" 21). This "unpardonable sin" violates "the basic principle of epistemology" by eradicating the gap between the observer, who can be nowhere other than the present, and what was made and done in the past (Grazia 13). This elision produces the "crude possibility of crediting a writer with a meaning he could not have intended to convey, since that meaning was not available to him" (Skinner 9). Describing examples of this trespass, Quentin Skinner faults approaches that read contemporary understandings of consent back into John Locke's *Second Treatise* or discover support for the welfare state in social thought at the time of the English Civil War. He instead advocates for "an alternative methodology" that studiously resists the temptation to impose temporal perspectives from the present on the past (48). Insofar as the historian of ideas is concerned, it is not the past but the present that is a foreign country, and Skinner charges methodologies that cross the borders of temporal landscapes with "academic imperialism," arguing that they ignore the "conceptual propriety" that houses everything in its correct place in time (49). Fundamental is the way that "facts are handled in the methodology of contextual study," which ought to ensure that facts do not "get fitted into an inappropriate framework" (49). From this perspective, facts are the innocent bystanders of history that get caught in the cross fire of overzealous interpretation and reckless presentism. What electrifies the fact-faction circuit, then, is the temporal insouciance of anachronism, which demands that

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the "history of thought" provide "a solution to our own immediate problems" (53).

From a different perspective, however, anachronism is precisely what allows us to understand, interpret, and use facts. Anachronism empowers critics to reckon creatively with the immanent temporality of facts as past participles, to reintroduce making and doing to what is made and done, to discern movement within otherwise static bits of knowledge. By placing the present too early, by importing present ideas into a prior time, anachronism enables us to understand facts as gerunds, as articulations between doing and making, as Rancière would say. Sins against historical sequence encompass much more than misplaced details such as the clock that strikes in *Julius Caesar* or the wristwatches worn by gladiators in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960). Rather, anachronism describes an irreverent sensibility, one unafraid to incur the charge of being inaccurate or, worse still, irresponsible, when it comes to chronology. "The accusation of anachronism," writes Rancière, is not merely "the claim that something did not exist at a given date. It is the claim that something *could not have existed* at this date" ("Concept" 28). Skinner is no doubt right that the welfare state was nowhere on the mind of the Levelers and that Plato could not have intended *The Republic* to be a commentary on modern totalitarianism (23). But these impossibilities represent opportunities for challenging what can exist in the realm of thought *now*, not just what could have existed in it then. The fallacy of anachronism restores the potential of the present to dead facts, enabling us to see a horizon of possibility that Catherine Gallagher, in her reading of "counterfactualism" and "backward time travel," connects to social justice (13, 19). We can thus understand why Rancière revises his initial assessment about the misplacement of facts in time to assert that "[a]nachronism is not a question of facts. It is a question of thought" ("Concept" 28). The contrast here separates believing from thinking: whereas belief requires that one "resemble one's time," anachronistic thinking does not insist that one be "contemporary to one's time" and therefore does not limit thinking to what is strictly believable or factual (36). In its indifference to sequence, order, and causality, anachronism challenges facts, whose safe lodging in the past makes them seem, if not immutable, then at least immobile.

Nevertheless, by restoring the present tense to facts, anachronism reverses not the course of history but the direction and meaning of historical interpretation and judgment. It is surely a fact that the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery in the United States in 1865. But as W. E. B. Du Bois asked amid the hardening of Jim Crow segregation, "What shall save us from a second slavery?" (43).[1] More recently, Michelle Alexander wondered why "hardly anyone seems to imagine that similar political dynamics have produced another caste system in the years following the collapse of Jim Crow—one that exists today" (21). Their critiques register the betrayals and failures that have led to present inequality, but their most radical effect is not to evaluate the past but to indict the present. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* enacts this reversal by making its protagonist, a woman named Dana, into a living anachronism who is forcibly dislocated from Los Angeles in 1976 to the slaveholding South. In this time-bending novel, Dana comes to resemble a fact that is placed too early: a resident of the bicentennial United States, she travels across time and experiences the horrors of American slavery, but this past also sheds a critical light on Dana, her choices, and the twentieth-century world she inhabits. "It is not we who sit in judgment on the past, but rather the past . . . which judges us," writes Fredric Jameson (70). Yet however severely the past would judge "the monadization, the privatized and instrumentalized speech, the commodity reification" that characterizes Dana's present as well

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as our own (70), there remain in the present the traces of a "Utopian impulse" from the past that anticipates "all other conceivable modes" in the future (71). The past, in other words, both prefigures the future and opens the possibility that when the future arrives, it may be changed. In the coming decades of the twenty-first century, as the human and every other species close in on a century of living precariously with nuclear weapons and with the collapse of the world's ice shelves into rising oceans, what is conceivable becomes both terrifying and necessary to confront.

Alluding to the watchwords of Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Margreta de Grazia writes, "If Always Historicize has been the mandate of the past generation, Never Anachronize may be its tacit corollary" (14). This injunction no longer incites the academic trepidation it once did, as critical work that takes a temporal turn—such as Susan Gillman's on the notion of "occult history" (22), Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood's on the "anachronic artifact" (14), Lee Edelman's on "reproductive futurism" (2), and Jeffrey Insko's on "Romantic presentism" (5)—is little disposed to strive for continuity, abide periodization, or give in to the pressures of optimism. Indeed, this prohibition likely has never held real sway: Jameson's description of "Nietzschean antihistoricism," in which "the very dynamics of the historical tribunal are unexpectedly and dialectically reversed," indicates that the recent timing of the temporal turn, one might say, precedes itself (45, 70). To historicize is to anachronize—at least that is the case for any critic who wants to think something different about the history and the facts it accumulates that we believe to be true. "Anachronistic irruptions . . . can certainly become sites of critique or alternative imagining," writes Elizabeth Freeman, who suggests that queer temporalities are often embodied by subjects who do not keep pace with traditional notions of progress ("Synchronic/Anachronic" 130). The "perverse backwardness" that is attached to subjects who do not live according to the protocols of straight time (Rohy xiv), the erotic asynchronies that fail to align with the rhythms of reproductive heterosexuality (Freeman, Introduction 159–60), and the presumptions about the atavism of nonwhite people all skew the temporal expectations that govern the investments, psychic as well as financial, of individuals who see themselves and are perceived by others as not advancing through time. Stuck in dead-end jobs, obsessing over past injuries, or caught in other nonproductive attachments, subjects who are temporally askew or simply out of time deviate from the linear, normative expectations of career, love, and care.

Despite the warning against succumbing to anachronism and mixing up the temporal placement of facts, even familiar narratives aligned closely with national histories and state forms might not belong to their time—or to the present from which critics read them. The frontier novels by James Fenimore Cooper—forming a series known as the Leatherstocking Tales—advance a narrative of settlement that provides indigenous peoples no option other than to resign themselves to "removal" and eventual "disappearance," terms that downplay the violence of frontier history. But the series, as Robert S. Levine points out, is structured around a chronological peculiarity, "the striking fact that the last novel in the Leatherstocking series, *The Deerslayer* (1841), is chronologically its first" (28). This oddity allows Levine to read anachronistically, which is to say it sets in motion a critical reevaluation of the fraught relation between settler colonialism and depictions of race. "It is time that we reread the Leatherstocking novels by beginning with the end," concludes Levine (45). Going forward by shifting into reverse, Levine muses, "[i]t is almost as if we need Cooper forever fixed . . . so we don't have to read him anymore" (30). Against the tendency to make interpretation static so that it becomes a fact and adheres to

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the past participle in the etymological DNA of *fact*, this reading insists that the making and doing associated with *facere* are essential to reading itself.

Readings that reorder the past, present, and future—each a receptacle for facts and actions—create a shifting conceptual terrain that upsets notions of succession. Temporal succession, as Rancière implies, is not unrelated to political succession. All lineal arrangements, from ruling families to consumer supply chains, represent "a vertical problem of the order of time in the hierarchy of beings" ("Concept" 23). The interruption of timelines loosens the hold that notions of chronology have on what is conceivable, expanding what could have been thought at a certain time, including the present. At its core, historical narrative becomes a matter of distribution, "the division (*partage*) of time" in which anachronism provides the impetus to reexamine how time and other resources—after all, time is preeminently a historical resource—are divvied up (23). This formulation echoes the opening pages of Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*: "I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (7).[2] The unmistakable allusion to Thomas Jefferson's self-evident truths ratchets up the political potential that Rancière sees in anachronism. Like aesthetic sensibilities, facts can be partaged, or divided into parts (the verb form of *partage* has become obsolete, but the noun form is still in use ["Partage"]), yet there is no guarantee that the distribution will accord with the ethos of *le commun* ("the common"). The fact-faction circuit suggests a different story: facts can amplify the divisions of party politics instead of providing a basis for a shared reality.

Instead of unequivocally referring to observations that have factual status because they are held in common, terms derived from *facere* can have quite different meanings associated with partisanship and internal strife. A term that originally meant, among other things, a group that organized chariot races in ancient Rome, *factio* ("faction") became for Alexander Hamilton the "pestilential breath" ("No. 81" 484) that threatened to cause political turbulence for American statesmen debating the virtues of setting up a Roman-style republic. Only a strong national union, Hamilton argued, could protect the vulnerable states from devolving into "wretched nurseries of unceasing discord" ("No. 9" 73). As Madison theorized, "The most common and durable source of faction has been the various and unequal distribution of property" (79). Rancière's distribution of "self-evident facts" cannot shake off the "unequal distribution" that breeds factions. Withheld in some cases and aggressively propagated in others, knowledge is parceled out not in keeping with a Jeffersonian commonality of "self-evident facts" but rather with a sharp-eyed calculation of factiousness. The potential for faction to give rise to the "rabious Polemics" that Coleridge associated with facts reveals that what is self-evident, accepted, and common is always in dispute. To pretend otherwise is to cede control of discourse to those who would seek to limit and distort it. Here, then, is the full power of anachronism: although faction, as an outgrowth of *facere*, develops from fact, its spirit of enmity and divisiveness has always been simultaneous with factual discourse.

Notes

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1. "Du Bois reorders linear time—positioning the past after, rather than before, the present," writes Laski (18).

2. The original French title of *The Politics of Aesthetics* is *Le partage du sensible* (*The Distribution of the Sensible*).

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