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Time: A Much Neglected Dimension in Social Theory and Research

Kurt K. Lüscher

Kuhn¹ has argued, in his discussion of the structure of scientific revolutions, that the development of science can be conceptualized as a process by which new paradigms are initiated. The present situation in the social sciences, and especially sociology, is also characterized by the search for new paradigms. This search, of course, is partly in the direction of the reintroduction of humanistic ideals, of 'bringing man back in' — but in the opposite direction to that which Homans has suggested. A further characteristic of this striving for new paradigms is the concern for the reintegration of the social sciences. An additional consideration is the growing interest in the differences between the intellectual traditions of the United States and Europe.

These issues lead to an increasing concern with the concept of time. A humanistic orientation has to take into account man's temporality; interdisciplinary work demands the discussion and clarification of basic concepts and ideas such as time and, in addition, the encounter between European and American social science leads to a renewed interest in social philosophy and to the discussion of basic philosophical themes of which time and temporality in human existence are among the most prominent.

Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the concept of time and its use in experimental and social psychology is given by Fraisse.² He starts with the observation that man lives in change. Hence, a first

referred to experiments by Wundt and Dietze. Wundt estimated that the optimal interval of succession for two stimuli was between 0.3 and 0.5 seconds. More recent studies support this estimation. Fraisse⁹ has shown that the organization of the melodic theme in music varies between 0.15 and 0.90 seconds, depending on the order and the piece.

James's concern for the present went beyond an interest in the mechanism of perception. He also wanted to know how things get their 'pastness' and he wondered whether 'the knowledge of some other part of the stream (of consciousness), past or future, near or remote, is always mixed in with our knowledge of the present thing?'¹⁰ The assumption of a sense of past and future, related to specific knowledge of past and future makes for the important distinction between the perception of time and its conceptualization. Following James, time is perceived, i.e., intuited, only for periods up to a minute; thereafter it must be conceived.¹¹

Whether one is interested in the perception of time or in its conceptualization divides a strict psychological concern for time from a social-psychological and sociological. The first might — to paraphrase an extreme phenomenon — lead to the discovery of what is sometimes called the 'inner clock'. It refers to the well established fact that certain individuals have the ability to wake up without any outside stimulus at a given time fixed the evening before.

The classical problem of research on time conceptualization was seen in the question of how far do individuals expand their temporal horizon in the future and the past. The term time-perspective came into use; recent reviews of the research literature include the works of Mönks¹² and Kasakos.¹³

The original methods of assessing time perspectives were either projective or 'probabilistic'. The latter attribute might characterize a technique developed by Wallace.¹⁴ Individuals are asked to name a certain number of events (e.g., ten) which they think will happen to them in the future. The average time span between the present and the named future events is taken as an indicator of the time perspective. Prospective methods use the well known procedure of completing sentences or short stories and again an average is calculated. With such a simple methodology Leshan¹⁵ established significant differences between children from the so called lower and middle classes, the former having a shorter time perspective. This result was partially confirmed by Barndt and Johnson¹⁶ who showed that a group of delinquent boys had a shorter future-time-perspective than a control group of non-delinquent

individual's belief in his own capacity to effect personal accomplishments.

3. **A money game, in which the respondents** could pretend to buy time, in the past, the present and the future. The idea here was to measure a time concern in terms of fantasy.
4. **A semantic differential on words** like future, or time.
5. **An achievement-value inventory.**

The main findings can be summarized as follows: first, a typology of temporal orientations, generated by the experiential inventory, reveals persons with many, few and no expectations. Almost every respondent lists past experiences, but past-present orienters remain the single group failing to report experiences from all three time zones, i.e., past, present and future. Second, whilst men and women perform almost identically on all measures, some differences are found in their connections; male past-present orienters (or future avoiders) show minimal prescription to achievement values but make predictions about their own futures, whereas female past-orienters show little involvement in the future either through expectations or fantasies. Hence, concludes the author, the meaning of the future as an object of expected involvement is perceived by men and women differently. The author then tries an explanation in terms of Parsons' pattern variables.

But what are the basic dimensions of the notion of time perspective, irrespective of the quality of the methodology? In the case where the subjects are asked for their future plans, they basically answer with a set of events which they feel will occur. The whole set of events has the character of a unity, their personal future. This unity is created by the assumption of a specific relationship between the events, and this relationship has two aspects, objective and subjective. The objective aspect consists of the fact that, in view of our general knowledge, event *A* will lead to event *B*, or event *C* is a prerequisite for event *D*.

The subjective aspect is displayed in the belief that the subject himself feels that he is going to experience the events from *A* to *D*. A given outlook ends at point *D*, the last event which is seen by the subject as related to himself. In other words, conceptualizing a time-perspective has the character of an operation relating events to a unity, relating a sequence to a duration. At the same time, it is an operation which relates the individual to his environment: an operation that combines 'subjectivity' with 'objectivity'. To be more concrete, the individuals' time perspectives depend upon the socio-cultural context in which they live. Consequently

stand for certain biological, physical, and psychological stages (or sequences). In all these cases, clock time at the most correlates with, but never explains, these stages. For true explanations become possible only out of a temporal frame of reference which is consistent in itself and whose relations to other temporal frames of reference are taken into consideration.

The most extreme conceptualization of social time is constructed by Gurvitch in terms of his understanding of sociology as a 'science which studies total social phenomena as a totality of their aspects and their movements, capturing them in a dialectic of microsocal, group and global types, in the process of becoming and disintegrating'.²⁹ He produces a reification of social time inasmuch as it means in his system 'the convergency and divergency of movements of the total social phenomena, giving birth to time and elapsing in time'.³⁰ On a somewhat more concrete level he elaborates the social time of classes and of contemporary societies. The bourgeois class, for instance, 'emphasizes time alternating between advance and delay, deceptive time, time where advance and delay are in desperate conflict . . .'.³¹ Unfortunately, this conception of time lacks a systematic reference to empirical events. So the case of Gurvitch can be used as an illustration of a one-sided, therefore non-operational conception of time which excludes the subjective component.

Alternatively, we find the case of a purely subjective conception in the work of Bergson. In his Oxford lectures on the perception of change he states: 'I am going to ask you to make a strenuous effort to put aside some of the artificial schema we interpose unknowingly between reality and us. What is required is that we should break with certain habits of thinking and perceiving that have become so natural to us. We must return to the direct perception of change and mobility. Here is an immediate result of this effort: we shall think of all change, all movements, as being absolutely indivisible'.³²

Following Bergson, duration is experienced in the present 'which alone is considered to have existence' through 'intuition'. Out of such an orientation, it follows that 'everything comes to life around us, everything is revived in us'.³³

It would be inappropriate to see this as an explanation, rather it is the expression of another extreme approach to temporality, namely pure subjectivism. There is no room for sequence, only duration, referred to as one's own life which is itself a form of total life. Any objectivity is

duration. In this way, these approaches incorporate a relativistic frame of reference.

This can be illustrated with reference to G. H. Mead's paradigm of the self. It is conceived as having two components, an 'I' and a 'me'. In general, more attention is given to the 'me': this is the way I see myself in the reaction of the others, as a 'looking glass self'. Hence, it characterizes the individual as a social being but the 'I' logically must assume the character of a residual. This interpretation is not fully appropriate and does not entirely reflect Mead's ideas. A more useful interpretation is one which emphasizes the task of relating the 'I' and the 'me' as a necessary condition for the notion of a 'self'; this means that the 'me' is observed in its confrontation with the environment, in an objective (or quasi-objective) sequence of acts which can be differentiated *ad libitum*. The 'I' assesses the unity which the individual conceives as his, as meaningful to him and meaningful of him. The 'self', then, is genuinely dynamic. It establishes for any moment his temporality by relating the objective world, conceived in the sequence of the 'me', with the subjective individuality, in articulating duration through the 'I'.

If we replace the term 'self' with the more familiar term identity, which it is probably appropriate to do, then it follows that the presentation of an identity demands, among other things, the assessment of temporality; an insight we have to keep in mind with regard to the practical problems of today.

In addition, one should remember that special emphasis is given by Mead to the process of communication. It is important to see that communication displays a temporal structure similar to the self. First, communication — as the self — is always a process. Its objective component, the utterance, is sequential. One word follows another. But meaning is established only by defining a certain sequence as a unity, i.e., a sentence. There is a certain degree of subjectivity in this, for the basic message can be seen in a word, in a sentence or in a whole presentation. We all know of conflicts which can arise between two people taking part in a discussion. They can disagree, for instance, over the importance of a particular sentence or a larger part of the conversation. The issue is, of course, very relevant to the consideration of the mass media.

The example of communication suggests a further temporal aspect. In many situations, an individual can engage in simultaneous communications, hence he can live, as it were, in several times. Indeed, if we allow for a subjective element in the definition of action, we also take into account the possibility of a multiplicity of temporal orientations, a

in terms which touch on these questions, but very often they are only peripheral rather than profound analyses; perhaps the most popular version is the reference to norms. However, norms come from the past and they do not allow for a new future, unless one is to be a deviant. In addition many writers take it for granted that norms are internalized, which does not allow for a process of interpretation in the moment of acting.

The most detailed theoretical analysis of this problematic area still seems to be Schutz's *The Phenomenology of the Social World*.³⁶ Schutz unites two German traditions of thinking. On the one hand he sympathetically examines Husserl's phenomenology which is probably best described as an attempt at a meta-logic based on elements of intuition. (In this sense he is the intellectual counterpart of Bergson.) On the other hand, Schutz begins with Max Weber, for whom sociology is the analysis of intentional behaviour. What are intentions, asks Schutz, and how are they possible? A primary consideration is that intentions display meanings related to actions. It is impossible to fully present Schutz's analysis, but in relation to our topic we may summarize his argument as follows:

1. **A person cannot attach meaning** to ongoing action. To find something meaningful requires a reflective act of consciousness, a looking back at what has happened.
2. **Motivation is one of two sorts:** 'because' motives and 'in-order-to' motives. A 'because' statement refers to something which has occurred in the past that is the cause of the present action. An 'in-order-to' statement refers to something expected, planned for the future. We sometimes say 'because' when we are actually using an 'in-order-to' statement, but a true 'because' statement cannot be rephrased into an 'in-order-to' statement.
3. **All planned action is in terms** of projected acts. When one plans to do something ('in-order-to'), one imagines the act as if it were already complete, and reflects on what will have happened. With this reflection it is possible to attach meaning to future (as yet uncompleted) acts. This is done in the future perfect tense: 'will have been done'.
4. **With this structure it is possible** to speak of a continuity of past, present and future with respect to a person's action and the meaning that he attaches to it.
5. **One's perception of another's intended meaning** is understood

final meanings through analysis in terms of function and dysfunction, which refer to whether or not they serve the maintenance and survival of the system. Through this, one of the two components of time, namely duration, comes into play. However, in this case duration is without temporal structure, without sequence, due to the fact that actions are classified in terms of their functional significance, i.e., in terms of their ultimate end. The very notion of function suggests a contemporaneity among all actions. They might be judged of differing importance, but the paradigm does not develop criteria for such differentiation; in other words, it does not provide a guideline for constructing any kind of temporal sequence. Consequently, it is impossible to establish causal relationships, since everything depends at the same moment on everything else if the system is to survive.

This, however, is a simplification for there are certain elements which try to account for temporal sequence and to relate it to duration. The very distinction between functions and dysfunctions can be interpreted in this way. Besides the maintenance of the system the possibility of its destruction is considered, and inasmuch as this allows for conflict it also allows for uncertainties in the outcome; in other words, possibilities of future differentiations are taken into account. A similar capability reappears at the level of the acting individual when Merton distinguishes between consequences that are intended and recognized and others which are not. Perhaps even more interesting is the use of the attributes 'intended' and 'recognized', the first referring to a private project of action and the second to a public; the first being a motivation of the form 'in-order-to', the second of the form 'because'. However, neither of these ideas are followed up systematically or are even brought to bear on the problem of time, but then, there is also the difficulty of finding a parsimonious definition of the concepts of social system or social structure in this work.

As hypothesized at the beginning, the social sciences are involved in a struggle for new paradigms and it is likely that these paradigms will give more attention to the dimensions of time than has previously been the case. Functionalism is often considered to be one of the outgoing paradigms in modern social science, but what is coming in its place? In terms of key concepts, 'integration' is being replaced by 'conflict' and, indeed, the notion of conflict seems to display a more obvious dynamic. However, the question which immediately comes to mind is, whether 'conflict' leads to a very mechanistic application of the idea of sequence, and hence, does not fully conceptualize time? But

There are similarities with another set of standard questions in socialization research, namely, the differences between social groups. If we assume that basic cognitive processes are the same, we need to consider whether or not there are differences in the ability to relate the notion of time to plans of action and even of career. A specific concept of socialization research has been in use for such a phenomenon, namely, the notion of deferred gratification.⁴² It means the ability to withdraw from immediate gratification in view of a future and more valuable gratification. The prominence of the concept stems from the easy explanation of some research which assumes that members of the lower social classes have less ability to refrain from immediate gratification. Many of the results however can be doubted on the basis of the way the concept of deferred gratification is operationalized. There are, therefore, serious difficulties with many of these plausible generalizations and clearly further research is needed in this area and on such related questions as the interplay between time-perspective and deferred gratification, the connection of deferred gratification with achievement motivation and its structural equivalent, upward social mobility.⁴³ However, our theoretical considerations do point to the likelihood of different cultural referents of time and different notions of temporality in different cultures. Many of them might be seen as subcultures and their specific characteristics can be seen in their specific approach to the temporal referents of social action and social life. Hippies for instance refuse a strict and compulsory orientation toward clock time. Many even strive for new temporal experiences related to drugs. Here, a field for exploration opens which is still overwhelmed by stereotypes or commonsense explanations; the basic issue can be seen in the function of temporal irritations within the process of striving for a balance between personal and social identity,⁴⁴ and it might also include the results of research with mentally disturbed patients.⁴⁵ Consequently, it is suggested that the development of the notion of time, together with its several related concepts, such as the establishment of time perspective, be used as a strategic variable in socialization research.

NOTES

¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

² P. Fraisse, *Psychologie du temps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 2nd edition, 1967). Also P. Fraisse, *Les Structures rythmiques* (Paris: Erasime, 1956).

³¹ Ibid, 94.

³² Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (New York: Hubner, 1946), 187-188.

³³ Ibid, 186.

³⁴ George H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (La Salle: Open Court, 1959), 1.

³⁵ Grace C. Lee, *G. H. Mead: Philosopher of the Social Individual* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), 18-25.

³⁶ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

³⁷ Roth, op. cit., 115.

³⁸ Robert K. Merton, *Social Structure and Social Theory* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), 19-84.

³⁹ Peter McHugh, *Defining the Situation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

⁴⁰ B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968).

⁴¹ Jean Piaget, *La Genèse du temps chez l'enfant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1946). See also Fraisse, op. cit., 278-307.

⁴² Schneider and Lysgaard, 'The Deferred Gratification Pattern: A Preliminary Study', *American Sociological Review* 18 (1953), 142-149.

⁴³ Kasakos, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Lothar Krappmann, *Soziologische Dimensionen der Identität* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1971).

⁴⁵ E.g., Von Gebattel, 'The World of the Compulsive', in Rollo May (ed.), *Existence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958). Eugène Minkowski, *Le Temps vécu* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1968).