

Time Differences

Temporalities

Russell West-Pavlov

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Reviewed by Jason Archbold

HOW DOES ONE QUESTION TIME? THROUGHOUT HISTORY, THIS PROBLEMATIC question has puzzled scientists, writers, and literary and cultural critics. As a result, there exist a far-ranging variety of theories and interpretations of how time works, and in Russell West-Pavlov's recent book, he argues that this plurality provides a better way of questioning Time, exposing its many variables in order to further reflection by the reader on the subject. This plurality is a response to what West-Pavlov argues is a misinformed demand for a singular, definitive concept of time. He writes that the question of time may even have 'common sense' views as its enemies: these views of time label it as something 'natural, normal and [therefore] invulnerable to scrutiny' (2). Capitalism seems to be one of the main sociopolitical engines in this common-sensical kind of time: 'This version of time is so insidious because it has managed to persuade us that it is coextensive with the very fabric of existence itself, despite the increasingly daunting evidence to the contrary: the destructive nature of capitalism, and its globally self-vitiating dynamic, is revealed by global climate instability, the fragility of global financial systems, and impending global food shortages' (5). In opposition to unquestionable, universal 'time', West-Pavlov puts forth his titular concept 'temporalities', which, in its pluralization, suggests the multiple perspectives which characterize this book and its argumentative programme.

The book proper contains eight chapters, outlaying various temporalities in different spheres of thinking. The first of these, 'Time-keeping', notes technological advances in the field of watch-making, and compares this to organic alternatives, such as the crowing of roosters (13). A key step in the argument of this chapter is that while the time reported from one's watch is ostensibly absolute and objective, this very suggestion is undercut by the notion of time zones ('Atlantic Time', 'Pacific Time', 'Greenwich Mean Time', and so forth).

'Philosophies of Time' reflects upon a broad range of thinkers, from St. Augustine, who famously claimed to know what time was but to be unable to explain it, to David Hume, who argued that 'time, as it exists, must be composed of indivisible moments' (qtd 31), along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Einstein, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and others. West-Pavlov also anticipates the concepts written of later which formulate time merely as a measure of commercial productivity, a principal opponent to multiple temporalities. The general argumentative movement continues here towards understanding time as 'change' or 'transformation' (31-3), a kind of flux which is not only experienced subjectively but perhaps subjective by its very nature as well.

Several alternatives to the Enlightenment view of history and historical time as inherently progressive are put forward next. This view may have been retrospectively imposed on the histories of the ancient world. West-Pavlov also opposes subaltern and indigenous histories which are not predicated upon archivism or even written records to state histories, as well as discussing newer literary-historical forms such as counter-factual or virtual histories. This competition of modes of keeping and writing history is illustrated with examples from literature and literary figures, such as Jorge Luis Borges, for whom 'Time forks perpetually towards innumerable futures' (qtd 75).

'Language and Discourse' studies the temporalities of narrative and argument, the fundamental concepts which underpin and reinforce much of the book. Following Ricœur, West-Pavlov states that while language can portray the mechanics of time, 'as if it were "outside" time, as no other medium can, [it] is its being 'within' time which in turn hampers the scope of its knowledge' (83). In other words, while the apparently inherent sequential nature of language can tell us much about temporalities, almost as if time were subject to narrative language, it is in fact the other way around. In addition, West-Pavlov notes narrative concepts such as trauma (the past continually invading the present), along with literary works such as those of Samuel Beckett and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which problematize the sequential conception of narrative time as unidirectional.

The book then takes a turn towards applied temporalities rather than the foundational temporal concepts of the earlier chapters. The chapters which follow do likewise. West-Pavlov looks at the temporal politics of feminism(s) and gendered temporalities such as maternity and the menstrual cycle and their effects upon gendered time broadly in society. This builds upon the work of philosophers and theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva to

explore the binary limitations of gendered time and suggest that plural temporalities are fairer and freer conceptions than that of gendered time.

Time is money, or so runs the modern cliché, and this is the central problematic interrogated next. From the organization of days into periods of work, rest and sleep, to temporal measures of productivity, and investment on commercial and corporate ‘futures’ (121), time has become increasingly commercialized since the beginning of industrial capitalism—something which West-Pavlov suggests is interlinked with the prevalence of Newtonian absolute time. Again the suggestion here is that a move away from the absolutism of time (as money) towards pluralistic alternatives is a healthier one.

In the final chapter of the book’s body, West-Pavlov writes that ‘Postmodern time is a temporal logic in which the suppressed aporias of absolute or universal time begin to re-emerge, often manifesting themselves in spatial form’ (137). In addition, he follows Paul Virilio in arguing that postmodernity figures time as being technologized and perpetually speeding up, and Jean-François Lyotard, in saying that postmodernity is a response to the failures of temporal, modern ‘grand narratives of reason and progress’ (139). A key concept in this chapter, drawn from quantum theory and other extensions of the theory of relativity, is that of ‘spacetime’, where time and space are intertwined. An artistic example of this is the work of Australian Indigenous artist Leah King-Smith, in which portrait and landscape photographs are superimposed upon each other, suggesting that ‘Indigenous temporalities, defying the erstwhile rhetoric of the “dying race”, continue to be co-extensive with the vibrant life of the landscape itself’ (141). In other words, the clash between the rigidity of the temporality of ‘post’-colonial history and the ancient, mythic temporality of the Australian Aborigines is dramatized by the picturing of the two coexisting in a specific spacetime—that of the Australian bush, the physical and spatial constant which anchors the two different temporalities. This example therefore demonstrates both postmodernity as a time appearing to ‘double up or loop back on itself’ (137), the postmodern concept of spacetime, as well as the central argument of multiple temporalities as a means to liberating the concept of time.

The key strengths of this book are its interdisciplinary nature, its accessibility, and the breadth of its examples, drawn from literature, art, philosophy and the sciences. As a result, this book is useful for scholars of all of those fields, and it encourages its readers to cross disciplinary boundaries and apply concepts in fields outside of those in which they originally operated. As such, *Temporalities* is especially recommended for those who share West-Pavlov’s interdisciplinary approach, or his interest in post-colonial studies, for which his awareness that the post-colonial, whether as a literary ‘style’, a mode of historical thinking, or a political designation, always engages with other conceptual bodies. This book

looks to become a landmark on the map of the study of time, especially its representation in literature and literary studies, and the arguments it produces should foster further questions from others: achieving West-Pavlov's objective of removing the 'common-sense' stigma from Time and returning it to a place where it may be examined and debated, hopefully by thinkers of many disciplines (and temporalities).

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