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*Historians*  
*and the Return to the Diachronic\**  
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Janus, the spirit of Time – famously facing two ways:  
as depicted on Roman Republican silver coin c.225 BCE.

A conscious ‘temporal turn’ is long overdue.<sup>1</sup> Many subjects seem now to be returning to investigate time; and the historians, whose subject-matter explicitly invites them to ‘think long’, should be leading a return to big-picture analysis, in innovative ways.

This essay investigates three related questions. Firstly, why has there been such a prolonged flight from Grand Narratives, with their big, sweeping tales about the trajectory of history through the millennia? Then, more immediately: what issues need to be confronted in order to return to debating through-time interpretations in both research and teaching? And, thirdly, is there a new multi-dimensional way of approaching the diachronic, to avoid the pitfalls into which fell the classic Grand Narratives? A coda ends by considering the implications for better understanding the future, in the light of better understanding the past. That last point is timely, in view of the recent failure of mathematicalised risk assessments, as made by the global financial service sector in the years leading to the 2008/9 credit crisis.<sup>2</sup> These calculations invited hubris, by believing that the future can be calibrated with total precision. Yet there is a countervailing nemesis, which is triggered by refusing to take action to forestall pending problems. History offers advice on the balance between calculable trends and incalculable surprises.

Needless to say, the answers to the three related questions are complicated. Were there one overwhelmingly obvious message to history, then it would have been identified long ago. In general, it is good advice to be suspicious of interpreters with a single nostrum, such as:

*‘It’s all really sex’*, à la D.H. Lawrence;<sup>3</sup>

or *‘It’s all really class struggle’*, à la Marx and Engels;<sup>4</sup>

or *‘It’s all really the March of Freedom’*, à la G.W.F. Hegel or *It’s all really progress towards American-style liberal democracy*, à la Francis Fukuyama;<sup>5</sup>

or *It’s all really the universal living will-to-power’*, à la Nietzsche;<sup>6</sup>

or *‘It’s all really the contest for survival between individual human genes’*, à la Richard Dawkins.<sup>7</sup>

Reductionist dicta, such as these, may seem beguiling. They certainly make for rousing debates. But they are poor history. There are many more things in the cosmos and upon earth ....

At the same time, while the past is marvellously intricate, history is not so

utterly tangled that historians (and the many others who study the long term, such as geologists and astronomers) cannot analyse its intricacies. Instead, complex developments over time repay close scrutiny to probe their shape, momentum, and meaning.

The past, viewed in its entirety, constitutes for all humans a vast reservoir of experience and information. After all, in this cosmos of unidirectional temporality, where time runs onwards and not backwards, people cannot learn from the future. Instead, humans learn from the fleeting present and from the encyclopaedic past. That is what makes history so crucial to study and, always, to debate.

### **I: The Flight from Grand Narratives**

For much of the twentieth century, analysts of Space rather than Time seemed to be seizing the intellectual initiative. Absolute time was ‘dead’, killed by Einstein’s theories of relativity. Time instead was to be related to Space, which thus claimed intellectual centrality. In anthropology, linguistics, and some models of philosophy, structuralism – or spatialisation – focused upon examining synchronic networks and signs, in order to discover the inner logic that confers meaning at any given point in time.<sup>8</sup>

Many historians began to share that preoccupation, providing innumerable and invaluable in-depth studies. For example, much of the strength of recent research in social, cultural, and gender history has been in ‘synchronic immersion’, which entails analysing specific themes (such as meanings, experiences, identities) within specific places in specifically defined short periods. That analytical approach has enjoyed a great buzz of intellectual fashion and excitement.

By contrast, it may be noted that economic history as a field has remained one of the major exceptions to this generalisation. Its practitioners do provide close-focus studies but many also continue to engage with the long term.<sup>9</sup> This particular field, however, remains specialised and has never recaptured the surge of excitement and recruitment that it experienced in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> In Britain, to take one example, that was the period when many separate Economic History departments were established. Today, however, only one of these survives as a stand-alone unit, while the rest have either merged with old-style History departments or federated into Schools of History or Humanities. In many other University systems, too, the subject

has been through a similar intellectual trajectory: from popular boom to a much narrower specialisation, often wrapped in austere quantification.

Undoubtedly, one major reason for the flight from the very-long- term in so many aspects of academic History is a practical one. As the quantity of research multiplies, so the discipline has been sub-divided into separate specialisms. In Britain alone, there are over 2,000 academic historians. Worldwide, the number must be well over 100,000. Since no one can keep up with the output of all these busy scholars, the professional answer is to specialise, either in a particular period and/or on a particular theme. Furthermore, these subdivisions of academic history are institutionally incorporated into teaching, examining, research, conferences, journals, professional associations, publishing, reviewing and assessment of all kinds at all levels. History students are generally invited to choose among the specialisms of their academic tutors. Scholars talk to others studying similar or closely-related subjects within shared time-frames. And experts generally decline to answer questions outside their own research fortress, replying with the common formula: *'It's not my period'*.

Rarely are historians invited to debate the possible long-span frameworks of history - whether cyclical, linear, static, revolutionary or multi-stranded. For example, urban historians rarely discuss the very long history of towns. Studies like Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (1938) may remain on reading lists as background briefing. *But how many now read Mumford?* Very few, in my experience. His quest to place cities within the socio-economic-cultural context of their times is no longer something that requires special remark, while his schematic contrast between the new, chaotic industrial city with the old, ordered organic settlement now seems far too simplistic. Research has moved on, adding immense depth and breadth - but diminishing length.

Specialisation has been, however, only the obvious symptom rather than the deep-rooted cause of the flight from the diachronic. After all, it is notable that big picture studies have never actually disappeared. For example, environmental history is breaking new ground. Diachronic studies like Neil Robert's *Holocene* (1998) survey humanity's changing relationship with the natural world from 10,000BCE until today.<sup>11</sup> This is history with a polemical edge, warning that humans ignore at their collective peril the scientists' analysis of the implications of global warming. *But do such global-environment studies appear in the current History curriculum?*

Overwhelmingly, no. Such studies, if accessibly written, appeal to educated readers and contribute to public political discourse. But their data and their arguments have commonly been marginalised for teaching purposes, not deliberately but effectively, by the sub-division of the History curriculum into many sectional courses.

One particularly grand but grandly failed attempt at world history also discouraged imitators. This was the cautionary tale of Arnold Toynbee. Between the years 1934 and 1961, he published his massive twelve-volume *Study of History* (1934-61). It was an epic project, chronicling the rise and fall not of ethnic groups or nation-states but of the entire stock of world 'civilisations'. Of these, he identified 21 (later expanded to 31), as well as eight 'abortive' or 'arrested' civilisations, and at least 650 'primitive' societies. Their contrasting fates were depicted as an unending process of continuous challenge, response to challenge, and fresh challenge once more. Soon, however, well-directed criticisms undermined Toynbee's basic classification of civilisations. Equally, his overall interpretation of history as challenge-response-challenge was rejected as banal and unenlightening. His reputation, once sky-high, collapsed. *Who now has read Toynbee? Even in the abridged text?* Only few historians; and fewer still would now claim him to be a seminal philosopher of history, as once was done.<sup>12</sup>

Above all, however, the flight from Grand Narratives in favour of synchronic immersion was especially hastened by the erosion in the twentieth century of two global saga-histories that were inherited from the nineteenth century. This important intellectual development encouraged fresh in-depth research, bringing valuable new insights. And it simultaneously appeared to free the subject from stereotyped assumptions that had been nullified by the test of actual historical experience.

Of these two meta-narratives, one was a confident belief in linear 'progress', from barbarism to civilisation.<sup>13</sup> That vision, which was found extensively but not exclusively in the West, sank in the twentieth century when confronted with the stark evidence of world wars, tyrannies, famines, killer epidemics, ecological degradation, nuclear bombs, and genocides. *Who now believes in universal and unstoppable progress?* Somewhat surprisingly, some people still do - but very far from a majority. Those who are still optimistic tend to invoke technological innovations and the human capacity for adventure. On the other hand, many others instead fear an unstoppable decline, especially with reference to climate change and environmental degradation.

And even those scholars, who balance between the extremes of optimism and pessimism, tend to sniff disparagingly when the word 'Progress' is mentioned.<sup>14</sup> In academic life, if used at all, it appears in ironic quotation marks. It may survive in some popular mantras, perhaps in relation to new technology - as in: 'you can't stop progress' - but such remarks are readily countered by the obverse: 'things are going (or have already gone) to the dogs'.

Another grand meta-narrative was the Marxist revolutionary sequence of historical stages, each representing a different economic-and-political system. These successive eras were held to be propelled onwards by the class struggle. One stage would be succeeded by a contrasting alternative, generating a historical pathway that would lead 'inevitably' to a new world of egalitarian communism and, ultimately, the 'withering away' of the state. It too was a progress narrative, but one that incorporated conflict. Yet things did not turn out as predicted, and great harm was also done by policies that tried to speed up history to produce the inevitably coming utopia. So this model too has fallen by history's wayside, disproved by events. *Who now believes in the inevitable triumph of communism?* Only a few determined Marxists, and they do that by redefining past attempts at establishing the workers' utopia as false-communism or 'Stalino-state-capitalism'. Even such a revised version, however, entails a recognition that history's stages follow less straightforwardly and sequentially than the founding fathers Marx and Engels had specified. There are snares and delusions along the way.

So the conceptual and organisational difficulties of writing a common story for all humanity are only too apparent. There is still great public appetite for narrative histories. Television programmes about the succession of kings and queens, or about the feats of military heroes and political villains, or about the course of major wars, are very popular. Yet such output retains its distance from the world of academic research, not least because, while TV producers like a straightforward narrative line, historians tend to prefer complexities. That makes it hard to bridge the two worlds of media and scholarship. And particularly so today, in the context of the recent marginalisation of macro-history within academic history. The coming challenge, then, is to find new and accessible ways of telling a tangled but not impenetrable global tale, that does justice to research detail but still returns to the big picture.

## II: Returning to Through-Time Interpretations

To acknowledge the collapse of the old Grand Narratives is not to blame today's scholars, who contribute magnificently to the richness, depth and professionalism of research knowledge. On the contrary, this is a very exciting time for historians – precisely because so much more is being discovered about so many new or hitherto neglected themes, like (say) gender history and (expanding now) environmental history or animal history. As a result, the aim is not to abandon what is now done well. Nor is the aim simply to announce another Grand Narrative in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion.

Instead, there is a good case for better augmenting and framing these accumulating insights by devising and debating new and better ways of approaching big-picture history. Currently, the timing for this enterprise is especially suitable, given the collapsing state of postmodernist theories. Those ideas, which had some currency in the West in the later 1980s and 1990s, held that time itself was broken or ruptured, so that history within time was disordered and randomised. It was a viewpoint that marginalised the efforts of historians, on the grounds that their interpretations remain no more than fictional.<sup>15</sup> However, the model of ruptured temporality is a fallible one. Things do manifestly happen through time – like sustained speech, in which sounds make sense in sequence - or sustained writing, which is understood by sustained reading, both taking place moment by moment.

Moreover, causes and effects do operate. Space itself is not only located in Time, it is integrally yoked with it. So the anti-philosopher Jacques Derrida's attempt at rejecting temporality as purely 'metaphysical' and substituting *chora* (or *khōra*) as an atemporal spatiality,<sup>16</sup> remains a curiosity that has not won converts. Indeed, it may be noted that even postmodernist theorists who approve his views, do themselves offer a narrative of sorts. They claim to have identified 'the death of the Enlightenment project'.<sup>17</sup> In that belief, they announce the advent of a new 'postmodernist age'. It is true that these theorists differ notably as to the timing of such a notional transformation.<sup>18</sup> But their analysis of death and rebirth, from an old world-view to a new and better one, is itself a transformation story, based upon a simple binary, which looks to a rejected past to explain/approve cultural progress in the present.

Historians, meanwhile, have overwhelmingly, if not unanimously, rejected the

anti-historical thrust of postmodernism.<sup>19</sup> They recognise that all those who study the past do give an imaginative as well as intellectual input into their histories. They are emphatically not, however, writing pure fictions. Nor are they operating in isolation. Historical data and interpretations are debated and refined within and between successive generations. As part of that process, some over-simplified Grand Narratives have been rightly discarded. But it is now time to return to thinking long as well as deep.

In that context, one primary issue to confront is the old question of periodisation. That requirement applies not only to the study of history but to many subjects across the humanities and social sciences, which borrow from history. Because the old Grand Narratives collapsed but were not displaced by alternatives, many of the old standard narrative stages of history have survived unchallenged. Thus the discipline remains divided, both for research and teaching purposes, into broad segments, which sub-divide the long-run into a schematic sequence of chronological periods, each with an outline name. These sub-divisions have a long history and are institutionalised throughout the profession. In other words, the meta-narratives have gone, but the sub-divisions, which they once sustained, are outstaying their welcome.

Often, the established periodisation is divided into a set of supposedly discrete historical stages, which act as mental 'default' systems. When questioned about their value, historians usually reply: *'We know that these period divisions are purely artificial but they are useful heuristically, for teaching purposes'*. However, such unruffled confidence should be questioned. By using outmoded period divisions, historians all too easily end up reifying historical stages about whose 'existence' they are otherwise sceptical, in another part of their minds. And, more importantly still, they and their students avoid thinking about alternatives.

It is true that some new specialist fields have consciously discussed the need to revise traditional periodisation. In women's history, for example, there were initial high hopes that there might be a new 'women's history of the world', with a new chronology of change.<sup>20</sup> However, after much research and debate, the familiar and institutionally standardised divisions of 'ancient', 'medieval', and the various permutations of 'modern' have proved hard to budge. Feminist scholars themselves disagree about any alternative schema; and new big-picture accounts of a separate trajectory for women through time have been thin on the ground.



Similarly, some scholars of urban history wrote reflectively about the challenging light that comparative urban development threw upon traditional questions of periodisation.<sup>21</sup> But there was very little response from other urban historians. And certainly no new ‘urban’ stage history has emerged that can be applied globally. The apparent failure of these new approaches suggests that what is wanted is not a new set of rival stages; but instead a different approach.

Common sets of historical stages are usually implicitly accepted rather than freshly justified. Even when there are, from time to time, stinging criticisms, such as Barraclough’s 1955 attack upon ‘medievalism’,<sup>22</sup> the standard periodisation remains unchanged – as much through its institutionalised status within the profession for strong intellectual reasons. A standard triad is thus *ancient/medieval/modern*, with the option of *postmodernism* as a contested extra with reference to very recent times.<sup>23</sup> Or, for Marxists, there is an alternative sequence. After many variants were canvassed, Stalin decreed that there were five main stages, each with a distinct form of economic production: *primitive communism (shared labour)/ ancient (slave labour)/ feudalism (bonded labour)/ capitalism (waged labour)/ communism (communal labour)*- with the unwelcome extra option (for Marxists) of *post-communism* in the post-1989 era.<sup>24</sup>

Stadial models of this type allow historians to keep chronological control, without anachronistically scrambling events or examples from one period of history with another. Each stage can then gain its own definitional label, hence allowing for straightforward contracts between different periods and *Zeitgeists*. Furthermore, these segments of history can be fitted implicitly into either linear or cyclical accounts. With such assumptions, one country or world region can then be deemed ‘ahead of’ or ‘behind’ another, in terms of the expected stadial sequence – say, from ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilisation’, or from pre-industrial to industrial, or from predominantly rural to urbanised.

Yet stage theories obscure as much as they illuminate. For a start, such schema make inadequate acknowledgement to any deep historical continuities that may persist over millennia. Instead, stage theories tend to encourage the erroneous idea that everything will change in synchronisation, at the end of one stage and the start of the next.

Historical continuity is thus one great fatality within all stage theories, whether

of rise or decline. The elements that persist through time have received much less theoretical attention than have theories of either revolution or evolution.<sup>25</sup> Yet without some constants it would be impossible to calibrate the extent of change on some comparative scale. There is, after all, a constant © at the heart of Einstein's famous formula  $e = mc^2$ , so the great guru of relativity theory did not himself eschew all absolutes.<sup>26</sup> In the study of history, historians might be expected to take an interest in the power of continuity, especially as they display great tenacity in holding onto long-standing historical periodisations<sup>27</sup> – but the stadal sub-divisions discourage giving attention to such considerations.

Very long-term incremental changes are also short-changed by the traditional stage divisions. As a result, it often happens that historians proclaim a novel trend in one period, while historians of prior or succeeding periods (or sometimes even both) are discovering the same novel trend in a quite different period. The 'rise of the middle class' was one such omni-present development whose actual history was obscured rather than illuminated by grand claims for its role.<sup>28</sup> But historians should not be obliged to disaggregate long trends into smaller stages: some micro-trends in human history, such as biological evolution, may indeed persist over millennia.

Problematic for all stage theories is the selection of defining criteria to start and end each finite stage. If one factor is highlighted, other important elements – which may persist, or which may change at other times – are ignored or underestimated. Interestingly, that point was noted long ago by Oswald Spengler – a stringent critic of the three-fold division of history into ancient, medieval, and modern: It is too arbitrary for historians to insert into history their own concerns, he insisted, and then to expect those concerns to govern all human development.<sup>29</sup>

Muddled 'modernity' provides one very central example of intellectual confusion. The concept is widely used and as widely diffused.<sup>30</sup> Historians often remark that the term is opaque but then continue to use it. Different experts have detected the 'birth of the modern' at numerous different points between the later twelfth century to the mid-twentieth century: a very prolonged period indeed for birth-pangs. There is also uncertainty as to whether and when 'modernity' has ended, if it has ended. Even the postmodernists, who agree that it has disappeared, disagree as to when its demise occurred – suggesting a range of dates from the 1950s to the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Within the Anglo-American tradition, there is sometimes incorporated a further sub-

division, known as the ‘early modern’, again with fluid start and end-dates. Or for medievalists, there are variant options, with the so-called ‘middle ages’ partitioned into its ‘early’ and ‘high’ stages. In practice, therefore, a cheerful eclecticism rules. But the standard default systems continue alongside, inexorably institutionalised within the profession. Little wonder that History’s reading public becomes either bemused or frankly sceptical.

Marxism offered the most famous set of historical stages, which were supposed to apply globally. These discrete historical eras came complete with their own in-built economic denominators and an in-built mechanism for change (often left unexplained in other stadial theories), in the form of the class struggle.<sup>32</sup> Convinced believers felt able, on the strength of this historical model, not only to understand the past but also to predict the future. Thus communist leaders, ruling in the name of Marxism, were confident that they held the key to history’s grand trajectory. Many were thereby emboldened to impose draconian policies, in order to propel society more rapidly in the direction towards which, they believed, it was ‘due’ to go. In some cases, townspeople and intellectuals were forced into the countryside in the name of rural simplicity (Mao’s China; Pol Pot’s Cambodia). Yet, elsewhere country-people were herded into new towns in the name of socialist development (Stalin’s Russia; Ceausescu’s Romania). Thus, paradoxically, even an agreed historical framework could lead to very different, though equally high-handed, policy applications in practice.

Meanwhile, sincere Marxist researchers faced the same definitional and ‘boundary’ problems as did all those who accepted stadial models. There was no consensus about the number of stages or the key mechanisms and dates of change. Marxist historians of Britain disagreed about even key developments such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>33</sup> Within that latter category, there were further problems. Some economic historians, like Russia’s Mikhail Pokrovsky, bravely argued for an early stage of ‘commercial capitalism’ (international trade) which preceded ‘industrial capitalism’ (the factory system). Yet such revisionism incurred the wrath of Stalin, for muddying the inexorable march of history. He also rejected an alternative attempt to introduce a separate *Asian mode of production* (state-directed labour), to apply to China and the East, in lieu of feudalism.

Too many variations would generate too many variant pathways. As a result,

stage theories tend to concentrate upon a relatively small number of organising categories.<sup>34</sup> However, these great eras then seem unconvincing under close scrutiny, with too many internal complexities subsumed into one. Indeed, stage theories raise as many questions as they resolve. What, after all, is their general message? Upon close inspection, they often dwindle into *earlier; later; later still*. Moreover, the common names for the great stages are bald and open to challenge. In practice, a precise meaning has ebbed from the terminology of *ancient/ medieval (feudal)/ modern (capitalist)*, which now means little more than a historical timespans *One – Two – Three – (and onwards)*. The hollowness of the existing terminology strongly suggests the case for some creativity with ‘naming’ different eras. The term ‘pre-history’, in particular, seems particularly bizarre in application to pre-speech human existence, since those origins were absolutely integral to what followed.

No periodisation ‘summit’ could or should resolve these dilemmas. As already noted, while historians currently work within the institutionalised frameworks, more and more individual researchers freely adopt their own timelines and historical frameworks. What can be expected, however, is a more explicit debate about these choices and justifications for the use of terminology. There is scope for more Conferences and discussion forums that focus upon diachronic themes to compare and contrast across periods, as well as those that focus upon synchronic immersion within specified periods. What assumptions are being made about trends over time? Is history linear? Or cyclical? Or some combination of the two? Or some other shape entirely? To be sure, such debates need careful thought, to avoid the Scylla of banality and the Charybdis of ‘*Oh, it’s all so complex*’.

Senior scholars, who sometimes turn to historiography, should be especially encouraged also to reflect upon historical periodisation, in the light of a lifetime’s research and teaching. That sub-division acknowledges that research neophytes have enough to do without taking on the cosmos as well. But young scholars, when turning a doctoral into a publication, could also analyse how they see their own subject as fitting into a broader picture.

Collectively, too, there may be scope for many more diachronic linkages via collective research projects. Currently, there is in official thinking a modish stress – indeed, a positively dogmatic stress – upon the need for such enterprises to demonstrate inter-disciplinarity. That innovation has been signally important in

regenerating some subject areas, like bio-chemistry. But far from all ills are cured by the same medicine. For historians (and for all scholars working on longitudinal subjects, like historical geography), it would make as much or more sense to encourage inter-temporality. That is, there is a need for collective projects to study history ‘in the long’ as well as history ‘in the round’. Conferences and research projects should be encouraged not just to review long spans of consecutive time but also to compare and contrast common themes or trends from disparate and separate periods of time. Such innovations should be the proper medicine for the subject. They constitute a challenge, certainly, but also a needed elixir.

Teaching also needs to be adjusted to provide a seedbed for diachronic debates. Too often, these days, students get a diet of rich synchronic detail but too little overview. They need such framework courses, to complement current ‘pick and mix’ programmes. Again, it should be stressed that overviews must not be taught as dogma, whether nationalist, religious, or ideological. They should provide concepts and themes for debate - not edicts about the inevitable course of history. Students need to encounter such interpretative schema, even if only (or especially if) to disagree. Ideally, indeed, they should have had framework courses at school, with some engaging long-span narratives which will help them to ‘locate’ the other courses which they study. The long-term has yet to be restored to the syllabus for pre-18s. But some University History departments are now filling the yawning gap with new or refreshed overview courses for first year students – with positive feedback. There is no prescribed formula, needless to say. Some courses in the newly named Big-History stretch back to the origins of the cosmos. Others content themselves with human affairs, whether from the primordial eras of pre-speech (misleadingly known as pre-history) or from any later point on the time-line up until today.<sup>35</sup>

Other teaching innovations should also look at different ways of incorporating the diachronic into the syllabus. Courses do not necessarily have to be organised around traditional linear trajectories. Instead, students can be invited to view a subject in synchronic details alongside an analysis of the same subject’s diachronic reputation (including forgetting as well as remembering).<sup>36</sup> Such measures enable students to assess how experiences in one period may either fit into or be revised in the longer-term story. Otherwise, without some explicit study of the different historical frameworks, people fall back on old mythic and belief patterns that subsist as sub-

consciously held cultural traditions. In other words, unless they are challenged, the old Grand Narratives – whether cyclical or linear - live on determinedly in ghostly guise.

### III: Three Dimensionality

My own view is that the past can be studied with an improved notation, known as three-dimensionality. It does not exclude the macro-changes which are often taken to provide great turning points, as in various stage theories. Yet it does not assume that such revolutionary transformations will happen all the time, or in regular sequence. Also acknowledged in every period are the unduly neglected forces of deep continuity and the slow, incremental processes of micro-change. Alterations and adaptations between these great dimensions form the stuff of history.

Such an approach, first outlined in *Time and the Shape of History*,<sup>37</sup> is post-Progress, post-Marxist, and also post-Braudelian. That is, it accepts the important perception from the eminent French historian Fernand Braudel that historical interpretations must be longitudinal. His model of the diachronic is the most substantial to have been produced in the later twentieth century, restoring and indeed celebrating *la longue durée*. But it differs significantly from Braudel's assumption that history can be divided into three parallel layers, specified as *events (surface)/ trends (intermediate)/ and geo-history (foundational)*.<sup>38</sup> His model is too schematic in dividing the surface from the depths, and allocating different aspects of history to each separate level. Moreover, he accords to geography a greater continuity than it actually has; and it notably underplays the structural power of events. Neither Braudel in his later works<sup>39</sup> nor his successors in the *Annales* School of French historians actually used his tripartite system.<sup>40</sup>

Having examined the world-wide range of historical interpretations, it became apparent to me that it is more helpful to think in terms of longitudinal *dimensions* that interlock, rather than stratified and near-autonomous layers. One is the power of continuity or persistence. It is found in many guises, not just in the form of geography. Examples can be found in the laws of physics, which do not change from day to day, or the rules of mathematics. They are not strictly time-less; but they are time-invariant. Other forms of persistence can be seen in long-lasting patterns of land use that continue through changing generations. Another example can be seen in the

underlying structures of languages, which survive deep-rootedly throughout the many medium-term and short-term adaptations to both written and spoken linguistic forms. In fact, given that continuities seep everywhere, with porous boundaries between continuities and changes of all kinds, framing factors that hold things together in through-time persistence turn out, on closer analysis, to be markedly widespread.

Also recurrent is the power of gradual, incremental change or ‘micro-change’. That can be seen, for instance, in the slow pace of biological evolution, when species adapt over long aeons. The gradual transformation of human languages between successive generations gives another case-history, although linguistic mutations are occasionally abrupt, as in moments of language birth and death.

And the third process is the power of short, sharp drastic change, often termed ‘revolution’, also known as ‘macro-change’. The extent of turbulence and discontinuity within history, both global and cosmic, is thus incorporated. An example is the Big Bang that began this universe, some fifteen billion years ago. It is true that scientists like Fred Hoyle reject this once-off theory of cosmic origins. Yet, even in his rival model of successive universes, there are still drastic changes when one universe departs and the next arrives.

Putting together the three forces of continuity (persistence), micro-change (momentum) and macro-change (turbulence) makes a three-dimensional web or grid which frames all history. Each aspect is seamlessly linked into the others, but their mutual relationships keep shifting, sometimes radically, making an interlocking but unruly braid of historical experience.

Continuity gives ballast to the system. It provides the benchmark against which other variations can be assessed. Often underestimated by historians and certainly under-theorised, its importance is very great. In people’s personal lives, it can be manifested in the force of habit and repetition. Life in fact would be totally bewildering if everything had to be invented *de novo* from day to day. But instead people rely upon large swathes of existence remaining quietly unchanged – or broadly unchanged - from one moment to the next: like the meaning of words; like the physical environment; like the human genetic inheritance. Continuity, furthermore, tugs at the forces of change, and works to ‘domesticate’ and assimilate them.

Micro-change, being gradual and incremental, then adds its own gentle dynamism. It prevents the system from clogging. And its long-term trends are slow,

subtle, easily absorbed. Some – like biological evolution – take place over millennia, so that living individuals are unaware of the quiet in-built momentum that occurs over the very long term. Micro-changes, which may be plural in any era, are thus characteristically hard to detect and often difficult to ‘date’, as they spread over long periods of time, from gestation to maturation.

Radical transformation, meanwhile, provides sharp impetus as well as turmoil. It may release some tensions but equally generate new ones, as when a political revolution settles old scores but also initiates new contests. Its force is dramatic, often shocking, always noticeable. Such great upheavals, however, are also imperceptibly assimilated by the forces of micro-change and continuity. Indeed radical discontinuity can then become the basis of a new continuity. Hence, at all times the three dimensions inter-relate, in an ever changing balance.

None of these three dimensions, it should be emphasized once more, can be allocated rigidly to different features of life, since all three dimensions apply potentially to everything. Accordingly, it is misleading to think *à la Braudel* that geography (for example) must always represent continuity, since the earth has not only experienced major shocks in the past (and likely to face more in the future) but also continually undergoes subtle small modifications such as erosion, continental drift, and so forth (also unlikely to cease). Furthermore, it is equally blinkered to ignore other, non-geographical continuities. For example, human languages, which often adapt slowly, and sometimes change rapidly and surprisingly, also contain persistent features in their basic structures and grammars. Thus, alongside the power of revolution and upheaval, the forces of persistence and micro-change also need systematic evaluation.

Deep persistence, onwards momentum, drastic turbulence: these features frame everything. As a triad, they match the three dimensions of space. While that comprises the seamlessly inter-locking triad of latitude, longitude and altitude, so there are simultaneously three longitudinal dimensions of history over time. And these inter-woven and ever-varying dimensions can be tested (and debated) and assessed in application to every period or culture around the world.



#### IV – Coda: Past and Future

Tracing patterns in the past encourages the hope that they can also be projected forward to help foretell the future. Among the famous prophetic models of history was the Marxist vision of the coming *Kingdom of Freedom*. Out of today's oppression would come tomorrow's liberation. Alas, the perfect society did not arrive on earth, as it was supposed to do. Because so many predictions of the future have failed to come true,<sup>41</sup> there is a rival litany of scepticism. People intone that: 'You can't learn from the past'. History is held to lack all meaning, other than that of chaos and confusion, rather as Macbeth defined life: 'a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing',<sup>42</sup> a counsel of despair updated in the song lyric by Sting: 'History will teach us nothing'.

Yet humans routinely act in the assumption that there is and will continue to be a smooth continuity from the past into future. That steadfast (and justified) belief allows people to generate precise plans which anticipate specific events-to-come, as well as to estimate less precise but still calculable estimates of probabilities, with reference to events-likely-to-come. For example, buildings in earthquake zones can be fortified against the probability of future shocks, without knowing exactly when these will happen. Or future financial risks can be quantified by bankers and hedge fund experts, as a means of providing secure underpinning for otherwise speculative investments. Of course, in that latter case, the current credit crisis reveals that the formula was applied over-confidently. The unexpected did happen and the calculations proved to be faulty.

Understanding the three-dimensional nature of past and future provides a clear warning to that effect. There are always surprises, whether stemming from the unexpected generated by humans or the unexpected generated within the wider world. These upheavals lead to macro-changes, which constitute macro-turbulence within the system. The extent of radical change is unpredictable, except in the general sense of predicting that there will be some future 'unknown unknowns'.

Set against that, three-dimensionality also teaches that there will be some developing micro-changes, in the form of trends stretching from past to present and into the future. The details are not known with any precision. Yet these are 'known' unknowns. Two (linked) examples from human history in the past three centuries have been the global spread of mass literacy and the process of urbanisation, leading

to a rising proportion of the world's population living in towns. Understanding such trends, in the animate and inanimate worlds, provides a general framework for future planning. But such long-term trends are particularly hard to stop or to divert, as humans are currently realising in terms of taking measures to halt the human contribution to climate change.

Throughout all this, three-dimensionality also offers a reminder that continuity will also work to 'domesticate' upheavals, both major and minor. It offers ballast to the system. In positive terms, it is stabilising, even if to keen advocates of change it can also be seen as inertia. Thus the known 'knowns' of deep continuity will continue to interact in complex ways with the forces of micro- and macro-change. In other words, persistent 'normality' adds an element of 'drag' or resistance into all calculations or estimates of future transformation. Every dimension interacts with and gives feedback to the others.

Returning to the diachronic does *not* seek to halt what historians currently do. But it positively seeks to enrich the subject and its public application. The clear need is to view all human history without trapping it into the 'timetable' of just one cultural tradition. To avoid that, historians need to study and debate outside as well as inside the familiar timeframes. And the answers should look not for single universals but for interlocking dimensions, which combined persistence (continuity) with micro-change and macro-change. In that way, humans can improve their greatest mental asset – their capacity to 'think long'.

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## ENDNOTES:

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- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay is also available in Italian translation: see P.J. Corfield, 'Returning Again to History's Big Picture?' in translation by Alessandro Magherini, as 'Tornare alla grande storia?' *Italia Contemporanea*, 250 (2008), pp. 89-102.
- <sup>2</sup> For introductory guides, see V. Cable, *The Storm: the world economic crisis and what it means* (London, 2009); G. Turner, *The Credit Crunch* (London, 2008); and K Phillips, *Bad Money: reckless finance, failed politics, and the global crisis of American capitalism* (New York, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> D.H. Lawrence's sense of omnipresent sexual symbolism was famously challenged by Katherine Mansfield: 'And I shall *never* see sex in trees, sex in the running brooks, sex in stones, and sex in everything [as he does]': J. Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield: a biography* (London, 1978), p. 88.
- <sup>4</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 34: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'.
- <sup>5</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, ed. C.J. Friedrich (New York, 1956), p. 456: 'For the History of the World is nothing but the development of the Idea of Freedom'; and the Hegel-influenced F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), cited in idem, *The Will to Power*, transl. A.M. Ludovici (Edinburgh, 1909), Vol. 1, p. xi: 'A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength – life itself is *Will to Power*'.
- <sup>7</sup> Dawkins is not alone among neo-Darwinists in applying competition to all aspects of human life.; but his formulation, much disputed by geneticists, is a particularly clear version of this extrapolation: see R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 38-9: 'Genes are competing directly with their alleles [rivals] for survival, since the alleles in their gene pool are rivals for their slot on the chromosome of future generations. ... The gene is the basic unit of selfishness'.
- <sup>8</sup> Structuralism was an approach rather than a school of thought. Its heart-land was within linguistics, semiotics, and anthropology; but there were attempts at establishing a structural Marxism, structuralist feminism, and structuralist history. See for variant overviews, M. Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (London, 1988; 1993); T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London, 2003); and R. Harland, *Superstructuralism: the philosophy of structuralism and post-structuralism* (London, 1987).
- <sup>9</sup> Two ambitious examples include E.L. Jones, *Growth Recurring: economic change in world history* (Oxford, 1988); and R.E. Cameron, *A Concise Economic History of the World: from paleolithic times to the present* (Oxford, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> The account by D.C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past: an account of the rise and decline of economic history in Britain* (Oxford, 1987) applies in broad outlines to many other countries too.
- <sup>11</sup> N. Roberts, *The Holocene: an environmental history* (Oxford, 1998). Others in this genre include C. Ponting, *A Green History of the World* (London, 1991), extended as *World History: a new perspective* (London, 2000).

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- <sup>12</sup> For critiques of Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), see M.F.A. Montagu (ed.), *Toynbee and History: critical essays and reviews* (Boston, Mass., 1956), plus E.T. Gargan (ed.), *The Intent of Toynbee's History: a cooperative appraisal* (Chicago, 1961); P. Silvestri, *Arnold Toynbee e la storia intera: un'importante ipotesi storica che abolisce ogni coordinate spazio-temporale* (Florence, 1991).
- <sup>13</sup> For such theories, see J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: an inquiry into its origin and growth* (London, 1920); D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990); and C. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: progress and its critics* (New York, 1991).
- <sup>14</sup> The question 'Did science (or medicine) progress in your period?', if asked at any Conference on the history of science or medicine, gets a general response of disbelieving looks, chiding words, and accusations of thoughtless anachronism. It remains, however, a valid question to ask, although without blaming people in the past for differences between their knowledge and that of today.
- <sup>15</sup> See M. Drolet (ed.), *The Postmodernism Reader: foundational texts* (London, 2003); and, in application to historical studies, K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London, 1991); idem (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997); and A. Munslow (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London, 2000).
- <sup>16</sup> See J. Derrida (1930-2004), *Khôra* (Paris, 1993), pp. 58, 75-6, 96, for Khôra as an immanent, intangible, timeless framing for the cosmos. For commentaries, see too D. Wood, *The Deconstruction of Time* (Evanston, Ill, 2001), pp. 260-1, 269, 270-3; and J. Hodge, *Derrida on Time* (London, 2007); pp. ix-x, 196-203, 205-6, 213-14.
- <sup>17</sup> Celebrating the 'death of the Enlightenment Project' forms part of postmodernist thought at its most polemical. Now critics return the compliment by identifying the 'death of postmodernism'. Or, alternatively, postmodernist thought is seen still-born - 'slipping into the strange history of those futures that did not materialise': see G. Myerson, *Ecology and the End of Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 74.
- <sup>18</sup> For divergent dates suggested for the advent of postmodernism, see P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007), pp. 124-31.
- <sup>19</sup> One of many rejections, penned by a historian, is R. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997). See also S. Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> See variously R. Miles, *The Women's History of the World* (London, 1988); B.G. Smith (ed.), *Women's History: a global perspective* (Urbana, Ill., 2004); and, focusing upon cultural imprints rather than a temporal history, M. French, *From Eve to Dawn: a history of women in the world* (New York, 2008).
- <sup>21</sup> See especially G. Rozman, *Urban Networks in Russia, 1750-1800, and Premodern Periodisation* (Princeton, 1976); and idem, *Urban Networks in Ch'ing China and Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, 1973).
- <sup>22</sup> G. Barraclough, 'Medium Aevum: Some Reflections on Medieval History and on the Term "The Middle Ages"', in his *History in a Changing World* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 54-63. The response from colleagues studying the relevant period of history was very frosty and Barraclough turned his attention to twentieth-century affairs instead.

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- <sup>23</sup> For a critique of the Modernity triad, see Corfield: *Time and Shape of History*, pp. 131-48. See also T.K. Rabb, 'Narrative, periodization and the study of history', *Historically Speaking: Bulletin of the Historical Society [Boston University]*, 8 (2007).
- <sup>24</sup> On the Marxist stages, see Corfield: *Time and Shape of History*, pp. 178-83.
- <sup>25</sup> The foremost historian theorist of continuity was Fernand Braudel (1902-85), on whom see esp. J.H. Hexter, 'Fernand Braudel and the *Monde Braudellien*', in idem, *On Historians: reappraisals of some of the makers of modern history* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 61-145. See also P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: the Annales school, 1929-89* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 32-53; and Corfield: *Time and Shape of History*, pp. 29-32, 208-10.
- <sup>26</sup> Einstein's formula incorporates E (energy), M (mass) and C (*celeritas* = Latin for speed, measured as the constant speed of light in a vacuum, at just under 300,000 kilometres per second).
- <sup>27</sup> The difficulties as well as the challenges of continuity-history are seen in T. Zeldin's *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London, 1994), where human sexuality is confusingly explored without reference to any historical sub-divisions whatsoever.
- <sup>28</sup> For a critique, see J.H. Hexter, 'The myth of the middle class in Tudor England', *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, 2 (1950), pp. 128-40; revised in idem, *Reappraisals in History* (London, 1961), pp. 71-116, esp. pp. 112-16.
- <sup>29</sup> Cited in Corfield: *Time and Shape of History*, p. 184.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid: pp. 131-48.
- <sup>31</sup> See ibid., pp. 127-31; and P.J. Corfield, 'POST-Medievalism/Modernity/ Postmodernity?', *Rethinking History* (2010).
- <sup>32</sup> Marx and Engels took the motor concept of friction (the dialectic) from Hegel but gave the dialectic a material rather than an ideological basis, to form dialectical materialism: see K. Marx, 'Afterword to Second Edition of *Das Kapital, Vol. 1* (1873), in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 456: 'The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him, it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell'.
- <sup>33</sup> Highly illuminating are the rival views of the Communist Historians Group in the 1940s and early 1950s, as they debated the nature of the English state in the sixteenth century and whether there was or was not a 'bourgeois revolution' in the mid-seventeenth century: see D. Parker (ed.), *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: debates of the British Communist Historians* (London, 2008).
- <sup>34</sup> A review of the most popular numbers for stage theories of history is provided in Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, pp. 164-73. See also for Western thought, C. Butler, *Number Symbolism* (London, 1970); and for far-Eastern traditions, R. Guénon, *The Great Triad*, trans. P. Kingsley (Cambridge, 1991).

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- <sup>35</sup> A compendious example of big history, which starts with the earth before getting to humans, is available in D. Christian, *Maps of Time: an introduction to big history* (Berkeley, 2004), although the unproblematic identification of the industrialising world post-1750 as ‘Modernity’ is disappointingly conventional for such an unconventional study.. For a classic overview of the problems and challenges of diachronic analysis, see too G. Barraclough, ‘Universal history’, in H.P.R. Finberg (ed.), *Approaches to History: a symposium* (London, 1962), pp. 83-109; and for other of the long-term, E. Zerubavel, *Time Maps: collective memory and the social shape of the past* (Chicago, 2003).
- <sup>36</sup> This technique has been used successfully by myself when teaching a course on early nineteenth-century British history. Students were asked to select (with advice) a suitable topic to be studied in two separate essays, one assessing the subject’s synchronic reputation and the other its diachronic reputation (including both the fall as well as rise of fame over time). After some initial trepidation, students warmed to the task and produced particularly original work on the diachronic dimension.
- <sup>37</sup> For detailed arguments, see Corfield: *Time and the Shape of History*.
- <sup>38</sup> Summarised in F. Braudel, *On History*, transl. S. Matthews (London, 1980), pp. 27-33, 74-8: from two related essays ‘History and the Social Sciences’ (1960) and ‘History and Sociology’ (1958-60).
- <sup>39</sup> Braudel later propounded an alternative 3-layered economic model, with deep infrastructure/ intermediate market economy/ and surface commercial and financial transactions: see F. Braudel, ‘Introduction’, *Civilisation and Capitalism: fifteenth to eighteenth century – Vol. 1, the structures of everyday life*, transl. M. Kochan, revised S. Reynolds (London, 1981), pp. 23-4.
- <sup>40</sup> Burke: *French Historical Revolution*, pp. 107, 110-11, notes that, over time, the informal *Annales* ‘school’ of historians diversified and eventually dissolved.
- <sup>41</sup> Predictions, forecasts, planning, prophecies, and fortune-telling come in many forms, both sober and fanciful. For very diverse approaches, see N. Campion, *The Golden Age of Astrology: a cultural history of western astrology – the medieval and modern worlds* (London, 2009); B. Bobrick, *The Fated Sky: astrology in history* (New York, 2005); W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: utopian experiments in England, 1560-1960* (London, 1961); A. Boesky, *Founding Fictions: utopias in early modern England* (Athens, GA., 1996); G. Claeys (ed.), *Modern British Utopias, 1700-1850* (London, 1997), 8 vols; N. Rescher, *Predicting the Future: an introduction to the theory of forecasting* (Albany, NY., 1998); O. Strathern, *A Brief History of the Future: how visionary thinkers changed the world ...* (London, 2007); and D. Goodman, *A History of the Future* (New York, 2009).
- <sup>42</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1605/6), Act 5, sc. 5.