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Stones and Jinns. Time between Layers of Sedimentation and Hauntology

BY MARGRIT PERNAU · PUBLISHED 24/01/2023 · UPDATED 23/01/2023

Layers of time, set in stone

Koselleck's metaphor of the layers of sedimentation (*Zeitschichten*) was and continues to be one of his most productive ideas.¹ Instead of assuming a neat division between the past and the present, this metaphor allows to explore ways in which the past retains its presence in the present. Like in the process of sedimentation – Koselleck here draws on geological knowledge – older layers of history never disappear, but get overlaid by newer deposits.² Koselleck's metaphor has repeatedly translated into visuals.



VBaevaDesign, Pixabay, 2015, URL: <https://pixabay.com/th/photos/%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99-%E0%B8%98%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%B4-%E0%B8%97%E0%B8%B5%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%94%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%99-%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%99-%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99-957018/> (23.01.2023).

This image reveals both the potential, and also the limits of the metaphor. It shows how one rock formation in the present is made up by many pasts, pasts which do not vanish into nothingness once they performed their historical task, but remain present. In his theory of history, Koselleck elaborates this argument under the heading of the contemporaneity of the

non-contemporaneous,³ one of his most important contributions to destabilize the idea of a unique and unilinear history and to open up possibilities for histories in the plural.⁴

But the image also shows that this presence of the past in the form of sedimentation becomes visible only under exceptional circumstances, a landslide or an excavation. Usually subjects living in the present would happily dwell on top of the many sedimentations, seeing only the uppermost. They might be aware of the structure of the ground beneath them or not, but it would in any case have little bearing on their present. How then can they access the invisible past? Do they have to dig through all the layers in order to reach a deeper one? Can they only dig on their own land and uncover their own past? Or is the buried past a resource all living subjects can use, to the extent that they can create a shared past post-hoc, as done for instance in the appropriation of the legends of Alexander the Great in Renaissance Italy, the Ottoman Empire, but also Iran and India?⁵ And perhaps the most important question: what are the implications of an image, which sets the contemporaneity of the past in stone, fixed and unmovable? The metaphor captures neither the malleability of the past through its multiple reconceptualizations: the past dug up is not the same as the past which sedimented, and diggings at different points in time produce different results, something Koselleck elaborated in detail in other contexts.⁶ Nor does the geological image account for the possibility that the past might have an agency of its own, not exclusively derived from the present.

Ghosts and Hauntology

How then can we take up Koselleck's concern with pluralizing the possible relations between the past and the present, without setting them in stone? This question has been intensely debated for the last fifteen years or more. One strand of the debate focused on the notion of presence: posited against an interpretation of the past as exclusively constructed by present-day subjects, and mostly through language, the focus shifted towards a past which refused to vanish, which made itself felt in the present. Its location was not in the minds and the brains of those who investigated the past, but gripped their guts.⁷ Like the affects it elicited, the past was non-representational and could not be contained through the category of meaning. In extreme cases this could be investigated through the notion of trauma,⁸ but also other pasts were no longer safely contained in deep geological strata, but emerged into the present without waiting for historians to lead the excavation.

The second strand of the debate drew on Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology,⁹ and further explored the figure of the ghost.¹⁰ Ghosts have the advantage of fluidity – they might be petrifying, but they are not petrified themselves. They easily transcend boundaries, constituted by walls and layers of stone, but also temporal boundaries. Finally, ghosts allow us to link up with the current debates on posthumanism, pushing against the restriction of agency to humans, and present-day humans at that, and bringing in other forms of subjectivity, embodied in animals, cyborgs or objects. Through them we can conceive a temporality beyond linearity, in which the past, the present and the future are no longer neatly divided into buffered entities,

but in which they have porous boundaries and in which agency is distributed among them.¹¹

Provincializing Ghosts

Not all ghosts are created equal, however. European ghosts are almost exclusively revenants, i.e. linked to persons who once were alive. Demons and devils may also haunt people, but they work differently. Provincializing ghosts allows us to bring in *jinn*s, present in a variety of Muslim traditions. Unlike ghosts, *jinn*s were created by God at the same time as humans, however not from earth, but from fire, making them volatile beings par excellence. They are born and they die, they procreate, mostly among themselves, but at times also with humans. They are shape shifters, which allows them to move at great speed and into inaccessible spaces. The *jinn* in the bottle, familiar from the tales of the Arabian nights, is a case in point. Like humans, they differ in character – some are helpful, some are naughty and trick people, others are downright frightening and dangerous. But also like humans, they are submitted to the laws and ethical rules set up by God.¹² What makes them specifically interesting for the history of temporality is the length of their life cycle, which greatly extends the idea of generational contemporaneity: Some *jinn*s active today can still remember their encounters with the Prophet of Islam, bringing first-hand knowledge from across the centuries¹³ and thus establishing new links of contemporaneity between the past and the present.

Still, not everyone is comfortable with bringing ghosts and *jinn*s into history and social science. Early debates have argued for taking the belief in ghosts serious, as it allowed for an insight into the beliefs of the historical subjects, the task of the scholar then being to discover what they “really” mean by referring to the figure of the ghost. Hauntology or jinnealogy avoids the decision about the existential status of the ghost. They neither are nor are not, but in Ethan Kleinberg’s elegant solution, their existence is crossed out, but still visible, the fluidity of their haunting blending into academic writing. What is more interesting than deciding on their precise ontological status, is the questions ghosts and *jinn*s allow us to ask and the vocabulary they offer to think about temporality. Some of these questions, notably the co-presence of the past and the present, reach back to Koselleck. Discussing them through the figure of the ghost rather than through geological metaphors allows us to reframe the questions, and perhaps even to suggest new answers.

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