

Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method

Introduction

Since antiquity, a host of philosophers have been racking their brains about the question “What is Time?” Various answers arise throughout history. One of the first is the Greek Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who relates time to the movement of celestial bodies. The patriarch Augustine (354–430 CE) does the opposite and places time in the human soul. His religious and prophetic time became secular in the eighteenth century. This challenged the German historian [Reinhart Koselleck](#) to elaborate on it, seeing progress and acceleration as its key features. A different approach shown by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who argues that time does not exist in reality, but is created in the narrative. He abandons the idea of progress and emphasizes a time of rise and fall. It seems a return to nineteenth-century historicism, in which other times also occur. This short introduction already illuminates the variety of interpretations of the concept of time. The irrevocable conclusion is that nowadays time has found itself *out of joint*.

The Concept of “Time” over Time

For twenty-first-century ears Aristotle’s answer to the question “what is time?” may sound strange. In his *Physics* he defines it as “the number of movement in respect to the before and after” ([1930](#): 219b and 220a). This definition originates in a cosmological orientation, because Aristotle’s time is connected to the movement of heavenly bodies, such as the sun and the moon. Their endless rotation makes his time without beginning and end, consisting only of the repetitive alternation of night and day. In this passage the present is an arbitrary point, allowing us to determine what comes before and after. Thus we perceive time as a succession. Moreover, such a random point enables us to collect and unite “now-points” in minutes, hours, days, years, and so on. Points and their sets can be counted, which is why Aristotle defines it as “the *number* of movement.” It is a definition of time as objective, outward, spatial, perceptible, and measurable.

Seven centuries later the patriarch Augustine introduced a Christian time regime, associating temporality with the way we listen to a psalm. Contrary to Aristotle’s nonreligious view of time, he sees time not as a succession of distant-apart points, but as a *distentio animi*, a distance of the soul, in which remembrance, attention, and expectation can emerge. In a psalm we do not pay attention to each note individually, but we listen to the current notes, remember the notes we have already heard, and anticipate the coming ones. Augustine’s time is not only a *distentio animi* but also an *intentio animi*. Time has a direction, it aims to find God and eternity. A religious song is the adequate instrument for this arrow-like movement. According to Augustine, time is the earthly backside of eternity, splitting it in past, present, and future. As such it has a beginning in God’s Creation and an end in the Last Judgement.

Because of the latter, Augustine's time is prophetic. Unlike the one of Aristotle, his temporality cannot be measured, because it is subjective, inward, non-spatial, and foretelling.

The two opposite perceptions above, make it clear how difficult it is to put time into words. In his *Confessions* Augustine confirms this: "If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know" ([2017](#): 11 ch. 14:17). It is a dilemma, which the German Achim Landwehr tempts to the proposition, that time discourses often have a binary character ([Landwehr 2017](#): 238). The exposition about the temporalities of Aristotle and Augustine exemplifies this.

A second binarity concerns the time of the clock. It regards the contrast between the different local times of the past and the more or less singular time of the modern world. The latter dates from the end of the nineteenth century and is named the Greenwich Mean Time, after the Observatory in Greenwich, South London ([Ogle 2015](#): 25). The need for this world time comes from the improvement of the means of communication, first by the railroad and later by the plane and the internet. This implies another contrast. The new means of communication make time faster and faster, creating a feeling of being always short of time. It creates the assumption that traditional life is more stress-free and quiet. Then the question arises when this change has taken place.

Reinhart Koselleck, a German expert of temporality, observes the transfer from the "traditional" into the "progressive" life in the eighteenth century ([Koselleck 2004](#): 9–25). In this epoch one discovers that the earth is much older than the approximately four thousand years of the Bible and that man has grown in reasonableness and consciousness. It is the age of Enlightenment, in which progress becomes the key word. Then the future seems more important than the past, although, according to Koselleck, in the Enlightenment history and historical consciousness also arise. Both are the result of the feeling that time *accelerates*. He expresses this by his famous definition of historical time as the tension between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation (255–75). The space of experience shows a rapidly disappearing past, the horizon of expectation displays an even faster dissolving future.

Interpretations

Acceleration has intrigued quite a few authors, which is reflected in several studies. Hermann Lübbe understands it as the shortening of a stay in the present, or even a shortening of the present itself, which he summarizes in the term *Gegenwartsschrumpfung* ([Lübbe 1992](#)). David Harvey launches the idea of a compression of space and time, referring to the coherence of acceleration and globalization ([Harvey 1990](#): 284–307). This process also involves continuous change, creating a kind of non-awareness and therefore uncertainty in everyday life, which Helmut Rosa explains in his *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstruktur der Moderne* ([2005](#): 16). According to Rosa, globalization not only multiplies and verifies processes of transaction but most of all it affects their speed (476–80). Christopher Clark

identifies many side effects of acceleration, such as changes in travel, punctuality, and waste of time, resulting in a reduction in space and the perception of time itself ([Clark 2019](#): 9–10). There also is a negative side, pointed out by Jérôme Baschet, who observes that stress is the associated phenomenon of time ([Baschet 2018](#): 6).

In England, thinking in terms of advancement evolved most clearly in the so-called Whig-interpretation of history. The nineteenth-century Whig-historians were often Christians, telling stories “from the standpoint of having Good News to relate.” This progressive idea is not yet harmed by “the barbarisms of the Somme and Paschendaele,” the great slaughters of the First World War ([Bentley 1999](#): 65–6).

In *The Whig Interpretation of History* in 1931, Herbert Butterfield perceives the First World War as the decisive event that ends the optimism of the nineteenth century. Historians no longer consider their own time as the best of all, let alone as a criterion for assessing past performances ([Butterfield \[1931\] 1973](#): 20–1). Butterfield returns to a position, [Leopold von Ranke](#) in Germany had already defended in the first half of the nineteenth century (see below).

Like Butterfield in England, Lucian Hölscher in Germany saw the First World War as the end of the homogeneous time of progress ([Hölscher 2013](#): 142–4). His insights differ from the Frenchman François Hartog and the German Aleida Assmann, who both found that this temporality only ended around 1980. Hartog introduced the term “[regimes of historicity](#)” to indicate how, before the French and Industrial Revolutions, people had the general idea to remain in the present and to live according to tradition. After that, a time of progress developed. His view differs from the one of Koselleck, who before the two revolutions already sees a “time of the modern.” Hartog’s progressive time regime continued into the late twentieth century. Then presentism took over from futurism ([Hartog 2017](#): 107–19). As a consequence, he distinguished between different *régimes d’historicité* with distinct experiences of time, articulating either the past, the present, or the future.

Aleida Assmann agrees with Hartog on the moment the time of progress slackens. Around the 1980s and 1990s she perceives “a time of the late modern,” in which acceleration slowed down ([Assmann 2013](#): 211). Assmann endorses Lübbe’s view that the dynamics of the modern era are no longer linear, but dialectical ([Lübbe 1996](#)). Progressive techniques require the counterbalance of the human measure and skepticism ([Assmann 2013](#): 227–8). Moreover, Assmann approves Marquard’s statement that “future needs provenance” (*Zukunft braucht Herkunft*) ([Assmann 2013](#): 228–38). In a more Anglo-French-oriented context, the post-1980 period is referred to as “post-modernism,” which also reflects doubts about modernism and progress.

In his *Time and Narrative*, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur no longer believes in progress either ([Ricoeur 1984–8](#): 3:212). He regards it as a utopian illusion, which forces him to make

time undulating (3:215). Several history books confirm this, having a title that includes rise and fall. See, for instance, Aleida Assmann's *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?* with its subtitle *Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*. Nevertheless, the time of Ricoeur remains homogeneous. This means that past, present, and future continue in the same wave. Ricoeur regards time as originally chaotic, therefore he needs something external to make it homogeneous, which he finds in the narrative.

Undulating times originate in Romanticism. [Georg Hegel](#) (1770–1831) and Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) are the protagonists here. They transformed the empty, accelerating time of progress into an embodied time, in which the past is just as important as the future ([Hölscher 2014, 2015](#); [Jansen 2020](#): pt. 1). After the French Revolution, the time of progress is discredited, although Hegel could not completely refrain from a rosy future. Ranke became a full-fledged romantic-conservative and enjoyed seeing an undulating time ([Ranke 2011](#): 78; [Smith 2009](#): 2). In it the past comes before the present and this before the future, making it a diachronic phenomenon.

Around 1835 a new temporality arose, which contrasted with the wavy pattern of romanticist time. In those days the young French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) traveled to the United States with his friend Gustave de Beaumont. Both wanted to discover Europe's future in this new country. They were particularly interested in processes of egalitarianism, considering them as inevitable, although they feared their excesses. Tocqueville reflected this in his *Democracy in America*. The book attempts to see the future in the present. This became even more obvious in his *The Old Regime and the Revolution in France*. Both studies exemplify a time, later referred to as the synchronicity of the non-synchronous, meaning that past, present, and future coexist, albeit usually in different spaces, systems, or institutions. Time then loses its homogeneity and diachronic character. [Karl Marx](#) (1818–83) makes a similar move. His materialism not only turned Hegel's idealism upside down but also his temporality ([Jansen 2020](#): pt. 3). In several studies Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson point this out ([Althusser and Balibar 1979](#); [Jameson 2002](#)). Synchronicity of the non-synchronous is also visible in Fernand Braudel's study about the Mediterranean world and in his *Civilization and Capitalism* ([Braudel 1992, 1999](#)).

In 2015 a workshop of young German historians articulated the idea that past and future coexist. In their opinion, that feeling is getting stronger. The German-French journal *Traverse* published articles wherein they describe their findings ([Auderset, Müller, and Behr 2016](#)). Especially Theo Jung's article emphasizes that different and even contrasting experiences of time occur simultaneously. Nanina Egli holds the same view. She shows how the accelerated time of the railway is connected to the interest of tourists for the medieval world of castles. Past and future are related, so time multiplies. Wolfgang Kruse perceives two periods of acceleration in the nineteenth century: one after the French Revolution and one at

the end of the century. In addition to acceleration, both periods also show “*stillstand*.” The second period, with its revolution in transport and communication, was also the era of “spleen” or “ennui.” It can be added to Kruse’s “ennui” that it was considered an evil by Pascal and Kierkegaard. Boredom, however, also can make us conscious of time, as Arthur Schopenhauer, William James, and Martin Heidegger believed ([Safranski 2016](#): 20–8, 30–4). Maybe just the combination of acceleration and boredom makes us more aware of temporality.

Another way to look at the opposition between times of acceleration and slowing down is Gadamer’s “Concerning Empty and Full-filled Time” ([Gadamer 1973](#): 77–89; 1–7; [Hölscher 2009, 2014, 2015](#); [Vessey 2007](#): 1–7). His empty time is seen as continuity (*Dauer*) and as an (Aristotelean) time that is available, measurable, and therefore rather abstract. Full time is the time of an experience of parting and new beginning. It is a sense of a closed period, which, although it lives on in memory, is also the beginning of a new era full of expectations ([Vessey 2007](#): 3).

[Friedrich Nietzsche](#) (1844–1900), the philosopher of the contradiction between “herd people” and “supermen,” is in fact the first to observe this feeling. In his *Thus spoke Zarathustra* he writes about the full moment in a subsection of the third part, named “Vom Gesicht und Rätsel.” Zarathustra comes to a gateway and states: “Two ways come together here.” The name of the gateway is inscribed above: “Moment” ([Nietzsche 1976](#): III:682). The two ways Nietzsche speaks of are past and future, which come together in the “Augenblick” of the present. For Nietzsche, the past is that part of time, we cannot return to and that gives us burdensome memories. “That time does not run backward, that is its wrath” ([Nietzsche 1976](#): II:668; [Dries 2008](#); [Small 2010](#): 106). Nietzsche seems to favor forgetfulness, but he only wants *moments*, wherein people reflect on their past to get rid of its burden. Thus, they can make way for a more creative future. In everyone’s life there is a moment in which he or she can choose to stay in the herd or to become a “superman.” With this *Augenblick* he introduces a so-called “kairotic time,” named after the Greek god Kairos, being the master of the right moment ([Jansen 2020](#): 167 and 173–174); [Murchadha 2013](#); [Shapiro 2013](#): 123.

Philosophers, for example, Bergson, Benjamin, Heidegger, and Derrida, and historians, for instance, [Huizinga](#), Ginsburg, and LeRoy Ladurie, have developed Nietzsche’s temporal ideas further. Kairotic time can also be perceived in Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. At unexpected moments Marcel, the protagonist in Proust’s novel, experiences involuntary remembrances that bring him from the present into the past, opening up the possibility to write a novel with a completely new “intrigue” ([Jansen 2015](#): 19–24). Huizinga experiences something similar through the thrill of a return to the late Middle Ages, which enables him to write a beautiful book about it ([Huizinga 1999](#)). In moments of historical sensation, past and present co-occur ([Huizinga 1959](#): 17–77).

Conclusion

“*Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?*,” Aleida Assmann asks via the title of her book. She refers to the blurring of the boundaries between past, present, and future. The answer to this question can be affirmative, not only because the past and the future are included in the present but also because of the coexistence of different temporalities. This starts in ancient times with Aristotle and Augustine, but has been accelerating since the eighteenth century. In the twenty-first century, time is really “*out of joint*.” The only way to deal with it is to perceive our crisis-rich present as a time to reflect on, having a past from which we inherit both good and evil and a future for which we are responsible ([Holden 2019](#): 405).

Related Articles

See also: [G.W.F. Hegel](#), [Johan Huizinga](#), [Reinhart Koselleck](#), [Marxism and Its Influences](#), [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), [Ranke, History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations](#), [Regimes of Historicity](#)

Further Reading and Online Resources

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