

Timing the strike: the temporalities of industrial action

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The time of the picket line interrupts the busyness of our ordinary working lives, opening up time for fellowship, listening and solidarities. It forces us to face up to the misery and violence of the ways our lives are ordinarily timed and allows us to notice other temporalities. The production of social time is a collective endeavour that needs to be thought about politically and together.

Time is out of joint in the UK and around the world. But even before the Covid-19 crisis and the lockdowns which are sweeping the globe, time was already out of joint in UK Higher Education. Last November, on the eve of the first wave of industrial action in the current dispute between the University and College Union and employers, a senior and well known academic tweeted out this question (or, perhaps, humble brag): ‘Can I ask academics of any seniority how many hours a week they reckon they work. My current estimate is 100. I am a mug. But what is the norm in real life?’¹

It didn’t take long for fellow Twitter academics to do the maths. That figure works out at over fourteen hours per day, or 8am to 10pm every single day, including weekends. When, in such a life, would there be time to eat or wash or take care of the usual daily chores of ‘lifemin’? What sort of competitive standard does it set to students, and academics just starting out, if this way of thinking about time becomes normalised?

Leaving aside the strange claim that this particular academic does not inhabit ‘real life’, there are three things that I want to point out about the temporality that animates this tweet and other competitive approaches to how much time we all spend working. First of all, it views time as a scarce resource; and secondly it assumes that this is a resource that must be used for work and not other valuable projects. Finally, it seems to pit humans in a battle for supremacy over time. All three of these assumptions take time to be a phenomenon outside of human control, and which we must submit to or vanquish. Is this a useful way of thinking about time, though? To answer this question, it may first be helpful to consider the range of temporalities that inform the life of the education sector and of universities.

When I was small, in my village primary school, it was a great honour to be the child chosen to ring the school bell that signalled that it was playtime or lunchtime or lesson time or home time. When I went to secondary school, the bell had the same purpose but it was automated and mechanical. You weren’t allowed to start putting your coat on when the bell went, though. The teachers used to say, ‘That bell’s for me, not for you’. We were being carefully trained to understand that we were not in charge of our own time. This mechanised progression through the day is a reminder of a time when the school bell existed to instil the discipline of the factory floor into school pupils, who were learning to be compliant and to live according to clock time.² The ringing of that bell, until very recently, had been replaced in the lives of academics by the University Hour, in which classes must end at five to the hour and begin again at five past. This gave us *just enough time* to sprint between classes – so long as we were not so excited and engaged by learning that we forgot not to over-

run. Since the strike ended, however, just before lockdown began, that sprint has been superseded, and instead we must remember to log into the next remote teaching session online, with the five minute buffer usefully repurposed as enough time to make sure everyone is connected and their microphones are working.

Our time in education is also cyclical and seasonal. Every year we notice as freshers' week or exam season comes round again. The years seem to go faster and faster but these recurring events come round the same, reminding us of the rhythm of the earth's motion round the sun. It seems to be a myth that our long holidays in summer derive from the agricultural calendar and the requirement for children to help with the harvest;³ but that myth itself nevertheless reminds us of other ways of living that are also closely based on the passing seasons.

These mechanical and cyclical temporalities also jostle with the familiar linear and teleological temporality of 'progress'. We are all going somewhere, we all have a goal in mind. It might be to get a degree. Or another degree. It might be to publish your research. It might be to get great student evaluations or do better in the Teaching or Research Excellence Framework this time. The idea of 'progress' or 'development' is deeply engrained in how we think about time: as Emily Robinson has argued, the idea of 'progress' always locates itself 'in a distinct position in time: at the very edge of the boundary between the present and the future'.⁴ This means that, in its beckoning on to a better future, progressive time has a linear relationship with the past, which it promises to fulfil. Benedict Anderson, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, talks about the 'homogeneous empty time' – the time of clocks and calendars and railway timetables – as also being the temporality of the nation state in which we all travel forward in time together.⁵ All these narratives of progress have a particular relationship with Empire and race: the experience of colonialism changed experiences of time and temporality;⁶ while racist ideas about the inferiority of colonial subjects produced narratives of civilisation (a word that first appears in English during the early period of colonial rule) which operate with implicit assumptions that colonised people and places are somehow 'back in the past' and need to be brought up to date.⁷ These civilising missions later gave way to the always deferred promise of international development, in which the rewards of prosperity are always in the future, never quite yet.⁸

These narratives of progress were taken-for-granted for a long time, but it seems they are now giving way to a different kind of linear time in which the future begins to look quite scary. We might be captured by an apocalyptic feeling that the future is closing in, coming towards us too fast, and we can't cope with everything it is going to bring, so we had better keep working faster and faster to appease it.⁹ This feeling of impending doom has been much intensified since we all went into lockdown in the face of a global pandemic. If my experience is anything to go by, and anecdotally it is, then the speed and frenetic activity of academic life has not come to a stop. Rather, it has moved (even further) into our homes, as we make remote connections and struggle to fit online teaching, meetings and writing around our various domestic responsibilities, including perhaps caring for the vulnerable and sick. The pressures that come with this vary, but are felt particularly intensely by the people on casualised contracts, who fear for not only their careers but also their livelihoods, as the future seems ever more uncertain.¹⁰

Slowing time down

The time of the picket line is a strange time, because it forces to a stop all of those familiar rhythms and all that forward movement that is sometimes so frenetic and so busy.

As students and academics, we are accustomed to feeling good about ourselves because we are working. Being busy is our virtue, our achievements are our identities. But striking brings it all juddering to a halt. Suddenly our solidarity and our political commitment reminds us that we have to stop all this dashing around. We are required, instead, to stand around on picket lines, to engage in the patient work of making signs and banners, to talk to each other without the discipline of the University Hour or the tightly-timed meeting agenda.

It reminds me of the work of political theorist Romand Coles, who talks about the civil rights movement in the USA of the 1960s. He describes the time Black and White activists spent sitting together, sometimes on porches, often bored, waiting for the next thing to happen, and he describes the importance of that time spent waiting to the building of relationships and community across considerable chasms of experience. He quotes Charles Marsh:

Their genius was their ability to demonstrate the strategies available to social progress within an unhurried and sometimes languorous emotional environment. As such, a condition for achieving beloved community was a certain kind of stillness in a nation of frenetic activity and noisy distractions, learning to move at a different pace, an attempt to move into a different kind of time ... waiting as a discipline.¹¹

Coles argues that this unhurried approach to time creates the conditions both for love and for democracy. We can take these two in turn.

First, then, is the question, if you are working fourteen hours a day, every day, without a break, of when you have time to love someone else. Love takes *time*. And this is all the more true if your loved one is also a child or someone else who is dependent on you for care. Taking care means taking time. It takes time to tie someone's shoelaces or to teach them to read or to feed and dress and wash them. Likewise, if you lose someone you love or live through something traumatic, it takes time to recover. Trauma and grief time, the constant circlings that have to be worked through and cannot be short-circuited, do not work with conventional timeframes and require their own bittersweet time.¹² It takes time to listen to someone. Perhaps this is why students say they want more contact time with academics, even though they often evidently do not have time to prepare and do the reading to make the most of the time we have with them already. When we are too busy and overworked to know our students' names, they want to be *seen*, to be heard, to be listened to: they want to make a claim on the thing that is precious, our time.

Secondly, exactly because it takes time to listen to someone, Coles argues that an unhurried temporality is also the condition of possibility for democracy, which escapes from the speedy processes of voting. In comparison with the 'representative institutions that incant a virtually unquestionable "yes"', we might for democratic reasons prefer to value the pulsing time of 'sitting on porches, leaning into the

stillness of the present, and listening in order to cultivate different voices and visions: wonder, love, struggle, care'.¹³

Slower time is also inclusive time. One of the most troubling things about the macho boast of working fourteen hour days every day without a break is that engaging in such a punishing schedule risks both producing disabled bodies through stress, burnout and exhaustion, and excluding disabled bodies who cannot keep up. Ellen Samuels writes about 'crip time', the time inhabited by disabled folks, saying:

sometimes it means we're late all the time, maybe because we need more sleep, maybe because the accessible gate at the station was locked. But other times we mean something more beautiful and forgiving. We live our lives with a more flexible approach to normative time frames like work schedules, deadlines, or even just waking and sleeping.¹⁴

We can all learn from crip time, especially now in the time of the pandemic – the time it takes to take care of our bodies and act flexibly in an unforgiving world.

Just as democracy takes time, so writing and thinking take time. Teaching, if we do it well, takes time. I am very fond of Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber's book *The Slow Professor*, which helps us see how slowing down time might be part of our vocation as students and academics.¹⁵ However, whilst Berg and Seeber are not individualistic and put emphasis on collegiality and the importance of working together to slow down the frenetic pace of university life, they are nevertheless optimistic about what can be achieved through voluntary action. Certainly, it is a radical act to slow down, to work only your contracted hours, to spend your time helping a colleague or comforting a student instead of racing to finish that shiny new article that you're going to publish in a 'top journal'. But we don't operate in temporalities of our own choosing, and there are real career and economic consequences to declining to join the ever-faster race.

Berg and Seeber ask us to find the value in slow time. But in this pandemic, as some people in our society work unimaginably long shifts, while others find themselves on furlough, or suddenly unemployed, and still others are expected to transfer our work online, it becomes clear that slow time can also be weaponised against us. It has become a truism that those of us stuck at home all day on lockdown might now all feel more empathy with people who are imprisoned and detained, whose lives have been put on hold by forces outside their control, or who have otherwise been excluded and find themselves stranded outside the usual temporalities that link us to others in the rhythms of life.

Acts of timing

One useful way of thinking about this is to draw on the work of Andy Hom, who argues that we need to move away from thinking about time as a noun and instead focus on *acts of timing*. This approach denies the commonsense notion that time exists independently from human attempts to make sense of processes of change. Instead, Hom directs our attention to the ways in which socially and politically directed (and contested) attempts to understand, manage and control those processes themselves *produce* time and temporalities.¹⁶ What is particularly attractive about foregrounding *timing* as a verb, is that it reveals the work that goes into timing our worlds in the

ways we do, and the politics of producing, regulating and contesting the timings we have to perform and inhabit. Once we see time not as an eternal constant, but rather timing as something we are constantly having to *do*, we can note that acts of timing are in principle open to change and political contestation. In other words, not only could we slow down, but we could slow down on a variety of different terms and with different consequences for the power relations between us.

For example, now that more of us understand more viscerally the importance of the work that various keyworkers – including NHS staff, refuse collectors, teachers, social care providers, delivery workers and supermarket staff – do for us, it would perhaps be an opportune time to ensure they can do their work at a less frenetic pace. This would enable them to enjoy the caring aspects of their work, from the important service of chatting to lonely customers and clients, to the life-saving time it takes to engage with seriously ill patients to understand their precise situation and communicate what needs to happen next.¹⁷ If we stopped thinking about imprisonment as ‘serving time’, but instead tried to find out whether the circling time of rehabilitation, of mending what is broken and of rebuilding broken relationships, could animate our prisons, we might try to remake them as the more difficult and the more redemptive institutions we long for. Likewise, in universities, timing our work more generously – especially for those parts of our jobs like writing, research and teaching, that require deep relationships, time for reflection and expansive daydreaming – would enable us to radically refocus our efforts on the things that arguably matter most. And removing the terror of the end of contract for precarious academic staff, opening up the longer horizons of job security, would release the energy needed for creative practice. All of this needs to be done institutionally and through practical politics, but we need to be careful that, after the strike and the pandemic, we do not fall back into different ways of trying to vanquish or master time, but rather consider the whole way in which we conceptualise and talk about timing our world.

It was when we stopped to stand on a picket line, as if it were our porch, that we began to notice that we were retiming our day. I have described above the other times hidden within the fast, busy, frenetic temporality of a university timetable. But time, like a university and a trade union, is a social and collective phenomenon. We can’t slow it down all by ourselves. We need to do it together. I don’t know exactly how, and that’s all part of both the problem and, perhaps, the solution. It strikes me that easy answers are too quick and quick answers are too easy. Let me instead finish with some more extraordinary words from Romand Coles:

This is not simply a *critical* task, but also something akin to recovering a sense of democratic – a sense of the world as immanently shot through with fugitive democratic possibilities, gifts, scattered shards of light calling us to receive, gather and carefully engage with each other in relationships that slip beyond the oblivion of anti-democratic cages to initiate better things.¹⁸

If we want our industrial action to initiate some of those better things in relationship with each other, the *timing* of the university has to figure in our demands and through our political practice.

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Notes

¹ This article originally appeared on the *Renewal* blog and is adapted from a Teach Out I gave on the UCL Institute of Education picket line on 26 November 2019 as part of the University and College Union's industrial action. For more on the strike and its aims see: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/he2019>. I gave a similar but extended talk on 13 March 2020 to a student occupation during a later wave of industrial action during the same dispute. I am particularly grateful for that latter group of students for spending a long time chatting with me and helping me develop these thoughts.

² E.P. Thompson 'Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism', *Past and Present* Vol 38, 1967.

³ Adi Bloom, 'Cut harvest argument and reap the rewards of holiday', *Times Educational Supplement*, 31 July 2009: <https://www.tes.com/news/cut-harvest-argument-and-reap-rewards-holiday>.

⁴ Emily Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*, Kindle Edition, Palgrave Macmillan 2017.

⁵ Benedict Anderson [1983], *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso 2006.

⁶ Jon Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835*, Palgrave Macmillan 2008.

⁷ Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilisation: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea*, University of Chicago Press 2009, p31.

⁸ For more on this 'temporal othering' see Cathy Elliott, *Democracy Promotion as Foreign Policy: Temporal Othering in International Relations*, Routledge 2017; and Andy Hom, 'Angst springs eternal: dangerous times and the dangers of timing the "Arab Spring"', *Security Dialogue*, Vol 47 No 2, 2016.

⁹ For some thoughts about apocalyptic narratives and their consequences, see Chris Methmann and Delf Rothe, 'Apocalypse Now! From exceptional rhetoric to risk management in global climate politics', in Chris Methmann, Delf Rothe and Benjamin Stephan (eds), *Interpretive Approaches to Global Climate Governance: (De)constructing the Greenhouse*, Routledge 2013. I have written a bit more on this in Cathy Elliott, 'H is for Heterotopia: temporalities of the "British New Nature Writing"', in Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch and Daan Wesselman (eds), *Heterotopia and Globalisation in the Twenty First Century*, Routledge 2020.

¹⁰ Richard Adams, 'Government set to cap university admissions amid Covid-19 chaos', *Guardian*, 29 March 2020; David Batty, 'Hundreds of university staff due to be made redundant due to coronavirus', *Guardian* 2 April 2020.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Kindle Edition, Cascade Books 2008, p251.

¹² Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, Bloomsbury Academic 2017; Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge University Press 2003.

¹³ Hauerwas and Cole, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, p339.

¹⁴ Ellen Samuels, 'Six ways of looking at crip time', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 37 No 3, 2017.

¹⁵ Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, University of Toronto Press 2016.

¹⁶ Andrew Hom, 'Timing is everything: towards a better understanding of time and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol 62 No 1; see also his article in this issue.

¹⁷ For a hilarious but painful read on the damage it does to doctors when they have no control over the timing of their lives and very little time to spend with their patients, see Adam Kay, *This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor*, Picador 2018.

¹⁸ Hauerwas and Cole, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, p115