

## Book Review: Time

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## Book Review

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Barbara Adam, *Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. ISBN 0-7456-2778-1, 184 pp.

To the series *Key Concepts* of Polity Press, Barbara Adam has contributed with a stout book on time. In the last 20 years the topic of time has attracted a much broader attention in the social sciences as can be deduced from the journal *Time & Society*. This makes the subject itself, however, rather complicated while it raises so many different issues. Adam has nevertheless taken a courageous initiative to identify key concepts related to time itself. In other publications like *Time and Social Theory* (1990) and *Timewatch* (1995) she has already clearly shown she can not only master the field of time studies but bring forward her own points of view. In the 1990 publication she stated that ‘time is always social time because only humans regulate and organise their lives by time. Only they conceptualise time. Only they use, control, allocate, and sell their time. Only they lead an “in time” existence and create their own histories and futures’ (p. 154). This definition includes that our views on time in the social sciences, as Adam stresses, cannot be separated from those in the natural sciences. Similar to the views of Norbert Elias, this topic is again recurring in her latest book where she intends to abandon that traditional dualism of natural and social time ‘in favour of a more reflective and reflexive, synthesising perspective on the subject matter’ (p. 104).

For her latest study she has taken a broad perspective, offering a journey to see time through many different lenses. The first lens is composed of myths and stories, ritual interactions and power relations. She depicts a *landscape* for the reader to wander in. The key issue in those ancient cultures is the temporality of being, which confronts each individual with the immemorial, existential issues of life and death. In those ancient cultures time was deified, like heaven, underworld, paradise, death and the cycles of renewal. Based on physical data of moon, sun and stars – the earliest ways to shape cultural forms of time reckoning – the Egyptians put the gods Osiris, Isis and Horus in charge of the three seasons associated with flooding, sowing and harvesting of the Nile delta. The priests were the first who began to name

and number particular moments of time to be respected in social life. Their knowledge about time provided them with a very powerful position, but in those ancient cultures and empires time stayed embedded in events, phenomena and processes.

Before moving into the modern world system that began in the 16th century to illustrate how time became reduced to a more profane topic she extensively deals with different time theories as developed by Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Husserl, Einstein, Heisenberg, Heidegger, Mead and Schutz, who were all, generally speaking, inspired by the Greek authors who dealt with permanence and change, motion and order. When Newton published *The Principia* in 1687, the clock had permeated the life of science. Newton was interested in the operational value of time as measure of motion, but he was not concerned with time in its own right. Neither was Marx, who did never focus on time *per se*. His theory of surplus value, however, provides the key to understand the development of industrial capitalism. Value is created by the processes of production and thus by the technologies that enter into these. All surplus value is derived from labour employed and exploited by capitalists whose benefit therefore can be seen as unpaid labour time. The ratio of surplus value to wage payments (paid labour time) is defined as relative surplus value. Absolute surplus value is raised by lengthening the working day; relative surplus value is increased by trying to compel workers to work at a faster pace, that is, *intensifying* work. Industrial capitalism became based on the intensification of work which could either lead to labour-saving or time-saving initiatives and usually both. When for example the 10 Hours Act was passed in Britain, speed-up processes immediately followed: the capitalists fought back by intensifying work again. Within capitalism, time became a decontextualized, a-situational, abstract exchange value. Instead of respecting the variable time of seasons, ageing, growth and decay, the invariable abstract time of the clock became hegemonic. The quantitative, divisible time of the clock was translated into money, leading to a commodification of time and, eventually, of life. Adam subsequently treats the other mentioned authors to describe their contributions to the analysis of time. The point she did not raise, however, is that Newton never used the clockwork metaphor. He disliked the mechanical clock as an authoritarian system, which could never match with the beautiful system, of the sun, planets and comets which proceeds from the dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.

Charged with a 50-page concise review of different time theories, she consecutively takes the reader into Part 2 of the study: the role of time in social life, exploring theory-impregnated time practices, which provide a large window containing a variety of lenses on the subject. Time practices focused on knowing the future, creating the future by (re)interpreting the past. She analyses how the six world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – that ‘share a belief in an eternal, transcendent principle beyond time and space from which our world emanates and to which we are ultimately to return’ (p. 90), have imposed in different forms their cultural will on time. Rituals about burials, ‘rites de passages’, dances and festivals, calendars and food preservation are illustrations of this cultural will that provide a collective beat to communal life. While accepting

that life is a temporary path in view of the eternal principle, human beings have constantly manipulated time by modifying nature's rhythms by lighting the hours of darkness and keeping ageing and decay at bay. Within this context it is still surprising how Christianity facilitated the clock-time revolution at the end of the Middle Ages. When the Chinese civilization, which in the 11th century was already familiar with the Su Sung water clock, became acquainted with the European mechanical clock, it was denounced as inaccurate, inappropriate for a society organized to variable hours and an affront to the emperor's self-esteem. Based on standardization and globalization, the modern world system, that is, the capitalists' world economy with its priority for and endless accumulation of capital, has been able to impose a standard time and a world time.

Colonization of time by illumination of gas and electricity, as well as colonization with time by imposing one universal time infrastructure on other parts of the world through wireless telegraph and telephone equipment, 'facilitated instantaneity and simultaneity, which means the elimination of duration and succession' (p. 119). Adam refers to the work of Manuel Castells, who in his *Rise of the Network Society* (1996), stresses not only the effects of simultaneity but also timelessness, meaning that the splicing together of unrelated events leads to a loss of chronological order and context-dependent rhythmicity.

After having introduced, through this variety of lenses, a fast range of topics related to time itself, in her last chapter she resumes the key issues by designing a conceptual framework based on five Cs: clock time, commodification, compression, colonization and control, which 'mark the distinctiveness of industrial societies' public temporal relations' (p. 143). Compression of time has not only been increased by intensifying work processes (Taylorism, Fordism, Flexibilization), but also through increasing tempo within transport, transmission and transplantation 'each with their own distinct means of enhancing independence of the social relations of time from space and the body' (p. 130). The biggest problem, however, is the concept of control which reduces time to an objectified, externalized phenomenon that is constructed to specific design principles. Adam is convinced that this is the biggest fixation the world economy is struggling with. While controlling the other four Cs, we seem to forget about tempering and transcendence, as well as a broader knowledge and know-how of time. In order to enlarge our scope about time, she insists upon the relevance of a label she had already introduced in 1998 as 'timescape' to draw attention to the complex of mutually implicated temporalities proposed. This notion indicates, 'first that time is inseparable from space and matter, and second, that context matters' (p. 143). It is fascinating to see how Adam tries to seduce the reader to move beyond thinking patterns in dualistic forms like day-night/light-dark/summer-winter. At the end of her exploration of key concepts in time studies she can, however, hardly detach herself from another dualistic form: 'What has slipped out of sight with the industrial way of life emerges from the shadow. We are once more confronted with questions about collective life and death, origin and destiny.' This should not be seen as a kind of criticism, because the book is an outstanding introduction to the topic itself. It inevitably invites one to explore the

landscape further, because ‘when so much control fails and converts intended actions into unintended consequences, there is a need to (re)consider the place and role of humans in the cosmic scheme of things, to take stock of the ways we approach finitude and the temporal limits to human being’ (p. 147).

## References

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