

Historical time is a concrete and living reality with an irreversible onward rush. It is the very plasma in which events are immersed, and the field within which they become intelligible.

Marc Bloch,

The Historian's Craft

Beginnings and Endings of Historical Epochs: Periodization in History

The comprehension of historic time it turns out is a very sophisticated business. The child is a complete presentist, absorbed in his immediate world of space and time and utterly unable to appreciate complex dimensions of either. When he reaches ten or twelve years, he may have some understanding of an historic past, although a broad sense of chronology probably still elludes him.¹ Indeed, chronological illiteracy remains one of the greatest failings in the present generation of university students, who frequently fail to grasp both event sequences and the horizontal comparisons in time of cultures, civilizations, and nations. By reducing this continuum to a memorization of dates and an intensive study of chronological charts, they soon alienate themselves from history of all sorts. To what end, they say, this stream of a dead and amorphous past?

Undergraduates are not unique in having difficulty with the chronological sweep of history. The ancients certainly had no such concept. Thucydides could but exclaim in the initial page of his Peloponnesian Wars that it

was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a larger part of the barbarian world--I had almost said of mankind. For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that immediately precede the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to

trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.²

Thucydides clearly had no better idea of the stream of history than many undergraduates. But there the difference ends, for Thucydides had little recorded history to draw upon; we of the twentieth century have an enormous store of historical information in a vast chronological framework, even if we often choose to ignore it.

The great continuum is further complicated by the unevenness in emphases which we inevitably give to the recent as compared to the distant past. Geologic time we measure in billions of years; the earliest historic in centuries; the most recent in decades or even such episodes as August 1914.³ We do this because, of course, we have more information in many instances about the recent but also because the episodic seems more manageable and possesses a greater drama than the grand flow of history.

How, indeed, does one make sense or use of this stream? Where, if at all, does one find romance and excitement in it? The answer is in the distinction which exists between continuity and change, between the continuum and those historical episodes within it.⁴ The historian's task is that of resolving the tension between these two by substituting "a web of many seams" for Maitland's "seamless web of history."⁵ In reconciling continuity and change, the historian really provides a narrower context for describing just what has occurred in time. That context he calls a period or epoch.

There is no magic or absolute quality about the historical period: it is really the historian's construct, resting in the

continuum and relating to the epochs preceding and succeeding it. Periodization, whether spoken or written, makes the historian's narrative more intelligible. His task, after all, is that of reconstructing a meaningful past by locating objects (people, events, forces) in time. The historian uniquely draws upon the learning of all disciplines to describe the change and thereby establishes a context. He compares the patterns which he discerns in historical time. This coherence which he has bestowed upon the continuum through periodization enables him to make greater sense and use of history.

The fundamental question is what constitutes an historical epoch. What are the elements or criteria for establishing the beginnings and endings of historical periods? What is the nature of this change which occurs within the continuum? These are but several ways of phrasing the vital question. First, a period may be identified with an individual or a sharply-defined event. When we have a genuine "hero in history" or events that articulate decisive changes in the historical continuum then we must pause to ponder the matter.⁶ Secondly, the epoch may be a watershed of forces, a point in time when obvious changes are occurring in politics, society, economics, and culture--one or more of these. While the beginnings and endings of these changes may be difficult to document with precision, we plainly discern them. Thirdly, the period may be designated rather artificially by simply establishing decade, century, or even millennia limits. Fourthly, the period may be broadly shaped by the rhythm of civilizations or a philosophy of history that tends to focus on the phenomena of civilizations or

class structures.

The first are those periods established with reasonable precision. Such a definite beginning and ending may be perceived in the single most successful periodizing enterprise, that fashioned by Christian historians, who divided history into B.C. and A.D. This periodization meets with such uncritical acceptance that we virtually conclude that Socrates knew he lived in the **fifth** century B.C. We have at least as much precision with this periodization as with any other.

Ages associated with heroes such as the Age of Pericles, Alexander the Great, Augustus, Constantine, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Bismarck can usually be designated with some specificity. Golden Ages, as they identify individuals with cities and political entities, e.g. Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, the Baghdad of Haroun al-Rashid, Laurentian Florence, and Elizabethan England are in the same category.

With wars or revolutions, the problem is more complicated than with heroes. A series of events may mark the beginning of a war or revolution; for a war, at least, the end may be clear-cut, e.g. an armistice or the signing of a treaty, but even that is not always the case. Do we mark the origins of the first World War with the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand or with the various declarations of war? Or do we recognize the long-range causes and speak of the era of the First World War as dating to the time of Bismarckian diplomacy in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War?⁷ When did it end? Some might say 1918 or 1919, but others have depicted the Second World War as merely part and parcel of the first, and thus an era of world war from 1914 until

1945.⁸ Only through the function of time and varying perspective do we see that World War II was an extension of World War I. The Second World war, incidentally, presents some difficulty on endings, for the peace treaties were either delayed or still elude us. Perhaps armistices suffice, although the almost immediate resumption of a Cold War clouds the clear division which one normally expects between war and peace.⁹

Revolutions are more difficult still, although they usually fall in the precise beginning and ending category. Did the Russian Revolution begin with the February uprising in Petrograd or the October one? Is a preferable origin the Revolution of 1905? And its ending? The choice exists among November, 1917, the conclusion of the shattering Civil War, or the Stalin Revolution of the early 1930's.¹⁰ Historians still argue these points as they attempt to make intelligible this century's span of Russian history. And what of the French Revolution?¹¹ Did it begin with the profligacy of Louis XIV and Louis XV, with the American Revolution, the Enlightenment (whatever and whenever that was), or the calling of the Estates General in 1789? And its ending? Thermidor which devoured the Revolution's children in 1794, Napoleon's coup d'etat in 1799, and the fall of Napoleon in 1814-15 are variously proclaimed. Indeed, should Napoleon be lumped into the revolutionary epoch, say from 1789-1814, in order to round off neatly a quarter century? Historians have also used the decade package, from 1789 to Napoleon's coup in 1799. The ways seem infinite, even when precise and natural endings appear to set off periods.

The second kind of period which I have chosen to emphasize

is that which is longer and more indefinite, one embodying change on a broad scale. If the historian has considerable latitude in dealing with specific events, his options seem endless and, indeed, ambiguous when he takes on such historical epochs as the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Here the analysis should focus on not just heroes but on such matters as political behavior and institutions; social mobility and structure; economic development; demographic patterns and configuration; intellectual, cultural, and religious climate; the transmission of ideas and culture; and the impact of science and technology.

Such criteria are necessary in defining and determining the origins of the Middle Ages. Should, one must ask, the Middle Ages be equated with the Dark, and may one legitimately speak of such a period between the two cultural peaks of Antiquity and the Renaissance? Historians of science like Lynn Thorndike and of technology like Lynn White take exception to the idea of a Dark Age and point to notable medieval accomplishments in their respective fields.¹² Wallace Ferguson, moreover, has shown that the demeaning of the pre-Renaissance era was a manufacture of Renaissance humanists.¹³

Be it as it may, we must first talk of origins. Did the Middle Ages, if we persist in using the term, occur with the first evidence of Roman decline in the second century, with the increased pressure of the German tribes in the third, with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth, with the "fall" of Rome in the fifth, with the emergence of Byzantium in the sixth, with the Muslim onslaught in the seventh, with the establishment of the Frankish dominion in the eighth, or when?¹⁴ Before long we encounter a Carolingian, Ottonian, Tenth Century, and Twelfth Century Renaissance.¹⁵ Are we to assume

that Middle Ages and Renaissance do not mix even though Johan Huizinga speaks of the Waning of the Middle Ages during the same Quattrocento that Jacob Burckhardt lauds a Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy?¹⁶ The fact is that the origin and conclusion of the Middle Ages are very, very elusive, even though historians by using the term have for the most part rendered an intelligible account of the stream of time since the age of Augustus. We now know better than to assume that the Middle Ages started abruptly in 476 and ended with, say, Dante or the fall of Constantinople. We know, too, that a Middle Age pertains only to Europe, and for many historians only a part of it at that. Recognizing these limits and that it is not a synonym for Dark, it still remains useful nomenclature.

Concluding the Middle Ages is, as noted above, quite as difficult and imprecise a task as beginning it. Sometimes the end of the Middle Ages is taken to be the beginning of the Renaissance. The point is not only when but where? Burckhardt has forever left his mark on European periodization with his Italian Quattrocento construct, yet was there a Renaissance elsewhere in Europe during the fifteenth century? Huizinga finds a distinctly medieval culture in the fifteenth century Netherlands, while Charles Haskins has suggested that the real roots of the Renaissance were medieval, in a Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. In effect, Haskins rejected the abrupt break which Burckhardt imposed on the continuum. This really raises the question about criteria for periodizing such amorphous epochs. Haskins was impressed with twelfth century medieval Latin culture; Charles McIlwain believed that medieval parliaments were important in appraising that general period.¹⁷

Burckhardt suggested that Italian individualism was the dominant mark of fifteenth century Italy. Economic growth and the rise of a middle class (forever rising!!) were characteristic features of Robert Lopez' Tenth Century Renaissance, which he meant to be the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages. Then there were such cataclysmic or heroic events as the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the conclusion of the Hundred Years War, and the Columbian voyages, particularly the first in 1492 to the New World.

The Renaissance, as Ferguson has shown, is a subject of endless fascination; and by studying it one is impressed by the perceptions of historians from their frame of reference no less than by objective historical events.¹⁸

Renaissance humanists

believed they lived in a veritable golden age compared to the one of superstition which had preceded theirs. Religious reformers in the sixteenth century reached a similar conclusion but for different reasons. For them the origins of Christianity rather than Classical Antiquity established the primacy of an earlier age, and they had simply recaptured the Christian essence after a millennium of clerical domination from Rome. Nor did historians during the Enlightenment relish the thought of extolling the virtues of an "Age of Faith" so they, too, accepted the Renaissance-Reformation theory of a dark age. Only romantics in the aftermath of Rousseau and the French Revolution found solace in these religious and ethical ideals of an organic society so lacking in their own time. In this same instance they imposed upon the Renaissance the image of a monstrous Machiavelle. Not until after World War I with the "revolt of the medievalists" was there an

attempt to modify that Burckhardtian synthesis, which had been unchallenged for half a century.

The Reformation was, in large degree, a hybrid between a precise and an imprecise period. Did it begin with Luther's nailing the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral and conclude with the Peace of Westphalia after the Thirty Years War, or were its beginnings and endings much more deeply-rooted?¹⁹ Some would discern origins in the protests of Wyclif and Hus at the end of the fourteenth century (if not in the Albigensian heresy of the late twelfth!) and would have difficulty closing the period before the Cromwellian era in Britain had spent itself. Then, too, does one use only religious events to denote the Reformation era. What of the sixteenth century's great inflation and resulting social impact, the modernizing of political structures, the oceanic discoveries, and, of course, the heroes of the age? All of these enter into the scheme of periodization and allow for sub-divisions as well as extensions of the epoch. One of the thorniest problems for students of the Renaissance and Reformation is the linkage between the two and the effect that it has for periodization. Was there a logical sequence of Renaissance to Reformation; did Erasmus, indeed, lay the egg which Luther hatched, as contemporaries had stated it? Or was the Reformation merely the religious expression of the Renaissance, a part of a thoroughly revolutionary pattern? More recently it has become fashionable to speak of the Reformation as a Counter-Renaissance, an anti-secular movement and epoch which had much in common with the Middle Ages and which, in turn, was tossed aside by the secularism generated by the Scientific Revolution.²⁰ Herbert Butterfield's comment

below makes this point. With all these qualifications the old limits of Luther and Westphalia pale into insignificance.

The age of the Scientific Revolution as the end of the Middle Ages continues where Lynn Thorndike's interpretation of medieval science left off, if we are to accept commonly-held opinions of historians of science. The suggestion is that the Renaissance was barren scientifically and that the secular ethos of the seventeenth century was a much more plausible termination of the Middle Ages and beginning of Modernity. Herbert Butterfield in The Origins of Modern Science identified the source of seventeenth century secularism:

It is the so-called "scientific revolution," popularly associated with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but reaching back in an unmistakably continuous line to a period much earlier still. Since that revolution overturned the authority in science not only of the middle ages but of the ancient world--since it ended not only in the eclipse of scholastic philosophy but in the destruction of Aristotelian physics--it outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom.²¹

Hans Baron, that indefatigable defender of Burckhardt has probed scientific thought and accomplishment during the Renaissance in order to counter this position; however, he is hard-pressed to discover a a secular climate in the fifteenth century comparable to that in time from Galileo to Newton.²² Alas, the world could

never be quite the same again, although Carl Becker discovered a medieval Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers in the Enlightenment.²³ So much for the eras which know only vague beginnings and endings. Alas, debate about and interpretation of them also know no limits!

Art styles, like scientific and intellectual revolutions, are used to label historical epochs but have equally indefinite beginnings and endings. The difficulty of establishing the temporal and geographic limits to the gothic, baroque, rococo, and romanticism is well-known. The relationship, especially, between late eighteenth and early nineteenth century classicism (sometimes referred to as classical revival or neo-classicism) and its antecedents and successors has troubled art historians and periodizers. Was classicism a revival style or derivative from the classic sub-structure of the baroque and rococo idiom?²⁴ What, indeed are its time limits? How does romanticism relate to it?²⁵ Some have suggested that the sublime classicism as exhibited in the "Oath of the Horatii" by Jacques Louis David or the world of cylinders, spheres, and cones of the architects Boullée and Ledoux should properly be labelled an age of romantic classicism.²⁶ One view is that classicism, as a dimension of romanticism, originated with the English gardens of the early eighteenth century, received authentication from the excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and was publicized by the Hellenist Winkelmann and the etcher Peranesi before achieving fulfillment at the end of the century.²⁷ When romantic classicism spent itself, as the argument goes, the classical gave way to a new phase of romanticism, a gothic revival. This kind of intricate periodization has sometimes led to more confusion than resolution in determining the cultural nomenclature for the

epoch, 1750-1850.

To conclude this section on imprecise modes of periodization, let me suggest other types occasionally used. Whenever geographic designations have labeled historic epochs, they inevitably have been imprecise. This is evident with the "moving frontier" in American history or the historic interaction between forest and steppe in Russia. Religion easily lends itself to periodization as suggested by the Reformation Age. The Age of Faith is sometimes substituted for the Middle Ages, or a part of it. Institutions identify periods, e.g. Age of the Church, of Feudalism, or Rise of Cities. Socio-economic developments may also periodize: the Bourgeois Century, and the Ages of Mercantilism, and Industrial, Agrarian, and Commercial Revolutions. Periods of migration also have marked periods. The Völkerwanderung of the late Roman and early medieval periods has provided a context within the continuum while the Jewish diaspora has been a virtual continuum unto itself. Scientific and technological achievements, mentioned earlier, have been important considerations for periodization. It may be that Hiroshima will provide an enduring chronological benchmark in our designating the post-World War II epoch an Atomic Age.

The third kind of periodization noted above, is, in a sense, not periodization at all. It is the unimaginative categorizing of events and movements into centuries, even when they do not quite fit. We have talked already about the Tenth Century Renaissance, the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, and could also refer to The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries, or a recent series with such titles as Europe in the Sixteenth Century and Seventeenth Century Europe.²⁸ Even with this apparent precision, overlapping occurs because historical forces are not always contained within

century limits.

Marc Bloch wrote thoughtfully about using centuries as a divide: "We no longer name ages after their heroes. We very prudently number them in sequence every hundred years, starting from a point fixed, once and for all, at the year 1 of the Christian era. The art of the thirteenth century, the philosophy of the eighteenth, the "stupid nineteenth:" these faces in arithmetical masks haunt the pages of our books. Which of us will boast of having never fallen prey to the lures of their apparent convenience?"²⁹ To make matters worse, centuries themselves are sub-divided with sometimes feeble attempts to apply broad-based labels to relatively brief spans in time, e.g. the Rise of Modern Europe series contains A Generation of Materialism: Europe 1870-1900 and the Age of the Baroque: 1610-1660.³⁰ Then, too, centuries are sometimes lumped together. William McNeill has thought in terms of millennia and half millennia.³¹ He sees a unity of the world between 500 B.C. and 1500 A.D. and between 1500 A.D. and the present. With the notable changes occurring just now, we have begun a new epoch.

Scripture, global historians, and philosophical systems-- those which or who have taken the broader view of man and society--have left their mark on historical periods. They constitute a fourth category for periodization. In Scripture the construct of the Four Kingdoms from the Book of Daniel has been a durable model. Interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel told the king that

You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the
God of the heavens has given the kingdom,
the power, the strength, and the glory, and

into whose hand he has put the children of men, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, wherever they dwell, making you rule over them all--you are the head of gold. After you shall arise another kingdom, inferior to you; then a third kingdom, of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron; for as iron breaks in pieces and beats down all things, and as iron crushes all things, so shall it break in pieces and crush.³²

It is less surprising that Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century followed Daniel's scheme--for it continued as accepted periodization until the Enlightenment--than that Hegel did in just the last century. For the latter the Four Empires were the Oriental, Greek, Roman, and German, which, of course, provided a convenient entry into the Middle Ages. In such periodization little can be said about the beginnings and ends of epochs, for they become self-evident and not really subject to any criteria.

In our day traditional periodization has also been buffeted by historians who take this broader view of mankind, yet they do so with immeasurably more finesse than did Hegel. I speak of world historians like William McNeill and Leften Stavrianos. Professor McNeill in his Rise of the West, places the West in a larger context and consequently of necessity deals extensively with the world beyond the West. In a very general way McNeill divides his narrative into The Era of Middle Eastern Dominance to 500 B.C.; the Eurasian Cultural Balance 500 B.C.-1500 A.D.; and The Era of

Western Dominance, 1500 to the Present. The middle epoch contains, for example, a number of sub-categories: The Expansion of Hellenism, 500-146 B.C., Closure of the Eurasian Ecumene, 500 B.C.-200 A.D., the Barbarian Onslaught and Civilized Response, 200-600 A.D., The Resurgence of the Middle East, 600-1000 A.D., and Steppe Conquerors and the European Far West, 1000-1500 A.D. As far as the West is concerned, McNeill is saying much the same that others have said, but by placing it in a world perspective, he has raised new questions about establishing beginnings and endings for periods. He has shown quite clearly that the old labels no longer hold.

The same is even truer of the periodization of Professor Stavrianos, who has authored a text which he calls a global history. He even more than McNeill challenges traditional periodization. Rejecting an organization which is essentially one for Western history with scattered chapters on the non-West, he has in The World to 1500 and The World Since 1500 viewed the world from afar, figuratively, from the moon. After establishing a world setting, the author molds both space and time thereafter. The thirteenth century is more important as the era of the Turco-Tartar advance than as one of the origins of the English parliament. The sixteenth century marks the beginning of the "World of the Emerging West," while the Renaissance and Reformation are curiously missing. In "World of Western Dominance, 1763-1914," one looks in vain for such traditional topics as the Unification of Italy and Germany. The nearest the author comes to either is a broader Political Revolution and its sub-topics of Liberalism and Nationalism. The last section is "World of Western Decline and

Triumph, 1914- . " In such a way the world historians, the Great Synthesizers, have dramatically changed our temporal as well as spatial perspective. While they are really not new at this, they are considerably more sophisticated than the followers of the Book of Daniel or Voltaire and his universal history in the eighteenth century.

Two recent advocates of the larger view, though differing in their method from McNeill and Stavrianos, have offered notable innovations in periodization. I speak of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, for whom civilization constituted a unit of study. ³³ Beyond that point they had little agreement. Spengler, really a gloomy biological determinist, believed that civilization passed through a succession of completed cycles. Beginning with childhood, it moved through old age before inaugurating an entirely new epoch. His periodization consisted of Indian, Arabian, Antique, and Western civilizations, the latter having begun about 900 A.D. By the twentieth century it had reached the "winter" of its life span and was in irrevocable decline. Toynbee, also anxious about the fate of the West, believed that through analysis of some twenty one civilizations a pattern or rhythm could be discovered. Far from being deterministic, he concluded that civilizations maintained themselves so long as they responded to the challenges which confronted them. His periodization incorporated within the challenge-response theme genesis, growth, breakdown, disintegration, an age of universal states, universal churches, and heroic ages. Though Toynbee's method differed greatly from Spengler's, he, too, saw patterns of growth and decline and so perceiving, he labeled these stages in the time continuum.

Recently the problem of reconciling periods of development

within a country to the tenets of a universal system has arisen. I refer particularly to the efforts of Soviet historians to clarify and articulate periods in Russian history in the context of the general Marxist scheme. The historian Leo Yarish has noted their difficulties:

The adjustment of the history of an individual country to a predetermined universal pattern tends under any circumstances to be awkward, but in this case it is made particularly difficult by several complexities. Not the least of these is that Marxism is a system of thought which leaves room for different interpretations of its basic theses. Even more significant, however, is the fact that the political leaders of the Soviet Union have reserved for themselves the right to determine which of these interpretations must be accepted by historical scholarship--and from time to time this official interpretation is changed to meet what they consider to be the requirements of overall national policy.

It is therefore not surprising that the periodization of Russian history has been a matter of controversy throughout the half-century since Russian Marxists have been writing general history, and that it appears to remain as far from a satisfactory settlement today as it was at the start.³⁴

Stalin himself initially generated much of the debate in his History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course, in which he stated that "The prime task of historical science is to study and disclose the laws of production, the laws of development of the productive forces and of the relations of production, the laws of economic development of society." With this model before them Soviet historians have usually tried to identify and set forth the chronological limits of the following: 1) a primitive society in which communal ownership prevailed, 2) a society in which production was based on slavery and antagonistic relationships, 3) a system identified as feudal in which a serf-lord relationship prevailed, 4) a capitalist system featuring the capitalist-wage laborer conflict and, finally, 5) socialism, which has been achieved in the USSR.³⁵ Although these five phases of development have often been modified during intense debates which have lasted for decades, Soviet historians usually approximate such an outline as they ascribe varying substance and limits to Russia's historical epochs. What has been notably absent has been the human factor, which clearly has played a crucial role throughout the Russian past.

In conclusion, the historian emphasizes the centrality of time in his grappling with the problem of continuity and change. He does so through periodization which imposes order and gives meaning to the continuum while at the same time provides the episode with a context. This has the effect of articulating the substance and enlivening the discipline, essential to both effective teaching and narrating.

The question arises as to whether the historian's construct of

a period is an arbitrary thing and really a bit of luck when it sticks as a label. The historian's credo, like that of any scholar, is one of attaining truth. While truth may be an absolute, the historian's method is one of a relativist, who recognizes that his/her conclusions are always tempered by the frame of reference. This relativism does not imply, however, that one period name is as good as another. Each, presumably, will stand on its merit and by the criteria utilized. As we have noted, the national historian of the last century will reach a different conclusion from the global one of the late twentieth in assessing Cavour's Italy and Bismarck's Germany. The same may be said of Burckhardt, who was obviously better received in a Europe-oriented world than in a global one. Periodization then is hardly arbitrary; it represents at any given time a synthesis of information from various disciplines. Because it is limited by the historian's frame of reference, it is inconclusive and may be quite imprecise.

Occasionally luck does seem to enter into the acceptance of a designation. In this respect, the term Renaissance requires a final scrutiny. Wallace Ferguson has noted correctly that Trecento and Quattrocento humanists were quite aware and vocal about the uniqueness of their age and its contrast with that of the Schoolman several centuries earlier. Yet it was only in the last century that the French historian Michelet used the word Renaissance to suggest a return to the humanistic models of Antiquity. Shortly afterward the word received the stamp of affirmation from Jacob Burckhardt. Now it is such a by-word for periodization that only a global perspective threatens to eradicate it. But was it not more than luck that led to the durability of the Michelet-Burckhardt term? Was it not the high intellectual quality of Burckhardt's classic Civilization of

the Renaissance in Italy that left an indelible mark on the continuum. That conclusion is undoubtedly a fairer one than just leaving it to fortune.

Periodization has brought with it its own problems.

Historical epochs as delineated by historians have a way of becoming absolutes which entrap both historians and their audiences. The former sometimes argue endlessly and fruitlessly about the more appropriate criteria for determining beginnings and endings of periods, while students, on the other hand, view the epochs as rigidly cemented into the continuum. Both parties appear forgetful that epochs are the historian's construct to be used to clarify and communicate, not defend to the death. In the end one becomes rather bored with Professor Baron's fanatical defense of the Burckhardtian thesis. Is it after all the end of all history? When the approach is excessively rigid, the problem of "lag" occurs, a frightening and unnerving phenomenon for the novice. How, indeed, can feudal elements linger into the French Revolutionary era (swept away, to be sure, on that memorable night of August 4, 1789) when we have been taught that the last vestiges had disappeared with Cellini's Italy? Again, E. M. Tillyard discovered medieval holdovers in Elizabethan England, after we had been convinced by that formidable triumvirate of Tudor historians Pollard, Read, and Neale that her age was thoroughly "modern." The examples are endless, and they show the risks in looking for precise and clear answers; these examples show also the difficulties of changing minds already made up about historical periods.

Why, then, is periodization--determining the beginnings and endings of historical epochs--so slippery? 1) Certainly the

historian should have at his command a broad range of interdisciplinary tools if he is labeling or attempting to understand the labels imposed on the great sweep of history. He must approach his task both in an analytical and synthetic manner. 2) All of this presupposes that he has an acute awareness of the importance of the temporal dimension and a sense of humility that his own frame of reference imposes special limitations upon him. 3) Only time will tell whether a label sticks and this may occur through luck, high scholarship, or a changing climate of opinion. We see readily that concerns about energy, population, Third World, space, population, food at the end of the twentieth century easily lend themselves to period labels. The variables are indeed great in this task.

The historian who dismisses the temporal dimension or regards it lightly as a mere abstraction does disservice to his discipline. Time is what distinguishes history from other disciplines. The continuum is what is truly unique, but he must reconcile it with change, the episode. Marc Bloch summed it up in his incomparable way: "The great problems of historical inquiry derive from the antithesis of these two attributes [continuity and change] ...To what extent does the connection which the flow of time sets between them predominate over the differences born out of the same flow? Should the knowledge of the earlier period be considered indispensable or superfluous for the understanding of the later?"³⁶ The answer to these questions are what the beginnings and endings of historical epochs are about. By developing criteria for arranging time in historical periods we can at once accent the continuum and relieve the monotony from it. The historian's public, whether in his classroom or his readers, is

receptive to the episode, but not the continuum. We practitioners will ignore this state of affairs at our peril, for recognizing and articulating change offers the best prospect for ordering the stream. Above all, it will increase the reception and make history a meaningful discipline that is so desperately needed today.

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Footnotes

1. See Carl G. Gustavson, A Preface to History (N.Y., 1955), p. 13.
2. Thucydides, The Complete Writings of, The Peloponnesian War. Unabridged Crawley translation (N.Y., 1951), p. 3.
3. The reference here is to both Alexander Solzhenitsyn, August 1914 (N.Y., 1972) and Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August (N.Y., 1962).
4. See Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft (N.Y., 1953), pp. 27 ff.; Trygve R. Tholfsen, Historical Thinking (N.Y., 1967), pp. 236, 247-48, 261 ff.
5. Quoted in David Hackett Fischer, Historians' Fallacies (N.Y., 1970) p. 145.
6. While the hero theme was first articulated by Thomas Carlyle, Heroes and Hero-Worship over a century ago, it has more recently been examined by Sidney Hook, The Hero in History (Boston, 1955).
7. The immediate and long-range factors are examined in Sidney B. Fay, Origins of the World War, 2 vols. (N.Y., 1928).
8. Winston Churchill, for example, links his narrative on the First World War with that on the Second in his volume, The Gathering Storm (Boston, 1948). Also see Hajo Holborn, The Political Collapse of Europe (N.Y., 1951) for a synthesis of European politics of this and the last century.
9. For varying interpretations of the Cold War see N. A. Graebner, ed., The Cold War: Ideological Conflict or Power Struggle (Boston, 1964).
10. Diverse interpretations of the Russian Revolutions from 1905 through the 1930's are found in Robert H. McNeal, Russia in Transition 1905-1914: Evolution or Revolution (N.Y., 1970); Arthur E. Adams, ed., The Russian Revolution and Bolshevik Victory (Boston, 1960); and Robert V. Daniels, ed., The Stalin Revolution: Fulfillment or Betrayal of Communism (Boston, 1965).
11. Roger Wines, ed., Enlightened Despotism: Reform or Reaction (Boston, 1967); William F. Church, ed., The Influence of the Enlightenment on the French Revolution (Boston, 1964); Peter Amann, ed., The Eighteenth Century Revolution: French or Western (Boston, 1963); David H. Pinkney, ed., Napoleon: Historical Enigma (Boston, 1969); Frank A. Kafker and James M.

- Laux, ed., The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations, 2nd ed. (N.Y., 1978); Crane Brinton, A Decade of Revolution 1789-1799 (N.Y., 1963); and Geoffrey Bruun, Europe and the French Imperium 1799-1814 all suggest numerous possibilities for periodizing this revolutionary era.
12. See History of Magic and Experimental Science, 6 vols. (N.Y., 1923-41) and Medieval Technology and Social Change (Oxford, 1964) respectively.
 13. The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation (Boston, 1948).
 14. For the Byzantine, Muslim, and Frankish roles in periodizing the early Middle Ages see Archibald R. Lewis, Naval Power and Trade in the Mediterranean A.D. 500-1100 (Princeton, 1951); Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlemagne (N.Y., 1957); Alfred F. Havighurst, ed., The Pirenne Thesis (Boston, 1969; and Richard E. Sullivan, ed., The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did it Signify? (Boston, 1959), respectively.
 15. For the last two see Robert S. Lopez, "Still Another Renaissance?" American Historical Review, LVII (1951-52), 1 ff; Lynn White et al., "Symposium on the Tenth Century," Medievalia et Humanistica, VIII (1955), 3 ff. and Charles H. Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1927).
 16. See Karl H. Dannenfeldt, ed., The Renaissance: Medieval or Modern (Boston, 1959) for varying interpretations of this epoch.
 17. "Medieval Institutions in the Modern World," in Speculum, XVI (1941), 275-283.
 18. Renaissance in Historical Thought, op cit., passim.
 19. Typical of this periodization is Harold J. Grimm, The Reformation Era, 1500-1650 (N.Y., 1954). For other dimensions of the Reformation problem see Lewis W. Spitz, ed., The Reformation: Material or Spiritual (Boston, 1962).
 20. This is really an extension of the classic debate between Wilhelm Dilthey and Ernst Troeltsch at the beginning of this century. Dilthey viewed Renaissance and Reformation as twin forces in the struggle for individual liberty; Troeltsch viewed the Reformation as the religious

- antithesis to the secular Renaissance.
21. (New York, 1961), intro., vii.-viii.
 22. "Toward a More Positive Evaluation of the Fifteenth-Century Renaissance," in the Journal of the History of Ideas, IV (1943), 27-49.
 23. (New Haven, 1932).
 24. For an argument against the classical continuum from the Renaissance see Fritz Baumgart, A History of Architectural Styles (N.Y., 1970), p. 258.
 25. Ibid., pp. 258-266. Baumgart uses the term romantic classicism, which was apparently first used by Sigfried Giedion, Spatbarocker und romantischer Klassizismus (Munich, 1922).
 26. See Emil Kaufman, Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, and Lequeu. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S., vol. 42, pt. 3 (Philadelphia, 1952).
 27. Fiske Kimball introduced the term romantic classicism in English when he discerned its origins in the English garden of the early eighteenth century. See "Romantic Classicism in Architecture," Gazette des Beaux-Arts, XXV (1944), 95-112.
 28. H.G. Koenigsberger and G. L. Mosse, Europe in the Sixteenth Century (N.Y., 1968) and D. H. Pennington, Seventeenth Century Europe (N.Y., 1970).
 29. Historian's Craft, pp. 181-182.
 30. By Charlton J. H. Hayes (N.Y., 1941) and Carl J. Friedrich, (N.Y. 1952), respectively.
 31. The Rise of the West (Chicago, 1963).
 32. Daniel 2:37-40.
 33. Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West (N.Y., 1926-28) and Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1934-59).
 34. "The Problem of Periodization," in C. E. Black, ed., Rewriting Russian History, 2nd ed. (N.Y. 1962), pp. 34-35.
 35. The Elizabethan World Picture (London, 1948). The reference here is to

Albert F. Pollard, Sir John Neale, and Conyers Read.

36. Historian's Craft, pp. 28-29.