

ACTIVIST TIMES:
TEMPORALITY AND POLITICAL ACTION
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE

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The COVID-19 pandemic has motivated many reflections on crisis and temporality.¹ Lockdowns broke habitual rhythms of economic and social life, constituting a period of stasis and uncertainty for those shuttered at home and of frenetic, unrelenting activity for healthcare professionals grappling to save lives and governments scrabbling to implement policies to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Multiple temporalities exist in the pandemic; lockdowns were ‘a sudden halt’ but also functioned as an ‘accelerator’ of existing social and economic change.² The broader horizons of past and future are being reconfigured along with our quotidian experiences of time: many analysts have reached for events such as the 1918 influenza pandemic—or even as far as the Black Death—in order to find meaningful historical precedents for our current predicament.³ The future, on the other hand, has contracted rather drastically amidst intense uncertainty over what the next few weeks or months—let alone years—will bring. The collapse of the future as a gradual unfolding extension of the present provides an opportunity for imagining new futures, but also risks a pessimistic presentist nihilism. The pandemic has collided and coexists with other events which serves to underline

the manifold temporalities that emerge with particular vigour during periods of perceived crisis.

The five articles in this Special Issue explore the ways in which different groups of activists have drawn on, experienced or projected different understandings of time in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, often in contexts shaped by substantial upheaval and uncertainty. Justyna Struzik develops the notion of ‘thick times’ to analyse the urgent work of HIV/AIDS activists in 1990s Poland, while Joachim Häberlen employs the concept of ‘heterochronias’ to explore the experiences of participants in urban revolts in the early 1980s in West Berlin, Amsterdam, and Zurich. Andrew Tompkins looks to debates about nuclear energy between activists, experts, and social scientists in France and West Germany in the 1970s to study different visions of modernity and the future; Patrick Soulsby examines the role of historical memory and contested pasts in 1980s and 1990s anti-racist activism in France. Marcus Colla argues that the architectural preservationists of the German Democratic Republic were ‘time activists’ who navigated the challenge of preserving and recovering the nation’s heritage while integrating it into the regime’s vision of the present. The authors’ concern throughout all these articles has been to bring questions of time to the fore in order to demonstrate how divergent experiences of time and different ways of conceptualising past, present, and future are crucial in understanding a whole variety of activist endeavours. Taken together, these articles argue that competing visions of the future and of the past—which often overlapped and coexisted in movements and moments—and the lived day-to-day texture of time have shaped historical events and processes as well as being a fundamentally important but often overlooked feature of activists’ and participants’ experiences. The temporal regimes that they inhabited were not singular or uniform, but contested and multifaceted.

Some argue that we are currently experiencing a ‘temporal turn’ in History and recent special issues of historical journals reveal a rich varied vein of work on time in European

history.⁴ But rather than a temporal turn, it is perhaps more helpful to think of a greater sensitivity to and foregrounding of time in a wide array of fields. Histories of childhood, for example, are predicated on the historical contingency of meanings and experiences of human beings' lifespans, which can lead to unpicking the political deployment of children as symbols of the future.⁵ Notions of time and temporality similarly frame fields such as memory studies and environmental history; particularly noteworthy in the latter is the contested notion of the 'Anthropocene'.⁶ Given time's intimate relationship to scale, it is a subject long debated and contested in discussions of *longue durée* history, from Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre's *Annales* school to the *History Manifesto*.⁷ Recent work theorising global history has also sought to expand not only the spatial but the temporal remit of scholarship, calling for history to be liberated from chronological constraints of particular events or eras.⁸ Time, therefore, has always been 'at the heart of all historical inquiry', even if only implicitly or else alluded to without further exploration.⁹

As regards political activism, time has always been a fundamental component of political projects, past and present; virtually all political programmes engage in defining temporal horizons, setting the limits of possible futures and (re)shaping the past to control its resources. While it may be too early to speak of a 'temporal turn' in the social-scientific study of social movements specifically, there is nonetheless an increased sensitivity to temporality in recent works.¹⁰ The study of contentious politics often focused on cycles and waves with time simply a linear backdrop or controlled variable, which contrasts with the attention afforded to space as a moulding factor of collective action.¹¹ But the swing away from structural approaches towards an emphasis on agency and culturalist frameworks along with a new focus on 'events' and critical, transformative junctures has opened a new path to examining time on a shorter scale and the experiential, malleable nature of temporality.¹²

Historical studies of changing notions of time are dominated by German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, who is regarded as the father of modern histories of time. In the late 1970s, Koselleck proposed that a marked change in the perception of time occurred in Western Europe between around 1750 and 1850 (he called this century-long span the *Sattelzeit*). In the midst of this *Sattelzeit*, the French Revolution marked an especially dramatic rupture in time, proclaiming itself as a ‘year zero’, the foundational moment of a new world based on equality, and inaugurating the modern regime of time.¹³ Time appeared to be speeding up and to have lost its previous cyclical quality, with the result that the past was no longer a guide for what might come in the future. Modernity, for Koselleck, was a state of acceleration which created the sense that the ‘horizon of expectation’ was hurtling away from the ‘space experience’, with the effect that increased possibilities generated greater expectations: ‘the more a particular time is experienced as a new temporality, as “modernity”, the more demands of the future increase’.¹⁴ More recently, François Hartog has attempted to explore the ‘tensions’ in Koselleck’s notions of a ‘space of experience’ and a ‘horizon of expectation’ by offering a broad account of what he called ‘regimes of historicity’, or the ways in which a particular society relates to past, present, and future.¹⁵ Hartog argued that these regimes vary between time and place, and that they tend to shift in moments of crisis, providing a new way of understanding change with each mutation. In contrast to Koselleck, he provided an account of modernity that was oriented towards the present rather than the future. Both authors, however, were concerned with constructing broad frameworks and with pinpointing modernity’s fundamentally temporal characteristics, rather than the manifold and contrasting ways in which historical actors experienced and thought about time. While the activists, rioters, regime officials, and social scientists who occupy the following pages were often embedded in temporalities that seem quintessentially modern in their rush towards the future, what is most

surprising and most enlightening about studying them is how often their ideas about time actually cut against this dominant model.¹⁶

An alternative approach to such attempts to unpick the broad temporal imaginaries undergirding western modernity lies in studies of the relationships between time, capitalism, and imperialism. In an anthropologically inflected essay written in the 1960s, E.P. Thompson explored the disciplining of individuals to the rhythms of industrial modernity. He suggested that the advent of industrial capitalism brought with it a shift from ‘task time’—an irregular way of working which responded to the demands of a given chore—to an emphasis on a more regimented ‘clock time’ which workers internalised.¹⁷ While he has been criticised for overstating the extent to which this ‘abstract, homogenous’ time actually penetrated people’s lives, Thompson’s essay is nonetheless highly instructive as it pointed a way towards understanding the impact of changing notions of time on individuals’ lives and daily experiences.¹⁸ In a wide-ranging exploration of calendar reform and the standardisation of time, Vanessa Ogle noted that time offered a way of ‘measur[ing] and establish[ing] difference’ under European colonial rule, pushing further the idea that time could be a feature of domination.¹⁹ Building on the notion of time as a tool of control under capitalist—and specifically imperial—projects, Frederick Cooper and Phyllis Martin have demonstrated how empires relied on particular notions of time discipline which could be subverted by colonised peoples and repurposed as a facet of resistance, for example during strikes.²⁰ These ideas are crucial in the pages that follow—the authors have sought to understand how activists could grapple with or negotiate dominant notions of time as they elaborated alternative visions of the future, reconfigured ideas about the past and its most important touchstones, and underwent different experiences of the day-to-day, lived texture of time.

These alternative ideas and experiences were often forged in circumstances of turmoil, and it follows that the articles collected here examine movements and moments shaped by

differing contexts of crisis. The crisis-ridden 1970s form the backdrop for Tompkins' study of anti-nuclear activists' visions of the future, and the HIV/AIDS activists of 1990s Poland were conscious that they were dealing with an acute crisis that occurred within the wider crisis sparked by the end of Communism. Perhaps more subtly, the urban rioters Häberlen studies, the architectural preservationists of Colla's article, and the anti-racist activists in Soulsby's work all felt themselves to be operating within a context of upheaval—whether they were trying to manufacture, control, or quell that upheaval. The centrality of crisis and upheaval has important implications for studies which take notions of time as their primary focus. Crisis, as Koselleck pointed out, is a concept which 'imply[s] a temporal dimension'—crises help create decisive moments when a choice must be made between multiple possible paths.²¹ In his studies on Weimar Germany, Rüdiger Graf develops these notions, describing how the perception of a crisis renders the present a period of intense 'insecurity' during which 'existentially different possibilities' might become 'equally possible'; the present, then, is imbued with urgency, 'a time to act in order to prevent the undesirable and realise the desirable option'.²² This is significant because it highlights how periods of turbulence brought ideas about past, present, and future into sharp relief for historical actors. But the idea of especially charged moments during which multiple futures unfurled from a precarious present also opens the way for understanding the importance of experiences of time. These experiences influenced people's actions and, ultimately, came to constitute different microcultures of time which could be inhabited (sometimes only briefly) by different groups.

Contested pasts, presents, and futures and the diverse ways in which time was experienced are key themes in this Special Issue. Tompkins explores how different interest groups grappled with notions of progress and modernity, producing divergent conceptualisations of the future in their debates about nuclear power, while Struzik and Häberlen both highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity of activist experiences of time in

different historical contexts. The activists of Struzik's study inhabited a set of 'queer temporalities' which were distinct from heteronormative expectations and time horizons governed by the pursuit of marriage and family. In their HIV/AIDS activism, they experienced an acute sense of urgency and threw themselves into frenetic activity—but they also suffered the disconcerting sensation deriving from the lack of a linear, usable past of queer activism that was evident in Western European countries. These features all combined to produce what Struzik describes as the 'thickness' of how their time of activism was experienced and later retrospectively imagined. This sense of a de-contextualised present has echoes in Häberlen's study of riots and squatting, in which activists sought to not only break with the past, but also with the present. Activists experienced revolts as a moment of release from chrononormativity and thus constituted an 'absolutely different' moment. This abrupt interruption of the flow of normal time produced a carnivalesque, topsy-turvy sense in which day-to-day happenings within the revolts took precedence over the past and the future. These activists were not attempting to shape a discernible future, but rather trying to escape from notions of continuity and linearity altogether, if only briefly.

In contrast, the anti-racist activists who are the subject of Soulsby's article consciously drew themselves into a longer history of activism in order to legitimise their actions. The weight of the past produced a sense of urgency which compelled them to base their efforts in an 'intergenerational contract'; a similar point could be made about the anti-nuclear activists of Tompkins' article, who moulded their activism in accordance with visions of the world to be inhabited by future generations. The Holocaust and its prominence in French public life in the 1980s was a key reference point for anti-racist activists, while colonialism was largely overlooked until the 1990s. The destruction wrought by the Second World War also features in Tompkins and Colla. Although the eyes of anti-nuclear activists—both social movements and experts—were firmly trained on the future, their apocalyptic imaginary was also rooted in

Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the bombing of Europe. For the officials tasked with preserving the German Democratic Republic's built environment, the problem was very different. As Colla shows, these activists faced a landscape of ruins which they had to incorporate into the regime's vision of historical time. The past here was not a fixed entity: architectural preservation was a 'contested domain' in which ruins appeared as 'alternative temporalities' and which could, by turns, maintain or challenge the prevailing temporal order. The past—as embedded in the built environment—was both inescapable and heavily imbued with contested political meanings.

The significance of this special issue is fourfold. The articles add a new dimension to the extensive and rich literature on memory and contested pasts; they integrate analysis of competing ideas about the past into studies of time which also take seriously experiences of the present and notions of the future.²³ Second, these articles contribute to a literature on time which is becoming increasingly concerned with particularities and nuances, seeking to understand specific experiences of time rather than construct overarching frameworks.²⁴ Third, these articles broach the question of how notions of time can appear different for those who held political power as compared with activists and thinkers who challenged the status quo. The latter group receives extensive attention, as several of our authors examine how time was experienced on the political margins. Finally, these articles examine a particular moment in European history between the end of the Second World War and the fall of Communism. This Special Issue does not propose a unified way of seeing this period—rather, we underscore the heterogeneity and the charged sense of possible futures but also restraining pasts for a range of historical actors and social movements.

¹ See Allegra Fryxell's eloquent Afterword "The human scale of time."

² Antentas, "Notes on corona crisis," 316.

³ See Fryxell, "The human scale of time" and Shamekh et al, "COVID-19."

⁴ Siegfried, "Reconfiguring the Future?". For special editions, e.g. Matthew S. Champion, ed. "Viewpoints: Temporalities", and Esposito and Reichardt, eds, "Fascist Temporalities".

⁵ The founding text is Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale*. A more recent synthesis is Heywood, *A History of Childhood*. The political use of children in a British context, King, "Future Citizens."

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- ⁶ Although the term—and fundamental premise—is older, the starting point for debating the Anthropocene is usually Crutzen and Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” 17–18. See a meditation on the challenge of the Anthropocene for conceiving and writing human history in Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History.”
- ⁷ Armitage and Guldi, *The History Manifesto*.
- ⁸ Aslanian et al., “AHR Conversation. How size matters.”
- ⁹ Roemer, “Between hope and despair,” 345.
- ¹⁰ See, recently, Edwards, Gillan, Kavada, Krinsky, Poell and Wood, eds. “Time for Change?”
- ¹¹ A summary in Markoff, “Historical analysis.”
- ¹² McAdam and Sewell, “Temporality in Social Movements.” On events, see Sewell, “Three temporalities” and developed in his *The Logics of History*.
- ¹³ On the ways in which the French Revolution advertised itself as a temporal rupture, Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 1–79. On modernity and the French Revolution, see Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 11–54.
- ¹⁴ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 3. For a stimulating collection of essays which tackle Koselleck’s legacy, see *Breaking Up Time*, in particular the chapters by Peter Osborne and Aleida Assman.
- ¹⁵ Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité*, 39.
- ¹⁶ A healthy scepticism regarding modernity has been manifest in Clark, *Time and Power* as well as in the collection of ‘viewpoint’ pieces on time in *Past & Present*.
- ¹⁷ Thompson, “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism.”
- ¹⁸ Ogle, “Time, temporality and the history of capitalism,” 5.
- ¹⁹ Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*, 7.
- ²⁰ Martin, *Leisure and Society*; Cooper, “Colonizing time.” Another recent and significant contribution on the relationship between time and power comes from Clark, see *Time and Power*; see also Greenhouse, *A Moment’s Notice*.
- ²¹ Koselleck, “Some questions,” 13.
- ²² Graf, “Either–or,” 600. See also Graf and Jarausch, “‘Crisis’ in Contemporary History and Historiography.”
- ²³ See for example Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, or Carvalho and Gemenne, eds. *Nations and their Histories*.
- ²⁴ See for example Wright, *Socialism and the Experience of Time*, or Krakowský, *Réinventer le monde*.

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