

Spiritual historicities: exploring micro-historical practices and alternative temporal directions in contemporary religiosities.

How do people make sense of their past, and look forward into their future, through religious practices in places of both modernity and political trauma? The past, the present, and the future are always interlaced in a historicist project. François Hartog (2003) argues that a “sense of historical time is generated by the distance, and tension, between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation”. Certain types of history are possible, he says, depending on the way the relations between the past, the present, and the future are configured. Religious and spiritual engagements are fundamental to this exercise, especially ones that have emerged in times of crisis, because they provide conceptual platforms from which the past, and the present connect directly to the future and its imagined horizons. This is notoriously the case of prophetic and messianic thinking, which provides moralizing and hopeful conceptual frameworks for past, present and future (Sarró 2011). It is also the case of confessional and testimonial regimes performed in and through (Pentecostal, Evangelical) acts of conversion, deliverance, redemption, and so on, which enable the reorientation of past experiences – traumatic or otherwise. Likewise, spirits also carry historical context (Palmié 2002). At the same time, as recently highlighted by Bandak and Coleman (2021), ideas of cyclicity and repetition are equally fundamental as acts of ‘ordering’ of human experience.

In this conference we pull these threads and explore semantics of time (Koselleck 2004) across different religious and spiritual contexts. We propose to explore the personal and collective role of alternative historicities. For instance, Don Handelman speaks of “prospective microhistories” (2005), a category he opposes to normative historiography, or atemporal forms of history, which has the past as sliced into periods and settled. Handelman defines prospective, or forward-moving, microhistory as “the creation and re-creation of moral existence in relation to the grounds of everyday existence”. Retrospective microhistory, as Handelman explains, begins in the past, with microhistorical events, and moves forward towards or into the present; prospective microhistories begin with presentness and move into the future, as this present becomes the past. This raises several questions that can be explored through a variety of ethnographic contexts. The first is: how is political, social, and individual trauma understood or recast through the embodied, material, and theological means that religions and new spiritualities provide? Second, how does this history-making project itself onto imagined futures or visions of progress? How are temporal continuities and discontinuities created? This implies a different focus on both the past and the future, namely, one that shifts from pure “history” or pure “anthropology” to the “anthropology of history” (Palmié & Stewart 2016, 2019). This is possible by attending to the social processes and microcosms of the present that themselves are deeply temporal. A special ethnographic emphasis will be given to new spiritualities and alternative forms of religion, as well as traditional practices rethought in the present tense, many of which already come embedded with their utopian visions.