

### **Breaking up Time. Settling the Borders between the Present, the Past and the Future**

**Veranstalter:** Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies; Chris Lorenz, VU University Amsterdam; Berber Bevernage, University of Ghent  
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**Bericht von:** Doris Lechner / Nina Reusch, DFG-Forschergruppe 875 „Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen der Gegenwart“, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

Time and the differentiation between past, present and future is something historians deal with every day but rarely reflect upon. In the workshop „Breaking up Time. Settling the Borders between the Present, the Past and the Future“ organized by Chris Lorenz (Amsterdam) and Berber Bevernage (Ghent) at the Freiburg Institute for Advances Studies (FRIAS) on 7-9 April 2011, constructions of time and historicity were discussed theoretically and empirically. The organizers posed three leading questions: Is temporalization dependent on cultural contexts? What is the role of historical actors and performative events for the conceptualization of time? Does temporalization have a political dimension and how do the politics of time function? The main topics of the workshop were the relationship between history and modernity, the way time is related to space and to politics, Reinhart Koselleck's theses on the relationship between experience and expectation, the teleological nature of time constructions and possibilities for overcoming this, and the role of colonialism and postcolonialism in Western and non-Western concepts of past, present and future.

In her introductory keynote speech, LYNN HUNT (Los Angeles) reflected on teleological time concepts in historical writing. Beginning with the question of whether globalization has an impact on the experience of time and historians' concepts of time, she analyzed the spread of Western thinking about time manifested in the use of the Gregorian calendar, the global standard time frame with the first meridian in Greenwich and the historical schema of antiquity, middle ages and modernity. She criticized the teleology implicit in li-

near Western time concepts: The idea of modernity as a goal of history leads to a Presentism that shapes historical writing not only in Europe but all over the world as a result of globalization. Hunt called for a less teleological view on history that allows for the use of modernity as a contingent historical category, but not as an inevitable endpoint of historical development.

As questions of teleology and of how to avoid it are closely linked to the relationship between history and modernity, this topic was picked up in several papers. Asked by the organizers to focus on „transformative events‘ and compare the ways in which they have recalibrated thinking about the relationship between the ‘past‘, ‘present‘ and ‘future‘“, the papers presented fell into two broad categories: more theoretically oriented (historico-philosophical) reflections on such transformative events were presented in the first and concluding panel, while the other sessions featured case studies of transformative events.

The first session dealt with general questions of the construction of time concepts and the breaks and borders between past, present and future. CONSTANTIN FASOLT (Chicago) defined the „break in time“ as a key concept of individuals and societies dealing with their past by setting their present self autonomously apart from the past and their own actions in the past. The modern European society set itself apart from the Middle Ages, which stood for ignorance, barbarism and superstition, concepts which stood in opposition to modern civilization and science. This break set in with the Renaissance and was completed with the French Revolution, but at the same time the Revolution and its aftermath showed the continuity of the past in the present, for example in the resumption of the violence that Europe actually wanted to break with. The European past emerged as something belonging to the present, the present itself became a part of the past. A result of the break, in which historians played an important role, is the division of European history into Ancient, Medieval and Modern. Fasolt requested contemporary historians to question the boundary between the Middle Ages and Modernity, and to further reflect on what it means to analyze the

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past.

JONATHAN GORMAN (Belfast), by contrast, investigated general modes of distinguishing past, present and future and the border between past and present without fixing the question to special cultural contexts, events or ruptures in history. Time, he argued, is actively created not only by historians, but by all social actors. In every society people share similar concepts of past and future, about what „earlier“ and „later“ mean, i.e., time exists as a thought that is linked with this common sense. Just as the present is constructed through shared presuppositions about time (and other things), the past begins once people no longer share former peoples' ideas of time.

The relationship between politics of periodization and historical experience was further investigated during the concluding panel on Koselleck's legacy. PETER FRITZSCHE (Illinois) introduced four ways in which ruins explained an understanding of historical time at the beginning of the nineteenth century (the admonitory, confiscatory, and adversarial nature of the ruins, and the ruin of the ruin) and thereby questioned Koselleck's idea of modernity's unilateral temporality. The confiscatory idea of the ruin suggests a „progressive historical development“ in which the ruin is viewed as a specimen of the „on-going obsolescence of the past“. The ruin as adversarial relic, however, objects to a „necessary historical development“ as in its nature of half-death and half-life it not only bears traces of dispossession and the usurpation of the past (what once was) but also envisions a „repossession if the by-gone past could be seen as the particular prehistory of a different present“ (what could be). In answer to Koselleck, Fritzsche concluded that the „confiscatory and adversarial potential of ruins suggest [...] that the space of experience (or imagined experience) is [not] necessarily stripped away by the horizon of expectation“.

PETER OSBORNE (London) further objected to Koselleck's introduction of 'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation' as transcendental categories of historical analysis. He asserted that they are subjected to „the emergence of new structures of temporalization of history“ linked to „the globa-

lization' of the (previously colonial) concept of modernity and the becoming-historical of the concept of the contemporary“. Focusing on the concept of 'global modernity', Osborne argued that in its need for constant innovation, the 'modern' inevitably „locat[es] a past within the present“, which at the same time „contains the future within itself“. This process continues through the stages of the 'colonial modern' and 'post-colonial modern' to a 'transnational' or 'global modern', which, however, cannot be grasped in a clear geopolitical imagery any more but demands the idea of the 'global contemporary'.

LUCIAN HÖLSCHER (Bochum), with reference to Koselleck's idea of the spatialization of time, first explained how in the mid-18th century the progressive, continuous and linear concept of historical time was constructed from an analogy of simultaneous historical events to a geographical, spatial neighbourhood. The „idea of history as a meaningful universe“ created by this spatialization of time, however, suffered a generational break through the experiences of World War One. Hölscher concluded that the war „produced a break in historical analysis and concepts“ which turned history into „a fabric of many universes, which cannot be grasped any more in one coherent structure“.

In another panel on the modern regime of historicity and the two world wars, FRANÇOIS HARTOG (Paris) also placed himself into Koselleck's tradition. He determined the 'regime of historicity', i.e. the way in which a society considers its past and deals with it, in modern societies as characterized by the „predominance of the category of the future“ and an increasing gap between the field of experience and the horizon of expectation. History is initially interpreted as a teleological progress in which the future illuminates the past. However, the idea of revolution besides progress introduced by the experience of the French Revolution as well as the breaks between past and future created by the experiences of the two world wars complicated the idea of the modern regime of historicity: History could no longer be conceived as a continuous, linear progress or single flow. Hartog concluded that after the disappearance of revolution in the 1970s, the progressively

increasing gap between past and future finally leads away from the predominance of the future to an „omnipresent present“ as the dominant category in the regime of historicity.

HAGEN SCHULZ-FORBERG (Aarhus) also reflected on the influence of the experiences of the two world wars on the perception of historical time by example of a case study. He showed how liberal economist networks tried to fix the future of the history of Western progress by working against an impending break in history during the inter-war period as embodied in the threatened loss of free markets in redefining liberal thought.

Further case studies reflected on revolutionary concepts of time. CLAUDIA VERHOEVEN (Ithaca, NY) characterized Russian revolutionary thinking as „wormhole thinking“: the awareness of the specific historical development in Russia which during the 19th century went on slower than in Western Europe, and the positive attitude towards this development that allowed Russia to skip the stadium of capitalism and escape from the present through a tunnel of time directly into socialism. Verhoeven showed that this anti-teleological thinking can be found in Lenin's theories about the possible emergence of revolution in every historical situation, in Kazimir Malevich's ideas of a future timelessness clear from every manifestation of the past and in the terrorist Nikolai Mozorov's vision of cyclical time and the triumph of life over death.

SANJA PEROVIC (London) described the French Revolution as an event marking a new conceptualisation of time, which manifested itself in the Revolutionary Calendar from 1792 and the calendar created by Auguste Comte in 1849. Both calendars dealt with the relationship between cyclical and linear time, and integrated both concepts. To be modern, for the generation of the French Revolutionaries, meant to think historicity and universality together. Therefore, Perovic concluded, the Revolution was in these calendars considered not only as an historical event, but as a timeless and universal principal.

While most papers addressed the conference questions within the frame of Western/European examples, Conrad and Gallois scrutinized historical time conceptions outside Europe. SEBASTIAN CONRAD (Berlin),

by example of post-war Japan, examined how the adoption of Western concepts of periodization may influence the way history is written outside Europe. He observed that post-war Japanese historiography inscribed Japanese history into a Marxist pattern of periodization, by interpreting and relating historical facts according to this predetermined structure of historical progress, which stands in a Western tradition but also claims universality. While Japanese history was thereby integrated into a universal world history, the attempt at the same time neglected links to Japan's history of empire in Asia: „different forms of periodization not only express culturally specific forms of group identity, but also actively shape the interpretation of the past“.

In contrast, WILLIAM GALLOIS (London) posed the question as to whether the adoption of, or attention to, non-European modes of apprehending (historical) time – such as Buddhist histories, Algerian Islamic time conceptions or the Australian Aboriginals' Dreamtime – might enrich Western/European historiography. Considering, for instance, the colonization of Algeria from an Arab-Islamic historical tradition of judgment time, Gallois appeared to suggest that such an approach might transgress common (post-)colonial readings by allowing for the reconsideration of „histories of moments which are already embedded in the canon of western historical knowledge“ by even further stepping out of the perspective of the „hopeful colonists“.

In an inspiring concluding commentary, JÖRN LEONHARD (Freiburg) assessed the papers by returning to the initial three questions. He observed that the dependence of temporalization on cultural contexts was debated in connection with time-space relations and the two interrelated processes of the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space. He further had the impression that although there are similar toolkits for distinguishing past, present and future in different cultural contexts, the case studies presented showed that they served different functions of differentiation. Politics of time entailed both the processes of the politicalization of time and the temporalization of politics and ideologies: As Leonhard stated, „regimes of historicity serve as prime markers of political le-

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gitimacy in the modern world." As regards the importance of social actors, Leonhard concluded that the historian – just one amongst many „different interpreters and translators of time“ – is increasingly losing his monopoly on time and temporalization.

Given the diverse approaches to viewing the relation of past, present and future, it is not surprising that Leonhard ended on a distinctly constructivist note: He demanded that historians take on the perspective of Luhmann's second-order observers more often in specifically paying attention to „linguistic and narrative conditions and rules for breaking up time“. His idea of analyzing, for instance, the change over time in metaphors for distinguishing between past, present and future, and the call for an interdisciplinary approach to determine uses of time, were welcomed in the final discussion. Thus, the workshop promised to provoke further debate on the construction of the borders between past, present and future in emphasizing how important it is to think about questions of time in the historical discipline.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Keynote lecture*

Lynn Hunt (University of California, Los Angeles): Globalization and Time

Chris Lorenz (VU University Amsterdam) and Berber Bevernage (University of Ghent): Welcome and Introduction

##### *Session 1: Rethinking Past and Present: Historical Change and the Politics of Periodization*

Constantin Fasolt (University of Chicago): Breaking up Time – Escaping from Time. Self-Assertion and Knowledge of the Past

Jonathan Gorman (Queens University, Belfast): The Limits of Historiographical Choice in Temporal Distinctions

##### *Session 2: Revolutionary Times and Competing Calendars*

Sanja Perovic (King's College, London): Two Revolutionary Events, Two Calendars: Year 1 and Year 61 in French History

Claudia Verhoeven (Cornell University, Ithaca NY): Wormholes in Russian Revolutionary History: Three Tales about Terrorism and

Time

##### *Session 3: The Modern Regime of Historicity and the Two World Wars*

François Hartog (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris): The Modern Regime of Historicity Tested by the Two World Wars

Hagen Schulz-Forberg (Aarhus University): Fixing the Future. Social Imagination and Economic Thought from the 1920s to the 1940s

##### *Session 4: Representing Time and Making History outside Europe*

Sebastian Conrad (Freie Universität Berlin): The Poetics and Politics of Periodization in Japanese Historiography

William Gallois (Roehampton University, London): Other Times, Other Histories?

##### *Session 5: Exploring Koselleck's Legacy: Grasping Changing Historical Experience*

Lucian Hölscher (Ruhr-Universität Bochum): Changing Historical Experience and the Construction of Continuity

Peter Fritzsche (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign): The Tense of Modernity

Peter Osborne (Kingston University, London): Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time

##### *Closing Session: Breaking Up Time. Concluding Comments*

Jörn Leonhard (FRIAS School of History, Freiburg): Concluding Comment

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