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Strange loops: Producing history in financial times

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History in Financial Times is in many ways a book about writing, but one of the questions it leaves hanging is where the power of writing runs out. Throughout the book, I make various claims about the ability of narrative discourse to shape the temporal and historical signatures of contemporary experience, and in so doing, to produce rather than simply record or reflect the sense of development and change we expect from 'history'. Yet when confronted with the thoughts of colleagues generous enough to take part in this forum, I am struck by the difficulty of responding to these in a way that might feel like a step forward, of writing something that pushes past the point at which *History in Financial Times* cuts off. Whether that is a fault of the book is not yet clear to me, although it seems equally plausible that this is one of its strengths. I will try to explain what I mean by this through a discussion of three questions that emerge in the forum, all of which strike me as not just fundamental questions, but deadlocks of a very peculiar kind – deadlocks we cannot hope to shake off, let alone answer once and for all. These relate to the contemporary status of historical discourse, financial market logics, and above all the figure of the 'strange loop', a conceptual device I borrow from Douglas Hofstadter (2007) and put forward as a means of reorienting the theory and philosophy of history. Before discussing each of these points in turn, it seems appropriate to offer some further, brief remarks on the contours of the book and why it departs from conventional forms of historicism in political economy.

As Fredric Jameson (2020: 146) notes, the idea of 'linear history' is a great thing to accuse others of entertaining but hardly a phrase anyone would use to describe their own position. If anything, in recent decades, social scientific theorising has gone in the opposite direction, thinking time and history through memory, anticipation, and range of other 'non-linear' processes. But the field of political economy has proven remarkably resistant to this trend. There are exceptions, of course, such as the growing literature on financial futurity, which Emily Rosamond (2020: 132-33) is right to point out that I sidestep. I do so, however, in part because capital's "fixation on the future" (Vogl, 2015: 56) has always been central to the concept of capitalism and theories of its historical development, as in Smith and Marx, but also in Hayek, Veblen, Commons, and Keynes. Consequently, it has been relatively easy for

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political economy to address the theme of futurity without having to question its reliance on what we might describe as sequential, rather than simply 'linear', modes of historical thinking. I would maintain that this chronological principle is the hard core of political economy and its various contemporary offshoots (such as heterodox economics, socio-economics, and international political economy); the thing it cannot give up on without risking dissolution and hence the thing it keeps from itself, the repressed other of political economy. I have tried to make a version of this argument elsewhere (in Samman, 2014), but it bears repeating here. Whenever the status of the past appears as a question for the field, it is quickly absorbed back into the paradigms of historical science, such that history and, by extension, the economic process, appears once again as in keeping with the chronological principle, moving forward through a series of states, stages, or phases. And so political economy always fails to adequately reckon with its foundations in historiology, even if it occasionally fails better than it did the last time.[1]

This, at least, is why I treat political economy as part of my picture, rather than a lens through which to view history in financial times. Another way to put this is that the book reads contemporary finance through the lens of its own historical discourse. I focus on various aspects of this discourse, from the concept of crisis and its related archetypes of cyclical and linear time (which are very much the currency of modern political economy), to the specific events, dates, and names that circulate through not only theory, but also news, expert commentary, and popular culture. The result is a somewhat unconventional history of financial capitalism, an account in which its uneasy reliance on historical discourse is foregrounded, rather than the usual focus on questions of law, quantification, technology, institutional change, or what have you.

In this context, the concept of the 'strange loop' is meant to suggest a form of feedback between the discourse of history on the one hand, and its notional referent, the process or movement of history itself, on the other. This entails not just a looping back in time ("a recursive action of the past on the present" [Samman, 2019: 5, 17], as I put it in the book), but also a loop through the abstract patterns of historical discourse, such that the imagined past circulates through the present, shaping what eventually becomes of it. On the terrain of history, then, the logic of the strange loop is one of "paradoxical level-crossing" (Hofstadter, 2007: 102) and spiralling feedback between present and past, real and imaginary; a quasi-historical process in which all efforts to imagine history become a potential input back into it.

There is, of course, much overlap between this way of thinking and the kind pursued outside of political economy, in fields such as cultural studies, anthropology, literary theory, and the humanities more broadly. To the extent that these are the kind of perspectives represented in this forum, I feel I am on relatively safe ground, surrounded by fellow travellers or "partners in crime", as Janet Roitman (2020: 138) so wonderfully puts it. But with this affinity comes a deeper challenge, related not to the justification of my enterprise but, somewhat ironically, to its output or utility. If one is willing to entertain the way I reorganise the concepts of time, history, and finance, then where does this leave us, in theoretical and historical terms, perhaps even in terms of ethics and politics? I will not pretend to have an adequate answer to this. Instead, I will respond briefly and as best I can to the ambiguities and limitations of my argument as identified by Jameson, Rosamond, Roitman, and Noam Yuran. Each raise a number of subsidiary points, all of which are interesting and worthy of further discussion, but for clarity in exposition I restrict my attention here to the three deadlocks I alluded to earlier. These are: history versus historiography, history versus financial history, and history versus strange loops.

History versus historiography

When we talk about events, cycles, and stages, do these belong to the order of history or its discourse? Is history punctuated by episodes and chapters, or do these merely reflect the narrative aspect of historical writing, its concepts, and so on? These are established questions in historical theory that I have effectively carried into the terrain of political economy, and while Roitman knows they are not easy to answer, she nevertheless poses them to me on a number of occasions. Why, she asks, do I take the collapse of Lehman Brothers to be “a founding event” for post-liberal finance (Roitman, 2020: 137); on what grounds do I treat it as a crisis in history, and does this not entail positing crisis as history and history as real rather than imagined? Roitman (2020: 138) detects “versions of positivism” elsewhere too, specifically, in my discussion of financialisation narratives. When I describe these as suggesting an epochal shift, does this mean I am “asserting that this epochal shift actually obtained (there are historical epochs, such as that of finance capitalism) or that ‘epoch’ is a category of historical reason, which gives rise to qualifications of human activity, such as ‘finance capitalism’” (Roitman, 2020: 138)?

My initial response to both of these charges is to plead innocence. Indeed, it is not me but the *Financial Times* that declares the collapse of Lehman as the end of an era, and I quote the newspaper in my Introduction in order to illustrate a much broader trend that I detail elsewhere in the book, whereby financial elites produce history through narratives of crisis, rather than to somehow posit crisis and history as the ground on which these elites act. Similarly, if I note the epochal character of financialisation narratives, it is because these narratives are themselves structured through a logic of successive periods, each with their own unique modifier (agricultural, commercial, industrial, financial). In other words, don’t shoot the messenger. Yet Roitman is also onto something deeper here, and she clearly signals this by describing the predicament in terms of a deadlock. “There is a tension in the book that is inescapable: between the production of crisis historiography, on the one hand, and the practice of the concept of crisis, on the other” (Roitman, 2020: 139).

Roitman acknowledges that this tension runs through her own work as well, and she goes on to offer one way around it in the form of an anthropological approach. There is much to be said for such an approach, which Roitman outlines in her 2014 book, *Anti-Crisis* (a significant influence, I should say, on my own thinking). In particular, an anthropology of crisis is attuned to the practice of the concept and thereby geared against taking either crisis or history at face value. Instead, both now appear as effective fictions, and this is exactly how I mean to deploy the terms in my book: as “effective crisis” and “effective history” (Roitman, 2020: 139). The only problem is that the anthropological turn, which leads one down into the “heterogenous terrain … [and] operations of finance” (Roitman, 2020: 139), risks obscuring the meta-historical aspect of these fictions, which can only ever appear at the level of a philosophy of history.

A case in point would be not just the ‘new crisis theory’ in political economy, as I call it, but also the social studies of finance to which Roitman refers, both of which have been very successful at discovering ‘effective fictions’ without ever having followed the consequences of this through onto the ineffable terrain of history. I suppose what I am trying to express is that historical discourse and its concepts bear an important relation not just to individuals or groups, but also to the developmental aspect of their interaction (which is what we normally think of as ‘history’), and that an approach that explicitly recognises this is warranted.

I am reminded at this point of a footnote of Hayden White’s, in which he briefly introduces a full suite of Heideggerian terminology for talking about such issues (*historiography*, *historiology*, *historiosophy*, *historiogony*, *historionomy*, and so on), only to then explain why he expects this to lead nowhere. “It is a useless gesture,” he says:

> first, because it is too jargonistic, and second, because it might contribute to the clarification of the term *history* and its various derivates, the vagueness of which is crucial to the maintenance of the myth that the term *history* designates something real. (White, 2008: 31, fn. 4, emphasis in original)

In other words, the notion that historical writing and historical science are distinct to one another, each producing different forms of wisdom, knowledge, or consciousness, also means that history as we commonly know it is the outcome of these operations, rather than their simple foundation. Consequently, there is no *real* distinction to be made between history and historiography, or indeed between ‘crisis in history’ and ‘crisis historiography’, only an *imaginary* one. It goes without saying, I hope, that crisis histories are nonetheless effective, and sometimes powerfully so. As Yuran (2020: 143) notes, “The way we understand our present is a real historical fact”, regardless of its basis in the imagination, and it is on these slippery grounds that any philosophy of history must be staked.

History versus financial history

A philosophy of history fit for financial times immediately runs up against thorny questions about the historical status of finance and the financial. One such question relates to the problem of periodisation – What makes these ‘financial times’? – to which I have already offered what I think is the least unsatisfactory response: ‘financial times’ are the effect of a financial-economic worldview being grafted onto the modern political-historical imagination. But there is another question here too, oriented toward what we might call the business of finance, the buying and selling of claims of one kind or another. By choosing not to start here, with the tokens of financial economy, I must instead specify their relation to the historical ones whose circulation I spend so much time detailing in my book. This is the point to which Rosamond pushes me in her thoughtful analysis, which ends with a rather provocative take on the matter. In the final instance, she suggests, “finance and financialization may not be quite as central to [my] argument as they initially seemed” (Rosamond, 2020: 134).

Rosamond arrives at this conclusion via a few different trains of thought, including a discussion of how I could bring out the financial aspect of my focus on recurring proper names like ‘Gekko’, ‘Belfort’, and ‘Packer’. Why not, she asks, “link the proper name more directly with financial valuation” and new systems or techniques of self-appreciation (Rosamond, 2020: 133)? This is a promising line of inquiry, but one Rosamond is far better equipped to pursue than myself, as her recent work on reputation capital and character investment already demonstrates. Instead, I would like to dwell for a moment here on the issues she raises with respect to my treatment of financial history, and in particular those episodes most commonly included in contemporary narrative accounts of financial capitalism: the 1930s and 2008. According to Rosamond (2020: 132), my take on these episodes exhibits a kind of ‘airiness’ that says nothing about the conditions that led to the Great Depression or the subprime crisis, and so nothing either on the relation between the 1930s and 2008; a lacuna she thinks especially significant given how the period between these two moments has been bridged with narratives of financialisation.[2] There is certainly an interesting story to be told here about such narratives, and while I touch on this briefly in my Introduction (Samman, 2019: 11-16), much more could be done to catalogue and critique the tropes associated with financialisation. But this is not equivalent to the task of ‘multiplying’ financial history or telling different stories about finance. All histories are revisionist histories, and so creating new ones won't undo the effects of the past on the present, which at present is a present attuned to histories of finance (or at least that is the claim I make in the book).

This has a number of implications, many of which I am only now beginning to afford the attention they deserve, but one that seems appropriate to highlight here is the changing fate of the 1970s. As Rosamond notes, if the 1980s were the dawn of a new financial era, then most contemporary accounts trace this transition back to changes set in motion during the 1970s (commodity prices, profit and interest rates, future markets, and so on). This, at least, is how things look from within political-economic historiography, and especially its Marxist variants. What is striking to me is how absent these mythical 1970s were from the pronouncements of the financial establishment during the turmoil of 2008. The 1930s were invoked ad nauseam, yet the 1970s only appeared very rarely, and almost always in connection with 'real' as opposed to 'financial' economy issues. If anything, the elevation of the 1930s to the status of a lodestar took place through the eclipse or erasure of the 1970s, which previously had loomed much larger in the historical sky. And so, there is an important discrepancy to observe here, between the histories that circulate amongst those who critically comment on the development of capitalist finance, on the one hand, and those that circulate within the financial press, the financial policymaking community, and perhaps even the financial industry proper (though of this I can't be sure, as Roitman points out): a discrepancy between the critical history of financial society and its world-historical self-image. This seems to me an issue that revisionist histories are ill-suited to address, but I think Rosamond recognises this; consider then the above more a digression than a rebuttal. The upshot, however, is that questions about the shape of *financial* as opposed to universal history are difficult to keep insulated from metaphysical complications associated with the latter.

Needless to say, these complications are themselves difficult if not impossible to resolve, and that is one reason why I introduce the notion of *homo historia*, a subject defined by "a certain style of not-knowing" (Rosamond, 2020: 134). But the implications of this in connection with finance are not something I specify in the book, and in his commentary on these themes, Yuran pushes my argument even further than I had thought to do myself, brilliantly unearthing a link between finance and stupidity. In particular, Yuran (2020: 141) pinpoints "belated recognition" as the key temporal-narrative form of finance; not exactly memory, but sudden recollection and so also a prior forgetting. 'Stupidity' in this context relates to a deeper "desire to forget" that plays out through financial economy in the form of familiar surprise: "Financial bubbles necessarily involve a forgetting of history" (Yuran, 2020: 144), not just once but over and over again, such that patterns of boom and bust appear less like the pulse of financial history and more like the mess left behind by people desperately trying to live unhistorically. What is a bull market if not the work of "blissfully herding beast" (Yuran, 2020: 144)?

This way of putting things has the benefit of situating the historical imagination within the economic process and financial markets in particular. Yet it also has significant implications for how we think about financial society more broadly and the kind of relation it maintains with history. I suspect Yuran is onto something when he suggests that the very rise of financial society – the "uncanny victory" of neoliberalism, as he calls it (Yuran, 2020: 144) – may reflect the peculiar appeal of attempting to live unhistorically, and the historiotheticised concept of trauma I put forward in the book is meant precisely as a means of thinking through this kind of ambivalence; trauma as a means of coming to terms with the anti-historical qualities of finance capital's historical imagination. This is why financial history seems to disappear into the terror of history: "history in financial times must be conceived as an eventless history, where events, if they indeed occur, cannot but appear as recurrence or revelation, as what has already happened before its time" (Yuran, 2020: 145). I could not have put it better myself.

History versus strange loops

The concept of trauma brings us to a third deadlock, which pertains to the historical status of the strange loop. The loop is a device I use to accentuate the key historical aspects of Freud's trauma theory, which as White (2008: 26-30) reminds us, entails an emphasis not only on 'afterwardness' or temporal deferral, but also psychic recognition and so a certain fictive or hallucinatory quality. Hence the strange loop: a figure of thought that scrambles the relations between present and past, real and imaginary. But where does this figure come from? What are its histories and what possibilities do these carry into the present?

In his contribution, Jameson provides a whirlwind tour of loop thinking of the sort few could summon with such ease, placing the apparent novelty of the loop against the backdrop of repeated attempts to deploy it in the face of various temporal paradoxes. I must admit, the history of the loop as a figure of thought is not something to which I had devoted much time, being too preoccupied with finding a way around those conceptual roadblocks encoded into the field of political economy (the chronological principle, the base-superstructure model, and so on). I suppose one can only historicise so much at once, regardless of how one chooses to interpret Jameson's famous injunction to always do so.[3] A more significant lesson looms, however, if one treats the history of loop thinking as a window onto the condition that the figure itself wants to work through. This is precisely what Jameson asks us to do, to interrogate loops as philosophical symptoms. I tend to agree with his assessment that these symptoms relate to the peculiar fate of historical time, and I will address this in a moment. First, a few remarks on the symptoms themselves.

As Jameson notes, these are linguistic, figural, and conceptual; poetic words or phrases that suggest an entanglement of temporal and maybe broader ontological categories. There is no guarantee that this entanglement leads anywhere, and Jameson (2020: 146) opens with a decidedly pessimistic tone in this regard, describing the concept of the 'feedback loop' as now "so self-evident as to stifle any possible philosophical content". I can certainly see problems with the concept, not least its affinities with the cybernetic turn in economic and financial discourse, but I would push back against the idea that it is a dead end (or at least that it must remain a dead end). The benefit of 'estranging the loop' in the way Jameson (2020: 146) does is to reveal its status as "the expression of a collective semantic need", and the concept of the strange loop as I deploy it registers precisely such a need within the field of political economy.

This is somewhat of a technicality, however, as no one knows in advance which word or phrase will meet rather than simply express this need, the need for a category that will make sense of the mess we seem to have made of time. Jameson illustrates this with a series of words or concepts that grasp at temporal novelty (crisis, revolution, the Flash Crash), all of which can themselves be understood as having shaped the trajectory of what we normally think of as 'world history'. But as the example of the Flash Crash points to, there is another, more fundamental issue at play here, which relates to questions about the human mind and the extent to which our categories of space and time are themselves subject to evolution, and thus historical in the traditional sense. Is it even possible, he asks, to invent a new temporal category that would take the place of past, present, and future?

Jameson's judgment on this, that we cannot very easily know, is eminently plausible, and so too therefore is his conclusion about the status of loops: that they are "a kind of figural leapfrog by which we try to imagine what thinking that future concept, or indeed a future category as such, would feel like" (Jameson, 2020: 147). A poetic leap over the problem of historical time and the kind of present it now confronts us with, and so perhaps a route around the deadlocks of history in financial times. Either way, our fate remains ensnared within the strange figure of the loop.

Post-history in financial times

Instead of ending with a new postscript for *History in Financial Times*, I thought I would try my hand at a prequel. The plot is very much the same, 'history feeds on history', only this time the characters and setting are different: a string of earlier writers, humanists of one kind or another, whose classic works already identified the deadlocks at which we have arrived here in our discussion.

Take Norman O. Brown. In *Life Against Death*, Brown (1959) mounts a scathing attack on the culture of historical mindedness, describing it as a kind of morbid sociality, a collective refusal of life maintained through an obsessive gaze on both the past and the future. Rather than go on like this, he urges us to find a way out of time and history, to somehow overcome our neurotic desire to 'make history' and return instead to the art of being and living (Brown, 1959: 18-19). But as Marshall Berman (1988: 79) would later note, this challenge to history's psychic rule was itself "a historical gesture of great audacity – indeed, a Faustian act in its own right". 'Great Men' cannot create post-history.

Irony aside, Brown's deadlock can be posed in terms of agency. *Homo historia* confronts the discourse of history from within, and as a result, struggles to escape its imprint in the form of a certain outlook on time, an outlook characteristic of historical subjectivity. This throws up all sorts of complications, but especially in connection with periodisation, which is no longer a simple naming of moments or sequencing of events, but instead an operation so fundamental we seem unable to think without it. Frank Kermode already put his finger on this back in 1967, when he divided the history of human time into three broad phases or stages:

> A desire to *use* the past denotes, we are told, an evolutionary phase already quite advanced. To find patterns in historical time – a time free of the repetitions of ritual, and indifferent to the ecstasies of the shaman – is yet another stage. And the assumption or understanding that finding such patterns is a purely anthropocentric activity belongs to a third phase. We are still not quite easy with it. Much of our thinking still belongs to the second phase, when history, historiographical plot-making, did the work of ritual or tradition ... But the third stage is marked by an understanding that this play of consciousness over history, this plot making, may relieve us of time's burden only by defying our sense of reality. (Kermode, 1967: 56-57, emphasis in original)

Even meta-historical narratives like this entail periodisation. But the point I want to stress here is where this leaves us, which according to Kermode, is with a sense of derealisation and loss of meaning relative to the first and second 'stages'. This is more or less how I end *History in Financial Times*, and I must confess to having stumbled over this passage only afterward, yet the question strikes me as very much to the moment. What are we to do in the face of this derealisation? What is the best way to 'defy our sense of reality'? To say that 'we are still not quite easy' with these questions would already have been an understatement in the late 1960s, before postmodern theory appeared on the scene; and even after thinkers like Baudrillard (and to a certain extent Jameson) put this in strategic terms, as the question of 'fatal' or simply 'postmodern' strategies, many were more inclined to recoil from this idea than embrace it. The situation today is surely more acute, and so Kermode's deadlock remains something we must grapple with, even if it would be foolish to expect a satisfactory resolution.

With this we reach the end of our short prequel, after which the argument advanced in my book loses some of its novelty, but not – I hope – its validity or merit. Rather than trying to escape the strange loops of history, financial or otherwise, we should instead seek to cultivate a different attitude toward history and the historical. This pertains to all the trappings of historical discourse, but also the fundamental correlates of historical mindedness these have helped to produce: our propensity to look backward and to look forward, over and over again. Though they may seem so, these are not opposites. The promise of a future that restores the past is just as much an invention as the promise of one that redeems it. Consequently, we should not expect any golden age nostalgia to fair better than the progressive promises now falling out of favour across the world. Both the future and the past are inventions of history, and history is a form of power rather than simple truth. The challenge, then, is to somehow start seeing our historical fantasies for what they are, and to come to terms with the effects these are having, on ourselves and on others.

Notes

1. Even in a special issue devoted to 'The historicity of contemporary political economy and its blind spots' (Best et al., 2020), the presence of the past is cashed out in a critique of presentism, which in the end is just another way of keeping the past from the present, of upholding the flight of time's arrow.
2. "Always historicize!" is how Jameson introduces *The Political Unconscious* (2002: ix).
3. It is interesting to note that 'airiness' is a persistent theme in discussions that focus on my treatment of crisis. For Rosamond (2020: 132), the historical comparisons I analyse seem to float around "'in the air'", while Roitman (2020: 139) talks about a "diffusionist history of crisis" in which terms circulate like so many aerosol particles. John Macintosh (2020) makes a similar point when he suggests a need to "also view crisis from below". I appreciate what each is getting at, yet I cannot help but think that the spatial metaphor of 'air' and 'ground' or 'above' and 'below' brings us right back to the base-superstructure model that crisis theory has been working for decades to overcome. For a delightful skewering of this position, see Debray (1983: 99-104).

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