

The Social Life of Time: Introductory Remarks

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So good morning, and welcome everyone to the first Temporal Belongings conference.

This event has been in the works for years now and it really is so good to see you all here, particularly given our own encounter with the time of politics [in the form of the widespread strikes in UK Higher Education this year].

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For those who don't know my name is Michelle Bastian and I'm a lecturer here at the University of Edinburgh. I've been developing the Temporal Belongings research network (www.temporalbelongings.org) since 2011. I first received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to do a scoping study on time and community (Bastian 2014). Since then I've been working with a really amazing range of people to put on events. We've run research projects, created online resources and generally we've been working to find ways to support research on time and belonging.

At every event I've organised, I've had people coming up to me saying that they have found it difficult to find others working on time in their departments or schools. Time has no disciplinary holdfast and we often find ourselves without colleagues close by. So I'm really pleased that the network has got to the stage where we can run an international conference like this. It's important for timesmiths, or timenerds as we are variously known, to have venues for getting together, sharing our research and building wider networks.

So we're here to talk about the social life of time...

In recent social science literatures, a focus on the 'social life' of something suggests an interest in foregrounding the active capacities of what has traditionally been thought of as inert. Approaches drawing on Arjun Appadurai's framework (1988), look to follow the movement of an object, a device, a method through its everyday manifestations in order to understand how it takes part in producing the social. For us this suggests that in challenging accounts of time as an inert background to social life, we might want to focus on the agency of particular manifestations of time, and also attempt to situate them; to trace them through particular contexts and everyday activities.

A paper on "The Double Social Life of Methods" by John Law, Evelyn Ruppert and Mike Savage (2011) provides us with further avenues for thinking the social life of time. They argue that understanding research methods as having social lives requires two moves. The first, which they take to be relatively unremarkable, is to

claim that "methods are social because they are constituted by the social world of which they are a part". They claim that methods are not neutral, but have a purpose and they have advocates. They "reflect the concerns of [these advocates] and subsist in particular ecologies". That is they are *of* the social.

While this may be unremarkable when it comes to methods, if we think about making similar claims about time then we find ourselves working very much against the grain. Accounts of time as having a purpose? as having particular advocates? as requiring particular social and environmental ecologies in order to manifest? How do questions like these fit with concepts of time as objective and universal?

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The second claim made in the paper, which is taken to be more controversial, is that methods also "constitute and organise" the social. They are not just produced by the social, they claim that research methods also in turn *produce it*. Here we would appear to be on more familiar territory when it comes to time. That time organises the social is a less remarkable claim to make, particularly if the focus is on time-keeping, or shared histories and futures. However, we actually need both claims working together. That is, both that time *organises* the social and that time is *of* the social. If we don't understand time as *of* the social, then the politics of time, the politics of its role in constituting and organising, are hidden.

Given our interests in discrimination and transformation, this doubled focus on the social life of time supports a more critical look at the way time produces and performs some realities while shutting

down others, precisely in its role of organising and constituting social life. This is clear in Charles Mills' essay (2014) on "White Time", for example, where he discusses the 'white temporal imaginary' and its production of exclusionary temporal ghettos. Times do have purposes and advocates, both explicit and implicit. They also have critics.

Finally, a third step in analysing *The Social Life of Time* is to think again about how we define time. I hope I speak for the other organisers accurately here, but I think for all of us it is important to challenge to idea that time is, at its most fundamental, about flow, about the pace of this flow or about the various ways that past, present, future might mesh together within a temporal flow. In her work on Beckett, Laura Salisbury (2012) has drawn attention to the way time operates as a form of containment and a venue for experimentation. Lisa Baraitser, in her new book *Enduring Time* (2017), argues for a focus on suspended time. That is, time that is dull and obdurate, of the times that *don't pass* and the kinds of care work that take place within them. While Andy Hom (2018) has questioned the way that, within International Relations, notions such as linear time, event time and timelessness have failed to be unpacked and situated within particular contexts and discourses.

Time as movement, change, rupture, speed is no doubt important, but another focus might be the ways these aspects of time themselves arise from particular relational configurations. As Bruno Latour argues in his essay 'Trains of Thought' (2005), time flows in particular ways due to particular alignments of humans and nonhumans in relation, the flow of time is not itself a primary

phenomenon. Importantly, Latour notes that these configurations are not equally beneficial to all. So what might we make of a definition of time as uneven and unequal relationality, rather than time as flow?

With this definition work on the social life of time might ask: What form of relationality is a particular manifestation of time enacting? Who is included and who is excluded? Who appears, who disappears? Who has agency and who doesn't? What entities are aligned, and in what ways, in order for this experience of time to arise? Who benefits and who suffers?

While these questions may challenge dominant approaches to time in many disciplines, I think they are nevertheless ones that many of us here are grappling with. As we'll see over the next three days, this conference will showcase a 'critical time studies' (Huebener 2015) which takes issues of power, discrimination and transformation to be absolutely central to the question of what is time.

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