

Beyond modernity. Transepochal perspectives on spaces, actors, and structures

Veranstalter: Basel Graduate School of History (BGSH), Institute for European Global Studies (EIB)

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During the last decades postmodern historical approaches have encouraged a fundamental discussion about the common comprehension of time and space. In this context the image of different overlapping spatial levels and the focus on these new rooms lead to a multiplication of time in historiography. Post-colonial studies and global history opposed „the modernity“ as the main historical narration of the 20th Century with the concept of multiple modernities.¹ This paradigm shift directs our attention on a history „Beyond Modernity“. How can historical spaces, actors and structures be thought anew in a transepochal perspective?

In her introduction SUSANNA BURGHARTZ (Basel) discussed the need for long-term studies, a *longue durée* perspective and big histories in reference to „The History Manifesto“.² The understanding of time leads historians to the question of periodization and possibilities of transepochal studies. Burghartz claimed long-term studies to go beyond euro-centric historical writing. Furthermore ROBERTO SALA (Basel) traced the weakness of the *longue durée* as an approach back to a progressive crisis of the paradigm of modernity. This crisis also targets on the nation state as main reference of historical narration. Transepochal perspectives give the chance to assume the existence of anthropological commonalities.

The first panel focused on *Spaces of movements and interaction*. PEREGRINE HORDEN (London) questioned the definition of the Mediterranean as a cultural entity via a micro-ecological approach. In contrast, he demonstrated, how different cultural spaces overlapped around the Mediterranean basin in ancient and medieval times. Afterwards DIRK HOERDER (Bremen) focused on how

migrants and global migrant systems created spaces. By focusing on heretofore neglected actors, namely women and slaves, he elucidated, how migrants crossed cultural and class limits. Thus, space appears moveable by the actors. Subsequently KAPIL RAJ (Paris) concentrated on imperial space in late 18th Century India. He illustrated the transfer of knowledge between European researchers and the authorities of the Mogul Empire. Both, European and Indian actors created through their interaction a contemporization of time levels and therefore modernity. The discussant ROBERTO SALA (Basel) questioned, if the picture of the Mediterranean must be understood as an image of Western domination. He highlighted, how a focus on personal actors enables historians to determine local, national and global spaces of action. The focus on a short period of investigation may give an access to transepochal questions.

Two workshops organized by graduate students were integrated in the program of the conference. Workshop A discussed *Transepochal Perspectives in the work of the Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin*. In their introduction MELANIE BOEHI (Basel) and ANNA VÖGELI LITELU (Basel) highlighted the main arguments of two papers of Depelchin with a focus on time concepts in historical narration.³ Following Depelchin the dominant Western forms of periodization lead to a silence in African history, which is reproduced by historians until today. The workshop was joined by ELÍSIO MACAMO (Basel), who gave a short talk on *Modernity on the Denial of History*. The concept of modernity has led to a loss of long-term perspectives and to a blindness for actors. The deeper meaning of going beyond the paradigm of modernity is therefore to break the silence in African history by finding a new

¹ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities, in: *Daedalus*, 129/1 (2000), pp. 1–29.

² Jo Guldi / David Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge 2014.

<<http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/>> (3.3.2015).

³ Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History. Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition*, Dar Es Salaam 2005; *Ibid.*, *Reclaiming African History*, Chicago 2011.

vocabulary for post-colonial narrations.

Workshop B, *Anachronic times*, was organized by four PhD-students, namely NICOLAI KLÖMEL, MICHAEL SCHAFFNER, SARAH-MARIA SCHÖBER and MARIA TRANTER (all Basel). In this context several articles functioned as the starting point of a discussion about time, temporal conceptions and time perceptions.⁴ Thereby the focus lay on the question for alternatives to the linear imagined time model. In general it seems to be difficult to question epochal specialized time models in research, while history as a field is organized along epochs. On the background of post-colonial discourses it would be unsatisfactory just to substitute one type of dating for another.

The keynote lecture was held by MADELEINE HERREN-OESCH (Basel). In its center stood the global rescue mission for the airship of the Italian explorer Umberto Nobile. On this example Herren-Oesch elucidated how historical actors appropriated the air space and thereby created new international rooms. While state borders became apparently fix, spaces outside the reach of habitation stretched the question on territoriality. Even in historical narration such places and actions constitute new spaces: the rescue team formed a rescue scape, which attracted then a strong media attention. Thereby a media scape was created, referring to a global public. The air mobility functioned as the connecting power of a new international community, that drafted a picture of the world as a „monosphere“.

The second panel asked for *Anthropological spaces*. RICHARD E. LEE (Binghamton) depicted the significance of Braudel's concept of the *longue durée* in historical and social science.⁵ Following this concept, the *longue durée* is strongly connected with the development of the European modernity and capitalism. Therefore the category of time itself appears as a social construct. In her paper, KATHERINE A. LYNCH (Pittsburgh) illustrated the history of families as a concept of civil society in Europe in a long-term perspective. Following Lynch, civil society appears therefor neither as a product nor as a sign of modernity, but as based on christian values. Afterwards ALESSANDRO

STANZIANI (Paris) criticized the former labor history to exclude unfree workers like peasants and slaves as actors. To make these actors visible, Stanziani claims for long-term studies and for a combination of local, national and global perspectives. The discussant ROLAND WENZLHUEMER (Heidelberg) set the papers into relation with the question of the roundtable discussion, which is summarized below. He contradicted the concept of modernity being at crisis as it was rethought as multiple modernities. Furthermore Wenzlhuemer demands to focus on questions: Research should therefore ask in a first step, how individuals related to state and society, and analyze in a second step, what solutions the historical actors found for their problems.

The roundtable discussion got the heard of the conference by asking: „Did the crisis of the modernity paradigm kill transepochal perspectives?“ SUSANNA BURGHARTZ (Basel) expounded the problem of how historians to choose the frame of time and space for their narration. The focus on dynamics instead of one progress led to a multiplication of time levels. Nevertheless, there still is a need for a frame like a map or a time structure to make connections visible and to tell them as a coherent story. KATHERINE A. LYNCH (Pittsburgh) defined, that the historian itself experiences the limits of historical space as he is bound to the sources. Therefore the narration of a „big“ or trans-epochal history is most challenging. KAPIL RAJ (Paris) urged caution not to create connections as a historian in retrospect, but to concentrate on the connections made by the historical actors. Instead of looking for a coherent or universal story, historians should think from the historical actors' position. Pursuant to Raj, transepochal histories exist in every culture, while the *longue durée* perspective was an inven-

⁴ Lynn Hunt, *Globalisation and time*, in: Chris Lorenz, Berber, Bevernage (Ed.), *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, Göttingen 2013, pp. 199–215.; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated and with an Introduction by Keith Tribe, New York 2004.; Alexander Nagel / Christopher S. Wood, *Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism*, in: *The Art Bulletin*, 87/3 (2005), pp. 403–415.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Historie et sciences sociales. La longue durée*, in: *Annales ESC* 18/4 (1958), pp. 725–753.

tion of Western historiography. In contrast ROLAND WENZLHUEMER (Heidelberg) argued, that history is not about the past, but about the present and includes therefore always a trans-epochal perspective. The real crisis of contemporary history is its problematic relationship to society. The fact that historians do not longer comment contemporary politics leads to a marginalization of the whole field.

The third panel discussed *Spaces of Sovereignty*. In her paper, ISABELLE SURUN (Lille) explicated the development of sovereignty as key concept for international law along a case study about the kingdom of Dahomey in today's Benin. Thereby it became clear, that the conception of sovereignty was in the pre-colonial African monarchy consistent and indivisible as it was connected to the territory and not to the inhabitants. Afterwards VALERIA PIACENTINI FIORANI (Milan) analyzed the use of the term „sovereignty“ in Eurasia from the 18th to the 20th Century. While Eurasia was influenced by different law traditions, sovereignty was mostly executed by a person, not by an institution. The last presentation was held by ELVIRA VILCHES (Raleigh). She exemplified the circulation of silver bars from Latin America to Spain and Portugal in the early modern period. The Atlantic can be thus understood as a monetary space, which facilitated the creation of financial networks. Sources like inscriptions in silver bars illustrate early structures of globalization. The discussant BENEDIKT STUCHTEY (Marburg) contextualized these papers with the coming-back of empires in the era of colonization. When nation states became colonial empires, they created spaces of sovereignty and knowledge, which lead to a globalization of the idea of empire. The concept of empire gives access to spaces of sovereignty, while the global history perspective enables to cross disciplinary borders.

The conference succeeded in stimulating the debate about a history „Beyond Modernity“. In this frame an interdisciplinary exchange took place in two ways: First, between the representatives of different fields like sociology, anthropology and history, and second, between the highly specialized histori-

ans themselves. This specialization in single epochs is in particular one of the main challenges of wide trans-epochal research projects and of a fundamental reconsideration of time narratives. The field of history struggles to navigate on the historiographical road „Beyond Modernity“ – a road, which is in fact new, but on which the field has already turned. The international conference has positively contributed to this important process of reorientation.

Conference Overview:

Welcome

Martin Lengwiler (Basel) / Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Basel)

Introduction

Susanna Burghartz (Basel) / Roberto Sala (Basel)

Panel I: Spaces of Movement and Interaction

Peregrine Horden (London), An absurdly small sea? Mediterranean connectivity viewed comparatively

Dirk Hoerder (Bremen), How do migration systems and migrants construct spaces

Kapil Raj (Paris), Contemporising epochs: The encounter between Mughal and British imperial spaces in the late 18th Century

Discussant: Roberto Sala (Basel)

Chair: Lukas Burghart (Basel)

Workshop A: „Transepochal perspectives“ in the work of Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin

With a Talk by: Elísio Macamo (Basel)

Organizers: Melanie Boehi / Anna Vögeli Litelu (Basel)

Workshop B: Anachronic times: Reading texts & images beyond the linear narrative

Organizers: Nicolai Klömel / Michael Schaffner / Sarah-Maria Schober / Maria Tranter (Basel)

Keynote:

Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Basel), Decolonizing epistemologies at 90° 0' N? Floating territories, shrinking time frames, and a global rescue mission

Panel II: Anthropological spaces

Richard E. Lee (Binghamton), Understanding in the historical sciences: Lessons from the *longue durée*

Katherine A. Lynch (Pittsburgh), The long history of civil society in the European past

Alessandro Stanziani (Paris), Bondage, labor and rights in Eurasia, 18th – 20th centuries

Discussant: Roland Wenzlhuemer (Heidelberg)

Chair: Roberto Sala (Basel)

Roundtable: Did the crisis of the modernity paradigm kill transepochal perspectives?

Susanna Burghartz (Basel)/Katherine A. Lynch (Pittsburgh)/Kapil Raj (Paris)/Roland Wenzlhuemer (Heidelberg)

Chair: Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Basel)

Panel III: Spaces of Sovereignty

Isabelle Surun (Lille), A bridge over the colonial gap: African sovereignty in the light of Euro-African diplomatic encounter

Valeria Piacentini Fiorani (Milan), Sovereignty and power in the Eurasian context between early modern and modern period

Elvira Vilches (Raleigh), Accounting for silver: Spaces of capital in imperial Spain

Discussant: Benedikt Stuchtey (Marburg)

Chair: Patrick Harries (Basel)

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