

What Difference Does Today Introduce with Respect to Yesterday's Tomorrow?

Birgit M. Kaiser (Utrecht University)

One near or far is seeking (seeking), what are they looking for?
I don't know, what if you find it?
Please, won't you tell me so, oh yeah
Now every young folk throughout the land
Looking for someone to understand
But all the older ones they just reminisce
Talking 'bout the good ol' days that they miss
[...]
We better wake up or soon it will be too late
We ought to stop and think
The sign shows the break of destruction.
Bob Marley and the Wailers, "The World is Changing" (1985)

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.
Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are a-Changin'" (1964)

In "What is Enlightenment?" (1984), a text that has repeatedly come up in *Terra Critica* discussions, in our attempt to (re)work critique from and out of its Eurocentric legacies, Foucault notes that "Kant defines *Aufklärung*" – and by implication critique – as "an *Ausgang*, an 'exit,' a 'way out'" (Foucault 305). According to Foucault, for Kant this also makes it a "question of contemporary reality alone." That is, he (Kant/Foucault) is "not seeking to understand the *present* on the basis of a totality or of a *future* achievement" but asks after the difference that "*today* introduce[s] with respect to *yesterday*" (305, all emphases added). In this paper, I would like to consider these (con-)temporalities of presents/futures/todays/yesterdays when exercising critique, because temporality is a recurring motif in many of our readings. It also slightly modifies the question (*Whose society?*) that our meeting – or at least its title – foregrounds as one of property, by adding pace and uneven durations.

When reading Stuart Hall's "The meaning of new times" (1988) about the newness (or not) of the times of the 1980s, I was first of all struck by how little difference today seemed to have introduced with respect to yesterday. The "'global' expansion" of capital "subordinating every society and social relationship to the law of commodification and exchange value" (254) that Hall notes for the 1980s, is as prevalent in the 2010s. The "lack of intellectual boldness on the

left” with which to contest “the apparent inevitability” of the political project of the right – “somehow rendered natural and inevitable” (257) – resonates with the demise of (at least the party-organized) left today. And the “regressive, national populism” articulated “through the potent metaphor of race” (153) that Hall noted in “Racism and Reaction” (1978) already a decade earlier feels just as contemporary, even if its logic of simplifying and naturalizing “concrete problems of different classes and groups in the society” (156) is currently pitched not only as a reaffirming white supremacy, but also heavily along a Christian (aka secular-liberal) / Muslim divide. Striking for such temporally self-situating texts, both of them seem to speak not only *to*, but almost *about* today. So, despite my obscure¹ sense during the past years that we are currently living in “new times,” these times are not so new after all (which was not really news, either). However, while that first reading impression, which sees earlier times that were never quite past, persist or re-appear, might be instructive (i.e. it might help seeing patterns of a historical configuration), it is not really what Hall suggests. For sure, he does *not* stress a timeless or cyclically recurring soup of reactionary politics. Reading Hall’s examination of the late 1970s and 1980s in 2019 might make it *seem* as if the Thatcher-Reagan era is still here, or has cyclically returned. But that is just a first, quick impression from the vantage point of Europe in 2019; it is not Hall’s point. If I were to stop at that sense of repetition, it might not only give way to fatalism or move us beyond any effectivity, possibility or even necessity of critique – because it all seems to remain the same sad system. It might also, even worse, unwittingly adopt an idea of cyclical time that, for example, Jonas Staal’s project *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018) has shown to underlie the world view of Bannon’s alt-right.² So, “simply” recognizing today in yesterday, or clarifying today through yesterday’s eyes, leaves intact the naturalized sense of temporality that is posited as cyclical necessity or accepted as doom.

Quite to the contrary, what Hall tries to disentangle are the vectors that run through and across the historical configurations of his 1980s and he stresses that in it (*as that moment*) *multiple* temporalities overlap and diverge.

One of the lessons of new times is that history does not consist of what Benedict Anderson calls ‘empty, homogenous time,’ but of processes with different time-scales and trajectories. They may be convened in the same conjuncture. But historic conjunctures of this kind remain complex, not simple: not in any simple sense ‘determined’ but *over-determined* (that is, the result of a fusion or merging of different processes and contradictions which nevertheless retain their own effectivity, ‘the specific modalities of their actions’). (257)

¹ Obscure, as in: unsure of direction, as in: losing what Arendt calls a “sense by which we take our bearing in the real world” (257) because what I took as post-WWII givens (or truths) are quite effectively contested.

² Staal’s project was shown at *Het Nieuwe Instituut* Rotterdam (20 April - 23 September 2018), see <http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/steve-bannon-a-propaganda-retrospective/>. Staal writes in *e-flux*: “Bannon believes that time develops cyclically through four ‘turnings,’ and that every fourth generation – every fourth turning – an epic civilizational war against evil must be waged.” (“Propaganda (Art) Struggle” in <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/94/219986/propaganda-art-struggle/>)

Thatcherism (and neo-conservative governance more internationally) has not triggered new times, Hall suggests, but rather effectively understood to “harness and bend to its political project circumstances that were not of its making” (249). The circumstances and conjuncture at which it did so were, and always are, *complex*. Thatcherism (and its various reenactments) is not merely mimetically expressing the desire of “the” pre-existing British people, but it has re-configured and co-produced desires and a public, gaining and shifting terrain at the expense of multiple other positions and trajectories. Therefore – and for me this is in part the gain from Hall’s analysis *for* today – far from cyclically recurring or running along a teleological line toward the future (or returning to myths of a deep, true past which operate on the same imagined temporal axis of linear thinking), “the times” are manifold articulation and negotiation, and as such an active (thinking of Arendt here) terrain.³ Bhabha calls this the “temporality of negotiation or translation” (11) and from there the challenge “lies in conceiving of the ‘time’ of political action and understanding as opening up a space that can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without rushing to produce a dialectical unity of the social antagonism or contradiction” (11).

Thinking back to critique then, the difference that today introduces with respect to yesterday lies perhaps partly in a specific pressure in 2019 to precisely perceive how “the times” are diffractive, multiple temporalities. How neither Marxist dialectic time, nor the contemporaneity of a pluralized social life (Hall’s positional politics, cf. 261) are sufficient – today. How critique, in order to consider contemporary reality *alone* (as its sole point of interest), has to account for and negotiate *multiple* temporalities and durations that constitute it, unevenly and out of step. How *tomorrow* has become a concern for today quite unlike yesterday. Just briefly, to end on this, what might that mean?

- Partly, also in view of the velocity demanded by neoliberal capital, “[t]o take one’s time, or use time itself, outside of some naturalistic teleology, and describe our affective field of perception, that is to ‘unfold’ the world” (Muñoz qtd in Moten, 268). Echoing Virginia Woolf’s insistence on taking her time when responding to the question of how to prevent war (*Three Guineas*, *Terra Critica II*, 2013), “our” affective field of perception requires *taking* time and *paying* attention, a slowing of pace to zoom in and blow up, complexify what otherwise might look like naturalistic causality. Moving closely, slowly.
- Partly, to understand what has been struggling its way into a (more or less shared, i.e. precisely contested) affective field of perception and thought: the longevity of coloniality, its conceptual and existential structuring of modernity and global capital, its deep temporality of at least five centuries that is active as/in contemporary reality.

³ Therein seems to lie the difference between “the times” (and the attempt to see if they are new) and “the years” that Ernaux so beautifully makes palpable. Ernaux is trying to capture “the lived dimension of History [...] grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen – perhaps nothing compared to those her granddaughter will see” (224-5). The years are “a common time, the one that made its way through the years of the distant past and glided all the way to the present” (224).

The factual persistence of racial subjugation and white privilege, activated contextually, but along a sufficiently consistent grammar of colonial modernity, is evident. Many are deeply tired of “the structuring of society in dominance” (Moten 256), in which surely patriarchy intersects with the axes of coloniality and capital.

- Partly, to unfold how anthropogenic climate change has emerged as fact and existential condition, exacerbating global socio-economic violence and injecting contemporary reality with senses of urgency (prognosis of systemic tipping point in roughly 2030), but also of lateness (a lost battle) and an evaporating future. Real moves will have to be made quickly, unfathomably soon, practically yesterday. Yet, as Wynter argues, the “continued re-enactment” of modernity’s racial grammar with its bourgeois, white *homo oeconomicus* hampers any effective response to that “existential imperative [...] hitherto unimaginable” (230) of a humanly uninhabitable planetary habitat, because Man2 remains over-represented.
- Partly, to harness the speeds of the digital revolution, with its circulation of images and information, fake or not, that cut through all of the above, loop these vectors into spirals that (can) reinforce existing affects and perceptions, but also always hold out the promise that those spirals might fly off that grid. The digital temporality seems in/determinate in that regard. It moves infinitely quickly, but might permit (or not) to freeze and coalesce transversally, depending on the infrastructures global capital has put in place.

“Our times” might make *multiple* temporalities palpable and available for critical thought. For critical practice (on the left), it might mean working through the lasting effects of linear thinking and morphing toward valuing the complex temporalities of multiple vectors, affirming the chances of “fusion or merging of different processes and contradictions” (Hall 257), of gestating sites that are on neither side of the dialectic, “*but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha 13).⁴ That something else besides (Marley: *if you find it? | Please, won't you tell me so..*) might be harnessed and bent toward the left – or it might not, because “[e]ach generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it, in relative opacity” (Fanon 145).

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah, “Truth and Politics” *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967. Reprinted with minor changes in *Between Past and Future*, New York: The Viking Press 1968, pp. 227-264.

Bhabha, Homi, “The Commitment to Theory” *new formations* 5 (‘Identities’) (1988): 5-23.

⁴ “The language of critique is effective not because it keeps for ever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of ‘translation’: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the Other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the ‘moment’ of politics.” (Bhabha 10-11)

Dylan, Bob, *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, Columbia Records 1964 (lyrics from <https://genius.com/Bob-dylan-the-times-they-are-a-changin-lyrics>).

Ernaux, Annie, *The Years* (transl. Alison Strayer), London: Fitzcarraldo Editions 2008.

Foucault, Michel, "What is Enlightenment?" (transl. Catherine Porter) in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol 1 (ed. by Paul Rabinow), New York: The New Press 1997, pp. 303-319.

Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth* (transl. Richard Philcox), New York: Grove Press 2004.

Hall, Stuart, "Racism and reaction" in: Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings. The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (ed. by Sally Davison et al) Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 142-157.

___ "The Meaning of New Times" in: Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings. The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (ed. by Sally Davison et al) Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 248-265.

Marley, Bob and the Wailers, *Bob, Peter, Bunny & Rita*, Jamaica Records 1985 (lyrics from <https://www.jah-lyrics.com/song/bob-marley-the-wailers-the-world-is-changing>).

Moten, Fred, "The Blur and Breathe Books" in: Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 245-269.

Wynter, Sylvia, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition" in: Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (eds), *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2015.