

Lively Temporalities: A Postgraduate Workshop
on *Interdependence Day*
Royal Geographical Society, London
11.00am, Saturday, July 1st, 2006

The Open University



Select Discussion:

Nigel Clark – Let me start by raising what might be a tangent. There's the idea of heterogeneous and multiple times. I quite like that because I'm constantly thinking about different times in the physical world and different human times. I now realize that, for a long time, I assumed that human time went fast and geological time went slowly. But Kathryn's and Stephan's comments about rapidly changing Antarctic ice shelves start to shake this up. Sometimes when I read about heterogeneous time, it's kind of easy to slip into that assumption: fast / human, slow / geophysical.

But an ice shelf might go in years, or a glacial era might kick off in just decades. And then there's the slowness of some human ideas. The idea of Nature as the Garden of Eden, that idea has been around for thousands of years. Suddenly we have geological time moving a thousand times faster than cultural time. So this whole notion of "multiple and heterogeneous times" does things. It helps me to think, "hang on, which is which?" With Nigel [Thrift] and Stephan [Harrison] here, I'd love to have a conversation about that.

Stephan Harrison – It's interesting that people use the term "glacially slow" when the glaciers that I work on move twenty meters per day. That's pretty quick. I think you're right. We used to think the climate changed incredibly slowly. But because of the ice core record, we've started to realize over the last twenty or thirty years that climate change is incredibly rapid, that we have an enormously sophisticated, non-linear, dynamic climate system, and that it flips from one quasi-state to another. So we can have enormous changes in perhaps five or ten years, changes that we used to think took hundreds of years. That's a completely new insight that we got from the ice cores, which we never had access to until the 1970s and 1980s. As a quaternary scientist, that's an extraordinary and exciting development.

Kathryn Yusoff – Richard Alley, in his book *The Two-Mile Time Machine*, talks about the climate "flickering." For me, that brings these things together that have been quite separated, geophysical time and the time of theoretical change, in a way that hasn't happened for quite some time. I'm very interested in that phenomena, one that goes from seeing the collapse of an ice shelf in real-time on a NASA website, to the idea of climates flickering. Trying to understand those two things together is, to me, a really interesting proposition.

Stephan Harrison – But the politics hasn't caught up on this. The basis for policy, and the way we understand climate change, is General Circulation Models. Yet those models, even the latest ones, don't even show El Nino properly, which is one of the biggest climate effects on the globe. They don't recreate rapid changes like El Nino in the past, so they probably don't recreate them in their future scenarios. Policy is being driven by these models, yet policy hasn't caught up with the fact that it's the rapid changes which would be the most disastrous for economic and political systems.

Kathryn Yusoff – Those kinds of interruptions, like the sudden disintegration of glaciers, is beyond those models. One of the difficulties in dealing with these abrupt changes or interventions is trying to find a way of representing them. How you speak, imagine and model these kinds of changes seems to be a very difficult task. If you tried to write these different times together, what would that topography look like?

Jennifer Gabrys – That raises questions about how responsiveness is tied up with time. What is the time of our response? Do our representations require more delay? This is coming up in this event, *Interdependence Day*, with a lot of different responses to potentially disastrous situations. How quickly must we act? How much time do we have to reflect? How immediate and engaged are our models? The reading [May and Thrift's "Introduction" in *TimeSpace: Geographies of Temporality*] also brought this up. A question of time-space: how much are we standing outside of that, and how much are we understanding it from within an embedded, responsive position?

Matthew Kurtz – The slowness with which language changes really stands out for me. That slowness is tied up with how we can respond, what we can respond with, how actively politics can engage with these kinds of scenarios and events. One of the things that Nigel Thrift's work brings out is the length of time through which structural changes take place, suggesting that it has taken a lot of time to develop a different kind of vocabulary and a different way of understanding. For instance, you recently used the phrase "glacial time" in a way that isn't the glacial time that Stephan and Kathryn are talking about. In your essay, that phrase seemed to be used in its older sense, that is, to mean that something was a very slow process. The shift in language takes a considerable amount of time, one which will be needed before we start to think of this phrase, "glacial time," meaning something else.

Nigel Clark – I was thinking of the way we write. It almost works on an agricultural time, like ploughing the field. You go down this way, turn around, and come back. It's been sped up slightly but it still seems to be at this agricultural pace. And then there are other ways: think of the Internet, or what happens with computer viruses. They are working with a very different mode of dissemination, which is not that agricultural model where you plant the seed, sit back for a while and see what happens. In trying to write about these things, I often find that ploughing the field is just too slow. How do I speed up? How can I write differently? How can I make something happen with my writing that will be at the same pace as these events we are talking about? It's very hard.

Jennifer Gabrys – There's a line in Walter Benjamin's *Reflections* where he says that we need to dispense with relying on the heavy, weighty books of the past and move more toward pamphlets, flyers, newspapers, and literature that's quicker. But then the question is, just because the situations are pressing, does that mean we have to continue to accelerate our response? Is that the only way to really engage?

Nick Mahony – That has political sides, one of which assumes an end of ideology and an end of big projects. People think the implication is that politics can now take place on an individual basis, and therefore they want more immediate ways of engaging. Are those temporalities, those ways of engaging, any more effective? In my empirical work, it looks like institutions are increasingly involving publics on the assumption that these publics want to be involved on an individual basis, which creates these exaggerated images of agency. I think it's very problematic, as well as very interesting and full of potential.

Jennifer Gabrys – That raises questions about time and agency too. The way we think about politics is almost like clock-time. We assume there's a standard register where we perceive ourselves as agents to affect change, like the way we read a train time-table and understand it as a sort of universal sense of time. It's taken as a universal sense of politics.

Nick Mahony – We didn't use to think like that. We used to think of politics as groups at work over a long period of time to bring about some kind of change. The idea that you can do it on your own is very new.

Kathryn Yusoff – And also the idea that it's not going to be done to you is very new. If ice cores have told us anything, it is that we are in this little anomaly of calm space on this very dynamic planet. The climate system used to move around in excessive ways. The idea that our agency is the starting point could be seen as somewhat problematic in that light, because our agency is one amongst an interdependent set of unknowables. What we do know is that we live on a very dynamic Earth.

The notion of taking a pause in order to understand those interdependencies, in order to situate ourselves in an ethics that isn't all about our agency but also doesn't deny our agency. That is one of the complex problems that is incredibly difficult to work through. To achieve that balance between not wanting to give up the political space of agency but also to understand that we are situated on a very dynamic planet that has a physical agency over, above, and through ourselves, one that works on a very different timescale.

Stephan Harrison – It seems to me that humans are very good at avoiding danger when it's obvious and quick. When you want to cross a road and a car is coming, you don't cross the road. But things like climate change, these things seem to occur so slowly. We have all the science telling us which way it's going but we don't do anything about it. Not much at least. I remember this winter was called a bad winter, but actually it wasn't a bad winter. It was a normal winter. It's a winter like the ones we used to have in the 1970s and 1980s. It just seemed bad because we hadn't had one for twenty years. Although climate change is rapid,

it's interesting how it seems to be slow enough for political imperatives not to be built up around it.

Angela Last – I think people like the possibility that, maybe, the science is wrong and the possibility that it won't happen.

Kathryn Yusoff – Do you think the abrupt change that we now know about from ice cores has given the media landscape its requisite event? Up until recently, scientific discoveries about the climate have been about slow things that happen over time, about things that don't have an event. Climate science didn't have an image like the ice shelf suddenly breaking away from Antarctica, and that image has had a lot of play in the media.

Stephan Harrison – The film, *Day After Tomorrow*, obviously played on this. It was rubbish scientifically but it was a Hollywood blockbuster. You couldn't have a film like that thirty years ago because it would have seemed even more unlikely to a popular audience than that it does now.

Nigel Thrift – I think Paul Virilio is definitely right about one thing. When you produce a system of any kind, you produce the disasters along with it, which are integral to it and they are very difficult to get rid of. The car brought in the car accident, the plane brought in the plane crash, et cetera. I think this is probably just part of how things are and will be. It's an uncertain world and you can't actually factor out that uncertainty. But so far as climate change is concerned, I think we can explain why it has taken so long for anyone to do much about it. I don't think there's any extraordinary difficulty in explaining that.

Stephan Harrison – I'm sure because the science is incredibly complex, and it's only in the past five years that we've been able to detect some attributions and to say, absolutely, it's happening and absolutely, we are partly responsible. You would not expect politicians to do something that could cost a lot, unless they were required to.

Joe Smith – One of the phrases that lodges in conversations about climate change and politics is the threat of the end of the world, or saving the planet. These are all the blockbuster phrases of course, and we behave as if this is the first time we've thought in this way. Of course, anyone growing up having their adolescent nightmares in the mid-1980s, like me, knows that apocalypse was actually a very prominent vision. If you were engaging in any centre or leftist politics, you engaged in conversations about the possibility that life as you know it could be ended by nuclear war. So we do actually have a body of literature to draw from, one that tries to explain how impossibly dreadful events might happen to us suddenly.

It might be worth looking to that for exploring points about surprising geophysical systems. It's true that collapsing ice shelves have been an important motif. But actually, they will only run that story once every six months. If you want to engage public discourse, then you also need something to fill the intervening six months, and that needs to have a different kind of texture.

Nick Mahony – That's tied up with individualization. If politics is individualized, then increasingly the only way to mobilize people is around drama and intensity. Then it becomes a competition for the most dramatic, rather than an ongoing campaign that people work on together. It's an individual thing that people are bombarded with so many calls for their attention and the one that's loudest wins. But they're only mobilized temporarily because the next drama is coming around the corner.

Nigel Thrift – I don't disagree with that. If you look at the way the Western media often react to things, it's framed in remarkably few ways, most of which were invented in the nineteenth century. A good example is melodrama. If you look at tabloids in particular, that's what they do: melodrama most of the time. That was a real invention, just like the clock. And the problem in many ways is how to inject a certain form of rationality (if I dare to use the word) back into these kinds of debates. It's one of the things that's most problematic: to try to have a concerted debate over a period of time. Popular history and things like that are interesting, I think, precisely because they can keep momentum with that kind of framework. The question is how you can keep momentum and how you invent media frameworks that allow this.

Nick Mahony – But that gets associated with the old way of doing politics, with bureaucracy and slowness and boredom. So increasingly the new regime of politics is about conviviality, about pleasingness, about responding to your individual needs and desires, which can't be sustained on a national forum.

Nigel Thrift – That's right. I think one of the problems is that a lot of media time (and political time) is about generating emotions of one form or another. Of course, that has always been the case but the problem is that people are getting quite good at it. That has started to substitute for actually thinking through issues on a concerted basis. And I'm really quite pessimistic about these kinds of things, funnily enough, partly because I think a lot of the new kinds of social protest actually simulate the models being used by the dominant forces, and it's problematic as a result.

Joe Smith – I'm talking to media decision-makers (news editors, TV commissioners) at the moment, and there are things that haven't yet fed through to the academic literature about digital media. Choice and convergence in media are completely transforming their landscape. The people at the very top of the tree know that they'll get through to retirement without having to seriously contemplate this. Everyone who is a few years off that know that there will be no such thing as broadcasting in a very short time. The phrases used suggest that we are currently seeing a revolution in consumer choice and power.

But the more thoughtful people are presenting two possibilities. One of them is glass half-full, the other one is glass half-empty. The glass half-full side says that the range of media and the capacity to choose is going to open up possibilities for richer and deeper mediated experiences, well-edited translations of what is found in the world by journalists and writers and beyond. They say we will be able, for example, to get more rich and complete accounts of what it is to live in an African

village, accounts that describe and place the skills of living with poverty for example. That will be available to us in a short space of time. I already know people working in that kind of way.

At the same time, it is anticipated that a very large chunk of the public are going to begin to step out of time, in the sense of time ordered by national hearth-rug type news events around the six o'clock news or ten o'clock news. This is because a large number of people will be able to program their experience of the media in such a way that they will actually bypass all experience of mediated news. The parody is that a substantial chunk of the audience will watch a whole week of soap opera and nothing else.

I don't know where I stand on this. It depends on the day of the week, but it is an intensely interesting time in terms of how someone with ideas goes into the world and shares them beyond academia. To PhD students, I would say it's an absolutely fascinating time to be able to think about how you engage a non-academic audience in your work. You're doing something on a three- or four-year time scale. You might actually think about ways of re-engaging with the world through blogs, through emailing the makers of programmes, through some of the open spaces there are in news outlets. You have no idea where that will lead, but potentially it could be some really interesting places, and it's a good device for practicing another kind of voice in the world. The changes in the media, especially the news media and proliferation of online and other platforms, are opening up new ways of communicating and debating younger researchers' work.

Matthew Kurtz – Does the vocabulary that Jon May and Nigel Thrift offer in the reading offer something that could be useful for you? What I've heard this morning has been discussion about the four themes that they identify: 1) instruments and devices, 2) texts, 3) systems of social regulation and discipline, and 4) natural rhythms. We started with a discussion about the variation of natural rhythms. There has been a lot of discussion about the instruments and devices through which media is taking place, and how that re-orders our sense of time. We've talked about social regulation, for instance in asking how contemporary audiences are being disciplined into reading that media in particular ways. What am I missing? Texts, and maybe I haven't heard as much about that in the last hour. This theme refers to the ideas that circulate, which circulate over greater lengths of time. This plays into how climate change is theorized, reconsidered, and re-thought through texts. To me, those four themes seem to offer a promising vocabulary for thinking about time and temporality.

Stephan Harrison – If you were a geographer some twenty years ago or forty years ago, you might be using old maps to reconstruct things in the past, and to get a better understanding of how things were operating in the past. That certainly went out of favour in the sciences. But now we're going back to it. One of the really big debates at the moment is, did the medieval warm period occur as a global event? National Academy of Sciences has produced this big book that came out this year, and basically it's about the question: was the medieval warm period a global event? If it was, that has enormous political implications and the way we

understand it. But it's incredibly difficult to find it whether it was warmer everywhere in the world at the same time, around the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. Of course this is sending you back to the historical records, back to old maps and travellers accounts. So we turned full circle. Here we are with these enormously sophisticated computer models, yet we have to go back to these more elementary records: captains' logs and so on. It's extraordinary how things have gone full circle in my subject. Just to say something about texts.

Matthew Kurtz – Right, I think there's meant to be a very fine line between texts as ideas and texts as material instruments. What you're pulling through is that these particular texts serve as instruments for making a record.

Stephan Harrison – Yes, you are making a record on the basis of things like tree cores, and there are enormous problems with tree cores and ice cores and coral growth. These are proxy records of change, so you have to go back and use these old historical records as well. And it seems like an entirely qualitative assessment of climate change, but that's the way it has to happen.

Nigel Clark – Then there is the move toward picking up on different kinds of cultural stories from the ethnographic record, the myth story and so on.

Stephan Harrison – And this is driven by the science.

Nigel Thrift – I wonder a bit as well about the actual vocabularies we have. We talked about language before, and whether it goes too slowly for the object. I don't have the answer to that. One of the interesting things is the degree to which language actually does change. There are enormous numbers of new words being coined every year. But it's also about whether we have languages that are sufficient to the kind of things we want to describe, and the way in which cultures can be complex in some dimensions and very simple in others.

I was struck by this one culture off the Cook Islands. It's about five thousand people in all, and it's the favourite of linguistic anthropologists. That's because it has about the most complicated language that anyone thinks is possible to actually survive with five thousand people. It's complex because everyone knows the lineage of everybody else, and they produced a vocabulary that allows you to know this and to memorize it and to work with it. Part of the problem with climate change and things like that is that we don't have vocabularies that are thick enough in the dimensions we want to describe. That may be one of the things we need to develop more of. That relates precisely to time because Cook Islanders have fantastic memories and those memories go back a long time. They don't work in the same kind of window that I think Western cultures work in. They have much more of a tail (if I can put it that way) of memory.

Nigel Clark – There's a real issue about globalisation here. It used to be fashionable to say that globalisation was coca-colonisation and everything becoming the same. Then it became equally fashionable to say, oh no, there are new knowledges, there are new ways of doing things, and we are not losing things. But I think the kind of languages that are emerging from this fast horizontal movement of globalisation, as compared with these in-depth knowledges that

really give us evidence of things that happened over centuries or millennia, that there is a very real question about globalisation there. It is sort of being camouflaged by the willingness and desire to talk about migration, horizontal movement, welcoming others who are moving this way and that way. This may come with a reluctance to talk about what is being lost as well. It went out of fashion.

Nigel Thrift – That’s absolutely right. This language I was talking about is dying out because of migration. You can’t learn it unless you start as a child. So far as we know, no one can actually learn the full range of glottal stops and everything that you actually need to be able to learn this language. So it is getting below its actual reproduction rate, and what will happen is it will die. With that, you can lose quite serious things in terms of environment and knowledge that you cannot get back. You lose descriptions of particular things.

Colin Marx – In the research that I have been doing in Durban, infrastructures are the things that activities and economies move around in different ways: the roads, the water, electricity, tele-communications. That infrastructure really seems to inform how we can think about space-time and to shape our experience of space and time.

But the question I want to ask is this. In the “Introduction” that you’ve written for the book, *TimeSpace*, I seem to end up thinking about time in the same ways that I’ve learned to think of space: multiple and heterogeneous and laden with meanings. But can that be right? Can we think of these two things in the same way? ... Space and time is all meanings and practices. There is nothing else?

Nigel Thrift – What else would you want there to be?

Colin Marx – It just seemed interesting that both space and time can be read as meanings and practices. Two things that you’d think are very different both get equated with meanings and practices.

Stephan Harrison – I don’t think we do think space and time are very different. Physics over the last century has shown that space and time are conjoined, that they are basically the same thing but another dimension.