

History: A Seamless Web or a Web of Many Seams?
The Broadmoor Lecture (4 May 2005)

I presented a paper so entitled at The Broadmoor resident forum on May 4. It is a revised version of that which was presented at the biannual meeting of the Society for the History of Time in Britain at the end of the 1970s. Normally, it would have been published but was disqualified because I was not in attendance at the meeting. This shorter (without the preface and somewhat revised) constituted the lecture.

The comprehension of historic time it turns out is a very sophisticated business. Children



are wholly present-minded, absorbed in their immediate world of space and time and utterly unable to appreciate complex dimensions of either. Only when they reach ten or twelve years, do they acquire some understanding of a historic past, although a broad sense of chronology probably still eludes them. Indeed, chronological illiteracy remains a challenge to college students, who frequently fail to grasp both event sequences and comparative development in time of cultures, civilizations, and nations. Their learning is reduced to a memorization of dates, a sure-fire prescription for alienation from the study of history.

How then does one make sense or use of this flow of history? The answer, I suggest, is in the distinction which exists between continuity and change, between the continuum and those historical episodes within it. As the French history Marc Bloch put it:

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. The historian's task is one of resolving the tension between these two by substituting a 'web of many seams' for Frederick William Maitland's 'seamless web of history.' The reconciliation of continuity and change really provides a context--an episode or period--for describing what occurred in time.

There is no magic about the historical period; nor it is an absolute. It is merely the historian's construct which, whether spoken or written, makes the historical narrative intelligible. The historian's task, after all, is one of recreating a meaningful past by locating people, events, and

forces in time.

What constitutes these historical epochs which presume to make sense of the continuum? First, periods are often associated with significant individuals--event-makers, so-called 'heroes'--or sharply-defined events that articulate critical changes in the historical continuum. Secondly, the epoch may be a watershed of forces, a place in time when a variety of changes are occurring in politics, society, the economy, and culture. While precise beginnings and ends of such changes may be difficult to document, we see clearly that they did occur. Thirdly, change may be designated artificially by simply establishing periods by decades, centuries, or even millennia. Fourthly, the context may be broadly shaped by philosophies of history that discern a rhythm in the behavior of civilizations (e.g. Toynbee) or a dialectic in the behavior of classes (e.g. Marx). Interpreting these periods and the elements within them is a major undertaking of historians and one of endless controversy among them. In reviewing each of these four examples we see how this is true.

The first are those periods established with reasonable precision. Such definitive bounds 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 categorizing won such uncritical acceptance that one almost assumes that wise old Socrates knew that he was living in the fourth century B.C. Ages associated with heroes such as the Age of Pericles, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Constantine, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Bismarck can usually be designated with considerable specificity. Golden Ages, especially those that identify entities with individuals--Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, the Baghdad of Haroun al-Rashid, Laurentian Florence, and Elizabethan England are useful historical markers. Even so, 'golden ages' do not always conform precisely with the reign or imperium of individuals cited.

On the other hand, eras demarcated by events--wars or revolutions, especially--can be much more complicated. Wars, it seems, do not always begin with a first shot and conclude with an armistice or treaty. When we label a period the 'era of World War I' do we mean a period which began with the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo and concluded on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918? Or do we favor long-range causes and speak of roots of the conflict in Bismarckian diplomacy in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War more than a generation earlier? When did it end? Most would say 1918, but others have depicted the Second World War as part and parcel of the first, thus resulting in an era of world war from 1914 until 1945. Only with the passage of time do we see the persuasiveness of the argument that World War II was an extension of World War I. The conclusion of the Second World War, incidentally, presents problems in that peace treaties were delayed and almost immediately fused with a Cold War that clouded the peace that should have happened.

Dating revolutions in order to place them in the continuum also presents a problem despite assumptions of precision in determining beginnings and end. Did the Russian Revolution begin with the February uprising in Petrograd against the monarchy or the October one against the socialist Kerensky? Or is a preferable origin the revolution of 1905 as a first phase? And its conclusion? The choice exists among 1917, the Civil War which followed, the Stalin Revolution of the early 1930s, or is the entire Soviet epoch to be viewed as a revolutionary interlude which collapsed in the early 1990s?

And what of the French Revolution? Did it begin with the profligacy of Louis XIV and Louis XV, the American Revolution in an 'Age of Revolution', or the calling of the Estates General in 1789? The French historian Lefebvre speaks of four revolutions, not just one,

beginning in 1789. And what of its conclusion? Was it the Thermidorian Terror, which devoured the Revolution's children in 1794, Napoleon's coup d'état in 1799, or the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814-15. Indeed, should Napoleon be lumped into the revolutionary epoch from, say, 1789-1814 in order to round off a neat quarter century of upheaval, or should the revolution be neatly packaged in the decade from 1789 to Napoleon's coup in 1799 thereby omitting Napoleon altogether from the cast of revolutionary characters. That doubts arise in periodizing an event with such seemingly precise dating as the French Revolution illustrates the historian's dilemma.

The second kind of period I suggest is one which is longer in duration and certainly more indefinite, one embodying change on a broad scale. If historians exercise considerable latitude in dealing with specific events, their options are endless and, indeed, less than satisfying when they take on such epochs as the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the so-called Scientific, Commercial, Agricultural, and Industrial Revolutions. Here analyses focus on not just heroes but on such themes as political behavior; 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.

One is likely to use such criteria in defining and determining the origins of the Middle Ages. Should the Middle Ages be equated with the Dark Ages, and may one with justification speak of such a period between the twin cultural peaks of Antiquity and the Renaissance? Historians of science [e.g. Lynn Thorndike] and of technology [e.g. Lynn White] took exception to the idea of a Dark Age and points to notable medieval achievements in their respective fields. Many years ago the late Wallace Ferguson argued that demeaning the pre-Renaissance (e.g. Middle Ages) was simply a manufacture of Renaissance humanists five hundred or so years ago. That being the case such notions should not mesmerize us today.

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 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? Before long we encounter a Carolingian, Ottonian, Tenth Century, and Twelfth Century Renaissance. Are we to assume that Middle Ages and Renaissance do not mix even though Johan Huizinga spoke of the Waning of the Middle Ages during the same Quattrocento that Jacob Burckhardt lauded in his classic *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*? Without doubt the origin and termination of the Middle Ages are very, very elusive, even though historians have for the most part rendered an intelligible account of the stream of time since the age of Augustus by employing the term. We now know better than to assume that the Middle Ages started abruptly with the ousting of the last Roman emperor in 476 and ended with, say, Dante or the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. We know, too, that the Middle Ages pertains only to Europe, and in the minds of many historians to only a part of it at that. Recognizing these limits and that it is not a synonym for Dark, it still remains useful tool in the classroom and for the textbook.

Concluding the Middle Ages is, as noted, quite as difficult and imprecise a task as starting it. Sometimes the end of the Middle Ages is taken to be the beginning of the Renaissance, maybe 1400. The point is not only when but where? Burckhardt forever left his

mark on European periodization with his Italian Quattrocento construct, yet was there a Renaissance elsewhere in Europe during the same fifteenth century? Huizinga found a distinctly medieval cultural resurgence, if not 'rebirth', in the fifteenth-century Netherlands, while Charles Haskins' twelfth-century renaissance suggested that the real roots of an Italian Renaissance were medieval. In effect, Haskins rejected the abrupt break which Burckhardt imposed on the continuum.

Haskins' challenge raised the question about criteria for periodizing such an amorphous epoch. He was singularly impressed with medieval Latin culture; Charles McIlwain believed that medieval parliaments were critical in evaluating the period. Burckhardt regarded Italian individualism to be the hallmark of fifteenth-century Italy. For Robert Lopez economic growth and the appearance of middle class society in 'a renaissance of the tenth century' constituted the end of the Middle Ages. Cataclysmic events such 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, have served as historian's markers in the continuum.

The Renaissance, as Ferguson observed in his *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, is a subject of endless fascination; and by studying it one is impressed by the diverse perceptions historians have had of it. Renaissance humanists believed that they lived in a veritable golden age compared to the Scholastics' age of superstition which had preceded theirs.

Religious reformers in the sixteenth century reached a similar conclusion but for different reasons. For them primitive Christianity rather than Classical Antiquity established the primacy of the early age, and they had simply recaptured the Christian essence after a millennium of a Roman clerical imperium. 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 discovered in it those religious and ethical ideals of an organic society so lacking in their own mechanistic and doubting age. In this same instance they seemed almost to identify the Renaissance with Machiavellian evil. Not until after World War I with the so-called 'revolt of the medievalists' was there an attempt to modify that Burckhardtian synthesis, which had been unchallenged for half a century.

The Reformation was essentially a hybrid between a precisely and an imprecisely defined period. Did it begin with Luther's nailing the Ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral and end with the Peace of Westphalia which concluded the Thirty Years War, or were its origins and termination more deeply-rooted? Some discerned origins in the protests of John Wyclif and John Hus at the end of the fourteenth century and had difficulty closing the period before the Cromwellian regime in England had spent itself. Then, too, does one use only religious events to denote the limits of the Age of the Reformation? What of the sixteenth century's unprecedented 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 equation of periodization and allow for subdivisions as well.

One of the thorniest problems is the linkage between Renaissance and Reformation. Was there a logical sequence of Renaissance to Reformation. Did Erasmus, indeed, 'lay the egg which Luther hatched', as contemporaries believed? Or was the Reformation merely the religious dimension of Renaissance, an aspect of a thoroughly revolution process? More recently it has become fashionable to speak of the Reformation as a Counter Renaissance, an anti-secular reaction which had much in common with medieval thought without Papal garnishing. 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 theory regarding medieval science left off, if we are to accept commonly-held opinions of historians of science. The suggestion was 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 than the Renaissance. The late Herbert Butterfield in *The Origins of Modern Science* summed up this point of view:

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.

Hans Baron, that indefatigable defender of Burckhardt attempted to find notable scientific thought and accomplishment during the Renaissance in order to counter this proposition; however, he was hard-pressed to discover a Renaissance secular and scientific climate comparable to one spawned by Galileo and Newton. Alas, the world could never be quite the same again, despite Carl Becker claim to having discovered a medieval Heavenly City of Eighteenth Century Philosophers flourishing during the Enlightenment.

The third kind of periodization is in a sense not periodization at all. It is the unimaginative identifying of events and movements with centuries, even when they do not quite fit. We have noted already noted the Tenth Century Renaissance and The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, Mention should also be made of an attempt to regard The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries; moreover, some years ago a series was published in which each volume carried a century title, e.g. *Europe in the Sixteenth Century*, *Seventeenth Century Europe*, etc. Even with this precision, overlaps just cannot be sliced off in that ninety-ninth year of each century. To make matters worse, centuries themselves are subdivided with sometimes feeble attempts to apply broad-based labels to relatively brief time spans, e.g. volumes in the *Rise of Modern Europe* series carry such titles as *A Generation of Materialism: Europe 1870-1900* and *the Age of the Baroque: 1610-1660*. Then, too, centuries are sometimes lumped together. William McNeill has thought in terms of millennia and half millennia. He sees a unity of the world between 500 B.C. and 1500 A.D. and between 1500 A.D. and the present with some notable changes occurring just now. Presumably, we are about to embark on a new venture in time--one which will herald a 500 year epoch.

Scripture, global historians, and philosophical and theological systems--those which or who have taken the broader view of history and society--have sought to make sense of the conundrum of the continuum. They constitute a fourth and final category in our quest for rational 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 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. (Daniel 2:37-40)

It is not surprising that others followed Daniel's scheme. Jean Bodin did in sixteenth-century France, and his model continued to win acceptance in the Enlightenment and even beyond. The German philosopher Hegel in the nineteenth century also promoted a brand of history grounded in Four Empires--Oriental, Greek, Roman, and German, which, of course, provided a convenient entrance 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 own lifetime 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 H. McNeill and Leften Stavrianos. McNeill in his *Rise of the West*, while professing to place the West in a larger context, 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 numerous subcategories: 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 putting it in world perspective, he has enlarged both the meaning and raised new questions about periodization.

Leften Stavrianos' text is a good example of what might be called global history; at least that was the term he used. He even more than McNeill challenged traditional periodization. Rejecting a structure which was essentially Western history with a scattered chapter on the non-West, he tried in *The World Since 1500* to view the world from afar, figuratively, from the moon. After establishing a world setting, c. 1500, the author molded both space and time thereafter. The second phase was that of World of the Emerging West, 1500-1763. The Renaissance and Reformation were curiously missing, although one does discover an Age of Conquistadors and The Netherlands' Golden Century. The narrative is essentially one of European expansion. In the 'World of Western Dominance, 1763-1914, one looks in vain for such old favorites as the Unification of Italy and Germany. The nearest one comes is a broader Political Revolution and its sub-topics of Liberalism and Nationalism. The last section dealt with the 'World of Western Decline and Triumph, 1914-to the present.' In such a way world historians, the Great Synthesizers, have dramatically changed our time and spatial perspectives in a more sophisticated way than Daniel had undertaken.

The problem of reconciling periods of development within a country to the tenets of a universal system was one which challenged Soviet historians. Stalin himself initiated the debate in his *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course* when 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...the laws of economic development of society. Challenged thus, Soviet historians frantically tried identifying and setting forth a

chronology which embodied: 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 serf-lord relationships prevailed; 4) a capitalist system featuring the capitalist-wage laborer conflict, and, finally; 5) socialism, which was achieved in the USSR.

Although Soviet historians fiercely debated the chronology of these five phases of development they succeeded variously in adapting them to the Russian historical continuum. Notably absent was the human factor, which clearly occupied a crucial place throughout the Russian past.

In conclusion, historians emphasize the centrality of time by grappling with the problem of continuity and change. They do so through periodization, which 1) imposes order and gives meaning to the continuum; 2) gives new meaning to the episodic dimension of history, thereby enlivening both the subject and the discipline and; 3) becomes a crucial device for effective teaching and narrating. Because time is what distinguishes history from other disciplines, the continuum is its unique feature--yet it must be reconciled with change. To quote Marc Bloch one last time:

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?

The answer to these questions are what the beginnings and ends of historical epochs are about, and we leave it at that. This paper was obviously dated, especially in light of so-called post-modern scholarship of the 1990s and after. Kathleen Wilson, for example, makes a strong case for viewing the eighteenth century and 'modernity' in a light quite different from mine in the 1970s (*The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* [2003]).