

REINTRODUCTION: The Politics of Time, II

Time is the Concept itself as positively present, represented to consciousness as the pure empty gaze/intuition (Anschauung). Therefore, Spirit must appear (to exist) in time as long as it does not grasp its own pure concept, that is, as long as it does not devour time.

Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*¹

The Church of the Pantheon in Rome is one of the oldest buildings in the world still intact enough to perform its original function, probably the largest piece of antique architecture to do so. It owes its immortality to two things. One of them is the invention of a technology not usually associated with antiquity: the cupola is made in one huge piece, out of concrete. The other is its popularity with the citizens of Rome: early Christian rulers gave up plans of demolishing it and converted it into a church. It is still quite obviously a temple for the cosmic-religious synthesis created at the short culmination of pagan antiquity: the all-embracing Sun God in the middle, and the entire antique pantheon arranged in a circle around Him, interpreted as His emanations.

The Pantheon also illustrates antique time: the opening at the top of the cupola allows the sun's rays to make their perfect circular movement within the temple, from subdeity to subdeity, so that the whole temple is effectively a sundial as well. Allegorically, if not in practice, this orderly array of subdeities, many of whom used to be associated with local orders with cults and calendars, beneath and within a unitary sun god also represents the establishment of a unitary cosmopolitan calendar.

We have had a politics of time for quite a while, particularly it is obvious that the history of modernity is intimately connected to a specific time political model which has been gaining power since the beginning of Christianity. It has a tendency radically different from the cosmic, circular structure of the Pantheon. St. Augustine makes the famous distinctive leap away from time as based on movements of the celestial bodies, even the sun, to an abstract, linear time. Even if non-astronomical, mechanical clocks were known in antiquity, mechanical timing is much more interesting once it is no longer a second-rate copy astronomical time. One thing it can do is to organize work in ways that removes it more and more from local, traditional and finally even, to a large extent at least, biological constraints. In short,

¹G.W.F. Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Suhrkamp edition (1995) p. 584, my own transl

it can be used to make work a resource. St. Augustine probably had no idea what he set in motion, but his notion of time comes to full expression in modern protestant work ethics implanted in some of us, where not only the sun but even the alarm clock is unnecessary: the abstract idea of working hours is enough.

As Hegel analyses the movement of alienation, it is intimately connected with the exteriorisation expressed in the hypostatization of an absolute, disembodied time, just as it is connected with the interiorisation of the pure subject. But Hegel also points to the possible and necessary overcoming of alienation which consists in more than just a return to the original innocent state before the construction of clocks and time: we can and must grasp it and devour it, take its construction upon ourselves as our own self-expression.

Marx seems to only partially grasp time as a basic category and political instrument in the modern accelerating mobilization, exploitation and alienation. In any case he seems to take it as simply given that there is some kind of true measure of time in which a true measure of "value in use" is produced prior to exploitation. Much more important, however, is that Marx has shown alienation to be a very concrete structure in the process of work itself whereby it channels itself into an exchangeable commodity, and this of course requires it to be measured into exchangeable units, it requires the function of the generalized factory clock whose readings should ideally be available wherever there are work resources. Nowhere is the political meaning of process independent time expressed more clearly than here: the construction of a measure enabling the exchangeability of as many aspects as possible within the form of life.

Since the problem of alienation lies in this deep -- but historically variable -- characteristic structure of work itself, there is no radically transforming solution without a transformation there: in the very dynamics where networks are built and extended for more and more dominant practice of measurement and exchange, in such a way that the two poles of subjectivity are produced and reproduced: labourer and consumer (cf. the treatment of these two relationally defined roles by Wise². A genuinely new politics of time is one which will digest and transform the factory clock and the currency unit, abstract time and abstract value, the sense and power of the processes of measurement in both respects.

This sheds an interesting light on the classical aesthetic opposition to externalized, spatialized time. This opposition is able to locate with great precision the core of the

²M. Norton Wise: *Work and waste: political economy and natural philosophy in nineteenth century Britain (II)*. *Hist.Sci.*, xxvii (1989), p.392-449

problem of the politics of time, but it becomes impotent when it comes to the establishment of an alternative, because it simply denies constructed, externalized time as a veil of illusion covering a true internal reality — and just because this internality is still the one constituted as one side of alienating temporal politics, it can only grasp this internality as a pure time of consciousness, feeling or intensity, perfectly expressed in the idea of “quality time”. The romantic reaction against the abstract and utilitarian organization of time and production is also expressed when Dreyfus advocates the preservation of islands and remnants of “non-rationalized practices” (See Chp. 2).

The attempt of turning this “reaction” in temporal politics into real life can take the shape of the attempt to avoid the technical and metrical wherever possible and to displace the focus towards the human, subjective and organic. As in the wish of leaving the hectic career life and settle on a southern beach or village, or the wish to work less to have time for children and self-realization. This is all certainly very sympathetic and desirable, but this reaction still does not basically transform the politics of time because its issue is so easily settled on the other pole of the modern construction of temporal politics: time-money, work-consumption. It becomes, for example, a week of holiday quality time on a sunny beach. Nice, but no transformation — if we consider the amount of work and other resources set in motion in order to bring it about it certainly does not counteract mobilization. Indeed the romantic reaction fits well in the function of making alienation bearable for groups who might otherwise have had power and creativity to change it. On the other side the aesthetic turn contains not only the moment of enjoyment but also an active one, the ideal of expressive work beyond the form of repetition compliant with the generalized relation of measurement and exchange.

Another well known form of reaction in temporal politics is the one which keeps the factory clock but transfers the exchange of units of money and working time it regulates from private capitalists to the state. Apart from the fact that this alternative form of organization has recently lost most of its once considerable extent leading to a wave of rather unthinking trust in the desirability and efficiency of the form of private capitalism, I suppose we can also say of the grand experiment of state capitalism that it has given us the important experience that the basic relation of work cannot be changed that way. (By the way I am not sure the breakdown implies that the attempt was a complete failure — would the distribution of wealth in the West have improved so much if private capital had not been under pressure from a rivaling form of organization? A phenomenon similar to Catholic counter-reformation?)

None of these attempts have basically modified modern politics of time. All of this is perfectly in accordance with Marx’s diagnosis of alienation as something which could not be modified without transforming the basic concrete relation of work.

However, it is obvious that the markets of work themselves have started a metamorphosis in several important respects. An increasing number of employees in the richer parts of the world are themselves capitalists as well. Also an increasing amount of their work is involved in managing streams of work, money and other resources, that is, the construction of the generalized factory clock. Further, that clock is getting transformed into more and more complex and flexible systems for regulating the exchange. Particularly, telework is expanding rapidly. Large groups are gaining increasing degrees of freedom of enfoldng work in family life and self realization projects. Other and even larger groups are being marginalized in a paradoxically intensified alienation by *not* working for wages, or by low status telework without company of fellow workers.

A genuinely new politics of time must recognize the powerful ramified, complexified and rareified factory clock as our own doing. We must, as Hegel said, sublimate-and-elevate (*aufheben*) this time, or what is now this monstrously ramified rhizome of times, by taking it upon ourselves as our free expression. Making this timing part of ourselves may seem a redundant piece of advice, we are already co-originated with it to such an extent that we cannot really extract an original, prescientific, pretechnological humanity in ourselves. So it could seem that such an affirmative strategy means simply giving up all resistance to an alienating politics of time extending its network of ever finer tentacles ever deeper down in our being. On the other side the idea of resistance thus given up is the one that assumes a core being in there that we could defend. Since there is not we can instead grasp the possibilities of poetic co-construction of the strange new compound phenomena.

Patterns of new politics of time are in the air, in the attempts of grasping the possibilities of this situation. The explicit metaphysical counterpart of the best of them would be one able to “devour” the classical structure fixating the polarities of work and consumption and the standardizing measurement of units of time and money. A metaphysics and cosmology of process can offer a perspective in which the world is full of process but not in *time*, neither technical nor lived *time*. Time is — or times are — constructed in order to coordinate and exchange, and very many of us are very competent in the multiple kinds of engineering required in order to make smooth transmission lines for various purposes through the higgledy-piggledy world of processes with all kinds of local orders that don’t immediately fit in. If we can take an affirmative participatory perspective on life as process — without much timing or with a lot of it, as the case may be — we may be able to help a move towards a

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open-eyed, pluralist, ecological, democratic politics of time. Not trying to revert romantically to “original time”, but to pass on to the production of orders under maximal creative respect for the multiplicity of other orders, we need problematizations of the politics of time which can stand up to the strong movement of metaphysical politics of time starting in Augustine, culminating in Newton, and paradoxically strengthened by romantic reactions at least up to Heidegger. What I have done is only to discuss a few structural elements for such a reproblematicization.

I can't help speculating, finally, that the emerging politics of time may resemble the Pantheon slightly again. A worldly time admitting its dependence on real world rhythms and processes (symbolized by the sun) and a time in visible negotiation with heterogenous local orders and rhythms (symbolized by the deities).