

Afterword: Time and Politics

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It is only in an interdisciplinary journal like *Time & Society* that an anthropologist can be asked to comment on a wonderfully diverse interdisciplinary collection of articles like this one on the ‘Political and Transformative Uses of Time’. For the benefit of this afterword, I will redefine the core topics of this special issue in more abstract terms as ‘time’ and ‘politics’, as it was precisely my own disciplinary understandings of these two concepts that I came to question after reading the contributions from colleagues of (mostly) other disciplines. This is the usual effect of inter- or transdisciplinary conversations: one is forced to reconsider one’s own (pre-)theoretical commitments. In what follows, I will therefore explore from an anthropological perspective, how the authors approach the core concepts’ relations to one another and how they determine what adding one to the analysis of the other adds to our understanding of the issues at hand. This is also to say that each article, given the analytical gravity of the central terms, does much more than provide some excellent and intriguing empirical examples of ‘uses’ of time in politics.

Let me begin with the nature of the relation between the two central terms. To explore this relationship, we must first define what is meant by ‘time’ and ‘politics’. All authors, within their own disciplinary remits (of sociology, anthropology, and media and cultural studies), do that well in their respective accounts. As the articles’ empirical diversity suggests, however, these meanings entail very different aspects. Temporal matters identified within the articles range from

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hope and temporal agency (Gokmenoglu and Manley), temporal synchronisation and heterogenisation (Genova), presentism (Folkert and Nahaboo), temporal complexity, structure, schema, orientation and coordination (Ruggero), temporal conflicts and properties of organisations, tactics and narratives (Wood), to future scenarios and temporal multiplicity (Mische and Mart). Politics have been explored in relation to phenomena such as national referenda (Gokmenoglu and Manley), class, inequality and self-presentation (Genova), populism and the governance of the poor (Folkert and Nahaboo), activism and social movements during national elections (Ruggero), policing practices and protest strategies (Wood), and the commission and design of future scenarios in neoliberal Africa (Mische and Mart). Some terms also merge the two domains, for example the ideas of ‘chronopolitics’ in Folkert and Nahaboo’s contribution or the ‘politics of time’ in Genova’s article.

However, what has been dominant in most of the articles was the idea that, analytically, either domain can be understood to preexist the specific relation between them. From an anthropological perspective, this is potentially questionable. Marilyn Strathern, in her famous 1988 book *The Gender of the Gift*, invites her readers (based on her analysis of Melanesian knowledge practices) to consider the possibility of a relation not relating two preexisting units (as many would presume). Rather, she wants us to try to think of a relation producing the things it relates. That is, in fact, what many of the practitioners covered in this collection do: they do not put ‘time’ to use, but particular aspects of it, and only in relation to specific political forms, concerns and practices. They specify (and thereby construct) what in each context these otherwise abstract notions mean or, indeed, become in relation to one another.

In the case of individual articles, we can see that hope and future orientations, in Gokmenoglu and Manley’s article on post-referendum Scotland and Turkey, are not innocent temporal features, but are evoked by concrete political contexts, in which they become the core mode of maintaining activists’ political subjectivities in the dystopian aftermath of lost referenda. As we can see, it is hard to determine what came first, as both – hope and political subjectivity – co-constitute one another. Similarly, in Genova’s article, the temporal operations of techno-aesthetic practices during the COVID-19 pandemic helped both to constitute a polity of those suffering from the same pandemic whilst also subtly politicising the difference in its actual experience, resulting in unequal temporal affordances and experiences. In the several cases of social movements, activism and protest (Ruggero; Wood), continuous modes of being political are existentially linked to particular modes of navigating time. Practitioners’ expressions of temporal agency are therefore not independent of their navigation of specific political contexts and concerns. Crucially, specific modes of time and future-making enable or preclude certain modes of political action. Folkert and Nahaboo’s piece shows this clearly: the UK government’s politicisation of

those deemed 'left behind' is based on presentist metaphysics, which can only be endorsed in contrast to the imagined temporal position of those governed as 'left behind'. Finally, Mische and Mart's analysis, too, shows, that the development and circulation of future(scenario)s is first and foremost used for political purposes. As they underline: political crises politicise time, e.g. through the construction of temporal multiplicity. And the reverse holds true, too: temporal crises, i.e. problems in meaningfully navigating time, are evoked to demand specific political responses.

Notwithstanding the empirical concreteness, in which particular times and particular forms of political practice are co-constituted in relation to one another: What does relating these two analytical and, arguably, empirical domains to one another add to our understanding not just of the manifold and varying relations between them, but also to our understanding of either of them? What does a focus on politics tell us about time (and temporal agency), and which aspects does a focus on time add to our understanding of politics? I will begin with a few abstract thoughts on the former.

With a close focus on the practical concerns of their research participants, one issue stood out in most of the articles: the construction and experience of 'time' is not an individual matter, but a collective one. This is no news to the social sciences, but it is an apt reminder that forms of temporal agency are similarly not an expression of individual persuasion and conviction. In my own work on temporal agency, through the concept of time-tricking (Ringel 2016), I focus on the variety of sometimes surprising ways in which humans are able to alter, manipulate, and navigate knowledge about – and experiences of – time. However, as in most studies of agency, the emphasis is on individual ingenuity and survival. What the papers of this special issue underline is the collective nature of temporal agency, and not just in the domain of the political. Most papers have a hands-on practical perspective: collective action needs coordination, synchronisation or, indeed, planned asynchrony. Practice, furthermore, unfolds in relation to others, with other politics and collective futures in mind. Politics are a collective undertaking, with matters at stake that effect everyone (as we were too clearly made aware of yet again this November). A focus on politics in the study of time obviously also adds the usual focus on the political-economic contexts relevant for an understanding of how time is understood, experienced and constructed, in this case, in varying neoliberal-capitalist contexts (see, e.g. Guyer 2007). Theories of power are usually backing these analytic operations, but a simple focus on politics as practice does the same: time is not an abstract, innocent domain, but a contested collective imaginary, claims on which translate into claims over power and influence.

The reverse operation, adding time to the study and understanding of politics, is less straightforward. One obvious point is that attention paid to times and the temporal features of political thought as/and practice provides at least some

insight into the processual and dynamic nature of politics – different temporal rhythms and regimes, metaphysics, contested futures and inequalities are all at play and stake in political life. Another fairly obvious feature: the necessary indeterminacy of political action. This stems from the complexity and coordinated nature of political practice. If we understand politics as the collective negotiation of a defined group's way forward, then untangling the different histories and futures that determine diverse political action in the present is not trivial. Rather, time is a crucial component of human practice, and not just because in most contemporary contexts it has been rendered problematic, and thereby made into a collective concern itself. Understanding the temporal multiplicity at the core of political practice, however, should not just lead to identifying ever more temporal aspects, features and varieties, but to drawing out how these, in turn, exist in relation to or dominate one another (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017).

Let me give you an empirical example of how 'time' and 'politics' relate from my own work on the former socialist model city of Hoyerswerda (Ringel 2018). As many postindustrial cities that face economic and demographic decline, this particular East German city – in 2009 Germany's fastest shrinking city no less – was defined by one feature in particular: that it had no future. Indeed, most of its citizens faced the reality of urban shrinkage on a daily basis, with the ongoing emigration of friends and loved ones, the closure of yet another school, social club or one's favourite restaurant, or the actual material deconstruction of the apartment houses that had made up Hoyerswerda's once vanguard New City. The problematisation of the future, however, is not just an outcome of the more or less correct assessment of the city's prospects within a capitalist political economy. It is the result of, or perhaps also the response to, various political processes and decisions. It took East Germans, as other postsocialists, several decades to see the turmoil and decline that they were experiencing not simply as economic phenomena 'natural' to the integration into a global market economy, but as the outcome of concrete politics (not all of which they had a say in or were privy to): capitalism, in its current neoliberal form, was allowed to unfold in places like Hoyerswerda, and in particular ways. That this led to a wholesale loss and subsequent problematisation of the future is therefore nothing less than a political matter.

Official local politics responded to this particular temporal regime of 'no future' with what Jane Guyer (2007) has identified as a form of 'enforced presentism': Hoyerswerda's mayor, the local government, the city's administration and most local parties never actually defined a clear plan and path forward – whilst constantly talking about and vaguely evoking Hoyerswerda's future (as all citizens did most of the time). They had, again in Guyer's terms, 'evacuated' 'the near future' and would combine their reactive navigation of the present not with presumably outmoded 5-year plans, but with a form of 'fantasy futurism'. As my book (Ringel 2018) shows, this local temporal regime did not remain

uncontested. However, crucially, those challenging the official political discourse about Hoyerswerda's future, were not – or not necessarily – disagreeing with the politics of those in power. Rather, what they challenged was the official politicians' form of what Guyer calls 'temporal reasoning'. What my many activist friends, most of them embedded in the city's socio-cultural milieu, demanded time and again was that the current political elite would yet again, in Guyer's term, 'colonise' the near future. Irrespective of the political contents, what they wanted was a clear and detailed plan ahead. The political challenge, then, was one in temporal terms.

Which brings me to a final point: An analysis of contemporary chronopolitics and 'chronocracy' (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020), i.e. of the politics that are done in and with time, might as well reinvigorate the political role of the social sciences. It matters to understand the ways 'time' and 'politics' are currently co-constituted in relation to one another. The trope of transformation in the special issue's title captures some of this ethos: if time is being put to transformative use in the domain of the political, then this demands academic scrutiny, which is exactly what this superb collection of articles provides. However, there is a further dimension to this. As Kirtsoglou and Simpson (2020) underline, the question of who is excluded from the various pasts, presents and futures of the societies in which we live, needs equal scrutiny because being in the same – even if contested – time is one of the bases for political participation. Being in the same time, thus, prefigures who is counted as belonging to the society in question – or not. Given this journal's name, however, do not get a social anthropologist started on what, in this particular context, 'society' might mean...

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