

CONCLUSION

NAMING THE AGE: MODERNITY? CIVILISATION? ENLIGHTENMENT? AND OTHER FRAMEWORKS – DEEP CONTINUITIES, TRENDS AND TURNING POINTS

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After a cornucopia of case histories, this final chapter asks not just: *were there changes alongside continuities?* but also, in parallel: *how should historians best define and name whatever trend or trends that they identify?*

None of the contributors argues for no-change. Yet none, equally, finds evidence of one incontrovertible and simple trend of historical development. Instead, historians need to marshal complexity, without losing sight of big long-term pictures. It's always possible for multiple or rival trends to occur at the same time. These reflections are especially relevant when assessing human modes of communication. The need to communicate is constant. Yet styles are historically variable, reacting to enduring cultural norms; shifting social mores; changing attitudes to ranking whether of class, ethnicity, or gender; innovations in communications media; updating technological options; and so forth.

Currently, there are a great number of analytical options. But none command a consensus. That conceptual diversity is likely to continue. Classically, out of continuing arguments and debates come further arguments and fresh debates. There is rarely a period of absolutely no change in history;

and, equally rarely, one of total revolution in all things. How then can the mix of continuity and changes in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries best be named? It's a good time to review this question, in the light of today's « temporal turn » to the diachronic, analysing both past and present within the long-term context of Great Time¹.

FROM EARLY MODERNITY TO MODERNITY?

Conventionally, a number of historians in the English-speaking world still make a distinction between the so-called Early Modern and Modern times. It is true, however, that different experts pick vastly diverse start- and end-dates for these eras, just as there are many variant dates for other fuzzy periods, such as the Middle Ages (Latinised as the Medieval era) or the Renaissance. For example, a number of studies define the Early Modern era as running from 1400 to 1700². Others just as confidently shift the entire period one hundred years later, starting in 1500 ending in 1800³. And there are many variants in between.

There are significantly different national traditions too. For example, French historiography customarily ignores the Early Modern and assumes that Modernity ended with the French Revolution in 1789, when the so-called Contemporary era began.

¹ See P.J. Corfield, « Historians and the Return to the Diachronic », in G. Harlaftis and others (eds), *New Ways of History: Developments in Historiography* (London, 2010), p. 1-32, 187-192, 227-229; also in www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/british-history-essays/Pdf27; and idem, « History and the Temporal Turn: Returning to Causes, Effects and Diachronic Trends », in J-F. Dunyach (ed.), *Les âges de Britannia: Repenser l'histoire des mondes Britanniques: Moyen Âge-XXIe siècle* (Paris, 2015), p. 259-273.

² A. Hiscock (ed.), *Mighty Europe: Writing an Early Modern Continent* (Oxford, 2007); J.P. Davidson, *Early Modern Supernatural: The Dark Side of European Culture, 1400-1700* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2012); E.J. Campbell and others (eds), *The Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior, 1400-1700* (Farnham, Surrey, 2013).

³ K. von Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (London, 1984); B. Kümin (ed.), *The European World, 1500-1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History* (Abingdon, 2012); S. Pollock (ed.), *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500-1800* (Durham, NC., 2011).

In general, too, the concept of an « early modern » period, stretching into the eighteenth century, is most frequently used by scholars whose specialist focus is upon earlier centuries. It's *not* a popular identifier among those experts whose prime focus is upon the years 1700-1800 and after. If they have to reference Modernity, they tend to view their period as « the birth of the Modern », running onwards from 1700⁴. Certainly, they do not evoke anything like « the twilight of Early Modernity »⁵. But in general historians these days stick to a temporal rather than descriptive phrase. Common among specialists (although not the general public) are references to « the long eighteenth century », leaving scope for flexibility as to when this long sub-period starts and ends. All these variations mean that, at very least, the datings are not self-evident.

Above all, the idea of Modernity as a separate stage of history is evocative but problematic. In application, it has a multitude of alternative start-dates and, for those who believe in a successor stage known as Postmodernity, end-dates. Books with titles like *The Birth of the Modern* abound. But their competing start-dates range from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries⁶. They can't all be right simultaneously. Equally, presumed events like the « Death of the Modern »⁷ or the advent of « Postmodernity »⁸ are detected at many variant dates, stretching from the later nineteenth to the later twentieth centuries.

Fashions in age-naming and, equally, in architecture (which shares some of the terminology) are fluid. « Postmodern » architecture, with its stress upon

⁴ I. Ferris and P. Keen (eds), *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900* (Basingstoke, 2009); D. Deacon and others (eds), *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present* (Basingstoke, 2010).

⁵ For varied specifications of seventeenth-century England, see S. Jettot, « De l'utilité du siècle en Angleterre: les incertitudes du découpage chronologique des années, 1600-1700 », in Dunyach (ed.), *Les âges de Britannia*, p. 85-97.

⁶ A. Compagnon, *Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, transl. F. Philip (New York, 1994); P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007), p. 134-139; and idem, « POST-Medievalism/Modernity/Postmodernity? » *Rethinking History*, 14 (2010), p. 379-404; also available in www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/what-is-history-essays/Pdf20.

⁷ T.C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of the Modernity in America and Russia* (Downers Grove, ILL, 1992).

⁸ Corfield, « POST-Medievalism », p. 383-388.

decorative whimsy, vernacular cladding, and bright primary colours, had its time of relative popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, yet now retreats before the return of steel, concrete and glass. Not only that. References to « postmodernity » in book titles are fast disappearing. As one expert comments aptly, the so-called « Age of Postmodernity » is « slipping into the strange history of those futures that did not materialise »⁹.

A celebrated American guru of architectural style, who was one of the first to embrace Postmodernity, concedes that the task of matching every variant fashion to big shifts in the *Zeitgeist* has become impossible. « It [the twentieth century] was an exhausting century », confides Charles Jencks, somewhat mournfully. Instead of the triumphant « Postmodernity », which he had once proclaimed, there are now rival and « quarrelling modernisms »¹⁰. Readers are reminded of the sceptical argument of Jürgen Habermas, who argues instead that Modernity, however defined, is not dead but an « unfinished project »¹¹.

Gradually, all these variant terms have lost precise meaning. Modern Times come with many global variants. References to Modernity as one finite period of history confuse rather than assist analysis. The terminology itself has become « hollowed out ». Hence, if the term can be reliably used at all, Modernity should be regarded not a precise historical « stage » but as a process.

And with that hollowing of Modernity, too, Early Modernity has lost any analytical edge. It has just become (rather loosely) descriptive. In effect, to talk of shifts in stages of Modernity, from Early Modern to Late Modern, does little more than to contrast « earlier » times with « later ».

In my view, these names can be dropped entirely from the litany of historical stages, without any loss of meaning. Instead, the adjective « modern »

⁹ G. Myerson, *Ecology and the End of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 74.

¹⁰ C. Jencks, *Critical Modernism: Where is Postmodernism Going?* (Chichester, 2007), p. 214-215.

¹¹ J. Habermas, « Modernity: An Unfinished Project » (1981), in M.P. D'Entrèves and S. Benhabib (eds), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 38-55.

makes most sense in reference to the swathe of years around « now ». That usage allows all individuals to live in their own « modern times ». But the actual dates are a moveable feast. The Modern is always « Here » and « Now », even though it may well appear to the next generation as nothing more than « Old Hat ».

THE CIVILISING PROCESS?

What about a descriptive name for a trend, something more specific? A suggestive terminology, with greater explanatory purchase, was proposed in 1939 by the sociologist Norbert Elias. He detected a « civilising process »: from barbarism to civilisation. Central to that shift was the diffusion of standards of good manners, of non-intrusive personal behaviour, of sexual self-control, and the avoidance of random violence. These attitudes were not only generated culturally but were also internalised into people's inner psyches. In many ways, this model echoed eighteenth-century progressive thought which saw history as a staged progression from « rude » to « polished » times. Hence for Elias the « medieval-feudal period » was generically coarse and squalid, in contrast to « present-day Western civilised society »¹².

Undoubtedly, there is a bitter irony in the fact that he was writing in a century and a continent which had already seen many acts of barbarism, and was to witness yet more¹³. Indeed, Elias's appreciation of the merits of politeness and self-restraint was sharpened by his experience of social crisis in 1930s Germany¹⁴. In that context, numerous historians have just as pertinently

¹² See N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Basel, 1939), transl. by E.F.N. Jephcott (Oxford, 1978); in revised edn. by E. Dunning and others (eds), *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford, 2000), p. ix.

¹³ C. Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge, 2010).

¹⁴ Elias, *Civilising Process*, p. xiv; and idem, *Studies on the Germans*, ed. S. Mennell and E. Dunning (Dublin, 2013). See also J. Fletcher, *Violence and Civilization: An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge, 1997).

detected an « uncivilising » process, particularly during civil strife and warfare¹⁵.

Nonetheless, despite objections that can be made to the schematic stages of Elias's trend – and his explanations of how it happened – he proved to be an influential pioneer. Above all, he highlighted the human capacity for co-existence, not just for mere survival but for the flowering of complex societies and cultures. At first, Elias's work was little appreciated. Yet in the 1970s and 1980s it attracted fresh attention, aided by the broad intellectual shift away from old political, constitutional, diplomatic, military and/or economic histories towards a new emphasis upon social, sexual, gender and cultural themes.

However, with further research, Elias's work has also been validly criticised. His chronology of change was not clear. At times, he highlights the sixteenth-century Renaissance¹⁶ but at others he quotes sources and cases from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, his source material is heavily reliant upon printed conduct books and courtesy manuals. Yet such publications constituted a repetitive and socially conservative genre of literature, which did not reflect the variability of real-life behaviour¹⁷. In eighteenth-century Europe, there remained, alongside the formal stress upon « politeness », a rival strand of « impoliteness ». That sort of behaviour featured heavy drinking, bawdiness, scatological humour, pornography, crude satire, comic literature, buffoonery, unconventionality, libertinism¹⁸. Nor were people obliged to stick just to one mode of behaviour. High-ranking ladies were relatively more trapped into good

¹⁵ M. Fulbrook (ed.), *Un-Civilising Processes: Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture - Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam, 2007).

¹⁶ Elias, *Civilising Process*, p. 60-72.

¹⁷ See above, p. xx, xx-xx, xx.

¹⁸ S. Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2011); V. Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2006); and H. Berry, « Rethinking Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Moll King's Coffee House and the Significance of "Flash Talk" », *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (2001), p. 65-81.

manners. But men, especially in private all-male gatherings, had much greater freedom – as seen at the rowdiest of London’s gentlemen’s clubs¹⁹.

Added to such criticisms, Elias’s overall model of change was far too schematic and top-down. He argued that innovations began in court circles, bolstered by state power, and were then diffused throughout society, through imitation and refraction²⁰. Yet, long before the twentieth century, things were not so simple. Social mores were influenced by many different groups – religious as well as secular – which interacted up, down, and across classes. By the eighteenth century there were critics as well as admirers of royal protocol. Above all, the imperial court at Vienna – known for its traditional « Spanish » protocol – was often found to be stifling rather than impressive. « Everyone cries out against this etiquette; even the emperor sometimes seems to be irritated by it », one candid visitor (a lawyer) observed in 1730; « ... nevertheless, it is observed like a point of religion »²¹.

Such rigid mores at Europe’s royal courts contrasted with the more relaxed politeness and inter-class civility among « polite society » in the wider world²². Monarchs were far from the only social leaders, in the urbanising, commercialising and later industrialising societies of western Europe and the USA. One new mode of greeting (not mentioned by Elias) was the egalitarian handshake, which spread from commercial usage, as already noted. Another example of an in-group codification that was not generated by royalty was the Masonic handshake. It became (and remains) a secret badge of exclusivity.

¹⁹ A. Lejeune, *The Gentlemen’s Clubs of London* (London, 1979). See also K. Davison, « Occasional Politeness and Gentleman’s Laughter in Eighteenth-Century England », *Historical Research*, 57 (2014), p. 1-25.

²⁰ Elias, *Civilising Process*, p. 85-86, 92, 103, 370-373, 384-399, 423, 427.

²¹ Johann Küchelbecker’s account of his 1730 visit, quoted in S.J. Klingensmith, *The Utility of Splendour: Ceremony, Social Life and Architecture at the Court of Bavaria, 1600-1800* (Chicago, 1993), p. 118.

²² P. Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain, 1660-1800* (Harlow, 2001); K. Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2001).

Manners can thus function as esoteric pledges as well as communal symbols, allowing people to deploy subtly variegated usages for different circumstances.

Standing back and taking the long view, it is undoubtedly significant that societies manage to find ways of living peaceably together²³ and to agree codified systems of manners. It is also a source of cohesion that people in all ages manage almost universally to internalise the customs of their own culture. Furthermore, from the eighteenth century onwards, there was an ever greater cross-class diffusion of polite standards, assisted by the spread of print culture, the growth of literacy, and (at table) the advent of cheap eating implements. Yet it is misleading to attribute the « civilising » process to just one era. There is no simple linear pathway, as Elias himself agreed²⁴. Nor a strict sequence of stages. Instead, there are long trends (albeit liable to disruption and reversals), which began before the eighteenth century and continue today.

« Civilisation » is always in negotiation. Behaviours can regress as well as improve. That said, however, acts of courtesy can undoubtedly leap across cultural divides²⁵. One example comes from Apartheid South Africa. As a child Desmond Tutu, later Archbishop of Cape Town, lived in the Johannesburg slums where a radical British clergyman, Trevor Huddleston, had his ministry. « One day », recalled Tutu, « I was standing in the street with my mother [a cook/cleaner], when a white man in a priest's clothing walked past. As he passed us, he took off his hat to my mother. I couldn't believe my eyes ...! »²⁶ Of course, this encounter was fleeting and did not change the world.

²³ Elias, *Civilising Process*, p. 161-172. For a study generating similar debates, see S. Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York, 2011); and critique by J. Gray, « Delusions of Peace », *Prospect Magazine*, 187 (21 Sept. 2011) in www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/john-gray-steven-pinker-violence-review.

²⁴ Elias, *Civilising Process*, p. 158, 382.

²⁵ F. Bargiela-Chiappini and D. Kádár (eds), *Politeness across Cultures* (Basingstoke, 2011).

²⁶ As reported by E. Aarvik, « The Nobel Peace Prize 1984 Desmond Tutu : Award Ceremony Speech », *Nobel Prizes and Laureates*, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1984/presentation-speech.html.

Nonetheless, Tutu remembered Huddleston's chivalrous gesture, as he signalled cross-class and inter-ethnic solidarity. Good manners showed their joint civilisation, despite adverse external circumstances. And later Tutu maintained this ecumenical attitude within post-Apartheid South African politics.

THE EXTENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT?

Many of the same objections to giving single names to complex eras of history apply to terming the eighteenth century as one of « Enlightenment ». There is at least an initial case for that usage. That optimistic name was, after all, circulated across European literary and philosophical circles. « When we ask, “Are we now living in an enlightened age?” », wrote Emmanuel Kant famously in 1784, « the answer is “No, but we live in an age of enlightenment” »²⁷. He was pointing not to something already achieved but to the prospect of radiant change.

Other positive names for the era included: « light », « reason », « science », « toleration », « improvement » and (emerging to become a nineteenth-century platitude) « progress »²⁸. While some were calm in their assessments, others were euphoric, as was the Nonconformist English clergyman Richard Price at the start of the French Revolution²⁹:

²⁷ E. Kant, « Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? », *Berlinische Monatsschrift/Berlin Monthly* (1784); in English, « Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment? » transl. M.C. Smith, in www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.

²⁸ J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (London, 1920); D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990).

²⁹ R. Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1790), p. 49-50.

I see the ardour for Liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws; and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience. Be encouraged, all ye Friends of Freedom. The Times are auspicious. ... Behold the light you have struck out, after setting America free, reflected to France, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates EUROPE.

Moreover, the concept of *the* Enlightenment also features in later critiques of the era. Postmodernist theorists, when delighting in the death of Modernity, traced its origins back to the eighteenth century. For them, the Enlightenment was depicted as cool, rationalist, science-bound, humourless, modernist, and « male », in contrast to a notional Postmodernity, which was claimed as warm, intuitive, humanist, witty, vernacular, and « female ».³⁰ In fact, hectic pronouncements like those of Richard Price hardly seem « cool » and « rational ». Instead, the Postmodernists' schematic binaries functioned as a form of polemic, hoping to kill the « old » and promote the « new ».

For historians, such generalisations are mere caricatures. But the point here is not to rescue the concept of Enlightenment from stereotyping and misunderstandings (although that is a worthwhile task in itself)³¹ but instead to explain why it does not constitute a helpful single name for the era. It is still deployed in studies of the history of political thought and cultural practices. But it is not today commonly used to apply to the period as a whole.

Enlightenment after all was not one monolithic experience which prevailed everywhere. Different ideas attracted attention at different times. There was no one new « public sphere » of male and « bourgeois » print culture,

³⁰ See Corfield, « POST-Medievalism », p. 383-388, 403-404, for two rival (and incompatible) Modern/Postmodern classifications from Ihab Hassan and Charles Jencks.

³¹ N. Hampson, *The Enlightenment: An Examination of its Assumptions, Attitudes and Values* (London, 1990); A. Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why it Still Matters* (Oxford, 2013).

which arrived at a stroke³². In the most open societies, women as well as men participated in public, private and semi-public forums of debate. At the same time, there were many pan-European linkages³³. Yet there were also distinctive national variants³⁴. Similarly, alongside certain core ideas, there were many shades of emphasis. If some philosophers espoused a cool and relatively conservative Enlightenment, others, like Baruch Spinoza in mid-seventeenth-century Holland, were intellectually and theologically subversive. His work, which took time to become fully appreciated, contributed strongly to the more revolutionary strand within the ferment of ideas, known as the radical Enlightenment³⁵. Meanwhile, other thinkers explored occult ideas, which were very far from rationalist³⁶.

Indeed, while a number of eminent Enlightenment figures, like Voltaire, were anti-clerical, there was also a notable strand of religious Enlightenment³⁷. Conventional thought among Protestants, Catholics and Jews, did not remain unaffected by these new intellectual currents and by the spread of secularism. An example can be seen in the work of Moses Mendelssohn, who strove to mesh traditional Jewish teachings with new ideas of liberalism and toleration³⁸.

³² For Jürgen Habermas's theoretical concept of the « public sphere » and the resultant debates, see J.A. Downie, « Public and Private: The Myth of the Bourgeois Public Sphere », in C. Wall (ed.), *A Concise Companion to the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2004), p. 58-79.

³³ J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005).

³⁴ R. Porter and M. Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981); and cases histories by R. Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, 2000); T. Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1690-1805* (New Haven, 2015); T.J. Reed, *Light in Germany: Scenes from an Unknown Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2015).

³⁵ J. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981).

³⁶ P.K. Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2013).

³⁷ D. Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

³⁸ Idem, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA., 1996).

Hence it is worth remembering that the social diffusion of Enlightenment thought was far from total. That caveat applies, both socially and geographically. Indeed, despite the long-term growth of literacy³⁹, there were still many areas across Europe where large numbers of illiterate people had no immediate access to the ferment of intellectual innovation. Moreover, needless to say, by no means all the literate agreed with Voltaire.

To dub the eighteenth-century as *the* or even *an* Age of Enlightenment obscures too much. It underestimates the extent of non-Enlightenment and ignores the alternative strands of thought and action which were positively anti-Enlightenment. While there were plenty of optimists, applauding the rise of « light » and « science », there were also intellectual pessimists who worried about problems, from the decline of religion to the risk of demographic crisis. Parson Malthus expressed that latter viewpoint in 1798, foreseeing not the future perfectibility of human society but the dangers of famine, disease and warfare, following population growth which in his view always tended to outpace the expansion of resources⁴⁰. In many ways he was a precursor of « green » ecological pessimism, which exists alongside technological optimism. Thus rival currents of hope and anxiety – Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment⁴¹ – both permeated eighteenth-century thought.

Europe in these years was an exciting place: expansionist and energetic. It saw population and urban growth; overseas voyages of discovery; global trade; the spread of colonial empires; great movements of people around the globe; scientific breakthroughs; technological experimentation; medical

³⁹ See I.G. Toth, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Budapest, 2000); R.A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, 2002); and D. Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000).

⁴⁰ T. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London, 1798), ed. A. Flew (Harmondsworth, 1970).

⁴¹ G. Graeme, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London, 2006); J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford, 2006); and debate in R.E. Norton, « The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment », *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), p. 635-658.

advances; theological debates; religious renewals; the diffusion of secularism; the development of state bureaucracy; the power of absolutism; the shock of political revolution; the stubbornness of counter-revolution; warfare both in Europe and overseas; the spread of literacy and numeracy; artistic and musical creativity; the ferment of ideas, including those of toleration, liberty, and revolution; continuing serfdom in eastern Europe; and (in parts of western Europe) the onset of structural economic transformation. Strikingly, too, there was the role of Europeans in organising the trans-Atlantic slave trade on a mass scale *and* in generating the campaign to ban the trade and, eventually, to end slavery itself (a campaign which still continues). Summarising all that as « Enlightenment » seems a bit like naming the twentieth century as an Age of Technology without mentioning genocides and two World Wars.

OTHER FRAMEWORKS –

DEEP CONTINUITIES, TRENDS AND TURNING POINTS

So where do these thoughts leave the question of age-namings? There is the option of taking the title of a dynasty, such as (in England) the Tudors or the Stuarts. These names have survived relatively well, at least in the English-focused historiography, not least because the start and end dates for these two periods of dynastic rule (1485-1603; 1603-1714) are closely aligned with historic centuries. Yet, even so, many historians avoid this type of nomenclature. Dynastic names from one country have little or no purchase when its history is put in a broader European or global history, where either different power structures or different dynasties prevailed. Furthermore, such family names are not particularly meaningful either in much earlier periods, when monarchical power was fragmented or disputed, or in later ones, when kings and queens become ceremonial figures. Indeed, taking labels from political or dynastic history often obscures other, quite different factors.

Another option is to use a term known to contemporaries of the period under investigation. « Enlightenment » or « Renaissance » are examples. Yet these invariably prompt debates about their dating and meanings. Contemporaries were often divided and it can be invidious to privilege one view over another. Would the twentieth century in world history qualify as the Century of Communism? A case could be made for the years 1917-1991. Or the Century of Conservatism? Or the Age of Liberal Democracy? Again, cases could be made. But such selections pre-empt the subsequent research. Eric Hobsbawm dodged the problem by choosing his abstract noun, naming the « short » twentieth century as « Age of Extremes »⁴². It was graphic enough. But hardly unique to that era.

Publishers often encourage authors to stick with known, even if intellectually outmoded, period classifications. That option, which is supposed to reassure readers, tends to promote boredom and conceptual fuzziness, such as the fog over concepts like « the » Middle Ages⁴³ or « the » Early Modern (as discussed above). Or, going to the other extreme, authors can invent something *outré* and provocative, which rival experts either shoot down in flames or ignore. Or there are many untestable truisms, like « An Age of Uncertainty » or « An Age of Ambition ».

Between such variations, the common alternatives these days are to identify chunks of the past by their century numbers or to sidestep these problems entirely by sticking to one theme through time⁴⁴. Either way, it is important that the chosen chronological framework has not pre-warped the research that follows. The new genre known as Big History⁴⁵, looking at the entire history of Planet Earth, offers a serious framework for very longitudinal

⁴² E. Hobsbawm, *An Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 1994).

⁴³ Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, p. 144-148.

⁴⁴ E.g. for a history of sexuality, stressing the timelessness of human intimacy, see T. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London, 1994).

⁴⁵ D. Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).

assessments, although practitioners with a science background often seem to retain rather stereotyped views of the past stages of human history.

Studying long spans of time certainly allows for an assessment of the extent and nature of deep continuities. These are too often underestimated, if history is sub-divided into too many little chunks⁴⁶. In terms of the history of manners and greetings, the long survival of distinctive cultural traditions is noteworthy. For example, in countries like Japan where it is not common to touch the other person when meeting, polite individuals can recoil when apparently invited to « invade » the personal space of others by shaking hands or (even worse) kissing cheeks. Here it is worth noting that even, when major changes to come, they do not automatically obliterate the old ways, which often persist alongside. For example, new technologies of communication have not ended the habitual forms of face-to-face encounters. For example, the live lecture survives, despite predictions that it would quickly be superseded by on-line learning.

Nevertheless, customs and traditions, however deep-rooted, are not immutable. There are long-term trends in history which bring gradual changes in their wake⁴⁷. Such developments need not be linear – and indeed usually are not. Nor are they necessarily irreversible. But their strong suit is their gradualism, which saps conscious opposition and gives innovations a chance to become embedded to launch a new tradition.

Examples of long-term trends apparent over the last three centuries include the global spread of urbanisation⁴⁸, the diffusion of literacy, the slow and patchy emancipation of women, the adoption in many parts of the world of democratic constitutions (in various guises), the march of technological

⁴⁶ P.J. Corfield, « Why is the Formidable Power of Continuity so Often Overlooked? » *Monthly Blog*, 2 (Nov. 2010) in www.penelopejcorfield.ac.uk/ Archive Monthly Blogs.

⁴⁷ P.J. Corfield, « On the Subtle Power of Gradualism », *Monthly Blog*, 4 (Jan. 2011) in www.penelopejcorfield.ac.uk/ Archive Monthly Blogs.

⁴⁸ P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013).

innovations (notably including new media of communication), and economic specialisation, as countries commercialise, industrialise, develop their service sectors, and streamline agricultural production⁴⁹. Equally, there is also the countervailing but similarly long-term process of global warming, exacerbated, it seems, by humanity's ill-considered excess burning of fossil fuels⁵⁰. These trends, some positive, some pessimistic, demonstrate the complicated through-time unfolding of history's web, impacting upon every aspect of human life.

Lastly, people often ask anxiously: *what has happened to historical stages and turning points? Have they really gone entirely?* The answer is no. There are indeed significant stages and major turning points, often associated with great upheavals, including wars, sudden encounters between peoples not previously in contact, technological change, cultural turbulence, and/or political revolutions⁵¹. The problem is to assume that all aspects of life go through discrete stages on the same timetable; that everything within one stage must match one formula; and that a turning point in one field must entail simultaneous « turns » across the board. Thus political-military successes or disasters may trigger sudden transformations, while cultural changes are often slow-moving. For example, styles of meeting and greeting usually change gradually, even imperceptibly. But sometimes there are abrupt breaks, such as the rapid disappearance of the fascist salute after World War II. Authors, encouraged by publishers, often over-use the dramatic term « revolution ». As a result, sceptics regularly debunk grand claims for big turning points. But it is wrong to throw out the fabled baby with the bathwater.

⁴⁹ D.S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technical Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (London, 1969); A. Kohli and K. Sugihara, *Labour-Intensive Industrialisation in Global History* (New York, 2013).

⁵⁰ See N. Roberts, *The Holocene: An Environmental History* (Oxford, 1998).

⁵¹ P.J. Corfield, « Reconsidering Revolutions », *Monthly Blog*, 6 (March 2011) in [www.penelopejcorfield.ac.uk/ Archive Monthly Blogs](http://www.penelopejcorfield.ac.uk/ArchiveMonthlyBlogs).

ENVOI:

History entails an intricate mix of continuities, trends, and abrupt turbulence, in an ever-changing combination⁵². Ages may well be distinctive but they are never monolithically uniform. They contain continuities and trends from earlier eras as well as innovations in their own day. Overall, the impact of these intertwined forces means that the collective human past is not simple but, equally importantly, not inexplicable. *Hats off to that!*

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⁵² Defined as historical trialectics in Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, p. 122-123, 211-216, 231, 248-249.