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§研究討論§

Making Sense of Time:

Towards a Universal Typology of Conceptual Foundations of Historical Consciousness

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Abstract

The article conceptualizes a general theory of cultural strategies to give time experiences in the human world a cultural meaning. It refers to anthropological universals of time experience and related universal cultural strategies of interpreting them. So, e.g., the interpretation of contingency in the change of the human world is done by telling a story. The enormous complexity of time experience and time interpretation is reduced to some general structures and typological differences. It characterizes modes of experience, dimensions of ordering it, sense criteria for the interpretation of time, modes of realizing this interpretation and, finally, some ideas about comprehensive developments in the understanding of time across different cultures. This theoretical and typological approach to understand the understanding of time is presented as a means for empirical research, mainly in intercultural comparison.

Keywords: time, historical consciousness, philosophy of history, typology of time interpretation.

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The following argumentation[1] is developed in the context of research dedicated to historiography in a comparative perspective. Such a comparison can be easily done within a cultural context which is grounded on the same or at least on similar principles of understanding the past as history. Substantial research and interpretation of Western historical thinking in a comparative way has been done. It is much more difficult to compare the treatment of the past which leads to historical thinking in an intercultural perspective. Not much work has been done in this field; and such work as there is tends to take the most advanced form of historical thinking, namely the Western one, as a parameter, and look at other cultures in terms of similarities and differences. This is where the problem lies; one mode of historical thinking is taken as a parameter of comparison regardless of what the other mode of thinking may be: that leads to a distortion of perspectives.

What can we do to avoid this distortion? First of all there is a need to develop the parameter of comparison in a theoretical way, so that we can check and prove how the perspective of comparison is worked out, what it makes visible and what it tends to obscure or hide.[2] In order to avoid the dominance of the conceptual frameworks of one culture over those of another it is necessary to start this theory by finding and asserting fundamental and universal elements of man's relationship to the past.

Such an anthropology of time concept is abstract and lets all differences vanish. But however generalised it may be, it can serve as a starting point. In order to bring differences into view, it is necessary to develop this anthropology of time concepts further into a typology of different categories for making concrete these time concepts.

Time is a basic dimension of human life. It is embedded in growth and decline, birth and death, change and continuity. It is structurally distracted

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1 I would like to thank Achim Mittag for extremely valuable comments, critique and hints to Chinese examples. The use of his proposals lies, of course, exclusively in my responsibility.

2 Jörn Rüsen, "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparison of Historiography," in *History and Theory, Theme Issue 35: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective* (1996), 5-22.

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by contingency and can only be pursued by following temporal perspectives in the cultural framework of human activity and suffering. There is no cultural orientation of human life without a complex interrelationship of memory and expectations. Husserl has characterized the underlying two main intentions of the human consciousness as *retention and protention.*[3] The human mind[4] always mediates both by working through the experience of change and giving it a meaning by interpretation which can function as a source and impulse for future perspectives.

History as we are used to understand it, cannot be found in all cultures and all times. But in every human culture the human mind conceptualizes time in a special way so that it distinguishes between different time dimensions related to past, present and future (in a very variable way); and in every human culture the experience of the past is brought into a pattern of significance which makes temporal change in the present day world conceivable and understandable and enables people to guide their activities (and suffering) along the line of an idea of change however vague it may be. Then they can understand what change means and how it is related to the human mind, its threats and hopes, its expectations and memories. In all cultures there is one mental procedure and cultural practice which brings about this interpretation in a way that change itself is presented as sense-bearing and significant for the purposes of human activity. This is the universal and fundamental mental strategy of telling a story.[5]

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3 Edmund Husserl, "Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins", ed. Martin Heidegger, 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1980).

4 Speaking of 'mind', I want to point out that its scope of meaning embraces what in the Chinese tradition was called *hsin* ("the heart-and-mind").

5 Cf. Paul Ricoeur's fundamental philosophical analysis: Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative.* 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988). I have discussed narration as a fundamental operation of historical thinking in a closer relationship to historical studies: *Studies in Metahistory.* (Pretoria 1993), 3-14; *Historische Vernunft. Grundzüge einer Historik I*: *'Die Grundlagen der Geschichtswissenschaft'* (Göttingen, 1983); *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit. Grundzüge einer Historik II*: *'Die Prinzipien der historischen Forschung'* (Göttingen, 1986); *Lebendige Geschichte. Grundzüge einer Historik III*: *'Formen und Funktionen des historischen Wissens'* (Göttingen, 1989); *Zerbrechende Zeit. Über den Sinn der Geschichte.* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001).

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By *narration* the human mind masters contingency.[6] It gives a meaning to the temporal sequence of events occurring in the change of their world. So human agency can be culturally guided by an idea of the temporal extension of the human world and the human self. This idea mediates the experience of change with the intentions, purposes and values of the human mind into one meaningful totality of time. The culturally dominant way of presenting this totality is telling a meta-narrative (or master-narrative), which in old societies has a cosmological extension and a religious setting. In later periods it is normally realized as a universal history, which combines secular, religious, and very often ritual elements in a dynamic way.[7] Modern historical thinking eventually tries to present such a totality of time in purely secular terms by using the mental power of human agency as a comprehensive and constitutive source of meaning and significance.[8]

I would like to contextualize this idea of narration as the source of historical thinking, bringing it together with a complex concept of time. Doing so I will enlarge the focus within which the work of historians appears in such a way that its acquaintance with other cultural practices and orientation strategies will be stressed and structurally interrelated.

I would like to start with an artificial distinction between experience and interpretation of time concentrating the focus on *experience* (1). I know that there is no experience without interpretation and no interpretation without experience, but, nevertheless, it makes sense to distinguish them: Every interpretation is an interpretation of something, and every experience

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6 'Contingency' has a broad meaning. For my purposes I concentrate on 'by chance,' 'occurrent by accident,' 'being out of order,' 'beyond a pattern of meaning'. In Chinese it fills the range of meaning between *ch'a* (inaccuracy), *pien* (deviation) and *luan* (disorder, chaos).

7 The best Chinese example for such an universal history is, of course, Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih-chi*.

8 Nevertheless religion remains an (often hidden) element of historical sense generation. Cf. Jörn Rüsen, "Historische Methode und religiöser Sinn - Vorüberlegungen zu einer Dialektik der Rationalisierung des historischen Denkens in der Moderne," in Küttler, Wolfgang; Rüsen, Jörn; Ernst Schulin, (eds), *Geschichtsdiskurs 2: Anfänge modernen historischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), pp. 344-379.

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is a challenge to a certain kind of mental activity called interpretation. Interpreted experiences can function as cultural means of human activity and suffering.

The first step of interpreting the experience of time is giving it a *dimension*, a space in the realm of human consciousness where it gets a specific treatment - aesthetic, emotional, political, technological, cognitive, etc. (2). Within these dimensions the experience of time eventually gets its *sense* by becoming related to our intentions which guide our memories and future expectations (3). The way of generating this sense can be furthermore differentiated in respect to its *modes* (4). A special issue is the question whether there is a logic of *development* in time concepts over a long-term change across different cultures (5). Finally, I would like to stress the *limits* of making sense in dealing with time and the principles of change within the human treatment of time as a basic dimension of practical life (6).

My distinctions and specifications have a *typological* character. This means that they are artificially constructed in order to bring to light and to make understandable complex phenomena and changes in reality. Such ideal types make specific characteristics visible by isolating them from others; the distinctive nature of the findings can be identified, described, interpreted and understood as configurations of these single specific attributes. Logically, types are clearly distinct and separated from each other; empirically, they rarely appear in a pure form, but mainly in mixtures, which have to be reconstructed.[9]

I. Experience

Starting with the *experience of time* I would like to point out an anthropological universal which underlies every human concept of time: namely the simple fact that humans must make sense of time in order to be

9 The classical description of form and use of ideal-types was given by Max Weber: "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," in idem, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen (Mohr). 1968), 3rd ed. 146-214; English in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. and ed. by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1949).

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able to live in the temporal changes of their world. They have to think about it, to give it meaning and significance in order to come to terms with the change of their world and themselves. They have to bring about a viable interrelationship of the intentions of their consciousness and the real changes in their world, and they have to mediate their experiences of the past with their expectations of the future, etc. Time as a matter of experience has the character of a challenge to the human mind. Here it causes mental movement and activity by which it becomes appropriated (in the sense of interpreted) and gets the feature of meaning and significance. Rise and fall, birth and death, growth and decay, youth and old age – all these occurrences have to be put into a pattern of significance which lets those who experience it come to terms with them. I would like to call this challenging character of time *'contingency.'* [10] There is a structural difference between the pregiven change of the human world (the external as well as the internal one) and the human self with its specific temporal dimension of remembering and expecting which is loaded with values and norms. This difference has to be mediated, and history is the cultural practice of doing it.[11]

Every time experience has its specific character in this realm of mediation between contingency and its appropriation and shaping by human interpretation. And every mode of time experience has these two sides: the challenge of contingency and the response of human sense generation.

In this tense dimension of experience time may occur in very different modes. I will only enumerate some of these modes: Duration, standstill, fleetingness, improvement or worsening, return to origins, a rupture of time by an unusual event, acceleration, emptiness, contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous [Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen], the melting of horizons of understanding into a diachronic relationship. And I would

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10 Cf. fn. 6

11 A remarkable confirmation in Chinese historical thinking can be found in the *Kung-yang-commentary* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: "To set to right things which have been thrown into chaos and to restore the world to order, there is none better than the *Spring and Autumn Annals*" (*Kung-yang chuan*, Ai-kung 14th year).

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like to mention here the union mystica of present and past, in which both lose their difference and distance so that people of the present feel immediately contemporaneous to the people of the past. A specific time experience is related to the value of time, it may be short, fleeting, precious; time can be looked at as something which one has to use in a meaningful way, otherwise one will miss a chance. The specific natural experience of time as emergence and passing, of birth and death has already been mentioned.

The general time quality of contingency can be differentiated according to its frame of reference in which the experience of temporal change gets a threatening power. So in respect to a moralistic cosmology contingency means misdemeanour; in respect to historical development contingency has the character of an event; in respect to a concept of temporal development contingency can have the character of an anachronism; in a concept of evolution (in the modern understanding) contingency has the character of accident; in respect to a theoretical order it is a mistake, etc.

II. Dimensions

Interpreting these different time experiences, the human mind shapes time in the form of a dimension, as an extension of existence in respect to the different categories they were used to understand the human world and the human self. So one can start with the fundamental difference between non-human and human time. In old societies one would say that there is a difference between divine time and human time. We can discriminate between natural time and human time, and we can differentiate this discrimination further on: The natural time has a physical, geological, and biological dimension, the human time can be subdivided into a psychological, a biographical, a social and a historical time.

Another dimensioning of time can be done by referring to the fundamental temporal structure of human agency. Here one can distinguish between presence as the presently living world, the past as the realm of experiences, the future as the realm of projects, projections and prediction.

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These three time dimensions of the human life world can be distinguished by a completely different time, where the constitutive principles of meaning and significance are at work. This reflects the traditional difference between secular and divine time. This other dimension contains those essential elements of sense, which were used by the human actors in pursuing the time of their life world. In archaic societies this time is the time of origin (arché) which is the essence of everything. In other cultures this time is conceptualized as an end goal of temporal change (eschaton) with elements of an unpredictable future. Origin and future as temporal sources of sense can become identified or distinguished, and they can be mediated into exceptional moments of the presence.

III. Sense

Dimensioning time in the described way is the first step of giving it sense, i.e. integrating it into the internal time dimension of the human mind where memory and expectation are loaded with values, purposes, threats and hopes. In the shape of sense time becomes a pattern of significance according to which the people live their lives, organize their activities, stand their sufferings, place the life span of themselves into intergenerational sequences, etc.

The shape of time in this pattern of significance depends upon the principles of significance which are related to the temporal extension of human life between yesterday and tomorrow. These principles decide upon the way contingency is appropriated by the human mind by narration. By narration time becomes (so to speak) a body of the human world and self. This body has integrated subjectivity and objectivity, values and facts, past, present and future, togetherness and otherness, indentity and difference.

In this realm of sense time has got the mode of a moving force of the human mind deciding upon the way how the people understand themselves and organize their activities in the course of time and come to terms with their suffering of temporal change. Here time is manifest as culture, it has the feature of symbols and language, of images and concepts. Time gets a specific cultural manifestation, a mental power, with which the people

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pursue the temporality of their lives.

This is the realm of culture where history gets its specific feature of sense generation and cultural orientation of the human life; it is very useful to elaborate a typology of different modes time can have as such a mental power in human life orientation. In the context of such a typology it becomes apparent that history is more than only one single type among others. In fact, it is a combination of different types of shaping time into a cultural pattern of human life orientation.

In the line of such a typology one can distinguish between a mythical and a historical sense of time. It is *mythical* when it is grounded in the divine time of origin and future, strictly separated from the human time of practical everyday life. We speak of *historical* sense of time, if the order of temporal change in the human world is essentially brought about by an innerworldly chain of events. This historical sense can further be differentiated into different types of historical narration: traditional, exemplary, critical, genetic.[12] The exemplary one has an *allegorical* character which we all know by the slogan "historia vitae magistra." Here the temporal chain of events stands for a meta-temporal rule of human conduct.

The distinction between past, present and future, which plays an important role in the mythical, historical and allegorical sense of time is given up in favour of another mode of this sense: the *mystical* one, where the three time dimensions fall together in a meta-temporal moment.[13] *Kairos* is similar to this, since here the three-sided-dimensions are as well syntheticized, but this does not happen in a meta-temporal moment, but in an eminent situation of historical time.[14] In the West, well known examples

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12 Cf. Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Narration: Foundations, Types, Reason", in *History and Theory* 26 (1987), 87-97; idem, *Studies in Metahistory* (Pretoria, 1993), 3-14, 63-84; idem, *Zeit und Sinn. Strategien historischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 153-230.

13 This also seems to be the case in Taoist ritual, the time aspect of which has been given elaborate treatment in Kristofer Schipper and Hsiu-huei Wang, "Progressive and Regressive Time Cycles in Taoist Ritual," in. Thomas J Fraser, N. Lawrence and F. C. Haber, eds., *Time, Science, and Society in China and the West* (Amherst, 1986) The Study of Time V, 185-205.

14 Here I mainly refer to Paul Tillich's work: Paul Tillich, *Writings in the Philosophy of*

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of the concept of Kairos is in religion the idea of God's incarnation in Jesus[15] or in the secular world the enthusiasm over the American or French Revolution. In Chinese history, the 'Grand Beginning' in 104 B.C., when a new calendar was introduced and some fundamental reforms on the symbolic level were adopted, could be characterized as a Kairos, when a fundamental reform on the mental level took place and a new calendar was introduced.[16]

Across these differences one can elaborate different types of the *religious sense* of time: a general one where changes in the human world are significant for religious salvation, which is conceptualized as an occurrence in this temporal change itself. Such a sacred sense of time can become manifest in different ways: a significatory relationship between different epochs, as it is conceptualized in the '*typological*' thinking where the Old Testament signifies the New and vice versa. In a way, the various attempts in traditional China to conceptualize the past as a cosmologically ordered succession of two, three, or five cyclical periods[17] may be seen as examples conforming to the same mode of thinking. These 'typological' time concepts include nature as well as morality, (and in the West) the end of time and eternity as well as the events of secular history. The religious essence of time covers the whole realm of temporal change of the human world. It gets an intensified power according to single events in which the forces of salvation accumulate. If this is the case at the end of the human world one speaks of an *eschatological* sense of time. This eschatological sense can be distinguished from the *apocalyptic* one, since it is not opposed to the time before as it is the case with apocalypses. Here the time of salvation is completely separated from the time before and there is no

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Religion, ed. John Clayton (Darmstadt, 1987), pp. 53-72, 327-342; idem (ed.), Kairos. 1926.

15 Mark 1, 15: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

16 Cf. Loewe, Michael: *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (104 BC to AD 9). London (George Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 17-36 ("The Grand Beginning-104 BC").

17 For an overview, see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 vols., transl. by Derk Bodde, (Princeton 1952/53), vol. II, 58-71; Needham, Joseph: *Science and Civilisation in China, vol. II: History of Scientific Thought*, (Cambridge, 1956), 232-261.

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mediation between these two times. There is a gap between secular time and divine time at its end.

Such an apocalyptic element can be put into the significance of events within the course of secular time. In this case one can speak of a *momentary* sense of time, where change and development come to a stop, and the chain between before and after is broken so that such a moment drops out of its historical connection with other moments. It gets a significance of its own, which can be preserved and renewed by historical commemoration. This momentary sense of time is elucidated by Walter Benjamin.[18]

Eventually, I would like to add three other types of temporal sense, which play a role in culture in general and historical thinking in particular: The sense of time is shaped by the *sequence of epochs*. The time of one's own life gets its meaning from its relationship to this periodization. Another type is of *numerical character*. Here the numbers of years play the decisive role. The physical chronology has changed into a magic of numbers which shapes the course of time into a very specific texture of significance related to the arithmetic of chronology. It transforms the historical order of time into a natural one.

Finally I would like to mention another mode of giving the temporal status of events a specific significance: namely *synchronism* as an indication of an internal relationship of events. Synchronic occurrence of events means that they have something in common which is important to know in order to understand what has happened.

IV. Modes

The sense of time is working in human life on different levels and in different modes. It can have the power of the unconscious or gain the structure of a highly elaborated philosophy or theology. In order to understand the variety of modes I would like to propose a typology which distinguishes between three different ways by which the sense of time works in human life. One could call it *functioning*, *reflective* and *operative*.

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18 Walter Benjamin, *Theses on History*, in: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York, 1985).

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I found the best interpretation of these three modes in Paul Ricoeur's analysis of three kinds of mimesis in making sense of time by narration.[19]

Sense of time is an element in everyday life activities and sufferings. Human agency takes place under pregiven circumstances which have their own temporal extension and their built-in symbolical interpretation. We are used to think of culture as 'invention' or 'construction'. The level I have in mind (Ricoeur calls it Mimesis 1) is the level of human life where this invention and construction are forces of living human life. Here the people are invented and constructed by the way their activity is determined by culturally powerful orders of time.

On the second level (Mimesis 2) the people explicate and interpret their own activities and sufferings by reflecting their in-built sense-bearing elements, and by doing so (Ricoeur stresses only the cultural practice of narration, since it is essentially related to time) they 'invent' or 'construct' the cultural orientation of their lives. Here time is a matter of active practical sense generation, done in the specific realm of cultural practices. This is the place where priests, soothsayers, historians, chief-praisers and other specialists for the sense of time have the say, communicating with those who need an elaborated form of presenting the cultural framework of their practical life apart from it's simple pursuit.

The third level (Mimesis 3) combines the reflective activities of sense generation with the pursuit of activities to which the generated sense is dedicated. Now the 'objective' courses of human activities are deliberately pursued by subjective orientations. People deliberately intend what they do and they understand what they do in a cultural framework of meaningful human life. On this level the constructions and inventions become real, so they can construct and invent the people and the symbolic world they belong to.

I refer to this threefold time dimension of human life, precisely described by Paul Ricoeur, since one can understand the *historicity of human life* by looking at their interrelationship. Each level is necessarily interrelated with the others. There is no simple pursuit of human activity and suffering without a

19 Paul Ricoeur, *Zeit und Erzählung, vol.1: Zeit und historische Erzählung*. (München, 1988), 90 sqq.

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reflection of their cultural motives and orientations, and such an orientation, of course, can only be given, if those who follow it relate their cultural practices to this pursuit. Additionally, this relation itself brings about an element of reflection within the pursuit of activity and suffering itself.

Reflecting this interrelationship we can discover a specific temporality in it: it is the permanent distraction of time experience, which does not completely fit into the unreflected orientation of human life, which makes the reflection of the second level permanently necessary. And the results of this reflection merge as an input into the life practice where it gets new challenges. This temporal dynamics transgresses the time dimension of level 2 where the people concerned make sense of time and speak of history.

The temporal interrelation of the three levels of pursuing time in human life generates a historicity which even transgresses the realm of historical consciousness. This historicity is clearly different from the historicity as it is reflected on level 2. Compared with the cultural practices of doing history (in the different types of sense of time) this transgressing historicity is 'real' whereas the people who make sense of the time of their lives give this sense an 'ideal' form. This ideal form becomes imbedded in the practice of life moving or at least influencing its temporal change. But one cannot say that this ideal construction of interpretation includes already the reality it produces. So there is always a surplus of historicity in the pursuit of human life which transgresses the sense of time produced by the people who have to come to terms with their time experience.

History thus can be understood as a dynamic temporal extension of human life which has to be brought into a concept of sense, which is a part of this dimension itself. In this respect history is always beyond the horizon of historians and those who work on concepts of time. It is this transcendent character of history which will keep the historians busy.

V. Developments

Conceptualizing time has substantially changed in the course of time. On the level of theory of history this change has been addressed with the question of a general direction. Is there a general development of time

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concepts which covers or goes across different cultures? Today the answer to this question seems to be clear: 'no.' The traditional philosophy of history of the Kantian, Hegelian or Marxian kind seems to have completeley lost its credibility. The critique of its Western ethnocentricity has reached a crucial point (at least for intercultural comparison).

But I think that there are still valid arguments for a different view: there is strong empirical evidence that at least in human ontogeny there are general genetic processes, which have a clear direction, i.e. which are irreversable and have to be passed by every human being. Without falling into the trap of onto- and phylogenetic parallelism one can nevertheless argue, that these early steps of ontogeny indicate a developmental logic of change in time concepts, the structure of which can be applied to the history of the human species.[20] The result of this application can be called a new philosophy of history. It essentially differs from the old one by its logic. It is *reconstructive and not teleological.*[21]

This irreversability of change can be empirically observed as well: in early stages of cultural development time is seen as an objective quality of pregiven things and events in the world (everything has its own time); in later stages and to a very high degree in modern culture time is seen as a construction of the human mind. Human time has become distinguished from natural time, and even the latter is (epistemologically) understood as constructive (but -- I would like to add -- nevertheless with an element of realism). The 'objective' time of nature became 'rationalized' in the form of time reckoning by sheer numbers. It lost its pregiven own meaning and became a matter of getting meaning by subjective construction. Additionally, the 'subjective' time of human life became a matter of subjective competence: Time in its projective function in human activity follows subjective rules (like: save time, use time for valuable purposes, don't waste time, etc.). In both cases one can speak of a process of

20 This is the strong thesis of Günter Dux, *Die Zeit in der Geschichte.* Ihre Entwicklungslogik von Mythos zur Weltzeit. (Frankfurt, 1989).

21 Günter Dux, "Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur. Instabile Welten". *Zur prozessualen Logik im kulturellen Wandel.* (Weilerswist, 2000), passim.

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subjectivation (along the line of 'rationalization' in the Weberian meaning) insofar as they have been exposed to the commands of the human mind (measurement in abstract numbers and objectives of the human will). An example of the increasing separation of time concepts from their 'objective' grounding is the well known five-hundred years cycle, which played a significant role in Chinese historical thinking. Being originally tied to astronomical calculations and cosmological speculations, it was then transformed into a concept of continuity of the cultural tradition (namely by Han Yu, 768-824) and later into the highly abstract concept of the "correct succession of the Way" (*tao-t'ung*).[22] Today one can discuss this issue of 'rationalization' in close relationship to historical chronology: Vis-à-vis the globalization process and clash of different cultural traditions of time reckoning in history, the best way of doing it is to use a scheme of extensive meaninglessness (in respect to dynasties, traditions of sacred time, etc.). This can be understood as a plea for simply counting years in a chronologically abstract manner.

So it makes sense to speak of a universal tendency of subjectivation (without a loss of realism). This tendency has deeply influenced the daily life of ordinary people. It has brought about the human attitude of being responsible for the time of one's own life and has irretrievably left behind the conviction that time is beyond the competence of human subjectivity.

VI. Limits

Typologies of sense generation should pay attention to limits. I would not like to discuss the question whether the idea of 'sense' even allows a contradicting idea of senselessness. Niklas Luhmann has made clear, that it is not possible: speaking of limits of sense and senselessness presupposes the idea of sense and does not negate it. But this is not my point. I would like to ask for challenges of sense generation which set pregiven concepts of sense related to time into doubt and urges (on level 2 of Ricoeur's three

22 For further remarks on this issue, see Achim Mittag, "Zeitkonzepte in China", in Klaus E. Müller, Jörn Rüsen, (eds.), *Historische Sinnbildung - Struktur, Funktion und Repräsentation des Geschichtsbewußseins* (Reinbek b. Hamburg 1997), 251-276, here 266ff.

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mimesis-concept), the work of explication and in certain cases for alteration and change in the concepts of time itself.

Here I would like to distinguish between three different modes of provoking pregiven time concepts on the level of their reflective treatment. A *'normal'* challenge provokes the potentials of interpretation in order to apply the already developed patterns to the new experience. In this case the work of reflection and application confirms the time concepts. But there are time experiences which make it necessary to change them, since they do not fit into the pregiven framework of interpretation. In this case I would speak of *'critical'* time experiences. A prominent Western example is in Herodotus (the 'father of Western historiography') work; it can be understood as a response to an orientation crisis which came about by the new power of Athens after the Persian war.[23] A Chinese example (as important as the Western one) is the breakdown of traditional political order, conceptualized by religion, the response of which is Confucius' new way of thinking. Religion became rationalized to morality. The "Spring and Autumn Annals" stand for this transformation (even more the Zuo commentary).[24] Another Chinese example is Ssu-ma Ch'ien's work: It has to be understood as a response to the 'critical' experience of the unification of the empire and the rapid fall of the Ch'in dynasty.

But time experience can have a radicalized critical status, which does not change the pregiven framework of interpretation, but destroys it without replacing it by a new one. In this case I would speak of a *'traumatic'* time experience. The best known example for this experience is the Holocaust. It is a theme in itself how such an experience can be dealt with in the realm of historical thinking. In respect to China, one could think of a number of historical examples of chaos, turmoil, invasion by 'barbarians', etc. which

23 Christian Christian Meier, "Die Entstehung der Historie," in: Reinhardt Koselleck, Wolf-Dieter Stempel (eds), *Geschichte - Ereignis und Erzählung* (*Poetik und Hermeneutik* V). Munich 1973, 251-305.

24 Cf. Heiner Roetz, *Chinesische Ethik der Achsenzeit. Eine Rekonstruktion unter dem Aspekt des Durchbruchs zu konventionellem Denken.* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992); idem, (Konfuzius. Munich, 1995).

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might have had a traumatic character; in fact, this has been argued with regard to the collapses of the Chin and Sung dynasties and the Mongol subjugation of all China, the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, and, in more recent times, the Great Leap Forward in Communist China.[25]

Every sense concept has a limit, which produces its permanent challenge. This can be easily explained by the interrelationship of the three levels I have described according to Ricoeur. The input of sense concepts of time into the process of human activity and suffering is already a limitation of their ability to interpret the human world, since they become an element of temporal change which cannot be sufficiently interpreted by themselves. Time is always more than the concepts with which it is interpreted, it always transgresses them in the dynamics of historicity of human life. But this limit is not a border which cannot be crossed. On the contrary: the permanent challenge of time experience, which goes beyond the concepts of its understanding, keeps this understanding in a permanent movement to renew, apply and change them according to this challenge. So the limit of time concepts is a part of its internal historicity. They always transgress their own limits in the course of time we call history and we all are a part of and we try to make sense of knowing that. By doing so, it is already ahead of us.

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25 Cf. the articles by Hoyt Tillman, Achim Mittag, and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, in: Jörn Rüsen, Achim Mittag, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, (eds.), *Collective Identity - Experiences of Crisis - Traumata. New Approaches to Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture in a Comparative Perspective*, vol. I (forthcoming).

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