Time representations in social science

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Time has long been a major topic of study in social science, as in other sciences or in philosophy. Social scientists have tended to focus on collective representations of time, and on the ways in which these representations shape our everyday experiences. This contribution addresses work from such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and history. It focuses on several of the main theories that have preoccupied specialists in social science, such as the alleged “acceleration” of life and overgrowth of the present in contemporary Western societies, or the distinction between so-called linear and circular conceptions of time. The presentation of these theories is accompanied by some of the critiques they have provoked, in order to enable the reader to form her or his own opinion of them.

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Introduction

Rarely in the history of Western thought has a concept inspired as much reflexion as that of time. The humanities, as well as the various fields of research making up natural science, life science, social science, cognitive science, and neuroscience all have fundamental things to say about time, or temporality, and its different accepted forms (duration, instant, moment, cycle, rhythm, flux, period, era, etc). Given this astounding wealth of scholarship, it is essential to define precisely one's object of study. This contribution deals with collective representations of time and the academic work they have elicited in the field of social science. Being an anthropologist, I provide an overview of the theories that have arisen and been developed and discussed in this field, but I also consider the work of sociologists, social theorists, and historians.

This contribution is based on the assumption that the construction of time in social processes of action and thought has as great an impact on individual representations and perceptions as, say, brain rhythms, light cycles, or the phenomenon of aging. Thus, if we are to understand what time means to individuals, we must pay attention to these various aspects, since they are all relevant to human experience.

The paper is structured in two parts. The first one deals with theories on time representations that have occupied anthropologists. It traces the origin of the notion of “social time” and its influence on subsequent research and theory. Anthropology has often produced classifications—of time among other subjects—whose scientific

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validity seems questionable, to say the least, but it has also offered rich self-reflexive critiques of these classifications as well as other, more flexible and cogent theories. In the second part, the focus moves to contemporary Western societies' relationship with time, approached through an analysis of sociologists' and historians' take on the issue. While the former discuss an "acceleration" of so-called modern life, the latter judge our era to be threatened by an overgrowth of the present. I then discuss the material presented, and conclude by highlighting the multidimensionality of collective time representations and offering a hint at a potential direction for future research.

Anthropology of time

Anthropologists have traditionally envisaged time through such aspects as time-reckoning, calendric patterns, cultural constructions of the past, time as a medium of strategy or control, etc. For the most part, the anthropology of time is actually an anthropology of time use in non-Western societies, although anthropologists have often framed their work in more abstract terms. Historically, the subject developed slowly from the mid-20th century onwards and reached a peak in the 1990s—at a time when the whole field of social science seemed to have found an interest in the subject of time—with the publication of many influential books and articles.

Time as collective representation

Much of the anthropological literature on time can be read as the legacy of Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology and anthropology, and the first to conceive of a "social time." In his seminal book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912),¹ the French thinker claims that time, like space, cause, and number, is a fundamental category of human thought. Durkheim holds that categories are socially determined and claims that human temporal awareness, both in the form of time cognition and concepts of time, has social origins. For him, time is a "collective representation," ie, a system of symbols having commonly shared meaning (intellectual and emotional) to members of a social group or society. Durkheim also argues that humans rely on collective representations in their experience of the objective (or real, natural) world. For him, periodizations (eg, days, months, and years), for instance, do not exist in

themselves—in the outside world, so to say—but reflect humans' take on the reality that surrounds them.

Durkheim must be given credit for having shown that collective representations of time do not passively reflect time, but actually *create* time as a phenomenon apprehended by sentient human beings.² However, his equation of social schedules and time itself is far-fetched and has proved to be misleading. This paved the way for the idea that different cultures or societies live in fundamentally different temporal dimensions.³ Commonly referred to as "temporal cultural relativism," this idea has subsequently become quite influential in, as well as outside of, academia.

Cyclical versus linear time

Almost half a century after Durkheim, Edmund Leach, strongly influenced by his predecessor, produced a theory according to which the concept of time combines two "basic experiences" of human life: first, "that certain phenomena of nature repeat themselves;" second, "that life change is irreversible"⁴ (p 125-127). According to the British anthropologist, the experiences of cyclical and linear processes are intrinsically, or logically, incompatible; there cannot be repetition *and* irreversible change. He states, however, that religion manages to reconcile these contradictory experiences—albeit artificially—by creating a single category (time), in which they are both included, and that by doing so, we are therefore led to think that "life death (change) is actually only a "phase" of recurrence (repetition) life → death → life → etc."³ (p 11).

Leach's archaic repetitive, or "cyclical," time was supposed to explain time concepts among non-Western people. It could implicitly be opposed to modern linear time, considered as "our" time. However, Leach's theory is faulty. It considers the existence of repetitive/cyclical schedules for events (eg, annual celebrations) as proof that (non-Western) people have a conception of time itself as something repetitive/cyclical, which constitutes a logically dubious assumption. Not only that, but this assumption does not match ethnographic evidence. Nancy Munn,⁵ referring to studies of time and space in South America, notes that long-term time is widely viewed as an incremental process, and not only a repetitive one. The Northwest Amazonian Barasana people, for instance, view the succession of generations as leaves piling up on the forest floor. With each passing generation, or each layer of leaves, "living people are taken fur-

ther and further away from the ancestors.”⁶ Since this is regrettable, the Barasana resort to repetitive male initiation, which brings the living in direct contact with their ancestors and therefore “squashes” the pile of leaves. In this imagery, leaves falling account for repetitions, but the growing pile stands for a progression, for irreversible change. Munn concludes that repetition here is inextricable from the nonrepetitive growth it produces. In other words, cyclical and linear time cannot be told apart, contrary to Leach’s argument.

Despite this and other ethnographic evidence against a clear distinction between linear and cyclical time conceptions, anthropologists have widely resorted to it, to the point of making it their dominant narrative form.⁷ In their writings, cyclical time generally appears as the more “primitive” and conservative form of time, prevalent in non-Western societies, whereas linear time is said to be more “modern” or progressive, and is ascribed to the West. Even anthropologists who have sought to refute temporal cultural relativism made use of this dichotomy. Maurice Bloch, for instance, presents cyclical time as ideological, as coming from ritual dogma, whereas linear time is, according to him, more rational, realistic, and rooted in experience.⁸ Anthropology has produced other dichotomies as well, for instance that of monochronic and polychronic people, advocated by Edward T. Hall.⁹ According to him, white Americans belong to the first category, insofar as they are used to concentrating on a single task at a time, whereas Navajo Indians belong to the latter, together with their neighbors, the Hopi Indians—but also, and quite curiously, Turkish market vendors—all of whom are portrayed by Hall as natural-born multitaskers.

Our time, their time

The constitution of separate temporal realms for “us” and “them” is not an empirical or analytical mistake that anthropologists would have systematically made, as if by some curious coincidence. On the contrary, it lies at the very foundation of the discipline’s epistemology. Johannes Fabian¹⁰ notes that “anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse,” in other words as “a science of other men in other Time” (allochronic meaning existing in different times, p 143). From its evolutionist legacy, anthropology kept the idea that other people—variously referred to as “primitive,” “savage,” “indigenous,” etc—are not only different, but

also distant in space and time. Although anthropologists necessarily share a common temporal dimension (intersubjective time) with the people they study—for they could not communicate with them, otherwise, and their research would simply be impossible—they tend to hide this in their writings. Fabian calls this process a “denial of coevalness” and defines it as “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (p 31).

Political uses of time representations

According to Fabian, anthropology’s allochronism has important political implications. Distancing non-Western societies in time makes them appear less modern, advanced—one could also say “developed”—and thereby rationalizes and ideologically justifies a certain type of relationship between the West and “the rest” (ie, non-Western societies), namely oppression. This justification, in turn, contributes to maintaining or reproducing these oppressive relations, this dominating position of the West. Here, Fabian highlights the political dimension that accompanies any production of knowledge. For him, time serves as an instrument of power, much like space in the colonial era, when one part of humanity declared the land on which others lived as empty, underused, and undeveloped, only to justify its seizure and use of it for its own benefit.

Another call to focus on political uses of time representations comes from Carol Greenhouse.⁷ For the American anthropologist, social time is about “the vulnerability of political institutions to legitimacy crises of different kinds” (p 15). Facing these crises, social actors manipulate time representations, either in order to defend or increase the legitimacy of the political institutions at stake, or to make them accountable. Greenhouse clearly opposes the notion of unitary time representations that would originate from a society as a whole and be shared by all its members at all times; for her, representations of time are instruments of power used by some segments of a society in their struggle against others. About the linear model of time, she writes, for instance: “If linear time dominates public life in the West, then, it is because its primary efficacy is in the construction and management of dominant social institutions, not because it is the only ‘kind’ of time that is culturally available” (p 23). Other representations of time (as cyclical

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cal, for instance) are not made invalid by linear time; they coexist with it, but only the latter is dominant, which is evident in the fact that it is proclaimed to be objectively real. According to Greenhouse, which representation of time dominates in a given society has everything to do with political discourse and nothing with bodily experience.

Present times

In this second section, I move away from anthropologists' preoccupations with time and turn to two topics that have been treated mostly by, respectively, sociologists and historians. The first one is the "acceleration" of everyday life in the contemporary, technological world; the second one is the predominance of the present in contemporary Western societies' temporal order. Both topics deal with representations of time, much like what precedes, but, in addition, they provide insights into common, present-day experiences of time.

An accelerating world

Since the 1990s, sociologists and social theorists have been widely preoccupied with what they saw as an increase in the pace of social life in so-called modern societies. Not only have the rhythms of life become faster, they argue, but social and cultural change has also speeded up. Some of them refer to this phenomenon as acceleration,^{11,12} others as time-space compression,¹³ instantaneous time,¹⁴ or timeless time,¹⁵ thereby alluding to the invention and spread of technologies (of transport, communication, etc) that radically shorten or even eliminate spatial and temporal distances. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), like mobile phones, personal computers, and the Internet, for instance, have revolutionized our lives by introducing simultaneity and instantaneity.^{16,17}

ICTs, among other technological advances, are supposed to reduce the amount of time necessary to undertake certain actions. In theory, they should thus make more time available, notably for leisure activities. However, as empirical studies have shown,¹⁸ people increasingly have the impression of lacking time, of having to run after it. In our societies, time has never been more scarce than now. How can this feeling of time pressure and time poverty be explained? Sociologists often adopted a Marxist approach, pointing to the capitalist economy's

continuous efforts in extracting more profit from labor. Empirical studies do reveal that people work harder now than they used to,¹⁹ but, contrary to what some authors have argued,²⁰ there is no evidence that working hours have increased. On the contrary, we seem to enjoy more leisure time than our forebears. For Judy Wajcman,²¹ sociologists have failed to provide a convincing explanation to the feeling of time pressure because they chose a wrong unit of analysis, namely the individual instead of considering the household as a whole: "the perception that life has become more rushed is due to the real increases in the combined work commitments of family members, rather than changes in the working time of individual workers." By considering households, Wajcman argues, one takes into account not only paid work, but also unpaid work, like housework or care of children, activities in which women are more involved than men. Indeed, studies indicate that working mothers are particularly affected by the feeling of time scarcity.²² According to Wajcman, there is, furthermore, a crucial difference in the character of time available to men and women; whereas the former tend to enjoy more "pure" leisure time, the latter often perceive their leisure time to be interrupted by activities of unpaid work. They must juggle with different tasks, which accentuates the perception of being harried. Here, quality rather than quantity of time available plays a crucial role in the feeling of time scarcity. Wajcman therefore concludes on the existence of gendered temporalities, as well as the multidimensionality of the feeling of being pressed by time. She does not further investigate the effects of this feeling on individuals, but we can assume it to be a source of frustration likely to affect people's moods.

Wajcman, as opposed to the theorists of the acceleration society mentioned above, considers that ICTs do not necessarily amplify our impression of time shortage. They may do so, but may just as well be used by people in ways that allow them to better rearrange their working and domestic schedules, and thereby to create free time for themselves.

A growing present

At about the same period during which sociologists took interest in the acceleration of the pace of modern life, historians began to engage in the study of the present. French scholar François Hartog,²³ among others, pro-

duced a theory on collective relationships with time, showing how notions such as present, past, and future are used and arranged differently in various societies and at various moments in history. According to him, contemporary Western societies have recently entered a new “regime of historicity” (*régimes d'historicité*, a synonym for temporal order) in which the present has become omnipresent. Hartog calls this regime of historicity “presentism” and defines it as an invasion of the present into the realms of the past and future. For instance, Hartog notes that the conception of the past as a bygone time has recently been replaced by that of memory, which revitalizes in the present what would hitherto have been considered as dead or obsolete. Memory thus appears as a “presentist instrument,” allowing for a “presentist use of the past.” Hartog also points to the importance given recently to the notion of heritage, which makes traces of the past necessary components of current individual and collective identities. As for the extension of the present into the future, the historian notes that our societies conceive of the time to come as a source of uncertainty and anguish. The future must be prepared now, in the present, in order to prevent potential environmental, political, health, and other catastrophes from occurring. According to Hartog, this is evident in the emergence of the principle of responsibility and the precautionary principle, which state, respectively, that the living are responsible for handing over to future generations a world in which life will be decent, and that an action should not be undertaken if it is deemed to have serious potential consequences, notably in the long run.

For the French historian, presentism differs significantly from previous temporal orders, namely futurism, eschatologism, and pastism (mentioned here in reverse chronological order). Futurism, which Hartog dates roughly between the French revolution (1789) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), emphasized the present as a step toward the future; time was seen as a movement of uninterrupted improvement, with an ever-increasing efficiency of technologies and a continuous economic growth. It was an era marked by the idea of progress and an orientation toward the future. Before the advent of futurism, eschatologism was the dominant temporal order, according to Hartog. It envisaged time above all as a process of salvation. In his theory, the resurrection of Christ marks the beginning of the process—being a fixed, past event, it acts as one of the delimitations of time—which needs to be completed, and this supposedly

occurs through the second coming of Christ (*parousia*), or Judgement Day—representing the other delimitation of time. In this regime of historicity, the present acts as an in-between stage; it is simultaneously a time of reminiscence about salvation and a time for the expectation of eternal life. “Past, present and future are articulated on the backdrop of eternity,” as Hartog writes (p 75). Finally, pastism, which the historian dates back to ancient times, conceived of the present as the reverberation of a mythical past. History consisted in legends, populated with heroes, kings, and battles that did not belong to any precise era but rather emerged from the very origins of the world and were attributed a capacity to influence the present.

Hartog's work certainly brings valuable insights, but it poses its share of problems too. Déborah Blocker and Elie Haddad²⁴ criticize the vagueness of the concept of regime of historicity, as used by Hartog. According to them, it alternately refers to a community's construction of its relationship with time, ie, the way it articulates present, past, and future; to a given society's representation of its past; and to an individual's appropriation of collective representations of time and history available in a given society. The question is therefore how one is supposed to move between those different scales, an issue not resolved by Hartog.

Discussion

Theories claiming that there exist fundamentally different conceptions of time among different people are simplistic, in particular when they assign one type of time conception to a certain people and another type, or other types, to others. The circular versus linear distinction is only one instance of this tendency to create rigid categories, but social science has produced a few more. Distinctions between “us” and “them” certainly say more about Western societies' need to distance themselves from the rest of the world in order to assert their superiority than they describe undeniable ethnographic realities. Another problem with these distinctions is that they are often informed by social evolutionism, ie, by the idea that culture develops (or evolves) in a uniform and progressive manner and hence, that all societies pass through the same series of stages to arrive, ultimately, at a common end. This paradigm lingers in much contemporary Western thought, but it was discredited long ago in the academic field.

The questionable validity of rigid distinctions does not mean, however, that there are absolutely no variations in the way time is represented or perceived among different people or at different moments in history. There are some, for sure. But the anthropological body of literature presented above should lead us to acknowledge that these variations are perhaps not as fundamental as some would have it. It may well be that linearity and circularity are just two fundamental aspects of the way we, as human beings, experience time, which would explain why both can be found, albeit in varying proportions, in collective representations of time throughout the world.

Similarly, theorists of the acceleration society may have a point when they claim that modern everyday life has become faster in comparison with previous eras, but their emphasis on ICTs as the main factor causing this speeding up of the tempo does not do justice to the complexity of the problem. As Wajcman has shown, Western societies have also undergone serious societal changes during the very period in which ICTs became central in our lives. Thus, the feeling of being pressed by time may have additional, or other origins, than the technological development so often put forward.

Finally, Hartog's theory of presentism, although it draws attention to important new phenomena marking contemporary Western societies, also hides, or at least downplays, the fact that futurism, eschatologism, and pastism, as distinct attitudes toward time and the present, have not vanished. Numerous signs indicate that these temporal orders still exist today in our societies and are playing an important role—perhaps as important as that of presentism—in shaping our individual relationship with time.

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Conclusion

Studying collective time representations requires paying special attention to their multidimensionality. Theories focusing on one or a few aspects often fail to provide sufficiently cogent explanations for our ways of reflecting on, and relating to, time. It must be emphasized that collective representations of time, like calendrical patterns or methods of time reckoning, for instance, only give clues as to the nature of our individual conceptions of time; they are not these conceptions. Much less do they fully explain our experience of time, which seems much richer and more complex, and influenced by a number of other factors, including socioeconomic position, gender role differentiation, power relations, etc.

This article has sought to give an overview of the different approaches to the topic of time that can be found in various disciplines of social science. While going through the relevant literature, it occurred to me that no-one, as yet and to my knowledge, has taken interest in the potential links between psychiatric disorders and collective representations of time. This seems to be an interesting direction for future research. One way to approach the issue would be through investigating collective time representations in relatively hermetic institutions, like mental hospitals, which, in a way, form microsocieties; another way would be to consider the impact of psychiatric disorders on collective representations of time and vice versa. In this regard, it would be especially interesting to investigate disorders such as attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which, at present, affects a large portion of the population in our societies, and should therefore be considered beyond its individual dimension. □

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Representaciones del tiempo en las ciencias sociales

El tiempo ha sido un importante tema de estudio en las ciencias sociales, como en otras ciencias y en la filosofía. Los cientistas sociales han tendido a enfocarse en representaciones colectivas del tiempo y en las maneras en que esas representaciones modelan nuestras experiencias cotidianas. Este artículo está orientado al trabajo de disciplinas como la antropología, la sociología y la historia. Se concentra en algunas de las principales teorías que han preocupado a los especialistas en ciencias sociales, como la supuesta "aceleración" de la vida y el excesivo crecimiento actual en las sociedades occidentales contemporáneas, o la distinción entre las llamadas concepciones lineales o circulares del tiempo. La presentación de estas teorías se acompaña de algunas de las críticas que ellas han provocado, con el fin de capacitar al lector a que se forme su propia opinión al respecto.

Représentations du temps en sciences sociales

Le temps est depuis longtemps un sujet majeur dans l'étude des sciences sociales, comme dans d'autres sciences ou en philosophie. Des chercheurs en sciences sociales se sont intéressés à des représentations collectives du temps, et à la façon dont ces représentations modulent nos expériences quotidiennes, étudiant ainsi un travail issu de disciplines comme l'anthropologie, la sociologie et l'histoire. Les principales théories qui ont intéressé des spécialistes en sciences sociales sont analysées, comme la présumée « accélération » du rythme de la vie et la surcroissance du présent dans les sociétés occidentales contemporaines, ou la distinction entre les conceptions soi-disant linéaires et circulaires du temps. La présentation de ces théories s'accompagne des critiques qu'elles ont provoquées, pour permettre au lecteur de se faire sa propre opinion.

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