

# Possibility and the temporal imagination

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## Why Time Matters for Possibility

There is a clock with three hands in my hometown of Bristol. It sits high up on the sandstone wall of the market hall, above the busy crowds below. One hand marks the hours, while 2 different minute-hands, one red one black, mark 'time' 10 min apart. A short walk away, fixed into the pavement outside a supermarket on a busy road, beneath the feet of passers-by, you can see a small bronze plaque. This marks the place, it tells us, where 'London time' was first brought to the west country, via a telegram carrying the Greenwich Meantime signal to the city. The plaque and three-handed clock are both material reminders that time does not just 'exist' as a neutral container for human life waiting to be discovered; rather, the time measures we use are a product of people, technologies and political decisions. They remind us that any measure of time is always selected from many possible measures of change, some of which may be in conflict. And they remind us that such measures come to normalise particular social relations and naturalise particular non-inevitable ways of coordinating and organising ourselves - in this case, bringing Bristol's day-to-day working practices into alignment with the centre of power in London. Timing mechanisms today are wildly diverse, from the calculation of parts per million of carbon

dioxide molecules in the atmosphere telling us that it is time for wealthy nations to reduce their consumption, to the rewriting of calendars by populists and demagogues as tools to ritualise collective memory and coordination social relations. The selection of timing practices reflects dominant values and has material, cultural and social effects, bring particular activities into alignment and coordination, alienating others, drawing attention to and valuing different forms of change.

In turn, timing practices create what Barbara Adam calls 'timescapes', rhythms of life that coordinate human and non-human actors and that naturalise the values and structures of institutions, communities, particular places or whole societies (Adam, 1998; Lefebvre, 2004; Southerton, 2020). Consider the familiar organisation of schooling around the time of the clock and a set of progression targets rather than the non-linear, multi-directional learning practices of young children. Or the international timing mechanisms of 'development' used to position and compare nations against measures of industrial and infrastructural investment (Escobar, 2011).

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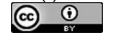
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Both mechanisms position children and nations in comparative relations to each other, mapping them onto a pre-determined trajectory that then reciprocally frames some as ‘ahead’ and others as ‘behind’. These timing mechanisms act as rationales for intervention, triggering a host of activities or punishments that together constitute a timescape oriented towards coordinating people, bodies, non-human actors towards the goal of getting children and nations ‘back on track’ or ‘caught up’. Such dominant timescapes, however, obscure the always-existing, multiple temporalities and timing mechanisms of lived experience (Baraitser, 2017; Sharma, 2014), the different measures of change that might be valued by those concerned and limit the perception of what might be either possible or desirable. They produce the isolation and abjectification of those whose bodies or worldviews cannot or will not for whatever reason, align with the dominant selected rhythm. When timescapes are allied with power, as industrial and colonial histories show, arrhythmia becomes subject to intervention and control, bodies are forcibly and violently brought into dominant time structures (Nanni, 2012; Pierre, 2015; Rooney, 2021).

Timescapes are also discursively constructed by what the political theorist Nomi Lazar calls ‘temporal frames’ – narratives about time that structure the stories we tell of the world (Lazar, 2019). Such frames include, for example, the idea of time as linear and singular, an arrow moving endlessly forwards and upwards in a dynamic of endless progress (an essential component of development thinking); cyclical origin stories or wave-like accounts of the ‘rise and fall’ of civilisations that position the present as a temporary aberration soon to be corrected; eschatological accounts of inevitable endtimes; utopian accounts of a vision of the future soon to be achieved but endlessly deferred. These (and other) temporal frames are key discursive mechanisms for securing political projects – from Trump’s cyclical nativist ‘Make America Great Again’ to the apocalyptic narrative of

climate protest (‘10 years to save the planet’). Temporal frames also naturalise starting points and end points, define origin stories and underpin naturalised future visions. They invite us to position ourselves in the urgency of the present or the awe and wonder of deep time. They mobilise familiar temporal tropes – ‘children are the future’, ‘our elders are our memory’. Such temporal frames influence who and what we value, direct individuals’ and societies’ attention to what is important, and tell us a story about our relationship to other people, species and times. The deployment of temporal frames also reflects and intensifies social cleavages. The eschatological narrative of ‘Net Zero by 2050 or else future catastrophe’, for example, comes into tension with the historical narratives of Indigenous and colonised nations for whom, in Kyle Whyte’s words, ‘the apocalypse has already happened’ (Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020; Whyte, 2018). Indeed, temporal frames that disconnect narratives of the future from stories of the past are a prime source of conflict around the world, in particular in situations in which the ongoing presence of the past is a subject of contention (Hyde, 2019; Sharpe, 2016; Sriprakash, 2022)

Time, in other words, is neither natural nor neutral. Our timescapes and narratives are constituted by both social and physical phenomena and have, in turn, political and economic effects that structure values and beliefs in often invisible ways. Indeed, it is precisely because timescapes and temporal frames are commonly misrecognised or misrepresented as ‘natural’, that they come to operate as effective forms of invisible power (Lazar, 2019, p. 58). It is unsurprising, then, that the history of political protest and the attempt to construct alternative realities, has often been organised around a challenge to an impoverished, singular conceptions of time that abjectify communities and obscure the possibility of other modes of organising lives. From the suffragettes blowing up Edinburgh’s astronomical observatory to the beatniks in the 1970s challenging ‘respectable

time-values' (E.P Thompson, cited in Rooney, 2021), to the graffiti 'No Cops, No Jails, No Linear Fucking Time', scrawled on an Oakland wall during the Black Lives Matter Protests, questioning the temporal frames and practices of societies has long been part of the practice of noticing other possibilities in the present.

It is for these reasons – that timing practices and narratives become habitual timescapes that in turn focus and blind our attention to different aspects of reality – that the question of time and our relationship to it is such a powerful force in structuring the perception of possibility. It is also precisely for these reasons that a temporal imagination is required – one that is capable of enabling us to reflect on how habitual timescapes are working in intimate and powerful ways to limit our imagination and attention to the emergent possibility of other worlds.

### **The temporal imagination: A definition**

In calling for the cultivation of the temporal imagination as a critical resource for possibility thinking I follow in the footsteps of C Wright Mills, David Harvey, Maxine Greene and Barbara Adam (Adam, 1990; Greene, 2011; Harvey, 1990; Mills, 1959) who foreground the interpersonal, empathetic and critical functions of the imagination. As such, I propose that the temporal imagination might be understood as: the critical and reflexive capacities to provincialise our own and dominant naturalised conceptions of time, to attune ourselves to the multiple temporal frames and timescapes present in any situation, and to engage in dialogue with others who use different temporal frames and practices.

This definition makes three moves that are directly aligned with the ontological and ethical project of Possibility Studies (Glăveanu, 2022). First, it insists that the world as we see it, is not all that it might be – what seems a 'natural' timescape is provincial, situated and provisional. Second, it insists on what Arturo Escobar calls

pluriversal possibility, namely that the world as it exists *is already* an abundant site of many different ways of living in time, measuring time, coordinating ourselves and conceptualising time and that therefore our challenge is to make these visible (Escobar, 2020). Third, it invites an encounter between different temporal frames and mechanisms as a foundation for deepening mutual understanding, analysing fault lines, and exploring with others, new possibilities. These three moves, I suggest, will assist in cultivating our attentiveness to new possibilities currently hidden behind and within naturalised timescapes and in so doing, help us to take up the challenge of 'infusing 'what is' with new perspectives' (Glăveanu, 2022).

In proposing we can cultivate such a temporal imagination as a resource for possibility thinking, I start from the assumption that the temporal imagination, as with any other imaginative activity, is resourced by social and cultural resources that offer tools, images and concepts to scaffold and mediate our ideas of the world (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). It is not a fixed capability. We can create new habits of attention which help us to develop a sensitivity to the multiplicity of temporal frames and processes that are at play in any given situation. Such attentiveness, as with any form of attention, will always be partial and limited, shaped by our traditions and intentions. There will be no fixed and universal body of 'temporal literacy' skills (Facer & Sriprakash, 2021). Indeed, recognising these limits is precisely part of what constitutes the temporal imagination. There will always be an enrichment of our imagination that arises from attending to others' perceptions and experiences of time. The practice of temporal imagination is always unfinished, reflexive.

We might, then, think of the cultivation of the temporal imagination as a form of attention that allows us to become alert to the different temporal frames, rhythms and processes at play in any situation and the possibilities that might emerge from them.

## Sensitising the temporal imagination

How might this practice of temporal attention in search of possibility be cultivated? I discuss elsewhere the forms of pedagogy and methodology we might want to deploy. For now, and for brevity, however, I simply propose a set of questions that we might ask ourselves to deepen our temporal attentiveness. These questions derive from the attention to time emerging from, but not limited to: scholarship in the Sociology of Time (Adam, 1990), Critical Time Studies (e.g. Bastian, 2011; Birth, 2012), Rhythmanalysis (Alhadeff-Jones, 2023; Lefebvre, 2004), Practice Theory (Southerton, 2020), Critical Theory (Grosz, 2005), Futures Studies (Andersson, 2006; Kim & Dator, 1999; Miller et al., 2018), Indigenous Scholarship (Country et al., 2016; Yunkaporta, 2021), Critical Heritage Studies (DeSilvey, 2017), Decolonial Studies (Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020; Todd, 2015; Whyte, 2018) and Philosophy of Communication (Lipari, 2010). I cluster them under three headings: attention to rhythmic coordination, to temporal narratives, and to pluriversal temporalities.

### *Attending to the rhythmic coordination*

From these traditions, we might begin to become aware of the temporal practices of any situation by asking: What are the rhythms of life in this situation? Who is coordinated and who is out of synch? What are the mechanisms that are bringing different people, non-human actors, things and organisations into synchronisation and how are these being aligned? How are these timing mechanisms themselves produced? What are the misalignments in rhythm? Are there moments when things and people come out of step or become unsynchronised? How might changes in rhythm affect the nature of the situation – if things sped up or slowed down what would happen? What might happen if the regularity of this rhythm changes or is disturbed? What actors might change their pace and tempo to allow others to align themselves? When does time flow and when is it disturbed

or impeded? What rhythms cannot be changed and why? How is arrhythmia being dealt with? How are moments of disruption of rhythm and loss of coordination being handled – are changes in rhythm and pace being treated with care? What is the nature of transitions and transformations from one state of being to another? What is being birthed and what is being allowed to decay?

In other words, we can ask what possibilities emerge at moments of coordination and asynchrony, at moments of change of pace and tempo, in new forms of alignment and misalignment of rhythm.

### *Attending to temporal narratives*

Here we might ask: When does time ‘start’ in the stories we are being told – where are the origin points? And where are the endings judged to be? How are these cuts in time being made and what is left out or brought into the story? How are constituencies, communities and ‘stakeholders’ being defined in these temporal narratives – who is part of the story and who left out? What happens if different start and endpoints are envisaged? When are futures deployed and when pasts? What temporal durations are deployed when pasts and futures are invoked – near-term, long-term, deep-time? What is placed in the future and what is placed in the past? When is the past seen as finished and when as alive? What is the present and how long does it last - is it an instant or a duration, something to work with or move through? How are pasts, presents and futures thought about together, and what is the nature of the direction of time? What shape do narratives of time take in this situation – are they singular or multiple, linear or cyclical, wavelike or treelike? Can time be stopped in this story or is it always dynamic? What metaphors do we use to think with time – is it to be spent and saved, hoarded, and allocated? Is it a river that flows, a still pool of presence, a gale that blows from history?

In other words, we can ask what possibilities become visible when we view a situation as

being told through different temporal stories, distancing ourselves for a moment from the habitual narratives with which we are familiar, and asking how the same situation might be understood placed within a different frame.

### *Attending to pluriversal temporalities*

Both of the above sets of questions begin to point to the abundance of temporal frames and practices at play in any situation. Taking a pluriversal temporal lens, however, necessarily challenges the assumption that the critical, reflexive lens on time and temporality will rest only with the scholarly observer. Instead, it invites reflexivity about our own temporal assumptions and openness to the temporal frames and practices of others. Questions we might ask, particularly as we seek for possibilities in relation to our current climate and ecological crises, include: Who is telling the time in this situation and how? What more -than-human time practices and rhythms are at stake? What might my practice of time-telling look like from other perspectives? How do my rhythms look from the standpoint of other actors in this situation? What are the histories and habits that shape my own temporal assumptions, where do these come from and what sustains them? What other ways of telling the time might I learn? What is the relationship between my time (and its ending) and the times of others in this moment? As we recognise the intersection between time and power, and its eradication of multiple lifeworlds, we might also ask – whose timeframes are being deployed, resourced and imposed? Whose rhythms have to change and whose stay the same? What timing resources are being mobilised to fix who in what times? And how am I also deploying time as power in this situation?

In other words, the search for pluriversal possibility through temporal inquiry, demands a critical provincialisation of the temporal habits that we bring to bear on the situation, an intentional engagement with the temporal practices of other actors, and a sensitivity to the deployment of time as a form of power that

seeks to foreclose the emergence of alternative possibilities.

Taken together, this set of questions offer a foundation for beginning to play with the potential of the temporal imagination in Possibility Studies.

### **The times of possibility studies**

Possibility research and scholarship, however, also has its own temporalities, rhythms and narratives. Possibility Studies is located in the multi-layered timescapes of academic institutional life – from the arc of personal careers to the long-term histories and impacts of universities and their interactions with the times of local communities, students, markets, funders and governments (Facer & Smith, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2014; Sliwa et al., 2021). Possibility Studies necessarily emerges from the familiar juggle of personal time, project time and process time distributed across networks of local and global relationships. It arises in a world of time pressure to publish and the rhythmic (mis) alignment of research activities with institutional and increasingly, corporate and state, strategic missions and goals.

Possibility researchers therefore also need to ask ourselves: how do our own temporal practices and frames foreclose or enable new possibilities to emerge in the world? What forms of chronopolitics do we wish to intentionally enact or avoid as we go about building this new field? And as we grow, what stories do we want to tell of origins and futures? What rhythms do we want to fall into? How can this field practice a way of learning and knowing together and with others that recognises that we are, in Ruth Ozeki's generative terms, not only human beings, but 'time beings'; that our existence and our work is irreducibly bound up with what it means to live in time? How can we 'recognise all time as a gift, and that valuing time as a gift is precisely the pre-condition for emancipatory research' (Facer et al., 2021). Such a temporal frame questions the current political economy of research and invites Possibility Studies to see

itself as a practice of care, of relationality, and of pluriversal politics in which other worlds beyond those dominated by the timescapes of modernity, can begin to be glimpsed.


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