Review - The Global Transformation of Time, 1870-1950

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The Global Transformation of Time, 1870-1950
By Vanessa Ogle
Harvard University Press, 2015

The history of time reckoning often is told through the lens of technological progress from the invention of the first clock through modern atomic timekeeping. This narrative obscures the politics, conflicts, and choices that shaped the growth of time standardization. Ogle's book is a welcome antidote to this story. By adopting a global history perspective, Ogle explores the debates and conflicts over time policy during the period from the 19th century until 1950. By focusing on nations such as Germany and France, or on colonies, she offers a perspective quite different from the standard texts on time standardization.

The book is organized around specific debates about time that unfolded in different parts of the world. Chapter 1 discusses time unification in Germany and France after the International Meridian Conference of 1884. Despite the seeming internationalism of that conference, both Germany and France followed courses toward time unification that emphasized contested issues of how time should be unified within the nation rather than across the globe. This included deciding how national time should be related to Greenwich time and whether time should be set to a meridian of a notable city, or in hour or half hour increments from Greenwich. Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of daylight saving time in relationship to the agenda of social reformers. In chapter 3, Ogle shifts the focus to how time was administered in European colonial possessions and sovereign nations outside of Europe. Her emphasis is on the unevenness of the movement toward global time standardization. Chapter 4 continues this theme by focusing on debates in British colonial India over the definition of time, and chapter 5 develops the theme with regard to ideas of time management in Muslim nations. Both of these chapters demonstrate that the eventual acceptance of uniform time and time zones offset from Greenwich was a complicated and contested process. In chapter 6, Ogle explores the emergence of the debate over a unified Muslim calendar. As she notes, Islam placed a premium on the direct observation of lunar cycles by reputable witnesses. The advent of the telegraph created complications in that reports from reliable witnesses could be relayed over long distances forcing Muslim officials to decide whether local timekeeping should be privileged over reports from far away. Finally chapter 7 addresses the late 19th and early 20th century movement toward calendar reform—an attempt to correct the problems in the Gregorian calendar, set an annual date for Easter, and try to align the days of the week with calendar days. Again, Ogle emphasizes that while there was widespread desire for calendar reform, there was not widespread agreement.

Throughout the book, the theme of how interconnectedness and globalization produced debate and disagreements rather than easy standardization is foregrounded. This theme is what ties together the seeming disparate cases of time and calendar reform from around the world, and this leads to Olge's conclusion that interconnectedness and globalization do not lead to uncontested standardization. Indeed, she alludes to the emergence of global standardization being more a product of empire than interconnectedness, with interconnectedness spurring nationalism and debate more than uniformity. This conclusion echoes a point made by a quite different work about a quite different period—Sacha Stern's Calendar's in Antiquity.

My main criticism of the book is that its conclusions are not bold enough given the historical data it presents. By this I mean that it could have more strongly challenged key works and assumptions in the dominant narrative of the emergence of time unification. Instead, she opts to soft-peddle criticisms of such pivotal works as E. P. Thompson's work on time discipline, or Benedict Anderson's discussion of newspapers and homogeneous empty time, and David Harvey's idea of time-space compression. For instance, through the first several chapters, Ogle uncritically applies E. P. Thompson's thesis about time, work discipline, and capitalism only to surprise the reader with a review of the criticisms of Thompson's argument on page 71. I would have preferred foregrounding the criticisms earlier and more strongly. Likewise, she does not develop her critique of Anderson until page 211. With regard to time-space compression, she never develops an explicit critique of the concept even though globalization and interconnectedness are central themes of the book. Finally, despite addressing issues of colonialism, it is largely through the lens of colonial administrators and local intellectual elites rather than more stridently anti-imperial, anti-colonial voices that are captured in postcolonial studies.

In effect, Ogle has produced a detailed history that challenges how we think about the emergence of global time standardization and demonstrates the complex politics that complicate simple narratives of European technoscientific developments in time metrology. Yet, she does not develop the implications of the history she has produced—that task is left for readers to ponder. Still, this is an extremely valuable addition to the literature on the history of time standardization and globalization for its breadth of examples and its challenge to the sorts of narratives of inevitable progress that dominate much of the existing literature.

Reference

Stern, Sacha. 2012. Calendars in Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

About the author:

Kevin Birth is a professor of anthropology at Queens College of the City University of New York. He has written extensively on cultural conceptions of time, including the numerous articles and the books *Any Time is Trinidad Time* (University Press of Florida, 1999), *Objects of Time: How Things Shape Temporality* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012), and *Time Blind: Problems in Perceiving Other Temporalities* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).