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

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Comments

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

Olsen is particularly interested in the “processes of 
reception” that shaped Koselleck’s intellectual world-
view 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 cri-
sis of historicism to the rise and fall of Gesellschafts-
geschichte—and how Koselleck situated himself in re-
lation to each—more than make up for it. What 
emerges from this account is a rich analysis of a thor-
oughly interdisciplinary thinker, one who ranged widely 
from political philosophy and hermeneutics to ontol-
gy, sociology, and anthropology.

Only some of Koselleck’s work has found its way into 
English translation, but his contributions to the philos-
ophy 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 po-
litical modernity (discussed in chapters two and three), 
through his investigations of the goals and scope of con-
ceptual history (chapter four), up to his theories of his-
torical temporality and how they relate to our under-
standing of both private experience and collective 
memory (chapters five and six).

Olsen maintains that Koselleck was primarily moti-
vated 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 En-
lighenment and its modern philosophical heirs. In pur-
suing 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 or-
bits 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 Ko-
selleck’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 concep-
tions of history, though, Koselleck also explored the 
possibility that human history—unlike natural histo-
ry—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 plu-
rural” (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 deconstruct-
ing 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 lay-
ers, which suggests that historical change is not a sin-
gular or universal phenomenon but is instead distrib-
uted across various temporal strata (p. 226). At some 
levels, historical change manifests as a radical, geological 
rapture; at others, it appears almost glacial. Show-
ning 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 medita-
tions History in the Plural will no doubt remain a 
trustworthy guide.

ANDREW SHRYOCK AND DANIEL LORD SMAIL, editors. 
Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present. 
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California 

When does history begin? Since the so-called time rev-
olution of the later nineteenth century, which under-
mined traditional beliefs about the age of the earth, the 
invention of writing has marked the beginning of his-
tory. Deep historians want to begin with the divergence 
of our hominin ancestors from the great apes some five 
four 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 collabora-
tive 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 
cowrote two of its eleven chapters, but they also in-
dividually 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,” com-
bines images and graphic information to fine effect, cre-
ating 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” his-
ory.

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 ar-
chaeologist. 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 con-
quest of nature that have their roots in biblical under-
standings 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
depth history. In the first, Smail and Shryock argue that
culture has always had profound effects on human bod-
ies. Like many of the phenomena discussed in this book,
culture and physiology are not independent variables;
they interact in continuous feedback loops. In the sec-
ond essay, archaeologist Mary C. Stiner and anthropol-
ogist Gillian Feeley-Harnik consider the coevolution of
people and the natural environment from the perspec-
tive 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 con-
sequences of sedentism. It also set in motion a process
of coevolution between humans and domesticated an-
imals 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 hu-
mans that made language possible but changes in lan-
guages that made them learnable. She also make a
strong case for replacing the traditional image of lan-
guage 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 Sub-
stance,” 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 pro-
vided 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 hu-
man sociability. They set the tone for most of the re-
main ing chapters as well by carrying their story through
the domestication of plants and animals and the im-
portance of banqueting in ancient and medieval soci-
eties to the changing modes of food production in the

modern world. The result is a model for how to tran-
scend 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 prima-
tological research. It appears that early hominins in-
herited from their prime ancestors some ability to recog-
nize 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 mi-
gration: 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 his-
tory; 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. Hu-
manity 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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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