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Review Time and its Object

Laura Rival

University of Oxford, laura.rival@qeh.ox.ac.uk

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Time and Its Object

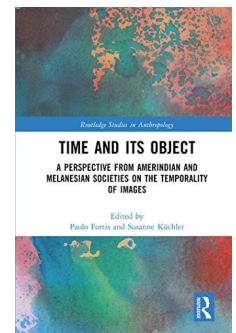
Time and Its Object - A Perspective from Amerindian and Melanesian Societies on the Temporality of Images, Edited by Paolo Fortis, Susanne Küchler, Routledge Copyright, Year 2021, ISBN 9780367260354, Published March 31, 2021 by Routledge, 214 pages, 41 B/W Illustrations.

Laura Rival

University of Oxford
United Kingdom

Over the last decade, and in response to the emergency of climate change, academic debate about the Anthropocene has deeply unsettled the discourses of time-space compression that marked the advent of economic globalization in the early 1980s. Back then, anthropology engaged in a thorough examination of accusations that its analytical practices were ‘allochronistic.’ The term, memorably coined by Johannes Fabian, helped generations of anthropologists look at their projects through historical time. Historicizing one’s ethnographic practices became a central concern. As globalization unfolded, the world was quickly awash with massive movements of goods, people, and ideas. Mobility (or lack of) became a convenient lens through which to approach the constitutive role of history in the present. For many, the Radcliffe-Brownian bias towards explaining continuity and social reproduction had finally given way to a proper attention to discontinuity, change and transformation. Published posthumously in 1992, Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* never quite squared with this anthropological turn to history. His anthropology of time invited us to focus on what people do in real time as part of an extended flow of human action; not on the way people symbolise temporality and its rhythms. Of course, publications such as *The Qualities of Time* (James and Mills, 2005) tried to salvage the Durkheimian heritage by bringing back through careful analysis of timing the question of history as the social experience of regularity. And there have been, more recently, calls for a ‘temporal return’ to the nature of historical process. As they watch neoliberal globalization fragment at speed, Elisabeth Kirtsoğlu and Bob Simpson, for instance, rearticulate and radicalize the notion of chronocracy. It is no longer anthropology that creates allochronistic visions, but the neoliberal order. Even as it slowly decomposes under Covid-19 viral loads, neoliberalism forces people ‘to live in the timelines of others, or worse, to inhabit various appendices of time, locked in structures of waiting for, and in postponed presents’ (Kirtsoğlu and Simpson 2020: 24).

The book under review takes a much less politicized view of the anthropology of time. For Paolo Fortis and Susanne Küchler, the editors, collective subjectivity matters a great deal, but in terms of the metaphysics that underpin cultures as coherent systems of meaning. This explains why the book adopts an analytical strategy that overtly recalls Gregor’s and Tuzin’s (2001) famous comparative volume on gender to explore ‘Amerindian’ and ‘Melanesian’ cultural constructions of time. And if the reader feels the presence of James Frazer and Alfred Gell (the eternal ghosts hovering in the background), it is because anthropology is far from having settled the question of the common experiential foundations of the category ‘time.’ Now that so much ethnography points to the fact that time is neither a question of pure universal rationalism nor of total individual subjectivity, what temporal return should anthropologists aspire for? *Time and its object* makes clear that the concept of time cannot



be successfully approached through the consciousness of the individual as an experiencing actor, no matter how dissatisfied anthropologists have grown with the concepts of 'culture' and 'society'. What the editors and authors of this book hope to achieve, therefore, is to look at the relationships individuals (properly encultured and socially embedded) entertain with temporal ideologies through material practice.

The chapter by Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino articulates with great mastery the metaphysical question that underpins the entire book's effort to fuse the anthropology of time with material culture. In Amazonia, and especially among the Marubo, it is ontologically impossible to separate time from space. By exploring ethnographically the speculative consequences of the encounter between pictography and alphabetic writing, Cesarino demonstrates how the 'shaman-drawers' he has worked with actively engage in speculative knowledge production. Best analysed as forms of selective writing, their pictures reveal aesthetic choices and memory techniques that encode the radical dynamism of Amazonian cosmologies. Ethnographic work rooted in collaborative research projects of symmetric anthropology is thus able to demonstrate that both the ahistoricity of western philosophy (Jacques Derrida and Claude Lévi-Strauss) and naïve approaches to coalescence (Johannes Fabian) end up reducing the pluriverse of human possibilities.

What is most wonderful about Els Lagrou's engagement with Huni Kuin meditations on time is its de-complexified and relaxed return to Lévi-Straussian structural insights. What a better way to prove that people use (material) culture as an active tool against chronocracy? By combining Claude Lévi-Strauss' approach to the double twist of the Klein bottle with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's further elaboration of it in his approach to the Grand Unified Theory of Amazonian sociality, Lagrou shows how the synesthetic relation between song, mythic narrative and design unfolds within the Huni Kuin's experiential world. The chapter, which offers a remarkable synthesis of Lagrou's life-long research on Huni Kuin theory and practice of design, convincingly demonstrates systematic correspondences between social life and material culture, as well as the overall coherence of the integral whole that the Huni Kuin perceive. On page 121, the reader gets a sense of how women who weave engage in the very same productive transgressions as men when the latter practice shamanic arts: "To know' means to partially become what is known; to partially become one with the one who knows and transfers his/ her knowledge. To learn means to engage in a process of partial other-becoming. The art of weaving with design involves an initiation ritual and reclusion that resembles, in every respect, the initiation of men in shamanism."

Frederick Damon's contribution on the outrigger canoes of the Eastern Kula Ring represents a similar synthesis involving data and interpretations building over several decades of research. Like Lagrou, Damon aspires to contribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss' legacy. How can a detailed attention to canoe building reveal that meaningful action is realised through time, and, as such, through the collective intentionality people mobilise while labouring? In what ways can the Kula Ring inform us on the early passage from history to meaning? Damon offers a hypothetical reconstruction of what he calls 'intelligent human action' through which he tries to explain how the original canoe design was progressively transformed into the designs documented through ethnographic research. The speculative model involves layers of selective replacement and 'additive technologies' that give preference to certain 'bundled values.' Damon's 'intelligent human action' is not that distinct from what historical ecologists call 'active adaptation.' In both cases, the stress is on human freedom and cultural choice. By focusing on the *longue durée*, the anthropologist is able to perceive how the dance of agencies (to use Andrew Pickering's favoured metaphor), human and environmental, leads to forms of social order that make life in places such as Woodlark Island possible (page 40). The comparativist may thus conclude that whereas the Huni Kuin or the Marubo value dualisms in perpetual disequilibrium, the Muyuw people and the Trobrianders favour gradual, linear

transformations, which are timelessly shaped after the very first design. This original design is now understood to be an encapsulation of the 'Chinese synthesis.'

There is no place here to comment on each of the eight chapters grouped in three sections. The first section deals with process, action, and sequence; the second one with surfaces, patterns, and shapes; and the third one with intercultural and cross-analytical movements. The book is ethnographically rich and thought provoking, especially when put in conversation, as I tried to do in this review, with other anthropological works on time. The book's introduction is theoretically dense. The epilogue, written by Carlo Severi, serves as a healthy reminder that any anthropological reflection on time and material culture must necessarily acknowledge ritual action. In this respect, an important thinker is missing from *Time and its object*: Maurice Bloch. Ironically, Bloch's important contribution to the anthropology of time gets mentioned indirectly through various discussions of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, a book which stands in close dialogue with Bloch's study of people's relationships to time ideologies; Bloch's anthropological theory of ritual knowledge; and Bloch's ethnographic approach to material practice. It is often forgotten today that Alfred Gell's work on time, art and agency would not have existed if it had not been for his efforts to offer valid answers to the fundamental questions raised by Maurice Bloch. With the proposition that humanity in the Anthropocene acts as a geological force, anthropologists may do well to revisit Bloch's famous 1977 essay 'the past and the present in the present.' As a new breed of ideology is messing up once again with western ontological categories, many ideas of birth and death (as well as of beginnings, destiny and endings; or cyclical versus linear time) will need to be rethought, both scientifically and politically. This book can be a useful guide to succeed in this endeavour.

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