The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise ... is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic.

Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise is something in which there is depressingly little belief at present. For all the enthusiasm for change manifest in the debates about postmodernism, there is probably currently less of a sense that 'things might proceed otherwise' in Western capitalist societies than at any time since the early 1950s. At a theoretical level, this situation has been depicted in a number of ways: from the 'realisation of nihilism' of Fukuyama's end of history, via the 'realisation of positivism' of Jameson's postmodernism, to a series of more diffuse analyses of the end of politics and the crisis of the future. One thing which is distinctive about all these scenarios is their fulsome embrace of that hitherto discredited nineteenth century genre, the *philosophy of history*; albeit, more often than not, in negative or inverted forms. Indeed, the mere fact that Fukuyama crafts his argument at this level has been enough for some on the Left to identify him as a friend: the secret agent of the State Department's discontent with its own rule, perhaps.

Personally, I am less persuaded that the philosophy of history belongs intrinsically to the left than I am of the dystopian character of its more recent manifestations. Dystopias may once have functioned to raise an emancipatory alarm about the present, now they all too readily merely confirm the 'worst case scenarios' of the policy planners - using the imagination to undercut, rather than underpin, the possibility that things might proceed in another way. Grand narrative forms of the philosophy of history have migrated to the Right, for fairly obvious conjunctural reasons. To declare the genre dead is simply to reproduce it in its presently most pervasive, if paradoxical form.

In Hegelian terms, this state of affairs has long appeared as some kind of crisis in the historical experience of 'reason'. Yet the fact that a certain literature continues to articulate the crisis from this standpoint is less important than what it reveals about the temporal dimension of the conception of reason at stake. For the historical present does not just resist interpretation along the lines of any of the currently available Hegelian models, it positively mocks them, and not for the first time.

There is a range of views about precisely which events this century have been most destructive of the orthodox Hegelian perspective on history as the demonstrable realisation of the idea of reason as freedom — as opposed to those heterodox variants which require no more than the logical basis for a speculative hope. They reflect the experiences of a number of political generations across a variety of social groups: from the horrors of the First World War, through European fascism, the holocaust, Hiroshima and the prospect of a global nuclear annihilation, to an increased awareness of the role of genocide and racial slavery in the constitution of Western culture, the ecological crisis of the planet, and the collapse of historical communism — a veritable 'slaughter-bench', as Hegel himself described history, 'at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed', but in this case without the promise of reconciliation at its end.

Most decisive, perhaps, has been the cumulative impact of these events on a form of historical consciousness (narrative totalisations of history from the standpoint of a realised reason) which has, in any case, been progressively eroded by the power of temporal abstraction at work in the social processes of capitalist societies. This erosion is perhaps the most far-reaching cultural consequence of commodification. It appears in Habermas in quasi-Romantic form in the guise of the 'colonisation' of the life-world by the system. It is associated more generally with the idea of 'modernity'. Few, I think, would disagree with Ricoeur today when he writes that:

> It now seems as though Hegel, seizing a favourable moment, a *kairos*, which has been revealed for what it was to our perspective and our experience, only totalised a few leading aspects of the spiritual history.
of Europe and of its geographical and historical environment, ones that, since that time, have come undone.

What has come undone, Ricoeur continues, is ‘the very substance of what Hegel sought to make into a concept’. Difference, he insists, ‘has turned against development, conceived as a Stufengang [succession of stages]’.7

Difference has turned against development conceived at the level of world history as a succession of stages. The European spirit can no longer find itself in the ‘absolute dismemberment’ to which Hegel refers in the Preface to the Phenomenology, however hard it may continue to try. ‘Contemplating the negative face to face’, it cannot dwell there any more. What Horkheimer described as ‘the logical difficulties that understanding meets in every thought that attempts to reflect a living totality’, have been so compounded by the perception of the concrete historical difficulties listed above as to appear insuperable.8

Both difficulties are primarily difficulties about the future: a conceptual tendency to enfold the future back into the present, in the first case – to deny its fundamental openness; the experience of the future (present futures) as a blockage or impediment to freedom, in the latter. From the point of view of the philosophy of history, the situation is thus not unlike that in the late 1930s, when Horkheimer’s famous essay set the Frankfurt School on the road which would lead, by the 1960s, to the impasse of Adorno’s relativism. It is not history, but the philosophy of history, which moves in cycles of repetition here. But does the renewed implausibility of Hegelianism, in its broadest sense, as a structure of historical experience (within which I include the philosophy of history implicit in the political culture of the Communist tradition) rule out the possibility of a totalising historical consciousness per se? Or does it rather, more taxingly, demand a radical change in our conception of its form?9

One thing which is at issue in this question, among others, is the progressive political legacy of the metaphysical tradition: the capacity of reason to mediate social experience in such a way as to foster, in a sufficiently concrete manner, the rational belief that ‘things might proceed otherwise’. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the fate of this tradition has hung on its capacity to think ‘history’ in the collective singular – to transform historical experience into what, following Adorno, one might call ‘philosophical experience’, and vice versa – and thereby to provide political culture with a temporal horizon appropriate to the project of large-scale social transformation. The philosophy of history may not ‘belong’ to the left, in the sense in which some of Fukuyama’s admirers like to think, but it is certainly a field upon which a certain socialist tradition depends, intellectually, for its credibility. This includes any development which would draw on the history of Marxism as one of its resources; Marx’s critique of Hegel notwithstanding. The crisis in the category of history manifests itself within this tradition as a crisis in the conception of political experience.

What follows are some brief reflections on the temporalisation of history which argue the theoretical virtues of continuing to cultivate the terrain of the philosophy of history (the field of historical totalisation) by rethinking its terms, in order to overcome the conceptual difficulties of its Hegelian form, by way of what I shall call a philosophy of historical time. The idea has a number of precursors – foremost among whom one might name Walter Benjamin and the later Sartre – but it is expounded here, for the most part, independently of its relations to these writings.10 The exposition is of necessity both summary and abstract.

**History and Historical Time**

What does the idea of history gain by a turn to the apparently even more abstract idea of time? Or to put it the other way around: what is added by the qualification ‘historical’ to the general idea of time?

It has become conventional, philosophically, to distinguish three main perspectives on time, associated with three different ‘times’: the objective or cosmological perspective (concerned with the time of nature); the subjective, lived or phenomenological perspective (concerned with duration or individual time-consciousness); and the intersubjective or social perspective (associated with a historical multiplicity of forms of time-consciousness which together make up the time of history or ‘historical time’). This third perspective or ‘kind of time’ is generally taken to come in some disputed way between cosmological and phenomenological time. Ricoeur, for example, in his monumental *Time and Narrative*, sees what he calls ‘properly historical time’ as the product of narrative inscriptions of lived time onto cosmic time.11

Each perspective or kind of time is identified with a particular canonical literature. Thus, cosmological, objective or ‘natural’ time is identified paradigmatically with Aristotle and the discussion of time in Book IV of the *Physics*: specifically, the famous definition of time as ‘the number of motion in respect of “before” and “after”’. Its main characteristics there are the subordination of time to movement (a reflection of the primacy of astronomy in Greek thought), and an image of time as an infinite succession of identical instants, split in relation to any one instant into a before and an after, an earlier and a later. This is what Heidegger calls the ‘ordinary’ conception of time, what Benjamin refers to as ‘empty homogeneous’ time, and what Althusser describes as the ‘ideological’ conception of time as a homogeneous continuum.12 It is essentially a way of measuring movement.

If we update the idea of nature beyond Aristotle’s simple cosmological scheme, we may include within a significant broadening of this category the *periodic* times of various biological cycles and the complex and contradictory *relational* times of more recent astronomical and subatomic physical theory. These are very different times from Aristotle’s, but they claim a broadly equivalent status, ontologically.

Phenomenological time, on the other hand, is generally
taken to have its philosophical origins in Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*, although one might trace it back further, to Plotinus.\textsuperscript{13} It is paradigmatically associated with Husserl and his *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* (1905; published 1928). It is further developed by Bergson and Heidegger. Its main characteristics are subordination of time to consciousness or human existence (*Heidegger’s Dasein*) as a dimension of its self-constituting activity, based not on the relation of before and after an instant, but on the permanently shifting, self-differentiating, tripartite temporal division of past/present/future. Past/present/future cannot be considered equivalent to before/present instant/after, for two main reasons, each of which has to do with the specificity of the phenomenological present.

Firstly, the concept of the present is not grasped by the Aristotelian idea of the instant because, as Augustine famously pointed out, it actually contains not just one, fleeting dimension of time but all three together. Past and future are not differentiated by their absence as opposed to their presence to consciousness, as Aristotle implied, but by the form of their presence as objects of memory and expectation, rather than attention, respectively. The present is actually a ‘three-fold’ present: a present past, present present and present future. Secondly (and this was Bergson’s and Husserl’s point), the ‘present present’ is not a point-like instant, but an expanded, longitudinal present, which must retain elements of the recent past through projective identification if a continuity of experience is to be possible. The lived present has *duration*. It endures. It also includes certain expectations about the future. Projected futures are a central part of the existential structure of any present moment. Most important, famously, for Heidegger, is the anticipation of death as the transcendental horizon of human temporality, such that human existence is essentially defined as Being-towards-death. On this model, what we call ‘time’ is the result of an ongoing process of temporalisation, part of the active (self-) production of a particular kind of being, rather than a merely given form. For the early Heidegger: ‘There is no nature-time, since all time belongs essentially to *Dasein*.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, the multiple social times of history provide the object for a tradition of historiographic literature about calendars, clocks, and social time-consciousness which emphasises the social determination and historical variety of forms of collective time-consciousness. This work has often focused on struggles over the units of labour-time at various stages in the transition to capitalism (the day? the hour? the minute?) and the role of religious institutions in introducing scheduling into social life. It is represented by the tradition of the Annales School in France (one thinks of Le Goff’s classic *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*), and in England by E.P. Thompson’s ‘Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’. More recently, Frederick Cooper’s ‘Colonizing Time’ essay has extended this kind of analysis of the temporal consequences of the imposition of wage-labour to the study of colonial Mombasa.\textsuperscript{15}

The main feature of this type of time is its social composition through struggle over the conflicting rhythms of different definitions of social practice (right down to the micro level of struggles over television schedules in domestic living rooms), or the objectification of subjective, phenomenological forms of time in collective, institutionalised forms. It is manifest in the regulation of calendars by holidays and feast days, for example, but also in the increasingly generalised (and subsequently ‘naturalised’) imposition of standard units for the measurement of time through navigational systems and the development of the railways. These developments are very recent. Clock time as we know it – that is, as a substitute for solar time – did not come into being until 1780, in Geneva. And it wasn’t until 1966, for example, that the US Congress finally passed its Uniform Time Act. In the nineteenth century the time-reckoning in colonised countries tended to work differently depending on whether the colonisers came from the east or the west. And although there has been a World Standard Time since the Meridian Conference of 1884, it wasn’t until 1940 that a country as central to modern European history as Holland synchronised itself with the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{16}

This literature includes the historiography of historical consciousness (historical accounts of the emergence of different ideas of history) and the semantics of historical time, as the past is extended longitudinally, in various ways, back beyond the memory of the living to embrace the community of the dead through tradition, and the future is extended forwards to include the expectation of various different ends to history and hence to historical time: Doomsday, the Last Judgement, Communism.\textsuperscript{17}

So, it seems that not all time is ‘historical’; at least, not
in the technical sense, or so the literature would have it. However, as will perhaps already be evident, there are actually two rather different kinds of time at issue under the general heading of ‘historical time’ here. There are the multiple temporalities associated with the historical and geographical diversity of social practices, and there is the single overarching temporality – the time of History with a capital H – through which these multiple temporalities are unified, if they are unified, into a single complex stream. It is the relationship between the two which lies at the heart of debates about the concept of history. It is the latter (emphatic) sense of historical time that I am concerned with here – the time of history in the collective singular – and its philosophical justification; or rather, as I would prefer to put it, the implications of its inescapability. For if we accept the early Heidegger’s account of the phenomenological unity of temporalisation (independently of the deeply problematic reduction of history to ‘historicality’ (Geschichtlichkeit) which follows it in the text of Being and Time), we may infer that, phenomenologically at least, some kind of totalisation of social times into ‘history’ cannot be avoided.

The key to this argument lies in the internal relations between the ideas of temporalisation and totalisation. All temporalisation is of phenomenological necessity an ongoing process of differentiated unification of the three temporal ecstases (past, present and future) through which human existence is constituted as something ‘outside-of-itself’ and hence open to history. In this sense, time is ‘the totalisation of existence’. Conversely, totalisation is of necessity a temporal process. The attempt to avoid this relation through the structuralist methodology of synchronic analysis serves only to underline the point, since its artificial negation of time places the results of such analyses, in principle, beyond the horizon of any possible practice, until they are mediated with experience through some process of temporalisation.

Furthermore, just as according to Heidegger the anticipation of death is a condition, existentially, for the temporalisation of ‘time’ in general, so the projection or anticipation of some historical end is a condition, hermeneutically, for the constitution of a temporal horizon beyond the generational reach of a living individual. The phenomenological structure of temporality – to which all time must at some level conform, in order to be mediated with experience – dictates that there be no historical experience without the implicit anticipation of an end of history.

This is to say at once a great deal and very little, depending on one’s point of view. From the standpoint of some great debate between opponents and defenders of the possibility of historical totalisation, it is a decisive intervention. It cuts the Gordian knot of the epistemological struggle between identity and difference, returning the deconstruction of time to the methodological position of a second reflection, from which its less enthusiastic adherents have never sought to displace it. The ‘temporising detour of deferral’ registered by Derrida’s concept of différences, rather than challenges, the movement of totalisation. Its ‘infinitesimal [yet] radical’ displacement of Hegelian discourse is precisely that: a displacement of Hegelianism, not an end to totalisation. All disputes about historical totalisation must be read as arguments about specific forms of totalisation and their limits, without generalisable implication for the idea of totalisation per se.

From the standpoint of those for whom the debate was always about specific forms of totalisation, their meanings and limits, however, we merely have a new point of departure from which a number of arguments can set out anew. There is no space to embark on this journey here, except to note that, since the ‘end’ in question cannot be posited as the realisation of an immanent telos without negation of the differential constitutive of temporality itself, totalisation will have to find another standpoint – in some kind of ‘exteriority’, perhaps. If the critique of historicism places Benjamin in the unlikely company of both Althusser and Popper, his insistence on an alternative standpoint for the totalisation of history distances him from them, definitively.

The early Heideggerian provenance of this line of thought distinguishes it in principle from the temporality of Hegelianism in at least two crucial respects. On the one hand, the acknowledgement of the finitude of human existence at the centre of Heidegger’s discussion of Dasein places strict hermeneutical limits on the epistemological status of historical interpretations, however successful they might be. (This has particular significance for the cognitive
status of historical ‘ends’, and their relations to the historical present.) On the other hand, however, if pursued in another direction, this stress on human finitude opens up the phenomenology of historical time-consciousness to the material of both the natural and social sciences, demanding an integral account of the three kinds of time referred to above (‘natural’, ‘phenomenological’, and ‘socio-historical’): the totalisation of social times into ‘historical time’ requires the totalisation of all three kinds of time—the totalisation of time—as history. Such an approach departs radically from Heidegger’s association of time with the question of the meaning of Being in general, in favour of the establishment of theoretical connections with the development of various positive knowledges, in the spirit of a renewal (but not a mere repetition) of the trajectory of Frankfurt Critical Theory.

Temporalisation and the Politics of Time

How do these abstract theoretical matters bear, concretely, upon the comprehension of history, let alone anything which might appear under the heading of a politics of time? What is implied for the idea of politics by a rethinking of the philosophy of history from the standpoint of the philosophy of time?

The connection lies in the concept of experience, and more specifically, in the possibility of what I shall call ‘historical experience’, using this phrase in the doubly emphatic sense we find in Walter Benjamin, referring to an emphatic sense of history (history as a whole, history in the collective singular, the totalisation of time) and an emphatic sense of experience (Erfahrung as opposed to Erlebnis, in the German—something which is acquired and learnt from, as opposed to merely ‘lived through’). This is a sense of experience which has little in common with dominant empiricist conceptions, although it is connected to one of E.P.Thompson’s usages of the term. In Benjamin’s writings, it is developed in increasing proximity to the concept of history and its political significance is determined, above all, by its temporal structures. For it is through experience that different categories of historical totalisation—such as ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, ‘progress’ and ‘decline’—are lived as socially produced forms of time-consciousness through which history is made (or forgotten). If structural categories of historical analysis like ‘capitalism’ are to be rendered effective at the level of political experience, they will need to be mediated by these phenomenologically more fundamental categories of historical time through which history is lived as an ongoing temporalisation.

Two main points can be extracted from Benjamin’s writings at this point. The first concerns the centrality of totalising temporalisations of history to the structure of everyday experience in capitalist societies. This is the object of Benjamin’s own distinctive sociology of modernity: excavation of the competing totalisations of history (competing forms of temporal totality) built into the interpretive structures of our social practices at a variety of levels. The second is the rather more problematic redefinition of ‘the political’ as a mode of temporalisation, such that the terms ‘political experience’ and ‘historical experience’ (in the doubly emphatic sense referred to above) become more-or-less equivalent. For the fundamental categories of historical experience—categories like ‘progress’ and ‘reaction’, ‘revolution’, ‘crisis’, ‘conservation’, ‘stagnation’ and ‘the new’—are not the products of different totalisations of historical material across a common temporal frame. They are not just based on different selections of which historical material is significant. They are alternative temporal structures, alternative temporalisations of ‘history’, which structure experience temporally—offering alternative articulations of historical pasts, presents, and futures—in what are, politically, significantly different ways.

It is in this sense that I write of a ‘politics of time’—indeed, of all politics as centrally involving struggles over the experience of time. How do the forms of the social practices in which we engage structure and produce, enable or distort different senses of time? What kinds of experience of history do they make possible or inhibit? Whose future do they ensure? Conversely, all temporalisations involve specific orientations to practice, since they provide alternative structures through which past, present and future may be fused together to define the temporal structure of action. A politics of time would attend to the temporal logic of these structures insofar as they open onto, or foreclose, specific historical possibilities, in distinctive temporal modes. It would rethink the political significance of social practices from the standpoint of their temporal forms. (Think, for example, of the way in which the political significance of the level of unemployment in capitalist societies is determined by the horizon of expectation within which it is received; and of how that horizon is related to broader forms of historical consciousness.)

This brings me, in conclusion, back to the quotation from Bourdieu with which I began: the idea that ‘the simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise … is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic’. For this is a possibility which must be lived as a possibility for Bourdieu’s point to hold true. What appears initially in Bourdieu’s text as a comment about the probabilistic logic of social laws, only becomes a point about practice if uncertainty is internalised as the basis of strategy: ‘substituting the dialectic of strategies for the mechanics of the model, but without falling over into the imaginary anthropology of theories of the “rational actor”’, Just as possibility (as a category of action) depends upon the internalisation of uncertainty as the basis of strategy, so politics (in the classical sense) depends upon what we might call the social production of possibility at the level of historical time-consciousness.

‘Possibility’ is produced by and as the temporal structure of particular types of action; it is sustained by others, and eroded and undermined by others still. And it is produced in a variety of temporal forms. It is in this deep structural sense that there is a crucial political significance to culture—culture as formation, not culture as value—and a need for a left cultural politics which would engage in the willed
transformation of the social forms of subjectivity at their deepest structural levels. For it is these forms, including the form of ‘the political’ itself, which determine (and ration) the social production of possibility. ‘The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise’ must be produced as experience if the otherwise is to proceed.

Notes


2 Lutz Niethammer, Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?, translated by Patrick Camiller, Verso, London, 1992 is particularly good at displaying the structure, as well as the history, of this inversion.


4 I am thinking, of course, of Jean-François Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition (1979), translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984. Fukuyama might be read as countering Lyotard’s Left Nietzscheanism with a more geo-politically realistic, Hegelian Nieszcechianism of the Right.


9 I take the critique of the temporal consequences of Hegelian philosophy (the ‘im mobilisation’ of time) to have been expounded in more or less completed form as early as 1839, by Feuerbach in his essay, ‘Towards a Critique of Hegelian Philosophy’, translated by Zawar Hafni in The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1972, pp. 53-96. For a recent variation, under the heading of the ‘eternalisation of the present’, see Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, Vol. 3, Ch. 9, ‘Should We Renounce Hegel?’.

10 For a reading of Benjamin’s cultural criticism as the working out of a philosophy of historical time in concreto, see Peter Osborne, ‘Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Time’, in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, pp. 59-109. Sartre’s position is strikingly reminiscent of Benjamin’s: ‘Marxism caught a glimpse of true temporality when it criticised and destroyed the bourgeois notion of “progress”... But — without ever having said so — ... renounced these studies and preferred to make use of “progress” again for its own benefit.’ Jean-Paul Sartre, Search For a Method (1960), translated by Hubert Barnes, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, p. 92. However, it is not clear that after 1200 pages of the Critique of Dialectical Reason Sartre got any closer to the ‘true temporality’ of history himself. Symptomatically, his most extensive remarks on the subject are to be found in the notes assembled as the Appendix to the unfinished second volume. Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume Two (Unfinished), The Intelligibility of History, translated by Quentin Hoare, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 401-24. In the text itself, Sartre returns repeatedly to the totalising structure of individual action, the exposition of which is progressively deepened, but he breaks off before ‘the advent of history’.

11 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, Vol. 3, p. 99. See also, Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Time and Creation’, in John Bender and David E. Wellbery (eds), Chronotypes: The Construction of Time, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, pp. 38-64. Oscillation between the languages of ‘perspectives’ and ‘times’ is a distinctive feature of most of the recent philosophical literature on time. It is as initially productive as it is ultimately problematic.


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