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# The explosion of real time and the structural conditions of temporality in a society of control: durations and urgencies of academic research

Claudia Lapping

Department of Culture, Communication and Media, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

In the context of ongoing debates about the distinctive temporalities associated with contemporary regulative regimes, this paper explores the interpretive trajectories initiated in contrasting conceptualisations of the politics of time. This exploration is developed through analysis of interview data from a study of unconscious relations in academic practice. Section one uses one moment of data to contrast phenomenological, Deleuzian and Lacanian theorisations of the relation between time and subjectivity. Section two is an exegesis of Lacan's paper on Logical Time. This outlines the way temporality is structured in relation to the subject's guess about the expectations of the Other. Section three uses this to develop an interpretation of three temporalities that constitute the space of contemporary academic subjectivities. The final section considers the intensification of the juxtaposition of these incongruent temporalities, contrasting Lacanian and Deleuzian theorisations of time in the Real/virtual and their implications for both methodological and political strategy.

## KEYWORDS

Temporality; society of control; Lacan; logical time; duration; urgency; Deleuze; continuity

## Introduction: the politics of time and the subject

In the context of ongoing debates about the distinctive temporalities associated with contemporary regulative regimes, this paper explores the interpretive trajectories initiated in contrasting conceptualisations of the politics of time. The discussion is situated in relation to Deleuze's (1995) theorisation of the contrast between the disciplinary mechanisms of the modern state and contemporary societies of control, and Bernstein's (2000) analysis of the contrast between competence and performance pedagogies. Both these analyses foreground the way practices of surveillance and observation within contemporary regulative processes reconstitute temporal relations in professional practice.

In his brief, rhetorical and influential essay 'Postscript on Control Societies', Deleuze (1995) argues that the disciplinary processes associated with the modern state are being overwritten with mechanisms associated with a society of control. A key feature of this shift is the displacement of hierarchically positioned professional subjects by digital and administrative systems: processes that used to be constituted in relation to

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**CONTACT** Claudia Lapping  c.lapping@ucl.ac.uk

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substantive objectives of bounded institutions are now more frequently unbounded, emptied out, lacking clearly defined goals or end points (Deleuze, 1995, pp. 179–181). This coincides with a decrease in the grip of disciplinary modes of observation or surveillance that have been conceptualised as central to the mechanisms of production of the modern subject. Disciplinary surveillance emerges within delimited spatial relations through the application of professional knowledge to define the interiority of the subject (Foucault, 1977; Lazzarato, 2006; Savat, 2009). In contrast the administrative mechanisms of surveillance within a society of control are exercised at a distance, compiling large scale quantitative data. Savat (2009) foregrounds digital technologies as an exemplary mode of synchronous observation and recording in which ‘one always already writes or constitutes oneself as code’ (p. 50). This mode of surveillance also shifts temporal relations: whereas disciplinary modes of observation are focused on the application of professional knowledge within a present relation, surveillance within mechanisms of control works at a distance to produce a predictive relation to a projected future subjectivity. Furthermore, these predictions are not stable; they constantly shift as new data is incorporated into the recorded observation.

Bernstein’s model of contrasting pedagogies resonates with this Deleuzian analysis. In *Class and Pedagogies: visible and invisible*, Bernstein (1975) argued that modern child-centred pedagogies are enacted through teachers’ covert surveillance of children’s activity, which they interpret through the lens of pedagogical theories of development and learning. Child-centred pedagogies thus constitute the present interiority of the child through the teacher’s professional interpretation of meanings within the child’s activities. Bernstein’s later analysis contrasted ‘professional’ with ‘neoliberal’/‘performance’ pedagogic identities, describing the former as ‘driven by inner dedication’ and the latter as ‘an outwardly responsive identity’ (2000, p. 69). The ‘performance’ model of pedagogy associated with ‘neoliberal’ identities no longer focuses on the child’s activity and inner development. Instead, pedagogy is articulated in relation to externally defined criteria, which constitute absences to be diagnosed and repaired in the child’s performance of tasks, so the texts that they produce are required to progress in quality in line with these external expectations. Thus Bernstein suggests: ‘in the case of performance models, the future is made visible, but that which has constructed this future is a past invisible to the acquirer’ (2000, p. 48). The data used to construct national and individual targets or ‘expected levels’ in contemporary classrooms are an exemplary production of the new modes of surveillance described by Savat, and also of their predictive relation to future identities.

These accounts of shifting mechanisms of production of practices and identities, and the displacement of professional objectives by administrative processes of ‘endless postponement’ (Deleuze, 1995, p. 179), have implications for our understanding of services across the public sector (McGimpsey, 2012; Thompson & Cook, 2014). They also provide the context for my exploration of the temporalities of academic research practice and subjectivities. The paper develops two main arguments. A more empirical argument interprets three contrasting temporalities in academics’ accounts of their practice; it suggests an intensification of juxtapositions of bizarrely incongruent temporalities, as we are increasingly caught up in processes associated with a society of control. A more methodological argument plays with the contrasting interpretive trajectories opened up by different theorisations of ‘time’. The paper attempts to maintain an in-between position, avoiding reification of any one epistemological frame. My overall aim is to avoid any sense of a

finalized conception of 'time'; but at the same time to use philosophical accounts that conceptualise duration as an animating force in static materiality (Grosz, 2000, p. 230) to open up ways of seeing academic practice as an instance of more generalised political formations.

### **The politics of time and subjectivity: three interpretive trajectories**

The analysis in this paper was initiated by a sense of contrasting temporalities in participants' accounts in an interview-based project exploring psychical or unconscious relations in academic methodologies. The project was explicitly designed to explore the recontextualisation of psychoanalytic approaches in research interviews. This informed the construction of both temporal and interactional aspects of the interviews.

Participants, eight academics working in the humanities and social sciences, were initially selected to represent disciplines with contrasting objects, methodologies and fields of applications. Six of the eight were based in selective, research intensive institutions. All were research active and had experience of the most recent national research assessment process. They were interviewed eight times each, over a period of up to two years. For each interview they were asked to provide a text that in some way related to their field of research, which became the initial prompt for the interview: 'Say something about the text that you have chosen'. The aim was to produce free associative material, but also to avoid the traditional psychoanalytic focus on biography, instead attending to the relation between the subject and their research practice. During the interviews I attempted to maintain something like 'evenly hovering attentiveness' (see, e.g. Bollas, 1999). My interventions were intended to elicit additional associations, or to offer my initial interpretations. As far as possible these interpretations were presented as provisional and playful, rather than authoritative; intended to draw participants' attention to connections and associations in their narration of their practice, and to provide opportunities for them to elaborate or refine these very provisional interpretations.

My analysis of this data has drawn on psychoanalytic and psychoanalytically informed social theory, from a predominantly Lacanian perspective (Lapping, 2013a, 2013b). The analysis offered here also engages primarily with Lacanian ideas. However, my aim is to keep other theorisations of time in play, to maintain a sense of contingency in relation to the different interpretive and political trajectories that they open up. This is important as a strategy for keeping in mind the provisional, complementary and incommensurable status of all epistemologies (Lapping, 2015; Plotnitsky, 1994).

The most pertinent line of differentiation in marking out these theories is the possibilities they construct for conceptualising a subject that is distinct from temporality. Are time and conscious temporal experience in some way external to the subject of consciousness and temporality? Or are prolongation and duration inherent to the very possibility of the subject? In parallel to these questions there are different positions on whether continuous duration, with its stabilising effect on identities, is given or constructed. More realist phenomenological approaches conceptualise the continuous duration of time as a given that is subjectively mediated through a consciousness that structures the subject's experience of temporality. Approaches that question the unity of the subject can also be associated with a critique of continuity, seeing continuity as a construction that supports the fantasy of unified identity. Both Deleuze and Lacan can be associated with this position.

The interpretive trajectories suggested by these contrasting theorisations can be explored by looking at a moment from one interview. This moment suggests a preliminary delineation of contrasting temporalities in the participant's research practice. B, an early career researcher who was in the middle of her first major funded research project, explained how this new position affected her relation to writing and publication:

Because this is a funded research, I mean, it has to have an output, because of its connection to the public funding that it receives. And I think I will say, for this particular project I'm more aware of, like, having a publication plan, than I would have for just my own – I mean, there is lots of stuff that I'm thinking I'd like to work on, but I have no clear agenda of when and how I will write those papers. Whereas, with this one, I'm actually feeling a little bit more responsible of having a plan. So it's not how I usually work. I think the way I would usually work would be a bit more organic and things sort of unfold. (B, Interview 2)

Her account invokes temporality as she contrasts the 'publication plan' associated with her current project with the 'no clear agenda' of her usual practice. From a realist, phenomenological perspective, this kind of account might be interpreted to explore the structuring of consciousness, and to trace, for example, B's conscious awareness of different aspects of what might perhaps be thought of as objective 'time'. It would be possible, for example, to interpret a foregrounding in consciousness of a linear, progressive temporality, in the formulation of a 'publication plan'. This might be contrasted with the B's usual absorption in a more 'organic' or recursive temporal dimension, in which 'things sort of unfold'. It would also be possible to trace B's relation to these contrasting temporalities. She articulated, for example, a sense of alienation from her own project: 'I'm treating something that I actually have created – I just completely came up with this research – as if it was something that was there and I'm kind of working for it' (B, Interview 2). Through this kind of analysis we might gradually begin to map a subjective experience of temporality within the structures of consciousness; and explore way these structures produce distinct subjective identities with shifting relations to both 'time' and research.

Politically, this kind of approach can help to foreground a 'desynchronization' of the temporalities of diverse social, cultural and psychical spheres (Clancy, 2014; Rosa, 2013; Vostal, 2014). In B's account this might refer to a break between the temporalities of funded and unfunded research. From a Heideggerian perspective, Clancy suggests, both these temporalities might be understood as removed from originary temporality, and thus associated with reduced opportunities for authentic engagement, in a way that is associated with psychological harm (Clancy, 2014, p. 34). Political or therapeutic interventions might be conducted at either an individual or a collective level, and work to unsettle taken for granted, conscious relations to time (p. 39). The aim, however, is to produce 'temporal coherence' (p. 42) through a more authentic relation to originary temporality that also, in Vostal's (2014) formulation in the context of academic work in higher education, recognises subjects' differentiated experience of time in relation to complex sociological variables (p. 19). The danger is that this collapses into an individualised demand that fails to engage with the specific conditions of the observed 'desynchronization'.

A more Deleuzian framing would direct attention to the relational construction of an appearance of unity and temporal continuity. This appearance is produced through

processes of contemplation and contraction, through which habitual relations between organic elements become established as an 'assemblage'. Using the Deleuzian language of 'assemblage', in B's account we might interpret one 'researcher-assemblage' constituted in a habituated contemplation/contraction between B's 'stuff that I'm thinking I'd like to work on' and her yet-to-be written 'papers'; and another 'researcher-assemblage' in habituated contemplation/contraction between a publication plan, funding, and, B's account also suggested, a new relation of responsibility for a researcher on her funded project (Interview 2).

The temporality of these assemblages might be understood in terms of Deleuze's (2004) first, passive synthesis of time. This, he says, 'constitutes time as a living present' (p. 97). His conception of a present temporality as the product of synthesis can be understood as a critique of continuity as given. It is informed by Bergson's and Dedekind's philosophical and mathematical critiques of the conflation of extensive, quantifiable space with intensive movement or continuity (Olma, 2006; Voss, 2013). The key point is that time is not a succession of instants, and that the intensive quality of continuity is not given, but contingently produced through the organic process of contemplation, habit and contraction. The apparently unified and continuous entity of researcher identity/assemblage is the outcome of habitual contractions between body parts, funding, publication plans, papers, co-researchers. Through a process of organic contemplation actions contract into habituated repetitions: 'When we say that habit is a contraction we are speaking ... of the fusion of that repetition in the contemplating mind' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 95; see also Bignall, 2010, pp. 14–15). The repetition itself is an imaginary product of contemplation, which contracts its objects so that they appear as repeated instances of the same element (Deleuze, 2004, p. 97).

The concept of duration here relates to the continuity resulting from habit, and Deleuze says, 'The duration of an organism's present ... will vary according to the natural contractile range of its contemplative souls' (p. 98). That is: the present endures just as long as the contracted relations between the contemplated elements brought together in the assemblage. This duration, though, appears in a variety of forms: 'All our rhythms, our reserves, our reaction times, the thousand intertwinings, the presents and fatigues of which we are composed, are defined on the basis of our contemplations' (p. 98). So contemplation, habit and duration might be understood as the unconscious conditions of multiple temporal forms. Or, rather than interpreting contrasting 'temporalities' in B's account, we might instead talk about one 'rhythm' constituted in linear and recursive relations. The naturalisation of these relations is politically important: the passive synthesis is trapped in the habitual repetition of the 'natural' signs and rhythms that constitute the living present. Politics requires the artificial construction of new signs or rhythms: materialities produced through desirous, active syntheses of time (see Bignall, 2010).

Deleuze's conception of the organic processes of contemplation and contraction as unconscious conditions of the living present offers one perspective on the unconscious conditions of duration. Lacan offers a contrasting conceptualisation of the unconscious conditions of temporality. He maps the relation between subjectively experienced duration and the dispersed signifying elements that constitute subjectivity by channelling the forces of desire and 'time'. This Lacanian framework draws attention to the network of signifiers, the big Other (see Hook, 2008), in relation to which the shifting temporalities of B's research emerge. B's more explicit publication plan relates both to the ambiguous

demand of the funder of her project and to her new position of responsibility in relation to the project researcher. Importantly, though, there is no suggestion that either the funder or the researcher specified the necessity to work with the kind of awareness of a publication plan that is suggested in B's account. Lacan draws attention to the way we constantly make guesses about the desire of the Other ('What does the Other want from me?'); and to the way these guesses are also constituted as a channel for our own recurring and idiosyncratic patterns of desire. For example, in B's interviews there was a recurring motif of a pleasurable oscillation between mess and order. Her response to the gaze of the funder and of her researcher as signifiers of big Other, imposing the linear temporality of a publication plan, might thus be interpreted as a repetition of this familiar oscillation. From a Lacanian perspective we might read this repetition as indicative of an-other, unconscious and a-temporal desire.

For Lacan, then, the phenomenological subject or consciousness is not the primary condition for a subjective temporal experience of an authentic or objective time. Instead we can see the naturalised phenomenological experience of the subject as constituted in a web of unconscious relations to the network of signifiers, the big Other, and to desire. The unconscious conditions of temporality, theorised by Deleuze (from the perspective of the organism) and Lacan (from the perspective of the subject) disintegrate any sense of a unified ego or phenomenological subject as a primary condition of temporality; and disaggregate the dispersed elements bound together as the naturalized continuity and durational temporal experience of the subject. The next section develops an exegesis of Lacan's paper on Logical Time. More than anything else I have read, this paper makes visible the workings of the exceedingly peculiar experience that is temporality.

### Lacan's story of logical time

In 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty', Lacan (2006) uses a prisoner's dilemma to explore the function of symbolic structures and the gaze of the other in the production of temporality and subjectivity. A logical puzzle is presented to three inmates: they are shown five discs, two black, three white. The warden will fasten one disc to each prisoner's back; they will be left in a room to consider, but forbidden from communicating amongst each other. The first to leave the room able to tell the warden the colour of her disc 'founded upon logical and not simply probabilistic grounds' (p. 198), will be freed. Having explained the task, the warden fixes a white disc to each inmate's back.

Lacan's discussion of this scenario develops a thesis about the relation between time, subjectivity and the o/Other: an imaginary, unified other or reciprocal subjectivity; or the big Other of institutionalized structures or language. The key point I want to foreground, initially, is the dialectical moves Lacan depicts between the subjective experience of duration/hesitation and the objectification of this experience in what he calls Logical Time. Objectified time here is not, of course, clock time, or time unmediated by social interference. Logical Time is represented by a *structural* hesitation without a delimited duration. Subjective time, in contrast, is the subject's experience of duration. The points I want to explain, then, are:



- The role of hesitation in interrupting, or ‘scanding’ (Lacan’s term, see Fink, 1997), the prisoners’ movement to the exit.
- The subject’s speculation on the thought process of the o/Other.
- The shifts between subjective experience of hesitation as temporal duration and objectified understanding of hesitation as Logical Time.
- The meaning of, and relation between, ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ time in Lacan’s account.

Lacan’s (2006) account is an expansion/explosion of what he describes as the ‘sophistic’ solution to the logical puzzle. This solution suggests that, after contemplating for ‘*a certain time*’ (and the simultaneous specificity and ambiguity of ‘*a certain time*’ is pertinent) each of the three prisoners moves towards the door, at the same moment, and each offers the same explanation:

I am a white, and here is how I know it. Since my companions were whites, I thought that, had I been a black, each of them would have been able to infer the following: ‘If I too were a black, the other would necessarily have realized straight away that he was a white and would have left immediately; therefore I am not a black’. And both would have left together, convinced they were whites. As they did nothing of the kind, I must be a white like them. At that I made for the door to make my conclusion known. (p. 162)

Lacan’s expansion/explosion of this solution – in which he claims ‘the philosopher’s garb’, associated with ‘the comedian’s banter’ and the ‘politician’s secretive action’ (p. 163) – draws attention to three moments: modes of duration that interrupt or modulate the unity or meaning of ‘*a certain time*’.

In the first moment, *the moment of the glance*, the subject, seeing two whites, excludes the only scenario offering certainty about her identity: that is, it is immediately apparent that it is *not* the case that ‘I must be white because I see two blacks’. The prisoner does not need to consider the thought processes of her peers in order to make this first logical exclusion. The instantaneous logical inference of this first moment, Lacan points out, is constituted in imaginary identification with an generalized ‘other’, a noetic, reasoning or intellectual subject: ‘*one who knows that*’ (p. 170).

In the second moment, the subject develops a hypothesis, based on the first logical exclusion, which she now imaginatively inserts into the thinking process of the two other inmates to produce the solution outlined above: the result of which being that the hesitation of the two others convinces the subject that she is white. This is the moment of *comprehending*, which presupposes a duration, the time taken for each to meditate on the possibilities: that is, the subject attributes a certain duration as appropriate for this meditation in her interpretation of the hesitation of her peers. Where the experience of temporality in the *moment of the glance* is constituted in identification with a generalized speculating subject; in the *moment of comprehending*, the experience of temporality – that is, the duration of the hesitation – is constituted in imaginary identification with a specific other – her fellow prisoners. Of this second stage of the hypothesizing process, Lacan comments:

The objectivity of this time thus vacillates with its limits. Its meaning alone subsists, along with the form it engenders of subjects who are *undefined except by their reciprocity* ... (p. 168, emphasis in original)

The *meaning* of the hesitation Lacan suggests, is fixed, within the logical scenario, that is, the hesitation leads the subject to comprehend that she must be white; but the *duration* of



the hesitation vacillates, or is not yet fixed at this point of the scenario. This vacillation has its effect, and produces a third temporal moment.

In the third moment, the subject reflects that if she is in fact a black, then her two peers will conclude their speculations a moment before her, since they have one less stage in their hypothesizing. This produces an urgency for the subject to move from the *moment of comprehending* to the *moment of concluding*, to ensure that the others do not conclude ahead of her – which would throw into doubt her conclusion that she is white. The *moment of concluding* thus involves a certain urgency and a move to action. The urgency, though, Lacan clarifies, is not, as some have suggested (Johnston, 2005, p. 28) to do with the opportunity for release, but rather is dependent on the logical meaning of movement in this concluding temporality:

It is thus not because of some dramatic contingency, the seriousness of the stakes, or the competitiveness of the game, that time presses; it is owing to [sous] the urgency of the logical movement that the subject precipitates both his judgment and his departure ... (Lacan, 2006, p. 169)

The urgency relates to the imminent possibility that the time of comprehending might 'lose its meaning' (p. 169). It is thus more existential than the specifics of the prison scenario, it relates to the possibility of a name, an identity, or a fixed relation to a signifier. The urgency is an urgency, and a temporality, common to *all* subjectivity.

It is important to recognise the combination of frivolity and seriousness in Lacan's account. He is deliberately exploding the sophistry of the logical puzzle, demonstrating how it relies on a ridiculous assumption of reciprocity between subjects. However, his demonstration of the way we experience temporality in relation to a guess about the expectations of an unknowable o/Other, and to the existential urgency of finding and fixing a name, is quite serious. So it is important to note that whereas in the *moment of the glance* and in the *moment of comprehending* there was reciprocity between subject and other, in the *moment of concluding* the subject has to make a final subjective assertion on their own behalf: 'I am white'. This replicates the psychological move from Imaginary identification with a reciprocal other to Symbolic identification with language or structural authority. Making this point, Lacan notes how the subjective assertion of the moment of concluding is analogous to the initial psychological formation of the subject in language:

The 'I' subject of the conclusive assertion, is isolated from the other – that is, from the relation of reciprocity – by a logical beat. This movement of the logical genesis of the 'I' through a process of decanting of its own logical time largely parallels its psychological birth. (p. 170)

Lacan's Logical Time helps us to notice the role of the o/Other in the construction of temporal experience. It distinguishes between a generalised imaginary other, a specific imaginary other, and the symbolic Other or structure of signifiers that captures or fixes the subject in language. It also illustrates the way that punctuations – here in the form of interruption or hesitation in 'a certain time' – bring about a shift in meaning ('scansion' in Lacan's terms). The temporal experiences of duration or urgency are (a) produced in relation to an o/Other, and (b) inherent to the process of identification or capture as a subject of a signifying system with a diachronic structuring of meaning.

The additional distinction between 'time' and 'temporality' is also worth noting. In part, Lacan's aim in the paper is to subvert or avoid the phenomenological distinction between

objective 'time' and subjective 'temporality'. He aims to do this by disrupting the assumed synchronicity of logic, by demonstrating the necessity of the diachronic durational hesitations to the logical scenario (Johnston, 2005, pp. 32–33; Lacan, 2006, p. 10). However, Johnston suggests that Lacan's aim is not fulfilled, because the durational instances are constituted and recuperated by the overarching logical form of the puzzle:

Lacan's temporal logic is a false temporality, a staged time in which the diachronic unfolding of crucial moments is immanent to the synchronic script of the *grand Autre*. (2005, p. 33)

He argues that the 'Logical Time' paper on its own does not present a psychoanalytic theory of 'time' as such. The exploration of temporality within the structure of the logical puzzle might rather be seen as a parodic or hyperbolic illustration of the fantasmatic status of temporal/durational experience, and of the impossibility of a direct engagement with anything we might inappropriately name as Real Time.

I would want to add a rider to this reading of Lacan's argument as wholly re-absorbed into the synchronic structure of the puzzle. The very metaphor of the prison, with its seductive narrative drama, alongside Lacan's other contextualising allusions, undercut the presumed universality of structure, offering glimpses of its more paradoxical aspect (cf. Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000; Dolar, 2015). Nevertheless, the structural aspects of Lacan's theory are productive for an understanding of temporality in a society of control.

### **The structural conditions of temporality**

My analysis of participants' accounts of their research practice suggests how the relation to an o/Other can be understood as productive of contrasting subjective experiences of duration in contemporary higher education institutions. These might be distinguished as chronological, teleological and narcissistic modes of temporality.

### ***The production of chronological temporality in identification with signifiers of perpetual process***

The constitution of duration in relation to the UK research evaluation exercise provides an obvious example of the way temporality can be implicated in the loosening of institutional boundaries and emptying out of substantive objectives associated with Deleuze's 'mechanisms of control'. Under the previous block grant system, the formula used by the UK University Grants Committee (UGC) to distribute funds was deliberately not published, in order that universities would continue to base the internal distribution of resources on their own principles, rather than those of the external body (Brown, 2013). Despite the *invisible* (cf. Bernstein, 1975) control exercised by the UGC, this can be understood as a reiteration of an institutional identity, the university, with substantive values beyond the criteria articulated by the funding body. The models of funding that replaced this system allocate resources via regular assessment exercises and in relation to explicit, published criteria of research quality (Brown, 2013, p. 53). This projection of externally defined deadlines into the university also has implications for temporality, punctuating research practice with a-synchronous criteria that reconstitute duration as an explicit linear chronology of ambiguous expectations.

The explicit chronology of research evaluation was directly referenced in interview accounts. The replacement of institutional criteria of value with external indicators of quality was also referenced, interpreted as a restriction on both scholarly and pedagogic production. F's account, for example, constituted a fantasy of a previous era of uninterrupted duration for research:

There are two professors who were my heads of department when I was an undergraduate and in their whole lifetimes they published one massive book each, one really important book in their field, and some small articles, maybe kind of three or four. (Interview 1)

This contrasted with her account of the way the assessment exercises punctuated her research with deadlines and targets. Asked if she was happy with her own writing, she responded:

No, God, you know, in the next four years I've got to produce two books and two big articles, and in the four years after that I've probably got to produce two more and two more. I'm 46 now, and if I work for another 20 years, that's five more sets, that's ten more books that I've got to produce. And there's no way I've got more than ten times more to say than my old professors have. (Interview 1)

In addition to the explicit chronology, F's account interprets the meaning of temporal punctuations in terms of significance of research output. Participant C's account similarly referenced the chronological frame of the accountability exercise, 'RAE', that punctuated his practice, but interpreted its meaning in terms of restrictions on genre:

Colleagues have said to me 'don't waste your time with textbooks because it doesn't work, RAE-wise' ... This is a book written during that period, but it didn't go in as one of my four publications, because it was a text book. (Interview 1)

Participant E's account suggested an alternative interpretation of the meaning of chronological interruptions. Here the punctuation of the external evaluation process appeared to intensify an existing institutional demand for disciplinary identification. She explained how her research fell between two fields, and described this as 'high maintenance', especially in relation to the RAE:

This kind of came during the Research Assessment Exercise, you know, there were concerns about whether some of the stuff we should put with law and some of the stuff with politics ... there were doubts, not about whether it was good or not, but maybe it feeds into that as well. (Interview 1)

The Other here is represented by the extra-institutional timetable of the Research Assessment Exercise, and the subjectively experienced temporality of research is constituted in relation to each participant's guess about what this Other desires of them. There is an apparent clarity in the chronological punctuations that reconstitute the linear temporality of research. However, the object of this chronological demand is ambiguous: since the exercise aims at selective attribution of prestige, it is not desirable for everyone to conform. The message is further confused by the empty criteria of perpetual process, interpreted variously as 'dumb down!', 'smarten up!', 'fit in!'. We might say that within this dimension of temporality, *chronology* is foregrounded, while substantive *teleology* is relatively obscure.

### ***The production of teleological temporality in identification with signifiers of substantive value***

In the face of uncertainty, C's account vacillated in a way that, following Lacan's logic, we might read as indicative of the urgency of a loss of subjectivity. His account references points of reassurance in relations to media and to political consultancy: 'A non-academic ... invited me for lunch, and it became clear that he thought my paper was the best thing that had been written in the area' (Interview 4). However, as well as reassurance, these relations constituted an additional layer of temporally inflected linear demand: 'I just have to keep up ... and, you know, that's a constant, it's two hours a day you'd have to spend reading the papers ... the media phone you up, you've got to know everything' (Interview 2). The financial incentive associated with consultancy – 'I need the money, the bottom line is of course that one has to earn a living' (Interview 2) – connotes another level of existential urgency in the temporality invoked in C's account. It is possible to interpret the fields of media and consultancy as offering a more substantive, if transitory, point of recognition, with a clear teleology beyond perpetual process.

For most participants, more obvious substantive points of identification were within strongly institutionalized methodological or academic systems of value. They referred to methodological frameworks, theoretical affiliations, and canonical texts and authors; as well as connections with journals, conferences, or established groups of researchers within their field. Participants F and M, both in literary studies, referenced 'historicism' as a major point of identification for their work. They named key authors or terms as signifiers of sources and controversial positions within contemporary debates. Their accounts also described relations to co-authors and to colleagues with shared interests who they met regularly at conferences. Similarly, participant G, a historian, positioned his research in an account that juxtaposed the influence of his PhD supervisor, alternative theories, and a contrast between generalizing versus particularistic methodologies. Like F and M, he also described specific interactions at recent scholarly events. These instances indicate chains of signifiers of methodological and academic position that constitute both substantive objectives and points of identification for researcher subjectivities.

In terms of duration and urgency, relations to signifiers within these chains constitute a variety of temporalities. The sense of duration produced in imaginary relation to ideas and colleagues frequently appears as one of continuity and stability. In addition, punctuations to this duration are constituted in relation to a certain level of reciprocity of expectations about regularity of meetings, timing of feedback, and submission of writing. There is, however, still uncertainty associated with the meaning of durational limits. G had recently sent a draft paper to some colleagues and noted: 'They've had the piece about a week now, and I'll be less nervous when they write back' (Interview 3). The uncertain subjective temporality of colleagues as reciprocal others, we might say, temporarily casts them in the role of big Other of disciplinary judgment. Relations to methodological signifiers of the disciplinary big Other could also produce vacillations in durational limits. M, for example, reflected that her identification with historicism was sometimes too categorical (Interview 6) and this produced an existential temporal tension, as the next diachronic move in her narrative of her methodological position was cast into uncertainty (Lapping, 2011, pp. 129–130). There is a substantive teleology to these temporalities, which relates to security of position within a combination of methodological and intellectual fields.

To return to the sociological productivity of this analysis: my suggestion is that signifiers of methodological and academic practice constitute more substantive, enduring conditions of temporality than the empty, ambiguous processes associated with societies of control. While they carve out different trajectories of duration and intensity, both sets of conditions constitute a largely linear subjective experience. This linearity is differentiated by a foregrounding of chronological (perpetual process) or teleological (discipline) aspects. However, within both sets of conditions, a sense of futurity is constituted via points of identification, signifiers, whose meanings are fixed within discourses that precede and subsist in relative independence of the individualised subject (cf. Bernstein, 2000; Savat, 2009). This is not the case with the more narcissistic temporality of embedded research practice.

### ***The production of narcissistic temporality in identification with signifiers produced in the practice of research***

My exploration of temporality was initiated by sections of my participants' accounts that suggested an intense build-up of relations to specific texts or practices related to the projects they were working on, resulting in a tacit presence of amassed potential connections. These extracts suggested a cumulative, continuous duration, constituted within this intense set of relations. These relations appeared recursive, with connections emerging within present activity, rather than in relation to a prior chronology or objective. As opposed to a linear drive forward, these accounts depicted a more suspended, back and forth temporality, without an explicit sense of futurity. Several narratives of this temporality included associations to a sense of retreat, nurture or insulation from other aspects of their practice (Lapping, 2013b). The question suggested by the Lacanian logic of temporality is: in relation to which 'other' is this sense of recursive, nurturing, or narcissistic temporality constituted?

Participant B's account of carrying out the interviews for her project exemplifies the construction of a sense of a continuous and cumulative duration:

The interviews are quite, it has a very cumulative effect in terms of understanding them ... now it is almost over a hundred interviews ... and it has happened through time and I participated in almost all of them. So I was there doing the interviews, which is great, because in another interview you constantly sort of add them back to back, you know, I rephrased questions with the next person and the next person. And I constantly think through the data, even during the interview process, and you make connections one to the other. (Interview 2)

The account describes a 'cumulative effect' that has 'happened through time'. The phraseology of 'the next person and the next person', might be said to replicate or reiterate a sense of cumulative and similar instances; repetitions of 'constantly' and 'I' add to the fantasmatic, symbolically structured, sense of continuous duration.

There are similar features in F's account of her sense of loss in relation to the project she had been working on at the time of our previous interview but had not been able to continue:

It rather upsets me to think about the reading I did on that project, because I'd have to do it again, because it would be so long after the fact that although the structures of understanding are there, the cobwebby stuff that research is like, you know, just those delicate threads that are kind of hanging in your mind when you're in it, are what go very quickly ... Because you,

it's all that stuff you don't even know that you're thinking when you're working on something else, and then that thing, I don't know, lights up or the connection comes, and then it becomes, you realise you were thinking it. ... (Interview 4)

This foregrounds the effect of an intense period of reading that results in a spatialized image of amassed 'cobwebby' understanding: 'those delicate threads that are just kind of hanging in your mind when you're in it'. F's account of her reading is similar to B's presence in her 'almost over a hundred' interviews: both suggest an intense period of activity leading to an almost ghostly familiarity with the material, which haunts the continuing activity, constituting multiple hanging or suspended possibilities for 'connection' or interpretation.

In thinking about the 'other' of these temporalities, it is worth bearing in mind B's own account of her project as 'something that I actually have created – I just completely came up with this research' (Interview 2). Respectively, B creates her interviews and F reconfigures texts as the objects of their research. As signifiers, then, these objects have a narcissistic relation to the subject, reflecting a self-created world or discourse. Other participants cited similarly self-referencing pleasures of the process of research: 'spending a long time writing a sentence' (Participant A); 'wasting time' following up entries in the Oxford English Dictionary 'even if they're not going to make it into the final paper' (Participant A); spending time in library archives (Participant G); or, in M's case, identifying with the medieval subjects of the text she was working on: 'sometimes on winter afternoons when you've been closeted away working, you do feel quite Anchoritic' (Participant M). The 'cobwebby' temporality constructed in relation to these self-created or self-referential signifying systems has a suspended duration, and an as yet unspecified objective or teleology.

Is there a political potentiality in this suspended or narcissistic temporality? Or, put another way, what force might enable self-created or self-referential signifiers to find a place in discourse? There are resonances between this state of narcissistic retreat and Guattari's (2011) account of the potential political productivity of 'chaosmosis', which he associates with psychosis, but also with childhood and aesthetic production (p. 17). He describes this as a state of 'ontological petrification' or 'existential freezing' located in the delirium 'of the dream and of passion' (p. 20). This 'extreme degree of intensification' (p. 20) can produce 'an emergent alterification freed from the mimetic barriers of the ego' (p. 22). Guattari suggests that the interpretation of moments of productive escape involves a sensibility to the multiplicity of 'real complexions' that 'do not have the same ontological colouring as each other' (p. 18). Where the Deleuzian/Guattarian ontological orientation foregrounds politics as a sensibility to new materialities, the Lacanian (anti)epistemological orientation foregrounds an ethical commitment to ignorance, sensitive to the dangers of imposing the interpretations of the analyst onto the other (Lacan, 1991; Lapping, 2011, 2013a). This contrasting orientation plays out in the contrasting conceptualisations of 'time', as virtuality, or as a traumatic and unknowable Real.

### **Theorising real or virtual 'time': methodological and political implications**

Each of the three temporalities marked out in this analysis is constituted in relation to the O/others of a signifying system. These are fantasmatic temporalities: they are not 'time' as such, but rather timeless, an apparently temporal unfolding that is in Adrian Johnston's

words: ‘an epiphenomenal effect dictated by structures that are out of joint with time’ (2005, p. 37). Whether conceptualised as structurally conditioned temporalities or, in more Deleuzian terms, as elements of a rhythm assemblage, this analysis suggests how the regulatory processes associated with societies of control produce an intensified juxtaposition of incongruent subjective perceptions of temporality or duration.

What does this analysis tell us about our current position and about possibilities for the future? To conclude, it is worth reflecting on the theorisation of ‘time’ as either Deleuzian virtual potentiality or as Lacanian traumatic Real, and on the implications of these speculations for a politics of destabilisation or change. Central to this problematic is the way in which we understand the (im)possibility of a relation to that which is beyond actualised discourse.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the materiality of infinitude, the virtual, is the basis for diverse actualisations (Guattari, 2011, p. 18). The paradoxical status of the virtual as the un-actualised basis of material actualisations can be traced in Deleuze’s account of the living present:

The synthesis of time constitutes the present in time. It is not that the present is a dimension of time: the present alone exists. Rather, synthesis constitutes time as a living present ... (2004, p. 97)

This suggests an ontology in which ‘time’ is both constitutive of that which exists but without existence (‘the present alone exists’). The ontological distinction between that which is constitutive and that which exists is the distinction between the Deleuzian ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’. Time is virtual, while the temporalities of the living present are actualisations of the hovering potentiality of the virtual. Within this ontology, the ‘new’ might be brought into being by varying the habitual rhythmic interplay between existing temporalities of academic practice. To do this the animating but also stultifying effects of duration must be replaced by the affective capacities of desire; a shift frequently associated with aesthetic modes of intervention, but also with the organism’s incomplete but developing awareness of its complex and multifaceted relations to elements of other bodies (Bignall, 2010). It is a politics of fragmentary but affectively pleasurable engagement. The virtual is not horrific or overwhelming, and the process of actualisation is one of joy (Bignall, 2010). In the context of academic research, this process might involve the creation of spaces where signifiers produced within narcissistically suspended rhythms could be shared, away from either teleological or chronological linear rhythms; or, alternatively, a more integrated rhythmic relation between disciplinary and processual technologies (Thompson & Cook, 2014, p. 712).

In contrast, a Lacanian foregrounding of structure, an apparent apolitical immanence, can be (mis)understood as a limitation on conceptualisation of a politics of time. Lacan’s story of temporality reasserts the way duration and urgency are bounded by unconscious, structural relations to signifiers, foreclosing a direct relation to ‘time’. ‘Time’ is beyond language, beyond signifiers, overwhelming both in its finitude (circumscribed by birth and death) and its infinitude (amorphous, unstructured, never-ending). Time in this Lacanian Real has no possibility of symbolic articulation.

However, Johnston (2005) draws on Lacan’s discussion of topological objects to develop a speculative theorisation of a relation between ‘time’ in the Real and symbolically



structured temporalities. He proposes that the bends, the points of shift in surface or perspective in these impossible topological objects, can be used as an analogy for a kind of registration of the Real:

In terms of temporality, these turning points are none other than the registration of the *tuche* of traumatic Real time. (p. 55)

From this it is possible to extrapolate that it is precisely the bizarre turns and shifts in our taken for granted experience of 'time', of duration and of urgency, that reveal not only the fantasmatic status of temporality, but also *the shift itself* as a point of impact of something else. It is the simultaneous co-existence and incommensurability of the three temporalities of academic practice traced in my analysis, the points at which they are hinged together, that indicate something radically beyond. This something else, Real Time, registers without ever coming within the realm of the knowable.

Here, Johnston (2005) draws attention to the important distinction between Real as regulative or as constitutive principle. The first, which he suggests is the correct reading of the Lacanian Real, sets a limit to legitimate interpretation. The second ontologises, and thus might be associated with the Deleuzo-Guattarian conception of the virtual. The contrasting politics of regulative ignorance and constitutive alterification suggest different stances in relation to irruptions of the Real/virtual. Lacanian anti-epistemology requires a rigorous reassertion of the ignorance of the analyst; while the more ontological language of Deleuze and Guattari argues for a sensibility to alternative materialisations of the virtual.

Finally, the Lacanian position might also suggest that the juxtaposition of bizarrely incongruent temporalities, intensified under processes of control, will produce ever more traumatic registrations of horrific, overwhelming and unknowable Real Time. The effects of these traumatic encounters with absolute and shattering ignorance are unpredictable: it seems, however, that the obedient position of research, or legitimised knowledge, within institutions of higher education is ever more likely to explode. A Lacanian position warns against optimism; but alerts us to the need to prepare for the evaporation of that which we think we once knew.

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