

Not Just for Historians: The History and Theory of Chronopolitics

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English Abstract:

Politics and time are intertwined. With a theme issue of *History and Theory on Chronopolitics*, historians Fernando Esposito and Tobias Becker contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between politics and time. On topics ranging from the revolutions of 1989 to the chronopolitics of historiography itself, the articles in this theme issue provide an overview of the possibilities that the concept of chronopolitics offers for the study of politics and time. A valuable read, not just for historians.

Nicht nur für Historiker_innen. Geschichte und Theorie der Chronopolitik

Abstract:

Politik und Zeit sind eng verknüpft. Mit ihrem *History and Theory*-Sonderheft über *Chronopolitics* tragen die Historiker Fernando Esposito und Tobias Becker dazu bei, das Verhältnis von Politik und Zeit besser zu verstehen. Die Beiträge in diesem Sonderheft behandeln so unterschiedliche Themen wie die Revolutionen von 1989 oder die Chronopolitik der Geschichtsschreibung selbst und geben einen Einblick in die Möglichkeiten, die die Arbeit mit dem Konzept der Chronopolitik für die Untersuchung von Politik und Zeit bietet. Ein Lesegenuss nicht nur für Historiker_innen.

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Politics today seems obsessed with time. Amid extreme weather events, environmentalist movements seek to save the future of the planet from the present of human civilization. At the same time, the far right are fueled not only by hateful ideology but also by the wish to reinstate an imagined national glory of the past. This onslaught of authoritarianism, in turn, transforms each election into a possible turning point, a caesura in the making. And yet, somehow, it all seems to have happened already – though it remains unclear whether it is reminiscent of Weimar’s political crisis, the 1980s’ economic and ecological crises, or the 1990s’ wave of neo-Nazi mobilization and violence. What becomes clear, however, is the evident connection between time and politics.

This connection is not a recent development. On the contrary, the intricate interplay of time and politics has been present for centuries, as a new theme issue of the renowned journal *History and Theory* reveals. With its central concept of *Chronopolitics* as its title, the theme issue joins a considerable number of works in the journal’s catalog that deal with questions of time. Similarly, the editors of this issue, the German historians Fernando Esposito and Tobias Becker, have been working for a decade on the history of times and temporalities. This longstanding engagement with time shows in their knowledgeable and informative introduction to the theme issue. In it, Esposito and Becker set out to delineate the concept of chronopolitics by proposing the differentiation of the politics of time, the time of politics, and politicized time.

The first, the politics of time, refers to time as an object of politics, for instance when calendars are reformed or time zones introduced. Within the theme issue, the articles by Benjamin Möckel and Helge Jordheim provide insight into the politics of time. Concerned with the far-right terrorist attacks on the Norwegian island of Utøya in 2011, Jordheim analyzes the genres of manifesto, timeline, and memory site. He concludes that a certain mode of constructing time prior to, during, and after the attacks can be assigned to each of these genres. Most convincing in Jordheim's argument is his analysis of the construction of a point in time at which a terror attack is seemingly necessary through the terrorist's manifesto. Möckel also examines temporal construction, that of future generations and concomitant political stances about these. Beginning with the French revolution and ending in the 20th century, Möckel traces how imaginations of future generations served the integration of distant futures into the present and the legitimization of political decisions. This imagining of future generations was done in political fields as diverse as eugenics, state finance, and ecological thinking. Therefore, Möckel's article is a valuable contribution to an array of histories – not only those of time.

Marcus Colla and Adéla Gjuričová's article on the revolutions of 1989 is placed at the intersection of the politics of time and the second concept, the time of politics. This concept raises the point that "politics takes place in time, and power relations are expressed through temporal practices" (p. 17). Examples include the practice of making diplomats wait as an expression of political power, but also the 'summer slump' when no newsworthy politics is performed. In the case of the revolutions of 1989, Colla and Gjuričová show how political actors in the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia tried to, on the one hand, formulate time, and were, on the other, influenced by their perceptions of the revolutions' temporalities. During the revolutions, political actors were simultaneously constructors of time and subject to time. Thus, the authors offer a compelling look at the interplay within the dimensions of chronopolitics that Esposito and Becker have set out.

The third concept, politicized time, "relates to the instrumentalization of time to challenge and discredit political opponents or to legitimize one's own program and actions" (p. 18). This is where the history of time becomes self-reflexive, because, as Esposito and Becker argue,

history has often politicized time by a “denial of coevalness” (p. 7 and passim) to others – for instance non-Europeans, whose colonization could thereby be legitimized. Esposito, in his article, offers another instance of this by examining how Southern Italy and its inhabitants came to be regarded as ‘backward.’ He argues that this differentiation between ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ reflects the difference between friend and enemy and thus a central political category.

Chronopolitics, understood thusly, is not only a methodological tool of historical research – of looking at the interplay of time and politics in the past – but also a tool of theoretical reflection on the work of historians. This is most tangible in Ethan Kleinberg’s article. Of all the contributions to this theme issue, this is the one most concerned with the theory of history, as it analyzes the temporal workings of historicism that still undergird most academic historiography. Kleinberg argues that historicism is deeply concerned with progress, but does not acknowledge the judgements concomitant with this concern. Therefore, historicist accounts of the past are not only already inscribed with a certain chronopolitics that favors the ‘progressed’ or ‘civilized,’ but they also conceal this chronopolitics behind a ‘scientific’ methodology.

Despite this accurate criticism of historicist time, I cannot quite imagine what practical consequences this has for my work as a historian. What are other forms of time beyond historicism and how can I allow for them in my work? Would this mean the end of historical writing as we know it and – maybe most pertinent – would that necessarily be a good thing? Furthermore, what would this mean for other disciplines concerned with chronopolitics such as sociology, anthropology, and political sciences?

This criticism, however, does not diminish the importance of this theme issue of *History and Theory* and the valuable contributions it makes to the history of time. It propels the discussion of time and politics forward with a collection of articles that elucidate the possibilities of utilizing the concept of chronopolitics. This includes its contributions to a self-reflexive discussion of the chronopolitics of history itself. Of course, this theme issue will not solve the crises of the present, or even that of historicism, but it helps to detangle the various ways in

which time and politics are intertwined. The histories of time collected here are valuable not only for historians.