

Review Article: One Time, Many Times

Abstract

This review article surveys recent work on time and temporality in international relations. It begins with an overview of Kimberly Hutchings's influential history of ideas exploring the relationship between *chronos* (quantitative experience of time) and *kairos* (qualitative conceptualisation of time). Building on the architecture of Hutchings's argument, it surveys more recent scholarship that supplements, extends and complicates her insights in two ways. First, while Hutchings focuses on the way in which theorisations of *kairos* shift over time, the development of a unified global *chronotic* imaginary was itself a contested process, frequently interrupted by *kairotic* considerations. Second, while Hutchings is interested in western conceptualisations of *kairos*, recent work has shifted the analytical focus to those subject positions marginalised by such *kairotic* imaginaries.

Books Reviewed

Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian, eds. *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the present, forging radical alternatives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, 342 pp., £36.99 pbk).

Andrew Hom, Christopher McIntosh, Alasdair McKay and Liam Stockdale, eds. *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2016, 210 pp.).

Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and world politics: Thinking the present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, 208 pp., £75 hbk).

Narendran Kumarakulasingam, ed. *Decolonial Temporalities: Plural Pasts, Irreducible Presents, and Open Futures* (Special Issue), *Contexto Internacional* 38, no. 3 (2016), 755-939.

Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time 1870-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, 288 pp., £29.95 hbk).

Although it was published ten years ago, Kimberly Hutchings's *Time and world politics* remains a key reference for thinking about time and temporality in international relations.¹ Working through the canon of Western political thought on questions of time, Hutchings reveals how assumptions about time have played a significant role in shaping the analysis and normative judgment of what is happening and will happen in world politics. Early in her book, Hutchings outlines two ways in which social life is temporalized—as 'chronos', which conceives of time as a quantitatively infinite, divisible medium within which life

¹ Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and world politics: Thinking the present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

is lived, and as 'kairos', in which a qualitative event is seen to create, arrest or change time rather than simply endure it.² It is kairos that allows us to see history as not simply 'one damn thing after another', but as endowed with a trajectory and purpose. Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century detached kairos from other worldly sources such as God and nature, placing it firmly in human hands. From here on, Western theorisations of time would be preoccupied with discerning the direction of human temporality and the mechanisms that drove it, and with the question of whether kairotic purpose was unified or plural.³

In this review article, I offer a brief overview of Hutchings's argument as a point of departure for a survey of more recent work on time in international relations that supplements, extends and complicates her insights in two ways. First, while Hutchings is concerned with the way in which theorisations of kairos shift over time, I read some of this work as suggesting that the development of a unified global chronotic imaginary was also a deeply contested process, frequently interrupted by kairotic considerations. Second, while Hutchings is interested in western conceptualisations of kairos, more recent work has shifted the analytical focus to those subject positions marginalised by such kairotic imaginaries.

Once upon a time

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 36.

Notwithstanding significant differences in their views of the ‘mechanisms’ or motors of history, Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Hegel and Marx converged in regarding kairos in singular and unified terms. With few exceptions,⁴ human cultural plurality was subsumed into a temporal singularity. The key figure here is Hegel, for whom different cultures were representative of different stages in world history. In a move that mapped time onto space, Africa was conceptualised as Europe’s past and Europe as everyone’s future, furnishing the ideological justification for imperial civilising missions. Hutchings traces the inheritance of these premises by post-Kantian and post-Marxist critical theorists (Habermas, Linklater, Benhabib, Hardt and Negri) who, for all their post-ness, continue to make sense of chronos through kairotic narratives wedded to progress and unity. This is not because they see progress as inevitable; rather, such a tendency is underpinned by the Kantian belief that progress can be hastened through the intervention of the theorist, insistent that such progress is realisable—a vision of theory as potentially self-fulfilling prophecy. As Hutchings points out, the temporality of such narratives is invariably captured in retrospect from a globalised capitalist modern present, which is interpreted as increasingly shared and towards which world politics is seen to have been evolving.⁵ Crucially, Hutchings sees even more pessimistic anti-historicists (Virilio, Agamben) as offering a unified conception of world-political time which is conflated with the time of late capitalist western modernity, out of which their apocalyptic visions of futurity are drawn.⁶

⁴ See Sankar Muthu’s reading of Herder in *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁵ Hutchings, *Time and world politics*, 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

It is in opposition to the monolithic theorisation of world political time by the overwhelming weight of western political thought that the critical potential of postcolonial,⁷ feminist⁸—and one might add queer⁹—theory becomes evident. For Hutchings, these interventions undermine the notion that world political time can be theorised in homogeneous and unified terms, or indeed that theoretical interventions can be timely in the sense of ‘reading’ the present and intervening in it in ways that redirect the arrow of time. Having devoted most of her book to canonical theorisations of time, Hutchings can do little more than gesture at the ways in which postcolonial and poststructuralist work offers ways of making sense of the temporal plurality of the present by recognising the ‘contingent and ongoing cross-contamination of different temporal orderings’.¹⁰ Still, it undertakes an immensely valuable provincialising exercise, making space for further work that might illuminate what is at stake in thinking about the temporal plurality of the present.

If Hutchings organises her discussion of temporality by thinker, other approaches have centred concepts. Thus, contributors to the edited collection *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* take as their objective the reframing in temporal terms of key concepts in IR such as war, security, identity and

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁸ Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 13-35; Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Hutchings, *Time and world politics*, 172.

inequality. It is impossible to do justice to the range of insights generated in an article of this length, so I shall offer only one set of examples here.

In their contribution to this volume, Andrew Hom and Ty Solomon offer a view of identity as a temporal formation. In prior work, Solomon has drawn on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to show how the subject is constructed through a retroactive temporality, wherein it posits itself as ‘having always been’—that is, as having had a stable essence in the past from which future action follows. Yet this is a fantasy because the subject is always marked by incompleteness deriving from an anxiety about ‘not having fully been’ in the past and ‘not quite yet being’ in the future. As Lacan puts it, the subject only ever ‘will have been’ since it never reaches the image of wholeness that it strives towards in its practices of identity formation.¹¹ Applied to a scenario in international politics such as the ‘War on Terror’, Hom and Solomon describe how the ‘America’ that was purportedly lost after the attacks of ‘9/11’ had never fully existed: rather, the retroactive presupposition of this ideal drove the desire for it and furnished the ideological justification for bringing into being something that the nation fantasised as already having existed and been lost.¹² Shahzad Bashir offers an analogous reading of ISIS in his chapter in this volume. Bashir argues against taking ISIS rhetoric of an unmediated return to an earlier Islamic era at face value, demonstrating how the movement’s contemporary predicament shapes its projections about the past. In his reading, this is ‘a past constructed in the image

¹¹ Andrew R. Hom and Ty Solomon, ‘Timing, Identity, and Emotion in International Relations’, in *Time, Temporality and Global Politics*, eds. Andrew Hom, Christopher McIntosh, Alasdair McKay, and Liam Stockdale (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2016), 24-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28-9.

of the future rather than the other way around.’¹³ Such temporal deconstructive readings open up for scrutiny and contestation the ubiquitous practice of deploying identity, history and memory as justification for the manifold violences of the present.

Chronos and its discontents

Critical theorists have tended to be more interested in debates over kairos that battle over the direction, mechanisms and purpose of history. Yet as Vanessa Ogle’s *The Global Transformation of Time* makes clear, the production of universal chronotic time has also been politically contested and frequently interrupted by what we might think of as kairotic considerations. Time unification entailed the abolition of local solar times in favour of countrywide mean times, which were in turn organised into twenty-four hour-wide time zones, as well as the spread of the Gregorian calendar to the non-Western world.¹⁴ Revisiting E. P. Thompson’s claim that the shift from a natural ‘concrete’ time told in accordance with the movement of the sun and seasons to an ‘abstract’ clock time occurred sometime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the advent of factory work, Ogle demonstrates that this shift was more arduous, prolonged and belated than commonly supposed, remaining incomplete and contested well into the early twentieth century.¹⁵

What interests me about her book is less the accounts of the initiatives and

¹³ Shahzad Bashir, ‘Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS’, in *Time, Temporality and Global Politics*, eds. Hom et al., 143.

¹⁴ Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time 1870-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10, 48-9.

motivations of time unification entrepreneurs, than the story of how their efforts were received by ordinary people in a range of different contexts.

Two snapshots are illustrative. British proposals for daylight saving were fiercely contested when first made in 1908. While proponents typically advanced justifications rooted in concerns about public health and temperance (pubs were thought to be busier after dark), objections were grounded in a libertarian antipathy to what appeared to many to be a state 'nudge' in favour of compulsory early rising as well as anxieties about the impact of daylight saving on particular forms of life and work. Agricultural interests were especially vociferous in their opposition, arguing that their work was irrevocably tied to the rhythms of nature and that changing the clocks would force workers to labour in the dark. While daylight saving was first implemented in 1916 in the exceptional circumstances of World War One as an energy conservation measure, it was only in 1925 that it became institutionalised in law. Ogle's reading of the daylight saving debates leads her to conclude that even in the heart of the imperial metropole and even at this relatively advanced moment in the march of industrial capitalism, many people strained to imagine an abstract time unchained from nature.¹⁶

Time standardisation was equally fraught in the colonies for reasons that are not difficult to fathom. The first moves towards time unification in the Indian subcontinent came in 1870 when railway lines from hubs in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras began to link up. At this point, the railways began to run on Madras time, Madras being located on the meridian that roughly bifurcated the country

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

and also being the site of the only government observatory that could establish time precisely. This meant that residents of Bombay lived in two concurrent times, a local solar time for most purposes, and Madras time (half an hour ahead) when they needed to catch a train. An 1881 proposal by the Governor of Bombay to simplify matters by shifting to Madras time for all purposes provoked uproar. Protesters objected to the lack of consultation, the disruption of prayer times, and the inconvenience of having half an hour less between sunrise and the commencement of work, thus attesting to the continued salience of natural time even after urbanisation.¹⁷ A 1905 attempt to draw Bombay into a new Indian Standard Time proved no more successful, unhelpfully coinciding as it did with the Viceroy's deeply unpopular partition of Bengal: adherence to Bombay Time now became a mark of nationalist pride.¹⁸ As late as 1950, the city's dual temporality was marked by the discrepancy between the clock crowning the Victoria Terminus train station, which displayed Standard Time, and those in the municipal corporation building across the road, which followed Bombay Time.¹⁹

Thus, far from being driven straightforwardly by the global interconnectedness forged through improved transport and communication, the effort to develop a globally unified chronotic imaginary was frequently interrupted by kairotic preoccupations with identity, freedom and power. Nowhere is this clearer than in efforts to 'improve' the Gregorian calendar by equalising the lengths of months, fixing the association between dates and weekdays and stabilising the timing of Easter. Pushed primarily by business interests citing the consequent

¹⁷ Jim Masselos, 'Bombay Time', in *Intersections: Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra*, ed. Meera Kosambi (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000), 167-8.

¹⁸ Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, 118.

¹⁹ Masselos, 'Bombay Time', 179; Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, 117.

advantages for ease of accounting, Ogle explains how these proposals were successfully rejected by religious groups across denominations, who viewed them as encroaching on religious territory on account of their temporal dislocation of days of religious observance.²⁰ Ironically, parallel initiatives around Islamic calendar reform with a view to harmonising the temporal observance of Ramadan were provoked, aided and complicated by secular developments such as the invention of telegraphy, attesting to a mutual contamination of the religious and the secular in the re-imagination of calendar time.²¹ *Pace* critical theoretic proclamations of the advent of secular, homogeneous time, Ogle's account of the defeat of Gregorian calendar rationalisation initiatives makes me wonder, paraphrasing Bruno Latour, whether we have ever been secular.

Kairos and its discontents

What are the implications of thinking about kairos in singular and unified terms, and of conflating it with the time of western modernity? More importantly, once we have provincialised this mode of thinking, what alternative temporalities are made visible and how might they matter politically? Introducing a special issue on *Decolonial Temporalities*, Narendran Kumarakulasingam reiterates the familiar view of the colonial experience as a temporal encounter in which European thinkers relegated contemporaneous non-European others to bygone times—a move that Johannes Fabian famously described as the 'denial of

²⁰ Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, 200.

²¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

coevalness'.²² Yet Kumarakulasingam also insists that colonial temporality was never entirely successful at displacing other ways of relating to time.²³ This is not to deny its power; instead it seems to imply, following Ranajit Guha, that colonial temporality is dominant without being hegemonic.²⁴ This opens up the question of what these 'other ways' might be and the possibility that recuperating them might be 'pivotal to political projects interested in rupturing a present whose inflection is violence and fatalism', as suggested by Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian in the introduction to their magnificent collection *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*.²⁵ A number of contributors to these two volumes address the time question from the perspective of a range of marginalised experiences—enslavement, indigeneity, untouchability, colonisation, statelessness, migrancy, homelessness, childhood—examining not only how subjects in these locations are placed behind or outside time, but also how they 'defied, deflected and appropriated'²⁶ their temporal emplacement. Again, a comprehensive survey of these rich contributions is beyond the scope of this article, so I will be selective in the discussion that follows.

To ask 'what is the time of slavery?', as a number of contributors do, is to wonder about the duration of the condition of enslavement. While their reflections

²² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31.

²³ Narendran Kumarakulasingam, 'Introduction', in *Decolonial Temporalities: Plural Pasts, Irreducible Presents, and Open Futures*, ed. Narendran Kumarakulasingam, *Contexto Internacional* 38, no. 3 (2016): 755.

²⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian, 'Introduction: Of time and temporality in world politics', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the present, forging radical alternatives*, eds. Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1.

²⁶ Kumarakulasingam, 'Introduction', 758.

largely meditate on the African American experience, I want to come at the question from the vantage point of a melancholic postcolonial Britain.²⁷ Reading British parliamentary debates on the occasion of the 2007 bicentennial of the abolition of slavery, it becomes evident that for many speakers, slavery ended with abolition—a view that is expressed so vociferously that some critics have read the debates as an exercise in ‘remembering the abolition, forgetting the “trade”’.²⁸ Yet the haunting afterlives of slavery are everywhere in contemporary Britain.

In the wake of the 1993 racially motivated murder of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence—a seismic event in the racial politics of contemporary Britain—a public inquiry headed by Sir William Macpherson concluded that the Metropolitan Police Service was ‘institutionally racist’. Macpherson is descended from another William Macpherson, a man who around 1800 journeyed to the West Indies, purchased slaves and entered into a relationship with an enslaved woman with whom he fathered a number of children (they would be denied the Macpherson name, becoming known as Williams). As Catherine Hall remarks in a review of a recent book on mixed-race Jamaicans in Britain, in delivering his indictment of the police, Sir William ‘knew his family’s history well.’ ‘Who can say’, she muses, ‘what part those imperial hauntings played in his understanding of the many failures attending the death of Stephen Lawrence?’²⁹ Saidiya Hartman could well be speaking of Lawrence or indeed countless others whose black lives patently do not matter to white supremacists when she says ‘I, too,

²⁷ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁸ Emma Waterton, ‘Humiliated silence: multiculturalism, blame, and the trope of “moving on”’, *Museum and Society* 8, no. 3 (2010), 131.

²⁹ Catherine Hall, ‘Persons outside the law’, *London Review of Books* 40, no. 14 (2018), 5.

live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship... If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison.'³⁰ To say this, she clarifies elsewhere, 'is not to deny the abolition of slavery or to assert the identity or continuity of racism over the course of centuries, but rather to consider the constitutive nature of loss in the making of the African diaspora'. It is to recognise that 'the "time of slavery" negates the common sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead.'³¹ Jared Sexton argues that a necessary implication of this recognition of coevalness is that 'slavery must be theorized maximally, in ways that rupture dominant understandings of time and its contingent relations of power, if its abolition is to reach the proper level.'³²

What is the time of indigeneity? As Kumarakulasingam and Mvuselelo Ngcoya point out, indigeneity has emerged as an important category that promises restitution, justice and equality to indigenous groups based on claims of prior occupancy of territory, self-identification, marginalisation and a commitment to the preservation of identity and custom. Yet the invocation of this category in postcolonial South Africa has been complicated, by its deployment against groups that have been co-sufferers under white settler colonialism, and by its appropriation by the descendants of settlers in everyday practices such as the

³⁰ Cited from Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian, 'International relations as a vulnerable space: A conversation with Fanon and Hartman about temporality and violence', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, eds. Agathangelou and Killian, 30.

³¹ Saidiya Hartman, 'The Time of Slavery', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002), 758-9.

³² Jared Sexton, 'The social life of social death: On afro-pessimism and black optimism', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, eds. Agathangelou and Killian, 71 (citations omitted).

cultivation of 'indigenous' plants as a way of aestheticizing properties and consolidating their anxious belonging ('putting down roots') in the post-apartheid state.³³ Other contributors similarly gesture at the potentials and pitfalls of the category of indigeneity. For João Nackle Urt, 'indigeneity' is an exogenous and generic term imposed on a range of colonised groups as a way of denying them contemporaneity with the coloniser.³⁴ Wanda Nanibush is critical of what she calls 'salvage ethnography' for its tendency to overemphasise tradition as a marker of authentic indigeneity and its denial of indigenous agency in the making of other modernities.³⁵ Kumarakulasingam and Ngcoya are illuminating in gesturing beyond these restrictive conceptions to alternative ways of inhabiting indigeneity. In an exemplary instance of decolonial scholarly praxis, in dialogue with an elderly farmer in KwaZulu Natal named Gogo Qho, they offer readers a glimpse of alternative human relationships with the botanical world—ones that are guided as much by conversations with ancestors as by tradition, experience and scientific knowledge. This suggests to them that the past 'is not an objectified archive waiting to be exhibited or plumbed by the professional knowledge dispenser or the bureaucrat, but rather... is in dialogue with the self.'³⁶

A number of contributors hint at possibilities for self- and world-making that lurk in the timespaces external to the chrononormativity of state and market in

³³ Narendran Kumarakulasingam and Mvuselelo Ngcoya, 'Plant Provocations: Botanical Indigeneity and (De)colonial Imaginations', *Contexto Internacional* 38, no. 3 (2016), 843-64.

³⁴ João Nackle Urt, 'How Western Sovereignty Occludes Indigenous Governance: the Guarani and Kaiowa Peoples in Brazil', *Contexto Internacional* 38, no. 3 (2016), 879.

³⁵ Wanda Nanibush, 'Outside of time: Salvage ethnography, self-representation and performing culture', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, eds. Agathangelou and Killian, 104-118.

³⁶ Kumarakulasingam and Ngcoya, 'Plant Provocations', 856.

which marginalised subjects typically find themselves. Drawing on work with migrant day labourers in Seattle and Portland, Paul Apostolidis describes how the erratic temporalities of casualised labour expose workers to violence and injury, but also, out of sheer necessity, engender temporally experimental modes of living. Denied the relative stability enjoyed by insourced workers, the precarity of day labourers makes them more able to discern alternatives to neoliberal temporalities and more willing to join political initiatives that struggle towards them. More than a speculative philosophical argument, this claim is grounded in ethnographic observation of how worker community centres 'bend the dominant flow of workers' waiting time, interrupting its violent trajectories and turning it toward distinctly anti-neoliberal endeavors'.³⁷ Ritu Vij makes a similar move in her reading of homelessness in contemporary Japan, in which she sees the potential for a heterotopic counterconduct not predicated on progressivist narratives of futurity and home ownership. Vij is persuasive in her critique of liberal advocacy on behalf of the homeless in which amelioration is offered at the cost of depoliticisation. But when she claims, in a slightly heroic vein, that 'atemporal modes of dwelling prone to seeking nomadic and temporary forms of shelter (tarpaulin tents, water tanks, cardboard homes, etc.) refuse a domestication of space and a terror of time',³⁸ I want to ask 'refuse, or are refused?' Isn't it conceivable that some migrant workers/homeless people would prefer the cold comforts of wage/mortgage slavery within the iron cage of chrononormativity (were these possibilities within reach) to the uncertain and precarious freedoms of heterotopic dwelling?

³⁷ Paul Apostolidis, 'Migrant day laborers, the violence of work, and the politics of time', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, eds. Agathangelou and Killian, 169.

³⁸ Ritu Vij, 'Atemporal dwelling: Heterotopias of homelessness in contemporary Japan', in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, eds. Agathangelou and Killian, 174.

The slippages in Vij's argument suggest to me that we are still grappling with a question that Fabian poses at the end of his magisterial *Time and the Other*, namely: 'Are there criteria by which to distinguish denial of coevalness as a condition of domination from refusal of coevalness as an act of liberation?'³⁹ (To complicate this question further, under what conditions might denial be transformed into refusal?) For Fabian, the answer depends on what can be said positively about coevalness. If it implies the oneness of Time as identity—'as, for instance, in the idea of *one* history of salvation or *one* myth-history of reason'⁴⁰—it threatens appropriation, even annihilation. Fabian prefers an understanding of coevalness as the common occupation, or sharing, of time.⁴¹ This would entail an understanding of international relations as the interaction of 'not the same societies at different stages of development, but different societies facing each other at the same Time.'⁴² Such an understanding would not end international conflict, but it would force a levelling of the temporal playing field.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the reviewers and editors for their helpful comments.

³⁹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 154.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 155.