

**CFP – FRIAS-Workshop 'Breaking up time. Settling the borders between the present, the past and the future', Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, School of History, Albert Ludwigs Universität Freiburg, Germany, 7 – 9 April 2011.**

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Since the birth of modernity history has presupposed the existence of 'the past' as its object, yet the concept of 'the past' and the distinction between the categories of 'the past', 'the present' and 'the future' have seldom been reflected upon within the boundaries of the discipline. Indeed several 'time-sensitive' historians<sup>1</sup> and philosophers of history<sup>2</sup> have observed that the question of time has largely been omitted from the agenda of history. However, taking a certain definition of 'the past' for granted seems folly, if we consider that throughout history different cultures and societies have conceived of 'the past' and the boundaries between 'past', 'present' and 'future' in very different ways. We have only to look at the various conceptions of time that are used in law (legal time), history (historical time) and religion (religious time) to see how the Western notion of 'the past' changes depending on the context in which it is being talked about.

While it is widely accepted that cultures have different dominant orientations in time, it is rarely investigated in history how these temporal orientations evolved and developed; do they simply succeed one another or do they coexist? It is symptomatic that Francois Hartog's thesis that Western thinking about history is characterized by a succession of three 'regimes of historicity' – from a past-orientation till the French Revolution over a future-orientation till the 1980's to a present-orientation since then – has hardly been empirically tested.<sup>3</sup> Therefore questions about the unity, the dominance, the spatial extensions, the transfers, the transformation and the implications of these 'time regimes' are still open to both conceptual and empirical analysis.

We feel that it is about time for historians and philosophers of history to start to analyze how cultures in general and historians in particular actually distinguish 'the past' from 'the present' and 'the future', and how their interrelationships are constructed: is distinguishing between past, present and future simply a matter of passively 'recognizing' or 'observing', what is 'natural' and 'undeniable', or does it involve a more active stance in which social actors create and recreate these divisions? Can we claim to know precisely how 'present' social and cultural phenomena turn into (or come to be perceived/recognized as) past phenomena? Do historians reflect on the nature of the borders that separate these temporal dimensions? The familiar problem of defining the boundaries of 'contemporary history' usefully illustrates the uncertainty about 'time' within the discipline of history: does the long standing taboo on contemporary history not, among other things, betray an underlying unwillingness to probe the limits that separate 'past' and 'present'?

Recently, however, there have been signs, within the fields of history and philosophy of history, of an increasing interest in the notion of 'time'. Following in the footsteps of Reinhart Koselleck a growing number of historians have started historicizing time-conceptions formerly taken for granted. In the field of philosophy of history, the relationship between the past and the present has recently moved centre stage in the debates about 'presence', 'distance', 'trauma' and 'historical experience' – sometimes leading to new forms of 'presentism', as in the case of 'memory studies' and in radical constructivism. Independently some postcolonial theorists and anthropologists have added

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History*, Budapest 2008; Lucian Hölscher, *Semantik der Leere. Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Göttingen 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Berber Bevernage, 'We victims and survivors declare the past to be in the present'. *Time, Historical (In)justice and the Irrevocable*, Ghent 2009.

<sup>3</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'Historicité, Présentisme et Expériences du Temps*, Paris 2003.

momentum to the growing interest in the notion of 'time' by deconstructing the 'time of history' as specifically 'Western' time.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background it seems worthwhile to make a connection between the historical and the philosophical debates about the temporal distinctions between 'past', 'present' and 'future'. What have so far been lacking are comparative analyses of the variety of ways in which historians and historical actors have been breaking up time in practice. In light of the 'performative turn' it is remarkable that the temporal distinctions have hardly been analyzed as *performative* distinctions – that is: as the result of (linguistic) action. Often 'the past' is somehow supposed to 'break off' from 'the present' by itself. Both historians and philosophers have emphasized the role played by catastrophic political ruptures, for example revolutions and major wars, in 'breaking up time'. However, the effects of these 'transformative events'<sup>5</sup> on notions of temporality have hardly been studied in a comparative perspective and as performative events. 'Year 1' in the French Revolution and 'Stunde Null' in post-1945 Germany probably are two of the most well known examples of this type of 'transformative event' in 'the past', but the end of the Cold War in 1990 may be considered as the most 'epoch making' event in 'the present'.

Of course critical reflexion on historical time should not be reduced to the writing of new (social, cultural) histories of time; it should also include a focus on the way in which time is implied in, and constitutive of, our discipline. François Hartog has, for example, argued that terms such as 'past', 'present' and 'future' are always invested with a different value in different regimes of historicity. This observation suggests that historians must ask whether historical time is the neutral medium or analytical tool that it is often believed to be, or whether it is actually inherently political. Do historians engage in a 'politics of time', as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian has for example argued to be the case in his field?<sup>6</sup>

The workshop we are proposing solicits papers which focus on (preferably two) 'transformative events' and compare the ways in which they have recalibrated thinking about the relationship between the 'past', 'present' and 'future'. The temporal framework of the workshop covers classical and high modernity, that is: from 1789 until today. As to the spatial framework the workshop is subdivided in three clusters: 1. Europe; 2. Europe and its colonies; 3. Europe and non-colonial 'outer-Europe'.

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<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000; Sebastian Conrad, 'What Time Is Japan? Problems of Comparative (Intercultural) Historiography', *History and Theory* vol. 38 (1999), 67-83.

<sup>5</sup> Doug McAdam and William H. Sewell Jr., 'It's About Time: Temporality in the Study of Social Movements and Revolutions', in: Ronald Aminzade a.o. , *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge 2001, 80-126.

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology makes its object*. New York, 2002.