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Theory of History at Work
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Time in History

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Time in History

During the coronavirus pandemic, between lockdowns and working from home, time seemed to have come undone, offering all the more reason to also pay attention to time in history. How do time and history relate to one another? And what does time mean for history as an academic discipline?

Similar to the seeming end of the world in a global pandemic and the end of one's daily routine due to working from home—temporal phenomena of different scopes—time in history has two different levels. In the first, time is a basis for historiography that is concerned not only with “times past” but also with change over time. In the second, time is a rich object for historical inquiry that reveals the intersections of different aspects in history. Both levels are occupied with time, as well as the need to theorise this occupation.

Time as a Basis for Historiography

Marc Bloch considered history to be the science of men in time, thereby elucidating time's fundamental role therein.¹ Whatever the object of study—be it the development, composition and structure of human associations in Social History, or the change, enforcement, and subversion of ideals of masculinity and femininity in Gender History, or processes of negotiation and decision in Political History—the focus is always on humans at a certain point in the passing of time. History, thus examines relations of “before” and “after”, as well as the processes in between.² It is concerned with continuities, ruptures, changes—in short with the human being in time.

These continuities, ruptures, and changes can have different velocities, as Fernand Braudel and Reinhart Koselleck have theorised in their models of temporal layers. Fast events occur on an upper level, while slower change unfolds in the middle level. At the lower end of the model flow the slow processes that can only be made visible over the *longue durée*.³ Considerations about the Anthropocene, Environmental History, and Big History have expanded this model by a “(very) *longue durée*”⁴ For instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued—with reference to the human influence on nature visible in anthropogenic climate change—that the boundaries between Human History and Natural History dissolve.⁵ History must engage with and theorise these different times, with the “pluritemporality” of historical processes.⁶

Furthermore, it is crucial to reflect on the significance of time for the description of these processes. Which metaphors does one choose? Which “figures of time” seem appropriate to grasp the process at hand and make it intelligible?⁷ What are the implications, for instance, of the fact that time is not only “layered” but also “flows” in the models of Braudel and Koselleck? This takes on importance given that depictions of history are always narrative: the historiography tells stories about the past, and stories have temporal plots.⁸ Paul Ricoeur posited that the relationship of narrativity and temporality is reciprocal.⁹ This raises a number of questions that need to be answered time and again in the course of historical inquiry: for instance, how can a non-teleological story of the past that takes into account the openness of the past situation be narrated in light of the knowledge about the story’s eventual end? What constitutes such an end (or beginning) of a narration, even though the historical developments remain ongoing? And how can both the end of the story and the incompleteness of historical developments be narrated? How can the synchronicity of such developments be captured in a necessarily sequential story, all the more so as these processes develop at different speeds? The choice of narrative means inscribes a certain temporality into the narrated developments. Time is therefore inherent to historical inquiry, which makes temporal (self-)reflection imperative.

Time as an Object of Historical Inquiry

Aside from being fundamental to historiography, time is also a fascinating object of historical inquiry. Time is, as Norbert Elias has demonstrated, a social construct created by setting different events in relation with one another, for the purpose of facilitating human orientation. In this sense time is not an object, but rather an action: humans are constantly “timing” in order to orientate themselves in the succession of events.¹⁰ As such a social construct time is alterable, and has therefore been repeatedly studied by historians in recent years.

As a relation between events and a means of orientation, time is a topic at intersections. After all, the temporal orientation Elias described occurs in various ways. History of Technology could, for instance, raise the question of the development of timing devices such as clocks and calendars, as well as their place in the respective societies. History of Ideas could explore various concepts of time and their influence on science and political movements. Furthermore, a possible object of Social History is the impact of temporal orders on lifeworlds, as questions of time can be coupled with questions of power: who established temporal orders?

With what justification? How and by whom were they enforced? To whom did they apply, and in what way?¹¹

These are only a few examples for the questions raised by a history of time that emphasise the potential of this topic at intersections. The question that all inquiries need to answer first, however, is what “time” means in their respective context. Setting out from different concepts of time and approaches—examining, for example, the history of working hours and leisure time, futures past and chronopolitics—has led to valuable insights. However, due to the different concepts of time, the relations of these insights to one another remain unclear: do these understandings of time have a common denominator? Still, this plurality of approaches does not lessen the potential of an investigation of time—or, more precisely, modes of “timing”—for historical inquiry. It can reveal a multitude of interrelations that would otherwise be hard (or perhaps impossible) to grasp: from the diverse (power-)relations of work to the relationship of politics and visions of history. While one needs to be cautious not to find time everywhere, and thereby lose focus of the actual object of investigation, history of time nevertheless enables a different point of view toward times past.

A Topic for a Theory of History at Work

Time is a topic at intersections on both levels: as a basis for historiography and an object of historical inquiry. Both levels, however, cannot be as neatly separated as I have done in this post. Rather, they merge into one another, as German historian Achim Landwehr’s examinations of time exemplify: he began with a history of time in the 17th century, continued with more philosophical explorations of the relations of pasts, presents, and futures, before proposing a different historiography centred around these relations.¹² The extent to which both levels merge into one another is also visible in the term “*Zeitschaft*” (time-scape), which is prominent in all of Landwehr’s explorations. There cannot be a strict boundary between time as a basis of historiography and as an object of historical inquiry.

The example illustrates the close ties between theory of history and historical inquiry when exploring time. Time is therefore an issue of Theory of History at Work and can, thanks to its numerous facets, contribute to the polyphonic discussion that Ethan Kleinberg has argued for in the opening article on this blog.¹³ And indeed, when dealing with time in history, a number of fundamental questions need to be answered time and again: how can time be captured in narrations of history? How can points of historical change be separated for analysis without

losing sight of change as a process? Which intersections can be illuminated by a history of time, and which cannot? Which tools are useful for this? What phenomena are part of the category of time if this category is not boundless? What, then, does time mean for history in general, and for individual historical inquiry in particular? The answers to these questions are more far-reaching than the rudimentary thoughts presented here. So let us get to work and see which polyphonic questions and answers, discussions, and inspirations time will bring for historiography.

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Tags: history of time / Narration / time

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992 [1941], 23.

² Historians are regularly concerned with the relations of an "after" to a "before", for instance in debates surrounding the politics of memory. Achim Landwehr has suggested the term "chronofence" to capture the relations of different times: Achim Landwehr, *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit. Essay zur Geschichtstheorie*, Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2016.

³ Braudel applied this model in Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [1949], 2 volumes, New York: Harper Collins, 1972–1973. Koselleck proposes a similar model in Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000, 19–26.

⁴ Fabien Locher, Grégory Quenet, "Environmental History: The Origins, Stakes, and Perspectives of a New Site for Research," in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56, no. 4 (2009), 7–28, here 23.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," in *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 197–222, here 201–207. Chakrabarty recently expanded on these theses in his *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

⁶ On pluritemporality see Achim Landwehr, "Alte Zeiten, Neue Zeiten. Aussichten auf eine Zeit-Geschichte," in Landwehr, *Diesseits der Geschichte. Für eine andere Historiographie*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020, 29–47, here 43–46.

⁷ "Figures of time" (*Zeitfiguren*) is a central term for Lucian Hölscher, *Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020.

⁸ For an introduction—in German—to narrativity and historiography, see Achim Saupe, Felix Wiedemann, "Narration und Narratologie. Erzähltheorien in der Geschichtswissenschaft", URL: <https://docupedia.de/zg/Narration> (29.10.2021). See also, on this blog, §1 from Jörg van Norden, "["There are no truths outside the Gates of Eden" \(Bob Dylan\)](#)".

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1980), 169–191, here 169.

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *Über die Zeit. Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984, 8.

¹¹ A classic example of a study on the history of time that examines the relation of clocks, work, temporal order, and power in the context of industrial capitalist society is Edward P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," in *Past & Present* 38 (1967), 56–97. More recently, the relation of time and power has been investigated by Christopher Clark, *Time and Power. Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

¹² Achim Landwehr, *Geburt der Gegenwart. Eine Geschichte der Zeit im 17. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2014; ders.: *Anwesende Abwesenheit*; ders.: *Diesseits der Geschichte*. A discussion of Landwehr's most recent *Diesseits der Geschichte* can be found on this blog: Sina Steglich, "[Vom Wann der Geschichte zum Wie des Historischen](#)".

¹³ Ethan Kleinberg, "[Reflections on Theory of History Polyphonic](#)".