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The History of Temporalities: An Introduction

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In recent years, and across multiple disciplines, temporality has become a focus of scholarly attention. Why is this the case? Haven't historians always been concerned with temporalities? As the pieces gathered here suggest, the answer to this question has to be yes and no. Like all historical categories of analysis, time has provoked scholars to think in different directions across multiple disciplines for many years. But with increasing unanimity scholars are now emphasising histories of 'temporality' and not simply of 'time'. What does this shift imply?

Thinking with 'temporalities' has helped historians to understand that 'time' cannot be considered as an object separate from human configurations, perceptions, and measurements, as well as to emphasize that 'time' is always and everywhere a condition of life in the world, and therefore an essential category of historical analysis. Temporalities are to time what materialities are to matter – a blurring of what might seem determined, an entangling of time with action, a refusal of subject/object divisions. This language of blurring and entanglement (or, as some might put it, 'fuzziness') is a way of allowing our objects of study to remain complex, often irresolvable, generating new temporalities as they pass from moment to moment in the passage of time.¹ And these temporalities are always bound up, too, with the scholar's own temporal settings. The history of temporalities is, in this mode, a self-reflexive history that must be alert to the temporal forms of historical analysis and representation, and to temporal assumptions and habits that shape fields and objects of knowledge.

¹ Jeffrey M. Perl, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Barry Allen, 'Fuzzy Studies: A Symposium on the Consequences of Blur Part 1', *Common Knowledge*, vxii (2011).

Historians of temporalities cannot, however, return to a ground-breaking article from the 1980s or 1990s to mark a turning point in their practice. There is no ‘Why All This Fuss About the Hour’ or ‘The Moment: A Useful Category of Analysis’ to help focus the field.² This is in part because the history of temporalities is still rightly connected with older histories of time (histories of clocks and calendars matter), and partly because of its self-reflexive nature: the history of temporalities when practised with theoretical sensitivity cannot perform the temporalizing language of the ‘turn’ without considerable wariness.³ It is easy to turn turns into linear narratives of historical progression.⁴ As Vanessa Ogle notes in her contribution, there is always a danger of scholarship becoming a capitalist ‘search for new profit opportunities’, opportunities often created by convenient forgetting (or ‘repositioning’) of the scholarship on which we build: trash the history of time, and you can buy the shiny new history of temporalities. That is not our aim. Instead, the contributions presented here build on earlier scholarship on time, drawn from multiple disciplines and deploying multiple approaches.

Because of the diversity of approaches to the history of temporalities, any historiographical survey has to be partial. But to introduce readers to the history of time, we might begin with the study of techniques of time measurement. Pioneering work here was undertaken by the nineteenth-century German historian Gustav Bilfinger, who traced shifts from the system of the monastic hours, and variable hours, to a fixed-length 24-hour system. Bilfinger’s study *Die mittelalterlichen Horen*

² Compare Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis’, *American Historical Review*, xci (1986); Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,’ *Critical Inquiry*, xxii (1995).

³ For discussion of the language of turns, see David Gange’s observations in this collection. Also James W. Cook, ‘The Kids Are All Right: On the “Turning” of Cultural History’, *American Historical Review*, cxvii (2012).

⁴ On the narrative construction of time, see M. M. Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981); Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pelauer, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1984–88).

und modernen Stunden: ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte (1892), was framed by a division between the medieval (the imprecise) and modern (precise), a division which has generated an array of debates over the precise location of these shifts.⁵ Scholars have agreed that something separates past times from our modern present, and have located that separation in an increasingly precise and historical awareness of time itself. We are moving here towards a second strand in the historiography on time – an emphasis on the relationship between measurement, social form and cultural norms, expectations, and experiences of time. Essential to the focus on expectation and experience are the changes wrought across the twentieth century in hermeneutics and phenomenology by figures like Martin Heidegger, and in his wake Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. An important voice inflected by this tradition is the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who saw the emergence of a *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization) of history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: an older medieval and religious timelessness gives way to the dynamic forward moving historical precision of secular modernity.⁶ Or we could take E. P. Thompson, who analysed changes in the fabric of time in relation to industrial capitalism in his classic 1967 *Past & Present* article.⁷ Thompson's pioneering study was undertaken in dialogue with other integrators of measurement and culture – for example, Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934) and Carlo Cipolla's *Clocks and Culture, 1300–1700* (1967) – alongside an anthropological and sociological tradition of considering ecological and socio-structural times in dialogue (chiefly, here, E. E.

⁵ For further discussion of this structure, see Stefan Hanß's contribution in this collection.

⁶ See, particularly, Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated by Keith Tribe (New York, 2004).

⁷ E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, xxxviii (1967). For further analysis of Thompson, see Vanessa Ogle's contribution in this collection.

Evans-Pritchard).⁸ Thompson's study could be seen to approach a kind of multidisciplinary *histoire totale* of time that emerged in its most complex form in the work of the *Annales* school, where time was formed and perceived within social and environmental spaces, within groups, and economies, and within long- and short-term religious and political environments and patterns of cultural production and practice.⁹

In each of these traditions, however, we tend to see an attempt to construct ruptures between the past and the present, a location of the 'timeless' in the past, moving towards a timely present, the puncturing of cyclical time by the arrow of modernity. Such divisions have been focalized through other entrenched structures of thought: the country against the city, the Greek contrasted with the Hebrew, or the East vs the West. Historians diagnosing these binaries tended not to reflect on how their own practice was involved in constructing exactly these divisions. And so one of the burdens of this collection, particularly articulated in Stefan Hanß's and my own contributions, is to press historians again to pay attention to their own role as masters and measurers of time, quite capable of colonizing histories with fantasies of static time: still, stable, unchanging, and lost.

That said, of course, there is also a capacity to fetishize change and instability, the plural, the diverse, and the multivalent. If pressed too far, histories of temporalities could simply assert that nothing ever changed, and everything was always and everywhere a flux of time. The essays gathered here do not point in this direction. Vanessa Ogle, for example, advocates for a genuine change in the

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (London, 1934); Carlo M. Cipolla, *Clocks and Culture, 1300–1700* (London, 1967); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, 1940). For the influence of these accounts for E. P. Thompson, see 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', fn 1, and 59–60 for anthropology.

⁹ For further more detailed discussion of the *Annalistes* on time, including Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and Fernand Braudel, see the contributions by Champion, Hanß, and Gange in this collection.

perception of futurity developed within capitalist societies. Allegra Fryxell locates one of modern time's key features as consistent attempts to isolate subjective and objective time, and then to collapse them. Stefan Hanß finds practices of precision in sixteenth-century ego documents which are contrasted with less precise modern self-fashioning. There are diverse forms of time, but with differentiations and distinctions which allow us to see change and continuity, flux and stability in dialogue.

Questions of changes from premodern to modern temporalities were high on the agenda of the symposium which provided the origin point for this collection. In May 2016, a group of scholars crossing the disciplines of history, sociology, art history and literary studies met under the aegis of the DAAD-Cambridge Research Hub to discuss the history of temporalities. The German-English nature of this exchange meant that discussion was often focused through critical engagement with Koselleck, and with one of his modern successors, the German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, who provided the symposium's closing lecture. As we have seen, Koselleck can be taken as representative of a pattern in the history of time which sets a timeless, vague, religious and often orientalist time of premodern societies, against the emergence of modern and 'historical' time, with its precision, clear boundaries between past, present, and future, and awareness of distance between the present and the past. The aspect of Koselleck's account of time taken up by Rosa is an emphasis on the acceleration (*Beschleunigung*) of social life in modernity and in our current situation in late modernity.¹⁰ In late modernity, for Rosa, rapid transformations in technology and in social roles mean a destabilizing of identity leading to alienation. For example, if premodernity was characterized by each generation continuing in the

¹⁰ Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung: die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), translated as *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York, 2013). Also Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Malmö, 2010).

family trade (not necessarily an accurate assumption), and modernity by generational shifts in occupation, then our current hypermodernity sees individuals shifting careers in shorter and shorter periods of time. How to maintain sustainable identities in this accelerated world becomes a key question for sociological exploration. Whatever we make of Rosa's schematization, its call to think about how affects and agents are not just shaped by, but also enabled, empowered, oppressed, and harmed by temporal conditions, is a timely one.

A light note of caution about the continued framing of the history of temporalities in opposition to scholars like Koselleck (or Rosa, or anyone else) is necessary at this point. Just as repeating denouncements of Philippe Ariès's theory – that high infant mortality rates for children in the Middle Ages meant that there was less grief over a child's death than in later cultures – does not really help us understand the emotions of medieval parents over the death of their children, sticking another nail in Koselleck's coffin is unlikely to help us get much further in understanding the temporalities of past cultures.¹¹ That is to say: we risk duplicating the dualisms of the older history of time in making our histories so dependent on dialectical relations with earlier scholars. Of course, questions of modernity will remain generative in part because the art of history is one of thinking about difference and definition. Questions of how we come to be where we are in time cannot avoid wrestling with categories such as the modern, just as they must come to terms with the rhetoric and practices of the old and new. The question is, will we call ourselves modern – or indeed postmodern or hypermodern – over and against the past or in

¹¹ The observation on Ariès here is indebted to conversation with Philippa Maddern. See also Margaret L. King, 'Concepts of Childhood: What We Know and Where We Might Go', *Renaissance Quarterly*, lx (2007).

careful conversation with it?¹² This question matters because many historians still see the past as a temporally-distant foreign country, often uncritically performing the kind of thinned-out temporalities of modernity worried at throughout this collection.¹³

There is, then, a need to develop an ethics and politics of the history of temporalities, a necessity which emerges explicitly and implicitly in the viewpoints presented here. In the current global political climate, it might seem that the history of time is a turning away from an engagement with the critical issues of the day – questions of race, class, and gender, for example. But as David Gange’s contribution highlights, the history of temporalities has significant bearings on political questions of ecology and the environment. And as Vanessa Ogle’s contribution, among others, shows, questions of temporality open up new ways of approaching more standard histories – here economic history, and the history of capitalism more particularly – with important political implications. Critiquing the temporal dimensions of theories and practices of race and colonization remains a pressing need across the world, as does finding ways to support deliberative democratic political structures placed under increasing pressure by the need for rapid decision times.¹⁴ The constructive question of how to best live our lives in time thus has fundamental implications for economic and social justice, and political practices both global and local.

I stress the constructive here because historians, and the humanities more generally, have for many years stressed critique. But we need both critique and

¹² The importance of François Hartog and Bruno Latour should be noted here. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York, 2015).

¹³ Compare here David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

¹⁴ Important works on race and colonizing structures of time, include Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000); Giordano Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire* (Manchester, 2013); and most recently, Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018). See also Allegra Fryxell in this collection. For the pressures of acceleration on deliberation, William E. Scheuerman, *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time* (Baltimore, 2004).

construction to be in play, seeking to reveal how temporal structures both disable and enable creative cultural communication and social practice, aid and hinder virtuous action and communal flourishing.¹⁵ Historians' disciplinary narratives often use time as a technique to marginalize earlier understandings of history that might help us here. Past cultures often make history an active political and ethical presence, providing examples of behaviour for emulation and avoidance, shaping understandings of the good, and provoking reflection on what the good might be. If we write histories of our discipline that locate these older kinds of historiography in a past locked away from the present – a 'premodern' past – we we diminish the stories and explanations available to us for facing the problems of the present.

Political questions are also raised by absences from this collection of viewpoints. Important work is emerging in the history of gendered temporalities, and more remains to be done on localizing and detailing the nuances of temporalities at various life stages.¹⁶ Important new studies are suggesting ways of further enriching the history of temporalities moving beyond the largely Western or modern global contexts analysed in this collection.¹⁷ The contributors to this set of viewpoints, however, hope that the materials gathered here, despite their gaps and silences, will offer a spur to others to develop fuller understandings of temporality.

What, then, is the history of temporalities presented here? First, it is an open, multi-field and multi-disciplinary approach to the study of mingled pasts, presents and futures, of rhythms and tempi, of old and new, young and old. Alongside an enduring

¹⁵ See recently, Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015).

¹⁶ A foundational intervention on time and gender is Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York, 1995). Also Cathy M. Yandell, *Carpe Corpus: Time and Gender in Early Modern France* (Newark, DE, 2000); Merry Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World* (Amsterdam, 2018).

¹⁷ See, for example, On Barak, *On Time: Time and Technology in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley, 2013); Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Chicago, 2016)

interest in languages, technologies, and techniques of time measurement, the history of temporalities as advocated for in this collection emphasises the performance of time across various media (stressed by Fryxell and Champion), and insists on time's embeddedness in space (forcefully advocated for by Gange). The history of temporalities is also a history of power, economies, and the everyday (as Hanß and Ogle argue). It traces the power of individuals and institutions to form and maintain dominant temporal regimes, unearths conflicts over different orders of time, and reconstructs attempts to harmonize temporalities, in theory and practice.¹⁸ As Hanß in particular notes, shaped by the history from below, it seeks out the nuanced temporal perceptions and experiences of those whose voices have often been silenced. And like all human endeavours, the history of temporalities is caught up in the currents of time. To which oceans and shores our histories will be carried, we do not fully know.

¹⁸ See especially Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); also Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R. Wilk (eds.), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture* (Oxford, 2009).