

Engaging Macrohistory through the Present Moment

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Introduction

It is distinctly presumptuous for a non-historian to comment on issues of macrohistory that are the focus of extensive studies¹ – or is it? Is it appropriate to frame macrohistory as only being a matter for historians? As with war and other matters, is macrohistory too important to be left to historians?²

The following is therefore a reflection on the significance of the rhythms of macrohistory for lived experience in the present moment – an experience that is a feature of the lived reality of all. The question is how do, or could, people engage with macrohistory – without being historians? Responding to the details of macrohistory over centuries is naturally disempowering to many. It might well be expected to engender a sense of apathy – despite the sense of perspective some claim it offers.

A possibly more intriguing framing of the challenge lies in the question of how a person might detect the longer-term rhythms that are of concern to macrohistory – especially in the daily life of a "blip culture"³ that seemingly treats such sensibilities as irrelevant. When the key focus for many is on the beat of music as pacemaker for the heart and its affairs, the larger rhythms are beyond our ken. And yet we each have to write such a larger perspective into the internal decoration of our psyches – as the fabric across which we move, even if only a stitch at a time. Whether understood within a pattern of generations or not, "personal macrohistory" extends from birth to death – and becomes a preoccupation at various stages.

The question explored here is how the text of macrohistory – and its larger dynamic – gets written into the individual psychic fabric. Can it exist otherwise?

Identifying Longer-term Rhythms

There has long been a preoccupation with the longer-term rhythms of human existence that only much more recently came to provide a context for macrohistory – but were notably neglected despite the work of Pitrim Sorokin (*Social and Cultural Dynamics* 1937). Much is made of the capacity of the earliest observers to explore astronomical cycles and predict eclipses – in both cases judged as being determining factors in the cycles of society and human experience. This provided a basis for astrology that remains vitally important to people of many cultures, including decision-makers at the highest levels (Reagan, etc). However it is one thing to be confronted with astronomically determined interweaving cycles and quite another to comprehend the larger dynamic that they represent, and yet another to sense their immediate experiential significance.

Many cultures have endeavoured to give meaning in the present to such longer-term rhythms through intertwining them with myth of immediate psychoactive significance. This remains of particular importance in the Balinese calendar and in a larger sense to Hindu and Buddhist understanding of the "Wheel of Life" as a context for cycles of individual reincarnation.

Such cycles were of particular importance to determining experience in the Mayan and Aztec cultures. Cultures might well be distinguished in terms of their ways of identifying macrotime and making it meaningful.

Concern is expressed about cultural memory, perhaps focused most poignantly in commemoration of wars long past ("Lest We Forget"), especially where such memories continue to be of central significance in determining relationships with other groups.⁴ Living memory may focus on the horrendously traumatic experiences of repressive political regimes of the past. In the case of the Protestants of Northern Ireland, these memories of the past continue to be literally "drummed in".

Some memories of this type are now associated by the young with the outdated views of their elders, no longer held in traditional respect. The patterns recognized in the older traditions then decay into intellectual or cultural curiosities – possibly fit only for tourists and anthropologists. With the dissociation from daily experience of the agricultural cycles, and those related to the movement of animals, a sense of longer rhythms may also be lost. The tales appreciative of the memory of elephants to ensure the survival of the herd, in very occasional times of great drought, also lose their significance.

In the present media era, new cultural artefacts nevertheless rely on a vestigial ability to appreciate the place of humanity in longer time spans. This is notably to be seen in popular science fiction movies and series⁵ that are formative for the imagination of many youngsters. It might be argued that it is the time span (in addition to any space span) that provides an experiential guarantee of depth, however artificial. The stories, plots and relationships – possibly spanning generations – give meaning to longer-term relationships that may be lost in the shorter-term relationships which many now accept as the norm for daily life, notably as exemplified by celebrity role models. The significance of longer-term may however be reinforced by actual tragic bonding experiences associated with accidents or warfare – of the type giving

rise to the Japanese time-spanning understanding of *giri*. Modern cultural artefacts still achieve resonance in people when they are able to give meaning to longer-term relationships, whether between friends, siblings, man and wife, elective affinities, or across generations.

The case is somewhat different with respect to what might be termed "time-spanning fiction" offering an epic "sweep of history". For, once there is a shift to spanning more than three generations, the sense of time becomes more intellectualized. This is the case with fiction concerning families and dynasties across more than a century, whatever the degree to which the facts are fictionalized and personalized. Such stories start to partake of the perspective of historical accounts across centuries. Extended to the history of humanity as a whole, there is a similarity to the experience of one-volume works such as H G Wells's *A Short History of the World* (1922) or the millennia spanning science fiction exercise of Olaf Stapleton's *Last and First Men* (1930), a "history" of the evolution of humankind over two billion years. Such intellectualization is however given a much more personal dimension in science fiction works such as Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: Archives*.⁶ This intimacy is a feature in another respect in *The Blessing Stone* (2004) by Barbara Wood which provides a sense of the epic sweep of human history. Perhaps providing the most popular, and problematic, sense of longer time spans is the novel of Douglas Adams⁷, adapted from a BBC radio series from 1978-1980.

R Buckminster Fuller was one of the first to popularize a *World Game* as guide to developing a longer term sense of patterns and options. A quite different approach, to eliciting a sense of such time patterns, is that associated with some new kinds of interactive computer games allowing users to explore nation-building and colonizing processes⁸ – some of which may be banned for distorting history. One peculiar development of the last decade has been the astonishing popularity of online "virtual world" role-playing games like *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call*, *Ultima Online*, and *Lineage* that offer an unusual insight into time. As argued by David

Plotz⁹, whilst every minute of the day, hundreds of thousands of people are gathering online to build digital civilizations, there are other much less known games developed to assist policy makers in making history.

Another approach to acquiring a sense of longer term time patterns is through the (often unforgettable) experience of "accidents", "disasters" or "problems". Problems might be seen as encounters with previously neglected rhythms of macrohistory. Obvious examples are very occasional flooding, heatwaves, cold spells, hurricanes, problems deriving from El Niño, invasions of pests, degradation of ecosystems (loss of songbirds, disappearance of "old growth" forests, etc). Much is currently made of the long-term cycles of climate change – as currently experienced in terms of rising sea levels. A socio-cultural example is provided by the very title of Samuel P Huntington's famed *Clash of Civilizations* (1993), which has done so much to frame the unfortunate response of the West to Islam through the "war against terror". The metaphor "clash" is indicative of the lack of conceptual subtlety in understanding of the interrelationship between long dissociated historical trends – "rape" would have offered the same insight in less mechanistic terms. The challenge is most evident in the modern tragedy of Jerusalem. This exemplifies millennia of historical inability, by the best and the brightest, to identify a fruitful intertwining of historical trends simplistically labelled as incommensurable. A classic case of being condemned to repeat the historical cycles of violence from which nothing has been learned.

The question of longer-term rhythms is also a feature of the long-standing issues of calendar reform. In this connection, Jose Arguelles has developed a recasting of the "myth of history" based on Mayan calendar cycles that points to current day problems as arising from the incompatibility of natural rhythms with the mindset associated with modern calendars. This historical narrative has been associated with an imaginative game.¹⁰

Experience of Longer-term Rhythms

It is acknowledged that time may be envisaged and experienced in a variety of ways.¹¹ For example, Hugh Rayment-Pickard¹² distinguishes four types: Catastrophic time (the devouring and meaningless image), Apocalyptic time (awaiting the arrival of meaning, sceptical of human endeavour), Kairic time (savouring the moment), Prophetic time (seeking to redeem time with work). As expressed by J B Priestly¹³:

We are not – even though we might prefer to be – the slaves of chronological time. We are, in this respect, more elaborate, more powerful, perhaps nobler creatures than we have lately taken ourselves to be.

Questions may be usefully asked, notably in the light of more recent theories of physics, as to the locus of "the past" and "the future" in relation to "the present".¹⁴ From a Hindu perspective, as articulated by theosophists and others, the "akashic record" is a form of universal filing system that records every occurring thought, word, and action – and may be "read". In Hindu mysticism, akasha is understood to be the primary principle of nature from which the other four natural principles, fire, air, earth, and water, are engendered. Macrohistory may therefore involve analogues to the degrees of "curvature" and "curled up dimensions" with which physicists currently struggle in string theory. The point is succinctly made by Nagarjuna¹⁵: "If the existence of the present and future depends on the past, then the present and future should be in the past."

How then is the "long" of "longer-term" to be understood and experienced? With regard to the nature of macrotime within oneself, in the West the insights of Marsilio Vicino (tutor of Leonardo da Vinci) are still valued by psychotherapists for his exploration of the experience of the time-defining "movement" of the planets "within" – in resonance with those "without".¹⁶

More prosaically, much is made of the experience of a "sense of destiny", notably by aspiring leaders. For others there is recognition of a "sense of a journey" or "path". Some cultivate a "sense of history". For others again, a

"sense of community" developed over the years is associated with a degree of time-binding that transcends time – especially for those sharing an agenda and "in it for the long haul", even understood to transcend particular life times. The nature of religious communities could usefully be explored in this sense. In the case of the Islamic community (umma), the Islamic calendar dates specifically from its creation. The same might be said of the Christianity community. These all point to ways of experiencing macrohistory.

Story tellers evoke a sense of macrohistory by situating tales "once upon a time". Much has been made of a "Golden Age" long ago, with which people continue to resonate. Romantic poets explore the sense of "far away and long ago" charted by Keats and Coleridge. This is explicitly echoed in science fiction movie epics.¹⁷ Science fiction frequently cultivates a sense of time.¹⁸ Christian fundamentalists focus attention impatiently on their rapture at the "end of time".

How is time experienced through memorials? There is a certain irony to the appreciation of Stonehenge as an early astronomical observatory underpinning superstitious ritual understandings of time – when modern memorials use just such stonework as a focus for memory.

The above examples all raise the issue of the nature of the "point" from which macrohistory is viewed and experienced. How is the observing individual specificity both transcended and embodied in that experience? Through a process of metanoia? How does this "point" relate to the essential challenge articulated by Reshad Feild¹⁹ of "removing the point from which we view." Traditional responses are challenged by the reality of Alvin Toffler's "blip culture" – in which the point may be not to have any sustainable point from which one views!

Pathology of Memory – Collective and Individual

Jeremy Rifkin²⁰ attempts to explain time in terms of how people think about things, and how societies are organized. Rifkin talks about the price people pay for scheduling their lives

with great precision. Specifically he discusses how people concentrate on immediate gains, and the price that they pay for losing the kind of context and overview provided by macrohistory. Daily life has in consequence become shaped by the time demands of modern industry, rather than guided by organic evolution. Values are shaped by activity around such distorted particular understandings of time.

Individual experience of macrohistory may also be explored through the pathology of memory. Insights are to be derived from the individual case, notably in extreme forms such as Alzheimer's disease. But these may suggest analogues with respect to collective memory.²¹ Might the time of a culture – in its macrohistorical setting – be understood to cease through a form of collective Alzheimer's disease? In *Holding Up a Mirror: how civilizations decline* (2003), Anne Glyn-Jones notes, following cyclic phases identified by Sorokin, that: "a wholly sensate, materialist society...ultimately loses all moral restraint to the point at which crime and lawlessness make the pursuit of happiness a hollow goal".

Perhaps the most obvious pathology is that of denial, whether individual or collective. Stanley Cohen's argument²² is based on hundreds of theoretical references in sociology and psychology, woven together with both private and public experience of how "the past comes back to haunt you". Regarding the stifling of global democracy by the USA at this time, George Monbiot²³ argues:

"When you forget, you must fill the memory gap with a story. And the story that all enthusiasts for empire tell themselves is that independent peoples have no one but themselves to blame for their misfortunes."

In an era of massive creation and dissemination of knowledge, past and present, concerns are frequently expressed at the degradation of knowledge of facts of apparently little immediate relevance. Even the most motivated deplore their inability to "keep up". In this sense, ironically, the emerging knowledge society may be understood as a society of ignorance characterized by massive limits to learning.

As the death of sequential, linear thought,

does the "blip culture" epitomize the opposite of a macrohistorical perspective in which there is only a NOW – that may be either one of bliss or dread, or some combination? Or does the blip culture hold insights into understandings of time – and of how it is ordered in consciousness – that macrohistory ignores?

Doris Lessing articulates the challenge in her fictionalized description of a poignant encounter of a "development specialist" from an advanced galactic culture with a leading representative of a "developing" planet:

"To say that he understood what went on was true. To say that he did not understand – was true. I would sit and explain, over and over again. He listened, his eyes fixed on my face, his lips moving as he repeated to himself what I was saying. He would nod: yes, he had grasped it. But a few minutes later, when I might be saying something of the same kind, he was uncomfortable, threatened. Why was I saying that? and that? his troubled eyes asked of my face: What did I mean? His questions at such moments were as if I had never taught him anything at all. He was like one drugged or in shock. Yet it seemed that he did absorb information for sometimes he would talk as if from a basis of shared knowledge: it was as if a part of him knew and remembered all I told him, but other parts had not heard a word. I have never before or since had so strongly that experience of being with a person and knowing that all the time there was certainly a part of that person in contact with you, something real and alive and listening – and yet most of the time what one said did not reach that silent and invisible being, and what he said was not often said by the real part of him. It was as if someone stood there bound and gagged while an inferior impersonator spoke for him".²⁴

Engaging with Longer-term Rhythms

The variety of approaches to engaging with longer-term rhythms includes:

- A burgeoning popular literature on developing a sense of time and timing²⁵ – changing the pace and quality of life through new attitudes to time and a form of temporal "downshifting", perhaps exemplified by the "slow food" movement. Some contemporary psychotherapeutic practices emphasize the function of temenos, as the sacred

space within in which deep time is experienced in meditation.

- Exploration of the value of some traditional practices to achieve a more fruitful psycho-physiological relationship to longer-term rhythms:
 - Ritual practices designed to mark, and transcend, the passage of time within a larger temporal pattern, notably the liturgy of the hours of prayer, as practiced in monasteries. Periodically the Dalai Lama confers the largest Buddhist ritual, the 12-day Kalachakra initiation, to large groups in support of world peace. Kalachakra means "Wheel of Time", referring to the cycles of time. The ritual is associated with construction of a sand mandala, subsequently destroyed.
 - The practice of yoga
 - The practice of ancestor worship, or praying to (or for) the souls of ancestors – and others of earlier generations
 - Use of pscho-active drugs to modify perception of time, notably as in traditional religious rituals
- Exploration of atemporal perspectives such as those relating to access to the "akashic record"²⁶ or to emerging understandings of the relationship between contemporary physics and consciousness
- Establishing a relationship to history:
 - "Making one's mark" to ensure a place in history, notably as practiced by politicians, scientists, and sports personalities
 - "Making history", as with statesmen, military leaders and explorers
 - "Embodying history" as may be intrinsic to the appreciation of symbolic figures, notably spiritual leaders and royalty
 - Exploring the sense of when "one's time has come", whether in relation to seizing an opportunity or death
 - Exploring the experiential nature of historical determinism and (possibly fatal) entrainment by history
- Recognition of the sense of time associated with a moment of glorious heroism or a tragedy.

- Exploration of the sense of time associated with commitment:
 - in the form of interpersonal bonds, notably through contracts – of which those based on the proverbial handshake may be the most binding. This is notably illustrated by the quality of moral obligation exemplified by untranslatable concepts such as the Japanese *giri*, typically experienced as irrational to the western business mentality.
 - in the quality of time associated with long-term care for another, whether as parent or for someone with a chronically disabling condition
 - to stewardship of land that has been "in the family for generations"
 - to objects, from houses to jewellery, that have been "handed down for generations"
- Recognition of the confluence of historical trends to a focus in a dramatic moment in time, possibly a moment of critical choice. A particular form lies in the perspective traditionally associated with an astronomical conjunction or an eclipse, and more recently in the world-wide celebration of a "harmonic convergence".
- Cultivation of a kairotic perspective regarding the differences between discourse in reality and the situational (kairotic) terms, as first articulated in classical Greece. This focus on the rhetorical situation of the present moment is not only dependent upon the appropriateness of timing and purpose, but also on the appropriate nature of the situation, the approach, and the implications of the discourse. For Kenneth Burke, *kairos* encompasses the occasion itself, the historical circumstances that brought it about, the oral or written conventions of the form required by occasion, the manner of delivery the audience anticipates, their attitudes to the speaker and the outside world.

The Long Now Foundation (created 1996) specifically focuses on the development of longer-term and "slower/better" thinking and on fostering creativity in the framework of "the

next 10,000 years". It is however unclear how it sees such thinking as encoded back into present moment engagement with macrohistory. By contrast the suggestion has been made for a Short Now Foundation to configure thinking into the present moment.²⁷ This notably explored the possibility that the time frameworks and dynamics of cosmology could be usefully understood as resonant analogues to experiences within the human psyche. For example, the so-called Big Bang explosion at the beginning of time might be analogous to the explosive expansion that takes place in any significant moment of creativity in the life of an individual – to be lost (or quashed) with any subsequent reversion to banality or loss of focus (or meditative concentration).

Manipulation of Collective Memory

Further understanding of the engagement with longer-term rhythms may be obtained from exploration of efforts to inhibit access to them and to selectively reinforce short-term perspectives.

Perhaps the most perverted approach is associated with destruction of longer-term carriers of cultural identity amongst the disempowered – as undertaken by colonial regimes, missionary religions, and more recently by the cultural imperialism of some media. Much long-term thinking might be seen as locked *within* any particular historical cycle (as notably documented by Pitrim Sorokin). However, such encounters with other cultures signal a relationship *between* distinct cycles in the macrohistorical process – which many are obliged to experience in the moment and to their extreme disadvantage. How conscious or deliberate this destruction has been, or continues to be, is a matter of debate. Nevertheless it drastically affects the relationships of indigenous peoples to their land and to its flora and fauna.²⁸ Examples include:

- repression of local languages, often to the point of forbidding or criminalizing their use
- repression of traditional ritual cycles, judged inappropriate in the eyes of a

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- particular religious or moral framework
- suppression of traditional music and its rhythms, in favour of the cultural products of the colonizing power
- destruction of traditional symbols (or their sequestration by anthropologists) to prevent them acting as a focus for alternative modes of thought

Feminist scholars have made the point that the role of women in macrohistory has been effectively excised by men.²⁹ History is written as "his-story", as in the classic case of Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with Sally Hemings. Is there any danger of macrohistory being similarly framed as "macho-history", especially since no macrohistorians are women? Does a similar mindset ensure the exclusion of "alternatives" from contemporary history – as efforts to activate a new historical cycle?

The feminist concern may be seen as excluding a particular quality from the appreciation and understanding of time and history. But the most deliberate distortion is associated with the many examples of historical revisionism,³⁰ of which the feminist case may be but a specially problematic example.

From this perspective, the massive genealogical programme of the Mormon Church may be seen as an ambitious manipulation of collective memory through which the dead (notably ancestors) identified in the past are converted by a ritual of proxy baptism for the dead to membership of their Christian community in the afterlife – including, controversially, Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In a time of speculation on the paradoxes of time travel, this intervention is consistent with research on the temporal manipulation of "retroactive prayer".³¹

More generally it is to be expected that macrohistory will become the terrain over which memetic warfare is undertaken in order to determine a preferred understanding of time, and of the temporal context for the daily life of the individual and collective "targets" of such crusades.³² As argued by Gary Younge:³³

Politics has, to an extent, always been about the triumph of symbols over substance and assertion over actuality. But in the case of Iraq this trend seems to have reached its apogee, as though statements by themselves can fashion reality by the

force of their own will and judgment. Declaration and proclamation have become everything. The question of whether they bear any relation to the world we actually live in seems like an unpleasant and occasionally embarrassing intrusion. The motto of the day both in Downing Street and the White House seems to be: "To say it is so is to make it so." These people are rewriting history before the ink on the first draft is even dry.

Conclusion

For the individual there is a challenge to distinguish between long-term experience (a) within an historical cycle (perhaps perceived linearly and sequentially), (b) in terms of the rhythms linking historical cycles into a macro-historical pattern, from (c) what might be termed a meta-historical perspective.

Macrohistory might be understood as a construct in (or of) social reality – as a memetic complex *par excellence* of intertwined, or topologically knotted, cycles. Like a complex atom, this complex may also be understood as holding in an implicate order the variations of historical possibility – structured into periods to form a periodic table of human potentiality in which the variations of higher "atomic weight" may remain to be detected. The patterns of change articulated in the *I Ching* offer an insight into Eastern variants³⁴ and their relationship to Gregory Bateson's "pattern that connects".³⁵ Such patterns may be explored as depictions of temporal pathways along which a person moves – onto some succeeding pathway, following a decisive reflection.

In this light, it is William Blake's sense of "a universe in a grain of sand" that points to the challenge for the individual of engaging with macrohistory – of projecting a sense of eternity into a moment of time. It is perhaps the poet T S Eliot who has been most skilled in giving form to this atemporal experience of time in individual understanding in the widely quoted extract from *Little Gidding* (1943): "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

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Notes

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2. *Issues too Important to be Left to Specialists: Selected web resources* 2004.
3. following Alvin Toffler. *The Third Wave* 1981.
4. cf. the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland, the Sunnis and Shias of Islam, etc.
5. *Star Trek, Battle Ship Galactica, Dreamscape, Dune*.
6. *Shikasta: Re, Colonised Planet 5* 1979; *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* 1980; *The Sirian Experiments* 1980; *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* 1982; *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* 1983.
7. *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* 1980.
8. *Rise of Nations*, a history based strategy game; or *Republic: The Revolution*.
9. *Iraq: The Computer Game: What "virtual world" games can teach the real world about reconstructing Iraq*. 19 June 2003.
10. *Dreamspell The Journey of Timeship Earth* 2013.
11. see notably *Times of our Lives*.
12. *The Myths of Time: from St Augustine to American Beauty* 2004.
13. *Man and Time* 1978.
14. *Presenting the Future* 2001.
15. *Examination of Time*, 2nd century BC.
16. see Thomas Moore. *The Planets Within: the astrological psychology of Marsilio Ficino* 1990; *Composing the Present Moment: celebrating the insights of Marsilio Ficino* 2001.
17. *Star Trek, Star Wars, Dune*.
18. cf. Roger MacBride Allen, *The Depths of Time* 2000.
19. *The Last Barrier: A Journey into the Essence of Sufi Teachings* 2002.
20. *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History* 1987.
21. *Societal Learning and the Erosion of*

- Collective Memory* 1980 and its annex *Pointers to the Pathology of Collective Memory*.
22. *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* 2001.
 23. An empire of denial, *The Guardian* 1 June 2004.
 24. *Doris Lessing. Re: Colonised Planet 5 - Shikasta* 1979 pp. 56-57.
 25. cf. Eknath Easwaran. *Take Your Time: Finding Balance in a Hurried World* 1997; John De Graaf, John (Ed). *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America* 2003.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *The Isdom of the Wisdom Society: Embodying time as the heartland of humanity* 2003.
 28. cf. Darrell A. Posey (Ed). *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* 1999.
 29. cf. Elise Boulding. *The Underside of History: a view of women through time* 1976.
 30. cf. Stanley Cohen. *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* 2001.
 31. Brian Olshansky and Larry Dossey. *Retroactive Prayer: an outrageous hypothesis?* 2004.
 32. see *Missiles, Missives, Missions and Memetic Warfare: Navigation of strategic interfaces in multidimensional knowledge space* 2001.
 33. *Never mind the truth. Guardian* 31 May 2004.
 34. *Relationship between 384 Hexagrams of the Chinese I Ching* 1983.
 35. *Hyperspace Clues to the Psychology of the Pattern that Connects in the light of the 81 Tao Te Ching insights* 2003.

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