

# An Introduction to Time, Temporality and Global Politics

Written by Alasdair McKay

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Adolf Hitler once said that 'time in this war, as in all historical process, is not a factor valuable in itself but must be weighed up' (quoted in Maiolo 2013: 229). He further opined that time 'will work against us if we do not use it properly' (quoted in Gellately 2007: 375). As early as 1937, Hitler believed that success hinged upon acting at the right time (see Faber 2009). For Hitler, quick decisive victories were often seen as preferable to long campaigns because he understood that the longer the war went on the harder it would be for the Germans to maintain military advantages (Fischer 2011: 144-45). Blitzkrieg (lightning war) was deployed to ensure the speedy victories he desired. The defeat of France was made possible by Germany's quick intensity of warfare and the failure of the French military to understand 'the quickened rhythm of the times' that was behind German military strategic thinking during that campaign (Bloch 1968: 45). America's increasing support for the UK meant that if Hitler was to realise his plan of creating an Eastern Lebensraum, he needed to do it quickly (Fritz 2011: 39). By 1945, when defeat was looming, Hitler lamented that 'the tragedy for us Germans is that we never have enough time' (quoted in Fischer 2011: 145).

This example drawn from the Second World War gives a flavour of how time is relevant to major international events. Yet, out of all the books and journals that have been published under the rubric of International Relations (IR) very few have paused to ponder the role of time or temporality. Time has often occupied the role of an entity that sits in the background whilst events transpire in the foreground and it essentially 'functions as context or as analytical indicator, but not as a distinct component deserving judicious investigation' (Hom 2008: 2). As Kimberly Hutchings (2008: 11) observes: the study of world politics has traditionally been 'overtly pre-occupied with spatial rather than temporal relations'. The pre-occupation with space has meant that there has been 'little space for time' (Hom 2010: 1) in analyses of world affairs from IR scholars.

In recent years some IR scholars have turned their attention to time and the temporal dimension of international politics. Writers have shown how the adoption of what could be described as a 'temporal lens' (see Hom 2008; Stockdale 2013) can greatly enhance our understanding of various human phenomena. This book seeks to serve as a vessel for this blossoming literature.

### **Time, Temporality and the Social Sciences**

For humans, time has an ambiguous and perhaps paradoxical quality to it. In some ways, it is something that we seem to push to the back of our thoughts in the same way a timepiece sits unthreateningly on the walls; it is 'simply what the mechanical clock and Gregorian calendar display, a neutral and enumerated dimension in which life unfolds' (Hom 2013: 2). Yet, it is also a mysterious concept that has always slipped into the human mind's ideas

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about change, impermanence, and mortality.

Humans are, so far as we know, the only animal with a capacity to reflect on past events and envision the future. We can, unlike other birds and beasts, project ourselves in time (see Routledge and Arndt 2005). The passing of time is accompanied by the human observation of change; this can be seen by noticing the falling of leaves in autumn, our own bodily changes, or the growth and development of others. Whilst time can be affiliated with creation, birth, and change for the better, it can also bring destabilising change, decay and death. 'Time' is very much, as Schwartz wrote, 'the school in which we learn' and 'the fire in which we burn' (Schwartz 1968).

Everything we do is embedded in time and we are in some way fundamentally aware of time, yet there is something about time that makes it beyond the human mind's capacity to fully grasp. The mathematician Alfred Whitehead (1919: 73) once stated 'it is impossible to meditate on time and the mystery of the creative passage of nature without an overwhelming emotion at the limitations of human intelligence'. Centuries earlier, St. Augustine (2008: 217) famously made a similar point with his musings on the question 'what is time?' – 'If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not'. We seem to think we know what time is, yet it seems difficult to precisely express what we mean when we speak of it. Despite time being one of the most commonly used words in speech – often we describe how time 'flies', 'slowed down', is 'running out', was 'wasted' or 'killed' – there is not a universally agreed upon understanding of time. Indeed, throughout history, time has been understood and explained in multiple ways. This includes moving in a linear direction; cyclical repetitive change; as foundational, functional, social and artistic (*McCullough 1991:1*); as a measure such as seconds, minutes and hours; or as lived experience or a form of social regulation, such as 'clock time' or 'Western standard time' (see Gell 1992, 1998; Adam 1994, 1995, 2002, 2006; Hughes and Trautmann 1995; Aveni 2000; Urry 2000, Hom 2010). It is a subject that has served as a muse for poets, novelists, musicians, artists and filmmakers. There has also been considerable engagement with time and related concepts in philosophy, mathematics, the human sciences, the physical sciences and the social sciences.

Social scientists have not shied away from confronting these issues. As Helga Nowotny (2015:4) observes, 'libraries are full of detailed and also of general investigations on social science and time'. Major thinkers of their times such as Emile Durkheim, George Herbert Mead, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Lewis Mumford all theorised on time from various angles. In more recent times, this tradition has been continued by the likes of Eviatar Zerubavel, Georges Gurvitch, Karl Mannheim, Julius A. Roth, Alfred Schutz, Ptirim Sorokin & Robert K. Merton, Norbert Elias, Niklas Luhmann, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Barbara Adam, Helga Nowotny, Elizabeth Grosz, Bob Jessop and Patrick Baert (see Ryan 2004 for an introductory overview of time and social theory). Recent work on time and related issues from scholars has led some to identify a 'temporal turn' in the social sciences (Hassan 2010). This renewed interest in time can be seen as a reaction to the 'spatial turn', that emerged in the late-1970s where globalisation was examined predominantly through reference to changes in the spatial contours of existence. Undoubtedly, the spatial aspect of globalisation cannot be ignored, but time, it is argued, is equally important in this process because changes in the temporality of human activity inevitably generate altered experiences of space or territory.

With reference to the temporal aspect of globalisation, some have focused their work on the fragmentation of 'linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time' and the emergence of a detemporalised life in 'timeless time' (Castells 2000: 429; see also 1998); the increased internalisation of time in 'the brains and bodies of the citizens' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 23) or the multitemporal multiscalar nature of globalisation (Sassen 1992; 1994; 1999; 2000). But, perhaps some of the most influential and consistent theorising on globalisation has identified the process as embodying a marked shift in the perceived acceleration of social life. Marxist geographer David Harvey, who interestingly enough criticised other scholars for adopting a dialectical approach that privileges time and ignores space (1996: 4), described this phenomenon as the 'time space compression' (Harvey 1989: 240). For Harvey, contemporary developments in capitalism, information, and communications technologies have led to the speeding up of the circulation of capital and a perceived speeding up of social life in general which is simultaneously reducing the significance of space.

The perception that life is speeding up has been a subject of much discussion for social scientists in the past two decades. The crux of this line of thinking is that the rhythms of life and the social and cultural change, aided by the

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invention and spread of technologies—such as mobile phones, personal computers, and the Internet—have radically shortened spatial and temporal distances. Scholars have used different terms to describe this perceived social acceleration and disagree about the exact sources of these recent shifts in the spatial and temporal contours of human life. Nevertheless, there is some consensus that alterations in humanity's experiences of space and time are working to erode the importance of local and even national boundaries in many arenas of human civilisation. In the spirit of those who had warned about what this development might entail for humanity, such as Virilio (1977) and McLuhan (1964), a significant section of literature has examined the political, cultural and ecological consequences of this development (Scheuerman 2004; Hassan and Purser 2007; Hope 2011; Bastian 2012; Hassan 2012; Rosa 2013; Sharma 2014; Wajcman 2015).

Whether or not one accepts that a temporal turn in the social sciences has occurred, IR has, until recently, not treated time with anything like the same level of interest as other schools of the social sciences or academic disciplines in general. IR as a whole exhibits something of a 'temporal blindness' (Stockdale 2013, 5) compared to other disciplines.

## IR Scholars and Time

IR scholars are relatively new to theorising on time and placing it at the foreground of analysis. As this book will show, scholars are now writing explicitly about time and its relationship to world politics. Still, there are earlier works to consider. James Der Derian's writings on diplomacy (1992) and war (2001), that owed a considerable intellectual debt to Virilio's theorisation of speed, endeavoured to focus on the temporal aspect of politics. Much of this work focuses on the collapse of the importance of space created by the previously mentioned perceived increase in the pace of life, and the political ramifications of this development. Within this perspective, the increase in the pace of the modern world—witnessed in all sorts of areas such as in transport, weapons, media—has resulted in a collapse of distance. This influences relations between states because what counts more and more in their strategic relations is the speed of travel, of weapons, of information and so on. Consequently, the political control and management of time is becoming more important than the control and distribution of territory, meaning that 'international relations is shifting from a realm defined by sovereign places, impermeable borders and rigid geopolitics, to a site of accelerating flows, contested borders and fluid chronopolitics' (Der Derian 1992: 129-130). This is what Der Derian (1990) refers to as the '(s)pace problem in international relations' – 'pace' becomes more important than 'space.'

The influence of Der Derian's writing can be seen in Michael J. Shapiro's work on temporality, the state and citizenship. Understanding citizenship as not simply a spatial but also a temporal phenomenon, Shapiro (2000) examined the consequences of the perceived quickened pace of life for the concept of citizenship and its relationship to the nation-state. Similar themes can be seen in the work of R.B.J. Walker (1991, 1993), who was for a while one of the few IR theorists to look at time in relation to state sovereignty. Essentially much of Walker's work is designed to 'draw attention to the contradictory, antagonistic, aporetic or radically undecidable character of the most consequential principles enabling modern political life, especially in relation to prevailing accounts of state sovereignty and its limits' (Walker 2010, 16). To Walker, the temporal aspect plays a pivotal role in driving this contradictory and antagonistic character. His work *Inside/Outside* (1993), whilst not devoted entirely to time, presented an analysis of problems over the concept of state sovereignty caused by the increasing significance of 'the experience of temporality, of speed, velocity and acceleration' (1993: 5) in modern life. For Walker, adequately understanding this development requires an examination of the role of not only space, but also time. Indeed, 'conceptions of space and time' he writes 'cannot be treated as some uniform background noise, as abstract ontological conditions to be acknowledged and then ignored' (Walker 1993, 130-131). In Walker's argument, the principle of state sovereignty is first of all a spatial resolution of the relationship between universality and particularity (Walker 1993: 11, 78, 177), but, importantly, it also serves as a temporal resolution. This is because inside the state there is a story of time as linear progress, which makes it possible for universalist aspirations such as perpetual peace and prosperity to come true. Outside the state, time is seen as cyclical repetition of conflicts and wars.

State sovereignty attempts to reconcile time and space, but with 'the startling velocity of contemporary accelerations' (Walker 1993: 178) comes the reality that temporality can no longer be contained within spatial boundaries. Indeed, 'the hope that temporality may be tamed within the territorial spaces of sovereign states alone is visibly evaporating'

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(Walker 1993: 155). In Walker's words, the acceleration of modern life has caused the distinction between time inside the state and outside the state to collapse. Today's world is a time of speed and acceleration, in which space is compressed and borders are becoming less significant, and so too is state sovereignty. For Walker, the brightest future for global politics lies in reframing it in a new light that avoids this paradoxical conflict between the national and the international, which would involve redefining the concepts that we use to explore the nature of political relations.

Elsewhere in the literature, *Time and Revolution* by Stephen Hanson (1997) argued that the history of Marxism and Leninism reveals an unsuccessful revolutionary effort to reorder the human relationship with time and that this failure had a direct impact on the design of the political, socioeconomic, and cultural institutions of the Soviet Union. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* by Jenny Edkins (2003) explored the remembrance of traumatic events such as war, genocide and terrorist attacks, and how these seek to serve as methods to reinforce feelings of nationhood – and yet also challenge it. Through several case studies, employing various scholarly approaches, she illustrated that some forms of trauma remembrance focus on the horror of the traumatic event and harness its memory to promote change and to challenge the political systems that initially spawned the violence of wars and genocides. William Callahan (2006) examined time and its role in national identity formation in international society through his work on China's 'National Humiliation Day'—a special holiday declared by the head of state during wartime which is celebrated in local churches throughout the country. In *Times of Terror* (2008), Lee Jarvis noted that narratives, such as claims to temporal discontinuity, linearity and timelessness, were all central to the narration of the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror.

Kimberly Hutchings' *Time and World Politics* (2008) was the first work in IR dedicated entirely to time and its relationship with global politics. She investigated the thoughts about time which inhabit Western political philosophies, illuminating the significance of the ancient Greek concepts Chronos and Kairos in intellectual thought and political life. Chronos is understood as a medium through which we can measure lifespans, periods and empires which ensures the certainty of death and decay. It comprehends time as predictable, inevitable and in a sense 'normal'. Kairos (meaning the right or opportune moment), is the 'transformational time of action, in which the certainty of death and decay is challenged' (Hutchings 2008: 5). It is 'exceptional time', affording a sense of human agency. Hutchings argues chronotic time makes it simple to view life, and politics, as ticking along to the rhythms of a linear, unimpeded process of history. But, granting a role for Kairos in politics makes the flow of Chronos uncertain and problematic because through its ascription of human agency, it is essentially struggling with Chronos' seemingly inevitable course and steering it in a different direction. She later shows that this struggle between Chronos and Kairos applies to both international theorists and political actors, illustrating them to be tormented by the idea that politics is a project of controlling time as Chronos and creating a different kind of time through Kairos. 'World political time', to Hutchings (2008: 21), represents an effort to balance these two concepts into a singular understanding of time.

## The Time behind IR

Despite the neglect of time in the discipline, IR theories are heavily anchored by temporal assumptions. Generally, there are two main templates for understanding temporality that underpin the discipline – the cyclical and the linear. For those unfamiliar with such terms, it is worth briefly discussing them. Cyclical theories of time are influenced largely by classical cosmology, where, drawing upon observations of nature, all aspects of the world are temporally organised in a rotational pattern of the seasons, tides, menstrual cycles, birth and death, rise and fall, growth and decay, and structured in relation to the rotation of the planets (Adam 2004: 18). It has been noted that in many ancient societies historical time was construed as 'cyclical', where time was generally represented as a wheel, whose kaleidoscopic revolutions symbolised the circularity of history playing out in an endlessly recurrent pattern (see Rosen 2014).

In IR, realists generally posit a cyclical view of history. They conceive international relations as a 'realm of recurrence and repetition' (Wight 1966: 26), where self-interested states are 'doomed to repeat the behaviour appropriate to rational actors with differing capabilities in an anarchic context' (Hutchings 2008: 13). Neorealists do not explicitly assume that human nature is evil, but they do posit that the only rational behaviour for states in an anarchical international system is to assume that all other states are potentially aggressive and must be defended against, a

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reality that they see continually repeating itself (Kaufman 2014: 2). In sum, realism implies a static temporality because 'the substance of nations' relentless struggle for power—their ascent, then decline, then eclipse in international politics—remains essentially the same' (Kaufman 1996: 349).

Linear time tells a different story to cyclical time as it sees time flowing in a particular direction and following a teleological trend. This more modern account of temporality has two main historical intellectual influences. The first is the rise of Christian historiography which, drawing on the teleological representations of temporality in the Judeo-Christian tradition, construed history as a sequence of events unfolding in a linear fashion. Events in biblical scripture clearly indicate a unidirectional notion of time moving from Creation to Apocalypse. The consequence of this understanding was that episodes in life were understood as having a beginning, middle and end and this ordering of experience had 'the potential to redeem human existence from the futility of nature's endless repetition' (Schaap 2005: 83).

The second intellectual resource is the historical progressivism of the European Enlightenment, which relies on an inference of the future from the known present or past which gave rise to a sequential understanding of historical development. No longer perceived as reliant on divine will, human destiny now lay in the hands of humans themselves—who could guide it towards a victory for reason and rationality. Modernity was and still is, 'revolutionary time', because it is 'the time in which progress through human intervention is possible, if not inevitable' (Hutchings 2008: 112). Within this type of thinking, then, there is also a belief in a moral direction to human history (Russell 1990:143-45; see also Hom and Steele 2010). Rousseau, Hegel and Marx expressed this idea in different ways but nonetheless argued for a dialectical progression towards the universal, though they diverged on what form the universal would take (Hom and Steele 2010, 276). Nevertheless, they all believed in a universalising aspect of time's arrow.

Linear time displaced cyclical time in societies and is essentially the dominant method for how we understand and measure time today. Hom (2010) has chronicled the rise of this conception of time to the status of the 'hegemonic metronome'. This regime of time's ascension went hand in hand with the rise of territorial sovereignty. Together these two drove to standardise a precise and coordinated measurement of time which 'buttressed the edifice of political modernity' (Ibid: 1156) as it spread globally. Western standard time, once established, was then exported to other civilisations. Hom (2010: 1168) concludes that Western standard time constitutes 'modernity's most global hegemon' having achieved an almost unquestioned position as the dominant method of time measurement cross-culturally (see also Attrill 2013: 6-35).

The concept of linear time flows through much writing from the traditions of liberalism and neoliberalism in IR. Liberals tend to see the historical development of man's power and freedom as inevitable, irreversible, and achievable. Whilst liberals do not write explicitly about the perfectibility of the human form, they insist that the international system holds widespread opportunities for international cooperation (Kaufman 2014: 2). As Hutchings (2008: 13) observes, liberal thought exhibits a temporality of limited teleology where a more peaceful world, characterised by global democratisation, can be arrived at through international cooperation.

Whilst this line of thought is most common amongst contemporary liberals, they are not the sole heirs to this linear-progressive understanding of time. Some forms of constructivism lean towards embracing a progressive linear temporality. Wendt's (1992) belief in the inevitability of global government is an example of this as it assumes that history is essentially moving towards a world state (see also Hom 2008: 35). Some Critical Theories draw heavily on classical Marxism's views of history as a linear image of progress through stages of economic development from feudalism to capitalism, and then after revolution, on to communism. But other Critical Theories adopt a more pessimistic view of linear time that could be characterised as linear-regressive, seeing history as heading towards decline, because no feasible political alternative to liberal capitalism can be found. In particular, the works of Virilio and Agamben have been accused of leaving 'very little room for worldly *hope*' in their understandings of temporality (Hutchings 2008: 131).

Following the traditions of social theorists, some IR theorists have critiqued these dominant models of temporality and proposed alternative approaches to understanding time. Chris McIntosh (2015) traces the influence of

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Westernized clock time on mainstream IR and security studies scholars, showing how this deeply embedded conception encourages a particular view of the past as a stable repository of static events and an understanding of social science as primarily concerned with generalization and prediction, two goals that are often contradictory. For Hutchings, a key problem with our dominant understanding of time is that it is so committed to forging a singular understanding of time that it excludes any alternative accounts of temporality, a practice which has significant political consequences. Drawing upon postcolonial and feminist thinking, Hutchings argues that we should entertain the possibility of multiple, co-existing, and diverse visions of temporality, described as 'heterotemporality' (Hutchings 2008: 4) which would 'undermine the idea that we can theorise world-political time in homogeneous or unified terms' (Ibid: 155). Hom and Steele (2010) in their critiques of conceptions of time in IR have discussed an 'open time' that moves beyond the constraints of popular paradigms and 'encourages creativity while cautioning against a simulated, idealised self, thus assisting in the classically realist self-limitation of political action that preserves both present ethical concerns and the possibility of progress in the near and distant future.'

## **Accounting for the Neglect**

The reasons for IR's neglect of time are difficult to identify. One could argue that the elusive, stealthy dynamic of time makes it hard to analyse in the same way as space. After all, we can observe the effects of time in the world, but there is a seemingly invisible quality to it and it is taken for granted as being represented by clock time. As Adam (1992: 175) observed of time as an analytical category for social scientists, it is 'deeply taken for granted in our daily lives and our social theories, it is not easily accessible to conscious reflection and social science analysis. This means that time needs to be made visible before its pervasive role in modernity can be appreciated'. This may provide a partial explanation but not a reliable excuse, because, after all, 'many IR scholars spend much of their working day analysing similarly invisible and imperceptible concepts, such as social structures, discourses, and identities' (Morini, 2012). Other reasons may be found in the history of IR as a discipline. Hutchings (2008: 11) writes that for much of the Cold War 'the space of international politics was thought of as frozen in time', which became reflected in academe. Assuming that inter-state relations would always consist of the balance of power where states would pursue self-interest in a timeless historical vacuum, IR theorists devoted many hours, days, and years developing models to support this, with neorealist texts leading the way. Theorists simply compared political units and tried to explain and predict political outcomes. This period has been described as the 'behaviouralist revolution' in which 'space gradually became privileged over time and context in analyses of world politics' (Vaughn-Williams 2005: 115). As an object of scholarly interest, time only became a real consideration for IR scholars when the Cold War ended, because, in the words of Walker (1993: 3), 'the demolition of the Berlin Wall may have signalled an opening across territorial space, but it equally signalled an awareness of temporal velocities and incongruities.'

According to Hutchings (2008:14) 'the themes of temporality and history have come centre stage in debates about world politics in International Relations since the end of the Cold War' (Hutchings 2008: 14). Perhaps the two largest issues were whether we had come to 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (Fukuyama 1989) or a world in which mankind was doomed to engage in an endless clash of civilisations (Huntington 1993, 1996). Yet, such writing has largely relied on assumptions about time and temporality without any real critical reflection on such concepts.

The so called 'historical turn' in IR merits brief discussion here. This research enterprise in IR arguably stemmed from 'an emerging consensus that history is taken far more seriously within the discipline' (Vaughan-Williams 2005: 117). Over the past two or three decades, many scholars have attempted to historicise the concepts which underpin international relations and inject temporality into the study of historical processes. Whilst there has been important work conducted in this 'turn'—much writing in historical sociology has done a good job of critiquing the ahistorical assumptions underpinning realism and neorealism (Lundborg 2016: 18)—there has been little willingness from this intellectual turn to confront temporality or time directly.

As Stevens (2016: 37) observes, 'important though the renewed emphasis on history is in IR, other aspects of time and temporality should also be of interest to students of the international, as they are elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities'. Not only do the chapters in this book address many other aspects of time and temporality in relation to global politics, they also provide a more critical approach to how we understand, and use, such concepts.

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