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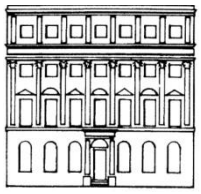

BULLETIN

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'Tales about Time': Temporality, Modernity, and the Order of Time
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'Tales about Time': Temporality, Modernity, and the Order of Time. Workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 29–30 Nov. 2012.

'Can one narrate time—time itself, as such, for its own sake?' Thomas Mann begins the final chapter of his *Magic Mountain* by posing this question.[1] To answer it from a historiographical, philosophical, and sociological perspective was the aim of the participants in the interdisciplinary workshop 'Tales about Time: Temporality, Modernity, and the Order of Time' held at the German Historical Institute London. The workshop focused on the multi-layered connections between time and history; the historical significance and interpretation of temporal patterns of order; and chronopolitical phenomena and practices. The latter include, for example, politically contextualized images of history and models of order (chronopolitics), but also concrete political practices (chronopolicy) that use time as a resource for social policy (for example, in setting working hours, or defining specific life divisions, such as retirement age). In addition, the workshop examined symptoms of crisis in the modern temporal structure and the emergence of new notions of order, along with associated changes in concepts related to time (history, progress, etc.). Finally, it reflected on the historicity and time-boundness of patterns of interpretation and narratives, and discussed their theoretical and methodological implications for historiography.

In his introductory paper, Fernando Esposito (Tübingen), organizer of the workshop, outlined its premisses and aims. It seemed to him that a central issue requiring clarification was why the debate on the topic of 'time' in general and the changes in modern temporal structures in particular had played such a minor part in historiography so far. Esposito surmised that the reason for this reticence on the part of historians was a certain reluctance to question the disciplinary frame of reference and the basic academic assumptions of their subject. Thus the model of universal, homogeneous, and linear absolute time needs to be historicized and contextualized. Against this background, he went on, dealing with the epistemological ambivalence of

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

[1] Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York, 1995), 641.

historical theories is a particular challenge to the discipline. These theories are always products of their time and, depending on approach, must themselves be treated as historical sources. The question therefore arises whether theories that are flowing in the stream of time can offer any firm support for empirical research. Esposito pointed out that current theoretical approaches which assume a fundamental dislocation within modern temporal structures make a critical distancing from sociological diagnoses and historical sources seem more difficult than ever today. In conclusion, Esposito discussed methodological implications in terms of his own research project on the European discourse on primitivism between 1860 and 1960. He hypothesized that ideas of civilizatory progress or backwardness formed and legimitized processes of social legitimation and transformation.

The thematic complexity of the workshop was illustrated by the first focal point, which concentrated on the techniques and media of experiencing and reflecting on time in the widest sense. The papers delivered here were located at the intersection between historiographical method and a substantive debate with the phenomena of time and history. In his paper, Peter Tietze (Tübingen) asked to what extent the idea of historicity had been problematized within historiography, becoming a catalyst for methodological innovation. According to Tietze, *Begriffsgeschichte* (the history of concepts) emerged out of the crisis of the paradigm of historicism, whose origin lay in the increasing awareness of the contingency of disciplinary and everyday certainties. Tietze argued that since the beginning of the twentieth century, *Begriffsgeschichte* had produced two types of crisis management in German historiography. Wilhelm Bauer and Otto Brunner represented the strategy of de-problematizing in that they mystified history with the assistance of static key terms thus, as it were, concealing the problem of contingency. Richard Koebner and Reinhart Koselleck, on the other hand, stood for a re-problematization by interpreting crisis as a chance for constant self-reassurance with respect to the basic assumptions of their discipline.

In his paper, François Hartog (Paris) looked at the novel as a medium for reflecting on time. Literature, too, he suggested, is trying to come to terms with the modern idea of the historicity of the world. According to Hartog, however, the work of historians and novelists is subject to fundamentally different epistemological conditions, both

theoretically and practically. While historians work in a situation dictated by what has already happened, novelists can overcome this time threshold and describe phenomena whose significance cannot (yet) be articulated in an scholarly way. Hartog named three novels (Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, and Olivier Rolin's *Méroé*) as examples of recent 'tales about time' which reflect the temporal architecture of our present. They share the motif of a post-catastrophic situation which provides the narrative background to the action. Hartog saw these fictional worlds of ruins as containing 'presentist' scenarios, and used this to explain the term 'presentism' which he had coined. According to Hartog, this refers to our present-day time regime, in which the future has lost its function as the driving force of history, while the past appears dimly as a load and burden to be borne. The present, he concluded, is expanding as an endlessly continuing omnipresence.

The themes of 'progress and expectations of the future' were another focal point of the workshop. This concentrated on contemporary 'tales about time' in the sense of historical topoi. In her paper on changes in futurology in the Western industrial nations around 1970, Elke Seefried (Munich) dealt with a group of actors who themselves told a new 'tale about time', or, to be more precise, developed a new narrative of the future. Inspired in the 1950s by think tanks and university research institutions, the discipline of Future Studies initially took the form of a transatlantic network. The aim of the new discipline was to design the future, with the aid of mathematical and empirical forecasts, as a technologically clearly defined horizon of possibilities. In the 1960s, Seefried said, there was still confidence that the future could be controlled, even, to some extent, created. This confidence was based on the assumption, drawing on cybernetics, of a controllable social acceleration induced by technology and science. Around 1970, according to Seefried, the prevailing notion of time along with images of the future were plunged into crisis. Future Studies reacted to socio-economic developments by questioning the paradigm of growth measured purely in material and quantitative terms and integrating elements from ecology and the criticism of growth more strongly into its position. Thus futurologists redefined their idea of 'progress', now seeing it as cyclical rather than linear. Seefried saw the Club of Rome report, *The Limits to Growth* (1972), as encapsulating this development.

Irritated by the way in which the concept of progress was often laid to rest in contradictory terms, Rüdiger Graf (Bochum) spoke about the longevity of the notion of progress in the twentieth century. Displaying an encyclopaedic grasp of the subject, he showed that the idea of progress always attracted special attention at times when it was also the subject of criticism. Contemporary perceptions and Reinhart Koselleck's grounding of the term in *Begriffsgeschichte*, Graf said, showed that the meanings attached to the notion of progress were always ambiguous, if not contradictory. Graf argued that all the obituaries penned for progress to date have been premature. Instead of a history of progress that places absolute values on the term, he suggested that historians should enquire about the meaning that was being laid to rest at any particular time. Thus it would become clear that it was not the idea of progress as such that had come to an end, but merely that it had been withdrawn from certain areas of intellectual discourse. As a basic component of attempts to interpret the world in terms of historical philosophy, he said, the notion of progress had lost credibility, but in the progressivist terminology of the technical and scientific elites, it continued to be used effectively. In conclusion, Graf said that he doubted whether the idea of progress was a suitable term of reference for a debate on the history of (contemporary) time.

The workshop's third focal point was on specific chronopolitical practices and objects. In his paper, Mathias Mutz (Aachen) introduced historical variations in justifications for the introduction of summer time in Germany and the USA in the twentieth century. He presented the introduction of summer time or Daylight Saving Time (DST) as a temporal disciplining of society, that is, as a chronopolitical practice that varied culturally, socio-economically, and geographically. Mutz pointed to the widespread misconception that the introduction of summer time had been ecologically motivated from the start (this was the case, he said, only after the oil crisis of 1973). Nationalist motives and military strategies had been the main factors, he argued. Thus Germany and the USA had introduced DST during the world wars in order to save raw materials such as coal and energy by making greater use of the resource of 'time'. Mutz also showed that in the second half of the twentieth century, DST accompanied the transformation of Western industrial societies into consumer societies. Thus the notion of 'time consumed' displaced that of 'produc-

tive time'. While the introduction of summer had originally been justified in terms of national advantages accruing to the whole of society, by the end of the century its value was seen mainly as creating additional free time, giving individuals the chance for relaxation and consumption. Mutz's account of DST thus provides a graphic example of a thoroughly ambivalent chronopolitical practice and a flexible tool of social engineering.

The subject of Sanja Perovic's (London) paper was a chronopolitical object, the French revolutionary calendar. Pointing out that the French revolution was a transformative event which resulted in not only the perception of time changing, she argued that the change in time and the beginning of a new time had been politically instrumentalized by the authorities. As the basis for legitimizing the revolution, the calendar drove the (new) time forward and made any return to the *ancien régime* impossible. The revolutionary calendar presented time itself as the purpose of history. With the help of the revolutionary calendar, the new regime attempted to create an absolute temporal rupture by institutionalizing a new 'imagined totality' to replace the past along with the previous cosmological, natural idea of time. Perovic was particularly interested in the question of why this prominent project of representing the temporal order per se in a modern, secularized way failed to make the transition to modernity. She suggested that this was because the French revolutionary calendar represented different, conflicting temporalities: a purely secular awareness of history on the one hand, and the everyday experience of natural time structures on the other. At the methodological and theoretical level Perovic argued that historians should not transfer the temporal logic of their own day unconditionally to the temporal patterns of order of their historical subjects, but should take these seriously in their own terms.

The workshop's final focal point was the connection between time and space, in particular, the interaction between the temporal structure of modernity and its spatial correlation, globalization. The sociologist Hartmut Rosa (Jena) supplemented the historiographical view by adding the sociological argument that the acceleration of processes and events is the fundamental principle constituting modern society. Rosa distinguished between three areas affected by acceleration: technology; social and cultural change; and the pace of life. Driven by the engines of the economy, social structures, and culture,

the modes of acceleration constantly increased. According to Rosa, acceleration has reached a critical point in our late modern present, resulting in a rupture in the experience of time. In a globalized world, he argued, the classical collection of modern institutions (society, history, subject etc.) is eroding and being replaced by a situation of fragmentary simultaneity, in which history in the collective singular is (again) being dissolved in a plurality of histories.

The philosopher Peter Osborne (London) also looked at critical time thresholds and dislocations of experience in modernity. In his paper he argued that the temporality of globalization is characterized by contemporaneity. The terms 'contemporaneity' and 'contemporary', he pointed out, developed their present-day meaning first as a specification, and then in distinction to 'modern'. According to Osborne, the change in notions of time after the Second World War was expressed largely in the contemporary arts. In the 1980s, the term 'postmodern' became established as an alternative to 'contemporal/contemporary', but it has yet to prove its staying power. Osborne also argued that today, contemporaneity relates to a situation that refers not to a coming together in time, but to a coming together of various times that are present at the same time ('contemporaneity as a distributive unity of multiple temporalities'). In this situation of global contemporaneity, Osborne went on, it is not only crisis that becomes clear, but the crisis of crisis (the concept of crisis).

In the concluding discussion, it became clear that the historiographical treatment of the topic of 'time' has to face up to the challenge of integrating theoretical considerations and concepts on the one hand, and empirical, historicizing work on the other. It has become necessary to place abstract, metahistorical intellectual structures on to a firmer footing with the aid of concrete research topics and source corpora. It will be necessary to face this challenge not only in order to work on the field of 'time', which has, until recently, been largely ignored by historians, but also to reassess the theoretical and methodological basis of historiography itself. This multifaceted workshop made a start in this direction. Despite the wide spectrum of topics covered, in the end, it affirmed Thomas Mann's insight, expressed at the end of the *Magic Mountain,* that 'it is apparently not such an absurd notion to want to narrate *about time*' (p. 642).

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