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Conference Report: *Chronopolitics: Time of Politics, Politics of Time,  
Politicized Time*

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*Chronopolitics: Time of Politics, Politics of Time, Politicized Time.*

Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London, the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF), the Leibniz Research Alliance 'Value of the Past', and the Arbeitskreis Geschichte + Theorie, and held in Potsdam, 16–18 September 2021. Conveners: Tobias Becker (ZZF), Christina Brauner (University of Tübingen), and Fernando Esposito (University of Konstanz).

This conference brought together scholars working on the interrelationship between time and politics, temporality, and historiography in order to systematize debates on chronopolitics and to connect theoretical work on temporalities with traditional historical research.

In his opening keynote lecture, Dipesh Chakrabarty (University of Chicago) outlined two conflicting chronopolitics arising out of the collision between geological and human–historical time. The notion of a 'post-pandemic future' illustrates the singularity that we attribute to the pandemic, whereas climate change is narrated as a process. Given the difficulty of placing the Anthropocene in terms of human periodization, Chakrabarty argued that human concerns (for example, the pandemic) should be converted into the Anthropocene time, and not simply vice versa.

While the keynote lecture looked at the synchronization of two temporalities, the first panellists focused on microstudies of three events as (de)synchronizers. Burak Onaran (Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) examined the junta's intervention within the existing time order after the *coup d'état* in Turkey on 27 May 1960. The immediate historicization of the coup fulfilled the promised future of the Kemalists' past, thus legitimizing the junta's actions and creating a continuity of historic meaning. Helge Jordheim (University of Oslo) then problematized the 'timelines' that were used to a great extent after the terror attacks of 22 July 2011 in Norway. Timelines often seem to reconstruct time and appear rational but, according to Jordheim, they represent highly conflicting instruments of evaluation.

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In the last presentation of the panel, Alexander C. T. Geppert (New York University) introduced ‘futurity’ and ‘velocity’ as the temporal regimes of the space age. The connection between these temporalities and a complex media infrastructure ensured that the moon landing on 20 July 1969 was perceived as a synchronizer of time and space, which transformed the world into a planet.

Despite the uniqueness of the events they addressed, all the panellists demonstrated that individual events encapsulate larger processes—be they the transition of power, dealing with terror, or new perceptions of temporal and spatial borders on earth. The focus was on synchronicity, and the discussion showed that it had a twofold effect: when politics aims to synchronize temporalities and events, political groups also have an interest in the politics of desynchronization. Thus to determine agency in specific studies, it is necessary to elucidate what Reinhart Koselleck called the defining layer in the temporal sediments of the event. In terms of agency, the case studies brought up the role of the media as a crucial synchronizer that also diversified and produced multiple temporalities.

Mirjam Hähnle (University of Basel) opened the second panel by arguing that in the eighteenth century, travelogues about the Middle East expressed relations between regions in temporal dimensions, describing relics or places. Rejecting the simple assumption of a break between premodern and modern temporalities, she proposed discontinuities and temporal overlaps between modernity and premodernity. Mirjam Brusius (GHIL) examined how archaeology contributed to the constitution of historical time and its relevance for the creation of European narratives of progress and civilizatory hierarchies. She demonstrated that history and archaeology rely on linearity constructed by material and archival practices that emerged in the nineteenth century in the Western world. In the panel’s last paper, Andrea Nicolas (Berlin) discussed how the political time regimes of governmental rule are interconnected with dominant forms of historicity, exemplified by the *gadaa* system of Oromo society in Ethiopia. She argued that the political contexts in which historicities emerge shape their historical narration. Thus the question of who shapes the discourse is crucial for the historiographical framing of *gadaa* as a counter-concept to Western democracy.

The panel emphasized the relevance of materiality for the construction of temporalities. Objects serve as tools to access certain periods and are used to establish temporalities, but themselves incorporate multiple temporal structures. Yet materiality can go further than the examples presented and also include temporal traces in practices and bodies. These findings demand new approaches to the history of science, archaeology, and cultural sciences, and especially to museums and heritage studies. Western colonial practices cannot be swept away, and collected objects pose a challenge to European exhibitions. This demonstrates the need for new approaches to collecting objects in the first place. Furthermore, the example of Oromo society problematizes how modern Western concepts such as 'democracy' change our perceptions and interrogation of empirical data, and how changes in conceptualization may politicize a subject, which is then appropriated. Similar conceptualizations affect attributions like 'modern' and 'premodern', or 'colonial' and 'post-colonial', which have their own temporalities and often alter our research methods.

The first part of the third panel dealt with the ideological temporalities of (post)socialism in Eastern Europe. Marcus Colla (University of Cambridge) asked what temporal orders existed under socialism, and how a temporal lens may help us to better grasp the conditions and crisis of late socialism. He argued that both simultaneous and alternative temporalities were strongly interconnected with the regime, and thus every critique connected to the notions of time was perceived as a critique of the regime. Adéla Gjuričová (Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague) complemented the discussion on socialist temporalities by focusing on the transition from socialism to democracy in Czechoslovakia. She examined conflicting temporalities in four subfields of the transition period: the legislative procedure; reform negotiations in parliament; the demand for privatization; and the election of 1992, with the subsequent transformation of what had been a federation into two republics.

Gjuričová used chronopolitics as a tool to distinguish various social groups by their specific experiences of time in order to overcome the binary notion of supporters of Communist policies and the opposition, while Colla productively identified temporalities in various policies and discourses. By differentiating between political

concepts of time and experiences of time, the panel demonstrated the importance of being aware of analytical methods and applied concepts. The concept of ‘revolution’ itself reveals temporal layers in the events of 1989, both as an analytical concept and in the language of sources: ‘revolution’ may re-temporalize 1989 by aligning it with other revolutions, or change its semantics in Eastern European languages by adding an active or passive component. Another issue that raised concerns was the division into Eastern and Western temporalities. It must be asked whether the changes were mutual, or what the specific features in each case were.

In the evening lecture, Margarita Rayzberg (Cornell University) and Blake Smith (University of Chicago) focused on academic chronopolitics and examined our disciplinary and systemic experiences of time, discourses on time, and perceptions of time as a resource. In their well-known book *The Slow Professor*,<sup>1</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber articulated a critique of speed and constant pressure for productivity in academia, but the panellists rejected the existence of this choice, especially for junior scholars who are dependent on high performance in a competitive environment. Academics are constantly producing and making sense of time when narrating their biographies. Another aspect concerned how academics communicate in society – how they strive to be timely and relevant when speaking on certain topics in public, despite having had a rather atemporal training while working on a Ph.D. thesis.

In the second part of the panel on socialist and neoliberal temporalities, Benjamin Möckel (University of Cologne) examined the discourse on the political metaphor of future generations. He argued that the concept’s success lies in its adaptation to various political agendas. Furthermore, the metaphor integrates distant futures into the political discourse to allow us to talk about the future. While Möckel problematized moral responsibilities as expressed in economic values, Elizabeth Cohen (Syracuse University) introduced the attribution of value to time in liberal democracies. Cohen focused on ‘scientifically measured durational time’ to describe how non-measurable aspects

<sup>1</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto, 2016).

of political processes are evaluated in terms of time. Starting with the calendar, which is essential for establishing and maintaining political boundaries, Cohen stressed the function of time in forming justice and in deliberation.

By leaving historical or experienced time out of her analysis, Cohen remarkably demonstrated how to make time and procedural temporalities visible. This approach may be applied not only to governing systems, but also to institutions that are determined by procedures, such as courts and parliaments. Furthermore, the examination of temporalities in procedures allows for long-term perspectives and comparisons, providing an opportunity to move beyond microstudies. As Cohen's analysis concentrated on procedures, she was able to precisely articulate their interconnected power relations. Thus Cohen's approach fulfils the demand to identify who the actors are in historical research on chronopolitics. Möckel's talk exemplified how its vagueness allowed the metaphor of future generations to work: it does not specify when the future generations start—or whether the actors are even speaking for themselves, as in case of the climate crisis. But the demand to consider the rights of future generations prioritizes political agendas connected with them as a strategy of legitimation. Does the success of the metaphor of future generations in agenda-setting mean that time is becoming irrelevant to certain political arguments?

The fourth panel focused on historicities. Fernando Esposito (University of Konstanz) problematized the doing of historiography not as observation, but as a chronopolitical act. Exemplifying the argument about the historicization of historicism put forward by Reinhart Koselleck, Esposito stressed that not every change of relation to the past happened with the intention of intervening in historiographical temporalities (as Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* or W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* demonstrate). Instead, changed relations to the past often relied merely on structural transformations. Stressing the Eurocentricity of Koselleck's concept of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, Esposito used it to conceptualize the plurality of times and contemporaneities as the new fundamental experience of time.

Using the term coined by Ethan Kleinberg (Wesleyan University), Esposito contributed to the 'history of the present'. Rejecting that way of narrating history, Kleinberg presented his own understanding of

the history of the present — one that disputes that the present is a stable point that itself presupposes a stable past. Kleinberg approached the present as a performative interpretation that transforms and limits the past. Thus he diagnosed the discipline's inability to relate to the future. As a result, historians 'roam an ever-extending present while looking back'. Kleinberg emphasized that Koselleck's assumption of anthropological constants throughout history is similarly determined by our temporalities, and in this respect restricts our imagination of possible present pasts. Kleinberg argued for a plurality of approaches to encounter the 'ghosts' of the past that are 'surging' in our present — enabling historians to ride 'the surge', as the past only exists as history.

Zoltán Boldizsár Simon (Bielefeld University) introduced a new approach of this sort, in which technological and ecological temporalities disconnect history from its past and break the developmental continuity between past, present, and future. Linking the political domain with historical temporalities, he described a desynchronization of political and technological time in terms not of the pace of change, but of the different kinds of change informing them. Drawing on Helge Jordheim's argument of a modernity that synchronized multiple temporalities with a single linear and homogenous narrative progress, Simon outlined a desynchronization of 'processual-developmental' and 'evental-unprecedented' changes, arguing that this produces temporal conflicts concerning our expectations of the future or the relevance of the past.

This conference laid out a potential programme for exploring the relations of time and politics in/of history. First, the connection consists of time as a resource in politics, giving rise to a struggle for dominance over time, or power relations characterized as temporal conflicts. Time as a resource can operate in different modes, such as a political use of historical time, the politics of memory, and claims of a crisis, but may also cover topics such as time in spaces like parliaments or courts. Second, politics and power presuppose actors who need to be identified in order for power and time relations to be visualized. Studying actors in dominant power relations, a history of chronopolitics must ask how the experiences of excluded actors should be considered. Third, academics must reflect on disciplinary chronopolitics and research as a chronopolitical act. Historians are

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crucial chronopolitical actors who police what counts as history and, by doing so, politicize time and history. Finally, the theory of history must not only frame empirical research, but also integrate the temporal category into research on historical and social change.

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