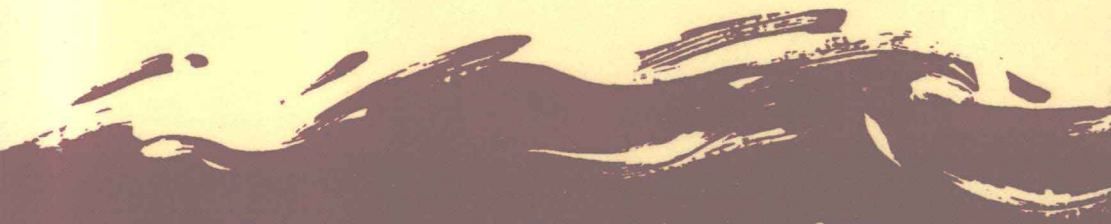
TIMEWATCH



The Social Analysis of Time

BARBARA ADAM

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To the people who have talked to me about time and specifically to Mary and Brian who have since died of cancer

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endars and Clocks', pp. 18–34 in M. Morrison, (ed.), *Managing Time for Education*, University of Warwick; (1993a) 'Within and Beyond the Time Economy of Employment Relations', *Social Science Information*, 32: 163–84; (1993b) 'Time and Environmental Crisis: An Exploration with Special Reference to Pollution', *Innovation in Social Science Research*, 6: 399–413; (1994a) 'Perceptions of Time', pp. 503–26 in T. Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology, Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, Routledge; (1994b) 'Re-Vision: The Centrality of Time for an Ecological Social Science Perspective', in S. Lash, R. Grove-White, and B. Wynn (eds.), *Risk, Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*, Sage, in press; (1994c) 'Running Out of Time: Environmental Crisis and the Need for Active Engagement' in T. Benton and M. Redclift (eds.), *Social Theory and the Environment*, Routledge, in press. I would like to thank the publishers for giving permission to use some of that material and to express my appreciation to the following colleagues, students and editors who have commented on drafts of the papers: Jan Adam, Stuart Allan, Paul Atkinson, Ted Benton, Dawn Clarke, Tia DeNora, Marco Diani, Ronald Frankenberg, J. T. Fraser, Judith Green, Tim Ingold, Tom Keenoy, Alwyn Jones, George Newell, Martin Read, Michael Redclift, Teresa Rees, Tom Schuller, Ginger Weade, Brian Wynn and Michael Young.

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Barbara Adam

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Introduction

Conversations about time

'When I think about time I think that it won't be long before I am old and die. We have only so much time to live and that is not very long at all. Well, take my mum, for example, she is old now and she will die. (*His mother is thirty-five, suffers from multiple sclerosis and has been tied to a wheelchair for the last five years.*) When you think a lot about time it goes by that much quicker which means I grow older that much faster. On school days I just think whether it is nine o'clock yet because school starts then and I must not be late. Next I think about time at three o'clock when it is time to go home. My worst thing of thinking about time is on the days when I come home from school before my parents have returned from shopping or from the hospital which means that I have to go to a neighbour's house. This is really an awful time because I don't know how long I'll be there and when my parents will come home.'

(*David, ten years old, pupil in a village primary school*)

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'How time enters my life? I was born and now I am fifteen years old. We use the word when we ask what time it is. We talk about closing time, lunch-time, getting-up time, and that time is up. What time is, that is more difficult to say. It is not a person, not a thing, not a vegetable. It's a period and units, the day chopped up into hours, minutes and seconds. But it also divides the past from the future. We can see the past in pictures and writing but we can't be

there – that is *a* time. *The* time is *now*, this very second. But I do not know what it is we are chopping up into units. I think it's an illusion since there isn't anything to be chopped up.'

(*Miriam, fifteen years old, pupil in a British comprehensive school*)

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'Time is about those things that happen to you and around you, those things over which we have no control. People die, accidents happen. I have no control over when the sun or the moon come up, when the pub opens, or when my friend is going to turn up today. I could get to be 105 years old or die tomorrow. Time has to do with movement. If everything stood still there would be no time, only matter. It's a mystery which we don't think and talk about. Only in programmes like *Dr Who* does time become important with 'time lords', 'time travel' and the 'time machine'. Today everything goes by the clock but, if this hadn't been started, we might organize our lives only by the sun or something else. Time then would be something quite different.'

(*Tobias, eighteen years old, car mechanic*)

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'Time is a scarce resource. I associate it with pressure and with the desire to use it in a meaningful way. I try to keep a very strict separation between my private and my working time; but the association with pressure and a shortage of available time is equally relevant for my private life and my working life: there is always too much to do, more than is possible. Family, friends, the house and the garden, elderly parents and making music all require time, and far more of it than I have available during my private time.

'For me time is a dimension within which everything moves and happens. In conjunction with space it is a universal framework. We can't move through space without time and vice versa which means that we can't pass, spend, or allocate time without occupying space. Nothing exists and happens without time and space.

'I think that the chronic shortage of time is linked to a steady increase of options and to growth in the potential for choice and action. Cities in particular provide us with far more possibilities than we can ever realize. At the same time, however, this widening discrepancy between the potential and that which can be realized enforces greater concentration and more focused plans and actions. It is also connected to our attitude to speed: if something can be done more quickly, then something else can be fitted into that

freed-up period of time. This positive evaluation of tempo and speed – the faster the better – which permeates our contemporary life, derives from a purely economic approach to time: the bigger the quantity and the shorter the production time the better for business. This artificial, economic creation of speed as a positive value has been unquestioningly incorporated into our everyday lives. It has become a taken-for-granted fact.'

(*Christoph, fifty years old, Ph.D. in philosophy, publisher, father of three daughters*)

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'Time enters my life in two significant ways. One has to do with ageing and the life-span and the other with time passing and coping with things to be done in a day. The decades seem important – like watersheds – important points in one's life where one is so aware in terms of what one would like to *be* and *be doing* and that in turn to the *social standards* and to *expectancy*. For a mother, the daily pattern seems so predetermined and there is always this pressure to be productive and not to be wasteful. Routines are terribly important because then there is no need for thinking about it and weighing things off. This all takes time and brings with it the danger that one ends up achieving nothing. A routine is essential for security because it represents the *possible*. I can't operate without an overall scheme because this represents the frame within which things are possible – the real potential. Plans which are far into the future or for which I can see no potential just get me frustrated. It is the little plans which are achievable that lead to satisfaction, not the thoughts about big major issues. At eighteen you think about solving the world's problems but you don't get beyond it. I need to see myself being effective in my actions rather than wasting time with great schemes and plans for the distant future.

'On reflection I relate time to the day and night and the sense of the year. Whatever you do, time passes – goes on outside our control. We can't stop that process. We can't make more hours in a day. We could in terms of a convention but we would not be changing anything in terms of this ongoing process. Hours are only a particular division we have imposed on this ongoing change of night and day. It makes me think of people in places such as Iceland where they have such different daylight and darkness patterns. They must not just be living different lives but also have a different perception of themselves and differ in terms of what they expect of themselves.

'Now, my husband likes to work at night because there is less pressure. It must have to do with the feeling that he *could* go on all night and because he is not distracted by what is awaiting him afterwards. All that is expected of him at night is sleep – not so if he wants to do an hour or two of work in the morning as part of a full programme of work and meetings during a day. Night-time seems to be a different sort of time from day-time even in a physical sort of way. The homoeopath has said in relation to my son's asthma that it makes sense that he coughs most between 3 and 5 a.m. It seems research has revealed that the earth's energy field is different then – even machines have a minute change in their motion and slow down.

'Birth and death make up our life-span and yet, when people die they are not gone but leave behind a presence and so did the people before them and those before. It's a spiritual experience of presence of persons and peoples past. Anything outside the time-span of our own experience is difficult to comprehend. An oak which we know to be 400 years old, a castle or events in history – we can't really know what they experienced, what it was like then. We can only get rare insightful feelings. We value old things and try to preserve them for the future so that they may serve as records for our present and what then will be the past. We are deeply interested in finds which connect us to the distant past, be they archeological finds of preserved people or of things made by people. We value old buildings, paintings and antique furniture. It somehow connects us to past peoples and gives us an insight into their lives, their existence, which would otherwise be beyond our reach due to the passage of time.

'That passage can be so variable. I once had my car parked on a slope outside a hotel and my baby was in a cot in the back. As I turned, standing in front of the hotel, I saw my car rolling down gathering speed and aiming for another car. I knew what I had to do. I had to run to the car, open the door, get inside and pull the handbrake. Between my seeing the car rolling and my achieving to stop it not more than a second could have passed and yet, time was suddenly stretched out to become eternal – everything seemed possible.'

[After that we entered an interesting dialogue about the many devices we have to stop, slow down, or speed up time, in other words, how we try to gain control over, or cheat, that which seems so firmly located outside our influence: time. We talked about trying to stay young, about preventing decay and making plans

for the future, about insurance, LSD, hypnosis, meditation, religion, art, architecture, writing, printing, language, technology, tradition . . .]

(*Mary, forty-two years, Joint Honours student of psychology and sociology, ex-teacher and art administrator, mother of three boys. Four years after this interview Mary died of cancer.*)

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Time forms such an integral part of our lives that it is rarely thought about. There is no need, it seems, to reflect on the matter since daily life, the chores, routines and decisions, the coordination of actions, the deadlines and schedules, the learning, plans and hopes for the future can be achieved without worrying about what time might be. It is, in fact, extraordinarily difficult to think and talk about time. Only very special circumstances such as these long, interactive, conversation-interviews seem to allow for the necessary reflective attitude to probe beyond the most superficial single associations – clocks and calendars, opening times, timetables, seasons – and for bringing to the surface what we normally take for granted. Such conversations invariably evoke total surprise at the degree of difficulty encountered in attempts to talk about the role and nature of time. It was something none of my interlocutors had ever been asked to think or talk about. When they did engage with the topic, death emerged as an unexpected feature of their reflections. This tended to be the case irrespective of the respondents' age and personal situation. While they were taken aback by the complexity of the task, I was amazed at the variation and uniqueness of the answers. Everyone, it seems, holds a very exclusive, personal meaning-cluster of time, a distinct but not fixed composition, one open to changes and linked to shifts in personal circumstances, emotional states, health, age and context. That which is rarely thought about thus constitutes a central component in our tacit knowledge-base. Multiple, composite, simultaneous, open-ended and changing, those personal meanings are at variance with the majority of social studies of time and their respective theoretical bases. This book is an attempt to take seriously the complexity of social time as it arises from personal accounts, academic research, and to a very limited extent from fiction, and to explore its implications for social science theory and practice.

If one-to-one conversations about time show us the multiplicity and breadth of conceptualizations of time in sequence, workshops on the role and nature of time in everyday life allow us to observe that complexity all at once: the network of meanings becomes visible as it is assembled from

the variety of brief and rather restricted reflections of individual group members. It takes on form as one thought triggers off others in the various members of a workshop. In such collective thinking situations, the association of time with clocks and calendars combines with that of deadlines, chores, routines, milestones, stress and ageing. Feelings that time presents constraint, discipline, control and structure are shared with the experience of time in terms of opportunity, points of reference and order or of celestial motion, the rhythms of the body and social organization. A sense of pressure and shortage or the need to prioritize and wait are complemented by an appreciation of time as a process of learning and healing or as luxury and relativity. The past, present and future get joined up with life-stages, activity and the commodity. Weekends, working days and the educational calendar are linked to time as organization, coordination, experience, memories and fears. Thus, once we bring the taken-for-granted to the forefront of our attention, the spell of clock time is broken. The invisible is given form.

In this book I want to continue this process, to move beyond the time of clocks and calendars and to make explicit what constitutes a largely unreflected aspect of contemporary social science: time embedded in social interactions, structures, practices and knowledge, in artefacts, in the mindful body, and in the environment. I do not aim to familiarize the reader with existing studies and theories of social time. I have written about these extensively in other work (Adam 1988, and 1990 especially Chapter 1) and, moreover, since then excellent reviews (Bergmann 1992, Nowotny 1992) and a journal (*Time and Society*) have been published which can provide that information. Instead, I want to bring time in its multiple expressions to the forefront of our social-science understanding and introduce its central role in and for our subject matter, methods and theories. In all of these domains it is the multiplicity, simultaneity and mutual implication that pose the biggest challenge to established traditions: the rational approach of abstraction, reduction and objective observation falsifies temporal experience and misses the central characteristics of the phenomena under investigation. The chapters that follow set out some of those constantly shifting, transient complexities and explore ways of keeping together what social science traditions have taken apart, namely, time with reference to the personal–public, local–global, natural–cultural dimensions of social life and in relation to the subjective–objective, synchronic–diachronic, linear–cyclical and contextual–general parameters of social theory.

In '"My" Time, "Our" Time, "Other" Time' I focus on one personal moment and from there I let the social times unfold. I move from the 'I' to the 'We' to the 'Other', from the personal via the collective to the

distant stranger, and establish simultaneously both a stronger collective temporal base and sharper differentiating features than are generally allowed for in traditional anthropological and historical studies. I demonstrate the coexistence of multiple times, reveal how language provides us with clues about this multiplicity and show how the resultant complexity cannot be contained within the classical dualisms of social science analyses. I thus pay serious attention to everyday experience and make the personal central to my work. I give a detailed account of clock time and offer a first analysis that serves as broad basis for all the other themes to which clock time is central. This allows me to home in on specific aspects of clock time in later chapters and avoid unnecessary repetition. Finally, I argue for the importance of getting to know the unreflected backcloth of 'own' time upon which 'other' times are constructed. Concern with the disattended temporalities of the social sciences' subject matters as well as the researchers' own methods and theories is central to this work and guides the approach to each of the subjects that follow.

Focus on the taken-for-granted and emphasis on the everyday and personal experience are continued in Chapter 2, 'Of Time and Health, Life and Death'. Here I stress the mutual implication of time and health, life and death and demonstrate how the times of 'nature' and the mindful body are inseparable from human being, well-being and processes of everyday life. I then address once more a theme opened up in the previous chapter: the complex relationship between clock time which foregrounds chronology, finitude and death and the life-generating times of the procreative body embedded in the rhythms of its 'natural' environment. Through the example of birthing I explicate how encounters with life and death take those involved beyond the realm of everyday time and how they bring to the fore times that are normally disattended, even submerged in subconscious being. Most importantly, I argue that the times of the mindful body and the physical environment cannot be excluded from social science analysis and that we need to bring together mutual implications and contextual–personal differences of times in analyses of specific events. Finally, I show how the way time is conceptualized makes a difference, how it affects not merely social science practice but our daily lives, our health and our relationship to birth and death.

The dominant approach to time, the way time is conceptualized, related to and used, tends to be established during childhood. Thus, in Chapter 3, 'Education: Learning the Habits of Clock-time' I show how the institutional structures and practices of Western-style education work to socialize, habituate and train young people into the clock-time approach to time which, in turn, has the effect of pushing into oblivion

the myriad of times that make up the temporal complexity of everyday life. I provide some historical background to the tightly choreographed routines of school life and reveal the roots of the prevalent time discipline in the triad of the monastic rules of St Benedict, the rise of science and the development of clock time for the mediation of natural and cultural processes. I suggest that social scientists in general and educational researchers in particular have to penetrate beyond the dominant times of clocks and calendars, timetables and schedules to the complexity of times – lived, experienced, generated, known, reckoned, allocated, controlled and used as an abstract exchange value – if they are fully to grasp time in educational practice and if such research is to bring about change not only in contemporary education but also in the children's later lives. I explain how existing approaches to social time mirror perspectives in education and educational research and suggest that the tradition is inadequate for the comprehensive mapping of educational time. I argue the need to take account of time-based invisibles such as aspects of the multiple life-worlds and the past–future extension; and, on the basis of my analysis, I caution against generalizations across time and the belief in an objectively observable reality uncontaminated by observation and unaffected by time. Finally, I analyse the relevance of Marx's, Durkheim's, Mead's and Schutz's writings on time for contemporary analyses of social life in general and educational practice in particular, before I consider some of the implications for social science of taking the complexity of times seriously.

In Chapter 4, 'The Time Economy of Work Relations' I examine contemporary work rhythms, their sources and their implications for participants. I demonstrate the connection between clock time, money, speed and efficiency and indicate how the market economy depends on a standardized, decontextualized, commodified time. Closely associated are both my exploration of 'free time' and a discussion of the high value of speed and flexibility. I show 'free time' to be not free but *produced time* which renders it inapplicable to all those outside paid employment, and I propose that the valorization of speed and flexibility has to be appreciated in relation to the economic principles of profit, efficiency and competition. In the context of work I consider women's ambiguous relationship to time and argue that a time that is generated and given cannot be encompassed within the time economy of employment relations. I demonstrate, in other words, that many women's times as well as the times of all those outside the time of markets and paid employment are not translatable into an abstract exchange value, that such time, therefore, is constituted in the shadow of the market economy. In addition, I suggest that the important feminist deconstructions of social time