

# How Time Shapes our Understanding of Global Politics

Written by Caroline Holmqvist and Tom Lundborg

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## How Time Shapes our Understanding of Global Politics

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Making sense of politics in the modern world has always involved constructing conceptions of the 'past', 'present' and 'future' (Koselleck 2004 [1985]; Toulmin 1992). In other words, as Kimberly Hutchings tells us, assumptions of time 'fundamentally shape what we can and cannot know about world politics today' (Hutchings 2008). Building on recent theoretical insights into the significance of time for thinking about politics (Chambers 2003, Grosz 2005, Hutchings 2008, Widder 2008, Shapiro 2010, Lundborg 2012), this chapter shows how questions of time and politics can be variously posed and explored. Rather than presenting a central argument, we seek to open up a number of different directions that research into time and global politics may take. This discussion is structured around four empirical areas, which can be thought of as potential case studies. The first explores competing temporalities embodied in the United Nations (UN) system; the second looks at apocalyptic visions of the global climate crisis; the third focuses on the instantaneity of global information flows; and the fourth examines practices of pre-emption in global counterterrorism measures. In each case, the dominant role of teleological understandings of time and history in modern political discourse is questioned, and at least four conceptions of time other than the teleological invoked: cosmological time, eschatological time, instantaneous time, and time as a flow of becoming.

By tracing the competing temporalities at work in these given examples of world political affairs, this chapter provides an overview of the types of inquiry that a focus on time in global politics might generate. They serve to illustrate the manifold ways in which questions around time and politics can be pondered and explored – mindful of the way in which certain discourses of global politics are permitted, promoted and excluded in various ways by and through different conceptions of time. As such, this quartet of 'cases' testify to the competing modes not only of explaining and understanding, but also practicing world politics, enabled by different conceptions of time. In other words, they point to the politics of time in global affairs. Before turning to these potential studies we begin by giving an overview of how time has been used as a point of entry into studies of global politics, as well as provide a brief introduction to the alternative notions of time that we use in each 'case' by contrasting them with the dominant linear and teleological time associated with modern political discourse.

### **Time, Politics and Globalisation**

The most cited books on contemporary globalisation are based on a rather limited engagement with time and temporality, which mainly focuses on the significance of speed, acceleration, and the compression of time and space. Much of this literature is based on David Harvey's (1990) concept of the 'time-space compression', which refers to how the ever-increasing speed of 'transnational flows' has collapsed distances in time as well as in space. The flows of, for example, money and information have become *instantaneous*, rendering spatial distances obsolete (Appadurai 1996, Urry 2003). The narrow focus on the significance of speed, acceleration, and the time-space compression is also evident in the literature more specifically concerned with the *political* dimension of contemporary globalisation. In this context, globalisation is mainly discussed by pointing to how the acceleration and speed of

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transnational flows challenge the static borders of sovereign territory (Der Derian 1992, Agnew 1994, Tuathail 1996, Scholte 2005, Held and McGrew 2007).

While the globalisation literature has opened up important questions about the potential significance of time for thinking about politics, there is much work to be done in order to advance our understanding of how *different* conceptions of time can be used for examining, analysing and understanding global politics and political life under globalizing conditions. In order to do this, a more expansive and nuanced analysis of time and its relation to politics is necessary. Therefore, we need other adjacent fields of study, which can be used in order to investigate the significance of time as a constitutive dimension of politics.

On the one hand, there is a growing interest in time and temporality among philosophers, social theorists, and scholars of International Relations (IR) (Hoy 2009, Hom 2010, Ruin and Ers 2011). On the other hand, there is a literature more specifically concerned with the *politics* of time and temporality. For example, in his book *Untimely Politics* Samuel Chambers (2003) has challenged the dominant linear conception of time and argued for an alternative non-linear way of thinking about politics, mainly by drawing on the work of Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida. Elizabeth Grosz has also problematised the linear conception of time in her book *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Politics* (2005), which analyses the significance of time as a productive force that conditions different forms of political struggles, in particular feminist struggles. Kimberly Hutchings' work on *Time and World Politics* (2008) was mentioned earlier and stands as the most significant theoretical contribution to thinking about the relationship between theories of time and theories of world politics. Another important theoretical contribution is Nathan Widder's *Reflections on Time and Politics* (2008), which offers a series of critical reflections on the limits of the linear progressive view of time and opens up to a more radical understanding of time and politics based on continental and poststructural philosophy. In a more empirical sense, Michael J. Shapiro's book *The Time of the City* (2010) addresses the politics of urban life through the lens of various philosophical conceptions of time. Finally, Tom Lundborg's book entitled *Politics of the Event: Time, Movement, Becoming* (2012) demonstrates how the concept of the 'event' can be used for analysing a sovereign politics of time seeking to reproduce ideas about a 'modern' political order through the inscription of 'borders in time' separating the past from the present and the future. Like many of these works we are interested in challenges to the dominant teleological concept of time.

## Alternative Concepts of Time

According to the dominant teleological conception of time, past, present and future are conjoined linearly, suggesting a 'forward movement' or 'progress'. The linear understanding of time is strongly associated with the grand ideologies that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: liberalism and communism. With the end of the Cold War came the declaration that history itself had come to an end (Fukuyama 1992). While Fukuyama's thesis has been widely criticised, the teleological conception of time it relies upon continues to have formidable influence, not least on discourses of global economic development that express confidence in continuous growth and the promise of progress from 'under-developed' to 'developed'.

At least four additional conceptions of time to the teleological can be identified in the tradition of intellectual history. First, the **cosmological** conception of time derives from Aristotelian thinking and was further developed in Renaissance philosophy via early modern science and entails a view of time as *cyclical* and *repetitive* (Cassirer 1979). This view of time has for example been used to think about the repetitive nature of politics in the modern era, and the eternal movements of inter-state politics in a world that lacks a higher authority than the sovereign state (Walker 2010).

Second, the **eschatological** conception of time is concerned with time as finite and the world coming to an end, and is strongly associated with theological Judaic-Christian traditions (Löwith 1949, Taubes 2009 [1947]). This view of time has for example been used to think about the values and fears that often underlie ideas about the world suddenly coming to an end via nuclear war, terrorist attacks or environmental disasters (Bradley and Fletcher 2010).

Third, the conception of **instantaneous time** relates to the view of the contemporary era as one of 'instantaneity', characterised by the time-space compression and the ways in which time has become 'radically present' (Harvey

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1990, Beck 1992, Heller 1999, Bauman 2000). This notion of time has for example been used to highlight the implications of the rapid increase of transnational flows – of people, money and information – which some see great potential in, while others point to the fears, dangers and risks commonly associated with them (Lundborg 2011).

Fourth, the conception of time as a **flow of becoming** was developed by 20<sup>th</sup> Century continental philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan, among others, and points to how time eludes the static being of the individual subject, prompting attempts to construct fantasies of the full presence of the coherent subject (Deleuze 1994, Lacan 2006). This view of time has for example been drawn upon to study a politics seeking to construct fantasies of the full presence of the individual subject *within* the limits of the sovereign territorial state, but also to express different modes of resistance that try to elude the authority of the state (Edkins 2011, Lundborg 2012).

We believe that some of the most hotly debated issues in contemporary global politics – including the global climate crises, global counterterrorism measures, global information flows, and the limits and possibilities of progress in the international order – can be rearticulated, rethought and analysed in a radically new light via a focus on conceptions of time. In this respect, while the dominant teleological view can be linked to a particular understanding of political life based on liberal ideals of freedom, progress and enlightenment, the other conceptions of time highlight alternative understandings of political life.

For example, discourses based on cosmological time can be linked to a form of political life that is reluctant to change and aims to continue, eternally, along the same road. Discourses based on eschatological time might instead point to a form of political life dominated by the constant fear of an abrupt end through, for example, apocalypse or disaster. In turn, discourses based on instantaneous time open up the possibility of new forms of political belonging through instantaneous connections between people located in different parts of the world. Moreover, time as a contingent flow of becoming can be linked to a more radical understanding of life, whereby life constantly eludes the full presence and completeness of the subject. To demonstrate how this may be accomplished we now turn to our four suggested case studies.

## Studying Time and Global politics

Since our specific focus is on the relationship between concepts of time and global politics, we have chosen four suggested case studies that all point to a distinctively global or transnational dimension of contemporary politics. In other words, they all relate to that which *transcends* or happens *beyond* the limits of the sovereign territorial state. In this respect, different concepts of time can be used both in order to take us beyond the modern state as well as to point to the various tensions between what lies beyond and what lies within the state/state system; tensions that emerge when different concepts of time clash with one another.

### *I: Competing temporalities in the United Nations system*

Coming to terms with the international and what may be said to constitute its 'order' is perhaps the main preoccupation of the discipline of IR. While the category of space has dominated research into the international and the question of order, the category of time remains under-investigated and under-explored. This is noteworthy: questions of how we think of change on the international level, of *stability* contra *rupture*, of *possibility* contra *determinism*, of duration and longevity versus finitude, and so on – all such questions are conditioned by understandings of time and temporality. This is abundantly clear when we turn to the organisation that more than any other can be said to embody the attempted construction of international order in the present day: the UN.

The inquiry into the competing temporalities at work in the construction of international order can be approached via a study of the UN as organisation. One way to structure such investigation would be to depart from the plethora of documents generated by the UN: from the UN Charter, key Security Council resolutions, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports to speeches by the UN Secretary General. These documents as texts neatly encompass the on-going and necessarily incomplete construction of international order. By focusing on the sui generis global organisation, the UN, we expect that such empirical research would yield insight into some of the central themes of mainstream global political discourse, in particular discourses of security and social and economic

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development.

The international order that is embodied in the UN system is at heart a liberal order, vacillating between, on the one hand, the promotion of the 'progress' of individual human life and, on the other, the fundamental dependence on the active support and participation of individual sovereign states, with the attendant principles of territorial integrity and non-intervention (Chandler 2002, Cunliffe 2011, Bellamy 2011 and 2005). Thus the investigation of the temporalities of the international *à travers* the temporalities embodied in the UN system is at once an investigation of the time of the international and at once an investigation of the competing temporalities of liberal international theory. While the teleological conception of time as everlasting progress is most strongly associated with liberal thought, we can expect this trajectory to be juxtaposed with a cosmological view of time as dominated by eternal cycles and repetition. In focusing on this interaction, the study of the political logics embedded in the UN system would shed new light on the limits of 'progress' in a world governed by the eternal movements of inter-state politics. The conception of time as instantaneous would offer additional perspective on the workings of the international system as embodied in an organisation that struggles to deal with the long-term politics of poverty reduction, climate change and so on, incessantly challenged by states' reactive concern for the immediate.

## *II: Apocalyptic visions of the global climate crisis*

A second potential area of interest concerns the global climate crisis. It is well established that one of the root causes of this crisis is the continuous aspiration for increased productivity/economic growth and its detrimental effects on the environment and the sustainability of the earth's ecosystems (Helm and Hepburn 2009). Thus, there is an important tension to be examined here: between the modern belief in the individual's as well as the state's right to continuous progress on one hand, and on the other hand an apocalyptic vision of the world, based on an eschatological conception of time as finite and the world rapidly coming to an end.

The tensions created between linear and eschatological time in the context of the global climate crisis can certainly be expressed in different ways depending on the discourse one is looking at. While the linear notion of time might be more dominant in discourses of national security, for example, eschatological time is often expressed in popular culture including films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and *Melancholia* (2011).

While studying the ways in which different discourses give priority to distinct notions of time, it would also be fruitful to look more closely at the interactions between eschatological and linear time. Another example of how this may be done is to study UN climate summits, in which clashes between opposing views of the climate crisis often become apparent. While some states highlight the extreme dangers of the climate crisis and point to the risks of inaction, others merely state that it is not in their national interest to take action in the present.

When studying the interaction between eschatological and linear notions of time we may also ask how they condition – rather than simply exclude – one another. For example, it could be argued that linear progressive time relies on the notion of a final end, which gives the search for continuous progress purpose and meaning in the first place, just like death gives meaning to life. On that basis, it is possible to investigate how fantasies of an absolute end of the world do not automatically threaten the idea of continuous progress of states and individuals but supplies the latter with its necessary and underlying condition: namely the constant risk of coming to an end. To progress then implies a contingent and unpredictable process of becoming, which is 'meaningful' only as long as it may suddenly come to an end. Hence the concept of time as a flow of becoming is also relevant to include in this analysis – not in order to think of becoming as 'eternal', but to highlight an unpredictable movement based on elements of chance and contingency. Indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely our inability to fully predict the future that gives meaning to life, and which makes all attempts to calculate what *will* happen futile. Eschatological time can thus be seen as a condition of possibility for linear progressive time as it poses a constant threat to linear time of reaching a sudden end.

## *III: The instantaneity of global information flows*

Investigation into the subject of global information flows presents a third potential avenue for investigation of the

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temporality of the global political domain. Recent decades have seen a surge in interest in how the spread of information and communication between individuals and corporate entities contributes to a distinct media sphere or global network society (Castells 2010). While some commentators see real political potential in social networking (often citing the 'Arab Spring'), more sinister manifestations of global information flows can be found in the increased reliance on global surveillance techniques and the military use of remote killing through unmanned aerial vehicles. Hence there is striking contrast between the diagnoses of the political potential of temporal instantaneity: promise on the one hand and risks and dangers on the other (Lundborg 2011). As social theorists have asserted for some time: delving more deeply into the constitutive role of speed, proximity, acceleration (Virilio 2006, Rosa, 2013) and instantaneity for global political discourse is imperative for understanding the limits and potentials of political action today.

Exploring the paradoxical effects of the instantaneity of information flows requires attention to the active role of materiality in global surveillance techniques and its importance for the military use of remote killing (Gregory 2011, Wall and Monihan 2011, Plaw and Fricker 2012). Previous research into the force of materiality in social and political relations (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams 2011 and 2015, Holmqvist 2013) points to the 'living' potential of material force in political affairs; and the assemblage structure of contemporary political phenomenon (Latour 2005, Bennett 2010). From the range of empirical materials that may be selected as basis for such investigation, we have chosen to highlight elements pertaining to global violence, and the impact of violent materialities on how politics is (or can be) enacted. Here, testimonials from drone operators, reports from the locations where drone operations take place, and official documents from the United States' defence and security establishment outlining the (current and future) use of unmanned weapons systems are noteworthy.

The contrast between and clash of teleological and instantaneous conceptions of time are expected to be of primary significance in this area of research. While the wars of (classical) modernity were imbued with teleological conceptions of time – evident in the conception of wars as temporally demarcated, bracketed by dates of beginning and end – wars conditioned by instantaneous time oscillate between a radical sort of present and endlessness. The breakdown of the distinction between 'war' and 'peace' in our time – indeed the breakdown between the *finite* and the *infinite* in war – demands new political temporalities. Given that the surveillance-wars never 'start' they can never 'end' in any conventional sense of the word either: reckoning with this is both theoretically and politically challenging.

## *IV: The politics of preemption in global counterterrorism policy and practice*

The fourth case is linked to the politics of preemption in global counterterrorism policy and practice. The concept of preemption refers to the strategy of pre-empting future attacks before they materialise (Rasmussen 2006, Massumi 2007). Following the discourses of the Global War on Terror, this strategy has been discussed extensively in recent years, with particular reference to the idea of protecting individual freedoms and liberties by making *exceptions* to international as well as domestic laws and norms (Neal 2010).

By highlighting the conception of time as a contingent flow of becoming we are able to add another layer to this topic by looking at how the politics of preemption can be examined and analysed in relation to fantasies of controllability. In this way, we can also shed light on some of the most controversial elements of contemporary counterterrorism measures, including indefinite detention, extraordinary rendition, the use of torture and secret prison facilities. Examples of empirical material to be examined include recent human rights-reports from organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as official documents from the US Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. Moreover, one may study the cultural expressions of these practices in films and TV-series like *Minority Report* (2002), *Rendition* (2007), *24* (2001-2010), and *Homeland* (2011-present).

While much of this discourse seems to suggest that contemporary political life under globalising conditions is increasingly unpredictable, it also expresses a certain desire to control the unpredictable. The challenge of satisfying this desire lies precisely in how the flow of becoming renders impossible the existence of a stable and present 'now', from which we can safely observe what has happened in the past and make predictions about the future. The unpredictability of terrorist attacks and the invention of new methods with which they are carried out are thus responded to with new ways of dealing with the contingent flows of becoming. Crucially, much of this discourse seeks

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to respond to the 'futura' of becoming by trying to imagine the 'unimaginable' of what might happen next. In this context, therefore, we need to study how counterterrorism policy and practice express a certain politics of time that prioritises the future over the present, and indeed appears to bring the future into the present in a remarkable non-linear fashion. The idea of acting on the future in the present brings us back to instantaneous time as it points to the ways in which policies are enacted *immediately*, without waiting for events to unfold. What needs to be studied, thus, is the interaction between the unpredictable flow of becoming and the instantaneity of the sovereign decision.

## Conclusion

By using time as a primary analytical lens, scholars will be able to rethink and rearticulate the theoretical frameworks through which global political discourses are examined, understood and analysed; provide new empirical insights into the conditions that shape political life in the contemporary world; and shed new light on our capacity to think about the limits and possibilities of 'change' in global politics. This approach holds the promise of generating a series of inquiries, as part of new research agenda with the potential for both theoretical innovation and substantive contributions to current political debates. Perhaps most significantly, this kind of agenda would take us beyond the narrow concern with progressive, linear and teleological time that has dominated the ways in which time is understood as mere 'history' in the discipline of IR. Any attempt to come to terms with the profound challenges of global politics must look beyond that narrow understanding of time and open up an expanded view of the multiple temporalities shaping political life in the contemporary era.

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