

Periodization

Periodization is the process or study of categorizing the past into discrete, quantified named blocks of time^[1] in order to facilitate the study and analysis of history. This results in descriptive abstractions that provide convenient terms for periods of time with relatively stable characteristics. However, determining the precise beginning and ending to any "period" is often arbitrary. It has changed over time in history.

To the extent that history is continuous and ungeneralizable, all systems of periodization are more or less arbitrary. Yet without named periods, however clumsy or imprecise, past time would be nothing more than scattered events without a framework to help us understand them. Nations, cultures, families, and even individuals, each with their different remembered histories, are constantly engaged in imposing overlapping, often unsystematized, schemes of temporal periodization; periodizing labels are continually challenged and redefined, but once established, a period "brand" is so convenient that many are very hard to shake of.



Petrarch conceived of the idea of a European "Dark Age" which later evolved into the tripartite periodization of Western history into Ancient, Middle Ages and Modern.

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History

The division of history into "ages" or periods is very old, and recorded practically as early as the first development of writing. The Sumerian King List operates with dynastic regnal eras. The classical division into a Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, Heroic Age and Iron Age goes back to Hesiod. One Biblical periodization scheme commonly used in the Middle Ages was Saint Paul's theological division of history into three ages: the first before the age of Moses (under nature); the second under Mosaic law (under law); the third in the age of Christ (under grace). But perhaps the most widely discussed periodization scheme of the Middle Ages was the Six Ages of the World, where every age was a thousand years counting from Adam to the present, with the present time (in the Middle Ages) being the sixth and final stage.

Background

Not only do periodizing blocks inevitably overlap, they often seemingly conflict with or contradict one another. Some have a cultural usage ("the Gilded Age"), others refer to prominent historical events ("the Inter-War years: 1918–1939"), yet others are defined by decimal numbering systems ("the 1960s", "the 17th century"). Other periods are named from influential or talismanic individuals ("the Victorian Era", "the Edwardian Era", "the Napoleonic Era").

Some of these usages will also be geographically specific. This is especially true of periodizing labels derived from individuals or ruling dynasties, such as the Jacksonian Era in America, the Meiji Era in Japan, or the Merovingian Period in France. Cultural terms may also have a limited reach. Thus the concept of the Romantic period is largely meaningless outside the Western world of Europe and European-influenced cultures. Likewise, "the 1960s", though technically applicable to anywhere in the world according to Common Era numbering, has a certain set of specific cultural connotations in certain countries. For this reason it may be possible to say such things as "The 1960s never occurred in Spain". This would mean that the sexual revolution, counterculture, youth rebellion and so on never developed during that decade in Spain's conservative Roman Catholic culture and under Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime. Likewise it is very often said, as the historian Arthur Marwick has, that "the 1960s" began in the late 1950s and ended in the early 1970s. His reason for saying this is that the cultural and economic conditions that define the meaning of the period covers more than the accidental fact of a 10-year block beginning with the number 6. This extended usage is termed the "long 1960s". This usage derives from other historians who have adopted labels such as "the long 19th century" (1789–1914) to reconcile arbitrary decimal chronology with meaningful cultural and social phases. Similarly, an Eighteenth Century may run 1714–1789. Eric Hobsbawm has also argued for what he calls "the short twentieth century", encompassing the period from the First World War through to the end of the Cold War.

Similar problems attend other labels. Is it possible to use the term "Victorian" outside Britain, and even within, does her reign of 1837-1901 usefully constitute a historical period? It sometimes is used when it is thought that its connotations usefully describe the politics, culture and economic conditions characteristic of the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, periodizing terms often have negative or positive connotations that may affect their usage. This includes *Victorian*, which often negatively suggests sexual repression and class conflict. Other labels such as Renaissance have strongly positive characteristics. As a result, these terms sometimes extend in meaning. Thus the English Renaissance is often used for a period largely identical to the Elizabethan Period or reign of Elizabeth I, and begins some 200 years later than the Italian Renaissance. However the Carolingian Renaissance is said to have occurred during the reign of the Frankish king Charlemagne, and his immediate successors. Other examples, neither of which constituted a "rebirth" in the sense of revival, are the American Renaissance of the 1820s-60s, referring mainly to literature, and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, referring mainly to literature but also to music and the visual arts.

The conception of a "rebirth" of Classical Latin learning is first credited to the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-1374), the father of Renaissance Humanism, but the conception of a rebirth has been in common use since Petrarch's time. The dominant usage of the word *Renaissance* refers to the cultural changes that occurred in Italy that culminated in the High Renaissance around 1500-1530. This concept applies dominantly to the visual arts, and the work of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci. Secondly it is applied to other arts, but it is questionable whether it is useful to describe a phase in economic, social and political history. Many professional historians now refer to the historical periods commonly known as the Renaissance and the Reformation as the start of the Early Modern Period, which extends much later. There is a gradual change in the courses taught and books published to correspond to the change in period nomenclature, which in part reflects differences between social history and cultural history. The new nomenclature suggests a broader geographical coverage and a growing attention to the relationships between Europe and the wider world.

The term Middle Ages also derives from Petrarch. He was comparing his own period to the Ancient or Classical world, seeing his time as a time of rebirth after a dark intermediate period, the Middle Ages. The idea that the Middle Ages was a "middle" phase between two other large scale periodizing concepts, Ancient and Modern, still persists. It can be sub-divided into the Early, High and Late Middle Ages. The term Dark Ages is no longer in common use among modern scholars because of the difficulty of using it neutrally, though some writers have attempted to retain it and divest it of its negative connotations. The term "Middle Ages" and especially the adjective *medieval* can also have a negative ring in colloquial use ("the barbaric treatment of prisoners in such-and-such a prison is almost medieval") but this does not carry over into academic terminology. However, other terms, such as Gothic architecture, used to refer to a style typical of the High Middle Ages have largely lost the negative connotations they initially had, acquiring new meanings over time (see Gothic architecture and Goth subculture).

The Gothic and the Baroque were both named during subsequent stylistic periods when the preceding style was unpopular. The word "Gothic" was applied as a pejorative term to all things Northern European and, hence, barbarian, probably first by Giorgio Vasari. Vasari is also credited with first using the term "Renaissance" (*rinascita*) to describe the period during which he was art historian, artist, and architect. Giorgio Vasari coined the term "Gothic" in an effort to describe, particularly architecture, that he found objectionable, supposedly saying "it is as if the Goths built it". The word *baroque*—derived from similar words in Portuguese, Spanish, or French—literally refers to an irregular or misshapen pearl. Its first use outside the field of jewellery manufacture was in the early 18th century, as a criticism of music that was viewed as over-complicated and rough. Later, the term was also used to describe architecture and art.^[2] The Baroque period was first designated as such in the 19th century, and is generally considered to have begun around 1600 in all media. Music history places the end of the period in the year 1750 with the death of J. S. Bach, while art historians consider the main period to have ended significantly earlier in most areas.

Three-age system

The usual method for periodization of the distant prehistoric past, in archeology is to rely on changes in material culture and technology, such as the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age and their sub-divisions also based on different styles of material remains. Despite the development over recent decades of the ability through radiocarbon dating and other scientific methods to give actual dates for many sites or artefacts, these long-established schemes seem likely to remain in use. In many cases neighbouring cultures with writing have left some history of cultures without it, which may be used.

Historiography

Some events or short periods of change have such a drastic effect on the cultures they affect that they form a natural break in history. These are often marked by the widespread use of both "pre-" and "post-" phrases centred on the event, as in "pre-Reformation" and "post-Reformation", or "pre-colonial" and "post-colonial". Both pre-war and post-war are still understood to refer to World War II, though at some future point the phrases will need to be altered to make that clear

Marxian periodisation

The Marxist theory of historical materialism claims society as fundamentally determined by the *material conditions* at any given time – in other words, the relationships, which people have with each other in order to fulfill basic needs such as feeding, clothing and housing themselves and their families.^[3] Overall, Marx and Engels claimed to have identified five successive stages of the development of these material conditions in Western Europe.^[4]

The theory identifies the following stages of history.^{[5][6][7][8][9]}

Primitive communism

The First Stage: is usually called primitive communism It has the following characteristics.

- **Shared property:** there is no ownership between individual possessions. Instead, all possessions the tribe finds are shared to ensure its survival.
- **Hunting and gathering** there is no concept of ownership beyond individual possessions. All is shared by the tribe to ensure its survival.
- **Proto-democracy:** tribal societies have yet to develop large scale agriculture, and due to this, their survival is a daily struggle.

Slave society

The Second Stage: may be called slave society, considered to be the beginning of "class society" where private property appears.

- **Class:** here, the idea of class appears. There is always a slave-owning guling class and the slaves themselves.
- **Statism:** the state develops during this stage as a tool for the slave-owners to use and control the slaves.
- **Agriculture:** people learn to cultivate plants and animals on a large enough scale to support large populations.

- **Democracy and authoritarianism** these opposites develop at the same stage. Democracy arises first with the development of the republican city-state, followed by the totalitarian empire.
- **Private property**: citizens now own more than personal property. Land ownership is especially important during a time of agricultural development.

Feudalism

The Third Stage: may be called feudalism; it appears after slave society collapses. This was most obvious during the European Middle Ages when society went from slavery to feudalism.

- **Aristocracy**: the state is ruled by monarchs who inherit their positions, or at times marry or conquer their ways into leadership.
- **Theocracy**: this is a time of largely religious rule. When there is only one religion in the land and its organizations affect all parts of daily life.
- **Hereditary classes** castes can sometimes form and one's class is determined at birth with no form of advancement. This was the case with India.
- **Nation-state**: nations are formed from the remnants of the fallen empires. Sometimes, they rebuild themselves into empires once more; this was the case with England's transition from province to an empire.

Capitalism

Marx pays special attention to this stage in human development. The bulk of his work is devoted to analysing the mechanisms of capitalism, which, in western society, classically arose "red in tooth and claw" from feudal society in a revolutionary movement. In capitalism, the profit motive rules and people, freed from serfdom, work for the capitalists for wages. The capitalist class are free to spread their laissez faire practices around the world. In the capitalist-controlled parliament, laws are made to protect wealth.

Capitalism may be considered **the Fourth Stage** in the sequence. It appears after the bourgeois revolution when the capitalists (or their merchant predecessors) overthrow the feudal system. Capitalism is categorized by the following:

- **Market economy**: In capitalism, the entire economy is guided by market forces. Supporters of laissez faire economics argue that there should be little or no intervention from the government under capitalism. Marxists, however, such as Lenin in his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, argue that the capitalist government is a powerful instrument for the furtherance of capitalism and the capitalist nation-state, particularly in the conquest of markets abroad.
- **Private property**: The means of production are no longer in the hands of the monarchy and its nobles, but rather they are controlled by the capitalists. The capitalists control the means of production through commercial enterprises (such as corporations), which aim to maximise profit.
- **Parliamentary democracy**: The capitalists tend to govern through an elected centralised parliament or congress, rather than under an autocracy. Capitalist (bourgeois) democracy, although it may be extended to the whole population, does not necessarily lead to universal suffrage. Historically it has excluded (by force, segregation, legislation or other means) sections of the population such as women, slaves, ex-slaves, people of colour or those on low income. The government acts on behalf of, and is controlled by the capitalists through various methods.
- **Wages**: In capitalism, workers are rewarded according to their contract with their employer. Power elites propagate the illusion that market forces mean wages converge to an equilibrium at which workers are paid for precisely the value of their services. In reality workers are paid less than the value of their productivity — the difference forming profit for the employer. In this sense, all paid employment is exploitation and the worker is "alienated" from their work. Insofar as the profit-motive drives the market, it is impossible for workers to be paid for the full value of their labour, as all employers will act in the same manner.
- **Imperialism**: Wealthy countries seek to dominate poorer countries in order to gain access to raw materials and to provide captive markets for finished products. This is done directly through the threat of war, or the export of capital. The capitalist's control over the state can play an essential part in the development of capitalism, to the extent the state directs warfare and other foreign intervention.
- **Financial institutions**: Banks and capital markets such as stock exchanges direct unused capital to where it is needed. They reduce barriers to entry in all markets, especially to the poor; it is in this way that banks dramatically improve class mobility.
- **Monopolistic tendencies**: The natural, unrestrained market forces will create monopolies from the most successful commercial entities.

According to Marx, capitalism has critical failings — inner contradictions — which lead to its downfall. The working class, to which the capitalist class gave birth in order to produce commodities and profits, is the "grave digger" of capitalism. The worker is not paid the full value of what he or she produces. The rest is surplus value — the capitalist's profit, which Marx calls the "unpaid labour of the working class." The capitalists are forced by competition to attempt to drive down the wages of the working class to increase their profits, and this creates conflict between the classes, and gives rise to the development of class consciousness in the working class. The working class, through trade union and other struggles, becomes conscious of itself as an exploited class. In the view of classical Marxism, the struggles of the working class against the attacks of the capitalist class will eventually lead the working class to establish its own collective control over production.

Socialism

After the working class gains class consciousness and mounts a revolution against the capitalists, socialism, which may be considered **the Fifth Stage**, will be attained, if the workers are successful.

Socialism may be characterised as follows:

- **Common property:** the means of production are taken from the hands of a few capitalists and put in the hands of the workers. This translates into the democratic communes controlling the means of production.
- **Council democracy:** Marx, basing himself on a thorough study of Paris Commune, believed that the workers would govern themselves through system of communes. He called this the dictatorship of the proletariat which, overthrowing the dictatorship (governance) of capital, would democratically plan production and the resources of the world.

Marx explained that, since socialism, the first stage of communism, would be "in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges", each worker would naturally expect to be awarded according to the amount of labor he contributes, despite the fact that each worker's ability and family circumstances would differ, so that the results would still be unequal at this stage, although fully supported by social provision.

See also

- List of time periods
- List of archaeological periods
- Regnal year
- Geological era
- Cosmological epoch
- Logarithmic timeline
- Chronological dating

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2. Pasiscla, Claude V, "Baroque" in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online. Accessed Feb 2014.
3. See, in particular, Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/work/1845/german-ideology/>)
4. Marx makes no claim to have produced a master key to history. Historical materialism is not "an historico-philosophic theory of the marche generale imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself" (Marx, Karl: Letter to editor of the Russian paper *Otetchestvennye Zapiskym* 1877). His ideas, he explains, are based on a concrete study of the actual conditions that pertained in Europe.
5. Marx, *Early writings*, Penguin, 1975, p. 426.
6. Charles Taylor, "Critical Notice", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980), p. 330.

7. Marx and Engels, *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*(<http://marx.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>)
8. Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in France* (<http://marx.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm>)
9. Gewirth, Alan (1998). *The Community of Rights*(<https://books.google.com/books?id=tFJwLFjF5xQC>) (2 ed.). University of Chicago Press. p. 168. ISBN 9780226288819. Retrieved 2012-12-29. "Marxists sometimes distinguish between 'personal property' and 'private property' the former consisting in consumer goods directly used by the owner, while the latter is private ownership of the major means of production"

Sources

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External links

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