

Periodization

Annotated Bibliography

David Stefan Doddington

Introduction

Periodization refers to how historians divide up time into discrete sections or ‘periods’, using discursive or chronological labels to indicate a sense of continuity, shared patterns and ideals, or the relatedness of events in a particular time and space. Historians use broad taxonomies here, referring at times to chronology (centuries, decades, years), cultural forces (the ‘swinging sixties’, the ‘Enlightenment’), rulers or dynasties (the Tudors, the Ming Dynasty), political transformations (Jacksonian Democracy, the Meiji Restoration), major events (the First and Second World Wars, the ‘Great Depression’), or ostensibly world-scale historical frameworks (antiquity, medieval, early modern, modern). After discussing some introductions to the concept of chronology, this annotated bibliography focuses on works that challenge conventional (‘Western’) periodization from different perspectives. This approach underlines the active role of historians in making history, and the fact that although periodization is necessary to organize our understandings of the past, it is also necessarily anachronistic, selective and involves making historical judgements that can and should be questioned.

Introductory texts

Ludmilla Jordanova, ‘Periodisation’, in her *History in Practice*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 145–66.

This is a valuable textbook for undergraduate history students, offering accessible, but rigorous and nuanced observations around all elements of

historical practice. Jordanova argues that periodization is necessary for historians given the vastness of the past, but also that efforts to chop history up into discrete periods involve historical interpretation that is subject to challenge and revision. She offers examples drawn from world history and notes commonly applied taxonomic systems for establishing historical periods, including rulers or dynasties, key events or individuals, epochs, centuries, decades or millennia, types of government, and cultural styles, moods and patterns. In emphasizing the descriptive element to periodization and the implicit or explicit value judgements this involves, Jordanova also furthers a central argument of the book: that we need to recognize the role historians and commentators play in making history, not just studying it.

Peter N. Stearns, 'Periodization in World History Teaching: Identifying the Big Changes', *The History Teacher*, 20:4 (1987), pp. 561–80.

In this important intervention, often cited alongside Bentley (see below), Stearns demonstrates that periodization is a crucial yet complex task in world history teaching. Like Jordanova, Stearns emphasizes the subjectivity inherent to periodization, stressing that the choices scholars make, and the categories they apply, are influenced by cultural, regional or national perspectives, and frequently connected to national or regional identities and narratives. He challenges notions of Eurocentrism, and considers tensions between global and regional periodization, but stresses the value in engaging with the interacting factors of expansions of technology, commercial interactions and exchanges, and belief systems as a means of structuring periodization in world historical studies. He is keenly aware of the difficulties students and teachers face when trying to balance coherent narratives with diverse historical experiences across different regions.

The 'medieval' and the 'modern'

Marcus Bull, 'What Are the "Middle Ages"?', in his *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 42–61.

In this chapter, Bull assesses the issues around periodization and medieval history. He provides a narrative history of how and why the apparently straightforward term 'Middle Ages' came into fashion, before digging into the more complex assumptions, arguments and value judgements embedded in such categorization. Bull shows that the concept of 'the medieval' was constructed in the historical context of 'the Renaissance', another framework that encompasses a chronological era and a cultural phenomenon. Scholars continue to debate the value and limits of 'medieval', disagreeing on whether it works as a unifying term across national borders and within continental or global perspectives, as well as whether cultural, religious and sociopolitical arrangements within this thousand-year period are sufficiently similar to

warrant the singular label. Bull offers the provocative idea of dispensing with the label ‘medieval’ entirely, but acknowledges that this is unlikely to happen due to the sheer weight of history behind the term and the need for some form of classifying category. However, his argument engagingly underlines the arbitrary and constructed nature of historical periods.

Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

This narrative-based thematic history of the world from 1780 to the onset of the First World War argues that this period saw the ‘birth’ of the modern world. It is a useful starter text for exploring key ideas around the notion of ‘modernity’, including an introduction which problematizes the term ‘modern’ and outlines its complexity, while demonstrating its relevance in understanding and conceptualizing shifting social, economic, cultural, religious and political practices that occurred between 1780 and 1914. There is a stated emphasis on decentralizing world history, moving beyond Europe and the ‘West’ to recognize the multiple and interconnected origins of global change, with consideration of diverse regions, peoples and polities when assessing change across the period. The periodization made explicit in the ‘birth of the modern world’ is here considered both chronologically, but also thematically, including intellectual changes, economic developments, social and political upheaval, colonialism and globalization. An important synoptic text that can be used to introduce students to notions of modernity at a global level.

Beyond the West

Jerry H. Bentley, ‘Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History’, *American Historical Review*, 101:3 (1996), pp. 749–70.

Jerry H. Bentley argues for a rethinking of traditional periodization in world history by emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural interactions as a primary driver of historical change. Bentley critiques traditional Eurocentric periodizations that divide history into ancient, medieval and modern eras, often based on developments within European civilization. He argues that this approach overlooks the global interconnectedness of historical processes and fails to adequately account for the influences and interactions between different cultures. Bentley argues instead that cross-cultural interactions – such as trade, warfare, diplomacy and cultural exchange – have shaped world history and led to significant developments in technology, culture and social organization, with concomitant effects in driving historical change. Bentley proposes an alternative approach to periodization that focuses on major waves of cross-cultural interactions rather than on developments within specific regions or civilizations.

Shahzad Bashir, 'On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies', *History and Theory*, 53:4 (December 2014), pp. 519–44.

Bashir examines the construction of time and chronology in the historiography of Muslim societies. He argues that historically, Muslim societies have conceptualized time in diverse ways, often tied to religious, cultural and social contexts, that these alternative temporalities are crucial for understanding Islamic history, and therefore they should not be subsumed under a singular, linear chronology associated with 'Western' societies. This work is part of a broader trend in challenging Eurocentric notions of periodization, demonstrating that universalizing concepts such as 'medieval' or 'modern' are unable to capture the complexities of experiences across different regions and eras, and reify historiographical inequalities.

Identity, intersectionality and periodization

Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' in Renate Blumenthal and Claudia Koonz (eds), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 137–64.

Joan Kelly-Gadol asserts that the necessary political and scholarly intervention of women's history lies not just in restoring or discovering women as historical actors, but also in calling into question accepted schemes of periodization and long-standing historical frameworks. She takes one of the most well-known labels used to categorize European early modern history – 'the Renaissance' – and shows that principal themes and values associated with it, such as cultural development, economic shifts towards market activity, and legal and humanistic notions of freedom, did not bring positive changes to the lives and condition of women. Kelly-Gadol disputes the common characterization of the Renaissance as a period of 'progress', asserting that this era saw women's exclusion from education and the public sphere, the entrenchment of patriarchal ideals and the reification of notions of gendered difference and women's inferiority. This influential intervention shows how changing the historical focus can force a reconsideration of the wider labels used to periodize.

Jennifer L. Morgan, 'Periodization Problems: Race and Gender in the History of the Early Republic', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36:2 (2016), pp. 351–87.

This short article is part of a published roundtable discussion on the concept of the 'early republic', a term often used to structure US history from around 1781–1861. Morgan considers who is included and excluded in frameworks of periodization, particularly those that privilege the 'nation' or formal politics (such as republic, democracy, and so on). Morgan, a specialist in

Atlantic slavery, notes her confusion at being asked to participate in the discussion, indicating that her work on gender and slavery often transcends rigid chronologies and national geographies. She claims that, if pushed, she would characterize her teaching and work ‘as falling under the periodizing rubric of early Atlantic, or colonial, or antebellum, or eighteenth century, or Civil War, but not early republic’. Morgan uses this sense of confusion to argue that historians must complicate analytical categories around place and space, especially when considering the histories of marginalized peoples. In doing so, she shows how transnational histories and the histories of marginalized peoples can challenge standard modes of periodization.

Temporal scales

Fernand Braudel, ‘History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*’, trans. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 32:2 (2009), pp. 171–203.

This is a new translation of Fernand Braudel’s influential 1958 article. Here Braudel introduces and elaborates on the concept of the *longue durée* (literally ‘long term’ or ‘long duration’), first introduced in his *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (1949), as a framework for understanding historical change. Braudel argues that history should be studied at multiple temporal levels, with a focus on underlying social structures – such as geography, climate and social organization – that change very gradually over long periods, and which endure and shape human societies over centuries, if not millennia. In addition to the *longue durée*, Braudel’s tripartite division of temporal frameworks comprised *conjoncture* (medium-term cycles, trends or patterns that span decades or centuries, such as economic cycles, demographic shifts or long-term social trends) and *event* (short-term happenings, political events, or the actions of individuals). Braudel critiques traditional history and classic modes of periodization for focusing too narrowly on events, dates, and the actions of great individuals, and thus failing to capture the deeper, more enduring forces that shape human societies. The essay is complex, but it is a necessary read for students getting to grips with historiography, alternative temporalities, and modes of thinking through historical change and periodization.

David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

David Christian’s ambitious concept of ‘Big History’ aims to study history from the origins of the universe to the present day. Christian’s explicitly interdisciplinary approach adopts a ‘cosmic’ or ‘universal’ perspective which situates human history within the context of the universe’s 13.8 billion-year history. Christian critiques traditional modes of periodization as overly

focused on national or regional histories and too short in chronological span. He offers the idea of ‘thresholds of complexity’, or pivotal moments in the history of the universe where new levels of complexity emerged, such as the formation of stars, the emergence of life, and the development of human societies. Each threshold represents a significant transition, leading to the world we know today. Christian argues for the construction of universal narratives that connect human history with the history of the Earth and the cosmos. These narratives help to contextualize human existence and underscore the commonalities shared by all people, regardless of cultural or national differences. ‘Big History’ therefore supports historians to recognize the long-term patterns and processes that have shaped the universe and human societies.

Conclusion

Historians are increasingly attuned to the need to think beyond national frameworks when considering chronological distinctions, to consider alternative temporalities and move beyond Eurocentric models, and to assess how far changing the historical actors/subjects can shift classic modes of periodization. Interdisciplinary approaches, and ‘Big History’, widen our perspective on what constitutes history and how to conceptualize historical time, but these positions are also open to critique. Historians grapple with the value and the limitations of using shorthand labels to signify commonalities among peoples or places. Nonetheless, most scholars agree that historians *have* to periodize in their work. The past is too big, too messy, and too rich in depth and detail to not apply some form of spatial and chronological organization. At the same time, any such organization is inherently subjective and must be critically interrogated.