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Time and history in International Relations

Time and Historical International Relations

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Abstract

This chapter complements efforts to clarify historical International Relations's use of the past by surveying its use of time. Scholars traditionally treated time and history as rough and ready concepts rather than carefully thought out terms of art. While this has changed in recent years, several issues persist. Widely popular but spurious temporal dichotomies like linear/cyclical and change/continuity exert outsized influence on the discipline's temporal imagination, leading scholars to mistake interpretive responses to the problem of time for natural qualities of time itself. IR's temporal turn has added significant temporal variety and made a compelling case that global politics is heterotemporal, but does not convincingly unsettle these traditional habits of thought. The fact that IR scholars interested in history and time do not engage each other as much as they could exacerbates these issues. Therefore, the chapter closes by proposing three ways forward toward closer dialogue between temporal and historical IR: narrative timing, temporalizing IR's own history, and historicizing the politics of time.

Introduction: the rise of time and history in IR

'International Relations, what a timeless, ahistorical discipline!' So the critical refrain went for decades, as structuralist rationalism, game theory, and large-N statistical work strip-mined international politics in search of elusive empirical laws, durable equilibria, or predictable phenomena that would provide IR its social scientific bona fides. It is debatable whether IR was ever as timeless or without history as it seemed, given that scholars – even those happily roving in formal models or scrubbing context from evidence to produce data – have always looked to the past for inspiration and cases, commented on present dilemmas, and wagered predictions about the future. It is probably fairer to charge that IR traditionally treated time and history as rough and ready concepts rather than explicit, reflexive, terms of art. Nevertheless, for the past two decades or so, IR ceased taking time and history for granted. Critical IR's interest in interdisciplinary time studies, historical sociology and the return of big comparative histories, the emergence of historical institutionalism, the use of thick descriptive case studies by constructivists, and new disciplinary intellectual histories all foregrounded time, contingency, and historical context.

Such developments offer a salutary opportunity to take stock of the discipline's underlying concepts and animating assumptions about time and history. Other chapters in this handbook interrogate the uses of the past and the historian's craft, offering a number of clarifications and useful ways to organize our thinking about historical IR. This chapter does so for time and temporality with the aim of explicating IR's use of time and proposing ways to combine temporal and historical IR more productively.

IR's traditional uses of time

Prior to a recent upsurge in interest, IR sporadically evoked time in discussions of surprising events (Jervis 1991), long-term change (Dark 1998), foreign policy (see Beasley and Hom forthcoming), international conflict (Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski 2005), or political science methods (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). But because time played a tertiary role in such researches, IR's temporal imagination hewed mostly to two binaries popular in the wider human and natural sciences – linear/cyclical and continuity/change – that unravel upon closer inspection.

Linear or cyclical?

First, IR treated 'linear' and 'cyclical' time as fundamental and dichotomous concepts (Hom 2020, 5–18). Linear time encompassed a huge range of phenomena and ideas, from *the* singular path of human history, a related sequence of 'developmental stages' common to all cultures, various progressive-normative claims about the 'march of history' toward a desirable endpoint, the way that grand narratives privilege hegemonic agents, positivist social science, and the basic link between cause and effect. Likewise, 'cyclical time' signified 'long waves', balances of power, historical materialist dialectics, core and peripheral world systems, and other recurring political phenomena (see Hom 2018; 2019). Almost as often, it was conflated with 'timelessness', based on the assumption recurrence somehow stands above or beyond time.[1] In both cases, scholars framed cyclical time/timelessness and linear time as natural opposites.

This prevalent way of thinking about political times proves unsustainable in at least two ways. First, it is unclear whether the opposition refers to time or history. 'Linear time' frequently helps scholars distinguish 'modernity' from earlier epochs (see Walker 1993). But such discussions rarely devote as much attention to time itself as they do to issues of periodization or the 'shape' of events. For this reason, such claims have come under scrutiny in IR and beyond (see Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Fasolt 2004). 'Linear' in these accounts primarily describes progressive historical development rather than making claims about the serial nature of time per se.

Similarly, cyclicality can describe recurring event series but struggles as an alternative to linear time or as a conceptualization of time as such. If time were to pass by doubling back on itself, we would relive our lives on perpetual and perfect repeat. This, in turn, would open up questions about the extent of our time loop and the possibility of historical memory. Tellingingly, while we might use 'cyclical time' to symbolize historical trends (e.g. Jarvis 2009, 39–40), espousals of cyclical time *per se* are hard to find.[2]

Finally, a more basic linear assumption about time underpins this opposition. The 'linear time' of historical progress resolves against a wider flow that is in some way linear enough for us to select and arrange some of its phenomena in an optimistic narrative indexed to

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[1] We could just as easily designate these rhythms as 'timeful' because they repeatedly fill up extended chunks of time (Hom 2020, 97).

[2] The rare example functions primarily as a counterfactual (see Sorabji 2006, 190).

calendrical dates constructed from the linear accumulation of celestial repetitions. Similarly, 'conceptions of timelessness emphasise the persistence of repetition and return … *between chronologically distinct historical eras*' (Jarvis 2009, 39 emphasis added; cf. Sorabji 2006, 184–85). But if repetitious phenomena mark both 'cyclical time' and 'timelessness' (e.g. Elman and Elman 2008, 359), it is worth asking whether this concept can bear its own weight or support IR's dominant temporal antinomy. While these interpretations of historical arcs contain temporal content, it is hard to see how they could cohere as opposing and exhaustive descriptions of time itself. They, and the assumptions from which they spring, remain several layers of abstraction removed from the lived experience of time or speculative claims about the nature of time itself. It is probably more accurate to understand their conflation with time *per se* as a matter of metaphor or idiom – familiar symbolic terms that hide assumptions even as they quickly transfer meaning in a dialogue based on a shared hermeneutic toolkit (see Elias 1989).

Continuity or change?
Even more commonly, IR scholars distinguish between 'continuity' and 'change' in various political processes and disciplinary subfields and treat these terms as self-evident categories of almost universal pertinence. Foreign policy analysis frequently speculates on whether state policy positions evince continuity or change over time (*inter alia* Zhang 2016, 771; Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili 2018; Sinha 2017). The same goes for national security and grand strategy (see Lissner 2018). According to such habits of thought, continuity and change pose 'competing perspectives on world politics' (Hughes 1997) or rough and ready ways of interpreting systemic change (Lawson, Armbruster, and Cox 2010) and globalization (Rupert and Smith 2016), among others. Critical projects to develop a 'postinternational' theory or to gender international politics also deploy this binary with ease (Rosenau 1990; Aggestam and True 2020). Moreover, the way that arguments about 'continuity *through* change' (Qin 2014 emphasis added) or the two working *in tandem* (Rosenau 1990) pitch themselves as provocations further attests to the distinction's stickiness.

Much like linear vs. cyclical, the continuity-change distinction depends heavily on historical interpretation of what actors and processes matter and how particular events relate to one another. The world and we in it are always changing in ways small and great (Grosz 1999), yet we perceive plenty of continuity, from everyday routines that help manage anxiety to the persistence of war as an instrument of policy in the states system. Going further, *some* continuity is the condition of possibility for assessing change, and vice versa. Would we apprehend and be able to explicate change without reference to some other persistent element of experience against which difference resolves as such? Would we appreciate continuity without some flux with which to compare it? What seems to matter more is the balance and quality of continuity and change in a given situation.

For instance, language relies on *continuous but manageable change* to make meaning. We assemble different combinations from a finite array of letters to make different words, order them according to syntactical rules that lend semantic import, and try to keep our sentences

brief enough that they do not exceed our audience's cognitive capacities. Language depends on change to make meaning, but change highly constrained by the demands and standards of interpretive continuity (Elias 1989, 201). The continuity of our communication would be hindered significantly if we were to begin assigning entirely random combinations of letters to common referent objects, or even to 'backward clauses writing begin to'. Yet such examples of linguistic breakdown still fall within the brute limits of continuity and change, suggesting we need more precise formulations of both terms to their functional relationship.

Beyond language, social life would be unthinkable without various admixtures of continuity and change – such as when I raise my hand and waving 'hello' to a friend across the street, and this *change* in my behaviour reproduces our friendship in the moment, ensuring its *continuity* over time. By contrast, if I were to *continue* walking without waving, my friend might wonder about a *change* in our relationship. Even this basic interaction bedevils the glib 'continuity or change' binary, and most international phenomena exceed it in complexity, nuance, and duration. Moreover, time scholars mostly agree that we become aware of time and history through the experience of meaningful change but also by our ability to establish continuity amidst the 'flux of experience' (see Hoy 2009). All of which is to suggest that IR would benefit either from more sophisticated categories of time or history than continuity and change or from more clearly disclosing the theoretical and political priors informing scholarly choices about which changes and continuities get elevated to the status of empirical trends or theoretical concepts.

The problem of time lurking behind enduring binaries
The final issue with IR's traditional treatment of time, and by extension history, is that our facile reproduction of these spurious binaries contributes to their reification and naturalization, which in turn further obscure the even more durable tradition underpinning them both. This is 'the problem of time', or time understood as a universal force or malevolent god (e.g. Chronos, Saturn) that naturally brings disorder, chaos, and death. As I discuss at length elsewhere (Hom 2020, 11–17), this tradition of explicating time as the cause of wreck and ruin stretches back at least to pre-classical Greece and likely further to ancient religions of the Near East, and easily predates self-conscious attempts to reckon duration through technical artistry or to elaborate concepts like 'linear' or 'cyclical time',[3] or historical change or continuity. It saturates the 'canon' of Western political thought and international theory, and returns in contemporary IR whenever events catch analysts or actors by surprise or as large-scale transformations near on the horizon.

On its face, this tradition does not comport easily with lines, cycles, change, and continuity. However, historical precedent offers a resolution. 'Linear' or 'cyclical' time, just like historical 'continuity' or 'change', depend upon interpretation and configuration, and cohere primarily as speculative visions about collections of meaningful events. Combined with their much more recent provenance relative to the problem of time, this suggests that they function

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[3] A Google n-gram search for variants of 'linear time' and 'cyclical time' returns few hits prior to the 1930s, making it all the more curious that IR scholars treat these terms as transhistorical and natural categories of time.

not as master claims about time but rather as *narrative responses* to the problem of time tradition. Their straight or curved 'shape', or their admixture of continuity and change assure us that meaningful elements persist, even if important factors are shifting, and thus provide ways to make sense of anxiety-inducing and sometimes overwhelming experiences. They substitute a tidy interpretive arc or story plot for the often messy flow of temporal existence or the complex world of international politics, and then offer actors a mimetic resource for decision and action . Such benefits make it easy for us to reproduce linear/cyclical or continuity/change claims, and thereby to conflate these practical and particular interpretations about historical experience for qualities of time itself (Hom 2020, 101–4). If we look closer, past the layers of reification, what we routinely find in such claims are competing glosses of huge, complex, and messy political phenomena – conceptual tools that schematize time and history, reducing complexity, boosting intelligibility, and ultimately guiding action by interpolating the past and extrapolating the future for the sake of managing and controlling present circumstances (McIntosh 2020). Yet much as the trendline interprets the data but is not that data, a linear or cyclical narrative can interpret temporal experiences and processes but becomes synonymous with time *per se* only through conflation, abstraction, and reification of just the sort that critical and historical IR scholars resist in other discussions.

IR's temporal turn
Such was the story for many years in IR. More recently, a number of critically minded scholars took closer looks at time's relationship to politics and found it much more diverse and complex than previously thought. This 'temporal turn' in critical IR produced a number of invigorating studies and new (to IR) concepts of time, from the recovery of classical notions of *chronos* (continuity)*, kairos* (a moment ripe for change), and *aion* (pure becoming) (Hutchings 2008); to a more sophisticated sociotemporality (Stevens 2015); the dominance of 'the present' over theory (McIntosh 2020); 'savage'(Blaney and Inayatullah 2010), 'subaltern,' and gendered temporalities (see Agathangelou and Killian 2016), and the 'ruptured time' of trauma (e.g. Edkins 2013) – all flowing from theoretical developments and original empirical research that make a compelling case that global politics is indeed a 'heterotemporal' realm (Hutchings 2008). Historical institutionalists joined them in foregrounding time more resolutely than previous scholars, albeit in very different ways that emphasized the path-dependence, organization 'drift', and generally deleterious effects of time's passage on institutional efficiency (see Fioretos 2017).

For all this new research and thinking, IR's temporal antinomies and the older problem of time tradition received little scrutiny. In fact, they underwrote much of temporal turn. Much critical IR explicitly contests the 'linear time' of the state, positivism, and hegemonic history, parroting a widespread tendency to conflate historical and methodological linearity with an 'underlying "base time"', 'essential temporality', or 'source time' (Chambers 2011, 198, 210). A particularly pitched example of this is the IR discourse of 'rupture', which claims to refute all intimations of linear time yet also foregrounds ruptures as resources for 'a politics otherwise' of less violence and greater affirmation in the future (Hom 2020, 208–31). Similarly, the historical institutionalist project seeks to explain why institutions change in time, an issue typically framed as distinct from continuity (e.g. Streeck and Thelen 2005).

This research also relies on the assumption that time naturally causes decay – an assumption that unwittingly disposes the theoretical imagination to conflate stability or continuity with transcendence and the eternal (Hom 2020, 185–207).

Two other areas of more self-consciously historical research deserve mention here: the embrace by primarily constructivist scholars of thick description and historical transformations (see Leira and de Carvalho 2017); and the efforts of intellectual histories to historicize or place IR's central ideas and traditions in context and recover their conceptual roots. In the case of intellectual histories informed by critical race studies, the humanities, and feminist IR, this project uncovers a theological (Guilhot 2010), imperial (Barder 2017), gendered (see Geeta and Nair 2014), and racist IR lineage (e.g. Henderson 2013) quite at odds with any disciplinary 'big bang myths' (de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson 2011) or claims about a 'value-free' social science. Such works not only place international politics and IR theories more firmly 'in time', they also destabilize the discipline's aforementioned 'presentism' by recovering its messy pasts.

Conclusion: Bringing temporal and historical IR together

For much of its disciplinary existence, IR treated time glibly or not at all, deploying intuitive oppositions and freely conflating history with time itself. Its temporal turn yielded a much richer appreciation of the global politics of time, if uneven conceptual development. Nor did such shifts include much dialogue with emerging work in historical IR. This is curious, given how much common cause exists between them to complexify, temporalize, historicize, and destabilize rationalist or positivistic IR. Furthermore, it remains exceedingly difficult to talk about history without talking time, or vice versa. For example, as the Cold War ended, Robert Jervis asked, 'will the future resemble the past?' After noting that 'History usually makes a mockery of our hopes and expectations', he argued 'it is clear we are entering a new world', that would 'follow patterns familiar in outline but unpredictable in detail' (Jervis 1991, 39). A decade later, David Campbell (2001) surveyed how 9/11 'broke time' but his primary purpose was to criticize 'the return of the past in response' to the attacks, especially several forms of 'Cold War redux' in emerging discourses about the event. For both scholars, the problem of time and the issue of history intermingled closely. So historical and temporal scholars would seem to have much to discuss, but move mostly in parallel – like passengers waving between two cars traveling in the same direction. To conclude, therefore, I would like to briefly sketch three ways to redress the disconnect between historical and temporal IR.

From time and history to narrative timing

One solution is to shift history – not under time but *within* the umbrella of *timing*. My own work proposes that we reimagine time not as a natural or metaphysical entity, nor even an objective existential factor, but rather always as the product of widespread timing efforts. Timing here refers not to coincidence or opportune moments but instead to a holistic, synthetic, and creative effort to establish or maintain change processes and dynamic relationships using some rubric or frame of reference as a *timing standard*. As social agents work *to time* in this way, and represent their efforts with symbolic language that prefers static or entity-like nouns to dynamic verbs, we build up a discursive catalogue of 'times' that

index various social timing efforts, some of which come to seem real, natural, and universal *only* by virtue of their widespread adoption and diffusion (Hom 2020, 27–81). Timing theory helps us scrutinize binaries like linear/cyclical and continuity/change and proffers a historico-theoretical explanation for the problem of time as a symbolic testament to how important and difficult timing has been to human survival and co-existence throughout history.

Understood in this way, timing intentionally covers a huge swathe of human activities, from technical innovation to intersubjective discourse.[4] One of these is *narrative timing*, or the way in which stories configure actions and agents to unfold a stylized world that not only communicates meaning but also re-configures our experience of time as a dimension amenable to understanding and action (Hom 2020, 82–107). On this reading, historical IR accounts are – like other stories – narrative timing devices that make sense of a past to enable understanding but also to inform current actions. While historical accounts often promise to place actors and events 'in their time' or to track change 'over time', when historians select and arrange such elements they are actively timing those entities – *emplotting* them in a dynamic, intelligible whole pointing toward one outcome rather than others, whether this be the moral of the story, the explanandum, or simply the chronological endpoint. So while it differs in scope and content from other IR knowledge modes, historical IR still partakes of a loose disciplinary project to understand how global relations fit together in order to anticipate or shape how they unfold in hopes of reducing suffering, improving outcomes, or forestalling apocalypse (Hom 2020, 232–44). In this way, international history sits alongside various global 'times', but all in service of vocational timing.

Temporalizing history
Second, we can combine the insights of narrative timing with intellectual history to explicitly *temporalize* IR's genealogy. Whether in its recent racialized and imperial academic past or its more venerable and self-styled 'canon' of political thought, key thinkers and works inspiring IR as we know it emerged from what we might call timing-intensive periods, those moments when thorny events and shocking upheavals necessitated fundamental revisions to the symbolic frameworks we use to make sense of politics. Thinkers and periods vital to the stories IR tells itself about its intellectual past consistently coincided with novel changes. In the traditional canon, Thucydides reflected on the Peloponnesian cataclysm, Plato and Aristotle responded to the near-collapse of the *polis* system (Gunnell 1987), Augustine to the Christianisation and sack of Rome (Markus 1970), the 'Machiavellian moment' proposed how new republics establish stable order amidst crisis (Pocock 2016), the Reformation and civil wars informed Hobbes', Locke's, and Rousseau's work (see McQueen 2018). More recently, inchoate international relations scholarship emerged from interdisciplinary efforts to restore or insulate empire and white supremacy from epochal transformations wrought by industrialized globalization, the expansion of political rights, and what one work called 'the rising tide of color' in global race relations (see Henderson 2013). And IR's emergence as a recognizable field with pretensions to disciplinary autonomy drew anxious inspiration from

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[4] It shares an interest in the effortful and often contentious production of time with recent work on global synchronization (e.g. Jordheim and Wigen 2018).

the legacy of two world wars and the development of nuclear weapons. All of these political developments undercut existing knowledge and expectations and engendered mighty theoretical efforts to restore a sense of meaning and intelligibility to international politics. We could join intellectual historians in framing this as a disciplinary set of responses to the problem of time, which several of these thinkers acknowledged explicitly. But we can also go a step further to think through how IR's direct or claimed intellectual history emerged from fraught timing efforts to restore meaning and re-authorize action in the wake of destabilizing experiences.

Historicizing time

Finally, rather than reconfiguring our theoretical imagination or reinterpreting familiar intellectual forebears, IR scholars interested in bringing time and history together could tap an almost completely undiscovered empirical vein of research to historicize time as a socio-political phenomenon. While the temporal turn uncovered numerous diverse times at work in contemporary international life, IR has not yet taken a close look at the history of various collective timing projects. If it did, it would find a rich collection of achievements in imagining, operationalizing, and distributing time *per se* as a resource, a rule, or a dimension to be reckoned and mastered by technique. All were political, most were international.

Inter alia, the earliest cosmological myths established sources of political order partly by casting humanity at the mercy of some malicious time god (Hom 2020, 11). The Seleucids reinvented calendrical reckoning to progressively number the years from emperor to emperor instead of restarting with each accession (Kosmin 2019). An international competition to devise reliable seafaring clocks and thus 'discover the longitude' drove the ascendance of Western standard time (Landes 2000). The International Meridian Conference and the rise of national empires like the United States, Germany, and the Meiji Restoration in Japan secured its dominance, establishing common reckoning conventions and global time zones but also trampling 'national sovereignty' in the process (O'Malley 1990; Hom 2010, 1163). National efforts to reinforce these conventions depended on the deployment of a power-knowledge nexus and engendered local forms of subversion (e.g. Barak 2013). Revolutionary projects played fast and loose with the public calendar, often pushing a bridge too far and drawing staunch resistance (e.g. Shaw 2011).

These episodes have gone almost completely unstudied in IR despite their manifestly political dynamics. But if we combine the critical IR point that all times are political with historical IR's interest in richer understanding of the past, then there is little reason to ignore the political history of time itself. Indeed, the strong point broached by all these preceding discussion is that if we are to take time and history seriously together, then we should weave time *in* history into IR's imagination. The history of time is the temporal ground of international politics.

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