Critical Dialogue

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"The Time of Global Politics," by Christopher McIntosh, is an insightful and thought-provoking work that offers a new perspective on the purpose of international relations (IRs) as an area of study. The motivation for the book is the "constant loop of crisis" IR faces owing to its failure to predict, let alone prevent, politically seismic trends, including the rise of authoritarian populism. Furthermore, the field seems incapable of explaining the present's failures, such as the insufficient responses to COVID-19 and the rise of China as a security threat, by relying on historical analogies. To address this ontological crisis, McIntosh proposes that IR scholars adopt a presentist approach, focusing on understanding current political relationships and dynamics rather than trying to explain how things came to be or what will happen next.

Applying a social scientific lens to this argument, McIntosh proposes that IR focuses primarily on descriptive inference rather than either causal inference or prediction. He essentially argues that the treatment of historical events as rows in a dataset, which facilitates causal estimation and forecasting, is misguided. Events separated by years, let alone decades or even centuries, are simply insufficiently comparable because of the infinite technological, cultural, and sociological changes that take place with the passage of time. Instead, McIntosh argues for a focus on the "politics of now"—leaving aside questions about how we got here and where we are going, and the development of frameworks and tools for bettering the understanding of present events and decision making. This is the best approach, according to McIntosh, for gaining real intellectual purchase on contemporary IR issues such as climate change, the rise of China, systemic racism, political violence, and war.

In contrast, "Warping Time" (with Benjamin Ginsberg) argues for a quasi-eternalist perspective on time. We assert that the past, present, and future are indistinct and even interactive. Political leaders, in response to present political dynamics, frame past events and create visions of the future that advance their agendas. In this view, the present holds a special ontological status as both the past and future are shaped by it, but all three exist simultaneously in some form and warrant scholarly focus.

To better understand the advantages and drawbacks of these two different approaches, let us further tease out the areas of agreement and tension between the two works. Beginning with areas of agreement, it is clear that both view the contestation and manipulation of temporal events for political purposes as central to the study of IR (and really, all branches of political science). Both works observe that there is a "plurality of pasts" and futures that are constructed by those who hold power in the present. It is for this reason that both assign the present a special ontological status.

Furthermore, both works agree that "clock-time," namely the standard, linear march of universal time, is insufficient for understanding the vulnerability of historical events and visions of the future to human influence. Both works observe the existence of political time—the notion that every moment and event is unimaginably complex and therefore unique; no event repeats itself exactly despite the common refrain about history.

This point about the complexity of historical events marks the departure between the two works, as each draws different implications from this observation. McIntosh concludes that, because identical events never occur in reality, a focus on developing theories and laws that govern political behavior is a fool's errand. In contrast, we believe that the social science models often have sufficient explanatory power to justify their creation and application, though IR perhaps encompasses a more challenging set of events to explain (e.g., war) than domestic politics (e.g., elections). Moreover, the implication that we examine is the susceptibility of the past and future to manipulation. Because every political event and policy issue comprises a constellation of numerous details, those with influence can frame these details in ways that align with their particular goals. Those with a platform can highlight certain details and obscure others to persuade a constituency about something in the present.

Examples of historical recasting abound in present discussions about immigration, K-12 social studies curricula, conflict in the Middle East, the Russo-Ukrainian War, climate change, among many other important issues. The

New York Times's 1619 project, for example, is an effort to "reframe the country's history" by centering the nation's historical narrative on slavery and its long-reaching consequences. Competing historical narratives influence how the public views different immigrant groups, the intentions behind the Vietnam War, the removal of Confederate monuments, claims to land in Israel and Ukraine, and China's sovereignty over Taiwan. As our empirical evidence shows, these understandings of the past shape current policy attitudes.

The present is likewise shaped by future expectations. Religious texts, as well as film and literature, are replete with stories of how visions or knowledge of future events shape present-day behavior. Financial markets are governed by expectations about future performance, and these expectations are influenced by political leaders, business executives, and market commentators who invoke frames and assessments of the future that suit their present aims. The same dynamic is at work in elections. Candidates paint pictures of the future for voters to win their support in the present.

In our view, both the past and future are malleable, though for different reasons. The past is characterized by rich detail and competing accounts. Because most have limited knowledge of the facts surrounding historical events, these events can be recast and leveraged by those with influence to shape present attitudes. The future is, by definition, unformed and open to speculation. But it can be used in the same way for strategic persuasion.

To test these theories of temporal interaction, we developed a series of survey experiments. Respondents were divided into control and treatment groups; those in the treatment groups were presented with historical accounts or predictions about the future. Respondents were then asked about their contemporary policy preferences. The findings show that those in agreement with the history lesson presented to them were far more likely (16 percentage points on average) to support a consistent current public policy than those in the control group. For example, those in agreement with the statement that, historically, the United States has been better off when the government stayed out of economic matters were 24.3 percentage points more likely than those in the control group to agree that, today, the government should leave more economic decisions to the private sector. In contrast, those in agreement with the statement that, historically, the United States has been better off when the government intervened in economic matters were 13.5 percentage points more likely than those in the control group to agree that, today, the government should make stronger efforts to regulate economic matters.

A similar dynamic emerged when we examined the effects of future visions on the present. Here, we found that presenting respondents with different characterizations of the future in policy areas such as immigration,

international relations, national security, and climate change affected their current policy views.

Furthermore, our analysis revealed that the future can affect the past. Leaders and groups who seek to advance a policy agenda or ideology often reimagine the past to align it with a future vision. Irredentist movements, including those in the United States, Scotland, and Middle East, frequently employ this approach. Our empirical analysis demonstrates this dynamic, showing that the creation of conformity between future and past views influences current policy outlooks.

Taken together, our evidence suggests that time, or at least political time, is far from linear and unidirectional. It bends and folds over on itself, creating a multiplicity of pasts and futures that are utilized by political leaders, and others seeking influence, to motivate constituencies and advance policy agendas in the present. Temporal reality not only appear neutrally but also molded and shaped by competing factions.

We therefore view the past, present, and future as intertwined and interactive. They exist simultaneously and are all real, yet all mutable. Although we agree with McIntosh that the present is of particular importance for scholars, we think that delinking the present from the past and future hinders understanding. We are reminded of the parable of the blind men and the elephant—trying to understand the present without considering the pasts and futures that shape it is like blindly touching one part of the elephant and drawing conclusions from that experience alone.

Response to Jennifer Bachner's Review of *The Time of Global Politics. International Relations as Study of the Present*
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— Christopher McIntosh 🆔

Bachner's review of *The Time of Global Politics* is fair and generous, and I appreciate the care with which it addresses the work. Ultimately, there is a great deal of overlap in the two pieces, and much to recommend both, but there are also important distinctions and points of difference that I wish to underline here. Some of these are undoubtedly due to the substantive focus of each—elections versus global politics, as Bachner mentions—but there are also some good faith differences in perspective regarding temporality and time itself, which emerge throughout the review and warrant discussion.

For instance, while I take the point of Bachner that the parable of the blind man and the elephant is compelling, it is inapplicable to the framework I advocate here. Part of the idea of presentism is that time and temporal experience —of which politics is a part—is heterotemporal, rather than universal. What this means is that metaphorically,