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Time, Space and Islands: Why Geographers Drive the Temporal Agenda

David Gange

Talk of disciplinary ‘turns’ is guaranteed, today, to draw groans and eye rolls. Despite the origins of this rhetoric in postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives, the ‘turn’ is often now taken to imply a singular temporality with strong strands of directional development while, where temporalities are concerned, every discipline now demands contingency and heterogeneity. But the rhetoric surrounding spatial and temporal turns is worth attention, since it illuminates the status of temporal concepts in history and neighbouring disciplines. The spatial turn, from the 1960s to 1990s, was transformative: a critical shift that rejected geography’s previously passive role as a stage for the action of history and inspired new interdisciplinary fusions across the human sciences without which today’s intellectual landscape would be unrecognisable. In light of this, it is worth asking what a return to the temporal might mean.

Prophecies of a ‘temporal turn’ have arisen every decade for half a century, with particular intensity at the end of the 1980s and in the present. They have never quite come true. Today, with talk of temporality intensified, and often conceptualised as a ‘historical turn’ (e.g. in sociology or management studies), new kinds of opportunity and threat seem to be orbiting the historical discipline.¹ Historians from William Sewell Jr to Patrick Joyce have presented this as history’s chance to seize initiative: to regain the central place among the human sciences that the discipline once, supposedly, held. The fact that such claims often appear as asides or even, in the case of Joyce, in footnotes suggests historians are unsure of how to grasp this chance.²

Underlying such claims are assumptions that while geographers are the go-to-scholars for the theorisation of space, historians can claim pre-eminence in conceptualising time. History,

¹ For example Roy Suddaby, ‘Towards a Historical Consciousness: Following the Historical Turn in Management Thought’, *M@n@gement*, xix (2016), 46–60.

² Patrick Joyce, ‘What is the Social in Social History’, *Past and Present*, ccvi (2010), fn.23.

according to Sewell, adopts ‘contingent, complex, eventful and heterogeneous’ temporalities, which are the field’s professional common sense and with which other disciplines could usefully inform their less ‘eventful’, often teleological, ordering of the social.³ Recent textbooks on historical practice convey similar messages: ‘it is widely acknowledged’ writes Prashant Kidambi ‘that the distinctive contribution of history to the human sciences lies in its reckoning with time’.⁴

If only this were true. Reading the scholarship of the ‘temporal turn’ is a sobering experience for a historian. Historical conceptions of time are often equated by geographers and literary scholars with a naïve historicism that is linear, developmental and homogeneous. History becomes the straw man against which others define their contingent temporalities. Deep mapping is seen as a rich device because it incorporates many temporalities without being tied into monocausal logics of historical narrative. Other examples appear in literary scholarship, such as David Lloyd’s *Irish Times: The Temporalities of Modernity*. History and the work of historians, for Lloyd, represents the hegemonic force, still sustained by ideas of progress, against which postcolonial scholarship must mobilise.⁵ Lloyd, like the theorist of photography, Ariella Azoulay, demands a relationship between past and present in which the present is a toxic offshoot from a living past; ‘pastness’ is not an absolute property, and the otherness of the present, not the past, is what we should worry about.⁶ Conversely, history in Lloyd’s model constitutes an ordering of time in which the past is gone, subsumed by irresistible social process into a careless present.

I had an unlikely opportunity to assess these contrasting visions of historical temporality in 2014, when a global confederation of Institutes of Advanced Studies began its first Intercontinental Academy. This event lasted three years, with meetings, several weeks long,

³ William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History* (Chicago, 2005), 81–123.

⁴ Prashant Kidambi, ‘Time, Temporality and History’, in Gunn and Faire (eds.), *Research Methods for History* (2012), 220–37.

⁵ David Lloyd, *Irish Times: The Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin, 2008), esp. 1–38.

⁶ Ariella Azoulay, ‘Potential History: Thinking Through Violence’, *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (2013), 548–74.

in Brazil (March/April 2015 and 2017) and Japan (April 2016). Fifteen fellows from across the arts and sciences gathered to collaborate around the concept of time. Takeda Kazuhisa (Waseda University, Tokyo) and I represented the discipline of history in a project that entailed exposure to a vast range of scholarship on temporalities.

One of the project's surprises was the realisation that the disciplinary portability of historical notions of temporality was limited in comparison with the ideas of literary scholars, geographers and philosophers. Henri Lefebvre and Paul Ricoeur carried more conviction than Reinhart Koselleck, Francois Hartog or Hayden White. Rereading Koselleck in this context revealed the reasons: his concept of acceleration and his periodisation possess all the rigidity and linearity that sceptics expect of history. I found myself abandoning advocacy of historical theory and drawing instead on work that unravels multiple temporalities from specific histories. This meant turning to recent studies of what might be termed 'temporal globality'. The closely interrelated work of scholars such as On Barak, Vanessa Ogle and Avner Wishnitzer provides an unusual revelation of the potential for research on temporalities to illuminate modern history.⁷ They show how the co-existence of multiple temporal regimes in colonial and semi-colonial settings such as Egypt, Lebanon and the Indian subcontinent played out in unexpected ways. Barak, in particular, conjures with immense sophistication how modern technologies that transformed the experience of time – transport and telegraphy – were given unique meanings amid different temporal expectations of diverse communities. Barak's ideas proved useful on the Intercontinental project because the methods of other disciplines – from social scientists to biologists – were reflected in this historical literature. Posthumanist, material and technopolitical implications fizz through Barak's text, creating a host of points from which debate could spiral out. It was less clear what history was giving

⁷ On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley, CA; 2013); Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2015); see also J. L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, CA, 2013).

back: how a particularly historical method might be identified. I also began to wonder whether history is currently running at dual speed as regards temporality: a few sites of contested global encounter, where imperial powers failed to comprehend the sophisticated temporalities of regions they disrupted, are subject to probing analysis. But reading recent historical work on temporalities in my own field (modern Britain), I found less to stir excitement.

This isn't because such settings offer less potential for temporal study; at least other disciplines don't seem to think they do. The issues driving temporal scholarship seem to swing easily from the local to the global in any geographical context. One familiar explanation for new interest in time suggests the idea is gaining relevance because conceptions of the future have changed dramatically. In African anthropology, time talk often involves discussion of a collapse of mid-term perspectives on the future; psychologists analyse time in relation to social anxiety and interaction between past and future in constructing reality; the environmental humanities and ecology sometimes embrace a new apocalypticism with theological echoes and implications. Time looms large in all these fields, but especially the latter: the term often now occurs in names of centres or seminar series such as 'Encounters in Deep Time' (environmental humanities at the University of Edinburgh). Indeed, this ecological context is where the idea of the temporal humanities begins to look necessary and urgent.

Perceptions of a new futurity are echoed in historical scholarship. Mark Levene's 'Climate Blues: or How Awareness of the Human End might re-instil Ethical Purpose to the Writing of History' calls for a wholesale reinvention of the discipline, while Armitage and Guldi's *History Manifesto* seems to mark a juncture with a futurity not of short endlessly repeatable

cycles – boom and bust – but radical contingency and unprecedented threat.⁸ If so inclined, we might diagnose a conjuncture today like that Koselleck saw in the eighteenth century when shapes of past and future take on new significance, and historical thought gains new potential.⁹

Is this, then, finally the time of the temporal humanities? The genealogy of temporal and spatial scholarship does not suggest we should expect that. Time, whenever its spread as an analytic concept has seemed inevitable, has quickly slid back into Augustinian intangibility. This genealogy, although well-known, is worth setting out because it provides crucial grounding for collaboration between historians and the other human sciences.¹⁰

Temporalities were clearly on the historical agenda before the explosion of interdisciplinary interest in time and space in the 1970s. Braudel's analyses of the temporal characteristics of historical process inspired one strand of scholarship, contrasting with E.P. Thompson's study of the impact of capitalism on the time regimes of industrial workers.¹¹ Surprisingly, these two traditions remained separate. Where the projects of the *Annales* and the new social history intersected in many familiar ways, the richest *Annales* visions of what temporalities are (most highly developed, perhaps, in *Montaillou*) became everything Thompson's was not: multiple, flexible and differentiated according to gender and social status.

But the really dramatic turn towards analysis of space and time as frameworks for scholarship came later. Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) was key in establishing a field. The most influential instigator of what became known as the spatial turn, Lefebvre inspired

⁸ Mark Levene, 'Climate Blues: Or How Awareness of the Human End might Re-instil Ethical Purpose to the Writing of History', *Environmental Humanities*, ii (2013), 147–67; Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014).

⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time* (trans. Keith Tribe, New York, 1985).

¹⁰ Robert Hassan, 'Globalization and the Temporal Turn', *Korean Journal of Policy Studies* (2010), 83–102; Jon May and Nigel Thrift, *Timespace: Geographies of Temporality* (Abingdon, 2005); Simonetta Tabboni, 'The Idea of Social Time in Norbert Elias', *Time and Society* (2001), 5–27; Zygmunt Bauman, 'Time and Space Reunited', *Time and Society* (2000), 171–85.

¹¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Reign of Phillip II* (trans. Sian Reynolds, Berkeley, CA, 1972); E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, xxxviii (1967), 56–97.

scholars to take up culturally specific studies of spatial consciousness. His temporal work, engaging ideas of speed, gained less traction.¹² Koselleck's *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979) perhaps came closest to doing something similar for time. However, the term temporal humanities never emerged, where spatial humanities became a movement.

Under the influence of Lefebvre and Koselleck an increasing number of scholars in various disciplines turned their attention to time and space as the dimensions of society. Historical texts such as Stephen Kern's *Cultures of Time and Space* (1983) used ideas that run back to both. But their really intense influence began at the end of the 1980s. Uncoincidentally, this was when English translations emerged (Koselleck in 1985, Lefebvre 1990).

Something odd occurred at this point: time and space became part of peculiar rhetorics of competition. The problem according to those who theorised space was that scholars were too focused on time; the accusation also operated in reverse. Texts on space continued to dominate. The influence of Lefebvre, combined with Foucault and Bourdieu, produced sophisticated analyses of the social and historical construction of space. In 1991 Frederic Jameson called for a 'new kind of spatial imagination'; Doreen Massey, in several works over a decade, demanded that political economy be spatialised to illuminate 'geometries of power'.¹³ Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) was a strident effort to make space the primary analytic category of scholarship. This was a sustained critique of historical thinking. Soja caricatures the possibilities of temporal concepts, reducing time to chronology in his effort to elaborate a 'socio-spatial dialectic' and deconstruct the tyranny of unexamined historical time.¹⁴

¹² Lefebvre's temporalities have been revived in the last decade: Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time* (London, 2010); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (London, 2013).

¹³ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC, 1991), 365–6.

¹⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London, 1989), 1–2.

As Robert Hassan has shown, the concept of globalisation was both a driving force and a product of this analysis of spatial organisation. In *Globalisation* (1992), often credited with defining subsequent usage of the term, Roland Robertson explored the wholesale transformation of the qualities of space and time that modernity had generated. There was perhaps also a shift taking place among historians: where analysing scale might once have implied discussing decades, generations and centuries, conference panels or special issues devoted to scale have increasingly assumed the term to mean locality, region, nation, zone and globe.

Ecocriticism at that moment insisted that the fundamental problematic driving scholarship was changing and that this transformation required a spatial and temporal reorientation of the academy, turning from the holy trinity of social analysis to vast geographical processes. As Cheryll Glotfelty put it:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from...the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed you would never know that there was an earth at all.¹⁵

There was some work in the spatialising moment of 1989–92 that seemed to reharmonise space and time. David Harvey, for instance, didn't take Soja's antagonistic line. In essays such as 'The Time and Space of the Enlightenment Project' Harvey explored 'time-space compression' in the emergence of modernity.¹⁶ In late capitalism, he insisted, the individual no longer had a role in constructing time or space: spatial and temporal imaginations were systemic and imposed. However, scholars have recently noted imbalances in Harvey's

¹⁵ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens, GA, 1996), xvi.

¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1989).

project: his ‘best-known books’, Noel Castree remarked, ‘do not strongly thematize time, though they do say a lot about space’.¹⁷

Alongside hundreds of historical, sociological and geographical studies of space, interest in time was less prolific. But trawling library catalogues for books on temporality will still likely land a reader in the years 1989-1992. The late ‘80s saw an ‘imperial turn’ in the study of time alongside new collaboration between history and anthropology. Anthony Aveni published *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks and Cultures* (1989), then J.T. Fraser released *Of Time, Passion and Knowledge* (1990). These were warm-up acts for three major texts: *Chronotypes: the Construction of Time* (1991), a collection featuring names of the status of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Alfred Gell’s *Anthropology of Time* (1992); and Norbert Elias’s *Time: An Essay* (1992). Not coincidentally, 1992 saw the founding of *Time and Society*. The journal’s first year brought several important interventions that are still among its most cited outputs, including Helga Nowotny’s ‘Time and Social Theory’ and Werner Bergmann’s ‘The Problem of Time in Sociology’. Also uncoincidentally, Bruno Latour’s writings of the early ‘90s, culminating in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), remain his most temporally-oriented work.

Over the following two decades, the literature on space grew dramatically. The work of the historian Phillip Ethington is exemplary of space’s victory in the unnecessary competition between dimensions. Ethington denies the possibility of studying time at all: ‘the past cannot exist in time, only in space’.¹⁸ He set himself the task of historicising what, in 2007, he still referred to as the most recent turn in historical thought, the ‘spatial turn’.¹⁹

This brings us back to the present, when the study of time proliferates in ways unseen since 1992. The richest examples come from disciplines that led the spatial turn. There are hints of

¹⁷ Noel Castree, ‘The Spatio-Temporality of Capitalism’, *Time and Society*, xviii (2008), 26–61.

¹⁸ Philip Ethington, ‘Placing the Past: Groundwork for a Spatial Theory of History’, *Rethinking History*, xi (2007), 465-493.

¹⁹ C.f. May and Thrift, *Timescapes*, which identified a ‘spatial imperialism’ in scholarship and prescribed, rather than more work on temporalities, rejection of time/space duality.

this lineage in On Barak whose research is informed by spatial-turn scholarship and speaks as much to space as time. But most cases come from geography, sociology and the environmental humanities, which have seen a return to narrative and the invention of visual and textual mapping practices calculated to emphasise temporal diversity.

The research project I embarked on after the Intercontinental Academy was a journey by kayak through all the Atlantic-island communities of Britain and Ireland. Part of its purpose was to ask how a view from the sea could inform a spatial and temporal reorganisation of archipelagic history. Looking inland from the coast, for instance, the Enlightenment appears as the triumph of a few cities – Dublin, Edinburgh, London, Birmingham – at the expense of elsewhere; for coastal communities it was the beginning, and cause, of a dark age. In contrast, much of what were once referred to as Dark Ages had been eras of great coastal strength and enlightenment. Reversals abound. The widely celebrated Education Acts of 1870 and 1872 were unmitigated disasters for Atlantic Britain, while the grim economic recession of the 1970s saw an island renaissance unprecedented for two centuries.²⁰ As David Lloyd showed in his work on Irish modernity, the multiple temporal trajectories of Britain and Ireland emerge most clearly at the edges.

What has been most striking in the research this journey entailed is that historians have contributed so little. Greg Denning, writing on the Pacific, and John Gillis, on the west Atlantic, are rare historians amidst the long roll-call of scholars who provide frameworks for analysing the temporalities of islandness.²¹ Where the north-east Atlantic is concerned historical contributions are rarer still. Anthropologists and literary scholars such as Lloyd explore the temporalities of Atlantic littorals, asking what it means to live in island spaces

²⁰ Roger Hutchinson, *A Waxing Moon: The Modern Gaelic Revival* (Mainstream, 2005).

²¹ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Honolulu, 1980); John Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago, 2012); Denning's work in the 1980s undermines any distinction between history and anthropology, his ideas formed in dialogue with other discipline-crossing scholars such as Marshall Sahlins, whose *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985) would become the decade's classic archipelagic study.

more empty of human habitation than at any time since prehistory. But the scholar who inspires most imitation is the cartographer, Tim Robinson, whose extensive writings on the Aran Islands and Connemara evoke vast spatial contexts and diverse, multitudinous, temporalities: ‘the immensities each little place is wrapped in’. Sweetly, Robinson has great faith in historians; his maps, he once told an interviewer, are ‘organised by the sense of sight. I cannot see Time (as a good historian can) and the dates of buildings and events I have noted do not begin to compose a local history; they mark, though, some points of attachment of the historical web from which one can grope back along the strands into the darkness’.²²

This is a project of countermapping that works against the military, Anglicising functions of Ireland’s official maps. The ‘strands’ of its ‘web’ entangle and demobilise the linear temporality of imperial modernity that was embodied in the quantification of Irish landscape for integration into British political economy. Robinson conceptualises this quest to see beyond officially-sanctioned narratives of progress as ‘finding chinks in Time’.²³ In his wake have come countless deep mapping projects that aim to scratch below the topsoil to clutter and diversify a single spot’s temporal meanings. All are historical as much as geographical: the map’s space is container for temporal data. Events and stories are compressed into vehicles whose virtue is their lack of narrative structure. These projects are often community endeavours, advised by University geographers such as Nessa Cronin (NUI Galway) who are interested in ‘how communities both inherit and create their cartography of belonging’: ‘ground-truthing’ is no longer a matter of metric data but of meaning made through centuries.²⁴ Yet it is rare for historians to take major roles.

Community endeavours to reconceptualise the temporalities of place exist by the hundred in the Gaelic speaking regions of Ireland and Scotland, particularly among the islands. There are

²² Tim Robinson, interview with David Ward collected in the Folding Landscapes submission to the Ford European Conservation Award, Tim Robinson Archive, NUI Galway, P120/3/4/1.

²³ Richard Pine, ‘Cartography of the Soul’, *Irish Literary Supplement* (1987), 16.

²⁴ Nessa Cronin, ‘Deep Mapping Communities in the West of Ireland’ in Lynch *et al.* (eds.), *Thinking Continental* (Lincoln, NE, 2017), 46–62.

regions here that, for many years, refused to accept the imposition of daylight saving time. Many of the more substantive initiatives constitute profound, practical applications of historical thought unrivalled in most fields of British and Irish history: they achieve precisely that link between historical practice and social impact for which historians strive.

The earliest Scottish example occurred in Ness (Isle of Lewis). In the mid-1970s, Lewis was among the most economically depressed regions of Britain, facing enormous unemployment and an exodus of young people to the mainland. Ness identity in the era of depression was founded in temporal myths: that the island had no history, that history happened to cities and in the English language, and that the only way for 'backward' Ness to 'catch up' was to imitate English-speaking cities.

The striking part of the story is how that situation was overcome. When a few Ness residents, including Annie Macdonald (now MacSween), gained access to job-creation and education funds they used them in radical ways. Macdonald pioneered one of the most successful job creation schemes in western Scotland, not by founding a fishing co-operative or transport company but by forming a Historical Society (Comunn Eachdraidh Niss) and recruiting a team of six to collect oral histories and placelore. At first this looked eccentric. In a 1979 interview, Macdonald noted the concerns of critics: 'they thought it wasn't the best way to spend public money. Maybe they thought the past was dead'.²⁵ Yet legitimisation brought by official funding facilitated a scheme conceptualised to stimulate 'the people of the Western Isles to perceive their own community more clearly'.²⁶

Nothing could be achieved economically, Macdonald realised, until the narrative in which Ness people placed their lives was reimagined. The six fieldworkers collected material to build Ness its own temporalities in tension with those of industrial modernity. By recovering

²⁵ James Hunter, 'Who Says History is Bunk? The Past Inspires Ness to a Better Future', *Press and Journal*, 1 Dec 1979.

²⁶ *Sinn Fhein a rinn e: Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean, 1977-92*, Comunn Na Gadhlaig pamphlet, Lewis Castle Archive, Stornoway.

the herring girl, crofter and Gaelic storyteller from posterity's condescension they showed that mainland histories taught in schools were not the only shapes the past could take. The result was not the total rejection of temporal ideologies and modernising narratives that an approach informed by anthropological theory might have produced, but a targeted critique of those temporalities of modernity that pushed industrial, urban and bureaucratic integration to the fore: they argued that Ness was not traditional but differently modern.²⁷ Many early initiatives involved practical acts of mediation, much like those described by Barak, between technologies that transformed experience of time – such as telephones – and the specific temporal setting of Ness, where memory endured through Gaelic patronymics and an ordinary phonebook would be incomprehensible. The society's impact was profound. The first exhibition featured photographs and coastal maps to spur the collection of Gaelic placenames; a 1979 newspaper article written by James Hunter (one of few historians ever involved with the phenomenon) remarked that this 'brought people together in a new way. It generated...the sort of enthusiasm for action which had previously been lacking'.²⁸

Remarkably, the Historical Society is now the region's biggest employer, its archive bustling with locals and visitors. Maps that repopulate the historic landscape have become ever more crucial to the islands' historical renaissance. And Ness's historical fever proved infectious. By 1990 there were fifteen new 'Comuinn Eachdraidh' in the Outer Hebrides, their voice aggregated through a Federation of Historical Societies who could assist in the provision of resources to re-narrate history in schools. Today that number of historical societies has doubled, affiliated in Tasglann nan Eilean Siar and instrumental in resurgent Gaelic culture. The first historical society began a revolution in island life that is only now coming to fruition.

²⁷ For instance, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983).

²⁸ Hunter, 'Who Says History is Bunk?'

These community endeavours constitute one of the most inspirational historiographical phenomena in modern Britain, and their work has been celebrated by geographers, such as Robinson, and literary scholars, such as Robert Macfarlane, yet they are still uncelebrated among historians. They might be read as demonstrating Ethington's point (that time can only be comprehended spatially) except that they do the reverse, rendering space temporal. What they show is potential for historians to engage the conceptual world that informs Barak, Ogle and Wishnitzer in other historical fields. But, perhaps, it's only by taking the spatial turn and learning from the current practice of geographers that the potential for historians of thinking through temporalities can be realised.