

In what ways have anthropologists approached the study of time?

“I was once told that there are seven storms of the rainy season. It is in fact important that there is such a tradition; but I eventually discovered that it was hopeless to try to find an exact list of seven storms”¹. The question of time and in particular its local perception and measurement has arguably been as important a preoccupation for the discipline of anthropology as subjects such as space, kinship, personhood and ritual. This essay proceeds chronologically towards the claim by Alfred Gell that, “There is no fairyland where people experience time in a way that is markedly unlike the way in which we do ourselves, where there is no past, present and future, where time stands still or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum”². Whilst this telos is inevitable, the events preceding it will, it is hoped, undermine its finality.

Both Immanuel Kant and Emile Durkheim conceive of the phenomenal world we perceive as being one that is structured by mentally contrived underpinnings³. What makes Durkheim a rationalist is his rejection of the empiricist assumption that time is merely another external fact of nature to be measured using commonly agreed terms. Durkheim substitutes collective representations as a kind of social logic and his position

¹ Robert H. Barnes, *Kédang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.130

² Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images* (Oxford: Berg., 1992), p.315

³ Gell (1992), p.9

is that it is collective representations of time that create and shape our ability to experience the temporal: “for it seems that we cannot think of objects which are not in time and space ... Now when primitive beliefs are systematically analysed, the principal categories are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion, they are a product of religious thought”⁴. Thus, for Durkheim, an emic understanding of time is not only attainable, the methodological approach to such an understanding comprises an analysis of the terms used to measure and describe time. Time is social time.

Evans-Pritchard concurs in *Nuer Time Reckoning*, writing that “Perceptions of time, in our opinion, are functions of time reckoning, and are hence socially determined”⁵. As this assessment is expanded upon in *The Nuer*, Evans-Pritchard distinguishes between two different kinds of socially determined time. Whilst the Nuer’s adaptation to their ecological niche necessitates an awareness of and conformity to ecological time; simultaneously at a macrocosmic level, time is geared around the abstract and generational unit inscribed in the genealogical charters for lineage, clan and tribal political affiliations⁶. As Gell points out, there does seem to be a contradiction here between Evans-Pritchard’s description of the Nuer’s reliance upon quotidian processes of socially coordinated collective action for a sense of process-linked ecological time and

⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915), pp.9-11; cited here from Gell (1992), p.3

⁵ E. Evans-Pritchard, ‘Nuer Time Reckoning’, *Africa* 12 (1939), p.201; cited here from Gell (1992), p.15

⁶ Gell (1992), p.15

the concurrent transcendent reckoning using the “structural time”⁷ concept of generations. Most striking however is Evans-Pritchard’s account of “motionless structural time” which Gell argues does not constitute a distinct perception of time nor does it require heterodox temporal beliefs. The contention revolves around the telescoping of Nuer genealogies to retain the relationship with the beginning of the world at a separation of no more than six sets, such that “these six sets are fixed structural points through which actual sets of persons pass in endless succession”⁸. Where Evans-Pritchard asserts that this represents a fixed temporal relationship to the mythic / ancestral past, Gell responds that although the interval may have been affected, the order and hierarchical relationship of events has not. Gell’s analogy with the non-receding New Testament epoch within Christianity cannot seem to address the question of how this lapsed interval is successively perceived.

The debate shifts into cyclical models for emic conceptions of time with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Using a “hot” societies / “cold” societies dichotomy, Lévi-Strauss suggested that in “cold” societies where historically contingent change is revisionistically denied, time is experienced synchronically (versus diachronically in Saussurean terms) with structures such as affinal alliance representing static immobility. John Barnes rejects

⁷ *ibidem*

⁸ Evans-Pritchard (1940), pp.107-8; cited here from p.19

Lévi-Strauss' classification of affinal alliance systems as synchronic arguing for its consideration as cyclical⁹ and Gell rejoins that as with any model consisting of periodic repetition it implies a linear temporal extension¹⁰. Writing in the first of 'Two Essays concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time', E.R. Leach explains time in some unsophisticated "primitive societies"¹¹ being experienced as "a repetition of repeated reversal, a sequence of oscillations between polar opposites"¹². In the second essay, Leach falls in line with the position that "we *create time* by creating intervals in social life"¹³. Robert H. Barnes takes up the question of this oscillation wherein the past "is simply the opposite of now"¹⁴ and suggests in his monograph on the Kédang that in their yearly ceremonies as with their house building, the sequential ordering of events is of enough import as to justify the use of the word cycle: "This is that a sequence of events is completed, that it returns to the original state ... Time, as it is represented in Kédang, is oriented, irreversible, and repetitive"¹⁵. To this, Gell adds that as well as Leach's alternating model logically necessitating cyclicity since it contains two positions, the oscillation between repeated reversals would not enable one to distinguish between

⁹ Cited here from Gell (1992), p.24

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ E.R. Leach, 'Two Essays concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time', *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961), p.126

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ib.*, p.135

¹⁴ *ib.*, p.126

¹⁵ Barnes (1974), p.128

“another summer” and “‘summer’ full-stop”¹⁶. We are reminded here of Barnes’ elucidation of the Kédang approach to past and future time. Whilst it is perfectly possible to express that something took place *n* years in the past or will occur *n* months in the future, “it is characteristic”¹⁷ to simply say *tun weén* or *ula weén* which translate as “another year” or “another month” – terms which do not specifically designate whether the past or the future is being referred to.

Maurice Bloch makes a radical break by insisting that “claims concerning the perception of duration” must be considered separately from “the ways in which time is divided up, or metaphorically represented”¹⁸. Bloch’s distinction between ritual time (static, cyclical)¹⁹ and practical time (durational)²⁰ is intended to provide a mechanism for escaping the hermeneutic of social agents who are incapable of conceptualising change from within the social structure. M.F.C. Bourdillon’s response is helpful in this context. Characterising the binary oppositions which structure Bloch’s essay as an over-simplification, Bourdillon observes that far from concealing the world, ritual non-durational conceptions of time can reveal it²¹ and comments that Bloch has not defined the quality of the durational time which is used for practical activities such as

¹⁶ Gell (1992), p.34

¹⁷ Barnes (1974), p.127

¹⁸ Maurice Bloch, ‘The Past and the Present in the Present’, *Man* (1997), p.282

¹⁹ Bloch (1977), p.284

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ M.F.C. Bourdillon, ‘Knowing the World or Hiding it: A response to Maurice Bloch’, *Man*, (1978), p.592

agriculture and uninstitutionalised power²².

In conclusion, although Gell rejects the “strong” Whorf hypothesis that language determines time cognition, he will allow that “different languages seem to highlight particular temporal / aspectual / modal relationships between events at the expense of others”²³. His conclusion regarding the way that time is experienced differently through physical, biological, social and psychological events is measured against the yardstick of an empiricist primacy given to “real-world processes”²⁴. Thus, whereas Gell writes that to suggest that “the category time is created for us by the rhythms of social processes is fallacious”²⁵ and would be to confuse it with that which “calibrates and measures it”²⁶; his position is difficult to reconcile with either Nuer genealogical accounts of the mythic / ancestral past or with others’ who assert the significance of interval perception. Leopold E.

A. Howe argues as follows:

Indeed a study of the way that a people perceives time can only be accomplished by an investigation into the ways in which the passage of time is reckoned, how the intervals are obtained, the systems by which such units are counted, if in fact they are, how the units are conceptualised and what images and metaphors are employed.²⁷

²² Bourdillon (1978), p.285

²³ Gell (1992), p.327

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.316

²⁵ *ib.*, p.325

²⁶ *ib.*

²⁷ Leopold E. A. Howe, ‘The Social Determination of Knowledge: Maurice Bloch and Balinese Time’, *Man* (1981), p.222

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