**time/时间(Shí Jiān)**

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Time in the West

Even though time is the most elusive thing in the world, human groups, wherever and whoever they may be, have never stopped trying to find ways to understand it, or even to domesticate it. Saint Augustine's (354-430) meditation, so often quoted, has remained famous, to the point that it has ended up taking the place of a reflection on time, that is to say, of dispensing with it: "What indeed is time? "Who would know how to give an explanation with ease and brevity? Who could formulate it in words, seize it even by thought? And yet what is there that we evoke by speaking and that is more familiar and more known than time? [...] What is time? If no one asks me the question, I know; if someone asks the question and I want to explain, I don't know anymore ». How to say more simply the constitutive aporia of time? Aporia in the literal sense: no path leads to it. A very frequent way of trying to grasp it has been to oppose a perishable time, that of mortal men, to a time that does not age, even eternal, that of superior, immortal, divine beings. Religions, mythologies and cosmologies were built on this gap.

Thus, in Greece, there was a mythology that made Chronos a primordial deity placed at the origin of the cosmos. This was the case in the Orphic theogonies. The time thus sacralized is a time "which does not age", imperishable and immortal. As a principle of unity and permanence, it appears as the radical negation of human time, which, on the contrary, is always unstable: it erases, causes oblivion and leads to death. For Anaximander, a pre-Socratic philosopher from Miletus in the 6th century B.C., Chronos is not deified, but there is an "order of time" that has to do with justice. "The things that are", he writes, going from generation to destruction "according to necessity", "do each other justice and repair their injustices according to the order of time". Time is not the same as justice, but it is, if not an agent, at least what allows justice to manifest itself, making it possible for an injustice to be repaired. Here we can grasp the first beginning of a cyclical time that judges. This supposed relationship between time and justice will contribute to make possible, many centuries later, the conception of History as a world court. Even if between Anaximander and Hegel there is the whole Christian apparatus of time culminating in the Last Judgment.

Moreover, in Greece still, Chronos is the place of a confusion or the occasion of a revealing misunderstanding. There is, on the one hand, Chronos, the time, whose etymology is unknown, and, on the other hand, Kronos, who is a mythical character. Son of Ouranos and Gaia, Kronos is famous for having castrated his father Ouranos (at the express request of his mother). Having thus gained power, he married Rhea, and from then on took great care to devour his children as they were born to avoid being, in turn, dethroned by one of them. We know the rest of the story. Zeus finally makes him undergo the same fate he had reserved for his own father and thus becomes the master of gods and men. We are in the register of the myths of sovereignty which have nothing to do with time or only negatively, since swallowing one's children is the best way to interrupt it. Nevertheless, a contamination between Kronos and Chronos took place, and Chronos, the ordinary time, will be durably perceived as the one who devours or reaps, under the features of Saturn devouring his children or of the Old Man Time armed with his scythe.

The Greeks made another division of great consequence, because it was more oriented towards action. Indeed, they split time into chronos and kairos: the first is ordinary time, that of the seasons, that which passes and is measured; the second is that of the unexpected, of the opportunity to be seized, of the favorable moment and of the decisive instant. Knowing how to mobilize the chronos/kairos couple wisely is the guarantee of a successful action. Between kairos and chronos, there is a difference, not ontological, but of quality. To take a common image, kairos is the opening of a window of opportunity that may last only an instant and is not perceptible by everyone. Otherwise Napoleon would not have won the battle of Austerlitz! To this first couple, the Greeks added a second one, of more limited scope, the one formed by kairos and krisis, to which Hippocratic medicine in particular resorted. In the first sense, krisis means judgment. Applying the concept of krisis to an illness, it means designating the moment when its course changes, tilting towards the better or the worse. It is up to the physician to know how to identify "the critical days" and, at the same time, the favorable moment for his intervention. Exists a semantic proximity between kairos and krisis.

Now these three concepts passed from the Greek world to the world of the Bible the day it was translated into Greek. The Bible was, as we know, the matrix of the three revealed religions, the three "religions of the Book", also called "Abrahamic religions". It is clear that without the Jewish prophets and Apocalypses, there would have been no New Testament or Christian times. Nor would there have been an Islamic time and a Koran without all these books and without the different Jewish, Christian and polytheistic communities living in 7th century Arabia.

To stick to the Christian time alone, the writers of the New Testament took up the three concepts for their own purposes. Not without modifying them. If chronos remains ordinary time, krisis is given a much stronger meaning, by naming the Last Judgment or the Day of the Lord, also designated as kairos. In Jewish apocalypses, the Judgment that will divide the righteous from the reprobate forever is preceded by the violent days of the apocalypse. The first Christians, a small Jewish apocalyptic sect, took up this scheme, while profoundly transforming it, since the Messiah had (already) come. Chronos does not change, nor does krisis - the final sequence is indeed the apocalypse, the Judgment and the end of time -, but kairos becomes the central concept. Kairos designates, in fact, the moment of the Incarnation. Christ is kairos and even the Kairos. He is the unique Event that comes to cut into chronos time a radically new time. Time becomes Christocentric, and will be more and more so until it makes Christ the pivot of world time. The result of this operation is that chronos is now squeezed between the two boundaries of the Incarnation and the approaching Judgment. Between the two, there is only a present without real history. For if all is not yet complete, all is already accomplished. It is necessary to be converted and to be awake, ready for the imminence of the end. With this new arrangement of the three concepts, a Christian regime of historicity takes shape that can be defined as an apocalyptic presentism. The Incarnation opens the time of the end, that, according to Saint Augustine, of the old age of the world, awaiting the end of time and of this world. But this end, feared and desired, only God knows its hour. So much so that all speculation must be proscribed. And yet, there has never ceased to be speculation, which the Church has never ceased to condemn and severely repress.

In the midst of the great diversity of times and calendars in use in the different human communities, the first gesture to find one's bearings was to establish synchronicities: such a battle was fought at the same time as another, such a sovereign is contemporary with another, etc. This was the task of the first Greek chronographers and historians. Thus, by finalizing the list of the Olympic victors, they established a shared instrument of measurement of time where each city could insert itself. Panhellenic, it was the property of nobody. The Christians had to make more. With them, the issue was not only synchronisms, but synchronization. For them, Christ occupies the place of the great synchronizer of all times: past and future. Since with the Incarnation a radically new time began, which has the vocation of informing all the others, wherever and whoever they may be. And this time must last until the day of the Last Judgment, which will come just after the torments of the Apocalypse. These are the two limits set for the history of the world.

Between the second and tenth centuries, this new time gradually conquered the Roman West, the kingdoms that succeeded it, and the European space, before, from the sixteenth century, it colonized the rest of the world. By bringing Christ, the missionaries, Catholic as well as Protestant, are indeed Christophores, but they are also Chronophores: they bring the true time, in its truth. By Christian time, one must indeed understand a daily discipline, punctuated by prayers and offices, and a calendar (first of all liturgical), but also a universal chronology and a theology of history. To convert the world is to work for the end of time.

In this brief genealogy of Western time, we must make room for a far-reaching technical invention: the mechanical clock in the 14th century. It is not natural to want to know the time with precision. But it is a fact that during the 15th century, cities and monasteries equipped themselves with clocks. For Marc Bloch, the progress in the measurement of time constitutes a true cultural revolution. Is this the passage from "Church time" to "merchant time", as Jacques Le Goff thought? Not necessarily, because the Church did not refuse this time cut up and counted day and night by the beater of the clock. In China, for example, the mechanical clock aroused some curiosity, but, despite the efforts of Matteo Ricci (17th century), was considered a "complicated oddity". "Their clocks are not worth our clepsydras", says a Chinese pamphlet of the 17th century. Being "so difficult to make and so easily deranged, are they not a waste?" Then the hour and even less the minute were not important for the organization of work.

The rest of the story is about the ways in which chronos, escaping little by little from its two guardians, kairos and krisis, took its autonomy, and, with modern time, extended its empire over the Western world and beyond. I retain here only two features. If chronos escapes them, kairos and krisis do not disappear for all that, but pass, so to speak, under the control and at the service of chronos. In fact, moderns have used them to think about temporal ruptures, starting with revolutions, and they have developed a whole analysis of the crisis that is still relevant today. Moreover, towards the end of the eighteenth century, modern time definitively left the straitjacket of biblical chronology. The traditional six thousand years were no longer tenable: the Earth's past had to be counted in millions of years and the future opened up to prospects of indefinite progress. Such a lengthening of time could only weaken the two milestones of the Incarnation and the Judgment, which, while preserving their theological significance, lost their place in a chronos time that they had long governed. But for all those who were a little "enlightened", they left history to enter into fable. From then on, the modern regime of historicity could take off. In France, in 1793, the revolutionaries aimed to create a new time and a new calendar, purely republican. It was, as we know, a failure. Calendars resist.

The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were decades of intense debate about time: Chronos sought to extend his empire. Thus, in 1884, the Washington, D.C. Conference led to the decision to take the Greenwich meridian as the reference meridian for the establishment of universal time (GMT) and the division of the globe into twenty-four time zones. In this long-prepared operation, slow to take hold and having aroused resistance, the leading roles were played by the United States, Canada and England. Isolated, the French could only finally abandon "their" Paris meridian. The Greenwich meridian became the "synchronizer". From then on, each nation could establish its own time: to each his own time and a common time for all. Theoretically, any meridian could have been used as a reference, but it happened that the Greenwich meridian was chosen, the one that passes through the heart of the then dominant imperial power. In other words, this universal mean time was a fundamentally Western and even Anglo-American time, even if its promotion was done in the name of its "usefulness" and its "modern" character.

In the same years, a lot of work was done on a reform of the calendars. Numerous projects were born, in Europe, in the United States and elsewhere. In the 1920s, the young League of Nations took up the subject. They wanted to move towards a standardization of calendars, which would take the form of a "World Calendar". It would accompany and facilitate trade and the ongoing globalization; it could also be an instrument for world peace. Outside the Western world, a part of the elites was in favor of such an evolution. Mahatma Gandhi supported this reform, just as he wished for "a uniform coinage for all countries and a supplementary language - like Esperanto, for example - for all peoples". But, in the end, the reform was not carried out, unlike the one of the time. Why was it not? Because with the calendars, we are not only, or not primarily, in chronological time, but in a mixture of chronological time and religious time. In fact, we saw the religious authorities rise to the occasion to oppose it: the Vatican even refused to discuss it. The three religions of the Book made a common front. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays would become "nomadic" days. Faced with this opposition, the different governments gave up. Hitler came to power, war was not far off: there was no more talk of it. And capitalism, as we have seen since, was able to adapt.

As imperious and imperial as it was, Chronos did not escape, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, crises and more or less severe questioning: on several occasions, the future wavered, but it did not sink, even managing to revive itself after two World Wars, at least until the future lost its driving force and proved to be the bearer of threats, the presentism came to give a name (for a moment) to the new experiences of time.