

## Time

If I am right, and I am not at all sure I am, time is an abstraction trying to reflect natural processes. Historical time is the attempt to describe or follow the changes in human societies. As we all know, our concept of time is relative, and is determined by the length of our existence. It is dependent also on our capacity of being conscious of ourselves. A one-day fly is not conscious of itself and therefore no time exists for it. But if it were conscious of itself, it would consider a month to be of almost unimaginably endless time.

Do animals, even those who are genetically similar to us, such as chimpanzees, have a concept of time? We don't really know. We do know that elephants for instance have a remarkable memory, but whether that has any relationship to human concepts of time we again do not really know, although with humans, memory is an indication that time is important. Memory has become essential for survival of humans, and is indicative of the consciousness of passage of time. With the development of the human species from its beginnings, supposedly some 300.000 years ago in East Africa, consciousness and self-consciousness have developed realization of before and after, and passage of something humans began to understand as time. Day and night and their predictability, the nine months of pregnancy, the inevitability of death but also the struggle for its postponement for as long as possible, all this produced the theoretical construct of time and its practical use.

Consciousness and self-consciousness produce the question whether life has meaning, and if so, what that meaning is. Do we live just in order to die? Is death the absolute end? The answer, humans thought, must lie with the intervention of a non-human intelligence that makes sense of the universe, and within that of human existence, and thus of time. The most important human invention, arguably more important than the invention of the wheel or of the use of fire, is the invention of a super-human intelligence, or gods, or a god. Humans invented these beings, and the Bible says, rightly I think, that Man created God in his image, a supernatural being with human emotions, desires, and passions, but contrary to humans, gods or a god do not die, otherwise they cannot direct the universe and this world from eternity, an idea connected with time, to eternity. What happens to humans when they die, as they all do? Some humans invented another stage, an after-life, solely for humans, not for cats for instance. They then divided that imagined after-life, for all eternity, into a good place and a not so good place. In human imagination, before birth there is no existence, but there is one, as we said, for all eternity, after death. That makes the world understandable. So you have imams, priests, gurus, rabbis, shamans, and so on who fail to explain to us what eternity means, except that it is an awfully long time, but they tell us that there is someone or something up there – never down there – that explains what existence means and what time means.

The concept of eternity has a great deal to do with historical time. As our Prime Minister said about the Eternal City of Jerusalem, it will be the capital of the Jewish people for all eternity. About 1500 before CE Jerusalem was a largish village

of maybe up to 1500 inhabitants, as our hydrologists argue, because that was what the sources of water made possible. A thousand years before that it did not exist. So there is no eternity in the past, but there is an eternity for the Holy City of Jerusalem in the future. The same applies when His Holiness the Pope talks about Rome as the eternal city. Prediction, or prophecy, after the destruction of the Second Temple, according to a well-known quote from Jewish sources, was given to fools and to babes. I don't qualify for the latter, and I hope I do not do so for the former. But we have a guarantee, because gods or a god has told us, via some wonderful people to whom gods or a god choose to speak, that there is eternity for humans as a race and for their social structures, and that some cities and even some buildings, are eternal. The truth about time, I think, in this sense, is that human life has as much meaning as the life of a giraffe, that is – none. All existence, from swirling galaxies to the life of a fly on this planet, is a passage to non-existence, to death. Life is there to die. But no, we say, that cannot be true. Our time on earth may be limited in time, but it must have a meaning. Well, why does it have to have meaning? Because a life without meaning has no meaning, which is a tautology, but the advantage of tautologies is that they are always true. So if there is no meaning, we invent it, therefore we have gods. A circular argument, to be sure, but again, circular arguments are in themselves correct. There is no after-life, which in a way is encouraging, because just imagine you would have to spend all eternity – as we saw, a very long time – floating around with angels, which would be so boring you could die of boredom, but you couldn't because you are already dead. In the other place it would be even worse. Religion, in its theist forms, is therefore a very

important solution when one considers time. When you deal with non-theist religions, such as Marxism or Marxist-Leninism, it is even more important. You then have structures of relations of production that determine social and political and cultural life. They are eternal, as long as human life exists. Pretty awful, but that is what this type of godless religion proposes.

The answer to the question posed above seems actually to be not so difficult: the meaning of life is life itself, the struggle to make life as pleasant as possible without harming others. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) said as much some time ago, but our rabbis did not like that at all.

In order to make ourselves understandable to ourselves, we divide human history into ages, or eras. The most popular division in the West is that between ancient, medieval, and modern times. Ancient times are those from the beginning of urban civilization, maybe some 9000 years ago, until 476, when the last Western Roman Emperor ended his reign. Some say this is not accurate, because Roman civilization continued in Byzantium (Constantinople, Istanbul), and the Western Roman Empire was a big mess before 476. Then we have the medieval, or feudal period, with lords and vassals and kingdoms where feudal lords and kings struggled for supremacy, with or against the spiritual authority of the Church, Latin or Eastern, which utilized the authority of God, that wonderful human invention, for very unspiritual politics and economics. There was development of feudalism, and then came the industrial revolution, and modernity is usually supposed to start with that, and, or, the French revolution. Does the first industrial revolution in England, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which used water power for textile manufacture and was based on the

dispossession of peasants by the enclosures system, belong to feudalism or to modernity? Is mercantilism in France in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries still feudal or is it modern? And what about Southern and Eastern Europe, where the development was different, in the South with the influence of the conquest of Central and South America and the inflation because of the influx of gold on the one hand, and in the East with the establishment of a more or less enlightened Polish-Lithuanian kingdom on the other hand? When the Bohemian Hussites developed new methods of warfare between 1415 and 1434, was that within feudalism or was it modern? And then of course some of us have difficulties including all post-1789 developments in Europe in the rubric of modernity.

This whole scheme, controversial as it is, makes absolutely no sense for China, South-East Asia, India, Africa, pre-Columbian South and Central, or for North America. Ch'in Shi Huang founded a united Chinese State in 221 BCE, and Chinese governmental and social structures differed markedly from European feudalism. There was no vassalage system, and agricultural production differed from the way agriculture was organized in, for instance, the three-field system in England. Indian civilization developed differently, too. The Aryan invasion of about 1500 BCE developed the caste system, and founded centralized states that vied with each other for domination. Religion was not a decisive factor in either China or India. With the Moslem, later Mongol invasion or invasions, beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a new governing class was introduced in North and Central India, but it remained the same social system as before. Initially, the Mongols-Moghul rulers (from the 15<sup>th</sup> century) tried to convert Hindus to Islam,

and they more or less exterminated Buddhism, but under Akbar (1556-1605) and his heirs accommodation with Hinduism became common. No similarity to European feudalism. There was no feudalism in pre-Columbian Central and South America, and the settlers in 17<sup>th</sup> century Northeastern America skipped feudalism altogether. Feudalism is therefore a purely European construct, and it is doubtful whether its application is tenable even for all parts of Europe.

Modernity is, again, a problematic concept. When does it start, and when does post-modernity come in, and what is the real content of these constructs? A lot of midnight oil has been burned by brilliant scholars to answer these questions, and one feels they could have devoted their precious time – because you live only once – on more productive issues. But it seems clear, at least to me, rightly or wrongly, that all these concepts of historic time are Euro-centric, and therefore invalid. The answer to this seemingly insoluble set of problems appears to me to be a global approach. We need to coordinate our understanding of human civilization – if civilization is the right term - by looking at the different human societies both in their discrete historic development and their parallels or differences with and from each other. Thus, we might actually find some parallels between European feudalism and the development of the Japanese Shogunate at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the early seventeenth centuries. For a number of reasons the three Shoguns of that era – Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Iyeyasu Tokugawa – established a conquering empire on the basis of a relatively centralized bureaucracy with nobles ruling over peasants in ways somewhat similar to those of feudal societies in Europe. With the exception of the rebellious nobles of the

South, the daimyos, and relying on an armed gentry controlling an agricultural society, the Tokugawa Shoguns successfully ruled a quasi-feudal Japan for almost two centuries. Similar parallels could be mentioned elsewhere, globally.

For all that we invent historical time. We now live in 2018, which is 2018 years after a Jewish prophet by the name of Yeshua of Nazareth was **not** born. Others use the year that the Prophet Muhammad left one town in the Arabian peninsula for another as the starting point. Traditional Jews start, quite properly, with the creation of the world. There is a slight problem there, because they don't start with the Big Bang, some 13.7 billion years ago or so – I don't really know, but who cares, another few billion years more or less – or the age of our planet, some 4.5 billion years ago, but with the **real** creation, about 5700 years ago. Sorry, Sumerian kings; you lived before the creation of the world. I don't know how, but there it is. After all, it is written in the Bible, right?

Can we repair all that? Can we agree on one set of dates, after we established how long it takes for the earth to circle the sun? I don't know. Until then, most of the world will use before and after Christ, including most Jews, who will use BCE, before the Christian Era, which I think is better. It is pure invention, but it is a useful way to measure the immeasurable, namely time

Historical time creates another major problem. Much of what we think we know about our past is a mixture of legend and fact. I would argue that for most historical legends there is a factual origin, but then the legend itself becomes historical fact, mingles with actual historical reality, and becomes history. Recently, a an attempt was made to describe what actually

happened during the events we have described to ourselves as the wandering of the nations, the Völkerwanderung, before and after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. When we examine that, we find that much of what we think we know is based on doubtful sources: second or third-hand testimonies, murky Latin writings written down long after the supposed facts, folk traditions, and so on. Nowadays they try to examine the DNA of groups of people, to find out where they came from, how and when they moved, and so on. There may be some interesting discoveries as a result. We may discover that the famous story of masses of hungry Franks crossing the frozen Rhine on the last day of 406 CE is either vastly exaggerated, or untrue, or of no great significance. For us historians these may be wonderful findings, and we may live off the grants that we will get so as to finance us when we try to find out. The question is, how important is it in the end? After all, the establishment of the Frankish State is a fact; the rape and pillage of Rome in 410 by the Vandals is a fact. The Visigoth conquest of Spain is a fact. The Celtic Baiovari, after giving their name to Bavaria, moved on and disappeared from history; that is a fact. And so on. The fascinating details of how this happened, by who and when, are not clear, and in part may be legend. Legend that quite plausibly may be based on fact.

Let me tell you a wonderful legend: the legend of the Exodus from Egypt. The whole Jewish civilization and religion is based on that. Slavery to freedom, the bad pharaoh who drowns in the sea together with his army, bread from heaven, ten commandments, the golden calf, entry into Canaan, and so on. Today, no serious or even non-serious archeologist or expert on the period will say that what the Bible tells us happened the

way it is told. Basically, the Sons of Israel, Bnei Yisrael, did not leave Egypt for the simple reason that they never were there. The Hyksos were there, groups of mainly, but not solely, Canaanites, not Israelites, whose rule of Northern Egypt under the 15<sup>th</sup> dynasty ended about 300 years before the Exodus is supposed to have taken place, according to the biblical story, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. No Egyptian army drowned in any sea, and the mummy of Ramses II who ruled for 66 years during the relevant century, is on display in Cairo, and it is absolutely dry, no sea water there. In any case, Sinai and Canaan were ruled by Egypt, so an Exodus would have led the Israelites from Egypt to Egyptian-controlled territory. The ten commandments are a wonderful adaptation of Babylonian laws, and so on. The Bible of course could not have been written before the Hebrew script became available, from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century on, so that any story about periods before the early ninth century are by definition legends. The Bnei Yisrael, or Israel, as they appear in an Egyptian inscription of 1208 BCE, came apparently from what is now the Syrian desert adjoining the Euphrates, and there were probably Canaanite groups leaving Egypt before the ninth century who joined the Israelites in Canaan. Part of the story may be connected to the multiple explosions of the Thera volcano, today the island of Santorini, in, or before or after 1623 BCE, which must have caused tremendous tsunamis and mass destruction all over the Eastern Mediterranean, and may be the source for the legend about the ten plagues which we Jews count on Passover. These interpretations of the sources for the legend are not facts, but perhaps reasonable conjectures. But the legend is more powerful than the facts. We don't know when and how it developed, but it became the founding story of a great civilization. It was based on facts, as I

am trying to show, but then developed independently of them. The legend has become a historical fact itself, with tremendous national and international influences, that again became part of the historical process. English-Welsh folksongs of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – if you were unlucky, I would sing them to you – talk about Canaan as the promised land, and the bread from heaven, the "man" (יֵמ), for the pilgrim on his road to Canaan; Afro-American songs talk about the Angel Michael who should, please, row the boat of the souls going to heaven over the mighty river Jordan, and so on. The walls of Jericho, in other words Afro-American slavery and oppression, will fall down when Joshua will lead his host and blow the trumpets. In historical reality, Jericho's walls did not fall for the good reason that Jericho was an open city without walls before and after the supposed entry of Joshua to Canaan, but that fact is of no importance. Legend becomes historical fact, and the legend defines the time: before and after the Exodus, or the entry into Canaan.

The Jewish experience is no different, in principle, from that of many others. To quote a very different legend: the Hawaiians had no written language, so they related their stories in the form of religious recitals and songs accompanied by dancing, the original hula. Historians have found that these orally transmitted stories reflect historical reality, but shaped it as well. The Hawaiian equivalent of Moses, Pa'o, most probably actually lived at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the kapu, the system of laws and customs that he introduced, held sway until the coming of the Europeans. The story was embellished, of course, but there is consensus that the basic facts are correct. Again, a fact-based historical legend

becomes history and influences society and culture. One could quote similar legends turned fact from quite a number of civilizations. Sometimes they are eradicated together with the cultures that produced them, but sometimes their eradication is eradicated by later developments. The poems by the Aztec king of Tlacopan of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Nezahualcoyotl, were destroyed by the Spaniards and recently resuscitated. Time is relative, and destruction can hit and eliminate the memory of historical facts together with the people that experienced them. But you never know. Sometimes that wonderful mixture of legends and facts may reemerge, because this dialectic of facts-legends-facts-history continues its history. It is history. Will we understand history? I don't know. Time will tell.