

FEATURE

PERIODIZATION: THEN AND NOW

*edited by Rebecca L. Spang
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INTRODUCTION

Periodization could seem an obscure topic and an unlikely rubric for essays in this journal. Unlike some other nouns ending in ‘-tion’ (‘revolution’ and ‘production’ both spring to mind) periodization does not immediately have political resonances. Yet a little consideration reveals how profoundly political the act of demarcating historical periods can be.

Take, for example, the period in which we now live. Over the past five years, prominent public figures in the United States and elsewhere have repeatedly claimed that when airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a new era in world history began. Eager to set international law and national precedent aside, the Bush Administration and its allies have happily exploited the feeling described by a *New York Times* editorialist on 12 September 2001: the attacks of the previous day were ‘one of those moments in which history splits, and we define the world as “before” and “after”’.¹ The old rules need no longer apply.

Often described as coming ‘out of the clear blue sky’, those planes have begun in public discourse to resemble the large asteroid that hit the Yucatan, 65.5 million years ago. ‘Our way of life’, like that of the dinosaurs, is said to be under threat. A shorthand expression – ‘9/11’ – has entered into common vocabulary, insisting on a specific origin, a point of rupture from all that had gone before. United-States policy, it is implied (and sometimes explicitly stated), had no more connection to the attacks than did the dinosaurs to the asteroid.

‘9/11’ is, of course, a selective formulation; it refers to very few of the many things that actually happened on the eleventh of September 2001. Bad news was buried; my brother’s son celebrated his first birthday; this journal’s Editorial Collective had a meeting: I know off the top of my head that all of those things happened on that date. But when public figures say ‘since the eleventh of September’, they are referring to none of those.

As serious students of history, we may like to think that our own chronological demarcations are more subtle, better justified, less ideological. If we often admit that they are arbitrary, we nonetheless make use of them on an almost daily basis. For university-employed historians, categories

defined by period provide the structures within which most teaching and hiring decisions are made: a historian of the twentieth century who retires is not likely to be replaced by a specialist in the seventeenth. Yet time does not exist without space, and exceptions to this rule certainly occur when the retiring scholar is not a historian of Europe or the United States. In few, if any, institutions, after all, is the historian of Ming China classified as an 'early modernist'.² Even as historians come to recognize Eurocentrism in many of its guises, we continue to operate within many of its central categories (such as 'the modern').

Few forms of periodization are as potentially pernicious as the definition of the 'modern' has been. The 'modernization theory' advanced by Walter Rostow and his colleagues in the 1950s as a response to Marxism was a central conceptual weapon of the Cold War. As Nick Cullather has written, modernization theory replaced the oppositional logic of colonizer/colonized with a single timeline along which all 'development' would necessarily have to occur. Pastoralists would have to yield to agriculturalists, artisans to industry. If the Tennessee Valley Authority and related projects helped rescue the United States from the Great Depression, so another set of dams would save Afghanistan from Communism.³ Like many 'schemes to improve the human condition', the plan combined spectacular arrogance with cheerful optimism.⁴ Its consequences have proven far less cheering.

For over twenty years now, many politically sensitive historians have hence been hesitant to write in terms of 'modernization' or to characterize 'the modern world'. Instead, 'modernity' – often glossed with words cribbed from the French poet, Charles Baudelaire: 'by modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal, the immutable' – has captured their attention.⁵ Defined as a matter of perception and experience, as an affective state, 'modernity' might seem free of the judgemental, whiggish prejudices associated with modernization theory. Yet this definition, too, requires an 'other half', a Not Modern, where experiences are not ephemeral and beauty is not fleeting. As an analytic concept, that is, 'modernity' ends up dividing, distinguishing and reinforcing many of the binary oppositions that historians drawn to the notion (as opposed to those who like 'modernization') want to reject. This is not to suggest that we must reject the category completely, but we may want to deploy it more carefully.

Like these introductory comments, the essays in this feature explore the politics and power relations at work in periodization. The specifics range widely, from a category now rarely used ('the Dark Ages') to one found more and more frequently ('Contemporary History'). Points of similarity and comparison emerge, nonetheless. Both Janet Nelson and Richard Smith find claims for British exceptionalism being made in the periodizations they analyze; Jane Caplan, like Nelson and Smith, points to a specific national context for periodization. Adam McKeown's contribution, like Smith's, encourages readers to re-examine commonplaces about how the 'early

modern' differs from the 'modern', and to recognize that claims made about time are also claims made for spaces. Taken together, these essays urge us to remember that historical periods are made by human agents, both contemporaries and those that follow.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 2001, p. A26, cited in Joanne Meyerowitz, 'History and September 11: an Introduction', *Journal of American History* 89: 2, September 2002, p. 413. The articles in this collection are also available as *History and September 11th*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz, Philadelphia, 2003.

2 For insights into how the periodizations common to European history intersect with non-Western histories see, in addition to Adam McKeown's contribution below: Craig Clunas, 'Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *American Historical Review* 104: 5, December 1999, pp. 1,497–1,511; Sebastian Conrad, 'What time is Japan? Problems of Comparative (Intercultural) Historiography', *History and Theory* 38: 1, February 1999, pp. 67–83; Thomas Keirstead, 'Inventing Medieval Japan: the History and Politics of National Identity', *Medieval History Journal* 1: 1, 1998: pp. 47–71; and the contributions to 'Forum: Periodization in World History', *American Historical Review* 101: 3, June 1996, pp. 748–82. These questions are further addressed by Geoff Eley's article on 'Periodizing the Global', in *History Workshop Journal* 63 above.

3 Nick Cullather, 'Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State', *Journal of American History* 89: 2, September 2002, pp. 512–37.

4 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, New Haven, 1998.

5 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in his *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, transl. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, New York, 1964, p. 13.

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The Dark Ages

by Janet L. Nelson

In her University of Vienna doctoral thesis, 'Das Schlagwort vom "finsternen Mittelalter"' ('The term "the Dark Middle Ages"'), in 1931, Lucie Varga observed with characteristic sharpness that 'terms are war-cries in cultural history' (*Schlagwörter sind kulturgeschichtliche Kampffparole*).¹ *Schlagwort* is hard to translate. My 1909 Cassells German-English Dictionary gives 'favourite expression, commonplace high-sounding phrase'; modern dictionaries give 'slogan'. You could almost say that 'The Dark Ages' began as the former and turned into the latter. Conventional term, catchword, stock-phrase, buzz-word, cliché: this particular *Schlagwort*, whatever else it is, is a simplification with attitude, and staying-power. In producing