When Time Matters

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces a collection of five research articles that address how time becomes materialized, regimented, politicized, and phenomenologically experienced in diverse ethnographic settings. Against notions of time's uniformity, we explore considerations of its relational nature in physics, linguistics, and anthropology. Temporal frameworks are not given but created, not unitary but multiple, and operate in degrees of lamination, synchrony, or dissonance. In colonial Papua New Guinea, the Ecuadorian and Brazilian Amazon, highland Bolivia, and South Korea, temporal frameworks serve as anchors to diverse social and political projects. These ethnographic accounts illuminate the dynamic and consequential nature of temporal semiosis.

Time matters. We are aware of this in different ways every day: when we hit the snooze button on our alarm clocks (or don't), make our way to appointments, coordinate schedules, or catch the next bus. We might wonder if the clothes we own are still in fashion or hear a song that reminds us of another era. As we, the authors of this essay, compose an introduction for a collection of ethnographic essays on time, we write under the pressure of a deadline. Perhaps you are considering the time you have right now for reading this piece, and which of the contributions in this volume will fit into your reading schedule today. Sometimes time seems to escape us; time flies. In other moments,

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The temporal arc of this project began with two panels at the 2017 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC. We thank Chris Ball for his role as discussant in one of those sessions and also the other participants in those sessions, among them Diego Arispe-Bazan, Lee Bloch, Tiffany Cain, David Divita, Cécile Evers, Katy Hardy, and Peter Schmidt. Some participants have published their contributions before this volume's completion (Arispe-Bazan 2018; Evers 2018), and others' contributions are slated to be published in the future (Divita, forthcoming). We thank both the initial participants and the contributors to this volume. We also extend gratitude toward the University of Louisville's Commonwealth Center for Humanities and Society and its director, John Gibson, for providing the structural and logistical support that enabled us to complete this project. We particularly thank Asif Agha and Kyung-Nan Koh for their editorial support and encouragement in making this special issue possible.

Signs and Society, vol. 7, no. 1 (Winter 2019). © 2019 by Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. All rights reserved. 2326-4489/2019/0701-0001$10.00

https://doi.org/10.1086/701150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time can seem to slow down. Whether through tedium or heightened attention, minutes can drag.

The notion that time is relative was suggested in the early twentieth century with Einstein's general theory of relativity, which interrupted the Newtonian notion that time and space could operate as separate variables and instead introduced a unified space-time that, rather than being uniform, was shaped by mass and speed. An even more radical notion of relativity, or relationality, has been proposed within loop theory in contemporary quantum physics, in which there is not only no uniform time as an independent variable but, in fact, a multiplicity of times, a chaotic network of relationally calibrated events, each with its own "time" in relation to other events (Rovelli 2018).

Building on Einstein's theories of relativity, the mid-twentieth century linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf suggested time's relativity in another sense by exploring contrasting conceptualizations across languages and cultures. Whorf ([1941] 1995) examined languages' differential use of spatial metaphors for time and how these metaphors may be buttressed by associated cultural artifacts materializing them, such as calendars and clocks. He noted differences in the representation of time between the Hopi language and what he called Standard Average European (SAE) in their treatment of time, observing that the treatment of time in SAE languages was not universal, that not all languages treat time as grammatically equivalent to other "things." Focusing on the use of ordinal versus cardinal numbers and mass versus count nouns in SAE languages (English, in this case) and Hopi, he noted in Hopi a departure from the SAE formula of cardinal number plus measure count noun plus mass noun (e.g., one + cup + of tea). In SAE languages, Whorf observes, "stuff" is treated grammatically as an infinite and continuous mass that is measurable, divisible, and can be sorted into containers. In these languages, time is grammatically equivalent to other substances, receiving the same treatment: water can be counted in cups, sand in pounds, and days (of time) can be lined up sequentially on a calendar, minutes and seconds (of time) divided out and measured with a clock. Whorf noted that Hopi, in contrast, treated days in their plurality with ordinal numbers (e.g., the tenth day), in their relational unfolding, as a series of befores and afters, rather than treating them as discrete units denoted with cardinal numbers (e.g., ten days). This difference between a relational and an absolute, uniform time echoes the tensions between Newtonian and quantum conceptions of time.

An investigation of time may seem esoteric and constructs for time easily considered abstract, but both are often quite practical and palpable, durable even. Time structures space, and vice versa. The access to different kinds of tech-

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nology materially changes one's experience of time, space, and the social relationships that develop therein. Velocity, speed, stagnation, or stillness are consequential and rarely value-neutral but entail social and affective effects—for example, notions of "modernity" or "backwardness"; simultaneously, manipulating velocity allows actors to achieve goals, to succeed or to fail. In the ethnographic settings discussed in this volume, we encounter technologies of temporality like clocks and calendars, but we also encounter other temporal technologies that go beyond these usual suspects—tea cups, boats, satellites, airplanes, airwaves, fingers. Such sources of technosocial power contribute to the production, maintenance, or upheaval of temporal orders.

Anthropologists have developed and adopted varied analytic constructs for time, including the palimpsest, chronotope, *longue durée*, and conjuncture, to make explicit their own conceptualizations of how time becomes manifest within their work. Archaeologists, for example, borrow the concept of the palimpsest to talk about how discrete pasts emerge in a single "moment." Linguistic anthropologists have increasingly extended Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) literary concept of the chronotope to trace the discursive construction of social worlds. The *longue dureé* is evoked in anthropological narratives to delineate perceived cycles or trajectories, and debates concerning periodization have famously been a locus for establishing expertise. This volume traces possible avenues opened up by an exploration of such varied frameworks for understanding time, their potentials, limitations, and alternatives.

In this volume we bring together questions of how time becomes palpable, spatialized, materialized, or conversely, how matter becomes, evokes, or dematerializes time. Contributors examine how time is experienced phenomenologically in the everyday and how large-scale temporal orders of modernity or ancient tradition are projected, recalled, and brought forth into the present. Temporalities affect our respective research sites and methodological approaches at varied scales: political epochs, agricultural cycles, lunar and solar calendrics, tidal regimes, second-to-second moments of interaction. Such temporal containers or intervals all provide at once structure and sites of agency.

Drawing on ethnographic data from Asia and the Americas, the case studies in this volume explore the production and representation of temporal frameworks, as well as subjects' experience of them, and the consequences of their intercalation or disarticulation. Especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts, frameworks for time have served as sites of contestation and negotiation. Temporal regimes, ranging from the mundane to the epochal, structure our lives. The drinking of tea in the morning and listening to radio programs, engaging

https://doi.org/10.1086/701150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with peers on mobile phones, and catching a ferry to descend the river or an airplane to reach the beyond are among the time-structuring activities examined in this volume.

Georgia Ennis and Anna Browne Ribeiro explore different temporal orders, and in particular, the latches or brokers that contribute toward the negotiation of different temporalities within two Amazonian contexts. In Amazonian Ecuador, Ennis examines how the temporal orders of the everyday and of ancient tradition become laminated upon one another. Morning time, which involves the preparation, serving, and drinking of tea, and the time of tradition become mediated and regimented through a radio program that produces a shared space for contemporary cultural performance of the ancestral. In Gurupá, Brazil, institutional calendars and market demands establish temporal orders not always aligned with those of community life. Where the earlier ethnography of Charles Wagley (1953) described Gurupá as an "Amazon Town" outside of time and history, Browne Ribeiro's ethnography attends to Gurupá's long-standing engagements with global economic rhythms, foregrounding the disjunctures between the competing temporal frames and to which Gurupaenses consciously and unconsciously orient.

Courtney Handman and Karl Swinehart investigate structural connections between state or institutional power, infrastructure, and the politicization of time in Papua New Guinea and Bolivia, respectively. Handman examines the temporal orders projected by Lutheran missionaries in Papua New Guinea through their juxtaposition of newly possible aviation with difficult, cumbersome travel by land. The compression of space through radio broadcast and airplane travel transformed the temporalities of both colonial extraction and missionary salvation. In highland Bolivia, Swinehart examines nationalist state discourses that reformulate a pre-Hispanic indigenous past as coterminous with a technologically advanced future through, among other initiatives, the launching of a telecommunications satellite. The cases examined by Swinehart not only invoke notions of modernity but also a particular foregrounding of the spatialization of time that draws on the space-time semantics of Aymara and Quechua, which contrast starkly with SAE semantics. In a diverse set of interventions in the public sphere, Bolivian state discourse invokes a trope of inversion, reversal, and revolution, in both the spatial and political senses of the term, within a framework that essentializes Andean and Western modes of time reckoning.

Stephen Rea's contribution discusses the temporality of Korean gaming and its reverberations in experiences of daily life. Rea considers the structuring ef-

https://doi.org/10.1086/701150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fects of leisure time within a larger context of capitalist development and class formation in Korea through an examination of the rhythms of Korean online gaming, in particular "ppalli ppalli munwha," a high-speed mode of play. Rea shows how this mode of entertainment has exceeded the realm of play to set the pace of many spheres of daily activity, a generalized frenetic state of "ppalli ppalli munwha" that has come to characterize Korean contemporary life.

These authors remind us that any sense that particular temporalities may be essentially Western or Other is not a preexisting state of affairs but a mutually constitutive relational result of encounter. Underlying all of these ethnographic cases are construals of modernity and of the present (with concomitant pasts and futures), of subjects situated within or outside of it, and of their respective alignments toward such construals. These articles demonstrate how subjects succeed in navigating imagined temporal divides, or bridge actual ones, bringing forth alternate, novel modernities. Whether in the shoring up of the nation-state or the saving of souls, cultural projects often project temporalities of progress and regress, imagined, perceived, or possible pasts and futures. These temporalities articulate with systems of value, production and circulation of goods and knowledge, and cultural projects in ways that are often contested and pose rich sites for anthropological inquiry. The articles in this volume demonstrate how temporal frameworks do not simply exist but are created and are not stable but constantly subject to reaffirmation, rearticulation, redefinition, or dissolution.

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https://doi.org/10.1086/701150 Published online by Cambridge University Press