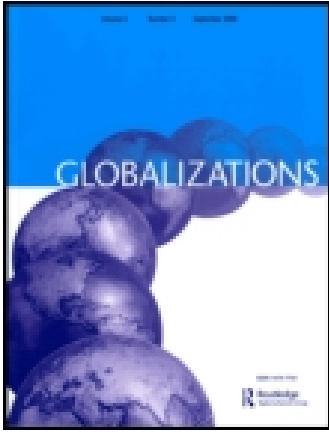


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Time and Global History

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ABSTRACT *The experience of massive globalization in the past two decades has provoked an epistemological crisis for historians. No longer is it possible to write histories of one part of the world as though the rest of the world did not exist. The challenge is how to do this without writing histories so dense as to be unmanageable. The essay proposes using an alternative conception of time, one based on moment rather than duration. Drawing on selected insights from Buddhist philosophy, the author suggests that, rather than reproducing timeline narratives that confirm existing identities, historians access the multiplicity and indeterminacy of actual experience in the past by suspending the flow of time and examining the world through ‘keyholes’. In addition to enlarging our sense of the complexity of the past, this philosophy of time encourages narratives that accentuate a tolerance of diversity and a compassion for its failures.*

La experiencia de la globalización masiva en las últimas dos décadas ha provocado una crisis epistemológica para los historiadores. Ya no se puede escribir las historias de una parte del mundo como si no existiera el resto. El reto consiste en cómo hacer esto sin escribir historias tan densas hasta llegar a un punto incontrolable. El ensayo propone usar una alternativa a la concepción del tiempo, con base en un momento y no en la duración. El autor sugiere, partiendo de ideas seleccionadas de la filosofía budista, que en vez de reproducir narrativas cronológicas que confirman a las identidades existentes, los historiadores busquen en la multiplicidad y la indeterminación de la experiencia actual en el pasado, eliminando el flujo del tiempo y el examen del mundo a través “del ojo de la cerradura.” Además de ampliar nuestro sentido de complejidad del pasado, esta filosofía de tiempo promueve las narrativas que acentúan una tolerancia de diversidad y una compasión por sus errores.

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在过去20年中，浩浩荡荡的全球化进程引起了历史学家的一个认识论危机。仅仅描写世界某一地区的历史而忽视其他地区的存在已变得不可能，与之而来的挑战就是如何在描述历史时不会因为内容太过宏大而无法把握。要解决这一问题，需要使用一种新的时间概念来取代现有的时间概念，这一新的时间概念以时刻而非时段为基础。借鉴佛教的部分认知，作者认为，历史学家不应当是用流水帐式的阐述来肯定现有的一些论断，而应当在考察时间流变的基础上用某些特定的时间“匙孔”来分析世界，并以此厘清历史中的多样性和模糊性。这一种新的时间哲学主张包容历史的多样性并对其失败持同情态度。

Keywords: time, diversity, history, keyholes, tolerance

The globalization of the past two decades has had effects on consciousness that few have anticipated. One aspect of consciousness that globalization has altered, I think, is our sense of history. Pressed into an active awareness of the entire world rather than of only the part with which each of us once identified, less and less are we persuaded to accept a local historical narrative as capable of standing in for the whole. The history of every place has to adjust to the history of all places—indeed, becomes the history of all places—such that those who insist otherwise are, rightly in my view, regarded as national or ethnic chauvinists. This shift from exclusive to inclusive history reflects the multiplication of community identities within contemporary nations, and has impelled the rise of world history in school and university curricula.

The history of the world is a lot of history, the burden of which is precisely that: a burden. The history of all places is far too vast for anyone to absorb, let alone make sense of. One way of relieving this burden—and this is what I have done in teaching world history to undergraduates—is to scale down from the global. Rather than limit the global spatially (which has been the procedure known as ‘the rise of the West’), I have experimented with limiting it by time; that is, while keeping the entirety of the world in view, I concentrate that view on moments in time. Replacing the universality of duration with the particularity of the moment would seem to contradict the commonsense notion that history narrates change over time. I certainly accept that history should not collapse the past into nothing but moments, which would effectively replace the global with only the most local. I nonetheless want to propose that we imagine our relationship to past events differently by suspending the meanings that duration usually supplies. This means in a sense, turning 90 degrees to the flow of time in order to capture the multiplicity of historical experience. Rather than bundle ever more local timelines into an unmanageably thick cable of interwoven historical narratives, I want to consider what happens when we cut across this cable in a way that touches all timelines but declines to reproduce any of them, by narrating global history in terms of moments.

The first advantage I see to this way of proceeding is that it obliges us to set aside the national and ethnic narratives that tend to dominate history textbooks. The intellectual coherence of most world history textbooks tends to rely on the alignment of the past with certain broadly accepted outcomes in the present, the acceptance of which rests in turn on the fashioning of cosmopolitan but also national identities. If we choose to approach the past not as what had to produce the present we happen to think we occupy, but as all that preceded the present and simultaneously supersedes the present, we find ourselves working with a different method. It is one that avoids reproducing the present as the necessary outcome of the past, thereby suspending judgment about what actually constitutes the present as it is experienced on a genuinely global scale. This is simply to declare that our narrative practices need to take continuous account of the

multiplicity of knowledge that globalization forces on us, and not settle on whatever arrangements of comprehensibility we think are in place at the moment.

Globalization has forced this task on us. In its current phase, it seems to me, the more we know, the more we need to recognize the partiality, even the inadequacy, of what we thought we knew. The task of historians now is not to unify the stories of the past, which is the urge that has guided much of the comprehensive (even imperialist) production of histories over the past two centuries. Rather, the task of global history is to multiply them. Where this will lead, in terms of the future production of historical knowledge, I cannot guess. The question is, rather, where it gets us, and that, to be slightly dramatic, is simply: the present. But the present, as we shall see, is not so simple.

Time as Duration

The history of globalization has hitherto been structured mainly as the narrative of Europe's expansion around the globe, beginning in the long sixteenth century. This is the story best told by historian Fernand Braudel and sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (in his early phase): the transformation of the world into Europe's periphery. Reaching back five centuries, this narrative imposes a long and durable historical timeline linking past and present, phased according to what Braudel famously called *longues durées*, the long durations of time over which we can pattern transformative shifts in social existence. Braudel was helped toward his formulation of world history by reading the work of Wolfram Eberhard, the German sociologist who fled to Turkey from Nazi Germany in 1937 (and who published the first edition of his *History of China* in Turkish before going to Berkeley). To better embed China into world history, Eberhard offered the concept of 'world time' (1965, pp. 13–14). As Braudel interprets it, world time is the temporal shape of big history, the scale that registers 'the trades and rhythms of the globe' extending well beyond the borders or concerns of only parts of the world. The idea of world time offered to Eberhard and Braudel the possibility of conceiving history as a single flow rather than as separate streams, some of which could be judged as inherently more important than others. To write his history of Europe from 'the perspective of the world', Braudel invoked world time as 'a kind of superstructure of world history: it represents a crowning achievement, created and supported by forces at work underneath it' (1984, pp. 17–18). Below Braudel's world time runs local time, in fact, a plethora of local times, each more or less indifferent to world time and generally able to resist its incorporation prior to the rise of global capitalism.

The urge within the European tradition to understand the past in terms of larger structures and durations has its roots in Hegel's philosophy of history. Hegel did not invent the project of unifying all of human history in a grand stadial model. He simply made coherent much of what eighteenth-century historians had been struggling to formulate, producing a comprehensive linear vision of time and space that regarded history as 'the realization of absolute Truth as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom' (Hegel, 1956, p. 341). Within this philosophy, space is the ground on which history occurs, but time is the dimension through which history achieves its 'realization of absolute Truth', in keeping with the Christian habit of thought that anticipates the completion of history as a return to the presence of God. Time is thus the medium through which God's message—in Hegel's philosophy, the realization of the World Spirit—is grasped.

But Christian time also bifurcates: there is the time of everyday existence through which things arise and pass away, and the time through which the divine spirit moves the devout

ever closer to redemption. As Augustine phrased this bifurcation, without the Word of God, ‘else have we time and change; and not a true eternity nor true immortality’ (*Confessions*, Book 11). Hegel takes this duality on board as a historiographical problem. At one point in his lectures from the winter of 1830–1831, he declares time to be ‘the negative element in the sensuous world’ (1956, p. 77). This is the notion of time as the sign of the relativity and partiality of the material world. Yet it is through time’s negation of the sensuous world that human consciousness learns dialectically to recognize the divine absolutes that exist apart from the world. Hegel restated this duality in secular absolutes by framing a world history that revealed the movement of the World Spirit toward the achievement of perfect freedom, which is the secular counterpart to Augustine’s immortality. History for Hegel was not a narrative of the triumph of God’s rule on earth through the struggle of good and evil, however, but of the movement of human societies from anarchy through despotism to freedom. Achieving consciousness of this movement redeemed the negation that time committed against the world, though only through time could this consciousness be achieved, just as only through time would despotism wither away and freedom be attained. Thus for Hegel time is the dimension through which the meaning of history is revealed.

Hegel went further, however, by mapping time onto space, as captured in his infamous dictum that ‘the History of the World travels from East to West’ (1956, p. 103). In this model of historical change, the contribution of Asia was to get history to its starting point; only in classical Greece would ‘History’ start to happen. From that place, by which he really meant that time (which Europeans denote as their ‘classical period’), transformative history began, thereafter moving westward from Greece to Rome and finally northward to Germany and the end of history. From this perspective, Asian dynasties were but ‘empires belonging to mere space’, or in Marx’s more resonant image, ‘vegetating in the teeth of time’ (Marx, 1951, p. 55). What had world-historical significance, by contrast, were empires belonging to time: empires in which people could genuinely engage in the secular political life that produces real change in consciousness. Asia was the childhood of history, and China at best the pre-adolescent stage only after which history could begin. China might be thrown into turmoil by repeated invasions from the steppe, but these dramas were nothing more than ‘the repetition of the same majestic ruin’ (Hegel, 1956, p. 106). Asian history was full of mere events that did not deserve elevation to world-historical time.¹

The prime task of global history has been to shake off this burden. ‘A historiography bound to a notion of progress or to any other purpose’ no longer inspires confidence, as political philosopher Wendy Brown has observed (2001, p. 3). The new challenge should be to think about ‘how we might conceive and chart power in terms other than logic, develop historical political consciousness in terms other than progress, articulate our political investments without notions of teleology and naturalized desire, and affirm political judgment in terms that depart from moralism and conviction’ (Ibid., p. 4). Historians have come slowly to realize that we are in epistemological trouble. The old habit of believing ‘that history has reason’ and a ‘purpose’ which is ‘fundamental to modernity’ is undercut by the growing suspicion that this is not what is happening in the real world (Ibid., p. 5). Writing the history of the world as though all people existed in world time as well as world space, to cite Hegel’s distinction, and not just within local time but world time, to repeat Braudel’s, means that we need to find ways to write history as though nothing was already worked out in advance of its actually having happened. Refusing modernity’s claim to have brought history to an end, in the Hegelian language of Francis Fukuyama in the 1990s, requires a different method and, as I invite us to consider, a different way of approaching time: not as duration but as moment.

I came to this way of thinking about time from two sources. At the theoretical level, the first source was my encounter with Buddhist philosophy; I shall say more about this shortly. At the practical level, thinking about history in terms of moments rather than durations emerged from the task of teaching world history to first-year undergraduates. How was I to narrate a history of the world over the last five centuries that did not (a) repeat the old narrative of the rise of the West or (b) reduce the students to catatonic boredom? I wanted to set aside the Hegelian timeline that implicitly celebrated the triumph of European capitalism, the virtue of the continuous expansion of resource depletion, and what some regard as the false autonomy of the individual from the constraints of tradition. At the same time, and to much the same purpose, I wanted to offer students an account of the past they could access through their own experience of living in a vividly multicultural, multi-polar world. The course unfolded around 10 events between 1609 and 1989. I selected these moments in part for their narrative advantages, each available for analysis as a turning point in the lives of those who lived through them. But my other purpose was to encourage the students to approach the past in the specificity that close attention to a particular event allows, rather than in its generality (the problem of scale for world history). I did this by asking them to look laterally and take account of what else was going on in the world at the same time. I wanted them to think synchronically as well as diachronically. Rather than provide them with a timeline built around what Jean Baudrillard has called the ‘illusion of the end’, I wanted them to avoid working back from outcomes, and consider instead what was potential and may have remained unachieved. We viewed the past not as a grand historical flow, as though it stretched across a wide screen, but as a moment, as if through a keyhole.

Time as Moment

The infinite brevity of the moment has intrigued philosophers. Baudrillard, for example, pondered its instant irretrievability in order to gauge the effects that the impossibility of retrieving the present has had on the contemporary moral imagination. Every event, once the moment of its occurrence is over, ‘exceeds meaning and interpretation’ by virtue of its irretrievability (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 13). Each moment moves beyond experience the moment it is experienced, and can never be totally grasped or understood. Whatever meanings we might choose to attach to an event, therefore, fall short of the reality we imply to them. Our interpretations are incapable of determining in full the specificity of what happened. Being conscious of the impermanence of the moment has the analytical advantage of freeing us from the judgments that have been prepared prior to its arrival, which is a prominent side effect (or is it in fact the intended effect?) of history. From a Buddhist perspective, the impermanence of time is intimately bound up with the impermanence of the self. This is not a topic on the syllabus of European philosophy, which is why thinking of time as impermanent, irretrievable, without end—unreal, to move into another Buddhist rhetoric—requires of us more than a bit of a mental stretch.²

If suspending the intelligibility of time as duration is worth trying out, it is not to override the logic of cause and effect, which is as important to Buddhist philosophy as it is to historical analysis.³ What I am arguing for, rather, is an alternative way of gauging the field of meaning in which events occur. Events are embedded in sequences, to be sure, but they are also embedded in the moment in which they occur. Whether events are themselves embedded in sequences, or we embed them, is not a question I shall pursue here. What I can assert, however, is that their embeddedness in the moment in which they occur is not dependent on our intervention. However events occur, they occur at only one point in time. Actors may seek to choose the moment in which to make them happen, though most events unfold without an agent consciously

timing their occurrence. Sequence allows us to reconstruct the logic that explains why events occurred when they did, but the actual moment of occurrence remains beyond our manipulation.

Another way of speaking of this putative autonomy of the moment in which an event occurs is to think of the global context in which the event is embedded. Every moment comes with a global context, which is already given to an event as it comes into being. This is not to argue for a Jungian theory of acausal synchronicity, in which events that happen at the same moment gain significance through a sort of symbolic resonance with each other (Main, 2004, p. 13). It is, rather, to draw attention to the depth to which an event is embedded in the moment in which it occurs. If we accept that an event happens in the context of a vast network of direct and indirect relationships with an infinite number of coexistent events that it affects and on which it depends, then judging event X as leading to outcome Y does not exclude the possibility that some of the events simultaneous with event X may have a bearing on outcome Y. The challenge is to determine what the extent of that context should reasonably be. The widest possible context is the entire world, a frame that the global historian is willing to consider. Taking a global perspective on history does not deny the value of building a tight logical sequence between event X and outcome Y. Context cannot determine which outcome is likelier than another; that must lie in the course of events themselves. Indeed, could outcomes not be proximately determined, we would have no way of organizing our societies, our economies, even our own lives. The point of adopting the moment as an alternative temporal perspective is to exorcise the Hegelian illusion that events unfold in relation to a 'final aim', 'successive phases', or 'progressive embodiments' (Hegel, 1956, pp. 78–79). It suspends our natural temptation to assume that we are the point to which all history has reached.

The advantage of denying time permanence and the capacity to produce an outcome is perhaps best accessed through Indian philosophy, which has devoted much thought to the ontological status of time, and even more through Buddhism, which goes so far as to deny time the status of the real. Not being a specialist in this field, I shall do so here only briefly, in order to suggest a few leads for thinking about time in a way that corresponds more effectively than time-as-duration to the multiplicity inherent in globalized experience.

Buddhist philosophers since Nāgārjuna in the second century have been fond of pointing out that time does not exist. Past and future are logical constructs extrapolated from the present; and the present itself is so infinitesimally brief and so immediate in its passing that its existence can neither be determined nor denied. The school of Zen emerged in part by applying this insight to the process of enlightenment, which could not be derived only from the accumulation of book-study over time but had to be apprehended in the moment through sudden illumination, or as Rolf Stein has translated the idea on the basis of Tibetan sources, through 'simultaneous comprehension' (1987, pp. 41–45; for the hermeneutic context of sudden enlightenment, see Faure, 1991, pp. 32–37). The thirteenth-century founder of the Soto school of Zen liked to express the non-existence of time by reversing the commonsense idea that time passes. 'In actual fact,' according to Dōgen, 'it stays where it is. This idea of passing may be called time, but it is an incorrect idea, for since one sees it only as passing, one cannot understand that it stays just where it is' (quoted in Capra, 1986, p. 55). There is only the present moment, and that is too brief for consciousness to grasp. In a world imagined as sliding inexorably along a time scale toward Armageddon, nothing can stay where it is; in a world imagined only as the immediate present, however, there is nowhere from which we have been sliding and nowhere to which that slide is tilting us.

In denying time an independent reality, Buddhist metaphysics has a heuristic purpose, which is to demonstrate the non-existence of the self and, ultimately, the unreality of the suffering that

attachment to the self produces. The Buddhist approach is also intended to generate an ethics of immediate moral response. Our mental habit of hypostatizing a self that continues to exist from one infinitesimal present moment to the next is what generates the illusion that there is a self and that it moves through time. If there is no time like the present, then there is no self that exists apart from the evanescent present, and therefore no self to preserve at the expense of every other self. There is only the self as it is sustained in its infinite web of living relations with others. Negating the autonomous existence of the self does not mean that the self has no history or, even worse, that there is no history. It means only that history, like the self, cannot exist outside the present, and that it, again like the self, comes into existence as we narrate it. What happened is what happened; what history we write depends on what is available among the vestiges of what happened; but what we regard as historical is what we choose to consider historical. That choice is not inconsequential, for it is often aligned to a particularly resilient construction of a national or ethnic self that seeks to assert that it is independent of our conditional existence in the present. One effect of this difference may be traced in the different understandings of self-destruction in Abrahamic and Buddhist philosophy. On September 11, 2001, suicide bombers embraced the 'desire to anticipate the end, possibly by death, by a kind of seductive suicide aiming to turn God from history and make him face up to his responsibilities, those which lie beyond the end, those of the final fulfillment' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 8). It was an act that demanded the sacrifice of the life not just of oneself but of others. By contrast, when Vietnamese monks protested American military occupation during the Vietnam War, they committed self-immolation, not suicide-bombing. Asserting identities of 'us' and 'them' may imply the need to act in defense of 'us' against 'them'.⁴ Declining that distinction, in contrast, may defuse the urge to harm others on behalf of the self.

History in a Global Age

The condition of contemporary globalization, arriving as it has under the condition of global capitalism, has been powerfully shaped by the narrative of the rise of capitalism that has dominated historiography worldwide since the nineteenth century.⁵ The lineage between capitalism and globalization, both as process and as idea, is so direct that globalization appears to be a variation on the earlier theme of Europe's triumph over the world (which itself is a variation on the even earlier theme of salvation). There may be empirical evidence to argue that globalization adequately describes the changes the world is currently undergoing, but conceptualizing this process this way may do nothing more than recirculate the logic of earlier theories of capitalist production. It predicts, as those theories did, that capitalist systems of production and consumption must eventually overcome the barriers to exchange that physical distance, national regulation, and cultural hostility put in its way.⁶ The assumption is that no place on the globe, given time, can resist the process. Like capitalism, globalization once begun is seen to be only a matter of time, and as Hegel said of the World Spirit, 'essentially the result of its own activity'.

The challenge in writing the history of globalization is to do so in a way that illuminates how the world got to be this networked without falling back on a totalistic explanation that recites the rise of Europe and reproduces the stories capitalist modernity finds congenial. This is why I wonder whether we might not set aside the turning points that have become conventional in the standard narratives of modernity and look more closely at other moments that cast light on storylines that capitalism's auto-history has suppressed or ignored. One effect of this search could be to reset the significant switch points along the track that globalization seems to have followed. Another could be to open keyhole moments that are not already plugged

into established narratives, that are not just moments in European time—or moments in Asian time, for that matter—but moments in global time: events that provide points from which to observe all that was happening around the world at the same time so as to enable us to watch its effects as they ripple out not just into its proximate region but, however mediated, around the globe.⁷

A keyhole is as much an artifact of the contemporary world as any other historical method has been of its time. After all, one of the effects of globalization on contemporary consciousness is that we experience the world today as a unified space in which events occur simultaneously, albeit digitally, rather than as a set of zones from which news of events reaches us through staggered time delay. We experience our lives in simultaneity with all that is happening elsewhere in the world, and have learned the inclination to see whatever we are doing in the present in relation to everything else. Our awareness of global simultaneity I regard as an unprecedented opportunity to reconsider the frame within which we approach historical causation, and therefore to suspend the judgments that our casual explanations are made to serve. The danger in relying too heavily on turning points is that they may simply reactivate old storylines—about the rise of the West, the rise of the nation-state, the rise of science, the rise of democracy, to name only a few—that implicitly reaffirm the old convictions: that global history is really just the confirmation, albeit in enlarged form, of the history of the West; that what has happened is simply the rehearsal for what must happen; and that we are still somehow heading toward the best of all possible worlds.

Given the mayhem of the world today, as Hegelian ‘civilization’ wages war on ‘barbarity’ in order to guarantee the price of oil, the old convictions can only work by denying what is actually going on. We might now wish to change the frame. That means abandoning the discourse of the triumphs and defeats through which nations and peoples like to identify their enemies, and thereby themselves. It means looking horizontally in the moment in time in which we find, or retrospectively place, ourselves, rather than simply fore and aft along timelines on which popular historical narratives rely. It means being alert to the largely unmarked complicities and ambiguities that show the history of the world to be not ‘us’ against ‘them’ but simply ‘us’. That discovered, we may begin to write history that does not participate in the structures of power that benefit the few at the expense of the many, or even the other way around. Such a goal may be impossible, but that should not discourage us from thinking how to attain it.

Notes

- 1 Hegel’s view was not supported by all his contemporaries, notably some who actually went to China. ‘The immobility of the Asiatics is one of those established ideas’, observed the missionary Évariste-Régis Huc (1855, p. 52) two decades later, ‘which is founded on an utter ignorance of their history.’
- 2 I might note that Corfield (2007), being rooted in the European tradition, neglects this way of approaching time.
- 3 The importance of temporal sequence for establishing relationships among events, or to put this another way, the conditionality of an event on its position in a sequence of interrelated events, is interestingly explored in Bearman, Faris, and Moody (1999).
- 4 I make somewhat the same point in my Globalization and Autonomy working paper (Brook, 2004). The present paper may be regarded as an attempt to work out one of the methodological implications of that earlier paper.
- 5 On the discursive impact of capitalism on history writing in twentieth-century China, see Brook and Blue (1999, pp. 113–118).
- 6 See, for example, Marx’s comments in ‘The Future Results of the British Rule in India’ (1853), reprinted in Marx and Engels (1972, pp. 81–87).
- 7 I have made some use of this approach in Brook (2008), a project supported in part by the Project on Globalization and Autonomy.

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Timothy Brook is Professor in Chinese history at the University of British Columbia. In his *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (Bloomsbury, 2008), he attempts to operationalize some of the aspirations in this article.