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Cosmologies of History: The Symbolic Organization of Time

In cooperation with the University of California at Santa Cruz, Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, and Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies at CEU

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Course Description

In his classic study of mythic and historical time, *Cosmos and History*, Mircea Eliade opposed these two basic terms as radical alternatives, fundamentally opposed in their social, anthropological, and existential implications. This course takes up Eliade's basic insight, his positing of a basic anthropological need to organize and control time, in social forms and practices, in systems of thought and knowledge, and in mentalities. Yet drawing on a wide range of more recent work in the theory of history, anthropology, literary theory, and philosophy, it also reconsiders Eliade's binary opposition of cosmos and history in favor of seeing these as complementary elements within unitary "historical cosmoi," symbolic ways that societies organize and control time.

This perspective shift and the synthetic approach that follows from it hold major implications both for the theory of history and for the practice of writing history (more broadly, for historically informed humanistic scholarship). We suggest a positive interpretative framework to evaluate forms of historical thought-systems that have been largely excluded from modern professional history, such as philosophies of history, theologies of history, and "native" historical cosmologies. In our practical case studies—ranging over mythic and religious thought, minority histories, collective everyday practices, dreams, and object-collections—we seek to encourage a wider embrace by historical thinking of marginal forms of memorial, artifactual, and eventual materials, until now largely treated as outside the legitimate archive of historically interpretable materials.

The concept of historical cosmoi justifies interdisciplinary and cross-cultural consideration of theologies, philosophies of history and historiographies, ethnographic conceptions, and scientific paradigms as comparable symbolic modes of organizing time. Correlatively, this basic framework suggests cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural ways of interpreting a range of social and cognitive systems in light of the problem of symbolically organized time. Although the course in no way can survey all the relevant literature and debates that are evoked by its approach and stated topics, it

aims to consider key nodal points of an ambitious, synthetic, interdisciplinary framework that can serve as a point of departure for theory and research in a number of scholarly fields.

The course has three major topical sections: “History and Cosmos,” “De-Universalizing History,” and “Critiquing Historicism.” The first, “History and Cosmos,” provides a general conceptual framework for the more specific topics considered in the later sections. These later sections consider the implications and applications of the history-cosmos conceptual framework for historiography and philosophy of history. The topics within these sections each specify and apply the view of historical thought as constructed symbolic cosmoi. The individual topics are clustered around two major critical implications of the history-cosmos concept:

- First, this concept implies a necessary shift away from the notion that history has a common chronological, social, or material “medium” that guarantees the translatability of one historical framework into another. Yet it also does not entail total incommensurability either, from which would follow epistemological skepticism about historical practice and the impossibility of cross-cultural exchange. Rather it focuses, theoretically and practically, precisely on the ways in which historical thinking incorporates and transforms symbolic materials in the construction of historical worlds, and the crucial role that the contact between these “worlds” plays in the process. (Section two: “De-Universalizing History”)
- Second, and rigorously following from the first point, the history-cosmoi concept provides an emphatic alternative to the notions of context and chronology that support various forms of historicism, old and new. Both at the macro-scale of cross-cultural historical worlds and at the more restricted scale of events and artifacts within a single cultural space, historicist thought subordinates the symbolic construction of historical worlds to the demands of a common medium of historical time, causality, and context, which in turn impose restrictive norms of legitimately “historical” sources, treatment, and explanation. Utilizing the history-cosmos concept as our instrument, we subject several foundational notions of historicism to a thorough critique and explore alternative concepts that might be used by historians wishing to advance in practice beyond historicism. (Section three: “Critiquing Historicism”)

Section one, “History and Cosmos,” then, focuses on these two basic modes of organizing time and the symbolic mechanisms that underlie them. Here we synoptically consider how time gets captured and contained within symbolically-organized structures such as narratives and other “chronotopic” figures, and we discuss the semiotic, rhetorical, and poetic means by which these structures are constructed and interpreted.

In the second section “De-Universalizing History,” we take up recent challenges to the view of history that conceives it as a universal medium allowing chronometric correlations between events of different orders and in different spaces. We sketch an alternative view of “global” history that emphasizes active, open dynamics of cross-cultural translation and creative misunderstanding, analogical and poetic transformation of other systems, and detachment / reattachment of minority elements within larger historico-cosmic systems.

The final part, “Critiquing Historicism,” considers basic concepts and topics of historiography in light of the idea of historical cosmoi. In particular, we focus on the conceptual foundations of historicist theory and practice: its notions of context, event, temporal continuity, causality, and singularity in historical time. Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of historical cosmoi not only provides new subject-matter for the researcher, but also may also suggest new methodologies, new forms of historical “source materials”, and new interpretative frameworks for historically oriented scholarship.

The final colloquium is meant to be a culmination of the course by means of a thorough intellectual exchange between resource persons and course participants. Plans for future collaboration will also be presented.

Topical Breakdown and Focal Issues:

I. History and Cosmos: *In this section of the course, the basic framework of the opposition of history and cosmos will be considered. Key questions in this section include:*

- *What cultural, political, and philosophical agendas are advanced by Eliade's rigorous separation of history and cosmos?*
- *How have later thinkers such as Ricoeur and Castoriadis mitigated this distinction and to what ends?*
- *How are historical cosmoi—from myths of genesis and cosmogonies to modern acts of political and cultural constitution—constructed?*
- *What are the social and anthropological conditions of these "cosmological" acts?*
- *To what extent do mythic acts of foundation exhibit traits of modernity and, vice versa, to what extent do modern acts of constitution retain mythic features?*

II. De-Universalizing History: *Historical cosmoi, as we develop the idea in section one of the course, are culturally specific, but universally present means by which all societies master and utilize time. This view implies that we recognize a very wide range of thought systems and practices as legitimately historical. This section of the course further develops the conceptual framework of the first section along the axes of the historical past and cultural differences. The contrast of earlier historical thought-systems with modern historical thinking foregrounds the special conditions in which modern history takes on its distinctive symbolic features. Similarly, cross-cultural comparison suggests the "cosmic" character of modern professional history in its reference to Western societies. Key questions in this section include:*

- *What is the history of modern Western conceptions of history?*
- *When do these come into being and under what conditions?*
- *In what ways do these conceptions borrow from and transform ancient historiographic materials?*
- *To what extent are conceptions of history necessarily shaped by cultural contact and cross-cultural exchange?*
- *How does comparative study of historical cosmoi help foreground the "cosmological" particularity of modern history?*

III. Dismantling Historicism: *The third section of the course focuses more closely on particular problems in the practice of historical thought. Throughout this week, we will be critically examining the conceptual framework of "historicism"—a loose, but persistent and widely diffused model in humanistic scholarship. We will contrast historicist approaches and historiographic concepts with alternatives that could be derived from a practical development of the idea of historical cosmoi. We will also examine a few practical cases of alternative (non-historicist) selection and modelling of historical material, such as Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* project and the Mass Observation dream studies immediately before World War II and during the London Blitz. Key questions in this section will include:*

- *How does historicism conceive of "context"?*
- *How does historicism conceive temporality and are there alternative conceptions of time that might give rise to different ways of thinking of context?*
- *How are key historicist explanatory topoi such as "crisis" related to its fundamental notions of context and time?*
- *How does the basic historicist framework limit and normalize the range of legitimately "historical" objects and documents?*
- *How might a non-historicist conceptual framework, such as that which we offer in our notion of historical cosmoi, extend the potential range of historical approaches and materials?*

For more detailed biographies, updated course description, syllabus, reading lists please check <http://www.ceu.hu/sun/index.html>

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