INTRODUCTION: MULTIPLE TIMES
AND THE WORK OF SYNCHRONIZATION

HELGE JORDHEIM

ABSTRACT

In this essay, which introduces the History and Theory forum on Multiple Temporalities, I want to discuss how the existence of a plurality or a multiplicity of times has been conceptualized in the historiographical tradition, partly by entering into a dialogue with recent writers, historians, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars, partly by returning to the eighteenth century, to the origin of “the modern regime of historicity” (Hartog). In these theoretical and historical investigations I aim to do two things: on the one hand, to explore and discuss different ways of conceptualizing multiple times, in terms of nonsynchronicities, layers of time, or natural and historical times; on the other hand, to trace how these multiple times have been compared, unified, and adapted by means of elaborate conceptual and material practices that I here call “practices of synchronization.” From the eighteenth century onward, these synchronizing practices, inspired by, but by no means reducible to, chronology have given rise to homogeneous, linear, and teleological time, often identified as modern time per se, or simply referred to as “progress.” In focusing on the practices of synchronization, however, I want to show how this regime of temporality during its entire existence, but especially at the moment of its emergence in the eighteenth century and at the present moment of its possible collapse, has been challenged by other times, other temporalities, slower, faster, with other rhythms, other successions of events, other narratives, and so on.

Keywords: multiple times, modernity, temporal regimes, layers of time, sociology of time, eighteenth-century historiography, history of geology, synchronization

In Ethan Kleinberg’s introduction to the first virtual issue of History and Theory, entitled New Metaphysics of Time, we encounter a kind of ambivalence, even a contradiction, which is at the same time surprising and productive. Moving beyond the emphasis on language and representation, Kleinberg claims, recent theorists have re-examined “our relationship to the past and the past’s very nature” and thus attempted to construct what he refers to as “a new metaphysics of time.” Already in the next sentence, however, and without skipping a beat, he goes on to address issues of digital publishing because, as he puts it, they are also about “timing,” more precisely, about the “immediacy” of both publication and access, contrasted with the impossibility of sifting through an almost endless number of articles “in a reasonable amount of time.”

In other words, the first virtual issue of History and Theory combines theory and practice, phenomenological and material concerns: the practices of digital publishing are seen as symptomatic of a new relationship to time, which can be described as “metaphysical.” In this essay, which introduces the History and Theory Forum on Multiple Temporalities, I want to discuss whether what we are facing both in recent examinations of historical and social time, and in the new immediacies and accelerating rhythms of digital technology, should not be described as a new plurality, a new multiplicity of times, rather than as a new metaphysics. I will argue that what connects the phenomenological and the material approaches presented by Kleinberg is that they in different ways deal with time not in the singular, but in the plural.

The five essays in the forum all explore times in the plural, distributed across geographical, cultural, or historical spaces: Islamic times, postcolonial times, industrialized and standardized times, digital times, even time gardens. As a framework for these contributions, this essay will attempt to develop in a more general form the idea of multiple times, partly in dialogue with recent writers, including historians, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars, partly by returning to the eighteenth century and the origin of the modern “regime of historicity,” to use François Hartog’s term.2

TIME OUT OF JOINT: THE END OF THE MODERN TEMPORAL REGIME

In her recently published book Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?, subtitled “the rise and fall of the modern temporal regime,” Aleida Assmann analyzes what she sees as the end of the modern temporal regime in terms of a specific way of structuring the relationship between past, present, and future. The defining ideas are discontinuity between the past and the future, the fiction of beginnings, processes of destruction and preservation, and discourses of acceleration.3 From the 1980s onward, Assmann claims, this temporal structure, in which the future has emerged as the all-dominating temporal dimension, is falling apart, and is about to be replaced by another temporal regime. In this new regime, she concludes, it is up to us to find a new and better balance between the three dimensions of time.4

Assmann’s essay is only the most recent in a series of attempts to conceptualize what is perceived to be a collapse of the temporal organization that has reigned in the Western world since the mid-eighteenth century. Among the other more recent attempts to map the temporal structure of modernity at the moment of its collapse is the path-breaking work by the French historian François Hartog, entitled Régimes d’historicité (2003), in which he introduces the idea of a “crisis of time,” in terms of a moment in history when a certain set of ways of understanding and dealing with time is about to lose its uncontested and quasi-natural position and character.5

4. Ibid., 323.
5. Hartog, Regimes d’historicité, 27.
What is collapsing around us, according to Hartog and Assmann, is the regime of historicity that we have become used to calling “modern,” characterized by an openness to and a strong focus on the future, and similar lack of interest in, or rather willingness to ignore, the past. The shorthand for this regime of historicity is, of course, progress, even though both Assmann and Hartog avoid this term, thus gaining in conceptual clarity, but at the same time losing from view the social and political implications of this temporal regime beyond the historiographical field. As Robert A. Nisbet and others have pointed out, progress, in terms of a homogeneous, linear, global movement into the future toward a common, unspecified, ever-receding goal, remains one of the enduring myths of the Western world and has withstood both historical and philosophical attacks and setbacks, from the collapse into barbarism theorized by the Frankfurt School to Francis Fukuyama’s neo-liberal “end of history.”8 At present, however, the myth of the uniform time of progress seems to be losing its grip: On the one hand, globalization has brought with it more complex and heterogeneous temporal relations, in which the global time of commerce, technology, and media comes into conflict with the different rhythms in the variety of cultures and communities;7 on the other hand, the “deep times” of climate change, giving rise to the new periodization “the Anthropocene,” challenges the limited temporal horizons of social relations and political decisions and forces us to renegotiate our views of past and future.8

Both in the theory and philosophy of history and in different fields of social and political practice, there are signs that time is indeed out of joint, to retranslate the line from Shakespeare’s Hamlet that Assmann uses as the title of her book. In their views of what comes after and replaces the temporal regime of modernity, Assmann and Hartog part ways: Assmann welcomes the withdrawal from historiography of Modernisierungstheorie, “modernization theory,” as practiced by German historians like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka and partly also by Reinhart Koselleck, as well as the advent of other ways of perceiving and writing history, not least “memory studies,” to which she has made important contributions.8 Hartog, on the other hand, in the tenor of Pierre Nora and others, mourns the loss of our relationship to the past as well as to the future and the growing dominance of the present, giving rise to the ubiquitous presentism, which is about to replace all other temporal experiences and horizons. After 1989, Hartog argues, history has been reduced to an eternal present, fueled not by religious

existentialism, as in the famous case of Augustine, but by new communication technologies.\textsuperscript{10}

What both Assmann and Hartog share, however, and what I want to take issue with in this essay, is the idea that the collapse of one temporal regime, in this case the "modern," must by necessity give rise to another, or in more general terms, that any period in history is characterized by a specific regime of temporality or historicity, according to which the relationship between past, present, and future, and thus the direction, speed, and rhythm of history, can be defined. Assmann puts it this way, full of optimism: "To organize these three levels of time [past, present, and future] in a new way and to put them in a balanced relationship to each other will remain an open adventure, but definitely also the most important challenge linked to the end of the modern regime of temporality. Culture does not only produce its own past, but also its own future."\textsuperscript{11}

According to Assmann, it is up to us, the readers of her book, to engage in the ongoing work of producing a new temporal regime to replace the modern, in which the future is less dominant and the interweaving of past, present, and future, not the discontinuities between them, represent the point of entry. From Hartog she has taken the idea of the temporal regime as a homogeneous and stable structure: it "installs itself slowly and lasts for a long time."\textsuperscript{12} However, the optimism and pragmatism are her own. Even if Hartog also raises the question "if it is necessary to consider the putting into place of another regime of historicity,"\textsuperscript{13} he ends on a much more pessimistic note. To him the new regime of historicity replacing the regime of modernity is \textit{un présent monstre}, a "monstrous present":\textsuperscript{14}

In this way the present has expanded as much in the direction of the future as in the direction of the past. Toward the future: by the \textit{dispositifs} of precaution and responsibility, by taking into account what cannot be undone and what cannot be revoked, by going back to the notions of patrimony and of debt, which are combined and give meaning to the whole. Toward the past: by mobilization of similar \textit{dispositifs}. The responsibility and the duty to remember, the making of everything into patrimony, the imprescriptible, and again the debt.\textsuperscript{15}

This monstrous present, Hartog concludes, "is at the same time everything (there is nothing but the present) and nearly nothing (the tyranny of the moment),"\textsuperscript{16} and has since 1989 replaced the modern regime of temporality. At one point in his book, however, he also considers another option: that "the dispersion or simply a multiplicity of different regimes of temporality could be a constitutive or distinctive feature of the present."\textsuperscript{17} Hartog leaves this idea by the wayside and continues to develop his theory of the ever-expanding present. In this essay, as well as in this forum, the ambition is to explore further this idea of a multiplicity of times

\textsuperscript{10} Hartog, \textit{Regimes d'historicité}, 119ff.
\textsuperscript{11} Assmann, \textit{Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?}, 323.
\textsuperscript{12} Hartog, \textit{Regimes d'historicité}, 118.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 208.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 217.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, 216.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, 217.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 208.
and temporalities as a viable theoretical and historical alternative to long-lasting, all-pervasive regimes of temporality, such as “the modern” or “presentism.”

Even though I have begun my discussion by questioning the assumption shared by Hartog and Assmann that the modern temporal regime will be replaced by a new one, which can be either more balanced or completely presentist, my argument goes further. During its entire existence, but maybe especially at the moment of its emergence in the eighteenth century and at the present moment of its collapse, the regime of temporality identified as “modern” has been challenged by other times, other temporalities, slower, faster, with other rhythms, other successions of events, other narratives, and so on. Answers to these challenges have come in the form of attempts to compare, unify, and adapt different times, or in other words, to synchronize them into the one homogeneous, linear, and teleological time of progress. In this essay I will discuss both temporal multiplicities and practices of synchronization in recent academic discourse as well as in eighteenth-century historiography.

PLURALIZING TIME: SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

To discuss time in the plural, the plurality or multiplicity of times or temporalities has for a long time been the prerogative of sociologists, whereas historians since the birth of historicism in the late eighteenth century have been left with the one singular time of progress and human development, with a few well-known exceptions. This is not the place to investigate at length how the borders between sociological and historical invocations of time and temporality have been patrolled, by whom and by what means. It suffices to take a brief look at some of the disciplinary investments in temporal multiplicity and temporal uniformity respectively.

In sociology, the systematic mapping of “the multiplicity of social times,” la multiplicité des temps sociaux, was introduced by the French-Russian sociologist Georges Gurvitch, a Durkheimian and student of Maurice Halbwachs. Arguing that all categories of thought, in this case, time, had social origins and should be perceived and analyzed as social institutions, Gurvitch identified eight types of time, each associated with special manifestations of sociability. For instance, the slow time of duration is the time of kinship, families, and demography, whereas “erratic time” is the time of irregular life and events, contingencies and surprises, “cyclical time” is the time of repetitions and recurrences, and so forth.18

In 1958, the same year that Gurvitch first presented his thoughts on the multiplicity of social times at the Sorbonne, his friend, the historian Fernand Braudel, published in the journal Annales his now canonical essay “Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée,” in which he famously argued, in dialogue with both Gurvitch and Lévi-Strauss, who had just published the first volume of Anthropologie structurale, that history was not concerned just with events. In addition to the rapidly changing and shifting event-time, there were two other levels of time, according to Braudel: the time of social and economic structures and cycles, with a much slower rhythm, and the longue durée of landscapes, geography, and

indeed, Aristotelian science. Analyzing these deeper, more hidden levels, history will change from an ideographic to a nomothetic science, to the extent that we will experience a convergence of history and social science: history will become a dimension of the social sciences.19

By pluralizing time, and in the same intellectual move, reuniting history and sociology, Braudel could have been restoring to history the level of reflection and complexity in dealing with questions of time and temporality that it had lost at the end of the eighteenth century and embraced the theory of multiple social times developed by Gurvitch. However, this was not Braudel’s intention. As soon as he had closed one gap between history and sociology, he opened another one:

The time of the sociologists cannot be our time. . . . Our time is, similar to the time of the economists, a standard. When a sociologist explains to us that a structure is incessantly deconstructing and then reconstructing itself, we accept this without question, if it matches our own observations. . . . But all this can only be defined in reference to the homogeneous time of the historians, in reference to the general standard of all these phenomena, and not in reference to the heterogeneous social time, a standard particular to each one of these phenomena.20

To Braudel, the three temporal rhythms, the time of events, structures, and landscapes, belong to the same time, the same temporal standard, whereas to Gurvitch multiple times will by necessity lead to a complete disintegration of any unity and continuity. Against the “chameleon-like time” of the sociologist, Braudel evokes the “indispensable white, uniform light” of the historian.21 It will take another twenty years until the discipline of history takes on the challenge presented by the sociology of time and especially by the work of Gurvitch.

In 1979, the German historian and theorist of history Reinhart Koselleck published his first collection of essays, Vergangene Zukunft, or in English, Futures Past, with the subtitle “on the semantics of historical times.”22 In an essay published seven years earlier, he had announced the general direction of his reflections on time in history: “History in general,” he argues, “can only prevail as a scientific discipline if it develops a theory of historical times.”23 If this essay contains a dialogue with Braudel and a reconsideration of his rejection of the multiplicity of social times, it is well hidden. Despite his training in German Strukturgeschichte, championed by his teacher Werner Conze, Koselleck still always kept an arm-length’s distance from sociological theories and from the exchanges between history and sociology, championed by Braudel and Gurvitch. Rather than social structures, Koselleck turned his attentions to language and to philological and hermeneutical paradigms and practices, developed to perfection.

21. Ibid., 96.
by another of his teachers, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Even in his Habilitation on legal reforms in Prussia, in which he set out to write social history according to German standards, imposed on him by his teacher Conze, his approach remains philological. The “historical-phenomenological method,” he claims, “can never be surpassed . . . by questions dealing with sociological phenomena of a more general nature.” Then he concludes that “all claims are based on interpretations of texts, deduced from these, strengthened by them.”

To Koselleck, the multiplicity of historical times is inseparably tied to language use, more specifically, to the use of political and social concepts, such as “progress,” “revolution,” “politics,” “democracy,” and so on, which he sees as aggregates of historical experience and at the same time as weapons in political battles, as both “indicators” and “factors” of historical change, as he famously put it. According to Koselleck, every concept has “its own internal temporal structure,” which is “inherent” in the concepts and is characterized by being “multilayered” and “complex.” This temporal constellation is a three-part structure consisting of all three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. Koselleck writes: “All key words in political and social language have a multilayered internal temporal structure reaching beyond the particular contemporary reality, both forward and backward.” Compared to his predecessor, Braudel, who before Koselleck was the last historian to systematically think about the multiplicity of times, Koselleck has much less faith in both structuralist models and time as a universal and absolute standard. Instead he investigates how specific historical events and processes, from the Reformation and the French Revolution to Prussian legal reforms, are shot through by different temporalities, some long and slow, going back to Greek or Roman Antiquity, some short, fast, and even immediate, caught up in the decisive moment, but all of them evoking the past, anticipating the future, and intervening in the present.

To Koselleck the key word is not multiplicity or plurality, but Ungleichzeitigkeit, nonsynchronicity. His method for breaking down Braudel’s “homogeneous time of historians” into multiple, alternative, and competing times consists in pointing at the nonsynchronicities between concepts and events, between different concepts, and between different elements in the same concepts—moments when time is out of joint, not primarily in terms of absolute discontinuities and periodizations, like the beginning and end of modernity essentialized by Assmann.

27. Ibid., vi.
and Hartog, but in terms of series of nonsynchronicities inherent in every historical period, moment, or event.29 Thus, the task of Begriffsgeschichte is to investigate “the Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen inherent in a concept”—a “historical depth that is not identical with their chronology.”30 Even though he keeps distilling and redistilling his theory of historical times, it will take Koselleck almost thirty years to develop this idea of “historical depth” into a full-fledged theory.31 This happens in the introduction to a volume of collected essays published in 2000, entitled Zeitschichten, “layers of time.” I will return to this theory shortly.

In a recent article the German historian Achim Landwehr observed that the reference to die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen in German historiography “cannot hide its origin in different versions of modernization theories and thus represents one of the last reserves of Eurocentrism.”32 To claim that something is “nonsynchronous” means to place oneself on the side of “‘progress,’ ‘avant-garde,’ or ‘elite’,” Landwehr argues. And he concludes: “The formula of the ‘Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen’ is not capable of conceptualizing the fundamental and mainly parallel coexistence of different sociocultural times, without reducing it to diachronic dissonance.”33 In other words, the formula performs the work that the anthropologist Johannes Fabian has paradigmatically exposed as a “denial of coevalness,” placing “the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.”34 In terms of an argument about German historiography and theory of history, Landwehr is probably right in his criticism, even though it is hard to be convinced that “the nonsynchronicities inherent in a concept,” evoked by Koselleck in the lexicon on political and social concepts in the European tradition, should in reality be a claim for Whiggish or Eurocentric history. However, as soon as we take a step back from Braudel’s claim that all history-writing needs one homogeneous time and open up toward the multiplicity of historical and social times, other solutions present themselves, which I will discuss in the rest of this essay: first, that the most fundamental feature of history is not the unity, uniformity, and homogeneity of Newtonian or Hegelian time, but indeed the plurality, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of socially and historically conditioned temporalities—in other words, that the most fundamental temporal feature of history is indeed Ungleichzeitigkeit, nonsynchronicity, inherent in all concepts, languages, cultures, and events, in exactly the “chameleon-like” way that Braudel was so vehemently rejecting; second, that the opposite part of the equation, Gleichzeitigkeit, or synchronicity, is never a given, but always a product of work, of a complex set of linguistic, conceptual, and technological practices of synchronization, which are found in every culture and at every time, but which have become especially dominant in

31. See John Zammito, “Koselleck’s Philosophy of Historical Time(s) and the Practice of History,” History and Theory 43, no. 1 (2004), 126.
33. Ibid., 20.
that period of Western history that we often call modernity. If these claims hold true, historical times should be investigated in terms of a dialectics between nonsynchronicities, which might be phenomenological, epistemological, or ontological, as well as existential, political, and social, and the work to adjust, adapt, and control, in other words, to synchronize them.

In the next part of this essay, I will approach these claims in two ways. In the first section, I will take a closer look at some of the conceptual tools available for this kind of examination, especially the idea of “layers of time” and the distinction between natural and historical time; in the next two sections, I will briefly draw attention to some examples of how the emergence of the modern regime of temporality, as discussed by Assmann, Hartog, and Koselleck, can be interpreted as the result of an ongoing and successful work of synchronization.

LAYERS OF TIME: THE HORIZONTAL AND THE VERTICAL

Despite the divide between sociological and philological approaches, Braudel and Koselleck are both engaged in conceptualizing the multiplicity of historical times in terms of depths and levels or layers. Koselleck’s term Zeitschichten, illustrated on the cover of the volume from 2000 by a geological formation, refers to “several layers of time of differing duration and differentiable origin, which are nonetheless present and effectual at the same time.”35 In a similar way Braudel chooses to conceptualize the times of events, structures, and landscapes in terms of “levels.” In one of the other classics in the field, L’ordre du temps, “the order of time” (1984), the Polish historian and philosopher Krzysztof Pomian talks about various “strata of time” and their possible conflictual coexistence, in reference to Heidegger, Reichenbach, and Husserl.36 It seems, then, that when historians and theorists of history engage in thinking about the multiplicity and the coexistence of different times, the image or metaphor closest at hand is that of layers, either in the geological or archeological meaning. In this way the problem of multiplicity and coexistence can be solved without losing sight of the processuality and directionality characteristic of the modern regime of temporality, by means of a metaphor that is itself very much a product of emerging modernity, the period Koselleck refers to as the Sattelzeit.37

The first to formulate a theory of multiple geological layers and hence of the multiplicity of times within the earth’s crust was the Danish natural historian Nicolaus Steno, in his 1669 presentation of the basic law of stratigraphy, which lays the foundation for the dominating theories within the geological sciences—namely that sedimentation proceeds in layers and that the upper layers are the youngest, the lower layers the oldest ones.38 In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, geology, or more precisely geognostics and mineralogy,

emerged from the tradition of natural history, in which natural and human events were taken to belong in the same group of particulars that could be studied in the prism of Aristotelian *historia* according to their temporal and spatial coordinates.\(^{39}\) In other words, the sudden and fundamental temporalization caused by the introduction of deep geological time and thus the dramatic expansion of the earth’s temporal scale by millions of years affected the human and the nonhuman equally. However, due to the emergence of the uniform and linear time of historicism, multilayered time never came to dominate the increasingly professionalized discipline of history in the same way as in the disciplines of geology, for example, in the works of William Smith and Charles Lyell, and later archeology. In his magisterial work on the reconstruction of geohistory in the age of revolution, Martin Rudwick studies “the injection of history into sciences that had previously been either descriptive or causal in their orientation, creating for the first time nature’s own history,” whereby he traces “how this novel geohistorical approach was derived from transpositions from the human world into the natural.”\(^{40}\) At the same time, however, as history was transposed into the earth and became multilayered, history on the surface lost its temporal multiplicity and became unified and uniform.

It took around 150 years before the first systematic attempts were made to regain the theory of multiple layers of history for human history, when Braudel, Koselleck, Pomian, and others made the claim that human history has the same multilayered character as the history of the earth and that in every historical moment there are various times, ages, chronologies, rhythms, and speeds at work. In the late seventeenth century, Steno introduced “stratigraphy” into the description of the earth, and especially of the earth’s crust; in the late twentieth century, Pomian transposed stratigraphy from the natural into the human world, in a move opposite from the one described by Rudwick: “Let us leave the diachronic to show that this stratigraphy of time and of history, preconceived here, allows us to understand, appealing to a purely synchronic analysis, the fundamental reasons for the polysemic nature of the word ‘time’ in philosophic and scientific discourse, not to talk about ordinary language. . . .”\(^{41}\) Even more elaborate is this transposition from the natural to the human in the introduction to Koselleck’s work *Zeitschichten*:

“Layers of time,” just like their geological prototype, refer to various temporal levels of diverse duration and diverse origin, which still exist and are effective at the same time. Even the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous, *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, one of the most informative historical phenomena, is taken up in this concept. Everything that happens at the same time, everything that emerges from heterogeneous life circumstances, both synchronically and diachronically.\(^{42}\)


\(^{40}\) Martin Rudwick, Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 651.

\(^{41}\) Pomian, *L’ordre du temps*, 334-335.

In this way the formula of the “Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen,” in terms of a specific combination of synchronic and diachronic perspectives, is given a spatial form—a vertical Gleichzeitigkeit descending through horizontal layers of Ungleichzeitigkeiten. According to Koselleck, all fields of human life and action contain different “structures of repetition [Wiederholungsstrukturen], which are changing at various speeds, stacked in layers [die sich mit verschiedenen Veränderungsschwierigkeiten abschichtig gestaffelt wandelt].”43 Contrary to Braudel’s theory, which insists on the “parallelism [Parallellschaltung] of long, short, and situative duration,”44 Koselleck wants to identify exactly what repeats itself in each temporal layer: rituals or dogmas, behavioral rules, juridical rules, or laws, institutions, constitutions, or organization.45 Another example he gives is language, in which three sets of language relations are described in terms of three layers: the pragmatic, always “unique and situated”; the semantic, “stays longer, is less variable, changes more slowly”; and the syntactic, “changes even more slowly, cannot be influenced directly.”46

Even though the theory of multiple layers of time, either in terms of Braudel’s longue durée, Pomian’s “stratigraphy of history,” or Koselleck’s Zeitschichten, offers a comprehensive and coherent solution to the predicament of multiple temporalities and their nonsynchronicity, the question remains what it fails to include and describe. Does it really make sense to think of time and history as layered—with the quick rhythms of human actions and events, including the life of the everyday, at the top, fully visible and even tangible, and then a set of progressively slow, progressively long-term, and progressively unexposed layers, until we reach the bottom, where we find the incredibly slow, almost imperceptible changes of landscapes and civilizations? A counter-example could be found in the current debates on climate change. All of a sudden the longest, slowest, and most imperceptible layers take on event-character, in the form of extreme weather and natural catastrophes, increasing CO2 levels in the atmosphere, political decisions or nondecisions, and so on, discussed most radically in recent works by the French sociologist Bruno Latour,47 whereas the fast-paced events of the everyday sink down through the layers of time until they disappear into the almost unchanging mythological layer of nature, well known from Roland Barthes’s work on mythologies of the everyday.48 Regarding the “social shape of the past,” in Eviatar Zerubavel’s words,49 it might be more useful to imagine different temporalities existing in a plane, as parallel lines, paths, tracks, or courses, zigzagging, sometimes touching or even crossing one another, but all equally visible, tangible, and with direct consequences for our lives. A historical example

43. Ibid., 15.
44. Ibid., 14.
45. Ibid., 12-14.
46. Ibid., 14.
of these kinds of “time maps” are the so-called “synchronistic tables,” which preceded the stratigraphic diagrams as the most dominant diagrammatic representations of multiple historical times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which I will discuss briefly toward the end of this essay.

Among the most widely used alternatives to conceptualizing multiple times in terms of “layers” is the concept of “temporal regimes,” transferred from the natural into the human sciences mostly via anthropological studies and theories. As already mentioned, the concept “regime” has recently gained prominence in historical theory and historiography through Hartog’s “regimes of historicity,” which he defines as “the temporal structure of a certain culture, historical context, or moment, the socially embedded experiences or articulations of the past, the present, and the future.” One problem with Hartog’s concept, however, is that it deals with time only at a very abstract, or rather, aggregated level; “historicity,” it seems, exists only at the level of what Benedict Anderson would call “imagined communities,” when a large group of people, belonging to the same community, in most cases a nation, share the same experience of time. In his work, Hartog considers the diachronic succession—not the synchronic coexistence—of three regimes of historicity: the past-oriented regime prior to the French Revolution, the future-oriented modern regime that collapsed in the late 1980s, and the present-oriented, “presentist,” regime of our own time. Furthermore, Hartog’s “regimes of historicity” consider time mainly at the level of experiences, rarely at the level of practices, technologies, and media, except for the practices of the historian. In this essay, I want to suggest another, less historicist use of “temporal regime.” The term should not be taken to refer to aggregated times, elevated to the level of imagined communities and split up into categories like “the past,” “the present,” and “the future,” but simply to the plurality of times inherent in the plurality of social phenomena. Furthermore, to grasp the complexity of the “temporal regimes” coexisting and competing within a society or between societies, we need to include the whole spectrum of experiences and practices, from medical technologies to political programs to historiography.

In addition to insisting on the plurality of historical times, the term “temporal regime” also serves to highlight some other aspects of temporal organization. Coined in fourteenth-century France, “regime” designated a kind of medical treatment, a particular course of diet, exercise, medication, and so on, prescribed or adopted for the restoration or preservation of health. In the same way, a “temporal regime” involves a set of practices prescribed or adopted to regulate the rhythms of a society or other kinds of individual or social rhythms. The term can help us target these practices—what they are doing and what tools or technologies they employ to get it done. At present, “regime” is still used in connection with health and well-being, but primarily it is employed as a political term, mostly in a

---

50. Ibid.
52. Hartog, Regimes d’historicité, 26.
slightly pejorative and negative sense: a regime is a governing structure, with no or only limited legitimacy, at least according to Western, democratic standards. Transposed into the analytics of multiple times, the term serves to remind us that time is also a question of power, the power to control movements, to decide about beginnings and endings, to set the pace, to give the rhythm. In other words, how to organize time, by means of calendars, clocks, narratives, encyclopedias, social media, mobile phones, and so on is intrinsically linked to questions of power and government. As a consequence, in our discussion of multiple temporalities we should not content ourselves with describing pluralities or multitudes but move on to discover the contrasts, oppositions, conflicts, and struggles involved in structuring, regulating, and synchronizing time.

NATURAL AND HISTORICAL TIME: UNITY AND PLURALITY

All the theories we have discussed thus far rest implicitly or explicitly on the assumption that the multiplicity of times is a social and historical experience, produced by human actions and events. Most if not all the theorists in question would agree to the claim that their discussions of the multiplicity of times are valid for historical time only, not the other kind of time, which they refer to as either absolute, mathematical, Newtonian, or indeed, natural. In one of his essays, Koselleck moves to distinguish “historical time” from “natural” time: “If one assumes that historical time remains embedded within natural time without being entirely contained in it; or, to put it differently, that whereas chronological time may be relevant for political decisions, historical interrelations cannot be measured with a clock; or, to put it differently yet again, that the revolution of the stars is no longer (or not yet again) relevant for historical time, we must find temporal categories that are adequate to historical events and processes.” Thus, “natural time” for Koselleck includes chronological, technological, and cosmological time. “Historical time,” he claims, is a product of what he calls a “denaturalization” and a “destruction of natural chronology,” which in Western history took place at the end of the eighteenth century. Prior to this, Koselleck argues, the process of history had been organized according to “natural” categories: the rise and setting of the sun and the moon, the change of seasons, as well as the birth and death of the members of the ruling dynasties. To describe the change taking place, Koselleck paraphrases Kant: “So far history has conformed to chronology. Now it is about making chronology conform to history.” In other words, from the late eighteenth century onward, historiography and historical thinking are organized according to categories obtained from history itself, derived directly from historical events, experiences, and expectations, such as “progress, decline, acceleration, or delay, the not-yet and the not-anymore, the before and the after, the too-early and the too-late, the situation and the duration.”

55. Ibid., 303.
56. Ibid., 306.
I will not at this point enter into philosophical discussions of social and absolute time; instead I want to make a purely historical argument: Neither in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the modern temporal regime emerged, nor at present, at the moment of its collapse, can we find any similar, clear-cut distinction between natural and historical times. On the contrary, in the field of multiple temporalities, arguments, experiences, and technologies come to bear, which keep crossing the disciplinary borders between the natural and the historical. An illuminating example is presented in Donald J. Wilcox’s study of Newton’s theory of absolute time in light of pre-Newtonian chronologies and “the rhetoric of relative time.” In this book, Wilcox argues that the absolute and homogeneous, Newtonian time, which is “truthful and mathematical” and which proceeds regularly “with no reference to any external thing,” is also the time of modern historiography, according to which events are merely parts of a succession or a continuum, gaining their meaning not from themselves, but indeed from their place in this temporal series, which encompasses both nature and human life. Newton’s argument for absolute time, in mathematical and physical terms, was at least in part an answer to the prevailing idea that events, groups of events, and processes had times of their own, times inherent in them, be it the Egyptian dynasty or the Flood. To Newton, on the contrary, time had an existence “of itself, and from its own nature,” as he puts in the Principia, published in 1687.

In this way, Newton succeeded in overcoming the plurality of times, inherent in different chronologies, starting from the birth of various important Biblical figures, such as Abraham or Moses, or represented in terms of dating systems such as by Anno Mundi, Anno Urbis, or Anno Domini. His response was to create an absolute and universal temporal framework, into which all events, lives, and kingdoms can be placed, independent of the narrative structure or meaning.

In an interesting way, Wilcox’s claim serves to illustrate how natural and historical times cannot be kept separate, but become intermingled as soon as we take a closer look at actual historiographical practices. However, in order to establish continuity between Newtonian absolute time and the linear time of historicism, Wilcox has to ignore large parts of eighteenth-century historical thinking, in which the unity of time is by no means given. In her response to Wilcox’s claims, Cathérine Colliot-Thélène retorts: “For centuries they searched for the unity of the world in the unity of chronology. But when they found it, the historians despised it, and at once started to look for the organizing principle elsewhere.”

In the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century universal historians such as Theodor Hellwig, Johann Christoph Gatterer, and August Ludwig Schlözer, to whom I will return shortly, there is always a tension between the one singular time, which can be understood both as Newtonian natural time and as the his-

61. Newton, Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy.
toriographical time of progress, and the many times unfolding in events, lives, and cultures. This can be observed most prominently in the tables accompanying some of these works, in which the one absolute time is represented by the timeline from the beginning of the world to the present day, whereas the multiple times of nations, cultures, and dynasties appear in the numerous columns filling up page after page.

In the late eighteenth century, the main protagonist in the exploration of both multiplicity and unity of time, across all regions of life and movement, is undoubtedly the German theologian and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. In his *Metakritik* of the new “critical philosophy,” published in 1799, he offers a paradigmatic formulation of the theory of multiple temporalities:

In reality every mutable thing has its own inherent standard [Maß] of time; this exists even if nothing else is there; no two things in the world have the same standard of time. My pulse, my step, or the flight of my thoughts is not a temporal standard for others; the flow of a river, the growth of a tree is not a temporal standard for all rivers, trees, and plants. Life times of elephants and of the most ephemeral are very different from each other, and how different are not the temporal standards on all planets? In other words, there are (one can say it earnestly and courageously) in the universe at any time innumerable different times.63

Whereas for Kant space and time are purely abstract forms of intuition [Anschauung], for Herder, on the contrary, time is historical and inherent in the things themselves, independent of human consciousness: Any temporal standard “exists even if nothing else is there.” There is no absolute temporal standard, neither in the Newtonian sense as a dimension of the universe, nor in the Kantian sense as a kind of human perspective. Furthermore, these phenomena, in which time is inherent, range from elements of the human body and mind, to elements of nature, rivers, trees, and plants, to animals and other planets. For Herder, then, in his criticism of Kant, the existence of a plurality of times is linked to the existence of a plurality of life forms, multiple times seem to imply multiple realities, or, in a more current idiom, “multiple ontologies.”64

If we for a moment were to use Herder’s argument as a prism to look at the present, which times would catch our eye? The life times of elephants have certainly changed. Elephants are victims of poachers, who are after their tusks, or they are born, raised, and die in zoos. The same goes for the temporal standards of all rivers, trees, and plants: Every year a huge number of plants become extinct, trees are chopped down or planted. And if the temporal standard of a river is equivalent to the way it flows, as Herder imagines, excessive rain and floods are bound to produce new temporal standards, influencing in a major way the people living along these rivers. In Herder’s passage, these “natural times” are again seen in analogy with human times, both biological and phenomenological: “my pulse, my step, or the flight of my thought.” Just as the life times of elephants have changed, so have the life times of human beings: We live longer, which

means in demographical terms that a larger percent of the world’s population, especially in the Western world, is older at any given time. If we follow Herder, this means that the temporal standard of human life is changing. But in what ways? In our observation of the present, Herder’s “innumerable times of the universe” change from a celebration of the diversity of nature to an insight into one of the most dramatic challenges to human life, and an imminently political one at that. Not only does the world contain a plurality, a multitude of times, which hardly can be separated and grouped into natural or historical, biological, and social, and which circulates within any human society, but these times are “out of sync” with one another. And these nonsynchronicities make it increasingly difficult for us to construct meaningful cause–effect chains or narratives that can be used to plan our actions, or, indeed, anchor our identities.

THE MAKING OF PROGRESS: THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY REVISITED

The existence of multiple historical times is by no means only a theoretical problem, but has wide-ranging political and social implications, manifest in expressions such as “Europe at different speeds,” “more and less developed countries,” and “first, second, and third world,” and “the time lags of climate change.” These expressions are representative of an entire vocabulary of delays, lags, and accelerations, used consistently to conceptualize global orders and disorders. Historical events, actions, and processes do not take place in one time and one time only, but belong to different temporal regimes, such as developments, processes, periods, plots, and narratives. This plurality of historical times poses a challenge for anyone who aims to map the intentions or causes leading up to an event, the consequences following from it, or to decide if an event constitutes rupture or continuity with what lies before and comes after it.

The foremost power of time lies in the ability to establish a temporal standard that is the same everywhere and for everyone, to adapt and adjust different times, different temporal regimes, to one another, to merge them into one, or in the terminology I adopt here: to synchronize them. For chronological time the prevalent temporal standard is known as Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), and was adopted in 1884 as a result of complex technological and political negotiations; for historical time, however, which in addition to chronological time units also involves events, actions, experiences, traditions, periodizations, and so on, the closest we get to a temporal standard is the idea of progress—which, I will argue, is as much a product of complex and ongoing synchronization practices as GMT. In the final part of this essay I will discuss briefly some examples of how progress was made, by means of what I refer to as practices of synchronization.

In historiographical literature, the invention of progress is routinely dated back to the eighteenth century. Due to a process of temporalization, history changes from a closed, homogeneous space of experience to an open and accelerat-

---

ing process of movement. Time is moving forward, into an open and endless future, and humanity moves and changes with it, reaching ever new stages of civilization, learning, and freedom—what Rousseau famously referred to as *perfectibilité* and Kant called “man’s exit from his self-incurred immaturity.” Temporalization means that all parts of human life develop their own temporal index, their own historicity. Through this process, Koselleck argues, concepts such as “democracy,” “progress,” and “history” cease to be labels for concrete empirical or theoretical phenomena and become concepts of movement, pointing toward or even anticipating an open and endless future, as a field of political battle and planning.

In *Meaning in History*, Karl Löwith famously analyzed progress as a secularized version of Christian eschatological thinking; this interpretation was later contested by Hans Blumenberg, who, in a much-quoted exchange between the two German philosopher-historians, argued that modernity and progress had their own specific “legitimacy,” linked to human *curiositas*. In both cases, however, the unity of time itself was never questioned or discussed. As soon as we presume that historical and social time are not one, but always many, another image of the eighteenth century emerges in which ideas of progress do not come into being due to secularization or intellectual curiosity, but due to a complex and ongoing adjustment and synchronization of different times. Among the most famous diagnoses of nonsynchronicity is the first *discours* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the arts and the sciences (1750), where he argues that the development of the sciences and the arts is indeed “out of sync” with the development of morality. Another example is Friedrich Schlegel’s review of Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, one of the most famous treatises on progress from the end of the eighteenth century: “The real problem of history,” Schlegel writes, “is the inequalities between the different strands of human development.”

Even though the eighteenth century is full of similar observations and experiences, scholars of the period have been so caught up in the emergence of progress, and the continuity between Christian eschatology and Hegelian historicism, that they have overlooked what I consider to be the most important new contribution in eighteenth-century thinking about time, temporality, and history: the experience of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* within and between cultures, and the work of synchronization.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the plurality of historical times characteristic of the emerging modernity was synchronized into the linear, homogeneous, teleological time of progress. This synchronization was achieved by means of a set of different genres, for example, universal histories, encyclopedias, novels, world maps. In works belonging to these genres, we find models of historical time that envision not only one but a plurality of temporalities, unfold-

---

67. Ibid., 340-348.
ing simultaneously in different regions of the world but also in different fields of knowledge or social practice.

In the extremely prolific eighteenth-century genre of universal history, one of the most striking examples is the work of the historian and professor at the university of Göttingen, Johann Christoph Gatterer, who in his famous essay “Vom historischen Plan” ponders how he is going to live up to what he calls “the rules of synchronicity [die Regeln der Gleichzeitigkeit].”70 In writing universal history, Gatterer claims, it is not enough to construct a linear, diachronic narrative; the historian also needs to take account of what occurs in different places in the world at the same time. However, written text can only give an account of one single diachronic narrative at a time, and to fulfill the rules of synchronicity, historical events must therefore also be ordered in space, more precisely, in the abstract diagrammatic space of the table. Prior to his 1300-page Einleitung in die synchronistische Universalgeschichte, published in 1771, Gatterer had already published another work, of a mere twelve pages, containing six tables, Synopsis Historiae Universalis: Sex Tabulis, from 1769, to which his huge narrative representation should only, as he puts it, be seen as a “commentary.”71 Indeed, until the end of the eighteenth century, most universal history books came with their own synchronistic tables, or tables were printed, published, and distributed separately and used by students, together with textbooks, to help them understand the synchronicities of global space.

Almost identical reflections about the relationship between the one time of the history of mankind and the many times of cultures and things can be found in the French Encyclopédie, by Diderot and d’Alembert. The editors of l’Encyclopédie took their inspiration from Francis Bacon, who in his Novum Organon from 1620 attacked the traditional idea of knowledge authorized not by experience but by canonical authors, and found not in nature but in old books. Against the practices of “compiling old and useless knowledge,” as Bacon put it,72 he insisted that true knowledge is always new and can always be revised and refuted through observation and experiment. If all knowledge is in constant change, there are by necessity multiple temporalities of knowledge just as there are multiple temporalities of peoples and nations; the encyclopedic genre faces a veritable task of synchronization to bring all these temporalities into sync with one another. In the preliminary discourse to the Encyclopédie, d’Alembert describes the temporal dynamic of finding new knowledge, which is by no means linear and universal, but individual and erratic: “[The intellect] retraces its footsteps, sometimes crosses the first barriers only to meet new ones; and passing rapidly from one object to another, it carries through a sequence of operations on each of them at different intervals, as if by jumps. The discontinuity of these operations is a necessary effect of the very generation of ideas.”73

71. Johann Christoph Gatterer, Einleitung in die synchronistische Universalgeschichte zur Erläuterung seiner synchronistischen Tabellen (Göttingen: Verlag der Wittwe Vandehoek, 1771), 1
To keep track of these movements, the editors of the most important eighteenth-century encyclopedias developed tables and diagrams, similar to the synchronistic tables of universal history, in which different temporalities of knowledge are represented in synchronic space. In the prefaces, they discuss how these diagrams should be understood. In the preliminary discourse, d’Alembert vents his frustration over one kind of diagrammatic representation, the tree of knowledge, and suggests other alternatives, among them the labyrinth and the world map, the *mappemonde*. Finally, he warns against understanding the encyclopedia genealogically and diachronically, instead of encyclopedically and thus synchronically. The goal of the encyclopedic work “consists of collecting knowledge into the smallest area possible and of placing the philosopher at a vantage point, so to speak, high above this vast labyrinth, whence he can perceive the principal sciences and arts simultaneously.”

Thus, the great encyclopedic enterprises of the eighteenth century, Chamber’s *Cyclopedia*, Zedler’s *Universallexikon*, the French *Encyclopédie*, and *Encyclopædia Britannica*, can be understood as attempts to synchronize different temporalities of knowledge. On the one hand, the editors themselves conceptualized the multiple temporalities inherent in their works by means of tables and trees of knowledge; on the other hand, they performed their work of synchronization by means of internal references, linking various pieces of knowledge with one another, which not only stem from different historical periods, but also belong to completely different temporal regimes, trajectories, and narratives.

In addition to considering tables, diagrams, and reference systems, I will end this essay by briefly discussing another way of synchronizing the multiple temporalities of global space, this time by use of both a philosophical concept and a, rather tenuous, metaphor. One of the key figures of the late eighteenth century, who both diagnosed temporal multiplicity and nonsynchronicity and strived to find tools to synchronize different times, is Herder. In a fierce attack on the historian August Ludwig Schlözer, Gatterer’s colleague and arch-enemy in Göttingen, and his treatise on the writing of universal history, *Vorstellung seiner Universalgeschichte*, published in 1772, Herder writes:

We humans always have problems with the One in history [dem Einen in der Geschichte], “in the perspective of mankind” [fürs menschliche Geschlecht]—where does it stand, the One, big endpoint? Where is the direct way to it? What does it mean, “progress of mankind”? Is it enlightenment? Is it improvement? Is it perfectibility? More happiness? Where are the standards [Maß]? Where are the facts to find a standard in such different times and among such different peoples, even if we have the best information from outside?

Herder’s attack on Schlözer and his use of tables to explain and represent universal history should be understood in light of the fact that Herder was already working on another solution to the problem of nonsynchronicity. He launched it, shortly after he had published his review of Schlözer’s *Vorstellung*, in the form of the idea of *Bildung*, a German “untranslatable,” often rendered in English as education, but here more in the meaning of formation or evolution, or even progress.

74. Ibid., 47.
In the concept of Bildung, Herder presents what we could call his figure or formula of synchronization: everything—flowers, trees, animals, but also humans—goes through the same process of Bildung, from a seed to a full-grown specimen, not only on the level of the individual, but also on the level of the entire group, the family, or the species. Ontogenesis and phylogensis overlap completely. All history evolves according to the logic of the ages of man. Mankind, then, Herder writes in Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit from 1774, had its early childhood in the Far Orient, its later childhood in the the Near Orient and the Middle East, and so on. In this way he succeeds in synchronizing the temporal regimes of different peoples and nations into one linear, homogeneous time of the formation, the Bildung of mankind—hence, of progress.

However, in Auch eine Philosophie, Herder only comes as far as the Egyptians and the Phoenicians before this completely synchronized, strictly diachronic narrative of the progress of mankind threatens to collapse. As Herder points out, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians did not precede or succeed each other, they existed alongside each other, at the same time, simultaneously, synchronously—the one along the Nile, cultivating the earth and building great cities, the other on the coast of the Mediterranean, living almost entirely from commerce.76 In questions of Bildung, Herder observes, the one was the complete opposite of the other: the Egyptians had patriotism, respect for religion, knew the secrets of the sciences; the Phoenicians had their vitality and art of living. Apparently, Herder suggests, these two people belong to two different times, two different temporal regimes, that cannot be synchronized, cannot be assembled into one singular, homogeneous, linear time.77 In Auch ein Philosophie, the work of synchronization means coming up with a new metaphor: The Egyptians and Phoenicians are “twins of the same mother,” he writes.78 Biologically, the metaphor is completely tautological and hence absurd, and testifies to Herder’s struggle to deal with the nonsynchronicities of human history in his work to synchronize the history of mankind. But the metaphor of the twins is also a very efficient and convincing way of synchronizing different temporal regimes, different narratives into a universal history modeled on the ages of man, thus combining natural and historical times. Twins are born at the same time, their lives follow the same chronology, but still they are singular individuals, following their own paths and setting their own goals. Nevertheless, in working to synchronize Egyptians and Phoenicians, Herder is faced with the danger that history, the synchronized regime of progress, might break up in completely opposite directions, one originating from Egyptian culture, the other from the Phoenicians. In Auch eine Philosophie, Herder is saved by the Greeks, more precisely, by the argument that the Egyptian and Phoenician cultures, though moving apart, are reunited in the culture of Ancient Greece, in the adolescence of man. The two twin children have become one

77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 22.
youth. History—in terms of Bildung and progress—has thus been synchronized and is back on track.

CONCLUSION: NEW MULTIPLICITY OF TIME

Returning to where I began this essay, the more illuminating part of Kleinberg’s discussion of what he rightly describes as new approaches to time and history may not be his claim for a “new metaphysics,” but rather the reference to the temporalities and timing issues in digital publishing. If there is indeed a “new metaphysics,” understood literally as that which comes after and thus is not a “physics” of time, this new approach is, I would claim, by necessity closely linked to the wide spectrum of linguistic and material practices deployed in attempts to deal with the temporal multiplicities and nonsynchroncities of global space, for example, by, as Kleinberg suggests, achieving digital “immediacy” or indeed synchronicity. In this essay, and as an introduction to the following essays, I have explored other less recent tools for synchronizing the world, such as tables, trees of knowledge, reference systems, and indeed books. And, at the same time, I have attempted to show how historiography and theories of history have tended to deal with a history that is already synchronized, in which the multiple temporal regimes at work in every historical situation have already been reduced to the one singular, homogeneous time of historicism. In this essay, as well as in the following four, we want to suggest how it could be otherwise.

University of Oslo