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# (Review) Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present

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## (Review) Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present

### **Keywords**

archeology, history, chronology, evolution

### **Comments**

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appropriate way to memorialize the tragedies of twentieth-century German history.

Olsen is particularly interested in the “processes of reception” that shaped Koselleck’s intellectual worldview as well as his legacy. His interest in Koselleck’s professionalization, or what Olsen calls “the making of the historian,” sets up the book as an insider’s account of German academia in the second half of the twentieth century (p. 7). If at times Olsen’s narrative slows to a seminar-like crawl while covering some of this terrain, his insightful commentaries on everything from the crisis of historicism to the rise and fall of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*—and how Koselleck situated himself in relation to each—more than make up for it. What emerges from this account is a rich analysis of a thoroughly interdisciplinary thinker, one who ranged widely from political philosophy and hermeneutics to ontology, sociology, and anthropology.

Only some of Koselleck’s work has found its way into English translation, but his contributions to the philosophy of history have been championed on this side of the Atlantic by some prominent thinkers, including Melvin Richter and Hayden White. Olsen, however, is the first to offer a complete intellectual biography. For the first time in English, we can now follow the threads that are woven through Koselleck’s entire *oeuvre*, from his early writings on the birth and consequences of political modernity (discussed in chapters two and three), through his investigations of the goals and scope of conceptual history (chapter four), up to his theories of historical temporality and how they relate to our understanding of both private experience and collective memory (chapters five and six).

Olsen maintains that Koselleck was primarily motivated by a desire to undermine—if not outright reject—utopian conceptions of history as a singular, universal, progressive process, notions bequeathed to us by the Judeo-Christian tradition and formalized by the Enlightenment and its modern philosophical heirs. In pursuing this aim, Koselleck, as Olsen deftly demonstrates, drew upon the work of such towering forerunners (many of them his former teachers) as Karl Löwith, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt. The degree to which Koselleck escaped the orbits of these influential thinkers is still open to question, but Olsen provides us with the tools necessary to ask it. Especially revealing in this regard is his use of Koselleck’s extensive correspondence with Schmitt, who proved to be a compelling intellectual mentor if not necessarily a sound political role model.

More than criticizing singular and utopian conceptions of history, though, Koselleck also explored the possibility that human history—unlike natural history—is fundamentally plural. In the words of Jacob Taubes, echoed throughout Olsen’s book and reflected in its title, Koselleck was a “partisan of histories in plural” (p. 213). If Koselleck began as an anti-utopian, he ended up as a proponent of pluralism. Or as Olsen puts it: “Whereas he first focused primarily on deconstructing histories in singular, he began to focus more on how

histories in the plural could be written in practice” (p. 227). This effort, still being debated by contemporary theorists of history, has given us a myriad of new terms and catchwords, such as *Zeitschichten*, or temporal layers, which suggests that historical change is not a singular or universal phenomenon but is instead distributed across various temporal strata (p. 226). At some levels, historical change manifests as a radical, geological rupture; at others, it appears almost glacial. Showing how both experiences could coexist, and doing so without falling into the trap of a reflexive relativism, led Koselleck to posit that there was also a corresponding *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, or a “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (p. 151).

Today, when universal history seems to be making a minor comeback, thanks in large part to the efforts of neo-Hegelians such as Slavoj Žižek and Susan Buck-Morss, Koselleck’s meditations on the multi-faceted natures of both historical time and historical writing are more relevant than ever. And to these profound meditations *History in the Plural* will no doubt remain a trustworthy guide.

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ANDREW SHRYOCK and DANIEL LORD SMAIL, editors.  
*Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2011. Pp. xvii, 342. \$29.95.

When does history begin? Since the so-called time revolution of the later nineteenth century, which undermined traditional beliefs about the age of the earth, the invention of writing has marked the beginning of history. Deep historians want to begin with the divergence of our hominin ancestors from the great apes some five to eight million years ago, if not earlier. History on such a timescale requires jettisoning the necessity of written documentation and reconceiving documents as any traces of the past in the present. It also requires that historians collaborate with those who study the deep past. This volume is the product of just such a collaborative effort. It is neither co-authored nor co-edited in the usual sense. The anthropologist Andrew Shryock and the historian and medievalist Daniel Lord Smail co-wrote two of its eleven chapters, but they also individually joined one or more others in the writing of another six, and no chapter has just one author. The first of many helpful figures, “Dates in deep time,” combines images and graphic information to fine effect, creating both a visual summary of the book’s major themes and a sketch of “the architecture of past and present” that bridges the gap between “deep” and “shallow” history.

Part one, “Problems and Orientations,” includes an introduction by Shryock and Smail and an essay by Shryock, the historian and anthropologist Thomas R. Trautman, and Clive Gamble, a geographer and archaeologist. The introduction traces the commitment to a “short chronology” based on rigorous analysis of

written documents to the need for historians in the later nineteenth century to legitimize their recently acquired presence on university faculties. The short chronology's biblical origins are apparent, however, in the fact that the invention of writing occurred roughly 6000 years ago, the same time as creation, as calculated by Bishop James Ussher in the seventeenth century. The short chronology has also perpetuated tropes of the rise and fall of civilizations, human exceptionalism and the conquest of nature that have their roots in biblical understandings of the past. Deep historians want to replace such things with non-narrative patterns or "frames" drawn from anthropology and the paleo-sciences. Shryock, Trautman, and Gamble show how one such frame can be key to "imagining the human in deep time." Kinshipping, the process by which people decide who is family and who a stranger, is as old as humanity itself. From the perspective of deep history, the DNA research that is uncovering the family histories of just about everyone on the planet, putting us all in touch with our deep ancestry, is simply a particularly powerful example of kinshipping.

The three essays in part two, "Frames for History in Deep Time," highlight the importance of coevolution in deep history. In the first, Smail and Shryock argue that culture has always had profound effects on human bodies. Like many of the phenomena discussed in this book, culture and physiology are not independent variables; they interact in continuous feedback loops. In the second essay, archaeologist Mary C. Stiner and anthropologist Gillian Feeley-Harnik consider the coevolution of people and the natural environment from the perspective of humanity's endless quest for calories and fuel. As they see it, the agricultural revolution meant trading a secure position as "top carnivore" for the unknown consequences of sedentism. It also set in motion a process of coevolution between humans and domesticated animals and plants that is still ongoing. In the third essay, linguist April McMahon, together with Shryock and Trautman, takes a similar approach, arguing that the evolution of language involved not just changes in humans that made language possible but changes in languages that made them learnable. She also makes a strong case for replacing the traditional image of language trees, which can only show divergence, with a web-like network that also shows convergences and thus better represents how languages change over time.

In the first contribution to part three, "Shared Substance," historian Felipe Fernández Armesto and Smail argue that a deep historical approach is the only way to understand the place of food in human history. They begin with the effects of a carnivorous diet, which provided the extra protein needed to have larger brains than other primates, and then discuss the importance of cooking, and eating cooked food, to the growth of human sociability. They set the tone for most of the remaining chapters as well by carrying their story through the domestication of plants and animals and the importance of banqueting in ancient and medieval societies to the changing modes of food production in the

modern world. The result is a model for how to transcend the divide between deep and shallow history. The essay that follows, by Trautman, Feeley-Harnik, and primatologist John C. Mitani, expands on the earlier discussion of kinshipping by reviewing anthropological insights into the phenomenon in light of recent primatological research. It appears that early hominins inherited from their primate ancestors some ability to recognize kin and even the kinship of others. From that beginning, human understandings of kinship relations became increasingly complex. The authors admit that there is much work to be done before a full history of human kinship can be written, but they are confident that we already know, in a deep sense, how to go about it.

Part four, "Human Expansion," comprises three final essays on human migration, the circulation of goods and notions of scale in deep history. The first is the work of Gamble, archaeologist Timothy Earle and Hendrik Poinar, an evolutionary biologist specializing in the study of ancient DNA. They argue that migration is one of the most basic patterns of human history and discuss the science that has made it possible to reconstruct its complexities with increasing precision. The second, by Smail, Stiner, and Earle, looks at a related form of migration: that of the goods that people have imbued with symbolic meaning and circulated among themselves, mostly for social identification and prestige. Increases in the number of goods produced and circulated have occurred at particular times, but the phenomenon is, like kinshipping, a basic constituent of all human history; it has no point of origin. The same authors are joined by Shryock for the final essay, which argues that the astonishing growth and complexity of humanity and human endeavor over the last couple of centuries, often regarded as a definitive break from all past history, is different only in scale from what has gone before. Humanity has burst through ceilings time and again, after long periods of incremental change. Deep history is in many ways the record of such processes.

It is impossible in a short review to give more than a hint of the riches to be found in this groundbreaking book. In battering down the walls between history and prehistory, it invites scientists and humanists to join in a common endeavor. By envisioning nothing less than a complete account of the human experience, it stakes out a new frontier for historical consciousness that is as welcome as it is timely.

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MARTIN REUSS and STEPHEN CUTCLIFFE, editors. *The Illusory Boundary: Environment and Technology in History*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. 2010. Pp. ix, 318. \$59.50, paper \$29.50.

*The Illusory Boundary: Environment and Technology in History*, edited by Martin Reuss and Stephen H. Cutcliffe, provides a useful introduction to the emerging field of envirotech studies. The thirteen essays that