

Futures Part: On the Semantics of Historical
Time / Reinhart Koselleck; New York:
Columbia Univ. Press, 1979 (93-104 p)

6

HISTORY, HISTORIES, AND FORMAL TIME STRUCTURES

The dual ambiguity of the modern linguistic usage of *Geschichte* and *Historie*—both expressions denoting event and representation—raises questions that we shall here investigate further. These questions are both historical and systematic in nature. This characteristic meaning of history, such that it is at the same time knowledge of itself, can be seen as a general formulation of an anthropologically-given arc, linking and relating historical experience with knowledge of such experience. On the other hand, the convergence of both meanings is a historically specific occurrence which first occurred in the eighteenth century. It can be shown that the formation of the collective singular *Geschichte* is a semantic event that opens out our modern experience. The concept "history pure and simple" laid the foundation for a historical philosophy, within which the transcendental meaning of history as space of consciousness became contaminated with history as space of action.

It would be presumptuous to claim that, in the constitution of the concepts "history pure and simple" or "history in general" (that are themselves part of specifically German linguistic forms), all events prior to the eighteenth century must fade into a prehistory. One need only recall Augustine, who once stated that, while human institutions made up the theme of *historia*, *ipsa historia* was not a human construct.¹ History itself was claimed to derive from God and be nothing but the *ordo temporum* in which all events were established and according to which they were arranged. The metahistorical (and also temporal) meaning of *historia ipsa* is thus not merely a modern construction but had already been anticipated theologically. The interpretation according to which the experience of modernity is opened up only with the discovery of a history in itself, which is at once its own subject and object, does have strong semantic arguments in its favor. It was in this fashion that an experience that could not have existed in a similar way before was first articulated. But the semantically demonstrable process involving the emergence of modern historical philosophies should not itself be exaggerated in a historicophilosophical manner. We should,

rather, be given cause to reflect on the historical premises of our own historical research by this once-formulated experience of history in and for itself, possessing both a transcendent and a transcendental character. Theoretical premises must be developed that are capable of comprehending not only our own experience, but also past and alien experience; only in this way is it possible to secure the unity of history as a science. Our sphere of investigation is not simply limited to that history which has, since the onset of modernity, become its own subject, but must also take account of the infinite histories that were once recounted. If we are to seek potential common features between these two forms, the unity of the latter under the rubric of *historia universalis* can only be compared with history pure and simple. I propose, therefore, to interrogate the *temporal structures* which may be characteristic of both history in the singular and histories in the plural.

Bound up in this question, naturally, is a methodological as well as a substantive intention, which has a dual aim. History as a science has, as it is known, no epistemological object proper to itself; rather, it shares this object with all social and human sciences. History as scientific discourse is specified only by its methods and through the rules by means of which it leads to verifiable results. The underlying consideration of temporal structure should make it possible to pose specific historical questions which direct themselves to historical phenomena treated by other disciplines only in terms of other systematic features. To this extent, the question of temporal structure serves to theoretically open the genuine domain of our investigation. It discloses a means of adequately examining the whole domain of historical investigation, without being limited by the existence, since around 1780, of a history pure and simple that presents a semantic threshold for our experience. Only temporal structures, that is, those internal to and demonstrable in related events, can articulate the material factors proper to this domain of inquiry. Such a procedure makes it possible to pose the more precise question of how far this "history pure and simple" does in fact distinguish itself from the manifold histories of an earlier time. In this way, access should be gained to the "otherness" of histories before the eighteenth century without, at the same time, suppressing their mutual similarity and their similarities to our own history.

Finally, the question of temporal structures is formal enough to be able to extract in their entirety the mythological or theological interpretations of possible courses of historical events and historical description. This will reveal that many spheres which we today treat as possessing innate historical character were earlier viewed in terms of other premises, which did not

lead to the disclosure of "history" as an epistemological object. Up until the eighteenth century, there was an absence of a common concept for all those histories, *res gestae*, the *pragmata* and *vitae*, which have since that time been collected within the concept "history" and, for the most part, contrasted with Nature.

Before presenting some examples of "prehistorical" experience in their temporal dimensionality, three modes of temporal experience will be recalled in a schematic fashion:

1. The irreversibility of events, before and after, in their various processual contexts.
2. The repeatability of events, whether in the form of an imputed identity of events, the return of constellations, or a figurative or typological ordering of events.
3. The contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*). A differential classification of historical sequences is contained in the same naturalistic chronology. Within this temporal refraction is contained a diversity of temporal strata which are of varying duration, according to the agents or circumstances in question, and which are to be measured against each other. In the same way, varying extensions of time are contained in the concept *Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*. They refer to the prognostic structure of historical time, for each prognosis anticipates events which are certainly rooted in the present and in this respect are already existent, although they have not actually occurred.

From a combination of these three formal criteria it is possible to deduce conceptually progress, decadence, acceleration, or delay, the "not yet" and the "no longer," the "earlier" or "later than," the "too early" and the "too late," situation and duration—whatever differentiating conditions must enter so that concrete historical motion might be rendered visible. Such distinctions must be made for every historical statement that leads from theoretical premises to empirical investigation. The temporal determinations of historical occurrences, once encountered empirically, can be as numerous as all the individual "events" which one meets with *ex post*, in the execution of action or in anticipation of the future.

Here, we wish initially to articulate the difference between natural and historical categories of time. There are periods that last until, for example, a battle is decided, during which the "sun stood still"; i.e., periods associated with the course of intersubjective action during which natural time is, so to

speak, suspended. Of course, events and conditions can still be related to a natural chronology, and in this chronology is contained a minimal precondition of its actual interpretation. Natural time and its sequence—however it might be experienced—belong to the conditions of historical temporalities, but the former never subsumes the latter. Historical temporalities follow a sequence different from the temporal rhythms given in nature.

On the other hand, there are “historical,” minimal temporalities which render natural time calculable. It still has to be established what minimum planetary cycle has to be supposed and recognized before it is possible to transform the temporalities of the stars into an astronomically rationalized, long-term, natural chronology. Here, astronomical time attains a historical valency; it opens up spaces of experience which gave rise to plans that ultimately transcended the yearly cycle.

It seems obvious to us today that the political and social space of action has become systematically denaturalized by force of technology. Its periodicity is less strongly marked by natural forces by nature. It need only be mentioned that in the industrialized countries, the agricultural sector of the population, whose daily life was completely determined by nature, has fallen from 90 percent to 10 percent, and that even this remaining 10 percent is far more independent of natural circumstances than was earlier the case. Scientific and technical domination of nature has indeed abbreviated the time taken up by decision-making and action in war and politics, to the extent that these periods have been freed of the influence by changing and changeable natural forces. But this does not mean that freedom of action has increased. On the contrary, freedom of action in the political domain seems to shrink the more it becomes dependent upon technical factors, so that—paradoxical as it might seem—these could turn out to represent a coefficient of deferment in political calculation. Such reflections should serve only to remind us that a denaturalization of historical temporalities, insofar as these genuinely exist, might primarily be driven by technical and industrial conditions. It is technical progress, together with its consequences, that delivers the empirical basis for “history pure and simple.” It distinguishes modernity from those civilizing processes historically registered in the developed cultures of the Mediterranean, Asia, and pre-Columbian America. The relations of time and space have been transformed, at first quite slowly, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, quite decisively. The possibilities of transport and communication have engendered completely new forms of organization.

No one could claim that the intersubjective conditioning of action in twentieth-century politics can be deduced solely from technology, and that it is only today that one knows of a historical time produced by human action. It is the case, rather, that a variety of temporal determinations are even today in circulation whose discovery, experience, and formulation in writing must be attributed to the Greeks or the Jews. One has only to think of the chains of motives or modes of conduct whose effects were formulated by Thucydides or Tacitus. One could also think of the sevenfold relations possible between master and servant that Plato outlined as basic elements of political order, whose contradictory quality simultaneously provided the motive power of historical movement. Temporal elements are established in the classical writings that are still heuristically relevant enough to examine and employ as a frame for historical knowledge. There are temporal structures contained in everyday life, in politics, and in social relations which have yet to be superseded by any other form of time. A few examples follow.

1. *The Greeks, without having a concept of history, identified the temporal processes within events. From Herodotus comes the sophisticated disputation in which the question of the optimal constitution is discussed.*² While the protagonists of aristocracy and democracy each sought to highlight their own constitutions by proving the injuriousness of the others, Darius proceeded differently: he showed the immanent process by which each democracy and aristocracy was eventually led by its own internal disorders to monarchy. From this he concluded that monarchy should be introduced immediately, since it not only was the best constitutional form but would in any case prevail over time. Aside from all technical, constitutional argument, he lent in this way a kind of historical legitimacy to monarchy that set it apart from all other constitutions. We would consider such a form of proof to be specifically historical. Before and after, earlier and later assume here in the consideration of forms of rule a temporal cogency immanent to its process, a cogency that is meant to enter into political conduct. One should also remember Plato's third book of *Laws*.³ Plato examined the historical emergence of the contemporary variety of constitutions. In his “historical” review he did make use of myths and poets, but the process of historical proof is contained for us in the question of the probable period within which the known constitutional forms could emerge. A minimum period of experience, or a loss of experience was required before it became possible for a patriarchal constitution to develop and give way to a monarchic and, in turn,

a democratic constitution. Plato worked with temporal hypotheses (as we would say today) and sought to derive a historical periodization of constitutional history from this history itself. The review of this history is reflected in such a manner that Plato observed that one could only learn from past incidents what could have occurred for the better, but that it was not possible to anticipate experiences, which required the expiry of a definite interval before they could be gathered.⁴ This again is an eminently historical thought oriented to temporal sequence and is no longer bound to a heroic prehistory in the sense of the logographers. Set against these "hypothetical" considerations of Plato, the Polybian schema of decline, fulfilled within three generations, is less flexible and less amenable to empirical substantiation.⁵

These three doctrines of constitutional process share the idea of a space of political experience limited by nature. There was only a limited number of constitutional forms, and the real business of politics lay in evading the threat of natural decline through the construction of a proper mixed form. The skilful management of a mixed constitution was (if you like) a "historical" task recurring from Plato to Aristotle to Cicero. Without acknowledging, or indeed even formulating, a domain of history pure and simple, all these examples register—as distinct to myth, even while making use of it—a finite number of given constitutions which, while repeatable, are determined in such a way that they are not freely interchangeable. These are subject to immanent material forces, as (for example) analyzed by Aristotle in his *Politics*, and overcoming these forces meant the creation of a "historical" space possessing its own temporality.

The formal, temporal categories noted above are contained in Greek figures of thought. Even if *Historie* as a body of knowledge and mode of exploration (*als Kunde und Erforschung*), to use Christian Meier's phrase, covers the whole human world and thus reaches beyond that domain which would later be called the Historical, it still shows what irreversible temporal processes and fateful intervals are. Implicitly, the ancients developed theorems concerning specific sequential spans, within which a constitutional transformation, given certain possibilities, is generally conceivable. This is a matter of historical temporalities that are indeed determined by nature and in this respect remain bound to it, but whose genuine structures enter into historical knowledge.

It was in this way that, within the Greek space of experience, diverse and historically variant constitutions coexist and are thereby comparable. The sequential course of the noncontemporaneous, which issued out of the

diachronic approach, was thus demonstrable as the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*). This was masterfully developed in Thucydides' *Proömium*.

Within this experience was contained the repeatability of histories, or at least of their constellations, from which their exemplary and instructive nature could be deduced. This entire complex persists, as we know, into the eighteenth century. The investigation of this complex as a unity remains a task for historical science, even if the theoretical preparatory work necessary for comparison basis is still rudimentary, thanks to way that a purely chronological sequencing of epochs dominates thinking among historians.

Finally, in considering the naturally derived "historically immanent" concept of time, reference might be made to the metaphor of various physiological doctrines which,⁶ finally adopted and elaborated by the natural law of the Baroque era, aimed at a *societas perfecta*. The comparisons of constitutions with the human body, together with its functions and ailments, a comparison that goes right back to Antiquity, naturally introduce given constants against which divergence or convergence might be measured. Here we have natural constants which, for their part, make possible temporal determinations without, however, involving a purely natural chronology based on biology or astronomy. Instead, historical motion is first recognizable as such because its interpretation is bound up with natural, organic categories. It remains an open question whether a "history pure and simple," experienced historically or historically-philosophically, can escape this interpretive tendency stretching from Antiquity to the natural law of the eighteenth century. The answer is probably not, for the naturalistic determinants that penetrate all histories—here more so, there less—are not, for their part, completely "historicizable."

2. If we examine the Judeo-Christian tradition, another space of experience opens up. This tradition contains theological, temporal determinations which cut across "empirical" findings. Without treating history directly, the Judeo-Christian interpretative approach introduces standards that exhibited historical structures of a kind not previously formulated. Seeing things from the point of view of the opponent—Herodotus's achievement and the methodological dictate of Lucian—was also possible for the Jews, if effected in a manner different from that of the Greeks. The Jews even gained a sense of their own history from the victories of their enemies. They could accept defeat as a form of punishment, and such contrition made their survival possible. Precisely because of their self-image as the chosen people, the Jews

were able to integrate the great powers of the Orient into their own history. The absence of universal human history in the Old Testament does not mean that "humanity" had not entered into their own history.

As a further example of the enormous transformational power of theological experience and of the theological problematic, a power which serves knowledge, we turn to Augustine. Here we have a synthesis of both ancient and Judeo-Christian trains of thought. Whatever the apologetic motivation for Augustine might be, his doctrine of the two empires made it possible for him to develop an "enduring answer" to every historical situation. The historical declarations on temporality that Augustine made are not distinguished by their linear form and substantial determinations. Augustine theologically articulated an internal experience of temporality which made it possible for him to relativize the entire domain of earthly experience.⁷ Whatever might happen on this earth was thereby structurally iterable and in itself unimportant, while being, with respect to the Hereafter and the Last Judgment, unique and of the greatest importance. Exactly because the meaning of history lies beyond history itself, Augustine gained a freedom of interpretation for the sphere of human action and suffering, providing him with the advantage of perceiving earthly events in an acute manner.

Augustine certainly made use of various doctrines concerning the age of the world—such as the doctrine of the three phases before, during, and after the Law (*Gesetz*), or the doctrine of *aetatis*. Such forms of periodization, reaching from mythology to modern historical philosophies, direct themselves fundamentally to ideas of origin and objective; the given situation is determined again and again by reference to implicit points of departure and termination. To this extent they represent transhistorical interpretive strategies: What was decisive in the case of Augustine—and this goes for all attempts to transform doctrines concerning the age of the world into forms of historical chronology—was his arrangement of the stages of the world's age in such a way that the period following the birth of Christ became the final epoch. Since the birth of Christ, therefore, nothing new could occur, and the Last Judgment was approaching. The sixth *aetas* is the final one and hence structurally uniform. Here, Augustine had gained a dual advantage. While he could no longer be surprised by anything empirical, theologically everything was novel once again. Augustine could define time, insofar as it was only the internal mode of experience of Augustine *qua* divine creation, specifically as a spiritual expectation of the future. This future, however, was theologically placed across the path of empirical histories, even if the latter

were disclosed by the former as terminal histories. Thus, Augustine outlined a horizon for the *civitas terrena* within which he formulated a series of regularities that, in their formal structure, delineated the conditions of possible historical motion. He formulated enduring rules of an apparently atemporal nature that were, at the same time, necessary for the knowledge of historical movement: they present a framework within which comparability can be identified, and they offer constants that make prognoses possible. There is no such thing as a prognosis which projects itself into the absolute unknown; even possible transformations presuppose a minimal constancy within such changes.

Augustine therefore proposed the rule: "*Non ergo ut, sit pax nolunt, sed ut ea sit quam volunt.*"⁸ (Not that one shuns peace, but that each seeks his own peace.) The failure of peace in the earthly sphere was due not to a want of peaceful sentiment, but to the fact that at least two persons sought to attain peace and thereby generated a situation of conflict obstructing the attainment of peace. In this way historical time was similarly released. Naturally, Augustine deduced this conception in a theological manner from his doctrine of the just peace to be found only in the Hereafter. But with this, he established for *civitas terrena* an enduring motive for historical turbulence that finds in a just peace no guarantee for its maintenance, and even in striving for such a peace finds no guarantee of its fulfillment.

He deduced a similar rule from his doctrine of the just war: the justness of a war, formulated as a moral postulate, provided no certainty that it was in fact just. Here, too, Augustine developed, at first theologically, a factor of movement which perpetually made it possible to deduce the earthly course of events from the relativity and limitation of prevailing forms of justice.⁹

Augustine drew a further regularity from Roman imperial history, whose immanent meaning he stripped of theological significance. The greater an empire becomes, he argued, the more warlike its desire for security; the weaker the external enemy, the more endangered its internal peace. With an almost automatic inevitability, the danger of civil war grows with the size of an empire, which in this process increasingly stabilizes its foreign relations.¹⁰

Thanks to his theologically founded approach, Augustine is able, within this domain of uniformity, to formulate insights which, even in the absence of their theological basis, reveal temporal sequential tendencies. Expressed in a modern fashion, Augustine produces formal categories which are introduced as a conditional network of possible historical motion. He makes

structural long-term forecasts whose substantial terms are always related to the finitude of historical constellations and hence to their temporality, but whose reproduction is held to be probable under comparable circumstances.

The final example of what is for us a genuinely historical form of knowledge cloaked by theology comes from Bossuet, whose *Discours de l'histoire universelle* stems from Augustine. Following the Augustinian theodicy, Bossuet formulates statements which contain a similar theoretical capacity without having to be read theologically, in the same way that Lübke claims Hegel's historical philosophy can be read. The constantly given difference between human design and fulfillment, between conscious engagement and unwelcome effect, or between unconscious action and deliberate intention: Bossuet deduces these differences quite traditionally from the will of God, and explains them as such. The ancient theological idea concerning the gulf dividing divine providence and human design thus assumes historical validity. This arises in the transposition of the problematic of foresight and its workings into the continually surprising difference between plan and effect; out of the theological epiphenomena emerges a historical phenomenon. One gains an insight into the manner in which historical structures unfold over time. The heterogeneity of ends can be cited as a factor that Bossuet interprets in a far more worldly manner than Augustine had ever done. Or again, Bossuet employs the ancient topos according to which cause and effect relate for centuries, but which can only be recognized *ex post* by historians through the assumption of providentiality.¹⁴ Such long-term sequences, which transcend the experience of any particular human community, no longer have any connection with mythical or theological epochal doctrines. They do stem from the doctrine of Providence, from whose predestined intention such long-term causal chains can be deduced. Should Providence as divine arrangement suffer an eclipse, it would be replaced not by human design but by that perspective which makes it possible for the observers of history (as with Fontenelle, for instance) to discover history in general, a history which gives rise to contexts of activity reaching over several human generations.

It is possible to regard men as the heirs of divine foresight. From this perspective, modern historical philosophy would indeed be a secularization—or, to use Gilson's term—a metamorphosis of the Augustinian doctrine of the two empires.¹² But the question posed here concerning temporal structures and their presence within a historical experience of history is more productive. If one considers this, it might also be possible to discover

a common standard for a possible critique of utopias. This would involve finding the temporal structures which could define as unreal the empirical content of both theological eschatology and historico-philosophical utopias. The point is not to deny the historical efficacy of such positions, but rather to show that it is easier to answer the question of the extent to which they might be realized.

In this context it would also be appropriate to investigate the typological and figurative referential field which should be contained within a time prophetic in itself.¹³ It remains an open question whether modern developmental doctrines, which conceive the sequential phases of the French Revolution typologically, represent a straightforward secularization, or whether they represent a proper form of knowledge. Certainly all the temporal declarations noted above arose in a pre-modern context which never organized itself in terms of "history in general" but which had developed against the grain of all potential individual histories. What we today call history was certainly discovered, but history was never explained in terms of history. The naturalistic attachment of historical process in the world of Greek cosmology or in the theological *ordo temporum* of the Judeo-Christian salvational doctrine involved historical knowledge which could be attained only by turning away from history as totality. This partly answers our question about the connection between the unitary history of modernity and the multitude of individual histories of the entire past. It might become obvious that historical structures and temporal experience had long been formulated before the time when "history pure and simple," the history of progress and of historicism could be semantically apprehended.

In conclusion, we can once again pose the contrasting question: by means of which categories can the specificity of modern history be distinguished from the regularity of recurring sequences outlined above? To deal with this, it is necessary to introduce into our hypothesis coefficients of motion and acceleration which are no longer derivative of expectations of the Last Judgment (as was earlier the case), but which instead remain adequate to the empirical factors of a world increasingly technical in nature.

Our modern concept of history has initially proved itself for the specifically historical determinants of progress and regress, acceleration and delay. Through the concept "history in and for itself," the modern space of experience has in several respects been disclosed in its modernity: it is articulated as a *plurale tantum*, comprehending the interdependence of events and the intersubjectivity of actions. It indicates the convergence of *Historie* and *Geschichte*, involving the essence of both transcendental and historicophilo-

sophical imperatives. Finally, it expresses the step from a universal history in the form of an aggregate to a world history as a system,¹⁴ conceptually registering history's need for theory and relating it to the entire globe as its domain of action.

It has since been possible to grasp history as a process freed of immanent forces, no longer simply deducible from natural conditions, and hence no longer adequately explained in their terms. The dynamic of the modern is established as an element *sui generis*. This involves a process of production whose subject or subjects are only to be investigated through reflection on this process, without this reflection leading, however, to a final determination of this process. A previously divine teleology thus encounters the ambiguity of human design, as can be shown in the ambivalence of the concept of progress, which must continually prove itself both finite and infinite if it is to escape a relapse into the naturalistic and spatial sense it earlier embodied. Likewise, the modern concept of history draws its ambivalence from its necessary conception of history as a totality* (even if only for aesthetic reasons), but a totality that can never be complete, for, as we know, the future remains unknown.