

Introduction

Periodisation in a Global Context

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When I was a small boy and was taught history . . . I used to think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines ruled across it at intervals. Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a ‘period’, and you were given to understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before. It was almost like a clock striking. . . .

The whole of history was like that in my mind—a series of completely different periods changing abruptly at the end of a century, or at any rate at some sharply defined date.¹

George Orwell, *The Rediscovery of Europe*

In C. H. Williams’ ironic description, German historians in particular “have an industry they call ‘Periodisierung’ and they take it very seriously.” He argues (in a manner that does sound familiar to Orwell, above) that “Periodisation, this splitting up of time into neatly balanced divisions is, after all, a very arbitrary proceeding and should not be looked upon as permanent.”² In producing and reproducing periodisations, historians structure possible narratives of temporality, they somehow “take up ownership

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1 George Orwell, *The Collected Non-Fiction*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Penguin, 2017), 1014. This epitaph is discussed at length in Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s Conclusion to this collection.

2 Charles H. Williams, ed., *English Historical Documents 1485–1558* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), 1.

of the past,” (Janet L. Nelson)³, imposing particular logics, or “regimes of historicity” (François Hartog).⁴ Epochal divisions and terminologies such as ‘antiquity,’ ‘baroque,’ the ‘classical age,’ the ‘renaissance’ or ‘postmodernity,’ are more than mere tools used pragmatically to arrange school curricula or museum collections. In most disciplines based on historical methods, these terminologies carry very specific meanings and convey rather definite imaginations for the discursive construction of civilisations, nations and communities. Indeed, many contemporary categories of periodisation have their roots in teleologies created in Europe, reflecting particular national, religious or historical traditions. Thus they are also closely linked to particular power relations. As part of the colonial encounter they have been translated into new ‘temporal authenticities’ in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Accordingly, periodisations are never inert or innocent. What some of the authors in this book call *Eurochronologies*, that is, periodisation schemes modelled on European historical developments (such as the triad Antiquity, Middle Ages, Modernity, or Renaissance) have been used and applied as models to the histories of other regions of the world, as part of what Jack Goody calls a “theft of history” which refers, in his words, “to the take-over of history by the West. That is, the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world.”⁵ Goody thus describes what he sees as a pervasive Eurocentric bias in western historical writing: it does not give credit to (and thus “steals”) the possibility of highly divergent historical developments in different parts of the world.⁶

In considering periodisation schemes from different parts of the world, then, the aim of this volume is to uncover some of the dynamics behind particular cultural and historical uses of these periodisation schemes, as concepts for ordering the past, and to understand the powers, the method, the logics behind them—their *chronologics*, as David Damrosch once put it⁷—and thus to reconsider these periodisation schemes as terminologies “devised to think the world,” and their possible uses in the writing of

3 Janet L. Nelson, “The Dark Ages,” *History Workshop Journal* 63 (2007): 191–201, here at 191–192.

4 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2002). See also Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein* (München: De Gruyter, 1987) and Stéphane Gibert, Jean Le Bihan, and Florian Mazel, ed., *Découper le temps: Actualité de la périodisation en histoire*, ATALA Cultures et sciences humaines no. 17 (2014).

5 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

6 For a longish description which puts Goody into the broader context of other writings re-Orienting historical thinking, see Riva Berleant, “Review of Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*,” *Anthropology Review Database* 2011/01/01 <http://wings.buffalo.edu/ARD/> (last accessed, November 2019).

7 David Damrosch, “Chronologics,” in *A World History of Literature*, ed. Theo D’haen (Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België, 2012), 35–46.

world of global history.⁸ The transregional and transcultural approach to periodisation suggested here is our second attempt to grapple with this question of *chronologies*, from a perspective that is neither exclusively driven by History as the ‘master discipline’ of periodisation, nor by Europe as the ‘center’ of gravity and scale.

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At a first conference in Frankfurt, in 2016, we met to discuss *Les usages de la temporalité dans les sciences sociales*.⁹ Then, our focus was on the disciplines and their particular ways of structuring and shaping the past. We asked since when certain disciplines had begun to use specific periodisation schemes, and whether these schemes, and with them the introduction of temporality as a key concept for the writing of history, had changed the discipline and its methods and sources of study. We also questioned whether there were particular ways of (not) handling temporality in, say, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, Geography, History, Art History and Literary Studies and how this had changed over time and in the history of the respective discipline. And we aimed to find out to what extent periodisation schemes were important elements in the self-perception of certain disciplines. Each of the disciplines, so it appeared, had its own semantics, and accordingly, its own rules of narrative, discourse and practice—its own *chronologies*. A specific disciplinary *chronologies*, therefore, would always (only) be able to express specific disciplinary contents, but when this *chronologies* becomes naturalised, these limitations are often no longer critically reflected. Accordingly, we asked questions about the transferability, translatability and reproducibility of periodisation schemes, moving betwixt and comparing between the disciplines and their conceptions in the francophone and germanophone traditions.

A comparative approach again drives this volume. This time, we engage in a regionally expansive global examination of periodisation schemes. The interdisciplinary perspective, taken in our first conference and volume and the transregional perspective taken here, allow for a reconsideration of the transferability as well as the non-transferability of concrete historical periodisation schemes. This may help us work out categories of historical analysis that go beyond disciplinary as well as national or civilisation-bound interpretative patterns. The essays in this volume therefore focus on travelling *Eurochronologies*, as they will be called by some of our authors, or *chronotypes*, as they are called by others—particular forms of periodisation which are often modelled

8 Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 999–1027, here at 1011, considers the Enlightenment in such a manner.

9 Pierre Monnet, Thomas Maissen, Barbara Mittler, and Jean-Louis Georget, eds., *Les usages de la temporalité dans les sciences = Vom Umgang mit Temporalität in den Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften* (Bochum: Winkler, 2019).

on European examples.¹⁰ In the Enlightenment, Europeans started structuring what they considered *the* History, a global process, in a collective singular (and no longer as *histories* in the plural).¹¹ Along with that, particular *chronotypes* have been translated worldwide into universal, national or—scaling down even further—community or group models.¹² This volume does not consider these European models, alone, however. It also considers alternative, complementary or silenced morphologies and models of periodisation and epoch-making—which have been termed *chronotopes*, building on and expanding on Bakhtin’s narratives of space-time¹³—and thus presenting alternative styles, or patterns of discourse about time and historical periods as used by different actors in different parts of the world, at different times and in different power constellation: comparing space-time as it is represented through certain periodisation schemes with the types of space-time experienced and described by those on the ground.¹⁴ As different scales (from group to nation to region to world) may also determine the narration of space-time, these are considered as *chronoscales* in this volume. Our collection thus considers the making of periodisation schemes through categories of diffusion and scope as these can teach us how successfully certain periodisation schemes have been ‘sold’ both in the official and in the popular realms, in certain groups, but also nationally, regionally and globally.

Throughout, we will attempt to answer some of the following questions: What shapes and forms the making of certain *chronologies* and not others? What are the ideological, cultural, religious and material reasons behind them? How can we rethink established models of periodisation, and especially dominant *Eurochronologies* or *chronotypes* along new trajectories of time, space, material and power? And what does this mean for a reconsideration of World or Global History?

The interdisciplinary and transregional perspective that we have chosen in this collection allows for a reconsideration of the “pitfalls of terminology” as Justus Nipperdey

10 See, most recently, the work done in a collaborative research project “East Asian Uses of the Past: Tracing Braided Chronotypes” (EAU-TBC), last accessed June 25, 2018, <https://eautbc.hypotheses.org>.

11 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 33–37.

12 This question of scale is important in several of the contributions to this volume (Banerjee, McElrone, Maurya) and returns in the Conclusion.

13 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin and London: The University of Texas Press, 1988).

14 For the question of power-relations when it comes to chronotopes or space-time, consider especially Christian Grataloup, “Les périodes sont des régions du monde,” *Géohistoire de la mondialisation: Le temps long du monde*, ATALA Cultures et sciences humaines no.17 (2014), 65–81. See also the “Erfurter RaumZeit-Forschung,” a project running since 2011, which specifically deals with aspects of space-time, accessed July 20, 2020: <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/philosophische-fakultaet/forschung/forschungsgruppen/erfurter-raumzeit-forschung>.

puts it in his chapter. We suggest the study of the (non-)transferability of specific periodisation schemes (or *chronotypes*) in different historical and regional situations. We offer thoughts on the possibility of coming up, in this process of dialogic negotiation, with new tools or categories of historical analysis, that may go beyond conventional interpretive patterns.

This volume intends to show the specific cultural, social, religious and national leanings and predispositions of periodisation schemes. The authors discuss the making of discrete *chronologies*, and the variable systems (e.g. religious, spatial, political) and morphologies (e.g. linear, spiral, cyclical). They focus on different agents and modes involved in the making of periodisation schemes, institutions ranging from the university to the education ministry, for example, but also on manifold genres such as the documentary, the editorial, the religious tract, or the historical novel. By bringing together scholars with an expertise in different regions of the world, we hope to better understand the importance of temporality (often combined in a complicated relation with spatiality, as discussed above) in the making of global history.

An apt example for this approach to the powerful rhetoric and realities of time-space is an art work by Huang Yongping (1954–2019), a Chinese-born artist who had long been resident in France. In his *Map of the World—La carte du monde* (2000) (Fig. 1), arranged in spiral form, he uses 400 copper needles, with little flags giving specific dates between the years 2000 and 2046, to pinpoint the beginning moments (*chronos*) and locations (*topos*) of a series of epoch-making catastrophes. According to the artist, this artwork is a mix of “the past, the present and the future,”¹⁵ as it illustrates the modification of the world, the metamorphoses of political and economic forces, the ascension of new geographic regions and the decline of ancient empires, followed by the provisional apparition of new candidates for power and the violence that these ambitions provoke. *La carte du monde* is one in a series of works entitled *Empires* in which Huang reflects on what he considers “the engine for the transformation of the world” (and at the same time, its destruction): Power. For Huang “maximum power equals maximum destruction.”

The art work captures, in a creative way, what this volume hopes to achieve in analytical terms: zooming in and out on periodisation, and the multiple and expansive possibilities of thinking about it—in terms of spaces, of times and of materialities. We want to understand the powers, the method behind it—its *chronologies*, that is—and we suggest, thus, a rethinking of its possible uses in the writing of world or global history.

15 Huang Yong Ping, “Pour ‘Empires’, je mélange le passé, le présent et le futur,” interview by Jérôme Badie, *Le Monde*, May 13, 2016. All quotes following here are taken from this interview.



Figure 1 Huang Yongping: *La Carte du Monde* (2000).

Periodisation is the business, first and foremost, so it may seem to many, of History or rather Historiography. As an academic discipline with particular methods, History in turn is a typical product of nineteenth century Europe, not unlike other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences: Musicology, Philosophy, Political Economy, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, etc. In terms of their *chronologies*, they each follow teleological narratives, which lead, essentially, from archaism to modernity.¹⁶ This does not necessarily mean that this is a narrative of progress; different kinds of ‘classicism’ from earlier times are also seen as exemplary, and indeed, distant ‘noble roots’ have been considered at least as important for the making and the genealogies of national histories, as the glorious unfolding of the respective nations in their respective present.¹⁷ In these ‘traditional models,’ as Rösen calls them in his theoretical contribution to this volume, history has thus been interpreted as a sequence of political

16 Stéphane Gibert, Jean Le Bihan, and Florian Mazel, eds., *Découper le temps: Actualité de la périodisation en histoire*, ATALA Cultures et sciences humaines no. 17 (2014).

17 See the discussion by Maurya in this volume.

(e.g. monarchical, constitutional, democratic), socio-economic (e.g. nomads, farmers, burghers) and cultural phases (e.g. use of paper, use of print technology, etc.) which, on the one hand, structured the development of mankind and, on the other, have made possible the formation and growth of particular nations.

These two processes, the development of mankind on the one hand and of individual nations on the other, were linked since the Enlightenment and along with its philosophy of history through the concept of civilisation in the sense of the continuous emancipation of mankind from nature. In this vision, mankind originated a set of cultural skills through time and space, on a path leading from the Middle East to the West, as several powerful civilisations handed the torch on, one to the next. Dividing the history of literature, art or music into particular segments meant positioning particular nations on the (always already validatory) scale of this ‘civilising process,’ one which was headed, inevitably, towards Modernity—and this is one of the reasons why it was emulated by others, as many of the chapters in this volume show. Many well-known concepts stem from this teleological interpretation of the past—‘development,’ ‘progress,’ and ‘the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous,’ for example were introduced by a German art historian, Wilhelm Pinder, in his 1926 book *The Problem of Generation in European Art History*¹⁸—an interpretation that Jörn Rüsen, in the typology introduced in this volume, calls “genetic.”

Prominent scholars such as Jacques Le Goff or Reinhart Koselleck, have criticised the arbitrary choices of particular periodisation schemes. Kurt Flasch even went so far as to state: “The concept ‘epoch’ had its time, and its time is over.”¹⁹ Others, such as Johan Huizinga, however, have shown how much we were to lose were we to discard periodisation schemes all together.

Indeed, the use of periodisation schemes is not only comfortable, it may even be unavoidable. Both Aleida Assmann and Jacques Revel argued, in their conclusions to our Frankfurt conference on temporalities in the disciplines, that the most important question was not whether certain groups, societies, nations or regions should cut and slice their past into pieces according to typified patterns (the “thick black lines ruled across the long scroll of history” in the words of George Orwell), but rather for what reasons specific groups, societies, nations or regions, or the world at large, would choose to go back to their own past and create their specific *chronologies*, a question which is, to some extent, at least, quite ‘universal’ and thus need (and must) not be burdened by European prioritism.²⁰ Indeed, it is to be questioned whether in fact the practice of periodisation and the use of specific *chronotypes*, i.e. the European

18 Wilhelm Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1926).

19 Kurt Flasch, “Epoche,” in *Historische Philosophie: Beschreibung einer Denkart*, vol. 1 of *Philosophie hat Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2003), 134.

20 See the concluding contributions by Aleida Assmann and Jacques Revel in Pierre Monnet, Thomas Maissen, and Barbara Mittler, eds., *Les usages de la temporalité dans les sciences sociales:*

or rather occidental form of interpreting very particular pasts as universal processes leading, inevitably, towards Modernity, is really tantamount to a “theft of history,” as Jack Goody had put it, a “usurpation of history” by those who have now, for quite some time, dominated the process of globalisation declaring the imposition of their chronologies imposed on mankind a victory. The alternative rhetorics and styles of the *chronotopes* offered in this volume, taken as viable ways of fashioning and describing possibilities of historical development, while coming from different directions, both within certain groups or regions, suggest that we are in fact dealing with a very common, if culturally shaped enterprise, which many different groups, no matter whether from the East or the West, the North or the South are in fact engaged in.

Is the all-encompassing modernity in which we appear to live, the product of only a few occidental societies, or should we follow Shmuel Eisenstadt in speaking of “multiple modernities” all over the world, and consequently of different ways of coming to and shaping such modernities?²¹ Or is there indeed such a thing as a “modernity-in-common,” as Carol Gluck calls it, and what would that then entail?²² In using European periodisation schemes—or *Eurochronologies*—would it make a difference to modify these ‘traditional’ terminologies, by adding, for example ‘Chinese’ or ‘Italian’ to ‘Renaissance?’ Or should we look for new terms and create new periods altogether?²³ Not only when it comes to periodisation might one have to think and write history in a manner different from what has been done traditionally, if we aim to cope with the realities and challenges of the twenty-first century. As of now, however, we do not quite know how—as established approaches in world or global history do not seem to offer an easy way out.

In the *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Patrick Boucheron proposes the globalisation of both the national and the regional as categories.²⁴ Without following a continuous narrative, he has chosen a series of sometimes surprising and even provokingly unconventional dates to structure his book. This kind of decentering of an established temporal perspective, or *chronologies*, facilitates new manners of thinking national or regional histories.²⁵ It is much more difficult to find convincing temporal perspectives

Vom Umgang mit Temporalität in den Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften (Bochum: Winkler Verlag, 2019), 317–337.

21 Shmuel Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1–29.

22 Carol Gluck, “Modernity in Common: Japan and world history,” in *Internationalizing Japan Studies: Dialogues, Interactions, Dynamics* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.15026/91239>

23 This question is discussed in Thomas Maissen and Barbara Mittler, *Why China Did Not Have a Renaissance—And Why that Matters: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

24 Patrick Boucheron, *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017); cf. also Patrick Boucheron, ed., *Histoire du monde au XV^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2009) and Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Delalande, *Pour une histoire-monde* (Paris: PUF, 2013).

25 Leigh K. Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory: The Promise of Mobile Locality,” *Cultural Critique* 79 (2011): 42.

on historical change at the level of the global. If one were to hope that global or world history could be more than just adding up specific local or national events in a collage, how can and how should such histories be written and structured—and which terminologies of periodisation should they use?

This is one question to be explored further in this volume: once one has acquired a better understanding of different terminologies, different practices and different processes of periodisation, and thus, the making of epochs in different parts of the world, one may be able to conceive several plausible narratives about and for periodisation in global or world history, acknowledging thereby different historical experiences, and as many different historical pasts as we possibly can, thus de-familiarising oneself with what one thinks one knows, and opening up possibilities to reconsider this knowledge. Thus, one might even allow differently formulated manners of thinking about certain ‘alternative’ periodisation schemes (*chronotopes*), to become constituents of potentially ‘generalisable’ reflections on their historical value in one’s own analytical structures (expanding the models proposed in Jörn Rüsen’s chapter by adding multiple dimensions)—thinking of productive co-creations rather than stifling enforcements of certain model *chronotypes*.

This kind of approach does not deny the global pervasion of European thought and the rise of the West over the last two and a half centuries. It highlights, however, that European periodisation schemes and epochal divisions are as ‘local’ and ‘timely’ as any others, without for that reason completely dismissing the possibility of their wider applicability. Re-centring through the kind of transregional and transcultural dialogue suggested in this volume, offers a different variety of response to any kind of centrism, thus making possible more inclusive renderings of knowledge production to counter the inequities and occlusions of what has clearly unmasked itself as a very local—European—‘universalism,’ which is only a temporary one, too, as we know, as cultural flows and the ensuing asymmetries of power are constantly shifting direction.

Throughout this volume, therefore, questions of space-time and power will be a major focus. How do different regions, cultures, and times use periodisation as a means and a figure of political and intellectual domination, both within and without these regions/cultures/timespans? The volume begins with a handful of chapters scrutinising periodisation as method: what are important motors, conditions, factors in creating certain periodisation schemes—*chronotypologies*. We then turn to discussing different morphologies of periodisation in a global context, European and otherwise, *chronotypes* and *chronotopes*: how are they made, how are they performed, how can they be traced? In our second section, we consider how both *chronotypes* and *chronotopes* are constantly contested as they are becoming legitimised, and how they are turned into co-creative rather than imposing und oppressive concepts and regimes for periodisation. In this second section, the volume also offers a rethinking of periodisation on different *chronoscales*, considering micro- and macro-levels of historical thinking,

re-considering hierarchies and perspectives in the making of periodisation schemes from the community to the nation, to the region and, eventually, the world.

Our hope is that readers of this volume will become a bit more conscious of those shortcomings that are unavoidable whenever one uses a certain *chronologies*—set terminologies or periodisation schemes and their systemic powers—and when one engages a specific intellectual habitus coined by one particular discipline or regional expertise in using periodisation schemes to understand global change, when these schemes and typologies remain always already culturally limited.

Since periodisation schemes from all over the world are studied and understood in this volume not only on their own terms, but also in the comparative context of others at the same time, there is room for interaction and dialogue. An idea, an event, an epochal frame may thus be read from a variety of different angles as expressed by vastly different and often dissenting interlocutors. This volume (as well as the conference and the open peer review that preceded publication), is an attempt to make interlocutors from different disciplines and fields engage with each other in something one might call a productive process of ‘history-in-dialogue.’²⁶ While this process is necessarily one where none of the protagonists naturally agrees, as they do not share specific disciplinarily or regionally informed presumptions and terminologies, a dialogue like this may still enable these protagonists to escape the dilemma of misunderstanding claims for uniqueness as claims for precedence or superiority. One day, perhaps this may even allow for new ways of conceiving world or global history.

Figure

Fig. 1 Photo credits: Huang Yongping.

26 See the conclusion to Thomas Maissen and Barbara Mittler, *Why China Did Not Have a Renaissance—And Why that Matters: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018): 133–158.