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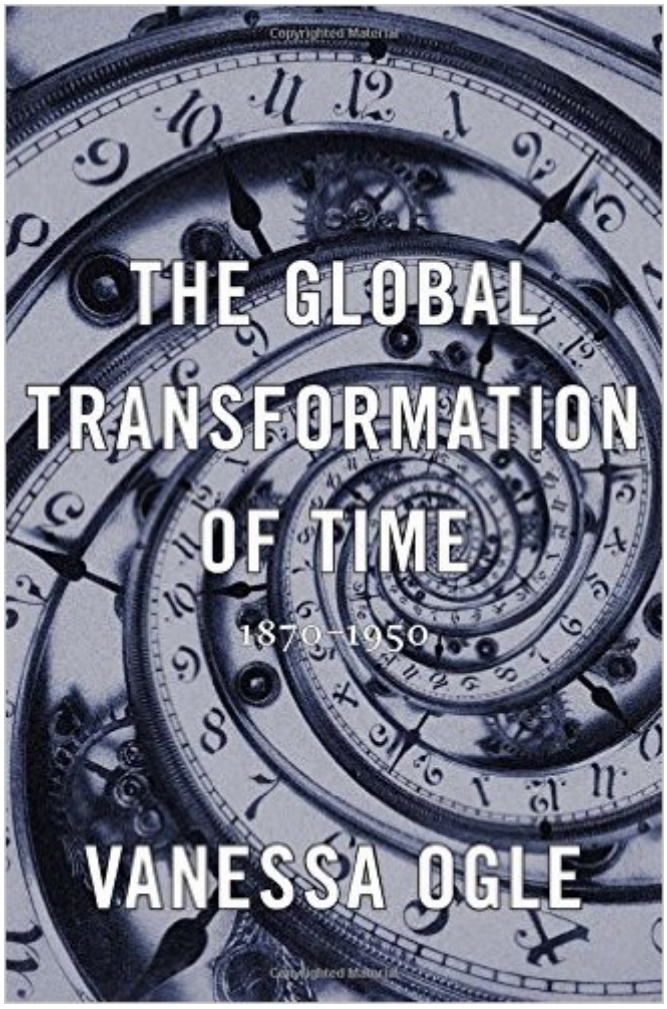
The Global Transformation Of Time: 1870-1950



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Synopsis

As new networks of railways, steamships, and telegraph communications brought distant places into unprecedented proximity, previously minor discrepancies in local time-telling became a global problem. Vanessa Ogleâ ™s chronicle of the struggle to standardize clock times and calendars from 1870 to 1950 highlights the many hurdles that proponents of uniformity faced in establishing international standards.Time played a foundational role in nineteenth-century globalization. Growing interconnectedness prompted contemporaries to reflect on the annihilation of space and distance and to develop a global consciousness. Timeâ •historical, evolutionary, religious, social, and legalâ •provided a basis for comparing the worldâ ™s nations and societies, and it established hierarchies that separated â œadvancedâ • from â œbackwardâ • peoples in an age when such distinctions underwrote European imperialism.Debates and disagreements on the varieties of time drew in a wide array of observers: German government officials, British social reformers, colonial administrators, Indian nationalists, Arab reformers, Muslim scholars, and League of Nations bureaucrats. Such exchanges often heightened national and regional disparities. The standardization of clock times therefore remained incomplete as late as the 1940s, and the sought-after unification of calendars never came to pass. The Global Transformation of Time reveals how globalization was less a relentlessly homogenizing force than a slow and uneven process of adoption and adaptation that often accentuated national differences.

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You can look at your smartphone or computer and tell the the time to such an exactitude that only scientists in obscure ivory towers need anything more accurate. And, other than the differences in time zones, everyone else in the world can do the same and get the same reading. That there is an agreed-upon world standard for such a thing might be a cause for optimism, especially since a century ago there was lots of worldwide disagreement about marking time. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the period when people started discussing worldwide time and coming to agreements about it. It wasnâ ™t always a coldly scientific endeavor, with power plays and nationalism often more important than objectivity, but how we came to the current standard is the story in _The Global Transformation of Time 1870 - 1950_ (Harvard University Press) by historian Vanessa Ogle. Ogle tells a careful and well-researched story of how horological chaos was transformed into our current and rather sensible system, and concentrates less on the world conferences that agreed on, say, dividing the longitude line at Greenwich for a standard, than the social, economic, and political forces that pushed for change.Before the time covered in Ogleâ ™s book, there was little need to try to synchronize clocks in different locales. It was train travel that showed the difficulties of all those different village times as people started moving long distances at fast speeds. Different railways kept time differently; in 1875, there were six different railway times being used just within the city of St. Louis. In 1883, the railroads decreed a Standard Railway Time, four hour-wide zones across America.

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