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HISTORICAL PERIODS AND THE ACT OF PERIODISATION

Xavier Guillaume

Historical periods are a central part of how the field of International Relations (IR) defines the subject of its analysis but also how it regards itself as a field of analysis.¹ On the one hand, historical periods represent the temporal unfolding of specific (spatial) logics of interactions – say, from the balance of power to Orientalism – among various and differentiated political units in a space that come to define what the international is. They are markers of dynamics researchers in the field of IR are set to uncover and study the evolution (see, for instance, the classical book by Ferguson and Mansbach, 1996, on politics). Moreover, historical periods are the markers of transition between temporally distinguished moments that are given a specific quality, often as chrononymous,² e.g. the ‘long nineteenth century’ (Hobsbawm, 1989 [1987]: 6, 8, 11) or the Cold War, and thus come to define a (largely European and western) space that de facto spills over and come to forcefully – physically, materially, symbolically or epistemically – include the rest of the world. In that sense, historical periods offer an implicit causal reading of the unfolding of history as per their design by a specific conceptual perspective.

On the other hand, historical periods are not simply a referential point the boundaries of which are set outside the writing of history (see de Certeau, 1975); they are not innocent descriptive tools. Quite the contrary, historical periods are constructed and as such offer a window into the practice of that writing in IR. An historical period thus is a *dynamic heuristic device*: what and how is defined a historical period may change. As a construct, a historical period inherently is simplifying and thus requires attention to ‘the genesis of its constructions, the plurality of the processes [by which it is constructed], the diversity of the rhythms [that are taken into account to construct them], the complexity of the gazes [behind their construction]’ (Gibert, 2014: 7). This is also at work for IR as a discipline or a field of study, since its own periodisation serves as a justification, from its origins to its unfolding, of its own legitimacy as a scholarly endeavour (see Schmidt, 2002; Ashworth, 2014, 2021). Unfortunately, a lack of attention to these dimensions largely is characteristic of Historical IR.

Historical periods are a particular place of contention in IR when ‘international relations’ takes on the form of homochronism (see Birth, 2008). Homochronism refers to the implicit or explicit conception in IR that only considers that one relevant historical time exists for every various and differentiated political units relevant to it. A first challenge then for IR is to consider whether the role of the field rather is to find ways to make sense of the multiple ways in which histories are written ‘in their own terms and according to their own canonical veridicity’; thus

seeking to study how they are juxtaposed, entangled, merged, destroyed, emerging, transformed, meeting or ignoring each other (see Bertrand, 2011: esp. 16–20, see also the contributions in Rüsen, 2001). The aim of this chapter is to set some of the parameters of this discussion by first defining what is a historical period as a necessary, but revealing, artifice when writing history. Importantly, historical periods, beyond their historical accuracies and robustness, should be seen as heuristic devices dependant on a scholar's working hypothesis. Working hypothesis are not something that need to be 'tested' in a 'positivist' sense, but rather a series of starting assumptions and premises – from the referent literature to someone's conceptual and critical apparatus – which are central in shaping a historical research's contours and how such research will be written within thus defined temporal boundaries.

I then move to reflect on why Historical IR tends to largely consider 'remarkable' periods – such as economic or systemic ruptures, the different times of the elites or the (Western European) state. Finally, I present some of the challenges and invitations that could be further explored by Historical IR, taking into account that while there are multiple ways in which we can construct historical periods, it is necessary to regard them as 'discontinuous continuities' (Revel, 2004: 2), precisely because we are, as researchers, those heuristically marking their boundaries and significance. History is often seen as a continuous unfolding through changes; this paradox should let us concentrate on how change is, implicitly or explicitly, thought through. Change, and more practically *what* change, is the interpretive key to identify the conceptual tools used to make sense of continuity. The ways by which we explain or understand change actually is key to how we construct a continuity that exists only through the identification of historical objects (events, thoughts, things, phenomena and so on) and their unfolding or evolution through time and how we periodise this.

What is a historical period? On the logic and politics of periodisation

To periodise, that is to say to determine a historical segment bounded by temporal markers of a 'before' and an 'after', is a necessary tool for historians. By cutting time into segments of a length that goes beyond the event, historians have a way to define, organise, hierarchise and select the latter, but also facts, moments, things, individuals or whichever historical objects, and to regroup and associate them in an intelligible order (Gibert, 2014: 7, 9). In the words of World War I historian Antoine Prost, to create a period is 'to substitute to time's elusive continuity, a meaningful structure' (Prost, 1996: 115). This 'meaningful structure' does not exist in isolation; as Stéphane Gibert (2014: 9) notes, its declination necessarily is plural. A historical period is as much defined by its set properties than it is by how it differs from or is in continuity with historical periods coming before and after it. As we will see in the next section, the type of continuities and ruptures Historical IR has focused on speak to how Historical IR has regarded what counts as 'international' history, largely naturalising historical periods (and its referent historical objects, such as the modern European state and its connoted concepts). This is largely the result of a lack of transparency and reflexivity as to the working hypothesis behind such periodisation.

Historical periods, or any concept which entail a specific deployment or evolution in time, while necessary to the work of any researcher, are not natural; they are/should be the source of scholarly justification, discussion, contestation and debate (see also Hom, 2021). One only needs, for instance, to think of specific historical objects (e.g. the state), historical periods themselves (e.g. the Cold War) or of intellectual and political movements (e.g. human rights) and the related debates about their periodisations to be convinced of this. For instance, the development of human rights as an intellectual and political movement is periodised differently by different authors. Hunt (2007) situates it in the 18th century, and even before, as an entrenched ideal that has forced its way as a civilisational process (in an Eliasian sense) in the world, while Moyn (2012)

situates it in the 1970s in a time which, while certainly bearing the mark of past ideals, it took a prominence as a last utopia of justice, in a context when the ideals Hunt put forth were long dissipated outside of the revolutions they bore. Periodisation thus is a necessary tool, but it is not a neutral tool as it encapsulates the working hypothesis set to analyse a specific historical object; here namely 'human rights'. A historical period reveals the 'meaning and the value' historians hold about it (Le Goff, 2014: 12–13). If a historical period is a construct, then, the question becomes not why but rather *how* to periodise? As periods are artificial and an attempt at a heuristic rationalisation, they also risk however to be a 'simplification and a flattening of historical reality' (Le Goff, 2010 [2004]: 10–11). Beyond the attribution of a chronology, periods mirror 'an ideology and an imaginary' lying behind them (Le Goff, 2010 [2004]: 11).

Like Le Goff, Kathleen Davis highlights how behind the 'logic of periodisation' and the arbitrary of drawing a 'line through time' (Davis, 2008: 3, 18), there is a *political* logic, a 'political technique' (Davis, 2008: 5, 17), which is not only about defining but also about occluding and reifying (Davis, 2008: 4) the ways by which the present is set. In a thought provoking way, paralleling Paul Veyne's call to organise history not by temporal periods but through their conceptual delineations (Veyne, 1976: 49), Davis states that 'we cannot periodise the past'; in effect, to reflect on periodisation is not so much about asking 'when' was say the middle ages or modernity, but rather 'Where is the Now?' (Davis, 2008: 5). As a political technique, periodisation not only operationalises an occlusion of some histories, but also 'redistributes [the] terms' by which we are able to comprehend them as histories. In others words, a periodisation is reflective of, or rather performing (Davis, 2008: 19), a specific political order. That political order organises and hierarchises, sometimes at the cost of silencing or even denying, how certain actions, subjectivities, political entities or histories are legitimised, whereas other are not.³ While an important heuristic tool for research, historical periods, as any methodological tool, need to be transparently established and discussed. An clear example of this situation is the elision of the 1791 Haitian revolution in any 'mainstream' reflections about Historical IR, or only paid a lip service, or any theoretical reflection about international relations (see, for instance, Buzan and Lawson, 2013), even though it may be strongly argued as it has been a central factor in the cementing of the western imposed international system in terms of a global colour line, questions of development and security (see Shilliam, 2008).

The next section provides a rapid and, by its limited nature, impressionistic and partial picture of Historical IR in terms of its approach to historical periods and the act of periodisation. Historical periods, because of their embeddedness and their necessary connected articulations, are a window as to how conceptions of continuity and ruptures are at work (Gibert, 2014: 9), at the level of which concepts or whichever historical objects, and thus what predominates as relevant in a specific (sub)field of study. As we will see, Historical IR has tended to privilege certain historical objects (e.g. the modern European state and the western international system) and correlated concepts (e.g. sovereignty, anarchy) as its focus of inquiry. This focus is reflective, I argue, of a lack of transparency in the act of periodisation which, while engaged in perfectly legitimate historical objects and their related working hypothesis, often lacks the historiographic reflexivity at the heart of crafting of historical work.

IR as grand (political) history: the myth of ruptures and exceptional time in historical international relations

Periodising necessitates marking off segments of time; such selection enables us to understand the hermeneutic logics behind the act of periodising (Davis, 2008; Gibert, 2014: 10; Le Goff, 2014). Doing so, we can see IR as dominated by the privileging of historical periods concentrating

on three broad non-exclusive historical objects: modes of government (e.g. political regimes/ideas and the [anarchic] international system), modes of productions (e.g. capitalism) or modes of destruction (e.g. wars and conflicts). These acts of periodisation tend to privilege rupture as a modality (see Gibert, 2014: 11) in segmenting the past. Furthermore, IR generally takes Europe, or more generally the west, as its starting and ending point, as its conceptual matrix to design and define historical periods (see, for instance, Hobson, 2012). It may seem a paradox to make such claim for IR as one of its central traditions of thought, political realism, in its 'codeword' expression much dominant in IR, seems to privilege historical continuity and universality in so many ways (from its 'units', to its 'mechanics' and 'politics', and its cyclical 'dynamics'). Yet, two things can be said about this possible paradox (following Molloy, 2006). First, our current understanding, our 'codeword' understanding of political realism in its various IR forms is the result of the political technique of periodisation, notably from Kenneth Waltz on, giving us this impression of a compact and unified body of thought, rather than paying attention to its plurality and its nuances. Second, and in consequence, the assumed realist ideals of continuity and universality may less be understood as historical reality than a specific ethos of political action which may take a variety of forms depending on which realist thinker we concentrate on: ruptures and crisis are the reefs upon which such varied ethos are to be tested (see also Larson, 2021).

In Historical IR, this reliance on logics of ruptures and a western conceptual matrix is epitomised in IR by the concept of benchmark dates (Buzan and Lawson, 2012). One of the main issues with this concept is that it assumes a clear rupture between an epoch and another, when it is difficult *in actu* to establish such rupture because 'epochs' are enmeshed in one another (Le Goff, 2014). 'Ruptures are rare. The usual model is the more or less long, the more or less profound, mutation' (Le Goff, 2014: 137). Furthermore, the notion of historical period relies on 'an idea that during a certain period of time, a society, a civilisation, a state, an economy present a coherence, characteristics forming a structure, which, after a while, are undone and are replaced by others, according to a more or less long mutation or a sudden change' (Le Goff, 2010 [2004]: 10). One of the most iconic benchmark dates in IR, acting a rupture between 'periods', is 1648. 1648 and the 'Treaty of Westphalia' have become a mythical benchmark date to mark the entry point of the modern state system as an overarching system of intelligibility about what is the international. The chrononymous Westphalia has become iconic despite the fact that what is commonly assumed to be (re)presented in the two actual treaties – sovereignty, non-intervention or the famous principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) – is actually not present in it (see Osiander, 2001; de Carvalho et al., 2011). This historical inaccuracy, prevalent in our educational textbooks as well as in our scholarship, highlights the importance of unveiling the act of periodisation and what it theoretically, politically and empirically entails.

Buzan and Lawson's conceptual discussion about how and why benchmark dates are set aims at a less presentist understanding of the international, whence the latter is teleologically read in light of the present, as well as of a less western-centric conceptualisation of it (Buzan and Lawson, 2012: 438–439). Yet, it is striking that their act of periodisation nonetheless remains attached to a conception of history which still replicates a teleological framework as well as a western-centric conception of the international by which Historical IR is read as a macro-history of orthodox historical objects characteristic (for many) of the latter: the European expansion via its crystallisation in a specific political unit – the modern western state – its related ideology – liberal democracy – and economic system – capitalism. The clearest example of this is the privileging of the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 as a benchmark for the non-west to enter the world and modern stage rather than the Haitian revolution of 1791. Japan was already in IR western-logic a state with westernised institutions, westernised international dynamics (it was an empire) and was consciously doing so to compete with the west (see Guillaume, 2011). The principal issue

behind this act of periodisation, legitimate in many other ways, is that it hides, behind an effort at conceptualising what benchmark dates are, its own premises by seeking to describe *what are in effect* the key historical international benchmarks, even if layered in stratified importance, rather than presenting them as working hypothesis based on the theoretical and political assumptions behind this conceptualisation.

This is rather predominant in IR which has largely been a history of the exceptional times of politics, concentrating on a type of grand History focusing on macro-historical objects (see Mabee, 2007) – modes of government, their relative modes of productions and modes of destruction – and what is usually read as diplomatic, security, intellectual or great power (systemic or otherwise) history. These objects are connected to their political importance as well as the exceptional times of political, military and economic elites, the intellectual history relative to the latter and/or to these different macro-historical objects.

A typical example of the difficulties of periodisation and its scholarly importance can be illustrated by the historiography of the Cold War, one of the most important chrononymous in IR. As Pierre Grosser (2014) has recently identified, the different interpretations behind what explains the Cold War – from great power rivalries to the clash of modernising politico-economic models – correlate with the different periodisations offered in the historiography of the Cold War. Yet, strikingly IR's take on the Cold War, even from a more 'constructivist' perspective, still privileges a classical, broadly understood, political *History* to determine what has led to the end of the Cold War or how to periodise it (see the contributions in Tannenwald and Wohlforth, 2005). At the same time, the *historiography* of the Cold War has moved to expand its horizon from the more traditional 'diplomacy, security and ideology' outlook, much fitting IR as it has usually approached it, to a 'bracing assortment of trans-national and domestic, cultural and social, human rights and media, economic and intellectual history approaches' (Romero, 2014: 686; see also Kwon, 2021). As this should make clear, the act of periodising should thus be read as a challenge but also an invitation to move beyond certain scholarly boundaries for Historical IR.

Challenges and invitations

The act of periodising, therefore, is as much a meaningful an act as is what is periodised itself. This act has faced many criticisms in the field of history and beyond (see Gibert, 2014: 15–21). Some of the most central for Historical IR are the questioning of the ideological frameworks (realism, liberalism, Marxism and other) behind the logics of periodising and how they naturalise rather than problematise (see above), the challenge to western and Eurocentric perspectives and their homochronism, and finally, the recognition of the ahistorical, I would argue anachronistic, qualities of historically driven scholarship (see Ashley on structural realism, but his argument can be extended beyond; Ashley, 1986 [1984]: 290–295). Beyond these challenges however, reflecting on the act of periodisation also offers at least two potential invitations, which I briefly delineate here: first, the most present one for our field, how can we research the 'discontinuous continuities' (Revel, 2004: 2) of multiple histories in light of contemporary connected and global histories; second, how could we shift away from our 'political' historical focus to a 'social' historical one, to historical rhythms rather than (temporal) segments.

One of the first challenges faced by Historical IR in terms of the act of periodisation is homochronism, that is to say to regroup any meaningful historical objects into 'a single all-encompassing set of temporal tropes' (Birth, 2008: 9), e.g. *the international society*. While homochronism does not need to be teleological, which would make it an anachronism (see below), it still tends 'to create a sense of coevalness [which] is consequently an imposition of one historical and culturally contingent, and presently powerful, temporality' (Birth, 2008: 15, 16).

These temporal tropes, in contemporary historical IR, can be such as the state, interstate wars, sovereignty, capitalism, democracy and so on. Homocronism also is related to the structuring of other 'historiographic rationalities' (see Bertrand, 2011: esp. 16–20) into a single temporal rationale through the fold of the (exploring, colonial, imperial, (post-)cold warring) west, the contact of which makes an Other take on meaning and existence (whether it is 1492 and the Americas or the colonial expansion in South East Asia, see Gruzinski, 2017). The issue and invitation here is to move away from a totalising discourse about the international, that it is a single spatio-temporal space that is simply more and more encompassing, even if it might be diverse. Historical IR scholars should strive to clearly unveil and problematise their situatedness, making apparent their historiographic rationality and their working hypothesis, without falling into such totalising discourse (see Douki and Minard, 2007: 21).

Another challenge facing the act of periodising in Historical IR stems from one of the forms homocronism can take: anachronism. Anachronism can be defined as using categories, concepts or chrononyms such as the Renaissance or Westphalia, that would be 'unintelligible to the figures being described' (Rorty et al., 1984: 2) through them. In this sense, anachronism has been and largely continues to constitute how IR conceptualises and treat history as either a stockpile of (past) facts that serve to explicate contemporary explanations or interpretations, based on contemporary concepts about the world, or as an ethical or practical exemplarity serving as an analogy to contemporary events (see, for instance, Walker, 1989: 171). Yet, anachronism, in any case a problematic historical practice, opens up another central challenge in thinking historically, or about history, in Historical IR: how to commensurate between events and facts of the past and our present? How do we hold a conversation with the past (see Rorty et al., 1984)? How do we connect differentiated polities into a historical narrative? How do we avoid anachronism while writing historical IR knowing it can take many forms? More broadly, how do/should we engage with the practice of periodisation in Historical IR (see, for instance, Green, 2019, on the 19th century)?

This challenge has been at the heart of a movement to rethink international history as more than a history of the west into the world but a connected or global history (on these conceptions see, for instance, Strayer, 1995; Subrahmanyam, 2007; Sachsenmaier, 2011; Çapan et al., 2021). Here lies a first invitation, in the form of a challenge, for historical IR, whether these global or connected forms of writing history are subsuming historical IR, and if not how to clearly situate the different orientations within the latter in a clear engagement regarding the former. Moreover, what does integrating the insight from connected and global histories mean for IR's own canonical periodisations (see, for instance, Abu-Lughod's challenge of European-centric reading of the international economic system, Abu-Lughod, 1991)?

A second less pressing invitation stems from a previous remark that Historical IR tends to be a *political* history of the international, and that this political reading tends to privilege the elites, states (or their functional and historical equivalents), diplomacy, security, ideology or the means of production and destruction. An invitation would be to design historical periods that are not attached to this political historical IR narrative but rather to a more social history of the international that may not be connected to elites but to the everyday (see Guillaume and Huysmans, 2019). By social history, I follow here Jürgen Kocka's definition which encompasses well the different historiographic traditions (French, German, British, United States and others) broadly related to this term: social history concentrates on 'social structures, processes, and actions in a specific sense (inequality, mobility, classes, strata, ethnicity, gender relations, urbanisation, work and life of different types of people, not just elites), in contrast to other sub-disciplines [of history] like economic history ... or the history of ideas' (Kocka, 2003: 21); to which I would add a history of things and objects and thus of material culture (see Lubar and Kingery, 1993). So the

question is what a social and/or material culture historical IR would look like and how would it effect the ways by which we can think in terms of historical periods about the international, and at which 'scale'?

Conclusion

Historical periods and the act of periodisation are a 'necessary evil' of our work as historians or historically driven scholars. As heuristic tools, we cannot do without them despite all the issues that are related to their designation, design and performance. As this chapter has highlighted, making use and designing historical periods should work hand in hand with a clear explicitness of the working hypothesis and the conceptual premises behind it. This a central feature to evaluate our craftsmanship (Bloch, 2007 [1949]) as historians or historically driven scholars. 'A period ... is the result of the know-how [*savoir-faire*] of the historian. They must guard from any selective history, only keeping data conforms to their interpretative model, thus creating a sense of ineluctability, hiding the potentialities, incapable to give back to the past the uncertainty of the future' (Gibert, 2014: 9). This is particularly true for Historical IR scholars as they are situated in a field that still largely is ahistorical in its relation to concepts – as we have seen in the prominence of homochronism and anachronism – and still takes what are standpoints from which working hypothesis could be formulated as unifying principles to do [H]istory, and not histories. Taking on the challenges of the act of periodisation and responding to some of its invitations could make Historical IR a much more prominent interlocutor in many social scientific and humanities fields.

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

- 1 This chapter notably benefited from the comments of the participants of the 2018 EWIS workshop and an EISA panel dedicated to this Handbook. I would also like to thank Julia Costa López, Benjamin de Carvalho, Claire Vergerio and an anonymous reviewer for their comments. All translations, quirks and errors remaining are mine.
- 2 This qualifying practice can be termed chrononymy, the act of attributing specific characteristics to an historical period by naming it – as a chrononymous – after an individual, a place (Westphalia), a dynasty, an identifiable trait (the *Cold War*), or a temporal marker. Chrononymous usually confers, by its naming, and as does the act of periodising, a stabilising and conventional meaning to a specific artificial definition (see Bacot et al., 2008).
- 3 Periodisation is an act that opens up a window to analyse what is regarded as relevant, how and by whom: laying bare how and what the *histôr* is witnessing maybe at the cost of losing track of the act of being an 'arbiter' through inquiry, an act never detached to who 'signifies' (Hartog, 2000: 394–395).

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