

Times

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Simon Critchley

Abstract

For the 2015 PARSE conference on Time, Bruno Latour and Simon Critchley discussed shifting concepts of time and their impact on developments in art, philosophy and the social sciences in a conversation moderated by Mick Wilson.

Question: *What is time?*

Simon Critchley: Difficult question, for at one level we know what time means in various ways (time to get up, time to work, time to play, time to sleep, time to sleep during the conference or whatever), but the nature of the time that we know and are completely familiar with is deeply enigmatic to us (it has been like this since Augustine posed the question). The problem with the question “what is time?” is that it presupposes that time is something that has a being, firstly, and that it only has *one* being: time is x or y and is one. Maybe that presupposition is fallacious, maybe we live and move within manifold and various dimensions of time. Maybe we should say not that time *is*, but that *times are*, as a first step. The time of sleep or dreams is not the same as the time of breakfast or the time of listening to music, or the time of waiting for something or the time of this conversation. Time in Gothenburg is not the same as time in New York or Azerbaijan. Time shifts, flexes and twists. It is malleable, elastic, splendidly relative and relational.

However, this is not the way time is usually viewed. And this is where Bruno Latour and I agree, I think. The dominant way of thinking about time is in terms of an arrow, an arrow of time, pointing towards the future; it is future-oriented, progressivist, indeed revolutionary. What is characteristic of the modern is a teleological, progressivist conception of time (which borrows from and secularises theological conceptions of time that are found largely in Christian ideas of providence). This is the idea of time “that passes irreversibly and annuls the entire past in its wake”.¹ It is this conception of time that has to be placed in question and placed in question fundamentally.

This concept of time finds its degree zero, a quintessential modern expression, in Kant. It is expressed early on in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the transcendental aesthetic. In this view, time only has one dimension, which is succession: one moment succeeds another. Time is uniform: it is now (i.e. the present), no-longer-now (i.e. the past) and not-yet-now (i.e. the future), and it flows in one direction, from past to future. Time is a uniform succession of nows that are unlimited, indeed infinite; there will always be more nows. Time is constant, as it is measured by the now, now now now, and very importantly time is irreversible, you can’t retrieve the past. The now that is gone is gone for good, but there will always be another now, anytime now.

It is this idea of time as uniform succession, as infinite, constant and irreversible, that I think Latour and I both oppose. But in the name of what? For me, in the name of a time which is reversible, intermittent, episodic, various and variable, pluriform, relative, relational, and, importantly, finite. Rather than thinking of time as a line or an arrow, we can think of it as a loop or a series of loops, as a spiral or series of spirals. This is a time which is various, multiple. If time is anything, then it is *times*. This idea of time as a spiral, loop or series of loops is something that art can show particularly well. Think for example of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* or *Sans Soleil*.

This idea of time as a loop or spiral rather than a line is something that we know, or knew, very well, in the sense of time being linked to the looping movement of the sun and sky. This is something Heidegger says very well in an odd moment in *Being and Time*: "time first shows itself in and as the sky".² The sky is bright, it's time to wake up, or the sky is dark and we should drink beer (or wine, if you like) and then sleep.

But why limit it to the sky? In Swedish, time is *tid*, time as period, span, term, but also space (the relations between time and space is essential and beautifully interesting). But what is buried in *tid* is the idea of time as tide, as the movement not just of sky but tide, of the sea, of the repeated, looping, shifting, but never identical motion of maritime (of the mari-time) tides, rising and falling, ebbing and flowing. Here time is physical, the movement of sun and moon and sea; it is not in our heads, or the form of inner sense as Kant says, but this time is also not objective in the sense of something existent and measureable independently of us in digital clocks. But to say that time is not objective is not to conclude that time is subjective. Time, the time of a world or of worlds, is more objective than any object and more subjective than any subject. You cannot reduce the sky or sea to an object and our psychical sense of time is prior to any account of subjectivity. Time is a question of what Latour calls the Middle Kingdom, between subjects and objects, the times of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects.³ But it is here that we happen to live.

Time is physical in the sense that it first shows itself in the sky, and we can link this, I think, to ideas of time as *physis* and *gaia*, and this time is also us in the most primary way. We are time and this sense of time is linked to world, to the network of entities that make up a world and an earth. I think we have here some of the elements for an earthly idea of time which I take it Latour is trying to get us to think and live.

Q: Time arguably has always been at the centre of the research initiatives of the natural sciences, of philosophy and of the many different practices of history and social criticism. However, time also occupies a central place for the curiosity and attention of artist researchers across all the arts. The intensification of the question of time has, in recent years, prompted some to speak of a "temporal turn" across the disciplines. What is your perspective on this relative interest?

SC: I'm suspicious of all talk of turns, because they tend to presuppose the idea of time as an arrow that both Latour and I want to criticise. Turn-talk can be an aspect of the culture industry or ideological production that I want to place in question. It's like when people talked of the postmodern turn a generation ago. I'm dubious about it. I'm also dubious about when some artists say "I'm working on time". It's as if they know what time is and they are working with it. This risks being vague and trendy or vaguely trendy, a *façon de parler*, little more. At that point, I want to ask: which conception of time are you working on, if one can indeed work on time (maybe times work on us). I want to know what that artist is doing with time. Namely, what is their story, what is their fiction, what is their mythology of time and how does it subvert this ideology of the arrow of time? At that point, I think matters can get more interesting. I think this idea of story, fiction or myth is what artists really mean when they say "I am working on time".

Q: *What is your understanding of the ways in which cultural practice relates to questions of time?*

SC: Cultural practice relates to and always has to relate to questions of time, but again it is a question of which thought or thoughts of time one employs. If one is using or assuming the standard, progressivist conception of time then we risk getting nowhere. With the kind of pluriform, finite, intermittent idea of time that I recommend to you, time or rather *times* do not come in succession: the future is no later than the past and the present is something inherently unstable. Times are happening at the same time, disturbing our usual idea of time.

Q: *What are chronopolitics for you?*

SC: If chronopolitics is the name for the way in which time relates to politics and political decision-making, then nothing is more important than the politics of time. I would suggest that we begin with Hamlet, when he says early in the play that the time is out of joint. This is a political statement made during a time of war (and it is during a time of war that ghosts appear on the battlements of the castle, of Elsinore and our various castles). There is a disjuncture of time and, for me, because of my aesthetic prejudices, this is what theatre best enacts. The idea of the disjuncture of time throws any teleological conception of time suddenly and massively into reverse. We could express this in a formula: *to say the time is out of joint is to say that the past is not past, the future folds back upon itself and the present is shot through with the fluxions of past and future that destabilise it*. Future, past and present are simultaneously “present”, as it were. The three ecstases of time are at work on us and in us at the same time, which breaks open how we think about time. This is what takes place in *Hamlet*, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, and everywhere theatre happens.

Q: *Many of the proposals we received for this conference seek to engage with the crisis of “anthropocenic” time. You and Latour have engaged in different ways with this issue could you elaborate?*

SC: I think that the crisis of anthropocenic time is that of the Kantian, modernist idea of time. This conception of time is not benign in its effects. It leads to the crazy idea that the West is ahead of the rest, has a different temporal structure to the rest captured in the idea of modernity and somehow physically located in Western Europe and to the even crazier idea that we can solve the crisis of climate change by not changing the conception of time that got us into this mess in the first place. The first thing we need to do is to rethink our conception of time, which will also lead us to question the privilege that we give to concepts like crisis. I’m sceptical about crisis talk, because it uses exactly this traditional, modernist, and I think degraded, idea of time. We could also link this to Latour’s critique of the idea of revolution and revolutionary change, which is the only way in which modernity could account for change. We’re better off without it.

Q: *We are currently embedded in a temporality that is shaped in large part by the instantaneity of global capital. How do you see the affects of this? How can this be understood historically and philosophically?*

SC: The problem with capital talk is that it uses or piggybacks on exactly the linear, progressivist conception of time that we need to place in question. Indeed, one of the problems with Marx, but more so with Marxists, is their fidelity to a theology of progress, revolution and the rest. I think that talk of capital is something wonderfully reassuring to people on the Left. Ah, it’s capital. It is like God talk or Nature talk or Providence talk. It is as if capital has a divine agency, which it clearly doesn’t. It is a consequence of political decisions and it is these that we need to question with a fresh and vital new series of political decisions. It has multiple and complex political agencies which we need to understand and challenge. We need much more complex, situated and local forms of explanation in order to resist or rethink ideas of “global capital”. The question of the global is

also reached too quickly, as if we know what the globe is. In other words, talk of global capital is too monistic or totalising. Here, I agree with Latour; what we need is a notion of earthliness which is not totalising or monistic, more of a flat, open network than a seamless quasi-divine force. I think, in all humility, that another conception of time could lead us to think differently about capitalism and to political responses to it, which would be perhaps more anarchistic, at least for me. This is, as Latour always insists, a question of *composition*, a word I very much like in his vocabulary. We need to compose an earthly politics rather than presuppose a conception of the global, even global capital.

Q: *Is time gendered? What might it mean to think time in relation to the question of gender?*

SC: Yes, it is. It is different for men and women. Obviously, a previous generation thought about the question of gender and time in terms of what was called “women’s time” (for example, the time of birth rather than the male obsession with death). There is nothing wrong with that. But it seems to me that we need to compose a more complex account of the relation between time and gender. What is the question of gender? How many genders are there? I think this becomes less and less clear in a way that is more and more interesting. Think about the way in which questions (plural) of gender have become more nuanced in relation to questions of intersex identity or trans categories. One place to start would be listening to Gothenburg’s The Knife: “Let’s talk about gender baby. Let’s talk about you and me”. (I had to get one reference to The Knife in this event. As they said in their last concert in Reyjavik, postcolonial gender politics comes first, music comes second.)⁴

Q: *Much recent theoretical discourse has focused on the “end of time”. What is your view of this?*

SC: I wish we could put an end to the talk of the end of time, but that is just as teleological and apocalyptic a claim as that which it is seeking to oppose. The idea of the end of time is theological, linked to the idea of end times, the last days etc. etc. I see this kind of talk as a form of crypto-theological reassurance that wants to avoid the hard task that we are facing, which is how to compose a politics that responds to the complex context of the anthropocene. There are two things I really hate and which I think are wrong: firstly, the idea that we can address the anthropocene and save ourselves and the globe with exactly the kind of linear, modernist conception of time that got us into this problem in the first place. And secondly, more controversially, the idea that we are fucked, that there is nothing to do and we’re living in the end times. We get off on this sense of pessimistic doom far too much (why do we like doom so much?) and fall back into a neo-Schopenhauerian pessimism. We seem to delight in wallowing in our own powerlessness. We are not powerless. We seem to like feeling fucked in this way. Maybe we shouldn’t like it so much.

Notes:

1. Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1993. p.47.
2. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1962. p.471.
3. Latour, op. cit.
4. See <http://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9092-the-knife/> (Accessed 2016-07-13.)

