Time-Tricking

A General Introduction

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This general introduction presents the term that is the theme of this Special Section: 'time-tricking'. Whilst initially mapping a few problems and perspectives that arise from it, we focus particularly on the question of temporal agency. We claim that the concept of time-tricking allows a reconsideration of temporal agency, and then set out how the articles that make up this Special Section contribute to this reconsideration. We will see that two versions of temporal agency are particularly salient in this endeavour: first, as a response to crisis; second, as a form of maintenance work.

Keywords: conservation, crises, temporal agency, temporal regimes, time-tricking

This collection of articles is about temporal agency. Through the notion of 'time-tricking', we propose to reconsider how human beings relate to the temporal dimensions of their lives, and whether they are able to influence them. Time-tricking refers to the many different ways in which people individually and collectively attempt to modify, manage, bend, distort, speed up, slow down or structure the times they are living in.

Such reconsideration seems important for various reasons that range ethnographically and academically from general concerns about the impact of widespread insecurities to personal hopes and political convictions. All such reasons imply both theories about time and theories about agency, meaning that they are always based on prior metaphysical commitments. The metaphysical question of what is actually tricked, and the question of who is doing the tricking, will be addressed in Ringel's theoretical introduction, which follows this introductory guide. The articles in this Special Section explore intersections of, as well as transitions and changes in, different contemporary temporal regimes. They seek to explicate the relationship between human beings and the temporal frameworks that structure their lives. Conceptually, they explore the symbiotic reciprocity between time-tricksters and their objects, necessitating new ethnographic attention to time.

In recent years there has been a renewed intellectual focus on time across the social sciences, from sociology (Adam 2004) and science and technology studies (Wajcman 2015) to human geography (Glennie and Thrift 2009) and anthropology (Guyer 2007; Bear 2014). A far-reaching and popular contribution to the recent interest with time

has come from work looking at increased mobility (Urry 2000) and acceleration, articulated in forms of 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1990) or of 'timeless time' (Castells 1996) in relation to new information technologies that allow simultaneity (Eriksen 2001) and the acceleration of global finance (Virilio 2012). This body of literature reveals a set of new and intriguing ways of problematizing time. Approaches insisting on a one-dimensional narrative of acceleration have been criticized, however, for being technologically deterministic and lacking empirical evidence (Glennie and Thrift 2009). The evidence presented in the contributions to this Special Section points instead both ethnographically and analytically towards the diversity of contemporary experiences of time (Wajcman 2015), towards 'heterochrony' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006) and 'multitemporality' (Serres 1982), and it outlines a variety of temporal agency which has previously remained ethnographically neglected.

The narrative of acceleration that is subjected to critique through such accounts depicts time as an external framework that organizes everyday life, but the articles that follow here go beyond this approach in order to look at the empirical ways in which people relate to and act upon the problems with time they encounter. The contributions underline that human beings are not just subject to time. They exercise agency in relation to time. As an analytical tool for unpacking the set of relationships between human beings and time, time-tricking refers, amongst other things, to the development of individual, intersubjective and collective strategies for stretching and bending time in relation to one's needs, preoccupations and 'deadlines'; for making sense of both unexpected changes in well-established temporal frameworks and conflicts between contradicting time-frames and temporal orders; and for creating and maintaining alternative ideas about time.

Time-tricking brings two specific facets of temporal agency to the fore, which is why this Special Section falls into two interrelated parts. First, we continue with an effort long-established in anthropology to track the reactions of people we encounter in our 'fields' to what they perceive as moments of crisis. The set of articles in Part I explores very different crises: whereas both Knight and Streinzer take us to austerity Greece, and Porter to revolutionary Yemen, with all three creating accounts of temporal agency in times of economic and political unrest, the crises described by White take place in hospitals and maternity wards. Despite the different contexts, these authors provide us with rich examples of reactions to specific conflicts and the often existential threats these situations pose.

The second set of articles follows the aftermath of such crises. They take us away from the intense and austere moments that forced a decision to places where other times, alternative times to those perceived as being dominant and troubling, are maintained. Again, such places are various: they range from the canals and rivers around London (Bowles) and English countryside cottages (Moroşanu) to the online worlds of children in Norway (Helgesen). They suggest different kinds of temporal agency, with time-tricking entailing rather different concerns, from endurance to other claims on the future.

In Part I, where the authors deal with temporal agency in times of crisis, two contributions address – each in a very different way – what is usually referred to as an 'economic crisis' in Greece. Knight shows that the last six years have had detrimental

effects on the temporal realities of his informants. Along with the big players supposedly managing the crisis, issues of time have left people in a state of temporal vertigo, pulling them into a vortex of multiple pasts and already destroyed futures. Surprisingly, it is sci-fi stories like *Star Trek* that help people to make sense of a time that feels as if it is tricking their very existence. In contrast, Streinzer's article is concerned with the actual economic and financial practices that help people sustain themselves during this crisis. Whereas he similarly outlines overwhelming hardship, his informants undertake an extensive relational labour of 'getting by' that tricks time by ensuring a household's economic survival.

Porter's analysis of revolutionary ethics in Yemen scrutinizes our understanding of a political crisis. By developing his idea of 'being change', he advances a notion of temporal agency that can work with a very different version of the future. This allows for a new understanding of temporal ruptures and a more complex approach to the revolutionaries' presents. Finally in Part I, White's contribution depicts the conflicts and insecurities involved in critical moments of parturition. Whilst very different temporal concerns – of doctors, nurses, health insurers, as well as the women giving birth – intermesh, all of these actors might be said to exercise temporal agency by attempting to influence the timing of birth. A shift changeover can thus spark a response in which women negotiate between different temporal knowledges in order to regain a sense of their body's and the baby's actual time.

In Part II, we turn our attention to forms of engendering and maintaining other, alternative times. In Helgesen's article, emergent socialities related to play and multimedia craftsmanship in virtual environments support the attempts of children in Norway to enact temporal agency. In addressing their future through engaging with imagined future selves, children are able to create a temporal place for themselves, away from normalizing interactions with teachers and parents, and from the overall temporal conditions that frame their off-line lives. The two contributions that follow then look at the enactment and maintenance of other times in relation to existing materials and infrastructures. Bowles depicts the qualities of time on a narrow boat. For London boat-dwellers, the everyday experience of slow and flexible temporal orders, together with the material configurations related to an old canal infrastructure that they manipulate in order to keep moving, are instrumental in articulating a connection to a perceived tradition of radical itinerant life that is not tied to the rhythms, or the ethos, of the capitalist city. Moroşanu's contribution takes us inside country cottages and listed domestic buildings in East Anglia. Preoccupations with maintaining character houses emerge as ways of enacting multitemporality, together with claims on morality, in relation to colonial and postcolonial history and to ideas about tradition. These forms of time-tricking delay an expected future of energy efficiency and carbon-emissions reduction.

The articles in this Special Section were first presented in a panel entitled 'Time-Tricking: Human Temporal Engagements, Devices and Strategies' which the guest editors, together with Daniel Knight, organized as part of the 2015 conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA). The theme of the conference was 'Symbiotic Anthropologies', and our panel proposed exploring symbiotic relationships that human beings develop with time, investigating

what form of symbiosis this might be. The concept of time-tricking emerged in preparatory exchanges for the panel. We thought the perspective of 'tricking' could provide an interesting entry point into the idea of symbiosis, and that 'time-tricking' would resonate with an audience of academics. The response we received showed that we had touched on something that sparked new thoughts and discussions. On the day, an active audience contributed to taking the conversation much further than we initially envisaged. The same goes for the articles that have developed since our first encounters.

Since all the articles present their specific perspectives on the topic of temporal agency, based on their respective ethnographic material, readers can choose their own order of reading. The structure of two parts only offers initial guidance. We also tried to ease the reading by limiting the lengths of each contribution and dividing the introductory section into two. In doing so, we want to cater to temporal constraints shaping both reading and readers. Inviting our readers to do some time-tricking of their own does not mean we are giving in to our discipline's enforced acceleration, which leaves less time for extensive reading. We understand this rather as a form of facilitating and fostering the reading of the overall issue. Such concerns, however, point to other sets of constraints involved in our own disciplinary practices of knowledge production.

In the process of assembling this Special Section, related time-tricking practices were involved. Overall, the period from conceptualisation to actually getting this collection of articles ready was not much longer than a year. In this process, the temporal elements, the 'pressures' and the 'deadlines', of academic work loomed large. At every stage, from authors to reviewers to editors and copy-editors, there was both the acceptance of time-tricking and its inevitable practice; and everyone had a lot of other temporal concerns to attend to. This issue is inevitably a product of collective time-tricking, making its guiding trope more than just good to think with.

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