

# The Present of the Day

*Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Contemporary*

*International Conference*

*Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi*

*in collaboration with ICSSR and Institut Français, Delhi*

*January 22-23, 2018*

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## Concept note

This conference will gather scholars across social science disciplines into a meditation on how different disciplines view the present: the conception of the present in social science (particularly anthropology, history, political theories think of the present), the presupposition regarding the nature of present in the present day practice of the politics, technology's approach and attitude towards present, and metaphysical theories of the present. It will also be concerned with the disappearance of the divisions and boundaries both in academic disciplines and in politics, which is related to the future of the academy and of politics.

The conference seeks to bring before ourselves the meaning of “the present” today—the present of the day—for our difficult juncture. The difficulty and the conjuncture refer to the technological appropriation of all that matters, political divisions of the left and the right appearing to be meaningless, the phenomenon in politics which demands instant action which is widely known as populism, the disappearance of episteme from the universities to the corporations and much more.

The question “*what is the meaning of the present for us?*” is not directed solely at the physics of the day which speaks most authoritatively on *Time*, although physics too can come to ask after it. Technology names the research disciplines and industries which dominate the present by claiming to shape it. However, the meaning of the present for a technologist would be different from that for a social scientist who studies the effects of technology on people and societies. It could also be that it is the aesthetician who is most intimate with the meaning of the present as the specialist of the imagination and sensibility. Another formulation of the question “*do we experience the present distinctly from other times and peoples?*” is a matter for the historian. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophical enquiries into the meaning of the present were set in a conjuncture with the interrogation of the tenacious present of “primitive societies” by anthropology. Anthropology was not studying the manifestation of eternity, which is not even an infinite passage of time, but the mechanics—structures, functions, causes—through which primitive societies tenaciously maintained their own form.

The experience of the present as the evanescent was thought in distinct ways in the last century by Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Davidson, Deleuze and Derrida, who worked through this question while asserting their difference with one another. “*What is the meaning of the present?*” is not an identical question in philosophy each time it is posed. The shared problematic of the abeyance or the suspension of the present was investigated by philosophers through conceptual inventions such as presencing, différance, difference, duration, individuation of events. The great theme of the last century, difference, is itself a name for this

problematic. The well-known idiom “metaphysics of presence” attests to this experience, also called nihilism, at the razor’s edge of modernity.

Today we have well determined futures arriving with or without announcement and these futures have already torn the fabulous divisions—Left and Right—in our experience of politics. Instead we have a new and equally fabulous division between those who would like to return to a tenacious form of society in the recent past and those who would leap to a tenacious techno-future which would swallow all the grounds upon which one could land—the tenacious past which would not pass against the techno-future determined as “the inevitable”.

This experience is the disappearance of the *contemporary* as the interval in which we give a measure to ourselves. The kind of present experienced by populism is one that prefers immersion to the interval of reflection. It is not what the last century called the postmodern, if we mean by that the sundering of the forms which could hold our experiences together. Instead, we have two grand forms with their own gravity which have dissolved the experience of the contemporary. Yet, the predominant experience of our day is of confusion, or the Babel. Confusion is properly the experience of an Idea which refuses its distinctions to the determinations of the philosopher through restless developments.

### **Themes for the conference:**

- 1) The meaning of the present in political philosophy
- 2) The cultural differences in the experience of the present
- 3) Anthropology of the present; the present implicit in anthropology
- 4) The evanescence and obduracy of the present in art, and in contemporary art
- 5) The relation of the present and the future in technology, especially digital and exponential technologies
- 6) the temporality of populism
- 7) the relation to the present, and the histories and futures of philosophy