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The Great Uncertainty: Thinking through questions of time

The global financial crisis, the shift in the global balance of economic power and the environmental threat have unfolded over very different time horizons, but they still come to a head at the same moment

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Colin Hay and Tony Payne

In the final post in this series about what we have called ‘The Great Uncertainty’ we seek to introduce to the discussion some questions about time. This isn’t as easy as it sounds. Historians routinely think about the unfolding of time when recounting the events of the past. But social scientists are not schooled in the same way and often they don’t reflect enough about time and, above all, the different tempos at which processes unfold.

The historian who can most help us here is Fernand Braudel, a Frenchman who became the leading figure in the so-called *Annales* School which devoted itself to the exposition of long-term social history. In 1949 he published a major historical account of the ‘world’ created by the [Mediterranean Sea](#). In his book he set out a very sophisticated way of thinking about ‘social time’, specifically linking the practices of historical subjects to different dynamics calibrated according to three different concepts of time – or time horizons.

The first of these horizons is that of *histoire événementielle*, or the short time-span of single events, or chains of events, with all of their distinctive individuality and capriciousness. The second is the *conjoncture*, or conjuncture. This seeks to capture the location of the short term in a wider temporal horizon and identify trends occurring over a period of maybe 10-15 years, perhaps somewhat longer. The third notion, within which the conjuncture should in turn be considered, is the *longue durée*. This consists of regularities and patterns of action that conceivably span centuries and, by virtue of their duration, are best comprehended as *mentalités*, or mental frameworks, that guide how human beings handle the natural and social circumstances in which they find themselves.

So why are we inviting you to think about these various Braudelian notions of time? Do they ring any bells as you recall the three processes of major structural change that we claim have created the present uncertain era? We think they should, because we suggest that it makes

sense to regard each of the three constituent processes (of financial crisis, shifting economic power and environmental threat) as unfolding in turn in accordance with each of these three different time horizons (or temporalities). Let's explain.

The financial crisis is a chain of events which has a beginning and, for all that this is hard to discern at the moment, will have an end. This crisis will certainly have done a lot of economic, social and political damage by the time it ends, but it will eventually be brought to a conclusion, even if, as we said in our first post, its short-term history lasts for an awkward period of years.

By comparison, in Braudel's terms shifting economic power represents a conjuncture. It's a process that doesn't easily lend itself to start-dates and finishing-dates, although we can now see that we are well advanced in the remaking of a world of Western economic dominance that peaked in the couple of decades following the ending of the Second World War in 1945. As again we argued earlier, it is still far from clear how these shifts will play out in precise fashion or even when the shift will settle into a new and recognisable shape. But the trend is manifest.

As for environmental threat and the growing challenge to the well-being of the planet represented by accelerating climate change, this is classically the stuff of the *longue durée*, the unfolding of change over a period of centuries (even if, once certain tipping points are reached, we move from the *longue durée* into the *conjuncture*). From when do we conventionally date the beginning of industrialisation? When did oil first become the basis of the global economy? Whatever the answers, it's surely becoming ever more likely that we will come to judge that an entire industrial-cum-economic civilisation of long standing has cumulatively undermined itself by its very success and global spread. It will need to be rethought (or, in Braudel's conception, its dominant *mentalité* will need to be reframed) via some of the painful, demanding means that we tried to begin to think about in the previous post in the series.

From a contemporary perspective, we should also add in to this complexity a fourth, and new, conception of time, that of 'emergency time', or just as aptly 'panic time', when something really dramatic and unexpected takes place and no play book exists for leaders to pick up in order to shape a response. This is the kind of time that was sparked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers on 15 September 2008 when for a few days nobody knew if the global financial system would survive or whether, as former US President George W. Bush crudely but accurately put it, 'this sucker could go down'. It's easy to imagine that emergencies like this will occur again.

We've approached this discussion analytically, seeking to separate out different processes of change against different time-scales. But it's obvious too that, in the practical world of governance and politics, all of these four types of uncertainty need to be addressed – and addressed in fact simultaneously. Indeed, in the worst-case scenario they may all be coming to a head at the same time, and on our watch. Unfortunately, in such circumstances we don't have the luxury of 'waiting and seeing' on the really hard issues that have surfaced in the realms of the *conjuncture* or the *longue durée* and, in the meantime, seeking just to manage our way through the easy stuff, that is, the emergencies and the *histoire événementielle* they add up to!

There is one final aspect to the question of time which is worth mentioning. In thinking about all of this, we should surely show a bit more sympathy to elected politicians, wherever they exist, who are seriously trying to handle these multiple uncertainties in democratic fashion. Several years ago, the eminent American political theorist, [Sheldon Wolin](#), noted that political time was out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms and pace governing economies, societies and cultures. He meant that in democracies political time requires an element of leisure; in particular, it needs to allow for deliberation and the negotiation of compromises between competing interests and views.

So here's the lesson: if we are collectively to chart some kind of workable way through The Great Uncertainty, we need to be sure to find the time to talk all of this through as concerned members of global society.