

Introduction to March's Theme: 'Time'

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Time and temporality are fundamental to social life. To be a member of a human collective inextricably involves having some shared sense of how time passes; without such, even the most ostensibly of straightforward tasks become impossible to co-ordinate or to reproduce, and society is left an all-the-more bewildering arrangement.

Social time is a way of conceptualising the sets of understandings that are folded into group membership and that both help explain our reality and that, accordingly, also constrain our practice, as Émile Durkheim, one of the pioneers of the social sciences, explained.

Taken-for-granted social assumptions regarding time are internalised into our circadian rhythms and day-to-day lives in a way that becomes normalised (paradoxically, even to the extent that they may become difficult to notice).

Following this Durkheimian starting point, it is thanks to a wide scope of technologies and abstract understandings that time becomes possible and embedded in social arrangements. In general, sociologists have been interested to study the practical nature of these disparate assemblages. It is important to note that it is not solely time-keeping technologies such as clocks, sundials, pendulums and so on, that can be thought of as creating social time; it is actively produced through the conjunction of our collective experiences of everyday life. And in fact, given the forms of temporalisation engendered by the aforementioned objects, it is perhaps better to think of them as time-making technologies, rather than time-keeping ones.

This month we are publishing a volume of thoughtful and thought-provoking pieces that address the challenges of studying time as it becomes rational in social contexts. We are proud to be able to showcase a wide variety of illuminating lines of inquiry that our contributors have generously shared. (In our Introductions to the Magazine, we always write something like: "We're delighted to bring together ...", "We have learned a great deal from curating and bringing together these excellent contributions", or "We are absolutely delighted with the set of reflections we are able to bring you this month". But it's always true! We mean it!).

This month, important questions are opened up regarding time as partial, rather than universal, as benefiting some groups more than others. The socially divisive nature of time makes necessary a critique of the "possibility that some may own time, while others can only owe it", of research that disrupts the ready familiarity of the ways the category of time is folded into everyday life. Reflecting a similarly critical approach to the category of time, through this sociological account of how sets of divisive moral values are attached to a sense of time within a Delhi slum, we come to understand these social sites saturated with hierarchical, temporalised judgements that affect people's lives.

Precisely because time is a socially relational category, it is practically entangled with other hierarchical sets of value judgements concerning groups. So, “far from being an abstract medium through which we live our lives, [time] is socially produced everyday through our interactions with technologies and fellow humans”, including with respect to gig economy work, and the regulation and exploitation of workers therein.

Attempts to challenge the implication of social orders and time also feature in this month’s Magazine. In a piece on time banks, we hear about the tensions between the radical potential of such reworking, which is sometimes in tension with respect to these organisations’ members’ more conservative sense of the scope of their own practise.

The body itself is also the site of timed recollections; with self-injury becoming one way in which “social truths [are] inscribed on the private surfaces” of the body. Significantly, our perceptions of time have been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic in ways with which we will grapple for some time to come. Engaging with the time-writing of a group of diarists, a series of metaphors capture the explicitly temporal dimension of our prolonged present.

As these pieces show, time is the outcome and the object of practical struggles, and in this sense is political. Adopting this starting point can tell us much about national elections, and ways in which power and resistance are understood in formal political processes.

Our collection this month also guards against thinking of time in solely human-centric ways. Through their relationships with each other, and us, non-human animals – including chickens – co-produce social-temporal assumptions that come to shape landscapes.

Non-sentient objects are crucial for legibility and communication of assumptions with respect to time. In general, designed technologies help to externalise implicit and/or amorphous social realities with respect to time, making an otherwise-abstract category more tangible and legible.

It is careful analysis of how and why certain repertoires of objects emerge from temporal assumptions that characterise sociological study. For example, situating a sweeping staircase in a high-end department store as an opportunity to analyse and “challenge what is deemed as belonging to the nature of things [and] the ways in which capital arranges its set of temporalities” can reveal much regarding this object and the context in which it comes to exist.

We can also find thought-provoking reflection in the piece on the dysrhythmic clock, which is an extended reflection on clocks – technologies associated with the making and keeping of time – being repurposed for other forms of ordering. And, situating Mary Douglas’ famous formulation that “dirt is matter out of place” relative to time may lead us to think that litter is matter out of time, and that the responses and interventions this evokes are similarly timed, as well as spatialised.

Thinking through time as experienced through the changing of landscapes, this month’s illustrator is Jeb Loy Nichols. Residing in the Welsh hills, Jeb is a singer-songwriter and visual

artist whose printworks reflect his remote life on a smallholding, centring on the seasonal and cyclical nature of time out on the mountains. For Emily DiCarlo, who is this month's brilliant Image-Maker in Residence, time is creatively explored through Coordinated Universal Time (UTC), a system by which the world regulates clocks and time. DiCarlo argues that this universal time standard is deeply flawed and discriminatory, creating an artistic body of work and writings to communicate these complexities.

So, as it always is, this month our Magazine is the outcome of a great deal of sharp analysis from our contributors; we hope you take something from their interventions, and thanks for reading!

References and further reading

Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo*. Routledge. (Original work published 1966).

Durkheim, E. (2008). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1915).

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