

Tolonen, Mikko: Essay on some aspects of my research on TIME

As the introduction to “The First UBIAS Intercontinental Academia: TIME” states, in ‘modern society, we are increasingly required to ignore our inner biological rhythms’ and ‘to meet the set tempo of our social schedules’. There are many perplexing problems and scientific questions related to this interesting phenomenon. A crucial aspect is the historical one. In order to understand how this disparity has arisen, we need to appreciate the way customs have changed (and changed us) within the last three hundred years, and ask how the idea of progressive history and civil society was born and how it relates to the question of personal identity and its social formation.

Reinhart Koselleck has famously argued that the modern conception of “one” unified history was created in the late eighteenth century as a product of the Enlightenment thinking. The idea of progress did not feature in the same way in earlier historical writings and we cannot find a uniform conception of history before the later part of the eighteenth century. The conception of history and history writing has clear implications for how people experience time and their existence. My interest in time is historical, philosophical as well as sociological. I study all the historical aspects of human nature and civil society. I am particularly interested in skeptical eighteenth-century thinkers who participated in formulating the notions of self, identity, history and civil society. Consequently, I’m currently working on three interrelated aspects regarding TIME.

Firstly, I’m studying the theoretical aspects of civil society and how this relates to Francis Fukuyama’s debate about “end of history”. I intend to show how what I like to call “proto-sociological” perspective of the late eighteenth century was founded on a kernel of skepticism towards the idea of human progress and how the idea of perpetual conflict between authority and opinion is notably the building block of modern conception of civil society.<sup>1</sup> Based on this theoretical framework, the end of history is nowhere in sight, and, instead, continuous change over time regarding personal identity and political organization is the essence of our existence.

My idea is to illuminate the consequences of an eighteenth-century development, in which civil society came to be understood in increasingly global and historical terms. I’m asking how the intersecting debates concerning “nature”,

---

<sup>1</sup> I’ve started to study this in Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume: Anatomists of Civil Society*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (SVEC), 2013.

“civility”, and “empire” related to the cosmopolitan European perspective of “Enlightenment” and its juxtaposition of history and modernity. As the contention between “nature” and “civility” simultaneously intensified with suspicions that the world might not be manageable by human agency, the question of conflict gained real significance, especially in relation to the ideas and practicalities of empire.

My hypothesis is that at the same time, the strife between “nature” and “civility” grew larger than it was when scholastic thinkers like Francisco de Vitoria wrote about encountering indigenous people in the west; or when later seventeenth-century natural law theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes, developed their ideas of sovereignty. It was the expansion of political economy and the extent of war during the later part of the eighteenth century that put a conceptual end to the almost linear development of the conceptions of luxury and civility. The world became unmanageable from an individual’s perspective and when the reality of chaos dawned on the authors, the views about civil society changed.

Secondly, what is directly linked to this larger question of nature of civil society is the philosophical analysis of personal identity and how it relates to its social construction. This question of the formation of “modern” self is naturally integral to the first objective stated above. When these perspectives are combined, it will give us some insight on how modern society and the self were created as artifacts. I’m studying this particularly in the works of Bernard Mandeville and David Hume. To give a “Mandevillean” reading of David Hume’s conception of self as a bundle of perceptions relates directly to our understanding of the Enlightenment and the progress of science and humanity. I intend to show that a skeptical reading of the Humean sentimentalism is the essence of the eighteenth-century North European thinking and how it illuminated the experience of progress, refinement and civil society at the time. It is the malleability of personal identity and the idea that there is no real substance behind our perceptions (that would be in metaphysical terms “real”) that crucially conveys the modern experience of time and change. It also helps us to realize that the Enlightenment thinking about progress was much less optimistic than has often been thought. The core idea of this line of Skepticism is that there is no uniformity in the self to begin with, and the experience of chaos and change are always present. What is central in this view is that the self as an artifact is fully dependent on the social aspects of civil society. At the same time, the idea of the timeless self or the earlier Christian ideas of perfection were sidelined in the late

eighteenth century, not because of militant atheism but because of the skepticism regarding the self in general. Humanity is transient, which needs to be faced as a fact. It seems to me that many existential thinkers including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were in fact much closer to this line of eighteenth-century thinking than has been recognized (also regarding the question of religion as a secular custom, a perspective which naturally excludes eschatology).

Thirdly, in order to verify the idea of an actual change towards the end of the eighteenth century regarding the conception of “one” unified idea of history, I am undertaking a computer-assisted study of the Koselleckian argument on the emergence of “one” history mentioned at the beginning of this essay. My idea is to use the ESTC records of all the British publications of history from 1470 to 1800 (included are the records of over 50000 titles that include the term “history” in any of the subject fields) and make a big data analysis of this material. This is a novel approach in intellectual history that will give material evidence about what kind of history or histories were written over time and how they changed as the British Empire grew. For this experimental work I have teamed up with a computer scientist, who has previously worked on big data analyses in microbiology and climate change.

To conclude, the reason to study these three interrelated themes regarding TIME is to learn how the question of personal identity relates to the conception of civil society and vice versa. My hypothesis is that one of the main features of “Western modernity” is that all thinking in humanities and social science became historical in a very fundamental sense during and after the eighteenth century: any ideas of the end of time or the end of history are alien to it. When this is combined to an understanding of the ephemeral self and the constantly fluctuating conception of personal identity, it can give us some theoretical background for understanding our own existence in time. I hope that my work on these three aspects of TIME would also benefit other scientific approaches in The First UBIAS Intercontinental Academia.

MT | 5. August, 2014 | Helsinki