

**History and the Temporal Turn:  
Returning to Causes, Effects and Diachronic Trends<sup>1</sup>**

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Published in J-F. Dunyach (ed.),  
*Les âges de Britannia: Repenser l'histoire des mondes Britanniques:  
(Moyen Âge-XXIe siècle)* (Paris, 2015), pp. 259-73  
Also posted on PJC website as CorfieldPdf37.

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***I: The Coming Turn***

Cultural life and thought - both in the West and globally - is now experiencing a Temporal Turn or *tournant temporel*.<sup>2</sup> In brief, that means a return to paying due attention, across a number of disciplines, to the very long term. The revived awareness of the importance of studying Time – defined as the ubiquitous clock of the universe – has been heralded in many subject areas, in both arts and sciences. For example, within the universalist subject of physics, one expert, speculating in 2002 about ‘undiscovered ideas’, forecast: ‘I think time

<sup>1</sup> This essay contains a considerably expanded version of a talk at the Conference on *Periodisations de l'histoire des mondes Britanniques* at the *Université de Paris Diderot* on 23-24 November 2012, with warmest thanks to all participants for stimulating discussions and in particular to Jean-François Dunyach and Tony Belton for perceptive assessments.

<sup>2</sup> Others define the Turn as relating specifically to the history of time: see eg. HASSAN R., « Globalisation and the “Temporal Turn»: Recent Trends and Issues in Time Studies”, *Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, 25, 2010, pp. 83-102.

still holds some surprises'.<sup>3</sup> The same new focus was heralded in 2004 within the more culturally-diversified subject of philosophy. 'My recommendation is to watch *time* closely'.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, this intellectual development, which growing numbers (myself included) are now dubbing as the Temporal Turn, is also being warmly welcomed by historians. For us, Time as a big theme never went away.

As a result, the Temporal Turn is now gradually complementing – and updating – the long sway of the Spatial Turn. The emphasis upon Spatiality, which began in the early twentieth century and gained further momentum within History in the 1970s and 1980s, underpinned twentieth-century structuralism and, after that, post-structuralism.<sup>5</sup> These were modes of thought concerned with identifying synchronic structures and meanings (for example, in language; or in power systems) rather than paying close attention to diachronic trends or upheavals.

Needless to say, the study of Space – defined as the infinite extension of the universe – still remains influential, not least in the emergent fashion for Global History.<sup>6</sup> This development has been greatly aided by the important new possibilities of mapping and understanding spatiality and place, which are consequent upon source digitisation.<sup>7</sup> However, it is clear that the Spatial Turn, which has generated rich findings and arguments, errs when and if it seeks to exclude Time.

Dividing Space from Time – or, in other words, sundering Geography from History – constructs a false and hence dangerously misleading dichotomy.<sup>8</sup> One of the most determined intellectual emphases upon Space at the expense of Time was proposed by the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. He argued that long-term temporality was purely a 'metaphysical concept'. That viewpoint fits with various minority heresies in Time studies, which maintain that time 'does not exist'.<sup>9</sup> Yet that case is hard to uphold, either theoretically or practically. Hence Jacques Derrida's proposal of an alternative state of 'chora' or 'khōra'

<sup>3</sup> SIEGFRIED T., *Strange Matters: Undiscovered Ideas at the Frontiers of Space and Time*, Washington, DC., National Academy Press, 2002, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> BAGGOTT J., *Beyond Measure: Modern Physics, Philosophy and the Meaning of Quantum Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> STURROCK J., *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi Strauss to Derrida*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> FINNEGAN, D.A. « The Spatial Turn: Geographical Approaches in the History of Science », *Journal of the History of Biology*, 41, 2008, pp. 369-88; R. HASSAN, « Globalisation and the "Temporal Turn" », art. cit.; and GOPNIK A., « Faces, Places, Spaces: The Renaissance of Geographic History », *New Yorker*, 29 Oct. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> For spatial studies within the Humanities, see essays by GULDI J. in [www.spatial.scholarslab.org/spatial-turn](http://www.spatial.scholarslab.org/spatial-turn).

<sup>8</sup> For a blending of both, see KAPLAN R.D., *The Revenge of Geography: What History Tells us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate*, New York, Random House, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> CORFIELD P.J., *Time and the Shape of History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 4-6.

(from the ancient Greek), signifying an atemporal spatiality that subsists not ‘in the long’ but ‘in the round’, has not won intellectual support, even amongst his closest admirers.<sup>10</sup> The ambitious plan to construct in a Parisian public garden a physical monument to symbolise the concept of ‘chora’ has come to nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of separating Space from Time, it is important to acknowledge that the two are intrinsically and inextricably paired. It was long ago noted that the impact of Einsteinian relativity was not to abolish time or space but to formulate a new understanding of their linkage. The 1908 commentary from Hermann Minkowski, the mathematician and one-time tutor-cum-student of the younger Einstein, realised that new ways of thinking were required:

Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.<sup>12</sup>

The intrinsic linkage of Space and Time is known as Space-Time or, as a minority of users (myself included) prefer, Time-Space.<sup>13</sup> Reversing the noun sequence gives priority to the dynamic force of Time. But either way, the conjunction makes a powerful formulation, whose implications are taking time to be fully appreciated. Indeed, it is still commonly repeated that Einstein has abolished absolute time (‘everything is relative’), without realising that he has left absolute Space-Time, or absolute Time-Space, intact.

One powerful factor promoting the Temporal Turn is the growing awareness of complex long-term climate changes across the world. That case clearly relies upon evidence, deployed by experts in many disciplines, that is based upon longitudinal data and experience over time.<sup>14</sup> Another factor promoting the Temporal Turn is the intellectual exhaustion of the many varieties of structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist thought, which focused upon immanent structures as opposed to long-term historical trends.<sup>15</sup> Studies in this mode have yielded launched many significant debates. But, by ignoring the integral nature of

<sup>10</sup> DERRIDA J., ‘Ousia and Gramme’, quoted in WOOD D., *The Deconstruction of Time*, Evanston (Ill.), Northwestern University Press, 2001, pp. 260-1, 269, 270.

<sup>11</sup> MORGAN, E., « Derrida’s Garden », [www.Fillip.2.2006](http://www.Fillip.2.2006): consulted on-line 7.10.2014. See too DERRIDA J. & EISENMAN P., *Chora L Works*, ed. KIPNIS J. & LEESER T., New York, Monacelli Press, 1997; BENNINGTON G. & DERRIDA J., *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 406; and WILKEN R., « Diagrammatology », 2007-05-09: [www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/intermingled](http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/intermingled), consulted 21.10.2014.

<sup>12</sup> MINKOWSKI H., « Space and Time » (1908), repr. in SMART J.J. (ed.), *Problems of Space and Time: Readings*, New York, Macmillan, 1964, p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Examples are BROWN N., *History and Climate Change: A Eurocentric Perspective*, London, Routledge, 2001; FLANNERY T., *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change*, New York, Grove Press, 2006; and MOSLEY S., *The Environment in World History*, Oxford, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> See SARUP M., *An Introduction to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Harlow, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

Space-Time (or Time-Space), these structuralist interpretations have proved too static – and finally lost credibility.

Simultaneously, the Temporal Turn is encouraged by the atrophying of postmodernism, the cultural offspring of post-structuralism in the twenty-first century. This school of thought also doubted the human capacity to understand phenomena through time. It was severely anti-historical, at least in its assumptions. ‘Histories are what historians write’, was a firm belief, signifying that ‘histories are *merely* the invention of historians’. Historical truth, according to this view, is a pure illusion, masking currencies of power.<sup>16</sup> However, critics were not slow to express dissent.<sup>17</sup> There are through-time processes that are beyond the invention of historians, who are through-time temporal beings themselves. In fact, the very nomenclature of ‘post’-Modernity implies a temporal sequence of ‘before’ and ‘after’. Thinking entirely without any concept of Time is more difficult than it might seem.

Furthermore, postmodernist theorists, who deride Modernity and its alleged accomplice, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, themselves show relish rather than disdain for through-time judgments. They do not hold back from expressing strong views on both past and present. Ultimately, then, the improbability of sustaining an anti-historical stance by invoking historical concepts has defeated the project. In particular, the challenge of making through-time moral and historical judgments, on epic issues like Holocaust Denial, showed that there is a limit to Postmodernist scepticism about the discipline of History. If there is no valid checking and weighing of rival interpretations by assessing evidence from the past, then all history-writings must be equally subjective, based upon no more than assertion. The only valid criteria of judgment would be aesthetic ones. But whose personal preferences should take priority? There would be no grounds – to take an extreme case – to reject Holocaust Denial as bad history.<sup>18</sup>

Such a realisation halted one very celebrated guru of history-as-literature, Hayden White. He announced to a Postmodernist Conference in 2000, that ‘Postmodernism can be taken too far’. His statement was met with surprise and disapproval by a very pro-

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<sup>16</sup> JENKINS K., *Rethinking History*, London, Routledge, 1991; idem, *The Postmodern History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1997; JENKINS K. *et al.*, *Manifestoes for History*, London, Routledge, 2007; SMART B., *Postmodernity*, London, Routledge, 1994; and, recently, HARTOG Fr., *Croire en l’histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> See variously APPLEBY J. *et alii*, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York, Norton, 1994; EVANS R.J., *In Defence of History*, New York, Norton, 1999; and SOKAL A., *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Discussed in LIPSTADT D., *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, New York, Free Press, 1993; EAGLESTONE R., *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial*, Cambridge, Icon Books, 2001; and GUTTENPLAN D.D., *The Holocaust on Trial*, New York, Norton, 2001.

postmodernist audience. It was bold of White at the time. However, the shift from postmodernist thought was inexorable, once the contradictions of its nothing-is-knowable theoretical position became fully apparent.<sup>19</sup> A year later, in 2001, a neutral observer of the debates decided that the so-called ‘age of Postmodernity’ is ‘slipping into the strange history of those futures that did not materialise’<sup>20</sup> – a verdict that seems amply confirmed well over a decade later. Books with ‘postmodern’ or ‘postmodernity’ in their titles peaked in the later 1990s and early 2000s but are now dwindling in number.<sup>21</sup>

Now, the coming Temporal Turn is energising many disciplines, including (rather too slowly) the recently-humbled discipline of economics.<sup>22</sup> And it is re-energising the study of History – a subject which constantly scrutinises its core reliance upon through-time interpretation and evidence from the past.<sup>23</sup> Like all species, humans live in Time. Unlike most others, humans ‘think long’. Historians are specialists who use that capacity to throw light on our past and present.

## ***II: History and Periodisation***

Unsurprisingly, the Temporal Turn is generating fresh interest in finding distinctive terms to name the study of History over the very long-term. Usages include references to the Bakhtinian concept of *Great Time*,<sup>24</sup> to the biologists’ *Deep Time*,<sup>25</sup> to the Braudelian *longue durée* [the long term],<sup>26</sup> and to (my personal preference) the Greek-derived coinage of the *diachronic* [through-time].<sup>27</sup> More recently, *Big History* – a newly-minted term of Australian origins<sup>28</sup> – is coming into circulation. The phrase has faintly boastful connotations (‘my history is bigger than yours’) and hence comic undertones. Yet its use by a new

<sup>19</sup> PJC’s recollection of the plenary panel at the « History Millennial Conference - Old Histories, New Beginnings? » at University College Chichester on 7 Feb. 2000.

<sup>20</sup> MYERSON G., *Ecology and the End of Postmodernity*, Cambridge, Icon Books, 2001, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> The British Library catalogue lists 107 entries with one or other of those words in titles of books published in 2000, compared with 43 in 2010 and 28 in 2014.

<sup>22</sup> A resonant call for the discipline of neo-classical economics to return to the insights of longitudinal economic history is provided in PIKETTY T., *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013; in Eng. transl. by Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press, 2014, pp. 31–33, 573–577.

<sup>23</sup> For further elaboration, see CORFIELD P.J., « Time and the Historians in the Age of Relativity », forthcoming in GEPPERT A.C.T., and KÖSSLER T. (eds), *Obsession der Gegenwart: Zeit im 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/ *Geschichte und Gesellschaft Sonderheft* 25, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> BAKHTIN M.M., « Towards a Methodology for the Social Sciences », in EMERSON C. & HOLQUIST M. (ed.), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, transl. V.W. MCGEE, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> See SMAIL D.L., *On Deep History and the Brain*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> BRAUDEL Fr., « Histoire et sciences sociales : *La longue durée* », *Annales: E.S.C.*, 4, 1958, pp. 725-53; reprinted in his *Ecrits sur l’histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 1969, pp. 41-83; and transl. in his *On History*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980, pp. 25-54.

<sup>27</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*: coined 1857 but rare before the early twenty-first century.

<sup>28</sup> Invented by David Christian of Australia’s Macquarie University.

interdisciplinary group, known as the International Big History Association, launched 2010,<sup>29</sup> is intensely serious. As a result, this formulation is tending to become the new term of art in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Another sign of the Temporal Turn is apparent in various new long-span academic courses and publications.<sup>30</sup> These encourage old conventional periodisations to be adapted or shed entirely. It must be acknowledged, however, that these long-span courses are unlikely to sweep all before them, partly because they can be very difficult to teach and to study, and partly because of embedded academic traditionalism.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, 'big' history now studies not just centuries but millennia, whether stretching back to the origins of the cosmos, or just to the origins of Planet Earth.

This renewed interest in the long term is rebalancing History, not by requiring an abandonment of short-focus studies for some purposes but instigating by greater efforts to locate such studies within longer-term frameworks. These are in turn themselves open for debate. Such a diversification will improve all forms of historical studies. The change builds constructively upon the fact that short-, medium- and long-term periods are always interlinked, since *'the synchronic [moment] is always in the diachronic'*; while, conversely, *'the diachronic is always in the synchronic'*.<sup>32</sup>

History as a subject is also gaining fresh impetus by reconsidering and, if need be, revising old assumptions about historical periodisation. That proposition does not mean that all historians today are called upon to give up their cherished specialisms. But they are invited to think also about how their particular 'bit' of History fits into long-term trends and/or continuities; and whether the conventional 'ages and stages' are helpful or need changing. Small amendments of this sort already happen from time to time. Thus the eighteenth-century in British history was conventionally divided at 1750 or 1760, before researchers in the later 1970s shifted to focus upon the 'long eighteenth century' from

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<sup>29</sup> See [www.ibhanet.org](http://www.ibhanet.org).

<sup>30</sup> Examples are CHRISTIAN D., *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004; BROWN C.S., *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*, New York, New Press, 2007; and SPIER F., *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> On the power of tradition/ continuity, see further discussion below pp. 10, 13.

<sup>32</sup> CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

c.1700-1830 or from c.1700-1850.<sup>33</sup> The Temporal Turn encourages more of such rethinking, on an ever grander canvas.<sup>34</sup>

Fresh thinking about the names for different historical periods is also revitalising the study of the past. Current nomenclature and periodisation is often very antiquated and contested ('Renaissance', 'Enlightenment' 'Modernity'). There's nothing wrong *per se* with keeping such traditional terms. Yet it can become unhelpful when old labels are seriously out-of-kilter with updated information and interpretations. For example, the label of *Prehistory* (first coined 1851) for the millennia before humans started to become literate is absurd. The old assumption was that 'History' depended exclusively upon studying written records, so that anything before their advent was untraceable *Prehistory*.<sup>35</sup> But today countless non-written sources are being adroitly used to study the pre-literate human past.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, non-literate communities in literate eras are not excluded from historical enquiry. Why then omit pre-literate humans? 'Big History', by contrast, links all of human history with that of our precursor hominids.

A further criticism of the concept of *Prehistory* is that it seems to imply that early people lived in a static antechamber to 'real' history, being governed by brute 'biology' before human 'culture' had begun. Yet there is ample evidence, such as that of organised burials and cave art, which challenges any deep chronological schism of pre/postliteracy. In 2013, an impressive British Museum exhibition of Ice Age Art, for example, boldly defined the exhibits as witnessing the 'arrival of the modern mind'.<sup>37</sup> When challenged on their terminology, experts who study pre-literate human societies, whether defining themselves as prehistorians, archaeologists, biologists, or paleontologists, generally reply that the term *Prehistory* is too common to avoid and does no harm. However, that second conclusion is too sanguine. To define human life before writing as *Prehistory* is positively misleading. Accordingly, I predict that the term will eventually be abandoned – if perhaps later (given its academic embeddedness), rather than sooner.

<sup>33</sup> See variously O'GORMAN F., « The Recent Historiography of the Hanoverian Regime », *Historical Journal*, 29, 1986, pp. 1005-20; and CORFIELD P.J., « British History: The Exploding Galaxy », *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34/4, 2011, pp. 517-26; see also [www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com](http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com); and [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk), British History Essays, pdf/24.

<sup>34</sup> BESSERMAN L. (ed.), *The Challenge of Periodisation: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, New York, Garland, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> TAYLOR T., « Prehistory versus Archaeology: Terms of Engagement », *Journal of World Prehistory*, 21, 2008, pp. 1-18.

<sup>36</sup> Examples are GAMBLE C., *Timewalkers: The Prehistory of Global Colonisation*, Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1993; and FAGAN B., *World Prehistory: A Brief Introduction*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> British Museum exhibition, 'Ice Age Art: Arrival of the Modern Mind' (Feb.-May 2013); and commentary by JANUSZCZAK W., « The Origins of Everything: Ice Age Art », *Sunday Times Magazine*, 3 Feb. 2012, p. 42.

In particular, History as a subject is being encouraged into fresh thinking about whether (and, if so, how) different periods do (or do not) constitute part of a procession of ‘ages and stages’. Too often an old tripartite model is invoked as intellectual scaffolding on the strength of traditional usage rather than any conscious endorsement. Thus three classic stages of relatively recent human history are: ancient/ medieval/ modern. Or that triad has been updated by postmodernist theorists into: medieval/ modern/ postmodern. Or another permutation, habitually used in France in application to French history, is: medieval/ modern (to 1789)/ contemporary (post 1789). Yet in practice there are many variants, applied to many periods – characteristically associated with complex arguments about the appropriate time boundaries for any given stage. For example, the particularly fuzzy concept of ‘Modernity’ has been at different times applied to different periods of history from the birth of Christ to the end of the Second World War.<sup>38</sup> As the satirical magazine *Private Eye* would say, implying that a drunken journalist has done a sloppy job: ‘*shurely shome mishtake here*’.

Abandoning schematic but unexamined ‘stages’ of history can bring an undoubted sense of intellectual liberation. To take one example, the Italian food historian Massimo Montanari trained as a ‘medievalist’ but jettisoned first the term ‘medieval’ and then the ‘ancient’ and the ‘modern’. Having done that, he wrote: ‘In the end, I felt freed as from a restrictive and artificial scaffolding’.<sup>39</sup> Others, who do the same, report the same sense of liberation. Either abandoning fixed and schematic ‘stages’ of history completely or adding flexibility/overlapping to such ‘stages’ encourages an awareness that different elements of human history may have different temporal trajectories and turning-points. For example, there may be long-term trends in (say) economic history, demographic history, urban history, food history, cultural history, art history, the history of literacy, and many other aspects of human life, such as changes in human biology, which don’t match neatly with (say) detectable stages in political history, whose dramatic events are often taken as decisive turning points.

An awareness of potentially different time-scales ends the intellectual contortions engendered by trying to shoe-horn all aspects of human history into rigidly defined ‘stages’. Hence critics of traditional ‘stages’ in history do not need simply to replace one set of ‘stages’ with another, or one set of period names with another. Many of the first protagonists of women’s history, for example, were unhappy with the traditional ‘stages’, as being defined

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<sup>38</sup> See CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op.cit.*, pp. 131-44; and *idem*, «POST-Medievalism/Modernity/ Postmodernity?», *Rethinking History*, 14, 2010, pp. 379-404; also via Taylor & Francis website [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com); and [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk), Essays, pdf/20.

<sup>39</sup> MONTANARI, M., *The Culture of Food*, transl. IPSEN C., Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, p. xii.



by events with particular meaning for men. Instead, the boldest feminist pioneers promised a new 'Herstory'.<sup>40</sup> It would, they maintained, revolutionise both the chronology and epistemology of the subject. Yet the claims proved over-hyped.<sup>41</sup> The study of women's history (and now men's history too) is greatly enriching the broad field of gender history, which in turn enriches all history. The new field has not, however, produced a new timetable for a separate women's history, let alone a new epistemology. Nor does it now expect to achieve such grandiose aims.

Collectively, historians should now be able to acknowledge instead that there may be big or small turning-points that apply to men and women as humans together, as well as continuities and/or trends outside such schematic turning points that may apply to the genders either separately or together. It is neither necessary nor feasible to subsume all women's history under that of men or, of course, *vice versa*.

There is, however, one and powerful potential barrier to fresh thinking in the form of the long-standing institutionalisation of historical periodisation and nomenclature within the academic world (and not just within the world of academe). Established period divisions are structurally embedded within and endorsed by academic departments, job descriptions, University administrations, grant-giving bodies, learned societies, conferences, journals, and publishing. For example, a high proportion of academic historians are classified by period labels, such as 'classicists', 'medievalists' and 'modernists'. (Such labels may be partially sidestepped by experts in specialist fields with long-span applications, such as 'economic historians', 'urban historians', 'art historians' 'gender historians'; but even then period subdivisions are likely to be invoked, such as 'medieval economic historians', and so forth).

These period divisions are useful in dividing up and familiarising the immense research field of History. Moreover, individual historians are often, but not invariably, very attached to such labels. In particular, smaller sub-fields (that is, small in terms of their number of practitioners), such as 'medieval history', often attract emotional as well as intellectual adherence from specialist practitioners. That response applies especially if the sub-field is felt to be embattled, in which case mutual solidarity among its practitioners is a vital defence mechanism. Yet excess attachment to all these outdated labels may impede

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<sup>40</sup> For an ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful attempt, see MILES R., *The Women's History of the World*, London, Paladin/Grafton, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> See critique by CORFIELD P.J., « History and the Challenge of Gender History », *Rethinking History*, 1, 1997, pp. 241-58, with debate in *Rethinking History*, 3, 1999, pp. 339-41; all reprinted in MORGAN S. (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 116-29.

fresh thought, whilst forcing historians stuck in the old frameworks into intellectual contortions or intellectual weariness.

In recent decades, the imperative demand from academic administrators and from grant-giving authorities has been for more ‘interdisciplinarity’. It has become an unexamined buzz-word, which sounds good. But, in the case of History, which is already an interdisciplinary subject within its own many sub-fields, it would be considerably more productive to call for inter-temporality.

Customary assumptions among academics, publishers and the wider public continue meanwhile to aid the forces of tradition. And a further barrier to new thinking about period divisions is the difficulty of finding agreed alternatives. It is relatively easy, for example, to criticise the term ‘Middle Ages’, Latinised adjectivally as ‘medieval’, on the grounds that the years in question – in Europe from (say) the eleventh to fifteenth centuries – are certainly not in the ‘middle’ of all human history or even in the ‘middle’ of relatively recent European history.<sup>42</sup> Yet it is much harder to find an agreed alternative, let alone to get others, even among specialists, to adopt any new nomenclature. In particular, it is worth noting that publishers and the media tend to be particularly conservative about the choice of period names/dates, which tends to curtail innovation in big publications.

Persistent period-divisions and period-terminology constitute an apparently paradoxical indication of the power of continuity in History. It is a discipline which is often said to focus upon change. Yet its practitioners also study continuity; and their institutional and operational frameworks are often deeply imbued with continuity too. Such complex permutations within the subject highlight the multiple features of History through Time. The minority of commentators, who characteristically argue that ‘nothing changes’ or that ‘there is no new thing under the sun’, are wrong in their overall emphasis. But the majority, who tend to say conversely that ‘change is constant’ or ‘it’s all about change’, are equally oversimplifying. It is not necessary to opt for either one or the other. Rather, the challenge is to assess the interlocking nature of continuity and the different forms of change: a category change in ways of thinking about the diachronic.

### ***III: Historical Triadectics:***

#### ***Or, Longitudinal History in Three Dimensions***

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<sup>42</sup> For uncertainties over the ‘medieval’, see CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-8.

Taking a longitudinal through-time approach, historians can instead identify changes and continuities at all sorts of different levels and with many different chronologies. It is not a question of replacing one old set of ages and stages with another. Or one set of key dates with another set. Instead the Temporal Turn encourages a complex interpretation that allows for the interaction of multiple dimensions. It also encourages historians to debate the options and alternatives, as they are now doing – without simply taking traditional frameworks for granted.

My own argument a trialectical process of History with three powerful dimensions, incorporating continuity and significantly different forms of change – all of which are constantly interlocking and interacting. In other words, historians should not assume that they are restricted to a choice of *either* continuity *or* change (already noted as constituting a false dichotomy). Instead they are challenged to analyse how these different dimensions interact over time, in a multi-layered way. There are often underlying continuities beneath what appear to be the most dramatic changes – and, equally, subtle changes within what may appear to be inertia and no-change.

Looking at Time's three dimensions in turn, macro-transformations or radical discontinuities in History come in many forms, when different trajectories and moments of major change coincide. These big upheavals are often dubbed 'Revolutions'.<sup>43</sup> In practice, however, far from every change, which is so-named, is as 'revolutionary' as another. To take one example, the American colonies' struggle for independence from Britain was dubbed by Richard Price in 1784 as the 'American Revolution'<sup>44</sup> and many today still retain the term as its historic name. Moreover, given the force of familiarity, its nomenclature is highly likely to persist. Yet the revolt proved to be more of a classic post-colonial transfer of authority than a complete social upheaval. It did indeed lead to an innovative constitutional settlement, which important long-term cultural as well as political implications – although even in that regard there were elements of retained tradition (seen, for example, in the prerogative powers transferred from the British monarchy to the American presidency). But particularly in social terms, it can be argued that the revolt caused and encouraged rather than stemmed from a profound upheaval.<sup>45</sup> In particular, the existence of slavery was left unchanged in the southern states, when independence was finally wrested from Britain in 1783. It was not until

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<sup>43</sup> On naming revolution(s), see CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-11.

<sup>44</sup> PRICE R., *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution: And the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World*, London, 1784.

<sup>45</sup> Contrast GREENE J.P. (ed.), *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits*, New York, New York University Press, 1987; with NASH G., *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*, New York, Viking, 2005.

eighty years later that Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. And, even thereafter, different forms of bondage and discrimination long haunted (and to an extent still haunt) many African Americans within American society – and their fellow-citizens too.

Expectations of instantaneous and, especially, of universal change thus often prove far too simplistic. When people intone solemnly, after some great crisis: ‘Things are changed for ever’ or ‘*Nothing* will ever be the same’, they are surely wrong. Yet major upheavals, turning-points and transformations do happen, encouraging historians and journalists alike to find a more complex set of classifications and terminologies for different degrees and forms of macro-change.<sup>46</sup>

Very long-term, gradual changes in History also benefit from reconsideration. ‘Evolution’ in human affairs has attracted less theoretical attention than has ‘Revolution’. Moreover, gradual trends are not necessarily universal; they are not automatically linear in their unfolding; and they are certainly not invariably unstoppable. Nonetheless, many long-term gradual adaptations (or micro-changes) do occur.<sup>47</sup> These processes are often concealed or ‘chopped up’ by shorter-term periodisations that may be based upon turning-points in political history.

Examples of diachronic trends include incremental changes, like (say) biological evolution within all living species. Or there are other long-term but fluctuating trends within human societies, including (say) urbanisation. Or the spread of literacy and the understudied social diffusion of formal numeracy. Or the hard-to-pin-down process of secularisation. Or the emergence of women into full public participation in political and economic life. The study of evolutionary adaptations such as these is aided when historians are not forced to delimit the study of trends within traditionally defined historical stages.

Approval for the study of long-term trends does not mean, of course, that every claimed trend must be accepted uncritically. For example, Stephen Pinker’s arguments about the global decline of violence are provoking serious research and debate. The result may well qualify what seems like his over-optimism – but the arguments will still make a significant

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<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the British case, see CORFIELD P.J., « Britain’s Political, Cultural & Industrial Revolutions: As Seen by Eighteenth-Century Observers and Later Historians », in *Current Research: Literature, Culture and Media*, Syddansk University, Odense, Denmark, 2013: [www.sdu.dk/Om\\_SDU/Institutter\\_centre/IKV/Videnskabelige+tidsskrifter/AktuelForskning/2013AF](http://www.sdu.dk/Om_SDU/Institutter_centre/IKV/Videnskabelige+tidsskrifter/AktuelForskning/2013AF); linked also to website of the International Society for C18<sup>th</sup> Studies; and [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/) British History Essays, pdf/31, Jan. 2014.

<sup>47</sup> On naming micro-change(s), see CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-8.

contribution to long-term History.<sup>48</sup> And a beneficial part of the return to the long term means that analysis can also focus upon diachronic causes and effects – as well as the current fashion for studying synchronic networks, identities, and meanings

Alongside a fresh focus upon different forms of change there is also scope for further consideration of the under-studied role of deep continuities in History. The power of continuity can be saluted in the name of tradition, custom, familiarity, constancy. Or it can be denounced as constituting inertia, inflexibility, stick-in-the-mud, even paralysis.<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx once famously denounced ‘the tradition of all the dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’.<sup>50</sup> Either way, however, this understudied force in History benefits from – indeed, positively requires – longitudinal analysis.

Here again there is important scope for debate. It is true that some aspects of the cosmos remain time-invariant, such as the rules of mathematics and the laws of physics. Yet other elements of continuity are much more contestable. Some features of the human experience, for example, are common to all humans: such as the basic capacities for language, bipedalism, tool-making, and so forth. But claims for other features, such as intrinsic gender or ethnic traits, are potentially inflammatory. There is always a risk that analysts will claim as perennial and unchangeable those specific features of social life which they secretly prefer. Nonetheless, longitudinal study through History provides the means for a calm assessment of such claims – avoiding the prior assumptions either that nothing changes in human nature,<sup>51</sup> or that everything does.

Fernand Braudel’s celebrated analysis must form an essential part of this reconsideration. But a just recognition of the power of deep continuity does not mean that this force should be automatically or exclusively equated with Braudel’s particular specification of the *longue durée* as geo-history.<sup>52</sup> Not only does geography in History display manifold changes as well as continuities, but also geography is far from the only aspect of History to display deep continuity. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that the power of persistence or tradition does not exist in isolation. Instead, continuity may be tugged at by various overt or

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<sup>48</sup> PINKER S., *The Better Angels of our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*, London, Allen Lane, 2011; and critique by GRAY J., « Delusions of Peace », *Prospect Magazine*, 21 Sept. 2011, in [www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/john-gray-steven-pinker-violence-review](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/john-gray-steven-pinker-violence-review).

<sup>49</sup> On naming tradition(s), see CORFIELD, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-6.

<sup>50</sup> MARX K., « The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte » (1852), in MCLELLAN D. (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 329.

<sup>51</sup> For claims for a « Stone Age human nature », see BUSS D.M., *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of Mind*, Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1999; and assessment in BADCOCK C., *Evolutionary Psychology: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> See above, n. 26.

subtle forms of change, whilst, equally, continuity/tradition may also work both to blunt the forces of change and to smooth the shock of the new.<sup>53</sup>

That blunting/smoothing function, among other things, explains why revolutionary political upheavals are often followed by the invention of new forms of tradition to sustain the new political/constitutional system. The mixing of continuity with even the most violent revolutionary upheavals – or with even the most drastic adaptations of prevailing ideas – reiterates the point that ‘change’ comes in very many guises.

‘Revolution’ is not the only model for fundamental transformation. Those who assume that are stacking the cards. The same comment applies to the concept of ‘paradigm shifts’, which was employed by Thomas Kuhn to describe major transitions in the history of scientific thought. Others, however, point to slow and cumulative changes in the history of ideas, as well as much global convergence and borrowing between different cultures over time.<sup>54</sup>

Some ‘revolutions’, as already noted, prove much more revolutionary than others. And some are actually undone or reversed, tugged by the forces of conservatism, or diverted or perverted by rival forces of transformation. Thus, while revolutions can achieve dramatic changes and a cleansing of the Augean stables, they also risk turning into something unexpected, unwanted, contradictory, or fearsome.<sup>55</sup> Revolutionary change thus tends to get a good press with the ardent and optimistic; but violent upheavals can prove disappointing, counter-productive, and sometimes positively dangerous, unleashing the unexpected and undesired in similarly violent measure.

Evolution or micro-change, meanwhile, has the capacity to make historical adaptations palatable and/or uncontested by proceeding in small incremental stages. ‘You can’t buck the trend’. Yet such gradual changes are not unstoppable. They have, equally, the potential to fall back into stasis and the capacity to accelerate (as the ‘thin end of the wedge’) into something more drastic.<sup>56</sup> Gradual or evolutionary change thus gets a generally good, if

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<sup>53</sup> CORFIELD P.J., « Why is the Formidable Power of Continuity so Often Overlooked? », in [www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/](http://www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/) no. 2, Feb. 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Compare KUHN, T.S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1962; with TOULMIN S.E., *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972; or BALA A., *The Dialogue of Civilisations in the Birth of Modern Science*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> CORFIELD P.J., « Reconsidering Revolutions », in [www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/](http://www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/) no. 6, March 2011.

<sup>56</sup> CORFIELD P.J., « On the Subtle Power of Gradualism », in [www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/](http://www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/) no. 4, Jan. 2011.

not ecstatic, press. Yet it can prove disappointing, either through being too slow to have much effect, or through inadvertently opening the floodgates to other, undesired trends.

Studying the historical dimensions of Continuity/ Micro-change/ Revolution thus directs attention to their continual three-way interaction: a trialectical process that continues throughout History – an interlinkage of persistence/ momentum/ and turbulence that is as integral to Time as are height, depth and breadth to Space.<sup>57</sup> Here the term ‘trialectics’ is invoked as the core descriptor for three-dimensional history. It must be admitted that, as a descriptor, this terminology is far from common, although it can currently be found in application to a variety of fields, including logic, ecology, and planning theories.<sup>58</sup> But its gradual spread indicates a growing intellectual concern to escape binary models in many areas of intellectual endeavour. The advent of trialectical analysis may thus be becoming a trend in its own right – as time will either prove or disprove.

Returning to the diachronic and big longitudinal themes will further encourage interdisciplinary and cross-period collaboration between groups of researchers. Yet the need for inspiration and core input from the many individual scholars who fuel the study of History will remain vital. In fact, History as a discipline lends itself to research projects both by teams and by individuals. Hence increasing numbers of historians will, like me, have had experience of both. Teamwork is helpful for large-scale projects, especially for engaging experts from different disciplines. Nonetheless, studies by individual historians, working on their own (within the context of the wider discipline), are likely to remain the most common form of output (an interesting continuity).

Moreover, while the study of History certainly prizes the scrutiny of many sources and their accurate use, convincing interpretations are not by any means correlated with the quantity or even the quality of the research data deployed. Ultimately, it’s the quality of the sustained arguments, backed by relevant evidence, which counts. And that quality will be tested by historical debates, which test ideas as promulgated not only within one generation but also between generations of analysts over time.

Combining an awareness of the interlinked powers of Continuity, Gradual Change, and Radical Discontinuity in past times makes it possible to offer limited predictions for the future. It will contain an ever-changing and always interactive admixture of continuity, momentum, and turbulence. Thus some things will remain the same (such as the laws of

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<sup>57</sup> For more on historical trialectics, see CORFIELD P.J., *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-3, 211-16, 231, 248, 249.

<sup>58</sup> Try web searches for trialectics in logic; ecology; and spatial theories, such as the planning concept of Thirdspace: for which, see [www.wikipedia.org/Edward\\_Soja](http://www.wikipedia.org/Edward_Soja).

physics). Some things will change gradually (such as biological evolution; erosion; and, within human societies, some long-term trends, such as the spread of literacy). And other aspects will change dramatically and unpredictably. That mixture explains both why some things can be predicted and why some cannot. Regularly recurrent events – like the return of Halley’s Comet (next visible from Earth in mid-2061) – can be predicted. At the same time, however, many other probable happenings cannot be given precise dates (like earthquakes or volcanoes) or even be assured to happen at all. Hence it is well understood that insurance is a matter of calculated probabilities, not certainties.<sup>59</sup>

Lastly, the seamless link between past and future makes the study of diachronic History essential, as illuminating the mixture of the known and unknown which frame the cosmos and human life within it.<sup>60</sup> Understanding both the extent of certainty and uncertainty in the past saves people from believing false assurances about the future. There are still many people who ask seriously: why study History, if it cannot give us certainty – and if it thus can’t help to predict the future?? The same question could equally be applied to quantum physics, or to climatology, or to any other field of knowledge which deals in probabilities rather than certainties. But the answer to all such questions is that it’s vital to know the differences between certainties, probabilities, and possibilities. History deals always in three major dimensions, one of which is the turbulence of the immediately unexpected. It is also striking how, after the event, explanations can be found. Although we don’t know everything that is coming, we can explain it, when it does. That is not a contradiction. It’s a function of living three-dimensionally within unidirectional Time. Continuity constantly mingles with different sorts of changes. So with us, so with the cosmos, as long as Time endures.

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<sup>59</sup> See MARGOLIS J., *A Brief History of Tomorrow: The Future, Past and Present*, London, Bloomsbury, 2000; and MORGAN C., *The Shape of Futures Past: The Story of Prediction*, Exeter, Webb & Bower, 1980.

<sup>60</sup> GULDI J. & ARMITAGE D., *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Note how different are the tone and contents of this highly confident tract from the much more downbeat postmodernist assessment in JENKINS K., MORGAN S. & MUNSLOW A., *Manifestoes for History*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007.