

# Time and Social Theory

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Social theorists writing about time generally agree that in the hands of humans this single linear, objective, natural physical dimension is transformed into multiple structured socio-cultural dimensions. “Social” time is overlaid with meaning and value and the linearity of physical time is re-shaped by convention into all manner of “unnatural” forms. Beyond the agreement that “social” must be distinguished from “natural” time, however, there is a great deal of diversity in how social theorists see time and temporality and their relevance to understanding the social.

Social theory’s questions begin by asking whether there is a “social” time distinct from both natural/cosmological time and personal/subjective time. How are social processes conditioned by their temporality? How is social reality constituted in and across time? Are there multiple “social times” associated with different social structures?

## THREE BRANCHES

Treatments of time in social theory can be somewhat crudely divided into three categories. The first includes the work of thinkers who have made explicit attempts to do a “sociology of time.” The second is composed of work which deals with time explicitly in the course of theorizing other social phenomena. In the third category we find social theories in which time plays an important but only implicit role.

“Sociology of time” perspectives include attempts to define “social time,” catalog forms of temporal regularity, describe multiple temporalities associated with different forms of social organization, explain cross-cultural or trans-historical differences in the experience and organization of time. Representative authors in this category are Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss & Henri Hubert, Pitrim Sorokin & Robert K. Merton, Georges Gurvitch, Wilbert Moore, Julius A. Roth, and Eviatar Zerubavel.

The second strand – corollary theories of time – theories of social time elaborated as key components of theories of other phenomena. Included here is work by Karl Marx, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, Norbert Elias, Niklas Luhmann, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens.

The third strand includes theories of diverse social phenomena – social change, development, diffusion, planning, for example – in which, even though not explicitly thematized, time plays a critical role.

## Distinguishing Philosophy of Time from Social Theory of Time

Although there are many overlaps and interdependencies, it is useful to distinguish “time and social theory” from “the philosophy of time.” To the latter are generally left questions such as what time is, whether time is real, how time is perceived or experienced, and how human existence is conditioned by its temporality.

Philosophical theories variously identify the origins of temporality in the actual experience of change, birth, growth, decay, and death and the experience of memory, planning, and expectation. For Aristotle (Book IV of the *Physics*) the “sense of time” depends on the mind registering change. St. Augustine, in *The Confessions* argues that time is a creation of God who is outside of time. Isaac Newton, to the contrary, argued that time is independent of both motion and God. For Immanuel Kant, time is real insofar as all experience is in time, but it is also ideal because it is a form of intuition, logically prior to experience, a contribution of the mind. Henri Bergson distinguished between the time of experience and the mind from the objectified time of clocks, mathematics and physics. Edmund Husserl employed the phenomenological method to analyze the experience of inner time consciousness. William James described the temporality of the stream of consciousness. Martin Heidegger looks at *Dasein*’s continual participation in its coming into being and its being toward death.

From these writers and others, philosophy has bequeathed social theory several dualities which, even if rejected by many theorists, continue to serve as theoretical touchstones. These include *chronos* (time/interval/while) vs. *kairos* (opportunity, critical/right moment in time), *aeternitas* (spreading out of time) vs. *tempus* (differentiation between past and future), *temps* (objective time) vs. *durée* (flow of duration), and linear vs. cyclical time.

## **SOCIOLOGY OF TIME : TIME AS THE OBJECT OF SOCIAL THEORIES**

Durkheim is often seen as the founder of “the sociology of time.” His *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is ostensibly about the nature of religion, but its overarching goal is to demonstrate, contra Kant, the social origin of the categories of thought – time, space, class, causality. He locates the social epistemologically in between the empiricists’ “mind as *tabula rasa*” and the a priorists’ “mind as hardwired.” Durkheim acknowledges the reality of the subjective experience of time but suggests that this is not the “time” as we are talking about it when we ask what time is. As a category time is not for me, but for us. The framework against which things are temporally located is taken from collective social life. “A calendar expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity. ... what the category of time expresses is a time common to the group, a social time, so to speak. In itself it is a veritable social institution” (Durkheim 1965, 23).

Hubert & Mauss extended this idea showing how social perception allowed groups to assign mathematically equal times socially unequal meanings as when the year between 20 and 21 brings new legal rights but that between 30 and 31 is relatively uneventful. This theme is continued and extended by Sorokin and Merton (1937) who argue that social time is not merely different from astronomical time, but that it admits of many variants – social time varies qualitatively across social space. Different calendars, systems of time reckoning, and meanings of temporality are to be expected in different societies, locations within societies, and even in association with different activities.

The idea of a multiplicity of social times taken up by Gurvitch in *The Spectrum of Social Time* (1964). Gurvitch identifies eight kinds of social time, each associated with specific manifestations of sociability (communion, community, and mass) or “levels of we-ness,” types of social groupings, and degrees of continuity/discontinuity and contingency/certainty. “Enduring time” is the time of kinship, families and local demography, the enduring

nowadays of everyday life. “Deceptive time” is the time of the daily round with its routines and surprises. “Erratic time” is the time of irregular life and world events, the uncertainties of ongoing history. “Cyclical time” is the time of dependable recurrences in life. “Retarded time” is the time of social symbols and institutions which, by the time they attain “reality” they are anchored backward in the past. As tradition and convention they are used in life moving forward but are marked by permanence that is backward reaching. By contrast, “alternating time” is the time of rules and algorithms and recipes. It is also based on the past and settled but it is used in moving forward toward change. The time of economy and industry is alternating time – it depends on what has been learned but is not about mere repetition. “Pushing forward time” is the time of aspiration and innovation. In it we reach out to the future, pulling the present forward. Finally, “explosive time” is the time of collective creation and revolution. It is the time which allows existing structures to be superceded and replaced.

A different tack on the multiplicities of social time was taken by social ecologists and functionalist thinkers of the 1960s. Here we see explicit concern with developing taxonomies and typologies of temporal patterning associated with different forms of social organization. Sorokin identified synchronicity and order, rhythm and phases, periodicity and tempo, Hawley, rhythm, tempo, timing. Moore discusses synchronization, sequence, and rates as fundamental socio-temporal processes with respect to a variety of institutions (the family, career, organizations, voluntary associations, and the city). He examines the phenomena of temporal concentration and segregation (as when fresh food wholesaling takes place in the wee hours so that produce is in the stores during shopping hours), temporal complementarity and schedule staggering which ease loads on systems (as when flex time reduces rush hour traffic), but can also result in temporal mismatches between individuals or institutions (as when shift-working spouses never see one another or working mothers cannot chaperone school trips). Roth described “timetable norms” as collective understandings of proper timing of life events (such as when one can expect to get be up for promotion or how a couple can date before they ought to “get serious”).

Zerubavel, in several influential works, consolidates much previous work and explicitly aims to establish a “sociology of time” (e.g., Zerubavel 1981; Zerubavel 1985) by examining phenomena such as schedules, calendars, public/private time, the week, holidays. In contrast to more ecological approaches above, which focus on the temporal patterning of social life, Zerubavel’s object is to elucidate the social foundations of temporal patterning. By analogy to Goffman’s public order, he focuses on the “sociotemporal order” which he differentiates from the biotemporal and physiotemporal orders. His analysis is built around the recognition of four forms of sociotemporal regularity which are neither natural, nor individually voluntaristic, but are, rather, conventional: sequential structure (collective agreement about the proper temporal order of activities); duration (how long things should last); temporal location (what should be done when – schedules); and rates of recurrence (how often things occur). These forms can be found at scales ranging from cognition and social interaction to organizations and whole societies. They are typically overlaid with normative prescriptions and temporal ordering is implicated in the general social order.

## **COROLLARY THEORIES OF TIME**

Many writers have developed treatments of time and temporality as corollaries to the investigations of other phenomenon. Time plays a role, for example, in Schutz’s theory of

social action, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, Giddens' theory of structuration. Mead, Elias, and Luhmann are often cited as theorists of time but here too their analyses of temporality are in service of other issues. Yet another set of theorists who deal with temporality in their analyses of the rationalization of society includes Marx, Weber, and Foucault among others.

Temporal considerations in Alfred Schutz's work on the meaning of action, routinization, social relationships, and multiple realities are important both in the field of phenomenological sociology and beyond it. Schutz used Husserl's phenomenology to provide a social psychological foundation for Weber's theory of meaningful social action. If meaning is retrospective and requires reflection, how can forward looking action be meaningful? How can an actor be consciously rational, aware of his/her "in-order-to" motive? Schutz employs Husserl's theory of inner time consciousness to show how a future act can be apprehended in the future perfect tense and hence be a part of the actor's choosing projects of action. Routinization is the process whereby such chosen, meaningful courses of action become typified and taken-for-granted as "I can do it again." The world of others is temporally structured. Schutz divides it first into those who are temporally inaccessible (predecessors and successors) and those who are temporally accessible. Those with whom we share time are further divided into those who are spatially not accessible (contemporaries) and those who are (consociates). With the latter group there is the possibility of sociation in its ideal form, the We-relation, in which, Schutz says, our inner times gear into one another and we "grow older together." In addition to everyday waking reality, Schutz has theorized "multiple realities" of fantasy, dreaming, and scientific theory. Each reality, according to Schutz, has its own distinctive "temporal style."

Marx's analysis of ideology introduced the idea that knowledge and ideas are historically contingent. More generally, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge implies a temporal component in the meaning of all social and cultural phenomena. He also introduced the idea of time as identity and social location, and generations as collective identities in his essay "The Problem of Generations." Contemporary work on cohorts and historical generations, the importance of biographical phases and the life course as structures of analysis continue this tradition.

Giddens' theory of structuration is an attempt to transcend structure/agency dualism by holding that structure and agency are recursively related: structures both constrain and enable actors even as actions constitute and reproduce those structures. From Hägerstrand's time-geography Giddens borrows five basic spatial-temporal constraints: the indivisibility of the body; the finitude of lifespan; duration/sequence/one task at a time; movement in space is always movement in time; finite packing capacity of time/space. Giddens suggests that the central task in social theory is to explain "time-space distancing" – the stretching of social systems across space and time – in the face of these fundamental constraints. Time, though, is not a mere environment of action, a dimension against which it takes place. Social life – from the reflexive self to enduring social institutions – is both subject to and constitutive of social temporality. Three "times" are key here: the time of Heidegger's *Dasein*, the basic finite temporality of being which is always a part of human existence; *durée*, the time of the day-to-day flow of intentional action; *longue durée*, the time of institutional duration. These times and their corresponding structures and practices are not hierarchical building blocks of one another. Rather, they are always co-constituting; everyday routine involves all three.

If Durkheim and his descendants had build a sociology of time around the dualism of natural and social time, others begin with the analysis of the origins of “social” time and move toward subsuming natural time. Mead develops his ideas about time in the context of his general theory about the evolution of consciousness and society. In *The Philosophy of the Present* Mead suggests the primacy of sociality as constitutive of mind and self which in turn apprehend time as the emergent contrast of past and future with the present. For Mead, the social and the psychological are an instance of “nature” and so this explanation of the psychology and sociology of time is an explanation of time itself.

Luhmann develops a similar perspective on time in his systems theory. Like Mead he sees time as emerging from the difference between past and future relating to one another in the present and like Mead he sees temporality not as uniquely human but as a part of the natural world of which humanity finds itself a part.

Several theorists posit changes in the meaning of time, attitudes toward time, and ways of experiencing time as a component/effect of cultural evolution. Elias suggests, for example, that as societies develop they require more complex forms of coordination and so from generation to generation humans acquire improved capacity for symbolizing time and using it as a “means of orientation.” Weber and others describe the progressive rationalization of time as a component of the rationalization of society beginning with the development of the Rule of St. Benedict. The primary theme here is change from “natural” and pre-industrial time to “rationalized” time. The former is continuous and spontaneous while the latter is subdivided and regimented. More recently Foucault has written about the micro-division of time as a manifestation of power, echoing and generalizing the observations of critics of F.W. Taylor’s scientific management time and motion analysis. Marx, Tönnies, and Simmel all allude to the replacement of natural pace with artificial and standardized pace of life as city time displaces the time of villages. “In the city,” Lewis Mumford famously wrote, “time becomes visible” (Mumford 1938, 4).

## **TIME AS AN IMPLICIT COMPONENT OF SOCIAL THEORIES**

A discussion of time and social theory would not be complete without mention of how time and temporality are frequently implicit components of social theories, most often as a taken-for-granted dimension along which a process plays out. Despite making little or no attempt to problematize time, these lines of thought offer potentially fertile territory for theoretical exploration in examining their unexamined temporal content.

Time is implicit in theories of social change, social mobility, cultural lag, life course and life cycle, careers, diffusion, planning, narrative, biography, and collective memory.

Nineteenth century social theory paid a lot of attention to the question of how societies evolve and develop in an attempt to understand where European society had been and where it was going. Condorcet, Comte, Hegel, Marx, and Spencer all offered teleological theories of the stages of societal development in which time is a taken-for-granted dimension. Social mobility theories invoke time as either a measure of movement in social space. Cultural lag theories depend on a background temporal dimension. Life course, life cycle, and career theories look at lives in time. Studies of information and innovation diffusion connect social space and time. Time scales are also implicated in planning. Recent work implicating time includes investigations of collective memory, narrative, and network dynamics. (Total document word count 2,931)

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## **SEE ALSO**

Emile Durkheim  
Anthony Giddens  
Alfred Schutz  
Space  
Structuration Theory