



## Sociological Futures: From Clock Time to Event Time

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### Abstract

This article articulates a shift from clock time to event time, a shift which raises particular challenges to dominant sociological strategies in regard to temporality, especially in regard to the future. In particular it raises challenges to the idea that alternative futures may be found by stretching time to the time disenfranchised or by seeking out and uncovering counter hegemonic forms of time. Taking feminist sociological approaches to time as a case in point, this article shows that while such strategies were relevant when time operated externally to events; they have little traction when time unfolds with events. For Sociologists to continue in their promise of working to secure alternative futures, their analyses must therefore become entangled in event time.

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**Keywords:** *Future, Time, Habit, Economy, Event*

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### Introduction

1.1 At this time of global economic and political crisis it seems more urgent than ever that Sociologists renew their commitment to the future, and especially their promise of working to secure alternative futures. But this article will suggest that to do so the discipline must rethink its strategies in regard to the forthcoming. In particular it must rethink the idea that alternative futures may be shored up either by stretching time to deliver futures to the time disenfranchised, or by uncovering counter-hegemonic forms of time. It will argue this to be the case since neither strategy is relevant in a context where the co-ordinates of temporalization are restructuring, a restructuring which involves a reworking of time itself, a reworking which concerns a shift from clock time to event time. This article will therefore claim that for Sociologists to renew their commitment to the future, their analyses of time must become entangled in event time.

### The Futurity of Action

2.1 Since its very inception the Sociological enterprise has made claims to the future (Adam, 2004), not least because that enterprise characteristically understands temporality to be inescapably tied to action in the world. Thus, and in the words of Bourdieu, 'practice [is] temporalization' (Bourdieu, 2000: 206). Aiming to break with a thing-in-itself view of time, a view which would have it that time has an object like quality operating external to subjects and their actions, Bourdieu argues we can do so by considering questions of temporalization from the point of view of the acting agent. Such a consideration he argues reveals time to be constituted in practice or will reveal that practice does not take place *in* time but *makes* time. To build this position Bourdieu turns to the future and especially as he terms it, 'the ordinary experience of pre-occupation and immersion in the forthcoming' (2000: 207). Thus in mundane action we aim not at a contingent future - a possible which may or may not happen - but at a future which is already present in the immediate present, a future which is already there. In a game of football, for example, a good player is one who places him or herself not where the ball is, but where the ball is about to land. In this instance, the forthcoming is not simply a possibility, but is something which is already present in the configuration of the game and in the present positions and postures of team-mates and opponents (Bourdieu, 2000: 208). For Bourdieu therefore the future is inscribed in the immediate present and more specifically is engendered by practical expectations constituted by our necessary immersion (and investment) in the social world. Indeed practice for Bourdieu is always aimed at the forthcoming: practical action will always concern futurity.

2.2 To understand how we are immersed not in a contingent but an already present forthcoming we must grasp however that for Bourdieu the social world comprises of social fields or structured spaces of positions which while having their own properties nonetheless are subject to general laws. Specifically, for

Bourdieu fields have stakes and interests but the stakes and interests at work in any specific field are irreducible to those operating in other fields (you can't, he says, make a philosopher compete for the prizes that interest a geographer (Bourdieu, 1993: 72)). Indeed, Bourdieu argues that in order for a field to function not only do there have to be stakes but also people prepared to play the game of that field. And, to play the game, agents participating in specific fields must be endowed with the habitus, that is, with the pre-reflexive and durable habits, dispositions, schemes of perception, appreciation and action immanent to specific fields, schemes which enable agents to perform acts of practical knowledge which are aligned to and engage the practical axiomatics of the field.

**2.3** But agents are not the benign carriers or mechanical followers of the rules and norms of fields. And this is so because the habitus acts as a system of *generative* schemes which engender practical action. Such schemes Bourdieu writes are 'the product of incorporation of the structures and tendencies of the world ... [and] make it possible to adapt endlessly to partially modified contexts, and to construct the situation as a complex whole endowed with meaning, in a practical operation of quasi-bodily *anticipation* of the immanent tendencies of the field' (Bourdieu, 2000: 139 emphasis in original). It is then the fact that we are incorporated in the world – that our dispositions are open to the very structures of the world, indeed are the incorporated form of those structures - that enables us to routinely anticipate and aim at the future. It is, in short, the relationship between habitus and field that explains our immersion in and routine anticipation of the forthcoming.

**2.4** Yet for Bourdieu temporalization is not a given potentiality of action, indeed for Bourdieu temporalization only takes place when habits and the habitus are aligned with the objective conditions of fields. This is made dramatically clear by Bourdieu in a discussion of exclusion from the economic field, and especially in his description of how the chronically unemployed often exist without a future. And that is so because for a practical disposition towards the forthcoming to be constituted a certain threshold of objective chances is required. In losing their work the unemployed, and especially the chronically unemployed, are deprived of such chances or, more precisely, are deprived of an objective universe (deadlines, dates and timetables to be observed, buses to take, rates to maintain, targets to meet and so on) which orientates and stimulates protensive practical action. <sup>[1]</sup> This deprivation, Bourdieu goes on, is evidenced in the chronically unemployed typically experiencing time as purposeless and meaningless – as dead time - and in their often incoherent visions of the future. The chronically unemployed therefore have 'no future' precisely because they are excluded from those objective conditions – or the pull of the field - which would allow the practical making of time.

**2.5** Much has of course been made of the manner in which Bourdieu assumes that habits and habitus will always tend to submit and adapt to the conditions of the field (see eg. Butler, 1999), but here I will resist the impulse to rehearse these arguments, and concentrate instead on what could be missed if this line of critique were followed. Specifically, what could be missed is the fact that in his writings on temporality it is telling that the example Bourdieu draws upon to elaborate how the future can be made in practice only when habits and field are in alignment is that of the economic field. Telling of course because in industrial capitalism the temporal rules of the economic field – and most notably the measurement of time in terms of abstract and reversible units of the clock (expressed in devices such as bus timetables, deadlines, targets and rates of production) - were hegemonic (Postone, 1993; Adam, 1994). And while Bourdieu himself fails to recognise or elaborate this hegemony, <sup>[2]</sup> nonetheless it is vital to consider in relation to the issue of how Sociologists have orientated themselves to questions of the future, an orientation which is particularly well illustrated by the case of feminist sociology.

## **Clock Time Futures**

**3.1** Consider for example that in industrial capitalism the question of access to time making - that is, access to the actualisation of a (clock time) future and indeed the issue of no future - was not simply an issue for the chronically unemployed but also for many women. Thus industrial capitalism was characterised by the exclusion and segregation of many women from and in the economic field (Walby, 1984) or, and to put it in Bourdieusian terms, from the very objective universe - timetables, targets, production rates and deadlines - which would allow the actualisation of time in practice synchronised with the game of the field. These socio-historic conditions produced two apparently oppositional but I would argue related responses within feminist sociology and feminist theory. The first was to develop a variety of strategies to allow women access to the making and owning of clock time, and the second was to develop alternative accounts of women's time, stressing not a reversible and abstract temporal universe but a lived temporal universe of singularity and irreversibility.

**3.2** In regard to the first strategy, we might locate endeavours to stretch clock time and its associated technologies to measure socially reproductive activities as paradigmatic of attempts to counter the exclusion of many women from the objective universe of the clock. Such attempts typically made use of techniques such as time diary and time budget methods which mapped and measured women's socially reproductive activities in terms of abstract, reversible units of clock time. While such attempts had a tendency towards failure since such activities typically escaped, evaded and defied measure in units of clock time, not least because of their live, qualitative and heterogeneous qualities (Adam, 2002; Marazzi, 2007; Adkins, 2009), nonetheless such strategies aimed at including women in the universe of clock time, an inclusion which for many feminists was vital if women were to become full socio-political subjects.

**3.3** In contrast, the second strategy eschewed the idea that a feminist politics of time should seek to include women in the universe of the mechanical clock and instead emphasised alternative time universes that women occupied. Often phenomenological in character, this work emphasised not a decontextualized, mechanical, reversible time but an embodied, lived and irreversible temporal universe, a time arranged not in standardised units or amenable to external measure but one that is emergent, processual and immanent to events, especially to patterns of birth and life. We might locate Julia Kristeva's (1981) work on women's time as paradigmatic of this strategy, especially her injunction that female subjectivity is linked to cyclical

and monumental forms of temporality which profoundly challenge conceptions of time as linear, teleological and prospective. While this body of work is often understood as offering a corrective to a masculinist preoccupation with death (see eg. Adam, 2002), nonetheless it may be better read (as I have also suggested is the case for attempts to stretch the universe of clock time to those activities where time cannot be exchanged in return for money), as an historically specific response to a general exclusion of many women from the then hegemonic clock time. Thus, while the first strategy sought to extend normative clock time and its values to lived and live activities, the second sought to discover alternative counter-hegemonic rhythms and values in the very same activities. And crucially both strategies were made possible by the hegemony of clock time with one embracing its normative values and the other seeking a ground for critique of this time in the phenomenological shadow lands constituted by the very dominance of the clock. And both, we might add, attempted in their different ways to give women a future.

**3.4** For the case of industrial society feminist sociological analyses of temporality and of the future were therefore seriously (and quite rightly) entangled with and in the dominant and hegemonic organisation of time, indeed (and even though this was not made explicit) were entangled in the dynamic inter-play of the relationships between practice, temporalization and the rules and logics of clock time. And it was of course not just feminist sociological accounts of time which were entangled in this dynamic but sociological accounts of time more generally. Thus while objectivist, normative and empirical sociological accounts of clock time and phenomenological and lifeworld accounts are usually held to be in opposition (particularly in as much as the latter stress alternative and counter-hegemonic time universes and futures) these may also be understood to be related. Specifically, they may also be understood to be entangled with and (and made possible by) a hegemonic clock time (including its exclusions). Yet while sociological accounts of time have been seriously and rightly entangled with and in the dynamic inter-play of the relationships between practice, temporalization and the rules and logics of clock time, we must surely ask if these forms of entanglement, and the futures generated in these entanglements, are relevant in our current juncture which witnesses a reworking of the relationship between habits and fields, a reworking which suggests that the hegemony of clock time associated with industrial society is being undercut.

### **From Clock Time to Event Time**

**4.1** Consider for example the profound forms of the restructuring of work and working life witnessed in the last decade or more which have involved a restructuring of the objective universe, including the time universe, of the economic field. More specifically we can point to the decline in shared collective measures of time in working practices (working days, deadlines, dates and timetables to observed, buses to take, rates to maintain and so on) and to the emergence of individualised experiences of working time whereby increasingly flexible, insecure and contractual workers are compelled to create their own working patterns, arrangements and practices (Beck, 2005); whose working time and non-working time is indistinguishable (Gill and Pratt, 2009); whose working time cannot be captured by and escapes the standardising impulses of spreadsheet formulae (Gregg, forthcoming); and whose value is measured not in units of labour time but in measures which confound notions of clock time, for instance in as yet unrealised and non-actualised potential (Sennett, 2006; Adkins, 2008). As Beck has wryly put it in regard to the latter, flexibility means 'cheer up, your skills and knowledge are obsolete, and no one can say what you must learn in order to be needed in the future' (Beck, 2005: 3).

**4.2** These kinds of forms of restructuring of the objective temporal universe of the economic field as well as of working habits and dispositions suggest not only that the hegemony of the mechanical clock is in decline, but also that the political economy of time is restructuring, and certainly that it is not in the pull of devices measuring time in units of the clock in which protensive practical action is (or is not) actualised. In short, the restructuring of the objective conditions of the economic field and of working habits and dispositions suggests that the actualisation of time in practice is now being co-ordinated along new axes, axes which presumably are in need of elaboration if Sociologists are to maintain their claim to the future. In regard to the elaboration of these axes it may be tempting to assume - as do many commentators on the process of individualisation - that these simply concern a decline in the powers of social structure and a proliferation of the powers of agency vis-à-vis time, an assumption expressed in the idea that we are now compelled to create our own futures. That is to say, it is tempting to assume that processes of individualisation in regard to time simply mean that agents now have increasing choice (even if that choice is compelled) in regard to time. However is this not to assume that the processes at issue in regard to individualisation, or in the reconstruction of the relationship between habitus and field, do not involve a material reconstruction time itself? Is it not to assume that in the time of individualisation, time itself remains the same?

**4.3** Yet a reworking of the actualisation of time is certainly implied in the undercutting of the hegemony of clock time, that is, in the undercutting of a form of time which measures events exogenously to their operations in abstract, reversible units of the clock, and in particular is implied in the ways in which clock time appears to have increasingly less traction in regard to phenomena it may attempt to measure. Consider, for example, that commodities increasingly evade measure in clock time because, and as Thrift (2008) has elaborated, commodities are now not simply fixed and frozen substances which move *in* time but are processual events in which time and phenomena are entirely entangled. Thus commodities now have their own temporal profiles, witnessed in the proliferation of commodities which are constantly on the move via continuous processes of experimentation, qualification and requalification (Callon et al, 2002). Crucial here is that for such commodities time does not exist externally to the phenomena or event it may attempt to measure as we encounter in clock time, but is merged with and unfolds with phenomena. Crucial here, in other words, is that in the case of the commodity we witness a shift in time, a shift we might describe as one from clock time to event time.

**4.4** This shift in time raises a number of immediate issues, not least those relating to the actualisation of the future. We might observe for example that in as much as event time does not operate externally to events but unfolds with events, this time confounds the key logic and dynamic of industrial society,

namely that of structure-action or field-habitus. That is, this time confounds the very dynamic which Bourdieu would claim allows for the mundane, routine and unconscious anticipation of the future. Event time implies in other words that the dynamic of the actualisation of the future in practice is shifting and moreover that this process cannot be engaged with reference to any depth or causal models, but with reference to models which resist this logic, for instance with reference to models of surface and of implication (Adkins and Lury, 2009). Event time is in other words entangled in a transformation of the social field, a transformation which following Latour (2005) we might understand as involving a move from the social as territory to the social as circulation. But while it is urgent that the co-ordinates of the actualisation of the future in event time be elaborated, we might also ask, following Bourdieu, is there a political economy to and of event time? Is there a 'no future' of event time? And if so how might that no future be constituted? Indeed we might even ask, are these appropriate or relevant questions to ask of this time? What I am arguing for here is a sociological elaboration of event time, an elaboration which is urgent if Sociology is still able to make claims to the future. Thus much as feminist sociological analyses of time for the case of industrial society were relevant in as much they were entangled in clock time, sociological analyses of the future, of the new and of change must now be entangled in the actualisation of time in practice in event time.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'objective chances' and 'objective universe' are Bourdieu's (2000: 221-227).

<sup>2</sup> This lack of recognition should in turn be understood as part of Bourdieu's more general failure to specify the dynamics of capitalist accumulation (Calhoun, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that this strategy is still in circulation within feminist sociology. In the context of debates on globalization, for example, the universalization and naturalization of clock time as an abstract exchange value has been understood to increasingly render invisible many of women's activities and especially socially reproductive activities. And one response to the intensifying invisibility of such activities has been to argue for the articulation of a politics of rights in regard to time, including the right to ownership of time (see eg Adam, 2002). Such a politics thus seeks to substantively extend the rules of the mechanical clock, and crucially the idea that time is external to the person and events it measures, to enable the clock time disenfranchised to own and exchange time and hence to have a future.

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