

## Geoff Eley, "Remembering the Future: What Use Is the Past?"

### Abstract

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How do we create the conditions for political optimism in a time of relentlessly diminishing expectations? The gaps between rich and poor, both internationally and inside particular societies, continue widening beyond any effective political control. So too does the gulf between the official rhetorics of democracy and popular cynicism about government's actual accountability. In another dimension, the world ecological catastrophe continues escalating beyond the reach of any coordinated political intervention. The idea that the conduct of politics bears any relationship to the practice of an ethical life seems an elusive trace of some earlier strange time. Contemporary politics seems increasingly organized around an absence, namely the loss of belief in any future society different from our own. How might history help with this predicament? In many ways history remains our best laboratory of contemporary understanding: it's where we can go in order to question our existing beliefs and assumptions, to make them less comfortable and familiar. It's where we can question the necessity of what otherwise seem to be solid and closed accounts of how the world works. It's where the apparent permanence of existing habits and arrangements might be de-authorized and even upset. History allows us to see how the world might be different. This lecture will explore some of the main pathways of political change during the past few decades. It will venture some arguments about the relationship of politics to social change. How can history help us grasp the new conditions and forms of political life? What is new and different about our present? What might be worth salvaging from an earlier time?

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Geoff Eley is the Karl Pohrt Distinguished University Professor of Contemporary History. He has published widely in German history of the 19th and 20th centuries, including his first book, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (1980, new edn. 1991) and a general reinterpretation of German history jointly authored with David Blackbourn called *The Peculiarities of German History* (German edn. 1980, English 1984). He is currently finishing another book on liberalism, popular politics, and the creation of the German national state between the 1860s and the 1890s. He joined the History Department at Michigan in 1979. During 2004-07 he chaired the Department of German, Dutch, and Scandinavian Studies. He previously taught at the University of Cambridge and was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and the University of Sussex.