Introduction: The Fabric of Historical Time

At the turn of the millennium, theoretical physicists seemed keen to explore the fabric of the universe. Although attempting to unravel the workings of the universe is not an endeavor specific to that moment, there was something new to these efforts: the “fabric” metaphor, which came to dominate such attempts. David Deutsch’s *The Fabric of Reality* (1998) and Brian Greene’s *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (2004) are perhaps the most illustrious examples of this tendency. Deutsch’s book applies the “fabric” metaphor when aiming to develop an understanding of reality as based on quantum mechanics, considering the subatomic level as the most fundamental. Quantum theory, however, is notoriously difficult to integrate with an Einsteinian physics in a comprehensive view. String theory, which provides the framework of Greene’s book, is a proposal to do exactly that: an effort to see together the small scale of particle physics and the large scale of general relativity in a coherent picture. For Greene, it is in the latter context, that of Einsteinian general relativity, that the “fabric” metaphor works best. “Einstein,” says Greene (2004: 69), “understood that gravity itself must be nothing but warps and curves in the fabric of spacetime.”

Our Element is nevertheless not about the fabric of spacetime, the mysteries of the universe, quantum mechanics, or string theory. Nor do we want to address the question of the “nature” of time by trying to situate approaches to time in physics and the natural sciences, on the one hand, and approaches to time in the human and social sciences, on the other. Although this would be an intellectually exciting and perhaps also necessary endeavor for time studies, our goal in this Element is somewhat more modest. We simply borrow the “fabric” metaphor from theoretical physics in order to make sense of something else. Instead of studying the nature of reality, the building blocks of the universe, and the fabric of spacetime, we aim to explore the fabric of historical time.

To see why it makes sense to approach the theme of historical time with the help of the “fabric” metaphor, the first step would be to get a firm grasp on what historical time is. Most approaches to historical time share a fairly regular assumption, namely that, unlike the time in spacetime – which refers to time as the fourth dimension as combined with the three dimensions of space – historical time is inseparable from human experience. The notion of historical time refers to time not as an abstract and homogeneous entity, but as a dynamic and contextualized constituent of human life, shaped by historical events, social and political structures, and cultural norms.

Reinhart Koselleck (2004: 1–2), the most prominent scholar of the theme in the second half of the twentieth century, explicitly defines historical time as opposed to what he sees as a unitary and measurable natural time. This provides
the background of Koselleck’s (2004: 2) far larger claim about the intrinsic plurality of historical time(s):

Even the singularity of a unique historical time supposedly distinct from a measurable natural time can be cast in doubt. Historical time, if the concept has a specific meaning, is bound up with social and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organizations. All these actions have definite, internalized forms of conduct, each with a peculiar temporal rhythm. One has only to think (keeping to everyday life) of the annual cycle of public holidays and festivals that punctuate social life, or of changes in working hours and their duration that have determined the course of life and continue to do so. What follows will therefore seek to speak, not of one historical time, but rather of many forms of time superimposed one upon the other.

The quoted passage makes clear two things at once. First, it testifies how profoundly the received view of historical time emphasizes its social character; second, it plays out the extent to which change in the sociopolitical domain takes place in diverging paces. The latter aspect is currently a true attention magnet. The intricacies arising out of the recognition of the multiple temporalities and the variety of the intersections of processes that unfold in time with different paces and tempos are among the cornerstones of recent discussions on historical time (for instance, Browne 2014; Jordheim 2014; Esposito 2017; Fryxell 2019; Tamm and Olivier 2019; Landwehr 2020; Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley 2020a; Bashir 2022; Fareld 2022a). Much of this Element will also be devoted to an examination of such intricacies. What needs to be addressed at this point is, however, not as much the multiplicity of times as the reverse question of why it nevertheless does make sense to talk about historical time, at least historically, as a prominent and once dominant category – without the need of constantly clarifying that what we mean by the singular grammatical form is in fact a plurality of times.

For underlying the plurality of temporal rhythms and the diverging paces of multiple processes and developments in a variety of human endeavors, there has been a shared conception of history as a developmental process unfolding in time. History as a unitary concept, the idea of a historical process that encompasses all the particular processes and developments, emerged in Western Europe between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. Koselleck has called this period Sattelzeit (cf. Décultot and Fulda 2016), meaning practically the formation of the modern world (modernity) through conceptual transformations that shaped the perception of reality. According to Koselleck, the period witnessed the temporalization of a cluster of interrelated concepts. “Revolution,” for instance, derived from the circular movement of stars, has achieved a temporal dimension.
in the *Sattelzeit*. It attained a directionality in time, pointing onward to a desired future (Koselleck 2004: 23).

Most importantly, the desired futures of revolutions and utopias—and, for that matter, any sort of “progress”—have been rendered possible by the simultaneous emergence of the temporalized concept of history as a unitary process unfolding in time. Past and future have emerged as differentiated categories (Schiffman 2011; Hölscher 2016). Or, to use the categories of Koselleck (2004: 255–275), in the *Sattelzeit*, a gap began to form between the “space of experience” (roughly speaking, that which one has experienced in the past) and the “horizon of expectation” (that which one can expect of the future)—and this gap is constantly growing as the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” are moving away from each other at an accelerating pace.

History, the temporalized concept as the Western world came to know it in the past two centuries or so, bridges this gap and smooths the differentiated past and future into a larger trajectory. In bringing new and old together and seeing both as part of the very same process (Arendt 1961), the modern conception of history and its historical time domesticate experienced novelty and expectations of the future (Simon 2019a: 20–27). As soon as the new is seen in familiar lights, as soon as it is conceived of as the next stage in a development of a past potential, radical novelty is tamed. It is one of the great conundrums of historical time that it entails both a rupture in time—as Aleida Assmann (2020) highlights—and the bridging of that rupture through its work of domestication (Simon 2021). Section 1 will explore these perplexities in details. Two more relevant questions need to be asked right after recounting the dominant view on the emergence of historical time: first, *where* is historical time; second, *when* is historical time? Whereas the first question situates historical time on the local-global spectrum, the second addresses both the dating and the historicity of historical time itself. In reality, the two questions often presuppose each other. Studying the historical thought of imperial China (Ng and Wang 2005) or the relation between ancient and modern Western historical thought (Lianeri 2011) implies both questions at once.

That said, for the sake of simplicity, let’s begin with addressing the question of where exactly historical time is by having a look at its conceptual environment. In that regard, the links between historical time and the notion of modernity seem evident. As the latter is one of the most frequently deployed and, at the same time, one of the most contested concepts of the human and social sciences, we cannot delve deeply into debates surrounding the notion of modernity. What we would like to point out in this regard is only that due to the intertwinements of modernity and historical time, it is little wonder that critiques
of them are also often interlinked. In fact, when addressing the question of historical time, a whole set of interrelated notions is at stake. Consider the following passage from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000: 7):

Western critiques of historicism that base themselves on some characterization of “late capitalism” overlook the deep ties that bind together historicism as a mode of thought and the formation of political modernity in the erstwhile European colonies. Historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century. Crudely, one might say that it was one important form that the ideology of progress or “development” took from the nineteenth century on. Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This “first in Europe, then elsewhere” structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing “Europe” by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.”

Modernity, historicism, progress, development, capitalism, nation and nationalism, global and globalization – are all heavyweight concepts with complex intersections. Yet all too often they have been seen as adding up to a relatively simple story of “first in Europe, then elsewhere,” the one that Chakrabarty highlights as the very structure of “global historical time.” Is this the case? Is historical time necessarily Eurocentric? Or is the kind of historical time Chakrabarty refers to only one particular European iteration of historical time, often disguised in the cloak of universalism?

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is a commonplace that a uniform conception of historical time, associated with certain experiences in a few Western countries, does not do justice to the variety of experiences of time. While it is evidently true that temporal experiences are many, the question remains whether specifically “historical” conceptions of time are varied too. On the one hand, and on a smaller scale, conceptions of lived time along identity categories in relation to history are increasingly gaining visibility. From feminist multilinear and multidirectional reconceptualizations of historical time (Browne 2014), through nonnormative “trans temporalities” (Devun and Tortorici 2018), to an “oppositional racial chronopolitics” guided by “race as a recognition of the racial structuring of the modern world and the concomitant need for corrective racial justice” (Mills 2020: 312), plenty of efforts set out to problematize the interrelated complex of historical time and Western modernity. On the other hand, and on a larger scale, the booming of localized time
conceptions and time experiences poses the question of their relation to the dominant conception of historical time, which they all consider oppressive and from which they attempt to break free. If the problem is the whole historical time/Western modernity complex, do these efforts then constitute alternative notions of “historical time,” or are they better seen as efforts aimed at the recognition of notions of time other than “historical”?

The central normative question of today’s debates on historical time is whether we should see only one “historical time” of global aspirations – one that is necessarily of the spatialized developmental structure of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” as Chakrabarty phrased it – or a multiplicity of localized historical times. The politics of both options have potential pitfalls. Whereas opting for the former risks denying a sense of historicity of their own from cultures outside the West, opting for the latter risks considering practically any temporal configuration that relates past, present, and future in one way or another as “historical.”

As a case in point, consider the jointly written book of Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam: *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (2003). The book’s opening sentence immediately sets the stakes by asking: “Did history and historical consciousness exist in South India before the conquest of the region by the British in the closing decades of the eighteenth century?” (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2003: 1). In answering the question affirmatively, the authors of *Textures of Time* intend to challenge what they see as dominant positions in postcolonial studies at the turn of the millennium. This means, on the one hand, the view that associates with history “practically any text that dealt with the past”; on the other, it means views that “history was entirely alien to the authentic Indian conception of things” (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2003: xi). As an advocate of the latter view, the book explicitly mentions Ashis Nandy (1995), who famously argued that there is only one conception of history that has engulfed the globe and sought alternatives to this conception of history by embracing the milliard ways of ahistorical constructions of the past. *Textures of Time* (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2003: 3) counters both views and makes the case for seeing a body of texts “from folk-epic to courtly poetry (*kāvya*) to variously categorised prose narratives” as history. It argues that in South India, prior to the consolidation of colonial rule, “no single genre was allotted to history writing” as was the case in Europe at the time of the professionalization of history as a discipline in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003: 4), history can occur in a variety of genres and in any genres both history and nonhistory can be written, which allows them to see forms of history.
different from the standards of European professionalized history writing. Eventually, in trying to distance itself from the views of Nandy that there is only one historical time, and thereby from the risk of denying a sense of historicity outside the West, *Textures of Time* opens up to the opposite risk of allowing practically anything to be seen as history.

We do not think that this situation can satisfactorily be resolved. At the same time, it seems to us that both Nandy and the authors of *Textures of Time* base their claims in one or another sense of historicity, which leads us directly to the second aspect we would like to highlight in this introduction, namely that historical time is itself historical. Whatever we think historical time may be is itself subject to change over time. On the one hand, this means that, in a constructivist view, at some points in the past historical time did not exist (as is the assumption of Nandy) and/or was conceived differently (as is the assumption of Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam). In this sense, periodizations and debates on dating phenomena are intrinsic to the history/modernity complex (Davis 2008; Lorenz 2017; Friedman 2019). Little wonder that Koselleck’s periodization of the *Sattelzeit*, as well as the dating of practically all individual aspects related to the *Sattelzeit* thesis, has been the subject of intense critical discussions (Jung 2010/11; Landwehr 2012; Décultot and Fulda 2016). On the other hand, the historicity of historical time also entails that it will be differently conceived in the future, and, at some point, it will even cease to exist as a pattern of thought. Hence the fact that we use Koselleck’s definition only as an entry point to a larger discussion centered around the claim that the modern configuration of historical time studied by Koselleck has been challenged more recently by other configurations of time. To a large extent, this Element is devoted to the task of fleshing out how, by the turn of the millennium, the once-dominant conception of modern historical time has come to be seen as only one of many coexisting configurations of historical time.

Most importantly, the historicity of historical time is one of the reasons we think that, in 2023, the “fabric” metaphor can shed a new and rather peculiar light on the topic. In that, it even has a great advantage as compared to the other two popular metaphors that occur with equal frequency in thinking about the intersections of time and history: “order” and “regime.” Like the “fabric” metaphor, talking about “the order of time” attributes a certain comprehensiveness and coherence to the temporal constitution of reality – be that reality a physical one (Rovelli 2018) or a social one (Pomian 1984). The same applies to the notions of “regimes of historicity” (Hartog 2015) and “time regimes” (Asmann 2020) or “temporal regimes” (Torres 2022), which perhaps are the most historically minded.
The “order” and “regime” metaphors, however, cannot escape the connotation of being enforced. They tend to imply an originary nonorderly state of things on which order is imposed in the constellation of a regime. Perhaps this is why they dominate thinking about time in the social realm while the “fabric” metaphor seems to lack such connotations and seldom makes its way into the same vocabulary. And that is precisely why we co-opt it. By borrowing a metaphor from the sciences, we want to hint at two things at once. First, we intend to align the way we think about historical time with the collapse of the distinction between natural time and historical time upon which Koselleck’s investigations have been based. Second, we wish to emphasize the extent to which the recognition of this collapse emerges out of the recent work of the sciences and to situate thereby the scientific “fabric” metaphor with human and social scientific thinking about historical time.

The premise of all this is provided by the notion of the Anthropocene, as it has emerged in Earth System science (ESS) in the past decades, or, more precisely, emerged together with the formation of ESS as a new scientific knowledge formation (Steffen et al. 2020). Since Paul Crutzen used the term at a conference in 2000 to indicate how the Holocene may no longer be the appropriate name for the current geological epoch, the Anthropocene was quickly diffused across disciplines. Behind its more recent multiple appropriations, critiques, and countless conflicting alterations in the human and social sciences (cf., for instance, Haraway 2016; Moore 2016; Davis and Todd 2017; Horn and Bergthaller 2019; Merchant 2020; Thomas 2022), the Anthropocene as an ESS notion intends to capture the systemic collision of the physical/natural and human/social worlds by seeing human activity as one of the subsystems comprising the integrated Earth System (Steffen et al. 2016; Zalasiewicz et al. 2021).

Etymologically, the notion consists of the words “human” (anthropos) and “recent” (-cene), spotlighting that the stratigraphic findings of late reflect human activity observable in recent sediments. That said, the most attention altogether has likely been paid to the chronostratigraphic aspects of the concept. In a debate across disciplines, the question whether the Anthropocene constitutes an epoch either in Earth history (on the geologic time scale) or in human history (in periodizations of social change) tends to overshadow the far more crucial question of how modern knowledge formations can even comprehend what Chakrabarty (2021: 26) claimed, namely that “anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the humanist distinction between natural history and human history.”

1 Human and social scientific criticism nevertheless tends to coin alternative terms on the assumption that -cene would mean “age” and the Anthropocene would mean “human age.”
True enough, many indigenous ways of living never knew such a distinction. As Cristina Yumie Aoki Inoue (2018: 27) says, for the Yanomami, living in the northern Amazon region, “the forest’s biological, cognitive, and physical diversity and the relationships between soil, water, animals, humans, and spirits constitute the very fabric of their lives,” in which “there is no dichotomy between nature and society or between land and ways of life.” In a similar way, Tamara Bray (2018: 269) argues that pre-Columbian Andean peoples, aboriginal inhabitants of the area of the Central Andes in South America, “were highly cognizant of the fact that persons, places, and things existed within multiple temporal frameworks.” Nor was such a dichotomy always present in European thought. Carolyn Merchant’s classic *The Death of Nature* (1980) has already shown how the Scientific Revolution slowly displaced an organic view of nature in favor of a mechanistic view in which nature was subjected to human domination. Merchant’s own ecosystem thinking, just as well as the more recent ESS view, problematizes and moves toward collapsing the nature/society or nature/culture distinction by focusing on their relation in a systemic frame. So does (without the systemic frame) the anti-anthropocentric imperative of the human and social sciences that has been emerging in a variety of shapes in the past decades across a diverse set of approaches and disciplines, from new materialism (Coole and Frost 2010), through critical posthumanism (Braidotti 2013, 2019), to historical studies (Domanska 2010) and anthropology (Crist and Kopnina 2014).

At the same time, it must also be clear that just because contemporary scientific thinking, human and social scientific imperatives, past thought patterns in Europe and indigenous knowledges can be seen as occupying a vaguely defined platform of decentering the human in one way or another (Tamm and Simon 2020), they do not really talk about the same things. What they all clearly indicate, however, is the necessity to rethink historical time (Tamm and Olivier 2019). They demand that we ask whether it is possible to meaningfully relate the historical time that we tend to associate with human history and the conceptions and scales of time that the modern sciences and various societal knowledge economies used to address in the past centuries.

It is in order to open up to such possibility and to accommodate the scientific impulse and the variety of recent imperatives that decenter the human (without losing sight of the more traditional ways of thinking about time and history in regard to the human world) that our Element will set out to explore the fabric of historical time, including cracks in that fabric and its changes over time. In a four-step argument, it will make comprehensible the momentous leap from modern historical time (that Koselleck investigated) to the ways in which Anthropocene and planetary temporalities recalibrate the fabric. The first step will sketch the basic premises of modern historical time and the exhaustion of...
these premises in the second half of the past century. The second step will explicate and zoom in on the multiple temporalities and historicities of historical time. The third step will address the consequences of affirming the multiplicity of historical times: if pluritemporality is integral to the fabric of historical time, it follows that the many coexisting temporalities intersect, clash, and conflict in various ways. Finally, the fourth and last step will briefly revisit in light of the preceding discussions the constitution of the fabric of historical time.

1 Modern Historical Time and Its Exhaustion

It is no news that modern historical time (that is, the “global historical time” of Chakrabarty, mentioned in the Introduction), its central features, and its satellite notions have acquired a bad reputation in many scholarly environments. Linearity, developmental processuality, teleology, and the notion of progress have received innumerable criticism in the past more than half century. Being held responsible for promoting the idea of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” and providing thereby the ground for the implementation of violent colonization projects, one might expect that conceptions of modern historical time and practices implying it are by now hard to come by.

Quite the contrary! The open repudiation of modern historical time in intellectual circles has been accompanied by a broad range of practices in society and the scholarly community alike that attest to its continuing appeal. To mention only two, think of, first, the retained omnipresence of progress thinking from economics to party politics. As Tyson Retz (2022) has recently argued, the idea of progress comes in several shapes. The undeniable decline of belief in what Retz (2022:16) calls “absolute progress” – that is, “the idea that progress in separate domains of human endeavor amount to overall human progress,” “a totalizing conception of human history” – has been accompanied by the rise of “everybody’s progress” (Retz 2022: 37–46) in neoliberal policies pursuing statistical planning and economic growth in the second half of the past century. And such forms of progress thinking reign today, even when they are known to cause disastrous consequences, as shown by Julie Livingston’s (2019) analysis of “self-devouring growth” in Botswana, predicated on the implementation of technological solutions that eventually led to reverse effects.

Second, the central tenets of modern historical time reign even in its own criticisms. Decoloniality, both as a theory and as a practice of “decolonization,” is modern historical time put to work at its most elemental. It conceives of the present as the outcome of deep historical processes as they unfold out of past patterns of colonial expansion, extraction, conquest, and resistance.
Nothing indicates better the close ties between modern historical time and decolonial thought than the family resemblance of their respective actionable modalities: historicization and decolonization. The same way as practically any present phenomena can be historicized by seeing them within larger patterns of historical processes, practically any present phenomena – from the discipline of sociology (Connell 2018; Meghji 2021) to the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd 2017; Whyte 2017; McEwan 2021) – can be subjected to decolonization and can come thereby to be seen as being molded into their present shapes in the course of specifically colonial historical processes (to which they themselves have contributed).

Does this mean that there is no escape from the hold of modern historical time? Well, no, it does not mean anything like that. It only means that breaking with it may be harder than previously thought. And, perhaps most importantly, it also means that we need a bit more intellectual honesty in openly discussing whether, in spite of all criticism, modern historical time should be escaped in the first place. For the emancipatory imperatives of many of today’s social movements and politically engaged forms of scholarship simply rely on it the very same way decolonial theories and practices do. They cannot but assume that betterment is possible over time in the shape of developmental process and gradual empowerment. This is precisely what nineteenth-century nation builders assumed too in the service of constructing national identities (Berger 2022: 34–38). Behind a difference in what counts as a desirable future to build, they share with today’s emancipatory imperatives the background assumption of modern historical time.

To hint at the complexities entailed by the survival of modern historical time, in the coming pages of this section, we will discuss its central features. Yet we will do so only in order to foreshadow its relative downfall. For there is a double twist here: it is not only that modern historical time survives despite its many critics, but also that it nevertheless loses its dominance despite its survival. What makes this possible is less the countless intellectual critiques and more the emergence of a variety of practices conceived as having been informed by temporal configurations other than the processual character of modern historical time. These recent challenges and alternative temporal configurations have been theorized in several ways in the past decades, and we will provide a necessarily limited overview of conceptual efforts that range from “presentism” (Hartog 2015) to our own notion of “disconnective futures” (Simon and Tamm 2021). We will do so in order to set the stage for Section 2 by claiming that, together with the survival of modern historical time, they all are part of a larger frame of multiple temporalities and historicities that constitutes the fabric of historical time today.