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## *Chronos and Kairos in Politics*

*The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* by David C. Hoy. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009, pp. 328, ISBN-10: 0-262-01304-5, £26.95 (hbk.),

*Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* by Kimberly Hutchings. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, pp. 208, ISBN: 978-0-7190-7302-1, £60.00 (hbk.).

By Ben O'Loughlin

In the West, today, we inhabit an 'extended present' (Nowotny, 1994), an uninterrupted unfolding of now without any sense of what a post-now would look or feel like or how it could be reached. For governments, this temporality is manageable: to rule becomes a continually emergent and adapting set of strategies and foci within which all eventualities are smoothed and loosely controlled, a little risk encouraged, or at least the right kinds of risk. Thinkers we might think of as progressive announce that the challenge of politics today is how to live together on the same world *now* without blowing each other up. "Space has been replaced by time as the main ordering principle", Bruno Latour (2005) writes. "We can get rid of nothing and no one", so the question becomes, "What should now be simultaneously present?" What practices and beliefs, what people and attachments? But does this discharge any interest in or responsibility for a future-oriented politics? For instance, Latour continues, "This does not mean that there is no progress in the end, or that no arrow of time can be thrust forward. It means that we slowly proceed from a very simple-minded form of cohabitation." Such modest hopes are not restricted to academia: since the 1990s we have witnessed the relational aesthetics of Bourriaud and others, who use art to construct new 'sociabilities'; "It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows. That is all, but it is quite something" (2002, p. 45). The principal imaginaries of a *different* future, in the West at least, are the apocalyptic, those envisioning catastrophic human-made disasters for our climate, economic systems or infrastructures – depressing visions that have been subjected to extensive premediation in the first decade of the twenty-first century in the form of all kinds of movies, drama-documentaries, and novels. If the future is not simply a more cosmopolitan version of today, then, it is one of humanity's own self-destruction. These imaginaries depend on some very basic assumptions about politics and time, theories of cause-effect and the connections of past, present and future. Perhaps

if we can identify and think beyond those temporal assumptions we could begin to envision a different politics.

It is in this context that two books have arrived that offer concise frameworks for thinking through this problem. In *The Time of Our Lives*, Hoy offers a genealogy of philosophers' discussion of our experience of temporality – the time of our lives – and its relationship to time, the apparently objective time of the universe, time-space. Hoy reverses the Kantian and neo-Kantian notion that “time is a form of intuition and is imposed by the mind on experience”; rather, from his phenomenological perspective, “temporality is a condition for the possibility of subjectivity” (p. vii). Tracing how we experience temporality allows us to map changing conceptions of subjectivity, the possibilities for political action, and the basic human problem of dealing with the sense of time's passing. Employing a framework of tracking how philosophers conceived of time and temporality, Hoy works clearly and crisply through Kant and Heidegger; Hegel, Husserl and Hacking; Benjamin, Bergson and Deleuze, and finally Derrida, Foucault and Žižek.

Hutchings covers most of the same thinkers, but adds a selection of more mainstream politics and international relations scientists and theorists, from which such assumptions about time and politics have arguably more directly shaped how states have conducted international affairs. In *Time and World Politics*, Hutchings offers a dualistic framework that usefully complements Hoy's axis of time/temporality. From ancient Greek thought Hutchings begins with the concept *chronos*, the sense of time as quantitative clock-time, a medium through which we can measure and compare lifespans, periods, and empires. If we approach time as *chronotic*, it becomes easy to think about cause preceding effect in a linear, unimpeded process of history. *Chronos* is distinguishable from *kairos*, the notion of transformation in *chronos*-time, of challenging and disrupting, of forces of divine Fortune or human agency wresting the course of *chronos* and guiding it in a new direction. If we assume a role for *kairos* in politics then suddenly the linear flow of *chronos* becomes far from inevitable. Machiavelli, for instance, understood politics as a cyclical process of leaders rising and falling as they were forced to deal with the good and bad luck of events beyond their control.

During the Cold War, Hutchings argues, ‘the *space* of international politics was thought of as frozen in *time*’ (p. 11). Scholars assumed inter-state relations would always constitute the stuff of international politics, and social ‘science’ was produced to support this. Behavioural and empiricist scholars, assuming history to exist in an empty *chronos*, simply compared differences in the characteristics of political units (executives, democratic systems, militaries, and so on) in order to explain and predict political outcomes. Yet even in mainstream theory, conceptions of *chronos* and *kairos* differed markedly. Liberals took from Kant the notion of reason as a *kairotic* force driving progress through *chronos*, while Realists understood the international system as

essentially permanent anarchy and subject to the repetition of power balancing. Time only became an explicit consideration when the Cold War ended. Scholars wrote of history's end, the inevitable clash of civilizations, the return of tragic great power politics, plural but simultaneous postcolonial world histories, or apparently endless states of exception. Hutchings demonstrates how these accounts depended upon contending conceptions of *chronos* and *kairos*. It is that reading, and that framework, that will allow her to arrive at her own position (post- post-structuralism, like Hoy, as we will see below).

Clearly, the end of the Cold War brought a different feeling of history, but where do such feelings come from, Hoy asks (p. 165)? Take Walter Benjamin's essay on Paul Klee's painting of an angel facing backwards, being blown into the future, witnessing a pile of debris piling up at its own feet. For Benjamin this is a parable. The debris stands for ideas of universal history and progress, the ideas of Kant and Hegel, an 'ideological sham' that distracted us from the victims of history and the violence of today (p. 154). There is no *telos* because if humanity is facing backwards we cannot see what is coming or any signposts showing direction or progress. However, that accumulation of debris offers hope: an imperative for a messianic moment of seeing history's wreckage and realizing a new direction. Any sense of inevitability due to assumptions of neutral, natural *chronos* can be disrupted by *kairos*, in Hutchings' terms. In Hoy's reading of Benjamin, such messianic feeling offers a spur for political action, a feeling of history being open to change.

However, Derrida rejects Benjamin's argument, calling instead for messianicity "without messianism", that is, without relying upon a messiah figure to guide history in a new direction (Hoy, 2009, p. 164). Any ideals to guide us anew would be projections of present concerns, likely to be irrelevant in the *longue durée*. Instead, Derrida asks us to focus on the here and now, to devise a form of democratic practice that incorporates hope; democracy structured as a promise. Democracy at least offers the freedom to criticize itself and other public matters. Instead of a feeling of history-to-come then, Derrida calls for a sense of promise now.

Both Hoy and Hutchings tend towards a focus on the present – as Hoy puts it, "because that is where the action is" (p. 180). It is the only time in which we can act and, he suggests, a genealogy such as his explication on time and temporality can open up tensions and trigger reflection about what *is*. And where do his reflections point? Hoy's phenomenology of a future temporality sees past and future as part of the 'lived present', or 'the time of our lives' in which all tenses are entwined:

... the future is equally open to interpretation through action. The futural can be understood as the projection of a present that is already past, and as the future of a past that has not occurred. As exemplified by Benjamin's angel, the future may not really be a function of what lies ahead of us. Instead, it might well be a

function more of what lies behind us, as a possibility that once was to be realized, but that also exceeds what was once present. (p. 182)

The *point* of life for Hoy is to affirm this openness to uncertain relations between past, present and future, to throw the dice despite not having a full grasp of the present. Meanwhile, Hutchings arrives at a focus on the present via a different route. Her review of modern political philosophers has shown them to be haunted by the idea that politics is a project of controlling time as *chronos* and creating a different kind of time through *kairos*, but that idea leads to an assumed singular time and a blocking out of anything that doesn't fit:

For all of our theorists, the time of world politics is the time of liberal capitalist states and the globalisation of capitalism. This temporality enables an overarching sense to be made of foreign policy-making, international law, global civil society activity, humanitarian intervention, global governance, intra- and inter-state politics in general, and of specific events like the end of the Cold War, the 1991 Gulf War, 9/11 or the war in Iraq. [What is missing is] authoritarian capitalist states, religion, non-Western culture, clientalist politics, imperialism, colonisation, the organisation of reproduction, gendered relations of powers. (p. 159)

Even critical theorists propose a single present and historical pathway. Virilio may write of the spread of Western war and technology as catastrophic but that spread is *the* meaning of world politics. Agamben may find the figure of the refugee standing outside that time, vulnerable, but their political potential and “usefulness resides in the extent to which he prompts Western critical self-reflection” (Hutchings, 2008, p. 161). Hutchings turn to Spivak, for whom the point is not to produce an alternative time but to unsettle the idea of a singular, true historical time, or to find “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (Spivak, 1987, in Hutchings, 2008, p. 164). This heterotemporality can be found both empirically and conceptually. We can simply look at the divergent understandings of Western humanitarian interventions, which can be seen simultaneously as missions of progress towards a universal liberal order or as a continuation of asymmetries of power. Contestation over the meaning of such interventions is not evidence of a clash of civilisations, with mutually exclusive temporalities, but instead “a mutual contamination of ‘nows’ ... which do not derive their significance from one meta-narrative about how they all fit together” (ibid, p. 166). And conceptually, Hutchings refers again to Derrida's argument that the present is never fully present, a supplement is there but not detected, making ‘now’ spectral.

For Hutchings, post-Kantian and post-Marxist accounts limit how time and

politics are considered. If civil society is a source of political hope, those accounts limit what counts as civil society: for Habermas, Linklater and Benhabib any violent movements are excluded; for Hardt and Negri any agencies seeking only reform rather than revolution are excluded: NGOs are regressive. For each theorist, progress is whatever they say it is, each promoting their own vision, thereby denying the plurality of politics. Plurality is also denied as each advances a particular *kairos* or transcendent driver of progress, either communicative reason or revolutionary praxis. Such theorizing is circular, Hutchings argues. Their identification of a *kairos* is the key to interpreting today's *chronotic* politics, but today's politics shows how *kairos* is at play, driving humanity forward. For instance, 'reason provides the key to interpreting political time, but political time in turn grounds the claims of reason' (ibid, p. 126). "What is to be done" is always already known, rather than a matter of allowing any emergence or plurality.

Hutchings anticipates criticisms of her conclusions. How can social science operate if we are immanent to what we study? How can we select what processes to study if we cannot fully know the present? How can normative political theory function if there is no past-present-future ordering that allows theory to guide humanity in a more acceptable direction? Her answer is that once we shake off the assumption of finding or creating a *kairos* guiding history we become free and we can find more possibilities for evaluating politics. As Hoy argued that the point of our lives is to embrace and affirm multiplicity and openness, so Hutchings argues the point of political analysis is to "appreciate the possibilities for change inherent in contingency" (p. 176).

These books are candid and ambitious (Hoy's is the first of a two-volume study). They achieve the task of challenging existing assumptions about temporality in order to offer a new basis for thinking and doing politics. The affirmation of uncertainty and embedding heterotemporality into political institutions might seem threatening to many. However theoretically-grounded, a focus on the present rather than the future may seem conservative. Given the failures of modern politics, are these the only choices remaining?

## Bibliography

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