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WRITING INTO SILENCE ABOUT TIME

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Time – great subject. Lots of it around. Universal application. Paradoxical too: time flies, time crawls ... time heals, time festers ... time is short, time is long ... time is money, time is priceless. And the list continues: humans can do time, have time, lose time, borrow time, gain time, forget time, remember time, miss time, or beat time. What a cornucopia of possibilities. Just right for the turning of the year, with its phoenix-like imagery of interlocking death and rebirth.



What's more, it's a great subject for historians. Our subject focuses upon the workings of Great Time, as evidenced in human history. (Or as evidenced in cosmic history, for those who stretch Big History to cover the entire existence of the cosmos).¹ So, one way or another, Time lies at the heart of all historical

¹ D.G. Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).

studies. Without temporality, there is no chronology and no sequencing; no cause and effect; no short term and no long term.

Incidentally, the reference to temporality should properly be spatio-temporality, because, since Einstein, the integral linkage of Time and Space must be understood as a given. The usual summary of that proposition is encapsulated in the terminology of Space-Time, as coined by Minkowski in 1908. But a minority of analysts, including myself, prefer Time-Space. That formulation gives the dynamic priority to temporality, which seems right.

Writing my own study of *Time and the Shape of History* (2007)² took me many years and was thoroughly enjoyable. Mostly I worked on my own. And, having published the book and numerous related essays, I find that I've basically written into silence. Not complaining. Simply an observation.

Some people say vaguely: 'how fascinating'. Or even: 'Wow'. But mainly they don't say anything. Even many close colleagues, with whom I've worked and debated for years, never mention the book. They don't mock or laugh or give me a critique. They simply don't mention it. That attitude is strange to me but instructive. It's been that way for ten years, ever since the book was published. Very few reviews. And only modest sales.

Why should that be? One general reason is that Time is one of those things that's always around but it's so intangible and abstract that it's taken for granted. It's in the aether, as it were. Why bother to say more? People do write excellent books about the history of attitudes to Time, including clocks, watches and time measurement.³ And, of course, some (not many) physicists⁴ and

² P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007).

³ E.g. L. Holford-Strevens, *The History of Time: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2005) and a popular overview in S. Garfield, *Timekeepers: How the World became Obsessed with Time* (Edinburgh, 2016).

⁴ See the best-selling S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London, 1988); and the more accessible J. Gribbin, *The Birth of Time: How We Measured the Age of the Universe* (London, 1999).

philosophers⁵ write books about the evolving study of Time and the tensions/paradoxes/mysteries within the concept. But there is relatively little literature from historians on the nature of temporality, rather than on the effects of change over Time. As a result, there were very few people willing to act as publisher's readers, before the book was published; few willing to review; few who teach anything along these lines; and few who are interested enough to read for themselves.

Yet obviously I've also reflected upon the qualities of the book itself. There are two major criticisms. One is that the book's too long. In fact, at 309 pages, it's not exceptionally lengthy. But readers tell me that they find it so. From my point of view, the length was exactly what it took for me to work through my views. I couldn't then have written less. Maybe now I might publish a more accessible short version, with illustrations.⁶

My original hope was that the brief self-contained interlink sections, appearing between each big chapter, would provide different ways into reading the whole. The book does not have to be read sequentially. The main chapters are more like the spokes of a turning wheel. So the interlinks were intended as way-stations on the journey. They play with different ideas about Time, such as time travel; time cycles; time lines; time ends; time pieces; and so forth. Furthermore, I ideally wanted these interlinks to appear on different coloured paper, to alert readers to the reading options. Alas, however, that did not prove technically possible. The compromise was to print them with a different type-

⁵ E.g. D. Cockburn, *Other Times: Philosophical Perspectives on Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge, 1997); J.T. Fraser, *Time, the Familiar Stranger* (Amherst, Mass., 1987).

⁶ For shorter accounts, see P.J. Corfield, 'History's Big Picture in Three Dimensions', *The Historian: Journal of the Historical Association* (Winter 2007), pp. 26-30; idem, 'History Viewed Long' (2008), for *London University's Institute of Historical Research History: Making History Website* www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/long_history; also posted within PJC website as Pdf2; and idem, 'Teaching History's Big Pictures: Including Continuity as well as Change', *Teaching History: Journal of the Historical Association*, 136 (Sept. 2009), pp. 53-9; also posted within PJC website as Pdf3.

face; but the visual variation is not marked enough. Perhaps I should have held out for shaded paper, or distinctive margins, for the interlinks – but anyway I didn't.

The second criticism is related to the first. Some readers do find the book hard to read. I find that verdict difficult to understand, because it's not written in technical language. Nor are the concepts in themselves very difficult to grasp. I think it's because the book is densely crammed throughout with information and ideas. The effect is a 'heavy read'. Ouch! I'm deeply sorry to have written a seemingly boring book. Particularly because to me, it's enthralling and completely the reverse of tedious.

Having said that, it's also good to record some cheering responses. I've applied my three-dimensional interpretation of Time and History to a global overview essay entitled 'Cities in Time'. People have found that instructive rather than boring.⁷

And I have had one truly great compliment. An early reader told me that it made her 'think strange thoughts'. (She meant the comment in a positive way). I was thrilled. My aim is/was to get readers to look at Time and History anew.



⁷ P.J. Corfield, 'Cities in Time', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 828-46; also posted within PJC website as CorfieldPdf29.

Writing into silence is a valuable learning experience. I have not stopped communicating my ideas on my ‘home period’ in research terms, the long eighteenth century. Nor have I stopped writing concept-pieces about History, Time and the long term.⁸ Interest in such matters is growing. Scattered evidence comes in the form of unexpected invitations from colleagues to contribute to conferences/books. Or messages from students, raising fresh questions.

Meanwhile, I’m trying even harder to make my ideas as plain and clear as I can. And I use humour wherever possible. Interestingly, there are only few jokes about Time itself (as opposed to jokes about the effects of Time) ... it’s not that sort of subject. Glad to say that I can laugh at myself instead. And, yes, I’m persevering. Time isn’t going to disappear.

⁸ P.J. Corfield, ‘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), pp. 259-73; also posted within PJC website as CorfieldPdf37; idem, ‘Time and the Historians in the Age of Relativity’, in A.C.T. Geppert and T. Kössler (eds), *Obsession der Gegenwart: Zeit im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2015), pp. 71-91; also posted within PJC website as CorfieldPdf38.