

International Relations and Time

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, MAY 5 2012

Time – that capricious force which constrains our choices, constructs our fortunes and, ultimately, consumes us all; scholars, diplomats, heads of state, human beings.

It is a strange concept; a maddeningly unmasterable one. And it is literally all that we have – the only currency with which we are all born equal, in principle, even if not in fact. (On average, a child in Angola is born with 50% less time, or 40 less years, than a newborn in Australia).

I have recently been pondering the concept of time, and its role in world affairs. It is such a pervasive feature of all forms of life – human, organic, bacterial – that I find it surprising that IR theorists do not spend more time reflecting on it. Many IR scholars spend much of their working day analysing similarly invisible and imperceptible concepts, such as social structures, discourses, and identities. Of the hundreds of thousands of scholarly hours spent in thinking about these, very few seem to be spent thinking about time itself. Yet, time is such a central concept in world affairs, and in our lives, that it deserves sustained scholarly attention.

When asked on 29 July 1914 if war could still be avoided, French President Raymond Poincaré supposedly replied: “It would be a great pity. We should never again find better conditions.” Hitler also felt under immense pressure to act on his expansionist ambitions. He had made up his mind as early as 1937, and perceived that “it would be imperative to act by 1943-1945 at the latest.”

All of the sabre-rattling we heard this year about a potential Israeli strike on Iran (see for example Benjamin Netanyahu, Leon Panetta, Niall Ferguson, Matthew Kroenig and a whole crowd of pundits) is a reminder of the importance of time, and how leaders perceive it, in starting or preventing war. This rhetoric encouraged the perception (perhaps intentionally so) that a diplomatic window to solve the Iranian nuclear crisis peacefully was about to slam shut. Ironically, this instrumentalisation of time as a negotiating premise – ‘time is running out for diplomacy, let’s talk’ – may have succeeded in colloquially “buying time”, thereby opening breathing space for the P5+1 negotiations with Iran.

We still do not understand enough about the uses and abuses of time, and actors’ perceptions thereof, in international affairs.

Some scholars are pursuing cutting-edge work on the subject of time in International Relations. But IR theory lags behind the advanced body of work on time by historians, physicists and philosophers. Some promising avenues for research include the insights of the negotiation and decision-making literatures on time pressure, and ripeness theory in mediations.

Not only is time central to our existence as individual and social creatures, but it is also a rare and perhaps diminishing resource for the community of IR scholars – diverted and drained as it is by an exponential growth of competing demands.

Let’s be honest. Which of you have the time to accomplish everything they seek or hope to in a working day, week or year? Our time, it seems, is lost in folders full of Word files, neglected by lost hours spent posting on Facebook and

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Twitter, reading articles on Foreign Policy and e-IR, trying to keep on top of the latest news, write a paper, finish that chapter, work to earn a living, and live and enjoy life on the margins of it all.

The IR calling is a fast-paced, high-intensity, you-snooze-you-loose business. It is, of course, a truly enriching and worthwhile career. But I cannot help but think that a superficial layer of constant internet chatter, around-the-clock commentary and information saturation is damaging to the academic calling of prolonged reflection, knowledge creation, and quality education.

A first step in attempting to govern the clock rather than being governed by it, to paraphrase Golda Meir, is to understand it. As R. G. Collingwood suggested, the linear concept of time as a stream or straight line obscures the essentially contingent nature of history, the present and the future:

“Time is generally figured or imagined to ourselves in a metaphor as a stream or something in continuous and uniform motion... [But] the events of the future do not really wait their turn to appear, like the people in a queue at a theater awaiting their turn at the box office; they do not yet exist at all, and they therefore cannot be grouped in any order whatsoever.”

This insight is of utmost importance to scholars of IR. It can help us to understand why calls for war as necessary, or predicated on some chronologically-determined closing window of opportunity, are philosophically as well as practically suspect.

Finally, a central characteristic of time, which runs against the moral and intellectual fibre of many of our best academic theorising in International Relations, is that it may truly be a zero-sum game. The more time I spend on e-IR, the less I can spend with Aristotle.

Could our great intellectual ancestors of ages past, such as Thucydides, Hobbes and Kant, have completed their *magnum opus* in the age of iPhones, the Internet and social inter-connectedness? Or would their work, which frequently took years or decades of undivided attention to accomplish, have wound up as unfinished drafts on their desktop?

In the academic era of the “publish or perish” doctrine, it is useful to reflect upon time, as both an important variable in IR theory, and a relentless force in our own lives. The global and immediate nature of contemporary information and real-time analysis is here to stay, and will continue to shape our discipline, and dictate our agendas.

But it would be a cruel irony if, out of an insatiable urge to know, follow and Tweet all current affairs in the present state of the world, we became short-sighted servants of the present, at the expense of a liberating sense of scholarly detachment which comes from reflecting on the past, the potential futures that are ours to forge, and the transience of our own moment in time.

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