Inquiring Into Academic Timescapes

Edited by Filip Vostal

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Praise for *Inquiring into Academic Timescapes*

'Hurry, hurry, hurry. Cramming work into the seemingly ever pacier rhythms of academic life. We have to wonder what this means for thinking and for the community upon which university learning is built. From a wide range of perspectives, this brilliantly curated collection of pieces avoids the obvious and brings forward the deep-rooted politics of time within the university. This book might seem like yet another thing to add to an unwieldy reading pile or another item to scribble on an anxiety producing "to do" list, but it will be worth it, not least because it will put those pressures into context and will allow the reader some space to reflect upon them.'

–**David Beer,** Professor of Sociology, University of York, UK

'*Inquiring into Academic Timescapes* is an essential resource for both novice and veteran scholars of timescapes. The collection includes insights from both seasoned temporality researchers and voices that are too often excluded from academic recognition. This collection draws together the off-beat habits of academic life to reveal the spontaneous order waiting for analysis. New scholars to the field will benefit from Vostal's efforts to curate a broad assembly of approaches to the study of academic timescapes, while more experienced researchers will benefit from exploring emerging research in the field. This collection inspired me to reflect on both my research methodology and the habits that make up my own academic practices.'

–**Fabian Cannizzo,** Honorary Associate, La Trobe University, Australia

'This fine collection of essays provides a nuanced account of the dynamic multiplicity of academic timescapes. It is a welcome counter to popular narratives about time pressure and the need for slow-down. A must-read for anyone interested in understanding the embodied experience of living as an academic today.'

–**Judy Wajcman,** Anthony Giddens Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics

'My ticking pomodoro timer is ticking away here as I sit down to draft my endorsement of this magnificent and urgent account of the uneven temporality of academia. It doesn't matter how long I spent reading it though. What matters more is that I find the right words to explain how *Academic Timescapes* allows the reader to time-travel and tempo-travel through institutional and disciplinary uneven temporal halls of academic life. This book includes riveting accounts of how time is spent, lost, and gained. If there's anything shared across academia it is after all a fixation on how others utilize time. Thus this book has you flipping the page with its immersive time stories. But more importantly this collection demands that academia takes on a broader temporal accounting. One must recognize and declare their temporal position within the larger structures of privilege and the production of precarity. (The 25 minute timer buzzes in background.) *Academic Timescapes* lays out the groundwork of what it means to think in terms of a new "chronosolidarity" including the possibilities of a new temporal order of academic life in the future.'

–**Sarah Sharma,** McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology, University of Toronto, and Author of *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*

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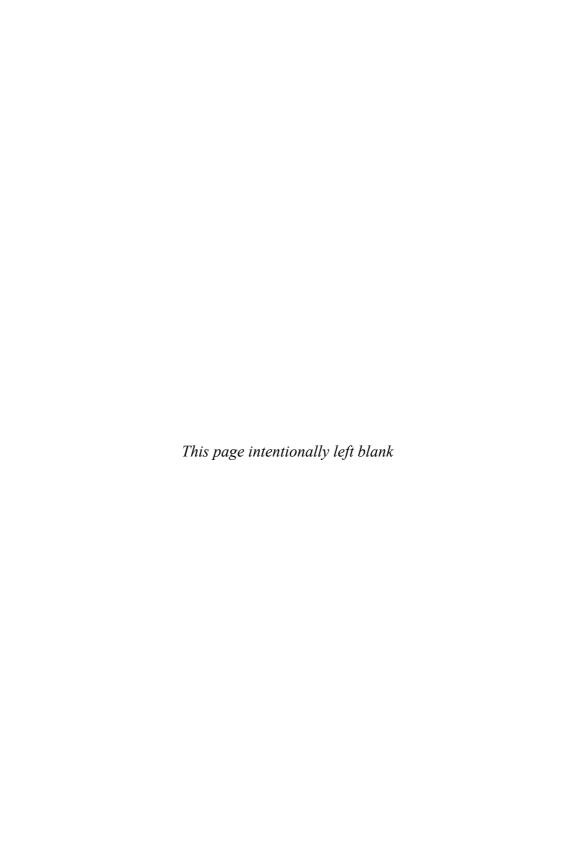
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Preface

Academic Timescapes in Focus

Barbara Adam

Time is everywhere and it permeates everything: the cosmos, our solar system, the earth's past, present and future, our environment. It is also a feature of our social existence: of family life, the education system, politics and law, as well as every aspect of commerce, business and industry. It is something we experience and do. With calendar and clock time we create, order, shape and regulate the world we live in. As such, it is also used as our prime organising tool. Despite its pervasiveness, however, time forms a largely un-reflected aspect of our daily lives in the public and the private sphere because it is not accessible to the senses: we can't see, touch, taste, hear or smell it. And yet, we are able to experience it. We experience it in the ageing of our own bodies. We know it by the passing of days and months and years. We recognise it when our students are graduating after years of study. We deal with it regularly in teaching plans and educational schedules and we feel it as time pressure when there is too much to do in a given time frame.

In the industrialised and industrialising world, therefore, time forms an integral part of daily life and work experience, while also constituting an invisible part of everyday life, where we know it at a tacit level only. This means time is part of our implicit knowledge base. Given its centrality to social life, however, social scientists are charged to render explicit what is currently implicit. An explicit engagement with time is important, as it not only aids research on academic work and study but also, and more importantly, it forms a foundation on which alternatives to current praxis can be imagined, envisaged and developed.

This collection engages with this task by elaborating the diversity of academic times and moving it to the foreground of attention. By way of providing a conceptual context for this work I outline some key implicit assumptions, relate these briefly to some classic theories of working time and show how, on the basis of my research on theories and assumptions about time, I have come to develop the concept of timescape.

Diverse Implicit Assumptions

Exploring taken for granted assumptions about time, held in industrial societies, one can discern a number of characteristics that can be summarised in the following way: it is common sense that clocks and calendars measure time, which implies that time is a quantity that can be given a number value. It is equally obvious that clocks and calendars divide time and that these divisions function as

boundaries, which structure our activities, as is the case with years, days and hours. Furthermore, it is accepted that time is standardised into the 24-hour clock, which, in turn, is divided into equal hours where one hour is the same irrespective of context, season and place, that is, whether it is summer or winter in Prague, Papua New Guinea or the Polar regions. In addition, this time is rationalised across the globe and divided into equal time zones. It is taken as given not only that daily life is organised to schedules of opening and closing times and structured into days of work, rest and social festivities but also that deadlines are an integral part of daily life. Finally, it is taken for granted that time is a personal and public resource that we can use, allocate and exchange for money. This cluster of implicit knowledge and assumptions works together as an integrated, mutually implicating whole.

Simultaneously, however, there exists another set of equally unquestioned assumptions about time, which relates largely to the natural environment, to embodied experience and to the private domain of social life. Long before time came to be associated with the invariable time of clocks, time was and, still is, associated with life, change and difference. Without needing to give explicit thought to the matter, it is appreciated that time has something to do with development and evolution, birth and death, growth and decay, on the one hand, and with the movement of earth, moon and sun, which affects all life on earth, on the other hand. It is taken for granted that this movement is the silent pulse that structures our being and makes us who we are: time-based and rhythmically constituted earthlings that embody patterns of activity and rest. Importantly, the daily and annual repetitions involved are marked by similarity rather than sameness and are constitutive of change and difference. This implies that there is a direction to time – people age, cars rust, burning logs turn to ashes, knowledge grows and accumulates – and we know that these processes are not reversible: people do not get younger. Cars do not get newer and there is no unknowing, only forgetting what we have known. Furthermore, it is taken as given that nature is suffused not with one but a multitude of times, each appropriate to the plant, animal or ecosystem in question and that the life span, metabolism and reproduction cycle of an earthworm, for example, is irreducibly different from that of an oak tree, a polar bear or a human being. Finally it is implicitly known that time is not merely lived or used but also gifted, as in the case of love and care where generosity with one's time tends to produce happiness and wellbeing.

Clearly, this implicit knowledge base is tied to very different assumptions from the first one. It recognises that all times are not equal and that time is rooted in difference and change. It appreciates that context matters, that every hour is not the same because seasons, time, place, condition, situation and biography make a difference. It acknowledges that there is a right time for in/action and an in/opportune time to intervene, an appropriate time to so sow and reap, a good time to learn and an optimal time for timing certain events and interactions, to name just a few examples. It implies an acceptance that quality takes time and some actions, processes and services tend to take the time they take, if they are to be done well – for example, writing a poem, researching a difficult subject matter, feeding a baby – and that for some tasks, such as playing a Mozart sonata, the appropriate tempo matters. It accepts the importance sharing and giving time, be

this among spouses, lovers and friends, between carers and the cared for, among colleagues, students, their teachers and their mentors.

In our daily lives, we weave our way through the differences without giving much thought to the matter, leaving unattended any inherent contradictions and incompatibilities. When this divergent implicit knowledge is brought to an explicit level of understanding, however, the contrasting clusters of taken-for-granted assumptions and know–how can be considered in relation to each other. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that that they are played out unequally in daily lives: the abstract time of the clock, where one hour is the same irrespective of context and emotion, dominates public policy and underpins the economic relations of work and study. Locally and globally, the invariable time, which goes round and round in a circle, is imposed on the variable cycles of nature, social life and learning. The variable time of life and death, development and growth of knowledge, of seasons and opportune moments, of hopes and visions for the future, has to be fitted (even squeezed) into the invariable, quantitative divisible time of the clock. Whether or not it is suitable, the abstract time, which can be exchanged for money and is central to the calculation of efficiency and profit, is applied to the qualitative time of creativity and care, of learning, research and writing. That is to say, in the context of work in general and academic work in particular, the variable, contextual and lived time is anchored in the time-world of clocks where uniqueness, variation and change and have been abandoned for the abstracted simplicity of sameness. Importantly, this fairly recent historical development of Modernity is today considered 'normal' and related to as 'natural fact'. As such, it has been exported right across the globe, where it has been adopted with varying degrees of success.

Working Time Theorised

In social theory, this taken-for-granted 'normality' of clock-time in public life and employment relations has been explored extensively, especially in relation to working time. In the world of remunerated work, as I have already indicated, clock time is the pre-condition to be paid for time, rather than a service or product. Karl Marx theorised this relation some 150 years ago. His analysis still stands and forms the basis for most of contemporary work on the commodification of time. In *Capital Vol. I*, Marx (1867/1976) argued that the different products of work have use values that are always context and situation specific, as is clearly the case with, for example, the use value of a table, a coat, a pension scheme or an academic journal article. To exchange something for money, however, requires a third neutral value to be introduced, which is to mediate between the two. Unlike the use value, which is context and situation specific, this mediating exchange value has to be independent from context. Marx showed that time is this common, decontextualised value by which products, tasks and services can be exchanged, evaluated, traded and remunerated. Not the variable time of seasons, ageing, growth and decay, joy and pain, but the invariable, abstract time of the clock where one hour is the same irrespective of context and emotion, allows work to be translated into money and traded as a commodity on the labour market.

The resulting equation of time with money has far-reaching consequences for the world of paid employment. Importantly, these consequences differ significantly for employers and workers.

For employers and business generally, efficiency and profitability are tied to speed, which means the faster something moves through the system the better it is for profit. Accordingly, there is pressure to produce ever more in ever shorter time spans. Again, it was Karl Marx (1867/1976) who first theorised this process as time compression. He pointed out that employers tend to compensate for any legal restriction on or reduction of working hours with compression and intensification of work practices, which are beyond legislative reach, with the result that ever fewer employees are expected to do the work of ever more people. In academia, for example, ever more publications are expected in ever shorter time spans, etc. Furthermore, when time is money, then any un-used time is money wasted, hence the effort to fill up ever more of any unused times. Again, academia is no exception. For the institution this might include extending the teaching day, filling gaps in the teaching week or running courses during the summer recess.

For academic teaching staff, the situation is clearly very different. They constantly have to synchronise the divergent relations of time and guard the socio-environmental limits of their lived time within the commodified and compressed time of work. For them, time and place are contextual: when and where they work matters. All hours are not the same. Rather, it makes a significant difference when and how many hours they lecture in a day, week, month or year and how easily the various elements of their lives can be coordinated. Their capacity for flexibility is tied to their commitments to significant others and likely to vary over their working lives. Patterns of work and leisure, activity and rest matter to them, and so do the distances between their work, home, children's schools and public facilities. As contextual social beings rather than abstract entities, employees learn from the past and are motivated by their future. They build up loyalties and commitments, nurture relationships and develop specialist knowledge and skills over time. Past and future, therefore, are of significant relevance. Crucially, as members of communities and families, people are not exchangeable or interchangeable. Rather, they are unique and irreplaceable in the contextual network of relations that make up work places, communities and families.

When we relate assumptions and approaches to working time, we can see that tensions arise in the interstices of the different temporal spheres, that is, among nature, society, home, work, production, employer, employee, economic exchanges and the money economy, for example. The social times of academics are no exception. They too are lived and negotiated in conflict, that is, co-exist in friction and a hierarchy of status. It becomes apparent that the increasing acceleration and time pressure, which seem to be an inescapable feature of academic life today, arise not just with time compression where ever more activity has to be crammed into ever shorter time spans, or with choice overload, or even with the commodification of time, which leads to speed valorisation. Rather, it also arises with the additional inescapable need to synchronise diverse patterns of time, relate very different, hierarchically structured approaches to time and negotiate their incompatible logics.

Timescape Complexity Conceptualised

Conducting research on social time in general and academic time in particular, it becomes apparent that irrespective of discipline and perspective within, everyone is using the same word, but not talking about the same thing and one begins to realise that time is not a single, uniform phenomenon but a compound one, that comprises a number of irreducible features, which appear to be constant across social contexts, cultures and groups and this applies to both the lived and the socially constituted abstract time. Since my first publications I have identified these features as follows: *time* as framed/bounded extent of varying length, which is imposed externally; *temporality* as the time within a system, a process time, which is marked by inescapable change; *tempo* as the speed and intensity of processes and changes; *timing* as both the right time and the synchronisation between, processes, actions, events, groups of people and externally defined extents; and, finally, *past, present* and *future*, the modalities of time. From the late 1990s onwards, I began to theorise this compound time as *timescape*, which has also been chosen as the title for this collection of papers. It seems useful, therefore, to explore in more detail what this concept entails (Adam, 1998, 2004).

In western and westernised societies, the most widely used aspect is time is as frame or period, which defines the socially constituted boundaries within which events unfold and durations can be measured. This aspect of time arises from history and biographies as well as cycles of the seasons, day and night, the 24-hour clock and the smaller units within. Academic examples would be the lecture, the semester, the personal research plan, an examination period or the budgetary cycles of universities and research councils, as all these are timeframes or periods within which activities take place. Moreover, time frames/periods tend not to be fixed but a matter of choice and definition, imposed rather than system-specific. For example, the actual boundaries of day and night are changing with the seasons. Clock- and calendar time frames are defined by convention and so are single examinations, examination periods, semesters and budgetary cycles. Even the large geo-historical epochs are defined variably and change with new academic insights. As such, the framing aspect of time covers both the external, socially constituted time of calendars and clocks and the variable and contextual time of biographies, things and processes within such externally defined frameworks.

Temporality, the second feature of timescape, is the processual and changing aspect of life and cyclical repetition. It is the time within a system and it is lived and experienced as change processes, as growth and decay, life, development and ageing, emergence, creativity and learning. For example, in nature everything is embedded in seasonal change and marked by directionality: spring returns, but never exactly the same as in previous years. Children develop into adults. People grow and die. There may be regression but the direction is from young to old. Order deteriorates and requires energy to maintain it. Knowledge accumulates. There is no un-knowing, only forgetting what had been known. And forgotten knowledge leaves memory traces. Focus on temporality, therefore, confronts us with the realisation that change is inescapable and that both sameness and reversibility

are impossible. Importantly, focus on the temporality feature of time shows us that we are time, that we embody and have all of time encoded within us. It demonstrates that we live, use, know and create time in interaction. And it reveals that the world is irrevocably and irreversibly different with every action, interaction and transaction.

Tempo, the third element of timescape, covers speed and intensity. As such, it is a central feature of all process times. In living processes, tempo is system-specific, variable and contextually unique. The tempo of clock-time, in contrast, is invariable and pre-set by the designer. For the clock, variation in tempo would mean that the clock is malfunctioning. Tempo as speed valorisation, as I have argued earlier, is a social effect of equating clock time with money. Moreover, clock-time relations and expectations, be they social, educational, academic, public or private, therefore, operate in contexts of widely diverging speeds. They may range from the lived rhythmicity of bodies and fellow beings to the IT communications at speed of light. While some processes are being connected in instantaneous and simultaneous networks of information exchange, others are conducted on the basis of clock-time and others still operate at the level of embodied time. Importantly, those varied speeds are nested, interrelated and combined into overarching rhythms of bodies, social relations and institutions. In our working lives we negotiate these different qualities and intensities of tempi without even thinking about it. It means, we manage not only this negotiation but also the complex and intricate synchronisation and timing associated with the widely differing speeds of social relations.

Timing, the fourth timescape feature, is important, therefore, to all interactions between individuals and collectives, daily routines and commitments and the public schedules of social life. Timing allows for the co-ordination and structuring of academia's public schedules with those of employee's, work and leisure. It relates to the synchronisation of the public lives of administrators, academics and students with those of personal activities with family, friends and colleagues. Finally, it covers the harmonisation of processes that can be quantified with ones that operate outside and beyond the reach of the clock-time beat. As such, complex timing is required for the synchronisation and integration of the diverse time logics of our lives. This too takes time and effort. And, clearly, the more difficult the logics to be integrated are, the more time and effort will have to be allocated, which, in turn, increases time pressure and stress.

Finally, human beings as well as their fellow species and their life worlds are uniquely located in a past–present–future continuum. They embody their past and present. As humans we live, imagine, design and make futures on a daily basis. We remember and anticipate, study and learn in the context of past experience and live life with purpose and motivation, expectation, hope and trepidation. Importantly, both past and future function as guides and causes for actions in the present. Embedded in their socio-natural environment, people are past and future oriented. As such, they are pirouetting and swivelling with skill and ease in this vast extension of their respective presents. At this point it is important to remember that clock time is indifferent to past and future beyond the directionality of the number system. That is to say, memory and anticipation, retention and protention – all

central for daily existence – have no place in the time that goes round and round in designed invariability and sameness. For clock time, past and future are an irrelevance.

Explicit focus on time and engagements with the diversity of social time shows that academia encompasses not just the quantity but also the quality of working time, not just the commodity but also the lived complexity. To understand and research it, therefore, involves combining into a coherent whole, the incompatible time logics that currently stress and stretch our lives and entails rendering explicit what is currently known implicitly. In addition, it means that we have to avoid focussing on one mode at the expense of another and, instead, need to know the diverse practices and the associated timescape features in relation to each other. This entails letting go of either–or thinking and facilitating instead an understanding that encompasses contradictions and paradoxes, multiplicities and complex implications, displacements and repressions, as well as resonances of the old in the new.

It means further that different practices need to be appreciated in terms of their temporal logics, which are not necessarily compatible with the logics of other work time systems, and that there is need to recognise the conflictual processes that arise within any specific timescape. Most challenging would be the realisation that time cannot be simply added to existing theories and approaches, that a time-based analysis will affect the ontology, epistemology and methodology of the subject under investigation. Academia understood in its economic, social and environmental complexity would, therefore, be the starting point from which to begin to take account of the temporal needs at all these levels and address current inequalities embedded therein. As such it could be an important step on the long path to change towards more sustainable academic practices.

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