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History in Round Numbers: Why One Hundred?

Christopher Prendergast

Abstract: This article is about the practice of dividing historical and literary-historical time into units of 100 years, with a particular focus on the semantics of the French term “siècle”. It examines how in the course of what we now call the seventeenth century the term “siècle” shifted in meaning from “age” or “epoch” to the round number 100. It contextualizes the shift with reference to the great Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, while also reflecting on the implications and consequences of a counterfactual alternative to modern historical chronology.

Keywords: periodization; century; “siècle”; narrative

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标 题: “世纪化”的历史: 百年何以成为历史分期的基本单位?

摘 要: 本文探讨历史学与文学史书写中将时间以百年划分的做法, 尤其关注法语词“siècle”的语用情况。本文分析“siècle”一词的词义如何在我们所谓的 17 世纪从“时代”或“时期”转变为现在的“一百年”。将这个转变放在古今之争的语境下讨论的同时, 本文也反思, 如果出现一种与这种现代历史年代学相异的反事实另类年代学, 会暗含何种启示与后果。

关键词: 历史分期; 世纪; “siècle”; 叙事

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Of the many issues that have faced both the theory and practice of literary history in recent decades, one of the most intractable is the problem of periodization, the division of both historical time and literary-historical time into units that help us to make sense of change. Indeed, in the more radically skeptical versions of the problem, the desire to periodize seems to place us in an impossible double-bind or aporia, perhaps best summarized by the curious grammar of Frederic Jameson’s well-known double negative: “we cannot not periodize”

(Jameson 29): on the one hand, largely because of the arbitrariness of cutting up historical time into coherent segments, we cannot periodize; on the other hand, we must periodize, as an essential condition of historical understanding and self-understanding (otherwise it is merely history as just one damned thing after another, as the famous saying goes). But whatever we do to break out of the aporetic circle, we cannot of course do so by simply going backwards to earlier models of periodization. A crucial part of the relevant story has been our long retreat from these models, most notably from the holistic periodizations that are the legacy of the Hegelian model of *Zeitgeist* history. This long retreat

has at least three major features or consequences. Firstly, in diachronic terms, we have learnt to live with fuzziness-i. e. the fuzzy boundaries between the historical units we call periods. Secondly, in synchronic terms, we have learnt to live with contradictions-the idea of a period as a force field of conflicting currents as against the monolithic conception of the *zeitgeist* model, whereby a period is circumscribed and saturated by a single, dominant world-view. Thirdly, in the footsteps of Benjamin and Foucault, we have learnt to live with discontinuity. Against the linear conception of historical succession, with its inbuilt teleological structure, such that a prior period is said to “anticipate” or “prepare” a future one (what has been called “predicting the past”), we have the stress on radical discontinuity, flash points, epistemic shifts and suchlike which are not explicable on the principle of a linear causality.

These broadly are some of the features of an earlier ground-clearing of our habits in thinking historically. But one habit that has not died, certainly not in Foucault’s work, is reliance on that fundamental unit of temporal division: the *century*. We are all familiar with the habit of thinking in centuries, with the tyranny of that numerical entity of 100 years as an organizing category of historical inquiry. So deeply ingrained is this habit that we are scarcely conscious of it; it has become a kind of second nature in our way with periodized temporality, with the consequence that we may tend to forget that as a way with history it is itself historical and indeed, on a world-historical view, of relatively recent provenance. Ernest Gellner, in *Thought and Change*, put it like this: “Societies exist in time. Notoriously, the ways in which various societies conceive themselves to be situated in time differ a good deal. The way in which time and its horizons are conceived is generally connected with the way the society understands and justifies itself” (Gellner 1). In our own case, our sense of historical identity is deeply bound up with the sense of belonging to a century, such that we have little difficulty in talking, for instance, of 20th century man or 20th century civilization. Although in itself an arbitrary and mechanical round number, the

category of “century” enters decisively into our existential and historical self-understanding.

On the other hand, however strongly naturalized, it is appropriate, as historically self-conscious beings, for us to inspect these habits of thought, with a view to uncovering their historical specificity and examining the intellectual and imaginative structures which subtend them. For, if *our* historical self-understanding is inflected by the concept of the century, this was certainly not the case in, say, the 14th century: what we call 14th century men and women would not have thought of themselves as 14th century beings, and our constructions of them as such is exactly that-a construction, an anachronistic back-formation from the terms of our own habits of thought. Let me therefore begin by trying to re-vivify what lies dead and buried in those habits with some particularly colourful examples of what these can mean and entail. I take the case of the 19th century (already of course begging the question by so naming it), and pose this question: what, apart from their involvement in literature and/or literary criticism, do the following have in common: the great Danish scholar-critic, Georg Brandes and the great English novelist, Virginia Woolf? On the face of it, not very much, one might think. But what they have in common is a certain way with the category of the Century, specifically the investment of an inert number (100) with all manner of narrative and symbolic meanings. Here is Virginia Woolf, on the transition from the 18th century to the 19th century in *Orlando*:

With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. the Eighteenth Century was over; the Nineteenth Century had begun. . . A change seemed to have come over the climate of England. Rain fell frequently, but only in fitful gusts, which were no sooner over than they began again. The sun shone, of course, but it was so girt about with clouds and the air was so saturated with water, that its beams were discoloured and purples, oranges, and reds of a dull sort took the place of the more positive landscape of the eighteenth century. (Woolf 147)

In this striking representation of transition from

the 18th to the 19th century we will note two things, firstly the notion of a *definitive* break, articulated by the meteorological imagery of a drastic weather change; secondly, the notion of a *precise* break, the marking of century-change by clock-time: the shift from the pastel blue sky of the 18th century to the sombre sky of the 19th century is completed precisely at the “twelfth stroke of midnight” 1799. Here then, in highly literary guise, is the idea of the “century”, in the mechanically arithmetical sense of a round 100 years, given a particular narrative shape, of an essentially Aristotelian sort, with an ending and a beginning as staple items of our customary imaginings of century-ness. Let me further illustrate all of these categories by reference to Georg Brandes in his instructively titled essay, “Thoughts on the Turn of the Century”. The essay begins with a meditation on endings, the end of the 19th century: “The century will soon be rounded out. By the ordinary rules there is still a year to go. Even though the turn of the century is not something we can feel, in fact the only appreciable change for us will be having to replace the 18 we have written for our whole lives with a 19, it still seems like a crucial adjustment in our lives. The years of our lives will have a new general name and a new first name. We are glimpsing a new dawn. In some ways it is an optical illusion. However just a change of numbers gives an impulse, a stimulus for change” (Brandes 5).

This is Brandes’s first paragraph. Here now is his last, the concluding moment of his essay:

We see the large, rich, foul century drain away and approach its grave. it was large, with enormous discoveries and gigantic deeds. It was foul, bloodstained and covered with horrific infamies. Its ending is dismal. The dark powers of brutality, war fever, subjugation and subservience howl out its final years in blackness. The sunrise of the new century is still but a distant admonition. (Brandes 129)

We have here a suite of metaphors-endings as death (“we see the century... approach its grave”) and beginnings as re-birth (“we are glimpsing a new dawn”; “the sunrise of the new century”). This is the rhetoric of fictive structure, broadly apocalyptic in both senses of the term: the modern idiomatic

sense of the catastrophe-laden 19c, and the older biblical sense of new beginnings. But we should note also the perhaps more interesting point that, even as he constructs the “turn” in this way, Brandes also hesitates: a round number (“the century will soon be rounded out”) is a purely arithmetic entity and to imbue it with high narrative significance is to fall prey to an “optical illusion”. The turn of the century, Brandes notes, has no subjective resonance as such (“is not something we can feel”), the mere replacement of one number (18) by another (19). On the other hand, “it still seems like a crucial adjustment in our lives”, a “change of numbers”, though purely mechanical, “gives an impulse, a stimulus for change”.

This narrative modelling as beginning, middle and end, birth, growth and decline... reflects some of our ways of converting an arbitrary number into intelligible shape. As we all know, in our own routine teaching practices, we rarely date what we call a century as a fixed round number (1800 to 1900, in the case of the so-called 19th century). We are far more likely to take the starting date back to, say, 1789 (the French Revolution) and the terminal date forward to, say, the outbreak of the First World War). Or, consider Immanuel Wallerstein’s description of the Renaissance as “the long century”, which, pressing the concept of ‘century’ to the point of breakdown, he runs across a period in excess of two hundred years. The whole business moreover is shadowed by cultural relativity. The Ancient Greeks did not think in centuries, but in quite different units (the Olympiad, for instance). Judaism counts historical time as a numbered succession of years from the alleged moment of Creation (contemporary Israel mixes and lives with both the Judaic and the Christian chronologies). Chinese chronology was traditionally dynastic, though that way of periodizing ended in 1911, replaced by cycles of 60 years (and not 100).

Finally, and internal to our own periodizations of historical time, we might want to think again about the foundation-stone of the whole temporal design on which for us the idea of the century ultimately rests: Anno Domini. The Christian practice of dating historical chronology from the birth

of Christ did not take effect until the 8th century. Thus if Jesus was born in Year 1 (or strictly speaking, year 0), Year 1 itself (i. e. the *concept* of year 1) was certainly not born in year 1. And, in any case, even this scheme could have been significantly different. I refer here to the intriguing counter-factual speculation offered by the French historian, Daniel Milo (in *Trahir l'histoire*), as to the consequences of dating the Christian calendar, and thus the whole procession of centuries, not from the birth but the death of Christ, from the Passion rather than the Nativity. This is not just a piece of whimsical fancy. Milo provides evidence that such a possibility was written into medieval Christendom's way with the whole problem of chronology, epoch and era. In the 5th century Victorius of Aquitaine was commissioned by the Pope's archdeacon to deal with the theologically and ecclesiastically vexed question of how to date the Easter festival by drawing up a calendrical table. A calendar (internal to a single year) is not of course the same as an epochal chronology, but the trajectory of Victorius's table, starting and ending with the Easter cycle opened a possible perspective, which was closed only in the following century with the endeavours of Dionysius Exiguus, the Scythian monk, who also wrestled with the Easter question, but this time taking his point of departure as the Nativity, although he did not do so expressly with a view to dating a chronology. He did however abandon the era of Diocletian and dated the first year in the Easter cycle from the supposed year of the Incarnation. His calculations were subsequently codified and disseminated by the Synod of Whitby and, in becoming standard practice, laid the groundwork for a view of historical time based on AD/BC, although the systematic organization of the relevant sequences into historical units of 100 years had to wait almost another 1000 years to come into being.

Milo's reminder that things might have been otherwise remains nevertheless a disarmingly simple but profoundly disorientating thought. Consider the implications of Milo's counterfactual. The knock-on effects of this 33 year displacement would be substantial, in relation to any of the century-based periodizations that interest us. Consider how

potentially complicated the story would have been if, working from the death rather than the birth of Christ, the 19th century were deemed to have begun in what we call the year 1833. The Russian revolution would belong in the 19th century. 1933, the year of Hitler's seizure of power, would stand as the very quintessence of fin-de-siècle catastrophism. European romanticism, would belong wholly in the 18th century. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Joyce's *Ulysses* would be canonical 19th century works. Proust, whom Antoine Compagnon has aptly described as a writer situated "entre deux siècles", would also be unambiguously a 19th century phenomenon. We might then, if only for the purpose of a thought experiment, enrich the counterfactual by mapping what would have been the case if the Republican calendar introduced in 1792 to celebrate the foundational character of the French Revolution had stuck. Between them, Dionysius Exiguus and Maximilien Robespierre would have ensured an outcome whereby year 1 would have been in 1759, *Du cote de chez Swann* would have appeared in 154 and the year in which I would be raising these questions would be 258. Perhaps most of these periodizing upheavals don't in fact add up to much, and of course, in so to speak a counterweight counterfactual, they would not have mattered to us had the calendar in fact been so organized; to us the relevant arrangements would have seemed as natural as the ones we actually have, and thus no source of disturbance or surprise. However the counterfactual is a reminder of the arbitrariness of these temporal and classificatory arrangements.

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Against this background, I now to turn to my principal topic. When and why the convention of measuring and thinking historical time in units of 100 years arose is itself an interesting historical question. My example here is a French one, specifically a major change in the temporal concept underlying the term *siècle* towards the end of the 17th century. The corresponding invention of English "century", along with its cognates in other languages (for example, German "Jahrhundert") is

a separate, though of course related, chapter of the relevant semantic and cultural history, which I shall here be putting to one side. Broadly English “century” derives from Latin “centuria”, originally used to designate a division of the Roman army as a unit of 100 soldiers, subsequently adapted in early modern English to mean a “century of things”, any collection of one hundred objects), including, in the early 17th century, a “century of years”. But it was not until the 18th century that the practice of *periodization* based on centuries was instituted.

However, as we all know, the Romance languages do not use terms based on Latin “centuria”, but rather the Latin “saeculum”: thus, French “siècle”, Italian “secolo”, Spanish “siglo”. My question concerns the moment at which and the conditions under which, in the French case, “siècle” joins with “centuria”, not terminologically (lexically the two histories are separate ones) but conceptually, to mean a period of 100 years, thus displacing an older and very different set of associations. This moment comes towards the end of the reign of Louis XIV, in the context of the famous *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, the details of which I turn to shortly, with the assistance of a remarkable book on the 17th century *fin-de-siècle* by Joan DeJean (*Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin-de-Siècle*).

In its derivation from Latin “saeculum”, meaning “age” or “generation”, French “siècle” was initially a term in religious discourse signifying “la vie terrestre”, the “world” and its ephemeral temporalities as opposed to the non-timebound eternal authority of the Church. From there it shaded into the more value-laden notion of “worldliness and the related ideology of *vanitas vanitatum*, the vanity of the things of this world. As such “siècle” was closely associated with old French “secular”, from Latin “saecularis”, which of course also produces English “secular”, itself originally a religious term designating what belongs to the world as distinct from the church and the sphere of the sacred, thus inaugurating the history that will connect “secular” with ideas of civil and lay authority. This emphasis on civil society and lay values in turn loops back to the meaning of Latin “saeculum” as age or period

and, in connection with French “siècle”, generates a strictly political definition of “siècle”: that is, the classical notion of “siècle” as a period of rule by a great monarch: “the age of Pericles”, “le siècle de Louis XVI”, etc. This definition was in turn finally displaced, in the late 17th century and early 18th century by the modern definition, the one we use ourselves, of “siècle” as a fixed number of 100 years, although it was not until the late 18th century and early 19th century that the 100-year unit was actively deployed as a method of periodization. In summary then, we have a semantic history involving a succession of three meanings: from an “age” (based on Latin “saeculum”); then more specifically the “age of a monarch”; and finally a period of 100 years. All three definitions will be found in serious modern dictionaries.

What I want to take from this intriguing semantic history is, first, the link between the concept of century and secular rule, and specifically “siècle” as a period circumscribed by the reign of a monarch. I gave as an example of the latter, “le siècle de Louis XIV”. *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand* (1687) is of course the title of a text by Charles Perrault (as it will later be the title of a work by Voltaire), the intervening period being precisely the period in which the term “siècle” evolves into its modern numerical meaning. It will be recalled that Perrault’s text was his first salvo in the great Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns that erupted in the hallowed precincts of French Academy. What then did Perrault mean by the word “siècle” in his title, what was the link with the Quarrel (specifically a quarrel about literature but more generally a quarrel about modernity), and finally what was the relation of this to a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualizing of historical time? These three questions are the ones I now want to address, with the help of Joan DeJean’s book. I begin accordingly with a summarizing quotation from that source:

Siècle (century) came no longer to be used exclusively in the traditional, temporally vague sense of ‘an age’ but acquired two new meanings. One of them was linked to monarchs, their reigns, and a personified view of history. The other was initially slipped in, as it were, on the coattails of the first new

meaning. What has become the term's most common meaning today, 'century', in the sense of precisely one hundred years, was originally called into being as a means of putting an end to an age and its turmoil, to a period we could characterize, in a terminology not yet available to those who brought 'siècle' into modern time, as a *fin de siècle*. (DeJean 3)

DeJean thus associates the invention of the modern meaning of "siècle" with a moment of historical and cultural crisis, marked by the sense of an ending and reflected in the Quarrel. The latter was primarily a dispute over the nature of literature and the authority of literary values. For the Ancients, literature and literary values were timeless, incarnated in the eternal authority of the writers of Classical Antiquity. For the Moderns, literary values were irreducibly time-bound, fully historical. This divergence produced two major bones of contention. The first was a matter of what today we would call cultural politics. The Ancients were conservative and elitist, seeing the Tradition as something to be protected and secured against the forces of modernity. The Moderns on the other hand sponsored a version of the "democratisation of culture", welcoming the formation and participation of a new reading public. Indeed part of the significance of the Quarrel was that it touched a public nerve, in a way that no other previous literary dispute had ever done and moreover contributed directly to the creation of new meanings for the term "public" itself (specifically the weight accorded to something called "public opinion"). The second, and far more controversial, bone of contention concerned the issue of values. For the Moderns argued not only relativistically (stressing the time-bound and therefore mutable nature of literary cultures), but also evaluatively, claiming that modern literature was not only different from but also superior to ancient literature. This claim (a version of the doctrine of Progress and Perfectibility), when applied to the question of the arts, is of course what most infuriated the conservatives.

The position adopted by Perrault and his followers, however, in turn generated a problem, in the form of a paradox. Modernity was defined by Perrault as contemporaneity, and contemporaneity

meant the present age of Louis XIV, as against the remote age of Antiquity. The progress of culture, on this view, achieves its pinnacle, its point of perfection under the rule of, and indeed in the person of, the Sun King: "Louis, the most perfect model of all kings/On whose creation the Heavens exhausted their treasures" ("Quel siècle...au siècle de Louis peut être préféré? De Louis qu'environne une gloire immortelle, De Louis des grands rois le plus parfait modèle?") (qtd. in DeJean 16). But it is here that we find the impossible paradox, whose consequence will be the strategic reorientation of the idea of "century" towards the modern meaning of a round 100 years. The paradox is this: if the "Siècle de Louis XIV" ("century" in the older sense of the age of a ruler) is the embodiment of perfection, of a cultural absolute under the regime of political absolutism, then what are the implications for the doctrine of cultural progress? What, conceivably, can come after Louis, that is, after perfection, if not simply decline and decay? If the Heavens have exhausted their treasures in the creation of the age of the Sun King, is it not then precisely "exhaustion" in another sense that inevitably awaits those who will come after, those condemned in advance to the dispiriting experience of belatedness?

This question is not in fact addressed by Perrault in the text of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, but it does come to the fore in his subsequent and much more detailed intervention in the Quarrel, *the Parallele des Anciens et des Modernes, en ce qui regarde les arts et les sciences* (the first volume of which appeared in 1688). Thus, he writes: "Our century ("siècle") has reached the summit of progress. And for the past few years progress moves at a much slower pace, and now appears almost imperceptible" (qtd. in DeJean 17). This notion of waning cultural vigour is further elaborated in terms of another figure, the comparison of historical time with biological time: "The duration of the youth of the world is usually thought of as that of the life of a man. Childhood, youth and the prime of life are over, and it is presently in its old age. If we reason in the same fashion that human nature is like an individual man, it is certain that that man was a child in the childhood of the world, an adolescent in

its adolescence, fully a man in the prime of its life, and that at present both the world and that man are in their old age" (qtd. in DeJean 17).

This anxiety about aftermath, the spectre of decline that accompanies the projection of a world post-Louis, is what underlies the key shift in the concept of "century". The term "siècle" becomes increasingly less a regnal term and more a purely temporal term. Shadowed by the fear of entropy and termination, the word is progressively detached from a monarch's life (and the corresponding equation of progress with perfection) and more closely aligned with a purely temporal construction possessing a beginning and an end. Perrault's *Parallèle* already indicates this semantic shift. The new meaning is also to be found in Furetière's dictionary published in 1690: "Siècle. s. m. Mesure du temps qui dure cent années". The distinction gathers force towards the end of the decade. Thus in 1699, Jean Donneau de Visé, the editor of the influential journal *Le Mercure galant*, raises a question that in France had never before been posed in these terms: "We are reaching the year 1700 and the question of the new century has not yet been decided. Some claim that it is about to begin, others contend that it will only begin in 1701" (qtd. in DeJean 72). And with the death of Louis XIV, the process of re-definition is more or less completed. For example, in the writings of the Abbé du Bos (who however personally did not approve of the changed definition): "The word century ("siècle") signifies precisely a period of one hundred years" (1719). By the time Voltaire writes his *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, the new meaning is more or less fully in place, although Voltaire's own title retains the earlier sense of the "age of a monarch".

Three things, I would suggest, we can take from this episode of late 17th century French history. The first is, under the pressure of an incipient crisis, the replacement of monarchical time by mechanical time, as something measurable rather than quasi-sacral, a shift tied to the rise of the modern scientific outlook (and we should remember here that, although Perrault's defense of modernity centred on the question of literature, it was also a defense of the authority of the sciences). Secondly, the creation of a new form of temporal self

consciousness, the consciousness of time as time, of temporality and historicity as against the assumptions of immutability bound up with the political logic of Absolutism which actively sought to de-historicize the grounds of its legitimacy. The third point however is quite different and needs to be coaxed out of DeJean's inquiries, since she herself does not address it directly. This concerns a resistance to the some of the implications of this new, more scientific sense of the measurability of historical time.

To illustrate this point, I need to return here in conclusion to the fact that the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns was an overwhelmingly literary affair. As such one of its consequences was to introduce the beginnings of what will later become an arithmetical model of literary periodization tied to a view of literature as essentially national literature. Perrault as Modernist was also and inextricably a Nationalist. But there is more to the literary dimension than the beginnings of a form of national literary history. Though the appeal to science and the scientific mentality underpinned the rationalizing of classical time into modern time, the construction of the latter remained literary through and through. By this I do not mean, as does DeJean, that the principle of the historical understanding of literature (ancient vs. modern) was at the centre of the relevant debates, but rather that the formal and imaginative shape given to the new concept of century was systematically literary. A purely scientific-quantitative measurement left the mind vulnerable to the sheer arbitrariness of a mechanical number-what Brandes alludes to in "Thoughts on the Turn of the Century" when he speaks of century change as the substitution of one abstract number for another. For that number to become meaningful, humanly intelligible, it had to be invested with narrative and symbolic fictions, and the late 17th century came up with the two dominant ones, that are still with us today. First, there is the metaphor of organic growth, the shape of a century analogous to the shape of a life (an analogy we have seen active in Perrault's text). Secondly, there is the notion of a turning point, whether doom-laden or promise-filled or a mix of both, thus laying the ground work for the much later association of the concept of "siècle"

with the concept of fin de siècle.

Deconstructing these fictions is of course child's play, a trenchant if somewhat implausible example being Max Nordau's remarks on the notion of *fin-de-siècle* at the beginning of his own *fin-de-siècle* book (it was published in 18920, with its alarming title and often even more alarming arguments, *Degeneration*:

No proof is needed of the extreme silliness of the term [fin-de-siècle]. Only the brain of a child or of a savage could form the clumsy idea that the century is a kind of living being, born like a beast or a man, passing through all the stages of existence, gradually ageing and declining after blooming childhood, joyous youth and vigorous maturity, to die with the expiration of the hundredth year, after being afflicted in its last decade with all the infirmities of mournful senility. Such childish anthropomorphism or zoomorphism never stops to consider that the arbitrary division of time... is not identical among all civilized beings, and that while this 19c of Christendom is held to be a creature reeling to its death presumptively in dire exhaustion, the 14c of the Mahommedan world is tripping along in the baby shoes of its first decade, and the 15c of the Jews strides gallantly by in the full maturity of its fifty-second year (Nordau 1).

Moreover these fictions do not exhaust our ways of thinking about historical time. The Annales school, for instance, has imbued us with a healthy scepticism of such divisions, with its emphasis on the significance of *longue durée* and the corresponding disappearance of distinct and distinctive century-structures into a far slower temporal rhythm. Conversely, Foucault and, with him, the New Historicists have tended to stress rather the principle of short duration, focusing more on break and discontinuity and on synchronic constellations of practices within in a delimited moment, for example, the history of a single year (for example, Gumbrecht's book, 1926). And for those of a more radical epistemological persuasion, there is the argument of Levi-Strauss, in the famous exchange with Sartre on the topic of history,

namely, that time being indefinitely divisible, all temporal decoupage, all constitution of historical units is irredeemably arbitrary (that however is an extremely radical position and, as far as I know, has happily not impaired practising historians in going about their business).

Nevertheless, the two connected forms or models for construing centuries and century-ness that I have described have stayed with us, as the narrative modalities of a major displacement from classical time to modern time, and which I am now tempted to summarize as the displacement from charismatic time (centred on the figure of a great ruler) to apocalyptic time (in the strict sense, to which I have already alluded, of time construed according to notions of beginning and ending). A mildly complicating postscript to the story of this change, however, might be the attempt by politicians to blur that distinction, as the ludicrously proffered marriage of the apocalyptic and the charismatic. As Marx, echoing Hegel, said, history always repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. It seems as if these habits will still be with us for some time to come, perhaps indeed for centuries.

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