

Timing the state

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Abstract

We wish to express our gratitude to the interlocutors for their considered and thoughtful commentaries on our article. They invoke new questions around the power of the state in directing action towards acceleration, performance, untimeliness, time essences, thickets and passages, and creativity. In this response piece, we develop our contention that the state in a digital era needs to be reconceptualised through timing as a form of statecraft. We will suggest first that while the state is not a coherent entity, it is in its temporality across spaces, scales, and actors that we begin to see its performative nature as auteur. Second, we address the question of untimeliness in our paper as an inherent aspect of temporal power itself. Finally, we address the provocation to expand our work on the creative uses of temporality from the margins.

Keywords

Timing, state, auteur, temporality, temporal creativity, temporal power, untimeliness, acceleration, statecraft, Kenya

We wish to express our gratitude to the interlocutors for their considered and thoughtful responses. All the commentaries appreciate the value and originality of our conceptualisation of the state as an auteur and the use of temporal power as a form of statecraft. Each commentary also appreciates our formulation of the state as both a seemingly coherent image of a linear future as well as its asynchronous materialisation through the multiple, fragmentary, and geographically diverse actions and experiences of its actors. Our interlocutors then invoke new questions around the power of the state in directing action towards acceleration (Pollio and Odeo), performance (Addie), untimeliness (Simone), time essences, thickets and passages (Guma), and creativity (Odendaal). Taken together, these questions

push us to think along several ways to expand our work on the temporal power of statecraft.

The starting point of our work on the state as auteur has been its conceptualisation as at once dispersed and centralised, singular and multiple, linear and asynchronous in temporality, directing action whilst also taking a back seat. This observation emerges from our work on the Kenyan digitalising state, where its linear timeline of a Silicon Savannah collapses as soon as it lands in the local

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land administration offices of county and municipal governments. This multiplicity of the state as performed, and the state as executed, shows how the state is both an auteur and actor of its own choreographed fiction. As Odendaal notes, this ‘exploration of the textures of the state as auteur in an assemblage configuration’ frames multiple, asynchronous time-images of the always incompletely digitalising state.

In their commentary, Pollio and Odeo highlight several metaphors of time used by the Kenyan state to note that Kenyan polity and its sequencing are not merely technical events but processes intertwined with the political and social life of the state. Specifically, they remind us that any theoretical impetus towards defining state temporality requires genealogical engagement with the concept’s longer trajectory in theory. In the article, our focus on the state’s temporal power does not imply that its temporality is solely produced in relation to technology. While a genealogical analysis of its temporality was outside the scope of our paper, the state as an auteur develops Datta’s earlier work on smart cities and the digitalising state with their tenuous productions of past, present and future time (Datta, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2024). Datta has previously noted that the digitalising state engages in acts of ‘futuring’ (Urry, 2016) that unravel its performance of technological progress through discursive framings of speed and acceleration in future smart cities. Indeed, conceptualisations of speed, velocity and acceleration are enduring features of ‘fast cities’ (Datta and Shaban, 2017) built across the Global South through a rhetoric of urgency to accelerate towards a future time of techno-utopian urbanism (Datta, 2016). The temporality of the state also extends to the selective envisioning of a mythical past through the image of accelerated technological progress, making technology and mythology complementary tools of state power (Datta, 2019). In this sense, Kenya’s aspiration to become the ‘Silicon Savannah’ is also a myth perpetuated by its actions at different scales and through different actors. In earlier work, we have also shown how crises serve to accelerate new forms of state power through data governance (Söderström and Datta, 2023). Certainly, as Pollio and Odeo

note, ‘the Silicon Savannah appears perhaps an oeuvre collective... of many auteurs.’ While we diverge from the state’s language as used by Pollio and Odeo, we appreciate the ways in which their intervention provokes a more nuanced consideration of the temporal concepts we develop in the paper.

In this response to the commentaries, we further develop our contention that the state in a digital era needs to be reconceptualised and investigated for using timing as a form of statecraft. We will first suggest that while the state is not a coherent entity, it is in its temporality across spaces, scales, and actors that we begin to see its performative nature as auteur. Second, we address the question of untimeliness in our paper as eloquently noted by Simone along with Guma’s observations on the time thicket, essences and passages. Finally, we address Odendaal’s provocation of how our work can expand upon the creative uses of temporality from the margins.

The temporality of the state as auteur

Addie notes that while the ‘digitalising state as auteur mobilises the aspirational imaginary of network time to manipulate the future... its temporal ontology remains fundamentally modern’. Drawing on Gramsci’s distinction between the production of time as plural, which consistently fails to prevail, and a singular time, which never fully manages to dominate, Addie offers a significant consequence of this dynamic. The state as auteur aims to produce singular time, in which all actions are timed to synchronise. Yet, in practice, it fails to assimilate all temporalities within its structure. The plural temporalities that persist struggle to significantly challenge state-time, yet succeed in puncturing the image of a coherent, homogenous state. He suggests that to be an auteur, the state must provide some structuring coherence, which in the presence of multiple temporalities may inflict substantial challenge to the state.

We have noted in the paper that the state’s structuring temporality exists as a counterpart to its

multiversal temporalities. While we make a conceptual distinction between the image of the state and the state at work, we have also noted that these two roles are, to a certain extent, complementary. The singular image of the state is constructed because of its fragmentation and sometimes refusal to comply by its multiversal institutions and actors. The state strives to offer coherence in its temporalities, but ultimately, this is always recalibrated on the ground. In his research in India, Ghertner (2017) too describes the flickering presence of the state as it appears and disappears with strategic timing, exerting its power when it suits itself and disengaging itself from issues it deems too complicated (or unprofitable) to address. The state's temporal power as an auteur then is always in the making, always incomplete and challenged, and its temporality is always up for negotiation, recalibration and challenge by its actors.

In our paper, too, we have reflected on this multiversal temporality of the state as a socially constructed network, continuously recreated, challenged, and reproduced by the plural acts of bureaucrats, policymakers, politicians, and citizens on the ground. The state articulates particular visions of governance which subordinate space, context and subjectivity to the narrative images of past, present and future. In developing his notion of 'time-images' Deleuze (2005: 95) notes,

... the hidden ground of time, that is, its differentiation into two flows, that of presents which pass and that of pasts which are preserved. Time simultaneously makes the present pass and preserves the past in itself. There are, therefore, already, two possible time-images, one grounded in the past, the other in the present. Each is complex and is valid for time as a whole.

Jones et al. (2004) have called these temporal networks of knowledges, practices, and actors 'action nets'. Timing as 'action nets' or a/synchronised processes can explain the workings of the state as a series of actions being created and used at specific moments to govern and control space. Jones et al. (2004) ask 'when is an organization an organization and not a series of events; when is an

action net an action net and not simply a piece of string between two knots' (p. 730). The power of the state as an organisation is to generate multiple temporalities around a ubiquitous seamless form of actioning. State action nets have recurrent themes – lack of capacity, embodied labour of state officials, imperatives for digitisation of paper, maintenance and securitisation of paper, increased value of paper in the information platformisation and automation in the future as a magical solution to current problems of governance. This way of seeing the performance and temporality of the state addresses why, despite its ontological temporality being thoroughly modern, as Addie notes, it is still subject to the social and political realities of timing its actions across spaces, scales, institutions and actors.

The untimely state

Simone, drawing on Agamben (2009), presents untimeliness as being out of step from dominant timings – too early or late, moving in a different rhythm, or operating within a distinct timeframe altogether. In our article, we have implicitly taken untimeliness as an inherent feature of timing. Separating timing and untimeliness echo the constructed dichotomies on formality and informality, visibility and invisibility, legibility and illegibility. As with the presence of 'timeless time' (noted by Addie, who draws from Castells), untimeliness also presents us with another motif of understanding the temporal power of the state. Simone notes that the state is not just an auteur but 'also the trickster, the sorcerer, and the hustler'. In our article, we investigate the temporal power of the state in offering a structuring coherence to its policies despite (or because of) the untimeliness of some of its actions. We have also suggested that the state's performance as auteur is directed in many ways to capture its untimely, chaotic and surreptitious improvisations through structuring frameworks of registration, ordering, and categorising. As with all forms of statecraft, there are elements which are left unfazed, are neglected, or which resist capture. What happens in those untimely, unseen, or unregistered spaces

has been important to us in understanding the temporal power of the state.

In doing so, we draw upon several scholars who offer us socio-political analyses of timing. Sharma's (2014) account of the different actors in the city speeding up or slowing down, from the taxi driver picking up a commuter to salarymen crossing the street in unison, we are continuously calibrating to the timing of others within a 'grid of temporal power relations' in which time and timing actions becomes relational, a form of social power and the construction of difference. Similarly, Mattern (2017) juxtaposes the different temporalities present in the city, from computer time to seasonal time, to explain how the city's rich ecology of human and non-human timings harmonised during the COVID-19 pandemic, when time all of a sudden became abundant and flexible.

Further, Guma notes in his commentary that the state-as-auteur overlooks how 'Southern digital futures unfold through multiple open-ended and incomplete essences, thickets, and passages of time'. Guma asks, what happens when the state is 'embodying orientations not constrained by time – and timing – but in fact existing beyond it'. We argue that the notion of temporal statecraft that we have proposed in our article enables us to conceptualise precisely the lack of state intervention as a form of temporal statecraft. Seen this way, it explains why the sudden acceleration in policies and initiatives towards the Kenyan state's aspirations to be a Silicon Savannah when for many decades leading to the millennium, the digital revolution in Kenya was slow in the making. It also explains why the sudden push towards a national land administration platform, when at the same time, municipalities and counties in the metropolitan peripheries of Nairobi are struggling to even assemble a geospatial lab. Timing is also a geographically specific temporal statecraft simultaneously accelerated and slowed down between the centre and the peripheries of the state, by design. Here, timing is crucial as both one-off events and long-term processes are determined by the temporalities and timelines of the executive branch of the state, that is the political elite and bureaucrats being in office for a certain period to act on and execute their policies.

A creative and inclusive approach to temporal power

In our article, while we have been focussed in-depth on the state's temporal power, how this power is creatively manipulated, resisted and negotiated from the margins has been somewhat muted. Therefore, we welcome Odendaal's provocation that 'constructing a frame that takes a more creative and inclusive approach, vested in context, would require a relationship to time contrary to state bureaucratic systems'. In our article, we have started with the understanding that the state-as-auteur engages in the act of time standardisation and fixation to determine who belongs, who controls the narrative of modernity and progress, and how they constrain the limits of spaces and times. Odendaal's intervention helps us develop a creative and inclusive approach to this temporal power that has been at the heart of our work for over a decade or so.

In critiquing smart and algorithmic approaches to addressing gender-based violence in India's smart cities, Datta (2020) has argued that marginal citizens use time-negotiation as a route to access safe spaces within and across the home, the mobile phone and the city. Through creative and participatory time-mapping methods, Datta noted that state-imposed temporalities of technology are recalibrated through strategies of time-hoarding, time-freeing, and creatively living with the imminent time of violence. Further during COVID-19 lockdown as time literally stood still in the peripheries, Datta developed the notion of 'thick time' through the co-production of community podcasts by young women experiencing the intimate violence of perpetual domesticity (Datta, 2022). Conceptualising thick time as the slow sound of feminist urban futures that are non-hierarchical and plurilocal, Datta argued that marginal citizens also use creative aural spaces to resist the state's temporal structuring of crises.

Our current work on the territorial politics of citizens whose spaces and temporalities are standardised through the geo-spatialisation of territories and boundaries suggests that we need to pay more attention to the creative uses of temporal power in the margins. In Kenya, the work of grassroots organisations such as the Pamoja Trust and Kenya Land

Alliance are technologically redefining people-to-land relationships to access land rights for marginal citizens and exit the liminal space/time created by incomplete bureaucratic digitalisation (Hoefsloot and Gateri, 2024). Also the work of colleagues in urban geography suggests that temporality has been a key strategy of marginal citizens to push back against the technocratic state (Addie et al., 2024; Ekman, 2024; Ghertner, 2017; Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021; Söderström and Datta, 2023).

To conclude, we suggest that critical geographers are yet to unravel the full impacts of time, temporality and timing on planning, policy and governance, as well as its dynamics with the articulations of everyday life. This is an area where we are currently developing further research around the choreographed performance of time and temporality between the state, citizens and para-institutions. Recent interventions by the Kenyan state on the use of platforms, algorithms and artificial intelligence to govern its territories and people suggest that we have only touched the tip of the iceberg. The full manifestations of the state as auteur are yet to come in the most timeless and untimely ways.

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