



Arkady Bliumbaum. A Review of **Kevin K. Birth**. *Objects of Time. How Things Shape Temporality*. N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 (Culture, Mind and Society). 222 pp.

### Clocks and Calendars that Think for Us

More or less the key role in the history of time has been played by the processes of temporal standardisation, which began approximately in the seventeenth century. One stage in this process was the unification of temporal diversity in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was undertaken in particular to bring order into the railway timetable, which turned out to be one of the most effective tools for the synchronisation of life in Europe. The powerful temporal shifts at the turn of the century that resulted in a single, unified social time evidently gave a serious impulse to reflection on time and on the co-existence or conflict of different temporalities that took place in literature, philosophy and art.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, the striving towards an awareness of the social construction of time and the attempt to reflect the role of technology in this process did not pass science by either. The German historian Gustav Bilfinger's book *Die mittelalterlichen Horen und die modernen Stunden: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte*, dealing with the history of time and timepieces, was published in 1892 and later became famous. In this pioneering work Bilfinger made the accurate and penetrating observation that the history of technology was by itself inadequate to explain the changes in the types of temporality that are relevant to

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<sup>1</sup> The American historian Stephen Kern interprets the combination of clocks and trains on Giorgio Chirico's pictures precisely in the context of the process of the unification of the railway timetable [Kern 1983: 23].

human society, such as the transition from mediaeval time to the temporal situation of modernity, in which clockwork becomes the dominant force, and time is strictly correlated with the devices for measuring it and comes to be regarded as countable: it was as important to take social and cultural history into account as the history of technology (see the discussion in [Le Goff 1999: 68]). In other words, this or that socio-cultural situation appropriates this or that device and endows it with a use, role and significance that go far beyond the purely technical sphere.

The seminal idea expressed in Bilfinger's book was taken up by other researchers: for example, the outstanding works of the celebrated French mediaevalist Jacques Le Goff on the shift from mediaeval temporality to modern temporality, from 'ecclesiastical time' to 'commercial time', which (like everything else) acquired a secular, business-oriented, 'computed' character, were written within the framework established by the German historian's concept. These works accommodate the technology of measuring time, the move from the church bell, which told the time of the services, to the workplace bell, which marked the beginning of the working day, the lunch break, etc., and thence to the evolution of clockwork (it is no accident that English *clock* is etymologically linked with German *Glocke*, 'bell'), which exactly determined, calculated and registered moments and periods of time. To a certain extent *Objects of Time. How Things Shape Temporality*, by the American anthropologist Kevin Birth, belongs to the same tradition of research (with which the erudite author is well acquainted).

The cover of the book bears an image of a strange object — a clock with two faces. The history of this object takes us back to the time of the French Revolution, when the new regime attempted not only a radical modification of the calendar, with its new era and new names for the months, but also to replace the twenty-four-hour day with a ten-hour one. The clocks with two faces were evidently intended to preserve their owner's sanity, enabling him to switch smoothly to the new 'revolutionary' time. Peculiar as it may seem to posterity, and unsuccessful as it may have been, this initiative of the revolutionary government is nevertheless interesting for researchers, as it demonstrates at least two things: that temporality can be manipulated (not least at the behest of politics), and the role of technical inventions in inculcating any particular regime of time. As the author writes, the evolution of the modern technology of time was not a functional necessity; it was the expression of authority (p. 168).

The idea of the constructed character of temporal regimes and of the significance of technical inventions for manipulating time is fundamental to *Objects of Time*. Kevin Birth's object is to convince

the reader that what we think of as the natural and, as it were, usual system of temporal co-ordinates, embodied in innumerable clocks and in the Gregorian Calendar, is in fact arbitrary, or, rather, imposed upon us. The objects of time are those things, those objects, which allow us to determine a point in time or a period simply by looking at a clock-face or a calendar, those material objects or 'cognitive artefacts', as the author calls them, which by imposing a particular type of temporality, think for us and act as a particular kind of mediator between the consciousness and the world. This reified temporality is so familiar and natural that the chronometrical devices that surround us on all sides hide the socially and culturally determined character of our temporal system of co-ordinates from the user.<sup>1</sup> The clocks and calendars that think for us make us forget, as it were, that the homogeneous, unified time of our railway timetables, working day, office hours, stock exchange, leisure, etc. are the result of a certain history, and not by any means calqued from the 'world time' that actually exists. The fundamental aim and striving of Birth's book is to lift the spell of this reified temporality and to behold the constructs on which our 'time' is based, but of which both the ordinary user and the researcher remain unaware.

Historically, the introduction of clocks and the spread of the Gregorian Calendar meant a movement away from 'natural time'. (The author devotes many pages of his book to the dissonance between the clock time to which we are accustomed and 'natural time', so that this could be said to be one of the main research topics of the book.) Freeing the user from the need to take note of sunrise and sunset and to have recourse to the highly complex observations (cognitive procedures), characteristic of pre-modern societies, clocks and the Gregorian Calendar represent a self-referential system of temporal co-ordinates which no longer refer to any 'external reality' and constitute an 'artificial', social, 'deontologised' time. In the author's opinion, both clocks and the Gregorian Calendar create the homogeneous, uniform, global time of the modern world, which is abstract and abstracted, divorced from any local context or the cycles of nature and radically 'denaturalised', and tends either to exclude any temporalities that are determined by local (natural, religious, mythological, etc.) contexts and inimical to a 'global' unification, or to absorb them.

As was said above, the time in which we live is mediated by objects which carry out certain cognitive procedures for us, whereas the

<sup>1</sup> As a sort of parallel to our 'forgetfulness' of the socio-cultural determination of our accustomed temporal co-ordinates, which leads us to take our 'time' as a given, 'the only possible one', and so on, Birth cites the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that thought is determined by language, and juxtaposes the reification of our relationship with time by devices with Marx's reification of social relations. However, these parallels are the sort of 'baroque curlicues' that add nothing to the book's theoretical postulates.

pre-modern European used to carry out procedures of this sort for himself, with recourse to a whole set of complex observations. The combination of procedures carried out by a timepiece, such as the measurement of duration and the determination of a point in time, which are usual to us (the author regards this conjunction as a phenomenon of the modern age), might have seemed far from usual to an Englishman of the beginning of the fourteenth century. As Birth shows, the determination of a point in time (time to go to work) and the measurement of duration (the time of the lunch break) were for a building worker in York in those days two different cognitive tasks (and by no means such simple ones as the trivial and instantaneous consultation of a watch), which were accomplished by means of various contextually determined procedures (p. 66). Contextually determined telling the time made people take into account such diverse factors as the crowing of the cock, the ringing of church bells, the vicar's dinner-time, and also the time taken by the city watch to make a complete circuit of the city walls (p. 65).

In one sense, the determination of time and its duration in the Middle Ages required good hearing rather than good eyesight.<sup>1</sup> The mediaeval man's auditory environment was literally full of phenomena which could be used for complex temporal calculations. An exact account of time worked — and, accordingly, a correlation between time worked and wages — came in only in the fourteenth century, delighting the bourgeois world with its universal accounting, its commercial time, 'trader's time'. Pre-modern existence without clocks or the Gregorian Calendar, the author thinks, presupposed the sort of temporal complexity which significantly 'enriched social life' (p. 160).

As for the history of the calendar, the author observes on p. 77 that in describing the transition from the pre-calendrical age to the calendrical it has not been possible to construct a narrative of the same sort as that which charts the shift from the situation before clocks to time measured by clockwork. He nevertheless constructs his investigation of the calendar following the pattern established in the investigation of the clock: as a sort of movement away from calendars that reflect astronomical or seasonal cycles, or indeed religious, mythological and other contexts, in other words, from calendars that relate to particular local contexts, based on the idea of a qualitative diversity in time (so that, for example, a religious festival or sacred period may interrupt the flow of profane time) to the ubiquity of the Gregorian Calendar, which was religious in its origins

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<sup>1</sup> Birth supposes that one of the most important shifts in Western temporalities was the change from auditory to visual signals: in that sense the bell which even now announces the beginning of the New Year in many localities (such as Times Square) where any number of timepieces are available is a pure anachronism, a tribute to tradition (p. 114).

but became the structural basis of an empty, qualitatively homogeneous time,<sup>1</sup> which, like an empty container, was capable of including any other type of temporality.

The study of the calendar reveals the important problem of the calendar as an instrument of power (the establishment and movement of holidays by the state, international agreements about temporal standards, etc.) — in other words, time as a political problem. Moreover, government decisions about establishing one or another form of temporality affect our cognitive apparatus, our mentality, which forgets the constructed and governmental aspect of the temporal regime adopted and relegates it to the unconscious. Temporality was always something to be fought over by various social, political or economic agents, institutions and groups (particularly for the right to determine time, which, for example, in societies where life was governed by religion, unquestionably gave ‘specialists in time’ a high social status and prestige). The imposition of the colonists’ own calendar played no small role in imperialist practice. The progress of capitalism across the planet (including in the form of the recent ‘globalisation’), the establishment of colonial regimes, and so on, all assisted in the imposition of the homogeneous, abstract ‘time’ of clocks and the Gregorian Calendar, which tended to displace the local, contextually determined, seasonal or other temporal regimes. As Birth rightly writes, homochronicity is often accepted as the self-evident result of the appearance of clocks and calendars, but it conceals a history of diversity, conflict and struggle (p. 168).

*Objects of Time* can also be read as a political text, in which the committed author’s chief adversary is global capitalism, which imposes its abstract time on the whole world, aiming to the utmost to synchronise all the times in the world and acting aggressively towards any local temporalities<sup>2</sup> with their reliance on natural and other cycles. The denunciation of an administrative system which exploits the potential of timepieces and the Gregorian Calendar to force us to think in a particular manner and supports a standardised, globalised temporal régime<sup>3</sup> is an important element in Kevin Birth’s project.

<sup>1</sup> The idea of ‘empty time’ goes back to the classic book of Benedict Anderson, who got it from Walter Benjamin.

<sup>2</sup> The conflict between the global and the local nowadays is beginning to acquire more and more of a political dimension.

<sup>3</sup> The basic problem that occupies Kevin Birth is that of the relationship between nature and society. Behind the denunciation of the devices that think for us and the administrative system that imposes on its people a standardised, constructed, abstract, radically ‘denaturalised’ time one can occasionally catch a glimpse of what looks to me like a sort of nostalgia on the author’s part for pre-modern temporal complexity, for a society living in accordance with nature and natural rhythms, for a *socium* that has not yet severed its ties with blessed (‘not constructed?’) nature or with the rhythms of the Earth — a sort of ‘neorousseauist’ manifesto.

Let us stop and try to evaluate the originality of what Birth has said. The reader of the book quite quickly becomes aware of a certain intellectual monotony, which, it seems, must also be evident to the reader of this review: the author repeats his basic idea about the constructed, imposed character of 'clock time' with excessive frequency. The idea of the constructed nature of our temporal system of co-ordinates, on which (as is perfectly possible) the user of clocks and calendars does not reflect (sometimes it seems that the author is addressing the lay reader and trying to stimulate him to intellectual activity), has been well known to researchers for a long time, as the impressive bibliography of *Objects of Time* testifies. The insistent (I would say, over-insistent) assertion that our temporality, embodied in clocks and in the Gregorian Calendar, indicates a break with natural time, with the seasonal, agrarian and astronomical cycles, is more or less the base postulate in works on social time. The temporal calculation connected with the emergence of the modern state, capitalism etc., in short, with the beginnings of modernity, the transformation of natural time and 'God's time' into 'people's time' the time of human society, closely connected with temporal standardisation,<sup>1</sup> the unification and radical 'denaturalisation' of time: this is precisely the starting-point for Viktor Zhivov's work on time in Russia, in which he refers to the ground-breaking research of Reinhart Koselleck [Zhivov 2009: 28].

The plan on which Birth's book is constructed can easily be found also in a late book about time by Norbert Elias (well known to the author of *Objects of Time*). Describing the relationship between 'nature' and 'society' Elias notes that urbanisation, commercialisation, and mechanisation lead to the historical dissociation of the system of temporal co-ordinates within which human society exists from the natural delimiters of time (the movement of the moon, the progress of the seasons, the tides, etc.), and its ever-increasing dependence on man-made devices [Elias 1992: 41].<sup>2</sup>

The thought that the 'time' that is natural to us is the result of a conflict between different historical agents (for example, the Church and the state), in other words, the result of a long and dramatic history, is quite correct but also hardly new (though it does, in my view, retain some potential for scholarship); it did, indeed, require historical material and a historical approach (cf., for example, the aforementioned works by Jacques Le Goff and Viktor Zhivov), in which the social, political and cultural genealogy of the technical

<sup>1</sup> Conducted, for example, by a state which is establishing a single 'national' time (a governmental instrument for uniting subject territories and establishing a sort of synchronicity between the political centre and the periphery).

<sup>2</sup> Later, however, Elias remarks that the link between the social and the natural is never completely broken.

devices for measuring time could also easily have been accommodated.

The author could, in the end, have stuck to the Trobriand material that he knows well, but even so it would have been more sensible to write history — colonial history, for example (the history of the imposition, inculcation, appropriation, etc. of European time).

A more substantial engagement with the historical material could, it seems to me, have given impressive results which would have made up for the lack of any theoretical originality. However, I shall refrain from any specific recommendations, and remark in conclusion that a highly qualified author has written a book of the second magnitude, in my opinion, which might yet, thanks to the large amount of material relating to the studies of others accumulated therein, not be without use to people who study the social construction of time.

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