

Feminist Philosophy

Time, history and the
transformation of thought

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Chapter 2

Desiring Difference and the Hierarchies of Time

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When do we claim to have seen better days, look forward to a brighter future, or strive to be more present in the actual moment? Whose time is considered valuable and whose is considered worthless?

In this essay I want to critique hierarchical valuations of time through the lens of queer temporality, focusing on “difference”. We are still under the influence of a conception of time indicative of sharp distinctions between then, now, and later, in which temporality is continually valued and assessed. This time paradigm of Western modernity, shaped by European Enlightenment and its idea of progress in the form of the linear and irreversible sequence, “forces us to emphasise change, development and replacement and to ignore the contemporary in the non-contemporary”, as the literary scholar and cultural historian Aleida Assmann points out.¹ The past thus turns into what no longer happens, and such a construct makes us define time as something in which the present can only exist in relation to what it is not, i.e. the non-contemporary. Contemporaneity then becomes the norm for our understanding of the world, and in which the past, but also the future, are assigned only the role of the Other.

Sure, our perception of the past always contains a measure of contemporaneity, but problems arise when present perspectives include hierarchical evaluations. These ratings can have various discriminating consequences and be sexist (as in a classic interpretation of Goethe’s *Faust* in which Faust is named “modern”

¹ Aleida Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition: Kulturelle Strategien de Dauer* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), p. 50: “zwingt dazu, Wandel, Entwicklung und Ersetzung zu betonen und die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigkeiten des Ungleichzeitigkeiten zu übersehen” (my translation).

and Gretchen “outdated”), ageist (children as a stretch of “not-yets” and the elderly as a pile of rattling “has-beens”), heteronormative (when the heterosexual life curve is deemed normal), or xenophobic (non-Western cultures depicted as “primitive”).² In the end, strategies of temporal difference are all about power and the precedence of certain interpretations.

Practices such as history writing take place in the present and are thus limited by knowledge and ideas of its time. We are then forced to revise history at regular intervals based on new facts and changed values, something which may sound reasonable in an epistemological sense. But this conception on the other hand ontologically implies that the past is static, frozen in time, and supposed to be something we can return to again and again with ever sharpened analytical tools. This means that the idea of the past as a kind of fixed essence, as constantly “the same” waiting to be continually visited, might be just as problematic as the concept of “difference”.³ Critique of a conception of time based on “similarity” is here put into words by new historicist scholar Catherine Belsey:

Time travel is a fantasy. We cannot reproduce the conditions – the economy, the diseases, the manners, the language and the corresponding subjectivity – of another century. To do so would be, in any case, to eliminate the difference which makes the fantasy pleasurable [...] Reading the past depends on this difference. The real anachronism, then, is of another kind. Here history as time travel gives way to history as costume drama, the reconstruction of the past as the present in fancy dress. The project is to explain away the surface strangeness

² Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon&Chuster, 1982); Clary Krekula & Barbro Johansson (Ed.), *Introduktion till kritiska åldersstudier* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other; How Anthropology Makes Its Subject* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³ Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

of another century in order to release its profound continuity with the present.⁴

The conception of ontological “similarity” between past and present creates the figure of the “time traveller” in which differences are erased. The time traveler strives to experience the past in terms of temporal location, which generates a historical perspective in which similarity and continuity are emphasized in a static and ahistorical fashion. The possibility of change and the emancipatory potential are then ignored.

When the relation between past, present, and future is defined in terms of similarity, people are considered to have the same driving forces throughout history and also in what is to come. We are, amongst other things, presumed to love our children and to feel pain in the same way as both our ancestors and our future generations. The conception of similarity erases the sharp distinction between then, now, and later which is otherwise characteristic of modernity’s chronologically sequential temporality governed by notions of development and progress. History or futurity as similes and parables transgress the conception of a one-way movement of time, and also diffuse conceptions such as anachronism as non-chronological, unsynchronized, what is misplaced. As such, similarity embodies an effort to compensate for the loss of what no longer exists, or the want of what may never exist.

So, to regard history as something which is “similar” to the present obviously presents problems, but I claim that it is just as questionable to emphasize “difference” even though Belsey in the quote above seems to prefer it. The concept of difference on the one hand certainly makes our historical fantasies enjoyable since they then can contain exoticizing aspects of both threat and allure in our longing for something else. But on the other hand distinct boundaries between various time dimensions tend to function hierarchically by emphasizing either the now of the

⁴ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 2.

present or the then of the past as something superior – either we talk about the good old days, or of the past as something we should count ourselves lucky to have missed out on.

I will here argue that a pivotal driving force in Western hierarchical historiography consists of a desire for the past which implicates a desire for difference. In the following I will try to unnaturalize this driving force without ending up in locked binaries where difference is set against similarity, linear time is set against cyclical, the timeless against the time-bound, etc. I am not alone in doing so, however. Several interesting contributions have appeared in the growing research field of critical temporality studies. Sure, mainstream historiographical research has also had a renaissance of late, for instance proposing an ongoing “time crisis” in Western historical consciousness, but I find the discussions of power and politics in critical temporality studies more innovative.⁵ The political implications of the Western time paradigm have first and foremost been observed in the feminist critique of linear progression, queer theory’s questioning of chrononormativity, and in postcolonial analyses of the continuous impact of history.⁶ Temporality has in this context been defined as “power relations as they play out in time”.⁷

My contribution to this field involves establishing a multi-dimensional model of the desire for the past which complicates the hierarchical time paradigm of difference. In this mission I will also relate to findings of the so-called affective turn in which affects and emotions in political, economic, social, and cultural power structures are actualized. History scholars, for example, write up various kinds of histories of emotion, media scholars

⁵ Cf. François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁶ Cf. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Freeman, *Time Binds*; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 4.

talk about popular culture trends of “affective history”, while queer theorists discuss “erotohistoriography”.⁸ This kind of research on embodied emotional reaction to realizations of the past is something which will be of interest to me here.

Diffusing Desire

The desire for the past is a multidimensional and complex driving force for historiographical expressions which in various ways represent a strive to replace what no longer exists – or, rather, what may never even have existed. These close to erotically charged desires contain also cognitive, emotional, and political aspects. That is, the desire for the past includes a quest to achieve not only knowledge but an emotion-laden sensual relationship to the past. It can also be driven by the political longing for recognition and restoration or an effort to recapture what is perceived of as past phenomena such as “the nation” or “the welfare state”. I regard this multidimensional desire for the past as the driving force through which the past is actualized by the queries and questions of the present, thus turning into what we call “history”.

In postcolonial and queer theory of history, the binary division of either “difference” or “similarity” between the past and the present has been deconstructed through a focus on asynchronous temporalities that intersect each other. Instead of being similar or different to the present, the past can be regarded in Derridean terms as an absent presence and a haunting spectre.⁹ In the United States, for example, the history of slavery still has implications for African-American citizens, and in various ways the colonial legacy lives on in previously colonized countries. This has been described by Achille Mbembe as a

⁸ Cf. Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Freeman, *Time Binds*.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

temporal “entanglement”, something which “encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another”.¹⁰ History is not considered as made up of diachronic linear seriality, but rather as a synchronous “interlocking of presents, pasts and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.”¹¹

Queer theorists, such as Carolyn Dinshaw, for their part speak of “a touch across time” in which emotional connections are forged through the epochs and create context and even political solidarity over time, or as Elizabeth Freeman who uses the term “erotohistoriography” based on the idea of temporal hybridization creating bodily affect.¹² Freeman, perhaps the most well-known scholar of queer temporality studies, is also the editor of the GLQ issue in which this new research field was presented in 2007. The focus on body and emotion characteristic of queer temporality studies becomes obvious already in her introduction, for instance in her interpretation of the Hamlet quote most often cited by scholars of the theory of history – “time is out of joint.” The familiar words are uttered by Hamlet as he speaks to his father, the ghost, who informs his son that he has been murdered. Since the publication of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* in 1993, the quote has been used as pretext for the postcolonial conception of the past as something still haunting the present. This conception has prompted several important and interesting interpretations, but instead Freeman significantly chooses to shed light on the somatic aspects of the quote. “Time is out of joint” turns into an image representing something felt on the bare skin and bones, even the actual skeleton being dislodged: “In this metaphor, time has, indeed is,

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 14.

¹¹ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 16.

¹² Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 21; Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 95.

a body.”¹³ The asynchronous, the queer, in this sense becomes a purely bodily experience. In relation to sexuality, time has also previously been a central marker – Freeman highlights Freud who based his theories on normative sexuality on temporal terms such as *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), and considered deviation either as “a sign of being stuck in a developmental phase or as an endless return to the past in a kind of psychic atavism.”¹⁴ Normative aspects of time in relation to sexuality can of course still be found today, also in queer theory, but queering temporality contains more than just observing feelings of timelessness, lateness, failure and delay. It can also be about political visions of the future and queer utopias.¹⁵

Indeed, perceptions and conceptions of time have somatic as well as political consequence; “temporality itself raises the question of embodiment and subjectivity”, as queer theorist and medieval historian Carolyn Dinshaw points out.¹⁶ An important aspect highlighted in queer temporality studies is the problem of “chrononormativity”, i.e. the chronological norm of the heterosexual life curve which constitutes “a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts”, both shaping and being shaped by our actual bodies.¹⁷ Childhood and puberty must in the right order be followed by adulthood’s marriage and childbirth, which in older age leads to grandchildren – life’s “dessert”. The concept of chrononormativity, as coined by Elizabeth Freeman, reveals how naturalized this pattern is and how self-evidently individuals, society and politics relate to this norm for the supposedly ultimate distribution of reproduction and production.

In the end, the values that are critically highlighted by chrononormativity are about succession, maturity and development,

¹³ Freeman, “Introduction”, GLQ 13:2–3 2007, p. 159.

¹⁴ Freeman, “Introduction”, p. 162.

¹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw, “Temporalities”, in Paul Strohm (Ed.), *Oxford Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 109.

¹⁷ Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 3.

and if you oppose them, you risk appearing immature, outdated and out of joint with time. However, violations of normative conceptions of time also make possible a multiplication or dissemination of time. Alternate and queer violations of time norms can consist of “asynchrony, anachronism, anastrophe, belatedness, compression, delay, ellipsis, flashback, hysteron-proteron, pause, prolepsis, repetition, reversal, surprise”, as Elizabeth Freeman puts it.¹⁸ These kinds of terms and concepts describing time ruptures flourish also within Western modernity. For example, the concept of “anachronism” is an invention that was established in the 18th century.¹⁹ In pre-modernity “syncretic chronology”, a kind of timelessness, reigned instead.²⁰ A medieval painting could quite obviously depict soldiers at Jesus’ tomb in contemporary 14th century armor, which created a temporal unity between the past and the now where Jesus is “not of a distant, foreign past, but of an eternal present”.²¹ Carolyn Dinshaw gives another example when she highlights the medieval mystic Margareta Kempe who falls into inconsolable tears in front of the altar’s Jesus figure, exhibiting feelings of him just having died.²² A syncretic chronology forms a temporal unity between past and present into an eternal now, the past turning constantly present instead of being “different”.

Today, the worst anachronistic sin is to apply contemporary theories and concepts to the past – to talk about “homosexuality” when discussing pre-modernity, for instance. On the other hand, it becomes necessary to commit a certain amount of interpretive violence against the past in order to be able to con-

¹⁸ Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. xxii.

¹⁹ Cf. Margreta De Grazia, “Anachronism”, in Brian Cummings & James Simpson (Eds.), *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter Burke, “The Sense of Anachronism from Petrarch to Poussin”, in Chris Humphrey & W. M. Ormrod, *Time in the Medieval World* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001).

²⁰ Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 47.

²¹ Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past*, p. 50.

²² Dinshaw, “Temporalities”.

ceptualize it at all in the present; if it is to be possible to approach the past, a “necessary anachronism” is required (at least according to G. W. F. Hegel’s claim in his *Ästhetik*). In classical historical materialist terms à la Walter Benjamin it is rather a matter of actualizing history, i.e. to constantly put the past in dialogue with the present perception of it in order to achieve political change.²³ New historicists point out that actualization in this sense actually constitutes an approach that can be compared to that of anachronism, which means that an interpretation – as well as objects, people, events or ideas – is placed in a time where it does not belong. Catherine Belsey emphasizes in the previously cited quotation that it is precisely this concept of difference between now and then that makes our imagination about the past enjoyable, while a figure like the time traveler, who strives to experience the past in its temporal location, instead creates a time conception in which similarity and continuity are stressed at the expense of possibilities of change.

Thus, anachronism in the sense of awareness of difference displays productive aspects too. It does not have to equal accusations of mistakes and wrongdoings but can infer contemporaneous political commitment. The real mistake, according to Belsey, is to try to reconstruct the past on the premise of similarity and its implied strive to bridge the time gap between now and then. To smooth out difference instead of affirming it and believing that the past and the present “resemble” each other, is according to Belsey in fact the properly pejorative anachronism. A conscious use of anachronism in the sense of clashing differences also implies that one takes responsibility for one’s political and ideological positions, according to Swedish historian Sara Edenheim.²⁴ Rather, according to both Belsey and Edenheim, it ought to be a matter of alienating the past instead of identifying with it. In this way our questions of the past can be nothing but anachronistic. But precisely because of this can

²³ Walter Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker”, *Gesammelte Schriften II:2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 468.

²⁴ Sara Edenheim, *Anakronismen: Mot den historiska manin* (Gothenburg: Glänta, 2011), p. 75.

our contemporary questions become interesting, important even, and a measure of “untimeliness” can hold emancipatory potential.

To dictatorially place the Other into a homogenizing temporality can be likened to abusive behavior, resulting in a loss of meaning: “History cannot represent, except through a process of translation and a consequent loss of status and significance for the translated, the heterotemporality of that world”, writes postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty.²⁵ Although temporality indeed requires some rewriting and translation – time requires metaphor according to Lynn Hunt²⁶, but to emphasize Otherness is not only a spatial marker but also a temporal one. The colonial heritage makes it obvious that space instead holds “a plurality of times existing together”.²⁷

Conclusion

Crucial ideas concerning asynchronous temporality have been presented by postcolonial and queer theorists in the last decade, but oddly enough they have left no mark whatsoever in mainstream history of theory.²⁸ Beside norm-critical aspects of temporality, which are key, queer- and postcolonial theory also pay attention to the somatising effects of temporality norms. Bodily affect, interwoven with sensory sensations and cognitive reactions, turns into emotions. They can entail feeling immature, to feel ahead of your time, passé, or even timeless. Emotions are not about chronology. Various emotions and emotional structures can exist in parallel at the same time, in the same place and in the same person. Mainstream history of emotions is more interested in studying diachronic perspectives, while a post-

²⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 95.

²⁶ Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time: Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), p. 3.

²⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 109.

²⁸ Cf. *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating Border Between Present, Past and Future*, Berber Bevernage & Chris Lorenz (Eds.) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2013), a mainstream anthology discussing historiographical issues similar to this essay but without any reference to queer theorists and with only one reference to a postcolonial theorist.

colonial theorist like Achille Mbembe instead studies synchronic “entanglements” and its intersecting and clashing dimensions of time and emotion, and a queer theorist like Carolyn Dinshaw talks about a “touch across time” in which emotional connections are forged through the epochs creating coherence and political solidarity across temporal dimensions.

So, what kind of time conception ultimately takes shape – who speaks to whom, how and why? If the historical past in the universalizing sense of the Enlightenment signifies *all* pasts since it is assumed to be the *only* past, then the number of histories has certainly multiplied by now. Queer temporalities are critiquing linearity and causality, but not by opposing them and thus getting stuck in binaries such as linearity versus cyclicity, timeless versus time bound, contemporary versus non-contemporary, and so on. Instead of alteritism’s static difference in the singular between present and past, it is all about differences in the plural. Time has several histories, evoked by multidimensional desires in which the past does not have to be assigned to the role of the excluded Other. Assuming the relevance of the body and its sensory experiences in relation to temporality, alternate non-hierarchical ways of conceiving connections between past, present, and future present themselves.