



Narrative time and International Relations

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Published online: 20 April 2022
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Abstract

Telling a story can explain how an event came about. It can thereby also change how we grasp temporality. In this article, I will discuss Paul Ricœur's notion of 'narrative time' in the context of International Relations. Viewed from this perspective, narratives not only explain, but also mediate two ways of understanding time, phenomenological and cosmological, by weaving experienced time and natural time together. How they do so will be shown considering three tools: calendar, succession of generations, and trace. The calendar and the succession of generations interlink, through narratives, physical and biological elements with experience. This includes the creation of 'temporal watersheds' by extraordinary events, periodisations, traditions, and the recasting of preceding academic generations. The trace gestures at the temporal implications of the sources on which IR builds by referring to their time bridging function.

Keywords IR theory · Narrative · Ricœur · Time

Introduction

More than 2 years after the first cases were detected, the world is still battling the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the search for a narrative framework to interpret the present situation is in full swing. Looking at prominent strands of this discussion, it becomes clear that many of them deal with the 'temporal orientation' of our present condition. On the one hand, this has to do with identifying a beginning. A common narrative places the current pandemic amongst other zoonotic diseases that emerged in the recent past and sees its inception long before 'patient zero'. The present predicament is thus understood as the culmination of globalisation and the long history of human encroachment on wildlife. Temporality also plays an important role in envisioning further developments: Will we see a clearly defined end to the pandemic? Will we look back and define it as a discrete event, or rather as

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the beginning of a new period extending long into the future? Debates that focus on the transformational effects of the pandemic are also closely related to this discussion. The following paper is not about the COVID-19 pandemic per se, but this current debate highlights the importance of that interrelationship between temporality and the narratives which we use to make sense of our world. It is this nexus that I will explore further in the following article with a focus on International Relations.

Narratives in general have become a prominent research topic, both as objects and as a mode of knowledge generation in International Relations. Despite the wide variety of substantial themes addressed by this research, the underlying assumption shared by most contributions is that narratives do not simply represent but transform the way we see and act upon the world by creating a ‘surplus of meaning’ (Ricoeur 1976). This surplus might translate into the constitution of collective identities (Berenkoetter 2014; Ringmar 1996; Subotić 2016), work to legitimise certain policies (Ochoa et al. 2021), or structure international conflicts (Kuusisto 2009; Ringmar 2006; Spencer 2016). Concerning narrativity as a mode of research, its explanatory value (Suganami 2008) and potential for generating distinct kinds of knowledge have been pointed out (Inayatullah and Dauphinee 2016; Ravecca and Dauphinee 2018).

How do narratives generate this surplus? One prominent answer to this question is emplotment, that is, the creation of a plot (Ricoeur 1984). The key characteristic of a narrative is that it meaningfully relates events and forms a coherent, self-sufficient story from a beginning through a middle to an end. ‘Economic discourse’, a regression analysis, or Picasso’s *Guernica* are, in this conception, not narrative in character, which brings the temporal dimension of narratives to the fore. Temporality is the abstract feature through which narratives realise their productive potential. The notion of a state’s autobiography, which situates it in time by weaving together strands of its past and envisioned future, takes centre stage when the identity formation of states is to be described. This can also be understood inversely as a critique, since narratives linearise time, establish boundaries and foundational events that underwrite problematic and potentially violent state policies (Edkins 2003; Lundborg 2012). When it comes to narratives as research tools, the temporal dimension also plays a crucial role, since narratives gain their explanatory power by emplotting temporal transitions from one state to another. The same applies to those approaches that seek to identify common plot structure or genres such as romance or tragedy, which are defined by a common sequence of typical characters and actions, leading from an original situation to a specific ending (Kuusisto 2009; Ringmar 2006; Spencer 2016).

Temporality is also the centrepiece of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s approach to narratives. Especially his magnum opus *Time and Narrative* allows investigating the relation between temporality and narrative, which is often assumed to be almost self-evident, in more detail. Time is frequently understood to be the background condition against or in which the ‘substance’ of a narrative can be formulated. ‘Empty time’ being the unproblematic prerequisite allowing to proceed linearly from beginning to end (McIntosh 2015). However, as Ricoeur argues, while narratives do have a chronological dimension, this does not exhaust their temporal features. Transcending the purely chronological—linear, discrete, and unending—narratives synthesise, create continuity, differentiate within this



continuity and, finally, inversely read beginning and end. These features allow a narrative to ‘answer’ one of the most often discussed conundrums when thinking about time, namely the separation between natural, ‘empty’ time on the one hand and phenomenological time on the other, which, in different guises, is addressed by the literature on time and IR (Edkins 2003; Hutchings 2008; Lundborg 2012; McIntosh 2015). Furthermore, narratives do not simply rely on time but are productive for temporal imagination itself. Taken together, both features create what Ricœur calls ‘narrative time’, and my article seeks to elaborate this notion in the context of IR. As the literature has shown that narratives are a widespread mode of sensemaking, this also has implications for the way in which time is understood beyond the ‘container model’ of empty time. I will argue, following Ricœur, that by mediating the chronological and the phenomenological, the narratives of IR shape a ‘third time’.

As several authors have demonstrated before, Ricœur’s work on narrative and time can be made productive for IR. Felix Ciută (2007) has shown, set against the background of European security, how narratives mediate experiences and projections in a constantly changing environment and that both strategy and identity are the outcomes of narratively creating meaning, which is why they are not mutually exclusive. Cerwyn Moore (2010) has used Ricœur’s work to analyse how narratives of founding events and the linking of past and present shaped the conflicts in Kosovo and Chechnya. Finally, the contributions by Ian Klinke (2013) and Andrew Hom (2020) are closest to my concerns, as they, too, both focus on IR and neighbouring disciplines. Klinke argues that most of the existing literature on time dealing with speed and acceleration does not pay enough attention to the narrative foundation of temporality and that Ricœur’s notion of narrative time would allow critical geopolitics to refrain from reifying time and temporality. Andrew Hom argues in the same vein but relies on the notion of ‘timing’ through narrative to show how various theories and methodologies address the ‘*the problem of Time* [that is] tropes, symbols, and assumptions that cast Time per se as a source of disorder, dissolution and death’ (Hom 2020: 11; emphasis in the original).

The following builds on these contributions, who mostly focus on Ricœur’s conception of the plot. As this lies at the heart of his theory of narrative, emplotment will also play a prominent role in the subsequent reconstruction. I do, however, seek to go beyond the approaches just mentioned in two regards. First, I will discuss the time-philosophical background of *Time and Narrative* in more detail. Although this seems to be a far-removed enterprise at first, some of Ricœur’s most valuable insights pertaining to narratives only emerge thus, as they are formulated to answer a (time-) philosophical problem. One of the distinct contributions a Ricœurian perspective on time and narrative can make is that it brings to light the historical dimension of narrative IR. Historical is understood here neither as having a history nor dealing with the past, but as a specific way of being in time. Second, by discussing narrative time in the context of IR, I will refer to three ‘instruments’ that Ricœur introduces as bridging devices between history and the more abstract discussion of temporality, namely calendar, the succession of generations, and trace. These are the mediating links towards which narratives work between ‘natural’ time, biological or physical, on the one hand, and experienced time on the other. So far, the literature



has not paid attention to this element of *Time and Narrative*, even though it allows for a productive translation of both narrative and temporality into IR discourse.

This article is structured as follows. First, Paul Ricœur's approach to the issue is outlined by summarising his discussion of the aporetic of time, juxtaposing phenomenological and cosmological concepts. This philosophical impasse motivates an answer given through narrative configuration, which will be elaborated next. By clarifying what narratives are made up of and what they 'do', this conceptual apparatus will then be discussed considering International Relations research by focussing on three intermediate devices, calendar, the succession of generations, and trace.

Time and narrative

Given an oeuvre that spans six decades and countless books and essays, I will not attempt to give an exhaustive overview over Ricœur's philosophical thinking.¹ Only three more general points with regards to his wider philosophical project shall be highlighted here that also characterise the approach to time and narrative and contribute to the fruitfulness of this approach for IR. The first is that *Time and Narrative* is firmly embedded in Ricœur's (1975) broader philosophical project of linking phenomenology and hermeneutics. The rerouting through a linguistically mediated process provides for a translatability that exclusively phenomenological discussions of temporality do not display when 'applied' to an academic discipline such as IR. Second, Ricœur's hermeneutical theory is guided by the attempt to (re-)link hermeneutics and the human and social sciences, which sets him apart from his predecessors Heidegger, and, partially, Gadamer (Ricœur 1973a). For the issue at hand, this is reflected in Ricœur's close examination of history. IR is not history but, as has been discussed for quite a while now, narrativity is not the demarcation line between history and IR; on the contrary, one of the bridges across disciplinary divisions (cf. Suganami 2008). Ricœur (1984: 83) describes his endeavour as a 'difficult threeway conversation between history, literary criticism, and phenomenological philosophy' and the next sections introduce IR to this conversation. Lastly, Ricœur's philosophical arguments on time and narrative do not relate to history—and as an extension to IR—as an intervening discourse from 'above' trying to offer advice on how to do history. Rather, their relation is a form of redescription by offering a novel perspective on what the narratives of IR 'do' when confronted with the question of their potential for temporal refigurations. For Ricœur, philosophical hermeneutics 'is predicated upon the de facto legitimacy of those [the human science's] discourses as it finds them' (Aylesworth 1991: 80). This point of departure guards against the fallacy of introducing a particular (philosophical) notion of time by positing it as a standard that needs to be observed (see also Hom 2020: 29–30). Time does not become topical for IR as an *a priori*, but as a collective imaginary that is the result

¹ See Chan (2003) for such an attempt within the context of IR. For a more general introduction, see Kearney (2004).



of our scholarship. The rest of this article describes in more detail how narrative time is generated.

The aporicity of time

What is meant by ‘time’ when discussing time and narrative? What do we look for when talking about ‘time and IR’? For Ricœur, thinking about time means thinking about one specific way of sensemaking and not an ontological building block of the universe. *Time and Narrative* is hence grounded in identifying an aporia that ‘stems from a reflective, autonomous mode of thought’ (Ricœur 1988: 276; n. 1). The said aporia emerges by contrasting Augustine’s and Husserl’s philosophies of time with those of Aristotle and Kant (Ricœur 1988: 11–59). The latter derive time from an external, physically given environment, while the former position time in the soul and consciousness, respectively. Heidegger, finally, tries and fails, according to Ricœur (ibid.: 60–96), to combine both in his philosophy. Here, I briefly highlight the arguments regarding Aristotle, Augustine and Heidegger, given that these bring Ricœur’s argument most clearly to light.

Aristotle, for whom time is ‘an ordering relation that is in the world before being in the soul’ (ibid.: 16), developed his argument by analogy: If we talk about before and after, this only becomes intelligible analogous to movement and magnitude in space. Before and after correspond to movement in space, which has a certain magnitude, namely the spatial distance a body covers. This distance can be indefinitely divided. The temporal distinction between before and after corresponds to two points in space that a body moves through and the time in-between parallels the covered distance. Aristotle arrives at his concise definition of time by introducing the term ‘number’: ‘For time is just this—number of motion in respect of “before” and “after”’ (cit. in ibid.: 16). Augustine objects to this, because he views all movement—including that of celestial bodies—as alterable and it should therefore not influence a definition of time.² As a result, every reference to cosmic phenomena is to be eliminated and only the *distentio animi* should be accepted as constitutive of time (ibid.: 12–13). First, Augustine conceptualises the present as a point of passage between past and future. Time is ultimately found in the soul, where ‘impressions’ of the past and ‘expectations’ of the future exist. The present is hence ascribed a privileged role, because past and future are only modalities of it: ‘there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things.’ (cit. in Ricœur 1984: 11).

In his discussion of these two approaches, Ricœur argues that a pure phenomenology fails, because it still needs to rely on external, physical constants. He believes a pure ‘time of the cosmos’ is insufficient due to its need to reintroduce a conscious and perceiving subject. Aristotle’s theory presupposes an observing mind that distinguishes and counts, while Augustine’s conception runs into problems in reverse when he considers measuring time. According to him, this can only mean measuring

² Which, however, is a misreading of Aristotle, who stressed that while time is not independent of movement, it is not identical with it either (Ricœur 1988: 14–15).



the extension of the ‘imprints’ that have been left in the soul. But according to what standard? This could not be an external one, hence it remains unclear how the soul itself could make such a measurement possible. Thus, concepts such as duration or succession become unsustainable.

Finally, Heidegger tries to reconcile both positions in his philosophy, which discusses phenomenological time under the heading of ‘Care’ and cosmic time as the ‘vulgar concept of time’.³ His analysis, developed in the second section of *Being and Time*, is situated against the ‘possibility of Being-a-whole’, which is only possible by ‘Being-towards-death’. Here, death does not merely refer to the end of a life, but to its defining characteristic: ‘*As the end of Da-sein, death is the ownmost nonrelational, certain, and, as such, indefinite and not to be bypassed possibility of Da-sein.*’ (Heidegger 1996: 239).⁴ There are two modalities by which this can be lived. One is in the inauthentic mode of ‘they’: ‘The public interpretation of Da-sein says that “one dies” because in this way everybody can convince him/herself that in no case is it I myself, for this one is *no one*’ (Heidegger 1996: 234). However, by listening to the ‘call of conscience’, Da-sein can escape this inauthentic state and is summoned ‘to one’s *own self*’ (ibid.: 252). The central notion here is ‘debt’ understood as ‘nullity’, which conscience brings to light. Because Da-sein is thrown into the world, it is ‘groundless’. There is no predefined course of action and Da-sein is free ‘for its existentiell possibilities’ (ibid.: 263). This is revealed when listening to the call of conscience, which can then be realised by ‘resoluteness’, meaning to assume responsibility for one’s own life and the realisation of its possibilities. Taken together, Care as the being of Da-sein is always temporalised between ‘facticity (thrownness)’ and ‘existence (project)’ (ibid.: 262). One last step in this chain is the connection of ‘resoluteness’ and ‘Being-towards-death’. Because death is the ‘eminent possibility’ of Da-sein, the existential interpretation of resoluteness is ‘anticipatory resoluteness’, which reveals Da-sein’s finitude and eventual wholeness by taking over the possibility of my death. Hence, the future assumes a privileged role at the level of Care as the vantage point from which wholeness and authenticity is disclosed. However, temporality in relation to Care is not marked by a division of past, present and future, but by its unity in three ‘ecstasies’. Care depends on the thrownness of Da-sein ‘in the way that it always already was’, and the present is necessary because only in acting can ‘resoluteness be what it is, namely, the undistorted letting what it grasps in action be encountered’ (Heidegger 1996: 299–300).

Heidegger (1996: 371–91) shows how less authentic modes are derived from this primordial and foundational mode of temporality, namely ‘within-time-ness’ and the ‘vulgar concept of time’. ‘Within-time-ness’ refers to Care as ‘preoccupation’, where the present reigns and time is ‘reckoned with’ in acting together with others: ‘*Henceforth*, that is, from now on, I commit myself to doing that *tomorrow*. [...] *Now* I intend to do that because I *just* realized that.’ (Ricoeur 1984: 60, 1988: 80–82). Vulgarity, on the other hand, is introduced by ‘now-time’. It is characterised

³ Earlier translations of Heidegger use the term ‘ordinary’, which is also the term in the English translation of Ricoeur.

⁴ All emphases following are in the original.



by the decoupling of preoccupation and time. Time is not ‘reckoned with’ anymore, it becomes an end in itself, best illustrated by following the hand of a watch, merely ‘counting’ (Heidegger 1996: 385). By only being a succession of ‘nows’, ordinary time appears endless. While primordial temporality as the meaning of Care relies on the authentic mode of Being-towards-death, ordinary time, analogously, is part of the inauthentic mode of ‘they’: ‘The levelled-down succession of nows remains completely unrecognisable with regard to its provenance from the temporality of individual Da-sein in everyday being-with-one-another. [...] One knows only public time that, levelled down, belongs to everyone, and that means to no one.’ (Ibid.: 389).

Ricœur’s (1988: 94) critique of Heidegger is similar to the one summarised above. Heidegger fails to show convincingly that the temporality of Care is completely independent of categories that belong to the two other understandings of time. While primordial temporality implies more than the ordinary understanding of time, it still presupposes the categories of ‘lower-level’ stages. Yet, Ricœur also argues that Heidegger fails to show how ordinary time can be derived from the temporality of Care, ‘anonymous instants’ from the ‘lived-through’ present (Ricœur 1988: 88). Both conceptions of time, cosmological and phenomenological, are insufficient on their own as well as ‘irreducible’ to each other (ibid.: 4).

The temporal refiguration of narrative

Both approaches to time can be mediated through narrative, however. Ricœur situates narratives within a broader frame of reference of an ‘extra-textual world’, distinguishing between three ‘levels’: *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂ and *mimesis*₃.⁵ A narrative is not created *ex nihilo*, but ‘grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character’ (Ricœur 1984: 54). This is *mimesis*₁, the precondition for and prefiguration of the formulation of a plot. The configuration of *mimesis*₂ and narrative is elaborated below in detail. After a plot has been composed, it enters ‘the world of the reader’, *mimesis*₃, leading to a ‘refiguration’ (ibid.: 79). Following Gadamer’s concept of a ‘fusion of horizons’, in ‘the act of reading’ the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’ merge. The recipient appropriates the experience and the world of the text, and the narrative ‘resignifies the world in its temporal dimension’ (ibid.: 81).

What takes place between *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₃ is the configuration of narrative. The most important element is the creation of order and consonance—narrative is a ‘paradigm of order’ and a ‘synthesis of the heterogeneous’ (ibid.: 38, 66). This refers to three aspects: First, creating a story from different events, ‘extracting a configuration from a succession’ (ibid.: 66), which leads to a ‘concordant discordance’. Narratives create an ‘intelligible totality’ from various

⁵ Ricœur takes the concept from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it refers to ‘imitation or representation of action’. This does not mean simply copying, however, but entails a productive element, namely composition by way of emplotment (Ricœur 1984: 33–34). Ricœur thus occupies the middle-ground between positions that either understand ‘narrative as life’ or ‘narrative as form’ (Ciută 2007: 194).



happenings, which can be summarised in the ‘thought’ of a story. Because events are related to one another, a plot only includes events that contribute to its progression; everything else is ‘filtered out’ (Hom 2020: 92–93). Events are related through causality, which functions as the ‘glue’ that rests on either necessary or probable connections (Ricœur 1984: 38–42, 65). Second, a narrative not only configures events, but ‘brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results’ (ibid.: 65). Finally, it also mediates between heterogeneous temporal features, the chronological and the non-chronological dimension of a narrative. Every narrative has a chronological dimension, marked by its episodicity. The events of a narrative can be temporally ordered according to the scheme ‘then, and then’, that is, linearly, which, in principle, can be repeated indefinitely. Hence, every event can be related to another one in the form of ‘before’ and ‘after’. A chronology furthermore allows events to be dated and to make claims about what time span separates episodes so that a timeline can be constructed for every story, telling us when events happened in relation to one another. This dimension of a narrative corresponds to the cosmological approach to time, from which it derives its categories (ibid.: 67).

A narrative eventually transcends the chronological dimension and refigures time in four ways: The first is by the formulation of a theme. Following Kant’s concept of ‘reflective judgment’, Ricœur (ibid.: 66–67) argues that individual episodes can be “‘grasped together” and be “translated” into one “thought”, which is nothing other than its “point” or “theme””, which transcends the chronological succession of the individual episodes and constitutes ‘the temporal whole’, that is a temporal synthesis. A narrative makes such an operation possible because it is limited and meaningfully relates events and thereby constitutes a ‘temporal frame’. However, Ricœur (1984: 67) cautions against the reading that formulating a theme as such is ‘atemporal’. A theme is still not completely separable from a specific chronology, which is true for all aspects of ‘narrated time’.

A narrative also transcends the chronological dimension by instilling time with continuity. An event is a meaningful part of a narrative because it ‘carries’ it to its conclusion. A refigured temporal imagination is the result, which lies in the continuity of time that is distinguished from the discontinuity of a chronicle that merely enumerates. Crucial here is the distinction between ‘instant’ and ‘present’: distinct moments correspond to instants that have no correlation to each other. ‘Human time’, however, is characterised by the present, which gives rise to past and future, all interconnected, as opposed to before and after (Ricœur 1988: 91). Cosmological time only knows independent states, but narratives create relations by portraying how a specific present became possible. It is primarily the formation of continuity that Ricœur means by the relationality of events. However, continuity is different from identity and notions of past, present, and future also imply differentiation and establishing ‘temporal demarcations’. A process which Andrew Hom (2020: 93) calls ‘cleaving experience’. In a narrative, an event has the function of what Aristotle described as *peripeteia*, an instance that changes the development of the plot, bringing about a ‘reversal’. For any event there is a past and a future that is different (Ricœur 1984: 207).



The last refigurational mechanism is the reversal of the ‘arrow of time’. A narrative’s conclusion is also the most important aspect here, as it allows ‘reading the ending in the beginning’ and ‘to read time itself backwards’ (ibid.: 67–68). A narrative not only refigures continuity, it also reverses the direction, as suggesting causation is only possible in retrospect from a perspective that knows the outcome. A hypothetical ‘ideal chronicler’ capable of writing down every event at one point in time could not note causal relations or the meaning of an event.⁶ Furthermore, the ‘content’ of a causal relation also changes over time and with the knowledge of the plot’s end. When we talk about the cause of an event, we do not do so by ‘going back’ in time, looking forward from the past to the present, but by looking back from the present which already knows the event. Not only is it impossible to bring the complete past to mind, it would also be meaningless: ‘*there is no history of the present*’ (ibid.: 147; emphasis in the original). In the case of a narrative, however, a chronologically subsequent event constitutes a preceding event as cause, which properties change. The narrative ‘bridges’ chronological time and can thus be described as a ‘shuttle’ by which ‘the meaning of experience, retrospections and projected expectations’ are constantly adjusted (Ciută 2007: 193).

Taken together, a narrative transcends the aporicity of time, leading to its refiguration as ‘narrative time’. The next section addresses a narrative’s refigurative potential with regards to temporality and connects it to IR. If scholars of international politics are also engaged in producing narratives, then their stories are equally part of ‘resignifying the world in its temporal dimension’.

The narrated time of IR

Ricœur introduces three ‘instruments’ that work as a ‘transmission belt’ for refiguring temporality: calendar, succession of generations and trace. The final section of the article discusses these in the context of IR and what kind of temporal refiguration they induce. All three are related to narrative and rooted in the preceding discussion of the aporicity of time, but each figure is located at a differing distance, in the sense of its level of generality, to narrative and thus speaks to different refigurations. I begin with the instrument most closely related to the content of the narratives we tell, the calendar, followed by the succession of generations and the trace, which are partly, in the case of the former, or entirely, in the case of the latter, positioned ‘externally’, that is, on different mimetic stages.

Calendar

The calendar mediates between cosmic and human time. On the one hand, it relies on an unending, linear continuum that can be subdivided into equal parts and traversed in both directions. At the same time, a calendar has a direction from which

⁶ This figure was first introduced by Arthur Danto (1965).



it proceeds, an axial moment, which is not deducible from any physical measure. In principle, every date can assume the status of the present—which is opposed to an anonymous instant—that divides time into future and past. Such a moment can then become the ‘temporal anchor’ of a calendar. A calendar can furthermore single out important dates that distinguish one day (or week, year ...) from the rest (Ricoeur 1988: 105–109). An emerging calendar based on narratives is marked by three refigurations: ‘temporal watersheds’, delineating events, and periodisation. What is important to keep in mind is that the three different mimetic stages form a circle. Every narrative already builds upon a calendar, but by its refigurative dimension it also helps reshape the calendars of IR.

Calendars include dates that are more important than others. These dates assume their importance through events that are included in a narrative as a *peripeteia* bringing about a ‘change of fortune’. After the event, the world is different, and a novel future emerges. A narrative refigures time in that it creates moments that separate a ‘time of before’ from a ‘time after’. This is, in fact, the criteria for an event to be part of our narratives at all; without this election or that negotiation the plot would have developed differently, and a different outcome prevailed. Events are hence contingent occurrences that can only be made sense of in relation to the plot. Related dates can then serve as the axial moment for a new narrative based on sedimented ones which have established a founding moment for developments from which future stories proceed and become intelligible: Not ‘Once upon a time...’, but ‘After the Cold War ended ...’. If the status of events as turning points is contested, this might also trigger the rare case of explicitly telling narratives that are focussed on stating the story in such a way as to deny the magnitude of events, in a strict sense, disqualifying them as events altogether. A prominent example is John Ikenberry’s (2011, 1996) take on international order. When it comes to the liberal international order, the latest dates that truly matter are 1941 and 1944. According to this narrative, a long present stretches from the Atlantic Charter and Bretton Woods to today without any true watershed events intervening.

Due to the contribution by Buzan and Lawson (2014), ‘key dates’ have recently received increasing attention. Their set of ‘benchmark dates’—1500, 1648, 1919, 1945 and 1989—operates, however, at a very general level, disregarding many other refigurations that emerge from IR research. As argued above, depending on the motif of a narrative, a very different calendar emerges, because the status of an event as crucial is only understandable from the wider context of the plot. For example, a story concerned with global environmental politics will probably include 1972 and 1992 as dates that ‘stand out’, while a story on global trade would more likely pivot around 1947, 1986, 1995 and 2003. Pointing to the ‘dominant calendar’ as opposed to other refigurations can clarify the relation to critique. As some authors point out (cf. Carvalho et al. 2011; Blachford 2021), the most widely used calendar in the field features few dates and a highly selective choice. A fact that can be explained by highlighting the motif of the narrative that underlies this dominant selection, namely a Eurocentric story focused on ‘states within anarchy’. This critique has a temporal dimension in that it shows what kind of exclusionary temporal refiguration a certain narrative leads to, but in order to change things it is necessary to focus on the underlying argumentative structure and not on temporality itself. The latter way of looking



at it might, however, be capable of at least partially explaining why certain ‘myths’ prevail, such as locating the founding moments of modern international politics in 1648 and of the discipline in 1919, despite a considerable amount of scholarship that shows otherwise (Carvalho et al. 2011). The persisting prevalence of these dates as orientation markers might stem from what Heidegger calls ‘vulgarisation’. As is the case with the calendars familiar from everyday life, the genesis of many extraordinary dates eludes us, which does not prevent us from using them as a formal grid for temporally organising experiences, however. A similar thing might have happened with certain dates in IR that are only faintly connected to their substantive points of origin anymore; chronology has superimposed itself on history.

An event’s status as a ‘turning point’ and ‘the contours of an event’ (Jackson 2006: 492), which here refers to its temporal extension, are both narratively constructed. When does an event start or end? The answer is a specific refiguration that depends on the theme, the point of the narrative told. An ‘event’ is already a synthetic category, the ‘temporal whole’ that is the product of a specific narrative, itself combining a multitude of diverse elements. If the theme of the Cold War, for example, is ‘ideological struggle’, this might describe a temporal synthesis that covers the time between the Russian revolution and the ‘advocacy of peaceful coexistence’ in the late 1950s.⁷ If, on the other hand, the point was geopolitical conflict and the superpowers’ ‘struggle for influence’, different elements would register as important and the end of the Second World War and the time between 1989 and 1991 are the temporal boundaries of the Cold War (Herrmann and Lebow 2004: 2–3).

One final aspect that concerns the calendar is the creation of periodisations. These are still based on the ‘physical component’ of the calendar (divided by fixed units) but transcend it. The best known example of this is the idea of the long nineteenth century that stretches from 1789 until 1914. This kind of narrative refiguration relates to Heidegger’s notion of the ‘lapse of time’ of within-time-ness. In this instance, reckoning with time means generating meaningful periodisations that transcend the purely chronological while still being tied to it, which is the reason for a contradicting formulation such as ‘long century’. IR is no stranger to such a twisting of time, but the meaning of the ‘nineteenth century’ is often a different one yet, namely stretching from 1815 until 1914 (Buzan and Lawson 2013: 620). More familiar are ‘thematic periodisations’ that spatialise time, such as the ‘American century’, the ‘Pacific century’ or the ‘Chinese century’. This narrative refiguration is similar to the one sketched above relating to the event, although it assumes a more comprehensive character as a ‘temporal orientation device’ that tells us ‘when we are’. Its narrative genesis is the element that remains the same. When the American century started, when or if it ended, depends on a story’s theme. Possible candidates include economic size, various other measures of power or intentions of using power (Nye 2015: 2–8). Depending on the point of the story, the American century could have commenced in 1898 (Eckes and Zeiler 2003) or in 1941 (Nye 2015). Taking another perspective, Joan Hoff (1999) stresses national self-determination and American ‘independent internationalism’ as the key story line, outlining the

⁷ See for example Lerche (1965), albeit with a different beginning.



‘short American century’ from Sarajevo in 1914 to Sarajevo in 1991. This shows that the ending is not set in stone either. While Joseph Nye (2015: 14) is ‘uncertain’ about its ‘date of death’, Andrew Bacevich (2012) already edited a ‘post-mortem’ to the short American century, which only lasted 70 years, twisting chronological time once more.

Generations

Whereas the calendar refers to the reconciliation of cosmological and human time, the succession of generations, ‘the replacement of the dead by the living’ (Ricœur 1988: 109), introduces a biological component. Karl Mannheim and Alfred Schütz are two important interlocutors for Ricœur on this issue. Mannheim (1972) argues against understanding generations as a purely biological phenomenon—though still accepting this dimension—which would only consist in figuring out the time span constituting one generation (mostly thought to be 30 years) and from there deducing everything relevant for the social scientist; a ‘sociology of chronological tables’ (Mannheim 1972: 311). Opposed to this notion, the ‘romantic-historic’ approach argues for understanding generations from a qualitative point of view, stressing similar and different experiences. As the calendar relies on planetary movement but is not exhausted by it, the succession of generations has a biological foundation but is not entirely described by it. To make this phenomenon more concrete, Ricœur turns to Alfred Schütz (1967), who distinguishes between contemporaries, consociates, predecessors, and successors. Consociates are persons, with whom one forms a ‘We-relationship’, that is, one experiences and interacts with directly, while contemporaries exist at the same time but not in the same space. Contemporaries relate to each other anonymously and are symbolically mediated, as ‘ideal types’ and not as individuals, they form a ‘They-relationship’. The most extreme version of the figure of the succession of generations would be to stress the categorical difference between predecessors and contemporaries: predecessors being all those who can no longer be reached (Ricœur 1988: 112–14). However, it is possible to restate the case as one of ‘distant communication’ and one of the devices that figure as a ‘link’ are narratives.

These could be directly transmitted stories of ancestors, thus making history resemble a long We-relationship (ibid.: 114). For this case, however, the relationship that matters is one of indirect contact, a ‘They-relationship’ to our predecessors that is symbolically mediated by narratives. Unfortunately, Schütz’ *Ihr-Beziehung* and Heidegger’s *Man* is often identically translated with ‘They’. Yet, for Ricœur, their difference matters. Anonymity, the ‘They-relationship’ with one’s contemporaries and predecessors, is the ‘middle-ground’ between Heidegger’s ‘They’ and ‘Mineness’, between private and public time (ibid.: 112–113).

Focussing on generations along the lines just mentioned implies most generally heeding the call by Ole Wæver (2003: 2) to focus on persons instead of ‘disembodied “schools” or “paradigms”’. Yet, a person is an equally truncated ‘unit’ when it comes to ideas in an academic field, whereas the notion of a generation allows a more interactionist understanding of how the discipline is assembled. Besides this lateral dimension, the concept of tradition brings the vertical dimension into view.



Ricœur (1988: 219–29) distinguishes between ‘tradition’, ‘traditions’ and ‘traditionality’. The term ‘traditions’ describes the actual content that is passed on, for example ‘the realist tradition’, whereas ‘tradition’ refers to truth claims that legitimise themselves by referring to predecessors. Lastly, ‘traditionality’ is used by Ricœur to denote the formal character of a ‘transcendental for thinking about history’, which he develops in relation to Gadamer’s notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.⁸ Traditionality brings with it a dialectic of, on the one hand, being affected by the past, and, on the other hand, our reception of the past, a dialectic of belonging and distanciation that characterises the hermeneutic project as a whole as Ricœur (1973a, b) conceives it.

Being affected by the past implies rejecting the idea of ‘absolute novelty’ (Ricœur and Castoriadis 2017: 5). As has been shown above, the narrative configuration creates something new, but it does so by relying on a prefigured and pre-structured field. There is no outside of the mimetic circle, which ‘moves from the configured to the configured, but never from the formless to form’ (ibid.: 6). Importantly, this also includes disagreement with one’s predecessors. Starting from nothing would mean complete unintelligibility, which is why there is a historical character—even if at first unnoticed—to the formulations of problems which is still true for conflicting accounts. Articulating disagreement is only possible within a shared framework and discontinuity takes place within a larger setting of continuity (ibid.; Ricœur 1988: 217–19).⁹ On the other hand, we are not only affected by the past but do actively reconfigure it from the present. Temporally, this means that traditionality avoids both subscribing to ‘complete contemporaneity’ and to the notion of the past as ‘passed and gone, abolished’. What is trans-mitted (*überliefert*) to us has, by ‘interpretations and reinterpretations’, traversed time. The temporal distance between a text and its interpretations is hence not simply chronologic and ‘empty’, but a ‘process of mediation’ (Ricœur 1988: 220). It is in this sense, that ‘a theory always bears the marks of its passage through time’ (MacIntyre 1977: 460). Again, the notion of a fusion of horizons becomes central, this time of the historical horizon and the horizon of the present: ‘tradition is an operation that can only make sense dialectically through the exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present’ (Ricœur 1988: 221). What has been said about reading the end in the beginning and ‘bridging time’ is similarly related to our narratives with regards to previous scholarship.

When the concept ‘tradition’ is explicitly discussed in IR, this is mostly done in the second sense introduced above, namely as a critique of calls to a tradition underwriting truth claims. This is the point of departure for one of the most influential histories of the field, Brian Schmidt’s *Political Discourse of Anarchy* (1998), which argues that most authors up to then have misleadingly constructed traditions to support their own agendas, such as defining an idiosyncratic version of realism. In the same vein, Renée Jeffery (2005) draws on Hobsbawm’s concept of ‘invented traditions’. Schmidt and Jeffery both distinguish between traditions that are ‘historical’ and ‘practical’ or ‘analytical’. The latter two speak only to the concerns of the

⁸ For a discussion of the relation between Ricœur and Gadamer in the context of IR, see Farrands (2010).

⁹ See also Alisdair MacIntyre (1977) for a similar argument in relation to tradition and narrative.



present, while the former refer to ‘a preconstituted and self-constituted pattern of conventional practice through which ideas are conveyed within a recognisably established and specified discursive framework’ (Schmidt 1998: 25). By pitting those two options against each other, one is left with the dilemma of ‘uncrossable distance or annulled distance’ (Ricœur 1988: 220), resulting in a dead and unreachable past disconnected from the present. Former generations would be mute when it comes to our concerns. Indeed, as Jeffery argues, for her, ‘[t]heorising, the organisation of knowledge into a system that explains or contributes to our understanding of certain phenomena is, by definition, a “presentist” “practical” endeavour’ (Jeffery 2005: 77). Put thus, the historicity of theorising is erased and continuity with our predecessors rejected. Traditionality in Ricœur’s sense, however, reinstates the temporal interrelationship that is ignored when only de-masking a certain literature as constructing false traditions. Theorising is then understood to be guided by present concerns as it is affected by past (re-)interpretations of previous generations. The point here is, of course, not to argue that texts cannot be misunderstood. However, stressing traditionality in the more general sense allows expanding the unduly restrictive choice between being truthful to the past and pursuing present concerns.

Brian Schmidt (1998: 25) himself hints, unintentionally, at the improbability of the existence of a ‘pure’ historical tradition when he considers Marxism a ‘clear example’. The ‘ideal chronicler’ here is the historian of ideas who is confined to reconstructing the ‘past present’ during which the thought was formulated originally. Whereas the critique levelled at the ‘ideal chronicler’ is that without a narrative’s end we cannot ascertain anything historically meaningful at all, the point here is that there would be no link that ties the present to the ideas of the past, but that there also would be no possibility to see our predecessors in a new light, when we believe ‘presentism’ and ‘anachronism’ are problems per se and if that would lead us to only adopt one ‘temporal viewing direction’. Taken to its extreme, this would also preclude identifying a tradition in the strict sense as understood by Schmidt, given that the ‘discursive frameworks’ an author is part of are probably never specified explicitly enough at the time of writing to allow clear categorisations.

Viewing past and present as clearly demarcated and unconnected has unfortunate consequences, as there are two reasons why we should not deplore our entanglement with the past in the sense of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, besides the more fundamental point of intelligibility. The first is that being part of a tradition means that we can become aware of our own prejudices by being confronted with past interpretations (Gadamer 1982: 266). A tradition in this sense provides an important corrective by allowing to distance oneself from the present. Secondly, by referring to the psychoanalytically informed concept of ‘retroaction’, Ricœur stresses that the possibility of reinterpreting the past also means that we can ‘deliver possibilities that have been prevented’ (Ricœur and Castoriadis 2017: 11; see also Solomon 2014). Both potentials can be illustrated by referring to one of the most prominent, cross-generational ‘linking projects’ in recent decades, the ‘rediscovery’ of classical realism.

On the one hand, engaging the tradition of classical realism has provided the possibility of making (then) present prejudices visible and opened up an avenue for critique, primarily aimed at the neoconservative American foreign policy of the ‘War on Terror’ and the Iraq War. These are contrasted with classical realist principles of,



among others, restraint and the realisation of limitations (Steele 2007, 2013: 746). The same holds true for theoretical developments: what today is unproblematically identified as neorealism has only taken shape by situating and differentiating authors in the context of an existing tradition, that is, classical realism (Ashley 1984; Cox 1981: 131–33). At the same time, today's classical realism looks different from 60 years ago. 'Applying' realism to today's problems, including as a means of critique, necessarily prompts new and different interpretations of Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Carr and others. Also, theoretical developments in the meantime inform how classical realism is read today, which enable discovering a potential that could not have been seen before. This might range from Ashley's (1984) Bourdieusian reinterpretation to Seán Molloy's (2010) 'rhizomatic reading'. Both are instances of an understanding that the 'ideal chronicler' would obviously disapprove of given the reversed 'arrow of time'. Ashley's piece is also a powerful reminder that this is still the case, even when the aim is to criticise others as 'misreading' one particular author or text and to 'go back' to the original. Ashley's classical realism is still (indirectly) tied to the position that he reconstructs as 'neorealist', because this is the foil functioning as a negative through which he looks back and thus informs his own interpretation. The present cannot be classical, but only becomes so by looking back from some point in the future, comparing it with subsequent developments (Gadamer 1982: 288). *Wirkungsgeschichte* means being affected by previous interpretations even those that one disapproves of and points to the impossibility of leapfrogging in time.

What about the present generation? IR is certainly far from a cross-paradigmatic, global dialogue, but it is also still a conversation of the living. In Schütz's terms and following Ricœur, there is a difference between contemporaries and predecessors, which is reflected in the narratives produced. This is situated at the level of *mimesis*₁. At this stage, all prerequisites exist for understanding and producing a narrative—'a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.' (Ricœur 1984: 54). One might add that for a scholarly International Relations narrative, one additional prerequisite is that it be anchored to the present, understood here against the background of the succession of generations. Again, engaging with other scholarly work may be very parochial, but there is engagement. We directly react to (some) authors and we write in order to be read and reacted to (by some). Failing to take this communicative dimension into account would result in us missing one important piece that helps us understand why our narratives are told the way they are. The most fundamental condition for intelligibility is the narrative resonance with a tradition and with one's predecessors. However, to be recognised as a disciplinary narrative, one must also engage with one's contemporaries, who are, for the most part, not consociates, while still transcending mere simultaneity, that is, creating a They-relationship. While the biological answer to the question of what constitutes a generation is chronological, and possibly a time span of 30 years, the symbolically mediated engagement through narrative is the phenomenological meaning of belonging to one generation.

Within the triad of predecessors, contemporaries and successors, future generations are the final missing piece. The narrative genre that relates most clearly to the future is prophecy, whose narrative voice tells a story from its 'quasi-present' looking back towards the past that is our future (Ricœur 1988: 260). Such an opening



immediately relates to the issue of forecasting and prediction in IR (cf. Wenger et al. 2020). There also is, however, a topic that is more clearly related to the succession of generations, namely teaching. During teaching, the ‘non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous’ in the succession of generations becomes acute (Mannheim 1972: 283). Many testimonies by IR teachers speak to the concern that there is—at least at some point—a distance between them and their students, either resulting from distinct experiences made by the next generation (Blaney 2020: 99–100; Greaves 2021) or from their lack of experiences concerning a specific event or period, such as the Cold War or 11 September, 2001. As Aaron Ettinger (2016: 198) stresses with regards to the latter, the crucial point is not the mere difference in chronological distance and age—which would also be the case with the Second World War, for example—but that certain events were once the present for some, while for others they were not; ‘[...] for each the “same time” is a different time’ (Pinder cit. in Mannheim 1972: 283).

While this concerns past and present, teaching is inherently connected to the future. The growing awareness in IR about teaching is premised on the realisation that through teaching a future generation of scholars and practitioners is shaped and that the influence of the ‘taught discipline’ might be much greater compared to its knowledge generating function by journals and books (cf. Frueh 2020). Considering the actual content of the taught discipline, the prophetic temporal structure outlined above applies here, too. Ideally, teachers select the content of their classes according to what they now believe to be valuable for their students in the (near) future. Besides the more abstract notion of a ‘travelling’ narrative voice, there is then also another connection to narrative, in this case fictional narrative.¹⁰ Encouraging the use of films, television series, and fictional writing for teaching IR classes is widespread, whereby their potential for tapping into the existing knowledge and the students’ preference for visual presentations are often highlighted. However, one further aspect is the possibility of distancing inherent in fictional narratives. They can provide the context of experiences that students cannot have made, for example living during the Cold War. If this is the aim, then the point is not to choose a documentary that brings the Cold War to life ‘as it really was’, but narratives that convey more abstract points, ‘images of events’ which can then also be applied to the present (Gokcek and Howard 2013: 439–41). The same feature makes fiction also valuable for speculating about what is to come by laying out possible futures (Boaz 2020: 243–44).¹¹ As students will spend most of their careers several decades from now, providing narratives that are able to imagine what the world will look like at that time seems to be a well-suited tool. Needless to say, these stories are not disconnected from the past and present—the ‘narrative shuttle’ simply expands its reach.

¹⁰ This is not confined to fictional narratives. Guzzini (2001) uses the same argument for advocating teaching theory.

¹¹ Ricœur (1985) discusses the relation between time and fiction in Volume 2 of *Time and Narrative*, which I did not go into here. For a more general discussion of the relation between fiction, narrative, and IR, see Park-Kang (2015).



As a result, past, present, and future do not become three ecstasies of one primordial time, Care, but are interlinked by a symbolically mediated process.

Trace

The trace is the contextual condition for our narratives to be told as historical—understood in a wider sense—in the first place; it vouches for a narrative’s credibility, while at the same time being only efficacious as part of a narrative. The temporal dimension of the trace lies in its present function as a witness to a past that no longer is. It is a mark from the past in the present, alluded to by the homonymy of something that has ‘passed’ and ‘past’. Furthermore, a trace is a ‘sign-effect’. It evokes notions of causality in the sense of the relation between the entity that made a mark and the mark itself, but it also articulates a relation of significance, prompting interpretations of meaning as to which kind of passage left such a trace (Ricoeur 1988: 120). Due to this double structure, the trace is situated as a ‘connector’ between Heidegger’s levels of temporality. It is oriented ‘Upwards’ towards Da-sein’s true historical condition as ‘having-been-there’ as opposed to merely ‘past’. ‘Downwards’, the trace can be associated with within-time-ness, datability, the lapse of time, and publicness. These also point to the vulgar conception of time, since the hunter or detective following a trace cannot do so without exact measuring (Ricoeur 1988: 120–24).

Below, I will give two examples of how the notion of the trace might be relevant to discussions in IR. The first, traces determining the beginning of the Anthropocene, can illustrate well the key aspects of the idea while being further removed from practical, everyday IR concerns. The second, traces in the digital age, is chosen as it inversely connects to more mundane, methodological considerations, namely which sources we rely on, while further increasing the complexity of the matter and thereby also throwing into sharp relief what is at stake when discussing temporality and traces.

That humans have become geological agents and we thus might live in a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is now also discussed in IR (cf. Biermann and Lövbrand 2019; Chandler et al. 2021). But when did the Anthropocene begin? Defining a new epoch relates, of course, to what has been said about the calendar before. The age of the Anthropocene is special, however, as it is discussed in geological terms. If the Anthropocene is to be officially recognised as a ‘formal geologic unit of time [it] requires the location of a global marker of an event in stratigraphic material, such as rock, sediment, or glacier ice, known as a Global Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP), plus other auxiliary stratigraphic markers indicating changes to the Earth system’ (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 173). Put differently, what is needed is a special kind of trace. According to one suggestion, this trace might be found in a several 1000 years old Antarctic ice-core, and in corn pollen and mineral remains of banana plants from 500 years ago found in Europe and South America (Lewis and Maslin 2015).¹²

¹² In 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group decided to focus the search for a GSSP on the mid-twentieth century. See Pattberg and Davies-Venn (2020) for a brief history of the process.



These three items instantiate Ricœur's argument about the trace's materiality and its relation to causality and disorder. Traces, a broken twig or trampled grass, appear as disturbances and 'disarrangements' (Ricœur 1988: 125). The ice-core shows a comparative reduction of CO₂ levels occurring at around 1600, while the plant remains were the first ones to appear in their respective geographic regions. What has happened? Lewis and Maslin (2015: 174–75) explain the reduction of CO₂ levels with the European arrival in the Americas and the ensuing decimation of the American indigenous population, as this led to a reduction in farming and the subsequent regeneration of forests. The exchange of species is also due to the effect known as 'Columbian Exchange'. This trace thus documents a material effect in the past, which is only visible and datable due to the mobilisation of a large array of technical expertise, which moves it towards within-time-ness and even 'vulgar time'. But it can and needs to be interpreted and read as a sign. The authors who introduced the idea that the Anthropocene commenced in 1610 suggest calling it the 'Orbis hypothesis' from the Latin word for 'world', given that from this time on, a global trading system was in place, also referring to Immanuel Wallerstein's work on world-systems (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 175). Furthermore, the violent and exclusionary nature of colonialism is what makes the starting date of 1610 compelling to some, as this highlights difference and unequal power relations, thus assigning the Anthropocene a critical potential as opposed to a narrative that configures a unitary and universal *anthropos* (Davis and Todd 2017). All this cannot be simply read off an arctic ice-core and plant remains but needs to be narrated.¹³ Yet, these remains that are protruding into the present from the past are needed to underwrite the narrative. They are the remains which allow the narrative to figure as a historical one, based on a mark that was unintentionally left in the past, several 100 years ago in this case, but that is read and interpreted in the present. A trace mediates by 'crossing time', without negating temporal distance: 'the trace signifies something without making it appear' and thus 'refigures time by constructing the junction brought about by the overlapping of the existential and the empirical' (Ricœur 1988: 125).

IR does not usually deal with ice-cores. What it does routinely deal with are artefacts such as documents and images, memoranda, speeches, etc. These are the most important traces that our scholarship relies on. Yet, what does it mean when these are increasingly digitally created? In a 'shifting media ecology' (Jackson 2019) — diagnosed before a global pandemic set in—the question of doing research based on born-digital sources becomes more pronounced.¹⁴ This might, among others, be the case for research on visibility (Bleiker 2018), digital public diplomacy (Manor 2019), or civil society mobilisation (Shirky 2011). Relying on digital data also has consequences for how to think about temporality in relation to the narratives created thus.

¹³ Carlo Ginzburg (1980: 13) speculates that the first narratives were told by hunters connecting the traces they found.

¹⁴ Born-digital sources are created digitally as opposed to sources that are digitised after their original creation.



Ricœur adopted and expanded the notion of the trace in one of his last books, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). Ricœur's main argument there is that memory and history share the same problem, namely the representation of something that no longer is. Without collapsing both into one, he insists on 'memory as the womb of history' (ibid.: 87). Memory is the final underwriter of the past's 'having-been', its second and more fundamental category aside from simply 'being no longer'. The crucial foundation that this rests on is the trace. Here, Ricœur distinguishes three kinds of traces: what historians rely on, for example, documents, artefacts etc.; neural or cortical traces as discussed by neuroscience; and 'psychic traces'. The cortical trace is the product of advancements in neuroscience that allow an ever more detailed localisation and mapping of the regions of the brain responsible for memorisation. However, this does not speak to the riddle of the trace in its 'time bridging' work, according to Ricœur (ibid.: 425–26). The cortical trace is static, because it is always present; 'there is no otherness, no absence. Everything is positivity and presence' (ibid.: 426). One could argue that this kind of trace is best used as a metaphor for our present predicament of needing to deal with an increasing amount of digital information that can be easily and seemingly infinitely stored in electronic memories (Mayer-Schönberger 2009).

However, as historians, archivists and computer scientists argue, this is misleading to a certain extent. The Internet is a constantly changing environment without a central archive that saves a newspaper's homepage or social media comments at a regular interval, for example. Furthermore, even if this was the case, data itself—the neurons, so to speak—is meaningless. We need software and hardware to render it experienceable, but the experience of images or websites differ depending on the software and hardware used to visualise them, even though the material trace, that is, the data, remains the same. Hence, Owens and Padilla (2021: 331) liken what we see on a computer screen to a 'performance of a play', which can change even though the script remains the same. The term 'performance' is also used to describe another phenomenon, namely increasingly individualised content in the 'age of algorithms' (Lynch 2017). Here, the problem might be even more serious, because the variability of what a user sees on a website or in an application is much larger, depending on the total sum of idiosyncratic past behaviour. This becomes especially relevant in relation to an increasing interest in debates on 'fake news' and 'post-truth' (Bjola and Papadakis 2020; Marshall and Drieschova 2018). Both are closely tied to online communication patterns, mostly via social media, which in turn are influenced by algorithmic control.

What does this mean for temporality and the notion of the trace? The 'cortical trace' of continuous presence might only be superficially used to describe the temporal dynamic of a world increasingly made up of digital data and a science concerned with this data. Opposed to the cortical trace, Ricœur argues the 'psychical trace' brings the enigmatic temporal dimension to the fore, because it involves absence and discontinuity. This kind of trace stems not from a (material) 'imprint', as with the other two types of traces (and the geological one discussed above), but from an 'impression in the sense of an affection left in us by a marking' (Ricœur 2004: 415). This impression is not constantly present but needs to be made present again through remembering and recognising. When it comes to born-digital sources,



what is needed is precisely a way of recollecting experiences, which, in this case, cannot be discussed as a feature of personal memory. We then come full circle by highlighting that preserving certain digital content asks for the ‘documentation of performances’ (see also Lynch 2017), or the domain of the historical trace, the third kind of trace Ricœur mentions. If IR increasingly needs to produce narratives that rely on digital artefacts, it should be aware of the need to also engage in generating and interpreting such traces. Increasing digitality then means that in order to evade refiguring a continuous present—either through ‘screen essentialism’ (Owens and Padilla 2021: 330) or the attempt to store a ‘flowing river’ (Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2016: 186–87)—to reinstitute the trace as a mark from a passage in the past to the present. Beyond relying on traces generated by others, this may indicate the increasing need to create such traces narratively, for example through digital ethnographies. One example of this comes from Chiara de Franco (2016) who, over an extended period of time, studied the interactions on a Facebook page dedicated to the digital exchange of Iranian and Israeli citizens.

Conclusion

What does it mean for thinking about time and temporality, when focussing on narratives as one of the ways by which IR approaches its subject matter? Going beyond the notion of temporality and change as a resource through which narratives function as explanatory devices, this article highlighted their refigurative temporal potential. Starting with Ricœur’s discussion of the aporetics of time in philosophical discourse, a break was identified between phenomenological and cosmological notions of time, which are insufficient on their own in their respective approaches. Narratives answer and ‘poetically resolve’ the philosophical knot to this ‘inconclusive rumination’ (Ricœur 1984: 6). The formerly irreconcilable dimensions of chronology and phenomenology are mediated by four movements: temporal synthesis, continuity, differentiation, and reversal. These more abstract notions were translated by three instruments—the calendar, the succession of generations and the trace—into the discourse of IR. Eventually, each lead to a refigured temporal imagination. For the calendar, the event in its synthetic and differentiating properties is most important, while the succession of generations mostly relates to the question of continuity and ‘temporal reversal’. Finally, the trace traverses these notions as the ‘raw materials’ upon which narratives draw. What is at stake here is the general question of historicity as the condition of possibility for research. Taken together, these three instruments do not necessarily add up to one refiguration of narrative time but need to be gauged for every particular narrative configuration that might give rise to different ‘times’.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the teams of the research groups Political Science and German/European Foreign Policy at Goethe University Frankfurt and International Relations at Technical University Darmstadt for helpful criticism and comments on previous drafts of this article. Thanks also to the three anonymous reviewers and the JIRD editorial team for their valuable feedback that helped to improve the text.



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