

## **Syllabus Master History of Society**

### ***Historical Culture and Historical Consciousness (Rotterdam FHKW 2008)***

## **The twofold character of time<sup>1</sup>**

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According to Jan Assmann the cultural construction of time is the most fundamental and all encompassing of all constructions of meaning in history.<sup>2</sup> He also emphasizes the heterogeneity of every culture: cultures encompass within themselves different concepts of time, such as "sites of memory" and "sites of renewal", which play a specific role in a given culture's structures of meaning. The different institutionalized forms of these time-sites often produce tensions between them.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are other, more objectifying approaches of time. In fact we distinguish two concepts of time which constitute an aporia, an insoluble problem: objective (measurable) time and subjective (experienced) time. Experiencing time supposes a human subject who articulates his or her perception of change: "time flies by" or "it seems to last an eternity". Hence we speak of subjective time. Measure time supposes sundials, hourglasses and clocks, instruments by which we make changes visible, measurable and exchangeable. Hence we speak of objective time.

In the first volume of *Time and Narrative* Paul Ricoeur proposes a way to deal with the aporia of this twofold character of time. He combines Augustine's reflections on time with the theory of plot from Aristotle's book *Poetics*. With this narrative approach he hopes to clarify the aporia of the being and none-being of time.<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur constructs a circle of temporality and narrativity, whose halves mutually reinforce one another. Starting point is the temporal character of human experience. According to him the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world, or: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience."<sup>5</sup> In this circular thesis temporality is linked with narrative in the sense that language configures and refigures temporal experience. The treatment of time by historians in their narratives is what Ricoeur calls "historical time". Historical time mediates between subjective time and objective time.<sup>6</sup> While Ricoeur's approach has its origins in

phenomenological philosophy, Reinhart Koselleck is inspired by cultural history. He examines the development of a specific attitude towards time.

To Koselleck, "historical time" refers to an awareness of human beings that the historical process is continually developing. He emphasizes that "historical time" is not simply an empty definition, but an entity which alters along with history.<sup>7</sup> This awareness originated in the eighteenth century, when a new perspective on the future, especially the idea that the future was malleable, led to a re-interpretation of the past. Between 1750 and 1850 the chasm between past and present became wider than ever before. In this period words like "progress" and "future" were used in their modern sense. Moreover, a turn-of-the-century awareness emerged. The *ancien régime* had become a closed chapter, hence a dialogue between the "old" and the "new" was possible. At the same time the notion "century" transformed into an independent entity: a precise numeral quantity with a specific identity.<sup>8</sup> According to Koselleck, these terms expressed the temporal difference between "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations".<sup>9</sup> Society's orientation towards the future made the past seem unrepeatable and closed off. Time was denaturalized.<sup>10</sup> "Historical time", diverged from natural time, had its own dynamics. Consequently, the past was no longer conceptualized as consisting of multiple histories but as one universal history ("Universalgeschichte"). From then on, this unified process which history had become, had to be explained and passed down from generation to generation. This type of history, conceived as a system, gives room to an epic unity that exposes and grounds inner coherence.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely at this point that we can make a connection with Ricoeur's notion of time. In his view narrating history is a process of *configuring* time, i.e. the shaping of temporal aspects *prefigured* in acting. The temporal configuration occurs in plots that give coherence to a diversity of individual events from the past.<sup>12</sup> The plot orders and integrates multiple and scattered events into a meaningful whole. This configurable dimension, Ricoeur explains, makes the story intelligible and followable. Consequently, the entire plot can be translated into one "idea" or theme. Yet, to be able to follow a story there has to be an "end point" from where the story can be seen as a whole, a kind of "conclusion" where expectation in the beginning finds its fulfillment. This implies the diachronic character of every narrated story.<sup>13</sup> Following the narrative (reading or hearing) implies a *refiguration* of temporal experiences. In the act of reading, the receiver plays with the narrative constraints and makes the plot work.

The process of configuration and refiguration favors one type of time over the other. By shaping time, the subjective experience of time is moved to the foreground while transforming or, perhaps, obscuring the objective, measurable time. So, historical writing does not eliminate the two forms of time, as stated by Louis Mink and Frank Ankersmit. In their view subjective time cannot be identified with narrative time because (in the words of Mink): "Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles and ends".<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, they consider

chronological (objective) time not essential for the historical narrative. It will be dissolved in the configurate nature of narrative.<sup>15</sup> Yet, historical time is a composite of subjective and objective elements. *Subjective time* is expressed in narrative, but *objective time* will retain its importance: both to date events and to delineate a historical period by choosing a starting and ending point.<sup>16</sup> An example may clarify this.

A time bar illustrates the linear extension of time by means of what I call ordinal, metric and configurative time. Ordinal time refers to the before or after; metric time refers to the measurable process, it expresses motion at comparable intervals; configurative time refers to historical eras or "plots", such as Antiquity, the Renaissance, Enlightenment. Ordinal and metric time relate to objective time, configurative time to subjective time because allowances have been made for interpretations. The whole procedure of delimitation of historical periods is based on specific dates that present conceptions of the past. Considerations regarding the *meaning* are decisive for any chosen turning point or historical period.<sup>17</sup> In periodizing, links are made from the "perspective of the historian who anticipates with hindsight."<sup>18</sup> Not only is the choice of end points subjective from the perspective of *historians*, the historical construct often depends on the temporal experiences of *historical actors* as well. Yet metric and ordinal time are still relevant. Thus, the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 (metric time) might be an argument for saying that this date defines the end of the twentieth century. The shock was so profound, as various commentators pointed out, that many people experienced the event as a watershed. People speak of the time before and after September 11 (ordinal time). From this subjectively perceived end point, historians are looking for a different construct with a new starting point, expressed in a new plot (configurative time). Perhaps the short twentieth century that Eric Hobsbawm defined as *Age of Extremes* has now become a less likely plot, or perhaps it is supported by new arguments.<sup>19</sup>

Both objective and subjective time are indispensable to historical practice. Combining and contrasting them enhances our insight into the different modes of the actor's temporal awareness, such as "sense of time" and "historical consciousness". The latter notions refer to specific *expressions* of temporal experiences. A sense of time indicates that people are aware that *objectively measurable time* and *subjectively experienced time* may diverge. The concept itself refers to the perception of duration (slowness, fastness) and intensity in daily life. For instance, seen from a distance, a past event like a revolution or war may appear to have spanned a short period of time, but in the perception of the historical actors living through it, it might have seemed an eternity. Historians Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker found another historical example of time divergence in the journal of a boy named Otto van Eck. On March 31, 1794 he wrote: "Me thinks, the older I become, the quicker time seems to pass." In other words, Otto was aware of the contrast between the passing of objective time and time as a subjective and age-related phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Another example is the description of historian

Loe de Jong about the German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War. De Jong explains that the occupation lasted exactly five years: 1940-1945. But the majority of Dutch people experienced this period as if it never seemed to end.<sup>21</sup>

A sense of time is one of the necessary preconditions for historical consciousness. It makes actors aware of their temporal, and thus historical position. The concept refers to a fundamental awareness that the present is somehow always based on past events. The self-evident carry-over of the past into the present is considered a pre-modern sense of history. We speak of modern historical consciousness<sup>22</sup> when people regard the past as fundamentally different from the present, when they experience the rupture with the past as final - which transforms the past into an object that has to be explained.

## References

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1 This text is based on Maria Grever, *De enscenering van de tijd* (Rotterdam 2001) and Maria Grever and Harry Jansen ed., *De ongrijpbare tijd. Temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden* (Hilversum 2001) 7-16.

2 Jan Assmann, *The mind of Egypt. History and meaning in the time of the Pharaohs* (New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Co., 2002) 12.

3 Idem, 12-13.

4. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative I* (Chicago 1984) 6.

5. Idem, 3.

6. To understand this mediating role, Ricoeur analyzes three instruments that historians have at their disposal: the calendar, the changing of generations, and sources or "traces". Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative III* (Chicago 1988) 104-126.

7. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main 1989) 354.

8. P.B.M. Blaas, "Het paradigma van de eeuwwende" in idem, *De burgerlijke eeuw. Over eeuwwenden, liberale burgerij en geschiedschrijving* (Hilversum 2000) 15-23; Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 19 and 33.

9. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 349-375, 366.

10. Blaas, "Historische tijd", 18 and 20.

11. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 53, 133 and 366.

12. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, 65-68.

13. Idem, 56.

14. L.O. Mink, *Historical understanding*, ed. by B. Fay, E.O. Golob and R. Vann (Ithaca 1987), 60.

15. Frank Ankersmit, *De navel van de geschiedenis. Over interpretatie, representatie en historische realiteit* (Groningen 1990) 123; Mink, *Historical understanding*, 57.

16. Chiel van den Akker, "Het verwachte einde. Tijd, geschiedenis en verhaal", in Grever and Jansen ed., *De ongrijpbare tijd*, 131-143. Lowenthal also emphasizes the importance of chronologies: "a chronological framework clarifies, places things in context, underscores the essential uniqueness of past events". David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country* (Cambridge 1984) 222-224; also Eviatar Zerubavel, *Calendars and history: a comparative study*

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of the social organization of national memory", in Jeffery Olick ed., *States of memory. Continuities, conflicts, and transformations in national retrospection* (Durham 2003) 315-338.

17. See on this topic also N. Rotenstreich, *Between Past and Present. An essay on history* (New Haven 1958) 100-101.

18. Blaas, "Vorm geven aan de tijd", 43-45.

19. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London 1994).

20. Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, "Otto's horloge. Verlichting, deugd en tijd in de achttiende eeuw", in Grever and Jansen ed., *De ongrijpbare tijd*, 97-112, 109.

21 L. de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede wereldoorlog deel 4 Mei '40 - Maart '41 eerste helft* (Den Haag 1972) v.

22. There is an overwhelming quantity of studies on these topics. A variety of approaches is discussed in Sharon Macdonald ed., *Approaches to European Historical Consciousness. Reflections and Provocations* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2000). See also the website of the Center for Historical Culture [www.fhk.eur.nl/chc](http://www.fhk.eur.nl/chc).